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Article

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Abstract *Previous studies of communities of practice had often emphasized the ease with which members are able to participate in the collective learning process through joint practices within a particular community. However, nothing much has been done to reveal the difficulties and problems of learning between different communities due to different and sometimes conflicting identities and power inequalities. This article reports a failed experience of a tertiary institution to outsource its information technology (IT) department. By highlighting the social conflicts experienced by the in-house IT technicians in coordinating with the outsourcing staff, we argue that the received unitary, managerialist viewpoints of communities of practice somehow neglect the broader social context and micro-political factors of learning. This neglect underestimates the critical challenges of resolving the social tensions caused by multiple identities and embedded power differentials across different communities of practice.* ***Key Words:*** *community of practice, conflicts, identity, organizational learning, power*

1 Introduction

Researchers in organizational learning have recently embarked on a 'social turn' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Elkjaer, 1999, 2003) to study how learning processes can take place under a shared and communal context. Instead of focusing on the individual as the key actor of learning (Lant et al., 1992) or conceiving organizations as an information processing system (Huber, 1991), it is perceived that the social and relational aspects of learning within different communities of practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991: 53; Lave and Wenger, 1991) do matter. Several landmark studies (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993; Gherardi et al., 1998;

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Mutch, 2003; Orlikowski, 2002; Wenger, 1998) have been conducted to further our understanding on the social dynamics of situated learning in various occupational and social communities.

Despite these significant theoretical advancements, the difficulties of collaborating with members from diverse social and organizational backgrounds have been understated. While the proponents of communities of practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Wenger, 1998) seem to emphasize the ease with which community members share somehow sticky or tacit knowledge through joint practices, it is still unclear how these common practices could be developed and shared across individuals from different communities with very different, and sometimes conflicting, worldviews and identities (Handley et al., 2007). To a certain extent, this is due to the fact that previous research had often focused on a single occupational group sharing idiosyncratic cultures and norms (Cook and Yanow, 1993; Gherardi et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The problems that may arise between different communities of practice with conflicting identities and norms are yet to be discovered. Failure to understand these challenges, we believe, would undermine the potential of 'cultivating' a community of communities of practice that share common identity and joint practices (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Echoing the view of Handley et al. that communities of practice should not be conceived as 'cohesive and homogenous social objects' (2006: 642), the main objective of this article is to explore the tension and conflicts underlying two distinct communities and the overall impact on organizational learning in an information technology (IT) out-sourcing project of a tertiary education institution in Macau, a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China. Through investigating its unsuccessful experience to outsource the IT function, it was found that lack of a common identity and power inequalities between the in-house and outsourcing staff distracted the collective learning and participation process and undermined the potential of creating a coherent learning community. We further conclude that this IT outsourcing project had caused a perception of significant identity conflict between the outsourcing staff and the in-house personnel in a fashion similar to what was identified as 'organizational disidentification' by Humphreys and Brown (2002), which subsequently affected the willingness of the staff in contributing themselves to the knowledge sharing and creation processes.

By highlighting the difficulties experienced by both the in-house and outsourcing IT technicians in the attempt to construct a constructive learning relationship under conflicting identities, we argue that the current unitary, managerialist views of communities of practice (Senge, 2000; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) have somehow neglected the broader social context and micro-political factors of learning, thus underestimating the critical challenges of resolving the social tensions as a consequence of multiple identities and asymmetrical power relations embedded across different communities of practice

This article is organized as follows. Part 2 examines the social theories of organizational learning with a particular reference to the issues of identity conflicts and power inequalities between communities of practice. The research methodology is explained in Part 3, while the major findings, final conclusions and related discussion are presented in Parts 4 and 5, respectively.

2 Communities of Practice, Identity Conflicts and Power

The communities of practice, which represent 'tightly knit groups that have been practicing together long enough to develop into a cohesive community with relationships of mutuality and shared understandings' (Lindkvist, 2005: 1189), had emerged as a key concept and setting to capture how learning takes place in organizations (Orr's 1990, 1996). It is understood that through the engagement in a process of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), members in the communities of practice develop shared practices, adopt a common identity and build up mutually interdependent relationships (Wenger, 1998), so as to undertake the collaborative learning activities. As argued by Gherardi et al., 'To know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities.' (1998: 274). According to this definition, participation in a community of practice is not just a mere process of doing things together because 'members are bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about' (Wenger, 2000: 229) which determines 'what matters and what does not, with whom we must *share* what we understand' (p. 239, emphasis added). Therefore, the issue of social identity becomes an important concern here since it is about the formation, interpretation and negotiation of the individuals' position in the community (who we are) and the ways they are related to one other—what we do (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2000).

Conflicting Identities Across Different Communities of Practice

Engaging in the social participation process central to the concept of communities of practice is not without difficulties when each individual belongs to multiple communities of practice with diverse practices, norms and identities in large organizations (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Handley et al., 2006). They develop their own narrative identities and a tacit understanding of the taken-for-granted assumptions about one's specific roles and responsibilities (Tajfel, 1978) through a continuously evolving process which is strongly influenced and shaped by the surrounding historical and social context (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Bearing these idiosyncratic values and social identifications, on the one hand, can facilitate the individual to develop the tacit know-how embedded in the community of practices (Cook and Yanow, 1993: 381) and collaborate with other fellow community members (Wenger, 1998). However, on the other hand, without a deliberate effort to mould the organizational socialization process to resolve interpersonal differences (Orlikowski, 2002), problems related to identity construction are deemed to occur, thus undermining the potential of participating in the situated learning process.

The first significant challenge is related to the negotiation and renegotiation of a common identity acceptable to and recognized by all members of communities of practice (Corley et al., 2001). Members who come from multiple communities of different business functions (Mutch, 2003), occupations (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984), expertise (Swan et al., 2007), hierarchical positions (Schein, 1996), projects (Cohendet and Simon, 2007) or institutional memberships (Huzzard and Ostergren, 2002) tend to develop their own unique patterns of 'thought worlds'

(Dougherty, 1992), underlying 'logics' (Carroll, 1998) and 'narratives' (Currie and Brown, 2003), thus affecting their appreciation of other people's roles and contributions. Failing to establish a common identity with which most of the members identify and share makes them psychologically distanced from each other and results in 'incoherence and fragmentation indicative of dis-identification' (Humphreys and Brown, 2002: 434).

In addition to the need for establishing a common understanding about the locally situated sense of self vis-à-vis the others, another significant challenge involves how different communities with vastly different epistemic 'knowing in practices' (Orlikowski, 2002) and situated curriculum (Gherardi et al., 1998) can come together, value one another's contributions and integrate their diverse bodies of knowledge into a common thread. Difficulties occur when those communities are unable to acquire 'the ability to act in the world in socially recognized ways' (Brown and Duguid, 2001: 200), resulting in 'parochial partitioning' (Cohendet and Simon, 2007), fragmented understanding (Bechky, 2003) and lack of social confidence (Andrews and Delahaye, 2000). It is only through the mutually adjusted, naturally emerged group socialization processes (Mork et al., 2008) in which participants try to resolve differences and develop a sense of joint enterprise among those involved in the complex working relationship (Wenger, 2000). Central to this issue is the social integration process in which members from different communities build bridges to link the diverse knowledge sources that are localized and embedded in the social and institutional environments (Lehrer and Asakawa, 2003) and to develop shared practices (Brown and Duguid, 2001). With the presence of those concrete subjects and abstract concepts as boundary objects (Carlile, 2002, 2004), it helps to facilitate the processes of perspective-making and perspective-taking (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995) and to mobilize their commitment to joint actions over different communities by crossing the corresponding syntactic (language), semantic (meanings) and pragmatic (power) boundaries (Swan et al., 2007).

Power Relations and Identity Constructions

Given the potential adverse effects of identity conflicts and diverse knowledge practices embedded in different communities of practice, there is a need to untangle the dynamics of power relations (Fox, 2000) and to assess the impact on the construction of identity during their boundary crossing encounters (Swan et al., 2002), because power differentials enable one dominant community to pursue political agendas, potentially at the expense of the less powerful (Hong and Snell, 2008; Vince, 2001). It is often that through the control and manipulation of various organizational resources, rhetorical and interpretative devices (Coopey, 1995; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000), the more powerful groups who dictate how and to what extent the participants with inferior power are given access to fully participate in the socio-cultural practices performed by particular communities. Following Contu and Willmott (2003: 285), the understanding from a power perspective focuses on 'how communities and practices develop and are reproduced within a wider nexus of politico-economic relationships and institutions'.

In the context of inter-community interaction, the senior members may seek to impose the process of identification and interpretation on its own terms onto the new members through the continual strife for legitimacy and acceptance, since 'individuals and groups require legitimacy as a political resource that reinforces privileged power relations and secures the acquiescence and enthusiasm of others' (Currie and Brown, 2003: 566). As demonstrated in the study of flute-makers in Boston, the apprentice gradually developed the competence and tacit knowledge needed to produce the finest flutes under a long-term and concerted cultural induction process by working hand-in-hand with the master-craftsman on a daily basis over a long period (Cook and Yanow, 1993). 'As a new member, for example, is socialized or acculturated into the organization, learning by the organization takes place.' (1993: 381). What are considered as meaningful and legitimate roles and contributions are subject to the normative expectations and influences of powerful groups, who 'are likely to wield more power in the negotiation of meaning' (Roberts, 2006: 627) and 'can attempt to exercise control of the dialectic through their discursive facility linked to any combination of resources and any negative and positive sanctions of coercion and inducements on which they can draw' (Coopey, 1995: 198).

3 Methodology

The study employed a case-study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1989), because organizational learning is conceived as a socially constructed phenomenon (Elkjaer, 1999, 2003) with a wide range of actors involved. As we were interested in the situated influences of the identity development and negotiation processes, a qualitative approach was deemed to be a relevant tool to uncover the particulars of social interactions in its complexity among the IT technicians (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It also enabled us to examine the social learning processes from a micro view and reflect upon its meanings and evolving structures of the events in the case under study (Stake, 1995).

Our case subject, EDUA, is a tertiary education institution based in Macau, a special administrative region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. The top management decided to outsource part of the IT operations in the late 1990s, namely the help-desk center, for cost reduction and quality improvement purposes. Throughout these years, they went through different stages of development, moving from an enthusiastic beginning to a dismal ending when the whole IT outsourcing initiative was called to an end in 2005 because of various disappointing organizational and interpersonal issues. In the end, EDUA replaced all the outsourcing staff with in-house technicians. The whole project was considered as a failure from both the management and frontline employees' points of view.

Data collection was conducted in two phases. Phase one was undertaken from 2000 to 2005. During this period, the second author, while being an insider, acted as a natural participant by closely observing both the outsourcing and in-house IT technicians doing their work and engaging in conversations. She also participated in various informal and formal activities, including internal/external meetings, social gatherings and face-to-face interactions at every possible moment, and examined relevant documentation and meeting minutes. We kept detailed records of what had occurred and sorted out the relevant issues for further investigations. The aim of this phase was to have a general and background understanding of the actual implementation of the IT outsourcing project, which served as a backdrop for the subsequent in-depth interviews.

The second phase covered the period 2005 to 2006 during which we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with different parties concerned, including both management and frontline staff from both in-house and outsourcing firms (see Table 1). Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours and was recorded and transcribed verbatim for content analysis. The interview questions focused mainly on the evolving work relationships and interpersonal adjustment problems between these two different groups and the impact on organizational learning. We classified them as two communities of practice based on the two criteria suggested by Blackler et al. (2000), since they shared (1) established relations and (2) established activities.

We followed the recommendations of Handley et al. (2007) to approach the interview data and to find out both the apparent and the hidden tensions by analyzing the occasions of 'transitions' when individuals from different social relations interacted together. The interview data were analyzed under an iterative and emergent process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). First, we tried to give initial codes to the interview passages based on the factual descriptions of the interpersonal conflicts. These concepts were then clustered into broad categories for the identification of emergent themes and the comparison with existing literature on social identity and situated learning process. This approach highlighted our attempt to be both sensitive to the case particulars while also allowing the data to be matched with appropriate theories.

At the later stage, once we had developed a greater understanding about the case context, such as interpersonal adjustment problems and identity conflict between these two groups, we became more sensitive to the issues of identity confusion and reconciliation in communities of practice (Handley et al., 2007) by drawing more directly on the related literatures on social learning and power (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Vince, 2001; Wenger, 1998). The final stage of data analysis entailed the detailed examination across respondents and data sources (Yin, 1989), giving rise to further theoretical modifications until we had reached the stage of 'theoretical saturation' (Strauss, 1987).

4 Findings

The overall findings indicated that there was a significant identity gap between the outsourcing staff and the in-house workers, perpetuated by the presence of multiple identities leading toward the detachment of community identification and subsequent social isolation. We report our detailed findings in the following sections.

Table 1 Background of interviewees

Participants	Responsibilities	Gender	Affiliation
Department head 'H'	Initiator of the IT outsourcing project.	M	In-house staff
Deputy department head 'S'	The deputy department head manages both other in-house technical teams and the outsourced Help Desk.	M	In-house staff
Help Desk team manager 'T'	The Help Desk team manager helps oversee the daily operation of the unit consisting of both in-house employees and on-site support technicians.	M	In-house staff
Help Desk team member 'R'	The Help Desk team member is responsible for handling the daily service calls from various academic and administrative units.	M	In-house staff
Help Desk team member 'A'	The Help Desk team member is responsible for handling the daily service calls from various academic and administrative units.	M	In-house staff
Help Desk team member 'C'	The Help Desk team member is responsible for handling the daily service calls from various academic and administrative units.	F	In-house staff
Help Desk team member 'F'	He was affiliated to the former outsourcing team and performed the service calls.	M	Former outsourcing staff
Help Desk team member 'J'	A new recruit under the service contract system.	M	In-house staff
Help Desk team member 'E'	She has been responsible for dispatching service calls to both in-house employees and on-site outsourcing technicians.	F	In-house staff
On-site PC support technician 'W'	An on-site outsourcing technician performed the service calls for two years on the Help Desk.	M	Former outsourcing staff

Identity Conflicts

Judging from the viewpoints of both the in-house workers and the outsourcing staff (see Table 2), it was evident that both parties perceived a significant identity gap. The former viewed the outsourcing staff as cheap and in essence an easy human resource to perform routine tasks, whereas the latter considered themselves as professional and mobile, capable of handling different technological challenges and mastering the latest IT. These contrasting images and self-assumptions created unnecessary tension between the two communities, which was not easy to mitigate.

Both the in-house staff and the outsourcing technicians reported that they had difficulties coming to terms with the roles and responsibilities of the outsourcing technicians. The basic confusion centered on two issues, namely who they had considered to be the principal lead and what set of policies and regulations they ought to follow. The Deputy Department Head S once made the following comments;

> Being a full time staff, he/she only needs to report to his/her own organization. However, in addition to completing the tasks being assigned by the client organization, the outsourcing staff had to face the request from his/her company as well. It is inevitable that he/she will be torn between both parties when carrying out the duties as there might be two different sets of company policies influencing his/her decisions. Which mechanism or policy should an outsourcing staff follow?

This viewpoint was echoed by the frontline workers from both organizations. While team member F voiced his frustrations during his previous job tenure as an outsourcing staff at EDUA, another team member A also expressed the feeling of confusion arisen throughout the daily interactions with them as a consequence of different organizational practices.

> We had the feeling of being a 'sandwich-class'. Both parties required us to perform well. Our company reminded us to put them as the first priority, while EDUA also asked us to support the service calls with strong enthusiasm and professionalism. We had a feeling of being stuck in the middle. (Team member F)

> In our daily job, it is often found that outsourcing staff have their own ways of doing things. It is understandable, because the outsourcing company may have their own standard work procedures. However, when an outsourcing staff comes to EDUA, he/she thinks that it is inappropriate for him/her to follow our existing practices. This creates tension among some technicians. (Team member A)

In addition to the conflicts about who should be considered as the boss and what policies to follow, the outsourcing staff were not clear about who the customers were. Another team member C also mentioned:

> The major obstacle is that the outsourcing staff are often facing the dual requirements from both clients and customers. They consider us (EDUA) as the client employing their services, but they often forget that the final customers are our users. If there is a better idea in their mind that they are hired to serve our users, they should have better performance evaluation. But many users just think that we have hired cheap labors [sic] to save costs.

Table 2 Identity conflicts between outsourcing staff and in-house workers

Outsourcing staff's own perception	In-house workers' own perception
We are professionals and deserve respect from co-workers It is a question of whether the in-house workers will treat us properly. Some people just have an attitude that 'You are here to serve us!' and they don't consider us as IT professionals. Then, they give us no respect and unreasonable job demands. (Team member F)	**We expect readily accessible and cheap IT technicians** We seldom communicated with each other and did not get along well with each other. We may look down upon the outsourcing staff. We thought that they were here not for long. Even though an outsourcing staff was working very hard, we didn't actually care. (Deputy department head S)
We are here to learn! I had to leave. If I continue to work here, I can't learn anything new and further develop my knowledge. I had few opportunities to try on new thing. (Former outsourcing staff W)	**They are here to work, not to learn!** The reason for us to implement outsourcing is to employ the external IT technicians at low costs. I pay them to serve here, but I don't expect that they don't have the requisite knowledge. If I have to conduct training for you, why don't I employ our own staff and teach him? (Deputy department head S)
We should not stay long at the position If a person stays in a stable environment for a long time, his professional skills would deteriorate. It's normal that an individual will become bored when he has been performing the same job for a long time. He would have a strong desire for trying new things and switching jobs. We have this kind of thought too. (Team member F)	**They should stay at their position as long as possible!** It took us a while to know how competent a new outsourcing staff was when one had arrived at EDUA. But once we developed mutual understanding, it was often about time for them to leave. It would take quite a long time for another new staff to become familiar with our work requirements, but the knowledge and skills would be gone after he/she left. (Team member A)
Only the incompetent ones will join EDUA The competent technicians will stay in the outsourcing company for handling the in-house projects. Only those who can't fit in will be sent to EDUA ... It is more or less like being expelled from the company. (Former outsourcing staff W)	**Only competent staff will be welcome** We demand the outsourcing technicians to have good knowledge or they will be replaced immediately. (Outsourcing proposal)

Without the intention of setting up a long-term relationship in EDUA, both the outsourcing staff and in-house workers failed to establish a common identity as envisioned in the literature (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Thus, a feeling of detachment prevailed among the outsourcing staff, putting them in a marginal position and creating multiple but peripheral identities. As reflected upon the difficult periods by team member E:

> Since the outsourcing technicians were not directly recruited by EDUA, they might lack a sense of belonging. They thought that they were being isolated from the rest of us and lack enthusiasm. The outsourcing members would say '*they*' instead of '*we*' when dealing with the end users.

During our field observation, there were some monthly gatherings being arranged to facilitate internal communication within the department. But it was evident that both parties stayed only with their own group and did not talk with each other actively. Reflecting on why there was such a response, team member F gave the following answer:

> We felt we were just *outsiders*. It was not easy to integrate with other people and the overall atmosphere was not right. It seemed that there was a boundary dividing us. After all, they were a group of people, and we were another team.

Power Inequalities

The by-product of identity conflict is an asymmetric distribution of power. This was not difficult to explain as power was very much derived from identity. The outsourcing staff, who were viewed as 'outsider' and 'cheap labor' by their IT colleagues, were accorded a lower hierarchical status and were given less social recognition, reflecting the acrimonious relationship between the two groups. This was reflected by team member C on the perceived change of work status of team member F after becoming the permanent staff.

> I think there was an image of 'master and servant' before. They [outsourcing staff] were treated as some kind of cheap labor only, not colleagues ... But the relationship is better now as his [team member F] identity is different. Now we are partners at work. It might be due to the change of his identity. There is definitely a notion of hierarchy.

The Deputy Department Head S also voiced the same issue while he was discussing the phenomenon that the full-time staff always asked the outsourcing staff to handle some labor works for them. But this idea was somehow reinforced by the management unintentionally while the supervision and control of outsourcing staff were delegated to the in-house staff.

> The daily supervision of these people [outsourcing staff] was in charge by our colleagues ... If there were someone to assign, they [permanent staff] didn't need to do it by themselves. For example, if I could assign the tasks to somebody, I certainly would not do it.

The common perception about the inferior status of the outsourcing staff could best be summarized by the statements of team member C in the following way:

> Frankly speaking, there was a common feeling among them: All the responsibilities were given to us. We do all the work and take all the blames [sic].

During the daily review meetings, which lasted from 10 to 15 minutes, all team members were present to report the problems of service calls and to discuss possible solutions. However, the meetings appeared to be another channel for the permanent staff to exercise control and dominance over the outsourcing workers. As seen by a former outsourcing colleague, team member E, 'the meeting was like a reporting from the junior staff instead of a genuine and mutual idea exchange'.

Apart from having a low hierarchical status, the outsourcing staff was also given limited access to information and decision-making power. They had to rely on the permanent staff to pass on relevant information and to receive instructions from the higher authority in order to complete the tasks. Sometimes they felt helpless and powerless.

> I had no power to make decisions. I could not give any recommendations to the final users. I just tell them: I don't know. I have to check with our colleagues first before I can give you the answers. I can't decide things by myself.

Impact on Organizational Learning

The foregoing results revealed that the IT department of EDUA encountered the challenges in obtaining the outsourcing staff's full participation and willingness to invest their energy and effort in cooperating with the in-house workers because of identity conflicts and power inequalities. As a result, they could not get the outsourcing staff well integrated into the daily work activities, which in turn created obstacles to the learning and knowledge sharing processes.

The differences in their self-assumptions regarding how they perceived themselves and identified with others had caused tension and apathy on the social relationship between these two communities of practice. They shared no common repertoires, languages, or communication channels (Carlile, 2002, 2004; Swan et al., 2007) to mutually engage in the joint work processes, which undermined the potential of any effective knowledge sharing. The reluctance to join group-based problem-solving sessions was more evident, since both communities viewed each other as alienated members and clung onto their own groups. There was neither any incentive to approach the other group for help nor to share what they had already known. They would rather keep the problems to themselves. Team members F commented on the seriousness of the issue:

> I am an outsourcing staff only. It's none of my business. I complete the tasks, make things work, and then it is ok. My responsibility is over. Don't bother me for the others. [Team member F]

Even though there were some regular meetings from time to time for the purpose of knowledge sharing, those efforts appeared to be in vain as both parties considered them as ceremonial with no practical value. Team member R reported what usually occurred during the meetings:

> Our in-house team had a lot of discussions every meeting. We had different ways of solving the problems and we would normally present and debate them in the meetings. If we

> did not share the ideas, how could we mention improvement? However, the outsourcing staff are not as enthusiastic as we are.

As a consequence, the failure to establish and preserve a common identity between these two groups of IT technicians created a negative learning impact on the organization, which resulted in a tacit knowledge loss. The outsourcing staff were isolated from the group conversations, leaving their idiosyncratic and situated knowledge (Von Hippel, 1994) about handling customers' on-site problems intact. This destroyed the IT department's original intention to maximize the usage and benefits of the outsourcing function.

> From the outsourcing service, we got some additional talent. But their skills and knowledge cannot be shared and retained in our organization. When a person leaves, his knowledge will be gone too. The outsourcing staff helped us to solve the problems. However, they did not let us know how to identify, solve and prevent the problems. [Team member R]

5 Conclusion and discussion

The case study reported a failed experience for EDUA to outsource its IT department. Both in-house and outsourcing teams remained as two largely independent entities with minimal degree of interaction, despite a deliberate and sustained attempt by top management to forge a common goal and mind. It was shown to be difficult for the newcomers, or outsourcing staff, to participate in the existing network of practice (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002) and to gain acceptance from the more experienced, in-house staff, because of differences in identification and power relations. They tended to possess an antagonistic attitude toward each other, which as time went on created a sense of isolation, and resulted in a breakdown of emotional and social ties.

The findings presented in this article demonstrate the identity conflicts and subsequent social adjustment problems experienced by both the in-house and the outsourcing IT teams, which lead us to query the notion of 'manageability' of communities of practice (Swan et al., 2002; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) and to explore the relationship between power and identity (Blackler and McDonald, 2000; Brown and Starkey, 2000; Coopey, 1995, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Vince, 2001). This apparent managerial failure in merging two separate communities of practice with conflicting identities has reinforced our assumptions about the situated (Gherardi et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991) and political (Hayes and Walsham, 2001) characters of learning. People differ in their abilities and bases of power to engage each other in the situation of complex activities, thus generating unnecessary tensions and struggles.

So it is interesting to see how the intercommunity relations were structured and sustained to the advantage of the more powerful group (Contu and Willmott, 2003). Instead of creating an 'aesthetic space' (Coopey, 1998: 375) in which each individual has an equal opportunity to voice their opinions, it is surprising to discover how one community of practice had become obsessed with the use of various political processes in order to achieve dominance and perpetuated their power asymmetry over the others (Blackler et al., 2000). In the case of EDUA, the in-house team was engaged in a continuous effort to control how the outsourcing team made sense of their lives and constructed their social identities. They undertook various activities to author a 'master and servant' identity narrative by stipulating the desirable performance behavior and clarifying the role and responsibilities expected from the outsourcing staff, who appeared as being marginalized during the daily work activities. Their emphasis on the implementation of various micro-social processes to assert dominance over the outsourcing team throughout the participation had revealed the political nature underlining the identity construction process (Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

The study suffers from two main limitations. Similar to any single-case study, the findings were somehow limited to the particulars of the IT department in the focal organization, EDUA. It cannot be generalized to the outsourcing of other services, such as cleaning and securities, in a wider context. Besides, as the IT outsourcing project in EDUA had been initiated a long time before, the researcher had difficulties locating the previous out-sourcing staff, who had already left the IT firm, for interviews. This may limit our capacity to gain a full and more balanced representation of the phenomenon.

As a conclusion, this research only serves as a starting point for examining the impact of conflicting identities on organizational learning in the IT outsourcing context. However, there are other forms of IT outsourcing in practice, including selective outsourcing versus total outsourcing (Lacity and Hirschheim, 1993), onsite outsourcing versus offsite outsourcing (Prahalad, 2005) and outsourcing of routine activities versus outsourcing of critical activities (Grover et al., 1996). More studies should be conducted on these types of outsourcing before a general theory can be concluded.

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