The foundations of the Semiotic Learning Perspective  
- conceptually innovating Organisational Learning

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Abstract. The current paper consists on an overview of the theoretical contributions which support an innovative framework within the Organisational Learning domain, the Semiotic Learning perspective. Organisational Learning has had its critique, namely that it is individuals that do learn so that it is a contradiction in its own terms. The present paper addresses this issue by developing an approach which is based on a theorisation of action and on a extension of the original contribution of the Organisational Semiotics theory. The theoretical approaches of social semiotics, action theory and critical realism are discussed as relevant contributions to the understanding of the constitutive social nature of learning. Organisational learning thus consists, under this perspective, on promoting the necessary conditions and the facilitation process for this learning to emerge and develop. Pragmatism and the social philosophy epistemic shifts are considered as relevant frameworks for this analysis. The perspective of Semiotic Learning stands for a theoretical contribution to the domain of organisational learning which extends the boundaries of current cognitivist and systems thinking perspectives through the focus on action and on its constitutive social dimension and rationalisation potential.

1 Introduction

One of the advantages of focusing on a broad and complex issue such as ‘learning’ as a starting point for analysis is that it unavoidably forces the enquiry process to explicitly consider those underlying and taken for granted assumptions that are seldom brought to light. In particular when considering the issue of ‘organisational learning’ this questioning process is critically relevant. Within the field of organisational learning itself this self-reflection and critique is considered and valued, namely through the call for reflective practice and the concept of double-loop learning [5], [6]. Nevertheless, there are different degrees of analysis and there are theoretical frameworks that enable epistemic shifts that disclose further possibilities for understanding.

At a general and introductory level it is important to consider the broad lines of the argument to be presented in this paper. The concept of learning that is assumed as relevant within the context of the current paper is a broad and inclusive definition. Formal and informal, intentional and unintended, planned and unplanned, and
conscious and unconscious forms of learning are taken to be part of a broad scenario and of a conceptualisation of learning that cannot be tied to a specific discipline or knowledge domain but rather overlaps and transcends them individually so that it has to be theorised under the sphere of philosophical reasoning. If learning is assumed to include all the creative, innovative, developmental and transformative aspects of human life it does not mean that it cannot be studied as such but rather that it has to be conceptualised philosophically. The next section presents a possible approach to this kind of reasoning which supports the main argument of the current paper. The subsequent sections further develop this rationale.

2 Paradox and Human Nature

Hanah Arendt [4] refers to Aristotle’s definition of humankind. Aristotle classified animal species according to specific features that would characterise each individual species as such and human beings were classified as the rational animal, thus as those who were able to perform elaborate reasoning processes and to express those thoughts through language. Later Aristotle was focusing on human’s unique qualities and referred that the most important aspect of humanity was that human beings were able to feel more than they could express and put into words.

The present paper focus on the tension that is implicit in this confrontation. Throughout the centuries there have been various interpretations of these statements in western philosophy. From the seventeenth century onwards the scientific thought has privileged the formal and explicit rational processes of the hypothetical-deductive method, thus focusing on the cognitive aspects of explicit and objective, structured and systematised human expression. Nevertheless, the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx have called attention to the frailty of the subjacent concept of the sovereignty of individual subjects and of the impact of the social structures and of the unconscious in affecting the assumed to be independent and objective rational processes [2].

In early twenty first century, though there is a wide range of variety in terms of methodological and epistemological approaches to social sciences in general, there is a dominant and mainstream perspective within management and organisational areas. This dominant perspective is characterised by an idealist, utilitarian and rationalist influence arising from philosophers such as Kant, Locke, Bentham and Mill. This perspective takes for granted the Cartesian split between mind and body, the individual and the social, and the internal and the external [19]. The predominance of the economic dimension in western society and the focus on objective results, on performance, and on efficiency and effectiveness are part of this process. The epistemic shift that characterised the last quarter of the twentieth century towards knowledge and cognition [11] is also a result of this world-view and it explains the importance of both cognitivism and behaviourism as well as of systems thinking perspectives within current organisational settings, thus affecting both management and organisational theories and practices.

This paper argues that the apparent paradox identified by Aristotle may be interpreted as a creative tension between that which may be ready to be expressed and articulated and that which is still being developed and worked on within an iterative and generative recursive ‘learning’ pattern. At an organisational level this implies that
both formal and informal aspects are critically relevant and, more importantly, that
the better the hidden, subtle, fuzzy, complex and often chaotic aspects of
organisation’s informal side are understood, the better results there will be in formal
and objective terms. The argument is that there is currently a disproportionate
distribution of efforts between the structural, procedural, predictable and controllable
issues and the innovative, creative, relational based, unpredictable and uncontrollable
aspects of organisational life. Though there are several theoretical and practical
approaches which critique and thus do not follow the mainstream control paradigm
perspective there is a general lack of theoretical foundations which may support,
direct and inform the shift in this balance.

Therefore the argument of the present paper stresses the dialectical and creative
tension between (i) the structural and objective aspects of organisational life captured
by cognitivist and systems thinking perspectives, which assume the individual-social
divide, and (ii) the unstructured and subjective aspects featured by alternative
perspectives, which treat the individual and the social as a single and unique reality.
The Semiotic Learning framework developed as a conceptual tool to support
organisational learning initiatives. It values equally both sides of the equation as
relevant to organisational development and it proposes a theoretical approach able to
integrate them. The critical issue about the Semiotic Learning perspective is that it
does not propose a normative or a prescriptive standing. It rather helps to
acknowledge and to develop an attentiveness and an awareness in relation to the need
for questioning and revising taken for granted assumptions.

For instance, it recognises the need to artificially separate the psychological and
individual aspects from the social and collective ones in order to progress with
organising and systematising procedures at organisational level. However, it argues,
this simplification process has to be further integrated in a wider framework that
recognises the artificiality and the abstraction from reality that has been performed. A
focus on action, understood in its philosophical dimension, grounds rationalisation
processes to organisational reality. This conceptual framework aims at bringing
further depth and breath to organisational analysis, both at theoretical and at practical
levels. One way that it promotes this is by broadening the horizons of enquiry.

3 Organisational Semiotics

Organisations, action and learning are concepts that are mutually embedded and
profoundly connected. Organisations, in order to survive, have to develop effective
mechanisms that allow them to learn from their actions and to incorporate their
learning into their practices. This permanent process is mainly automatic and
unconscious, though it may be made explicit in various degrees and circumstances.

Several scientific communities emerged from the study of organisations from
semiotic and philosophically informed theories, mainly from the philosophy of
language domain. These theories take a special interest in the role of action and
language in the creation of social practices, structures and norms. The perspective of
organisational semiotics (OS), was developed by Stamper in the early 1970s [30],
[39], [40]; the language and action perspective (LAP), was developed by Goldkuhl
and others in the early 1980s [16], [18]; and more recently the perspective of action in
language, organisations and information systems (ALOIS), also developed by Goldkuhl and others in the early 2000s [17]. These overarching and multidisciplinary academic communities have a common general conceptual standing when compared to mainstream organisational approaches. Each of these conceptual approaches recognise the need for the philosophical grounding of organisation theories and therefore offer a degree of sophistication and of complexity of analysis that is seldom found within the dominant conceptual management theories and mainstream approaches usually characterised by a reductive and prescriptive standing.

The Semiotic Learning perspective develops from this tradition and is particularly influenced by organisational semiotics theory. Most developments from the seminal works of these communities consist on applications of the theories to particular situations and case studies, in particular within information systems analysis and design contexts. The development of the perspective of Semiotic Learning is also an application of these theories though to the less tangible and objective field of organisational learning. This application requires an extension of the semiotic and action perspectives and an emphasis on the theoretical and philosophical grounding of such approaches. Therefore the Semiotic Learning perspective undertakes this enquiry by recurring to the theories of social semiotics, critical realism and action theory.

The Semiotic Learning perspective emphasises the social dimension of organisations and attributes an important value to pragmatic and practice based approaches. These two aspects have been the result of the influence of the organisational semiotics theory, though they also are a foundational and constitutional part of the action and language communities. Firstly, organisational semiotics refers to the different fields of analysis, the ‘ontology ladder’, that incorporates the social dimension as a critical element of the analysis, and secondly the ‘ontological charts’ ground the theoretical framework in the real circumstances of organisations.

Organisational semiotics interprets organisations as information systems, independently of technology. The social constructivist perspective of organisations, which are viewed as social constructs, is also relevant to organisational semiotics. Information is a central concept that may be analysed through diverse perspectives and semiotics offers a framework which allows us to interpret information at syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and social levels [15]. Syntax deals with signs without regard to their meaning; semantics deals with the signification of signs in all modes of signifying; pragmatics deals with the origin, uses and effects of signs within the behaviour in which they occur [29]. Stamper has added three fields to semiotics, besides the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics levels: empirics, physics and social world [39]. Empirics studies the statistical properties of signs; physics is concerned with the physical aspect of signs and marks; and the social world is where the effects of signs in human affairs are studied.

4 Organisational Learning and Complexity Theory

An organisational learning initiative has to take into account the specific context of change and complexity that characterises the current environment of the knowledge economy of the information age [23]. Both organisational learning and knowledge management have developed as an effort to promote new theories and practices able
to understand the reality and to profit from the challenges being created by the new economic environment. Within management and organisation theory several theories have emerged which followed this goal including communities of practice [8], [26], [48], [49] tacit and explicit knowledge [33], informal learning [31], organisational change and learning [32], organisational meaning [13], [46], [47], organisational epistemology [45], and collaborative forms of work and learning [1], [10], [12].

The concepts of double-loop learning and of reflexive practice [5], [6] are central to the field of organisational learning [34]. The perspective of Semiotic Learning also assumes as central the reflection process implicit in questioning taken for granted assumptions as defined by the concept of double-loop learning and implied by the call for reflexive practices. However, Semiotic Learning further explores the meaning-making and signification nature of these inquiring processes. Moreover, it breaks the mainstream cognitivist approach by interpreting these reflexive and learning practices as being social embedded and embodied processes.

The Semiotic Learning framework acknowledges the importance of the early work on group psychology developed by Lewin [28] and other social theorists such as Thrist [41], the appreciative systems tradition developed by Vickers [43], [44] and of the soft systems methodology developed by Chekland [9]. The process of designing organisational learning initiatives is itself anchored in a systematic collaborative inquiry process into the organisation’s learning experience and practice [35]. Appreciative inquiry has advanced beyond being a philosophical orientation to becoming a theory and a method for system’s learning and development. It fundamentally seeks to build constructive ongoing dialogue between people in an organisation, a dialogue about past and present learning capacities, processes, innovations, and unexplored potentials. Organisations are more than rational goal-seeking machines [9] and appreciative systems address the relationship-maintaining and community aspects of organisations, obscured by functionalist and goal-seeking models of organisation and management.

Systems thinking proposes four characteristics of systems: emergence, hierarchy, communication and control [9]. The field of systems thinking developed in different domains and the engineering systems, or the hard-systems perspective, focused on systems’ purpose, goals, information processing and function, and its aim was to optimise the system as a whole. In the 1970s, the soft-system approach developed and instead of perceiving the world as systemic it perceived it as a complex whole which could be explored through alternative world-views and a systemic process of inquiry. The exploration of alternative world-views and of systemic processes of inquiry focused on learning leading to action rather than on optimisation. According to Chekland [9] hard-systems focuses on problem-solving and model organisations as coordinated functional task systems seeking to achieve declared goals, and thus see the task of management as decision making in support of goal seeking. H. Simon [37] developed this type of approach which proves to be extremely effective in situations where there are clear-cut performance measures, and goals are objectively defined. Soft-system methodology arises as a complement to hard-systems perspective and it focuses on open complex systems, systems which are in constant interaction with their environment and where the social and political aspects of the system are especially taken into account.

Urry [42] states that from a non-mathematical perspective, chaos theory, the non-linear, and complexity may be taken to be a single paradigm. According to Stacey
analyses drawn from natural complexity sciences are based on a Kantian view in which nature is assumed to unfold from already enfolded forms, though this perspective does not encompass an explanation of the emergence of truly novel forms; this strand of complexity thinking is an extension of systems thinking about nature. An alternative perspective is that derived from Hegel, interpreted by Mead, in which the future is understood to be under perpetual construction, and it is this second strand of the complexity sciences that consists the source domain for analogies with human action [38].

Chaordic systems thinking, developed by Eijnatten [14] is a conceptual contribution for explaining human performance management under turbulent conditions, which is presented as a new paradigm for working life. This approach tries to account for “the emergence of real novelty in terms of Stacey” [14]; it recognises that systems are complex, dynamic and non-linear, in which chaos and order co-exist; it is based on an understanding of systems as holons (entities that are both wholes and parts, both autonomous and dependent); and it agrees with Stacey’s argument of the previous system approaches as suffering from a Kantian split and from being highly embedded in a control paradigm [14].

The approach taken by the Semiotic Learning framework acknowledges the importance of systems thinking though it integrates it in a broader perspective. Complexity has been theorised beyond systems thinking and Stacey [38] conceptualises organisations as complex responsive processes of relating, where iterative processes sustain continuity with potential transformation at the same time. Stacey’s work focuses on meaning, power, negotiation, dialogue, on the importance of the unconscious, and on self-organisation though not from an autopoietic perspective. The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating is a dialectic theory, firmly based on paradox, and it takes the individual and the collective simultaneously, seeing both as arising in the interaction between individuals, where individuals themselves are not bounded, self-determining entities. Systems theories assume that the future is the unfolding of what is already enfolded in the system or its environment, while this alternative to systems thinking shifts its attention away from whole systems, to focus on local processes; it does not search for deeper levels or structures but rather “it explores how we might understand the ordinary, observable communicative interactions between people in local situations in the living present.” [38].

5 Social Philosophy and the Epistemic Shifts

Semiotics is the science of signs and it covers the analysis of signs and the study of sign systems. A sign is something that stands for something else so that semiotics can also be understood as the study of meaning-making or semiosis. A culture is the system of daily living that is held together by a signifying order, including signs, codes, texts, and connective forms. Semiotics is not just a theory but it is a common and unavoidable practice present in all forms of communication. Thus the study of semiotics in human communication may be a form of studying cultural anthropology. Semiotics can have a positivist application when focusing solely on the formal, explicit and visible structures of language or other sign systems, or else it may take a
more interpretative approach when focusing on the dynamic and transformative nature of the same sign systems.

Semiotics, as the knowledge field related to the interpretation of signs, was already present in Greek Antiquity as well as throughout the Medieval Ages, though it was the works of F. Saussure and of C. Peirce in late nineteen and early twentieth centuries that marked the science of signs as it is known today, so that all current approaches followed the influence of one of these schools of thought. Semiotics has diverse branches and orientations, ranging from positivistic approaches, aiming at unique, linear, static and exact correspondences between sign and meaning, to social semiotic approaches where signification is understood to be a complex and dynamic process, inseparable from the social context in which emerges.

Social semiotics explicitly takes a non-positivist approach as it focuses on the contexts, prerequisites, and conditions of possibility for a meaning creation process to occur. All meanings are the product of a community and the analysis of sign systems and of sense-making processes cannot be separated from the social, historical, cultural and political dimensions of these communities. Social semiotics focuses on social subjectivity and therefore takes a non-cognitivist approach: instead of referring to meaning-making as something that is done by minds, it points to the role of social practices within communities. Communities are thus interpreted not as a collection of interacting individuals but as a system of interdependent social practices [27]. Social semiotics may be understood as a discourse on meaning-making where the aim is to examine the functions and the effects of the meanings we make in every day life, within communities, organisations and society.

The Semiotic Learning framework uses social semiotics theory as one of its foundational conceptual approaches. Social semiotics, developed by Halliday [22] and Kress [24] among others, raised out of the Saussurean school of thought. Saussure claimed that we use language not only to communicate but to construct our world, and when he distinguished between langue, the abstract structure of a language, and parole, the way it was actually used in practice, he directed his attention to the former. Subsequent developments from this movement and focus on langue, on the abstract structures of a language, were structuralism and also positivist approaches to signification and interpretation. Social semiotics, on the other hand, focused on language as it was actually used, on parole, thus taking the rich and fuzzy world of social, cultural and political spheres into account. In a playful way, social semiotics is known to have developed out of what Saussure dismissed and put to the side, thus working on what was inside Saussure’s ‘dustbin’.

Semiotics is understandably assumed to be related and connected to communication. Though this is indubitably the case, there are many other aspects which precede, condition and determine semiotics as communication, especially when communication itself is interpreted from an information theory perspective, which focuses on messages being exchanged between a sender and a receiver, such as Shannon and Weaver’s theory [36]. Habermas’ concept of communication, where he distinguishes “instrumental rationality” as the successful self-maintenance efforts, and “communicative rationality”, as the achievement of shared understanding, is broader, richer and more complex than an information theory perspective [21]. The Semiotic Learning framework focuses on the achievement of shared understanding, thus on the Habermas concept of “communicative rationality”, and it is centred on action as the source and as the primary means of meaning-making.
Action theory holds a privileged position within the Semiotic Learning framework. Within this context, both social semiotics and critical realism are relevant as theoretical conceptualisations which enable a better understanding of action itself. Organisational learning is grounded in human action and the cognitive processes of knowledge creation and meaning-making cannot be understood as separable or independent from action. Action also implicitly involves a social context and dimension. Even when considering individual and isolated actions these are framed by a social referent, and they are meaningful as long as that referent is acknowledged. The fundamental role of action within the domain of organisational learning arises from its constitutive rationalisation potential as well as from its intrinsic social character. Action enables the understanding of an organisation beyond its goal directed and decision-making dimensions. Action theory refers to action’s intrinsic presence within rationalisation and interpretation processes so that hermeneutics, ontology and epistemology are inherently action related. Innovation and change are thus understood, under the current framework, as arising from action’s transformational potential.

According to Gonçalves’ work on the philosophy of action [19] rationality is not a structure, a paradigm, nor a frame or a rigid law, permanently defined; it is the meaningful reality which emerges from action, which is the process of constituting an organised whole. Rationality cannot be reduced to mental schemes, as it is nurtured from a global rationality which arises from the structure of action. Under this perspective of philosophy of action, language enriches the world as it is the activity which best develops the possibilities of the world. The world is not considered to be a previously defined project, perfectly delineated, and then language being used to express it; the world is defined and realised within the same action where, or through which, language is being constructed.

6 Pragmatism, Critical Realism and Agency

Peirce developed the concept of pragmatism and was later followed by James, Dewey, Popper, Morris, Sellars, Putman and others [11]. Pragmatism derives from the Greek word *pragma* which means action. It emphasises the concept of human beings as agents and focuses on their practical relation to the world. Delanty and Strydom [11] explain that the principle according to which experience forms the basis of all knowledge is shared by pragmatists and empiricists, these later including positivists and neo-positivists. Pragmatists contrast with positivist by the former focusing on creative inquiring and the later on passive observation. At a deeper level, the contrast is even greater because of pragmatism’s origin in Peirce’s critique of Descartes, and the overcoming of precisely those Cartesian dualisms which are presupposed by modern western philosophy, including positivism.

Examples of these dualisms are subject and object, body and mind, perception and conceptualisation, theory and fact, fact and value, deduction and induction, reality and copy, nature and culture, individual and society, sign and signified, and so forth [11]. To overcome these dualisms pragmatism rejects some of the basic guiding ideas which inform not only positivism but also interpretative and structuralist traditions. Among these are the notions such as the subject of knowledge as an individual,
observation as presuppositionless activity, truth as a picture or representation corresponding with reality, knowledge as being built up of observation and logical inference, social science as being exclusively concerned with culture, and hence the interpretation and understanding of symbolic meaning, knowledge as involving an arbitrary or conventional twofold sign relation, and so on.

Pragmatism, by contrast, stresses the anchorage of knowledge in real collective problems, and knowledge as being dependent on the mediation of signs, which means that it regards knowledge as being social by nature. It focuses on the development of knowledge which it sees as taking place in different ways, and in a variety of contexts. Pragmatism is centred on abduction, not induction nor deduction, and not only on the individual creativity but rather on the cooperative search for truth within a community through interpretation, discussion and argumentation, i.e. through the creative collective overcoming of action problems. Peirce developed the notion of abduction which is the process by which a new concept is formed on the basis of an existing concept which is perceived as having something in common with it, thus it focuses on associations [11]. Induction is the process of deriving a concept from particular facts or instances. Inductive knowledge is empirical knowledge, of facts and information, while deductive knowledge is formal rationalism, mathematical knowledge, and logical reasoning.

The Semiotic Learning framework explicitly takes a pragmatic perspective on organisations. This strand is further enforced within this framework by the contributions of critical realism theory. Critical realism focuses on social structures and on social practices, it stresses the importance of discourse and of human agency, and social agents and social change form the basis of its rationale. The fundamental links between individual and social arenas is a central issue to an organisational learning initiative. Traditional approaches to organisational learning focus on individual learning and then on group learning, so that organisational learning is understood as the aggregate result of both individual and group processes. The Semiotic Learning framework takes a radically different perspective by acknowledging the foundational social character of all learning processes, so that the distinction between single and group becomes an irrelevant question.

Critical realism is a multidisciplinary movement in philosophy and the human sciences which started with Roy Bhaskar’s publication in 1975, of *A Realist Theory of Science* [3]. The term “critical” suggests affinities with Kant’s idealism and rationalism, though the term “realism” indicates that there are fundamental differences. Bhaskar’s philosophy is reflexive as transformatively practical, or presents a transformational model of social activity. According to this theory, social life has a recursive character, as agents reproduce, and transform, the social structures they use, and are constrained by, in their substantive activities. Critical realism, as a theory of science, presents three distinctive features: «(i) it recognises science as a social practice, and scientific knowledge as a social product; (ii) it recognises the independent existence of the objects of scientific knowledge; (iii) it has an account of scientific experiment and discovery as simultaneously material and social practices, in virtue of which both (i) and (ii) are sustained.». [7].

Critical realism [3] argues that without the concept of a social structure we cannot make sense of persons as any predicate which applies to individuals, apart from a direct physical description, presupposes a social structure behind it. Though we need the notion of a social structure, the only way to acknowledge it is through the social
practices that it incarnates and reifies, which in turn are embedded in the actions of its members. A social structure is not visible or witnessable, only its social practices are. Though implicit and invisible, structures are enabling or constraining, as they open up or else severely restrict the actions of their members.

However, structures are not simply a medium for social practices, as these practices also change and influence the structures themselves [3]. This implies that structures are both medium and product of their practices. Social structures are reproduced and transformed by the practices of their members. Thus individuals have an agency capacity to interfere back, and thus promote social change. Not isolated individuals, however, but units and collectivities of individuals. Individuals are persons and their acts are situated in a world constituted by past and present human activity, thus a humanised natural and social world. Because social structures are incarnate in the practices of their members, this means that they do not exist independently of the conceptions of the persons whose activities constitute, thus reproduce or transform, them. It is because persons have beliefs, interests, goals, and practical and tacit knowledge, not necessarily cognitively available, acquired in their early stages as members of a society, that they do what they do and thus sustain, or transform, the structures to which they belong. Critical realism, according to Bhaskar, thus proposes a transformational model of social activity. It states that reality exists independently of our knowledge about it, and it takes science as a social practice, and scientific knowledge as a social product.

7 Epistemological Concerns and Scientific Communities

Every scientific community, as any social structure, is constituted by the social practices that it produces. This production includes the repetition and reinforcement or else the change and transformation of the social practices themselves. The sustainement of practices tends to strengthen the cohesion of the community while the transformation of practices tends to introduce diversity and innovation. In order to guarantee long term survival and development both elements are critical so that it is the tension between the two patterns that has to be taken into account.

There are two possible questions that may be posed to the scientific communities that grew out of an interest to explore the links between information technology and organisations, analysed from the perspective of philosophy of language and of action, including semiotics. Traditionally, the production of scientific work within these communities has tended to be characterised by the application of the seminal theoretical work of key authors to specific situations at a micro level. The first question to consider is whether it is possible and desirable to explore alternative conceptual formulations within the broad field of philosophy of language and of action or of semiotics to be applied to study of the role of information technology within organisations as a whole. This question includes the possibility of reinforcing and strengthening the need for action, language and semiotics perspectives in order to pursue the understanding of organisational complexity. This may imply not solely an application of seminal categories and concepts but also a further development of their specific rationale and an explicitation of their underlying assumptions.
The second question to be raised has a less straightforward formulation. The pattern that has been referred above, of application of theoretical work, has been explicitly directed at analysing the role of information technology within organisations. The implicit and subjacent assumption has tended to be that the relevant aspects to be studied would be those that link information technology and information systems to the goal oriented and decision making centred perspective of organisations. This implies that the formal and structured aspects, as those that software engineers traditionally take into account, are the focus of attention while there is an implicit disregard for the analysis of how information technology may affect the informal and unstructured, social and community related aspects of organisations. The second question to be raised, therefore, is whether it is possible and desirable to use action and language philosophy and semiotics to focus complementarily on the soft and intangible issues that are present within organisations and which unavoidably influence their tangible and objective functioning.

The present paper does not aim at answering these questions though it is positioned on the boundary of the issues that these questions address.

8 Conclusion

The present paper presents the theoretical framework which support the Semiotic Learning perspective to organisational learning. This perspective has developed from the original works of the organisational semiotics theory developed by Stamper [39], [40]. Most applications of this theory have been limited to the specific area of information systems analysis and design though the theory itself raises critical issues that may be applied to the study of organisational reality at various levels. The importance of the study of organisational development, change and innovation within the current context of the knowledge economy [23] contrasts with the lack of integrative theoretical frameworks able to deal with this complexity. The need for sound conceptual basis calls for a process of inquiry able to adequately respond to this need. The Semiotic Learning perspective integrates several theoretical contributions which enable a standpoint for further analysis of the complexity of organisational life.

The knowledge economy of the information age cannot be understood independently of the underlying assumption of the critical role and importance that is played by information and communication technology within society as a whole. If the impact of information technology within organisations is solely interpreted as the formal information system direct role in organisational procedural functioning there is a risk of a reductive understanding of the full potential of the socio-technological revolution that is under way. Both organisational learning and knowledge management fields aim at exploring these opportunities though their own development is not without critics. A fundamental critique is their lack or rather poor theoretical underpinnings as well as the need for broader and integrative conceptual formulations able to inform theory and practice. The Semiotic Learning framework consists in one possible answer and an effort towards this development.

The early contributions of the organisational semiotics theory focus on two central aspects that are often dismissed by mainstream approaches to organisations. These are (i) the need to ground theory in practice, thus to take a pragmatic perspective and to
validate the conceptual approaches within the daily context of organisational reality, which is achieved through the ‘ontology charts’; and (ii) to take the relevant social context into account, which corresponds to the social world level of the ‘ontology ladder’. Both these aspects are further developed within the Semiotic Learning perspective in particular by its pragmatic focus on action as the primordial basis of human rationalisation processes. Apparently this perspective radically contrasts with dominant cognitivist approaches however, within the Semiotic Learning framework, they are not interpreted as incompatible but rather as complementary perspectives both simultaneously needed in order to grasp the complexity of organisational reality.

A focus on action is emphasised as it is the element most easily dismissed within the current cognitive and knowledge centred approach to organisations. Knowledge and meaning derive their importance from action and language and unless these links are expressed and emphasised the efforts of promoting organisational learning have shallow and short lived results. The Semiotic Learning approach does not propose specific organisational practices or prescriptive measures; it presents and discusses possible points of analysis that emerge from some theoretical frameworks. These frameworks in turn direct and inform the necessary questioning and inquiring process that forms the core aspect of an organisational learning initiative as such. The ability to question the taken for granted assumptions, as the concept of double-loop learning asserts [5], [6] is assumed to be the ultimate criteria for evaluating the quality of an organisational learning approach. The Semiotic Learning framework proposes one possible way to conduct such process of inquiry and identifies several theoretical approaches which enable such process to emerge.

«(...) semiotics is currently the most complete and sophisticated theory of meaning and culture.»

Lagopoulos [25]

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