

# FINDING THE PACE OF THE LEARNING PRACTICE OF PURPOSEFUL ORGANISING

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose with this paper is to understand how the creation of a new purposeful organising within the public sector developed by exploring the nature of the learning practice that was deployed in an empirical case. Five patterns of actions were found in the empirical material that served different purposes in relation to the rhythm of the learning practice. The patterns of actions are in this paper called *navigating*, *planning*, *communicating* and *documenting*. These four were recurring and synchronized in time through a fifth, overarching pattern of actions called *pacing*. The paper contributes to the understanding of learning in organising by expanding our knowledge of how patterns of actions are synchronized temporally in a learning practice.

## KEYWORDS

Learning in organising, practice, patterns of actions, rhythm.

## INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR A PURPOSEFUL ORGANISING

Never before have organisations had the need to engage in purposeful organising as much as today. Times are turbulent with private sector organisations having to deal with the consequences of globalisation and public sector organisations facing growing needs as migrants from unsafe areas of the world seek shelter. In Sweden the situation is pressing. About 163 000 migrants sought for asylum in Sweden during 2015, and almost 35 000 were unaccompanied refugee children<sup>2</sup>. This enormous increase (about 100 per cent compared to 2014) in refugees arriving to Sweden was, and still is, a challenge for local governments and the demand to develop new flexible routines for managing the administrative processes more effectively, have become apparent and vital. Representatives from public sector organisations express an urgent need for co-operation; to work across organisational borders and to find new ways forward to increase social sustainability and social cohesion.

This is however not easy. The ideas of “New Public Management” (NPM) still influence the organising of the public sector in Sweden and various control- and management systems have reinforced interorganisational as well as intraorganisational borders, making co-operation difficult (Almqvist, 2004; Gruening, 2001). There are several attempts within the public sector to engage in purposeful organising, i.e. the creating of organisations that better caters for the needs of the public by embracing the ideas that changed ways of working, innovative thinking and effective learning experiences would provide opportunities to create sustainable organisations that can better cope with the societal challenges both in the current situation and in the future (Osborne, Radnor, Vidal, and Kinder, 2014; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013). Some municipalities in Sweden are using a concept where public organisations and non-profit organisations jointly define a local issue and agree on what is needed to manage or

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<sup>2</sup> [Migrationsverket.se](http://Migrationsverket.se) (The Swedish Migration Agency) 2016-10-25.

resolve it. Others create networks with employment offices to enhance the working possibilities for unemployed citizens. A third example is the organising of meeting places in co-operation with sports clubs and educational associations in order to facilitate migrants' integration<sup>3</sup>.

Fascinated by this development, the authors undertook an empirical study of yet another example of purposeful organising; the development of a new organisational structure for a more flexible organising in a large Swedish municipality where the citizens as well as various organisations outside the public organisation were to be involved.

The purpose with this paper is to understand how the creation of a new purposeful organising within the public sector developed by exploring the nature of the learning practice that was deployed to drive the process forward. A practice-based view on learning in organising focuses on what individuals do, for example when working and solving problems together, and in that way create new and shared knowledge (Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella, 1998) and this perspective seemed suitable since it focuses on the actions and interactions that enabled the project managers to perform their daily tasks in a social context (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2009; Nicolini, 2013; Tagliaventi and Mattarelli, 2006) when working on the project.

## **LEARNING IN ORGANISING**

Practice theories have emerged from several different traditions, especially from social sciences and sociology, each with its own history, terminology and basic assumptions (Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Von Savigny, 2001). One reason for its popularity, is because of the possibility to explain various social phenomena such as knowledge, meaning, learning and power (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi et al., 1998; Nicolini, 2013). In the twentieth century the work situation was stable and methods for bureaucratic settings were used in organisational studies, but in the later part of the twentieth century the working conditions changed from blue collar work to white collar, the service sector increased and the clear boundaries between groups decreased (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Therefore the interest in the concept of practice was renewed and studies on learning in working practices increased around the year 2000 (Gherardi, 2015). The practice-based perspective was understood as a useful perspective for understanding "...what humans actually 'do' when managing, making decisions, strategizing, organizing, and so on..." (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, and Yanow, 2009, p 1309).

Since then the understanding of practices in research on learning in organisations has developed and changed from understanding communities of practices as a container of knowledge where the community itself is prior to its activities (Lave and Wenger, 1991), to the understanding of practices as "the activities themselves that generate a community [that] form the 'glue' which holds together a configuration of people, artefacts and social relations" (Gherardi, 2009).

Whereas working groups are formed and often coordinated by the managers of an organisation (Aronsson et al., 2012), practices are shaped by interactions of various kinds, and practices are therefore not limited by the boundaries of the organisation. Practices include actions and activities forming patterns of actions (Czarniawska, 2010). Important elements of practices are patterns of actions including individuals' story telling and retelling; cooperation and shared conclusions; decisions and results of the work (Brown and Duguid, 1991). It is the recurring patterns of actions in practices that

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<sup>3</sup> LOSSA, Publication from The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR (2015).

enable both researchers and practitioners to recognize them as a specific practice (Gherardi, 2001, 2009).

But a practice is not just an array of recurring patterns of actions performed by skilled practitioners. Practitioners' common sense, the common way to knowing how something should be done and how to act upon things, are another dimensions of practices – in fact, this is what forms the patterns of actions that constitute the practice (Czarniawska, 2010). Knowledge is created and developed by people as they work together (Gherardi, 2015). The following quote by Gherardi sums up our view on practices:

A working practice is not only a set of activities performed by knowledgeable practitioners, but it is also a common way of doing and knowing what to do. Practitioners' sense of what is a practice is a felt sense of what is appropriate, what should be done next, when to act, and when something is correct or incorrect, effective or not, good and beautiful, or not. Knowing is something people do together (Gergen, 1985) and it is done in every mundane activity, in organizations when people work together.

Gherardi, 2015, p. 16

With this perspectives, studies of structures and hierarchies become less important when focusing on what individuals do in an organisation, e g when making decisions, organise or learn (Gherardi, 2009, 2015; Miettinen et al., 2009; Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow, 2003). Instead, the practice-based approach to organisational phenomena (e g learning) enables the researcher to closely study how individuals perform their daily tasks (Barley and Kunda, 2001; Gherardi, 2015; Miettinen et al., 2009; Schatzki et al., 2001).

Practices, where learning and knowledge is situated, can also be described as ongoing social processes between individuals in organisations. Organisations can in an analogous way be understood as ongoing processes, constantly changing without the limitations of time and space in a continuously changing world (cf Chia, 1995; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Langlely, Smallman, Tsoukas, and Van de Ven, 2013; Sergi and Hallin, 2011).

One way to emphasize learning as an ongoing process is the use of a vocabulary where verbs are highlighted, rather than nouns. The notion of *learning in organising* is used in this paper to put the emphasis on the patterns of actions that create the knowledge used in organising (Gherardi, 2001). In a similarly way the concept of organising is used in order to focus on processes – not structures; i e the patterns of actions as they emerge. (Czarniawska, 2004; Weick, 1979)

## **A CASE-STUDY OF THE ROLE OF LEARNING PRACTICE IN PURPOSEFUL ORGANISING**

### **The case**

In order to explore how learning may be understood in purposeful organising we draw on a case study of a re-organisation process within a municipality in Sweden; a process that was initiated in 2014 and that affected the working situation for about 300 employees. The aim of the project was to develop a new, purposeful organising consisting of parts of the municipal organisation in order to improve internal collaboration within the municipality as well as the co-operation with external stakeholders such as companies and citizens. The ultimate goal was to better meet societal needs and to make better use of the positive energy and inspiration in civil society on the local level and thereby achieve a social sustainable society. Two project managers' were assigned responsibility for preparing and implementing the new

organising and a new approach to how to best manage current and forthcoming societal challenges.

The work to prepare and implement the new organising ideas was recognized as an 17-month project and consequently a steering committee was assigned to the project. As there was no fixed project plan, the planning of the project managers' work developed iteratively according to the response they got in discussions in meetings with each other, as well as with other stakeholders.

In addition to the steering committee, the project managers organised a team of the managers from the units affected by the re-organising. The project managers had regular meetings with the steering committee, the team of managers and other groups of professionals with special knowledge in certain areas, for example economy, HR and strategic issues. In addition, weekly meetings were held between the project managers. In these meetings they discussed daily issues and shared information between each other that was relevant for future decisions of the project.

Through meetings, the project managers appreciated the opportunities to learning and knowledge sharing. By discussing propositions and suggestions with each other and with the people in the different groups, the project managers also made use of the participants' feedback on ideas and issues concerning the process of re-organising in their learning processes.

In the final phase of the project two pilot districts were selected as sites where the new purposeful organisation was to be launched. Today, the new ideas developed in the project are currently tested in these districts. A team for each district has been formed, led by two process leaders, with the aim to contribute with their knowledge concerning the local resources and the citizens' needs; needs that have to be met in the endeavour of fulfilling the aim and purpose of the project – to create a purposeful organising in order to become a socially sustainable society.

### **Collection of empirical material**

Given the focus of the study – learning in organising – we chose to focus empirically on the learning practice of the two project managers that lead the work described above. Empirical data was gathered in twelve weekly meetings with the project managers in which they described and reflected upon the progression of the project. Through the unstructured set-up of the meetings, these themselves enabled the project managers to reflect on their learning in organising-process as they shared thoughts and ideas with each other and with the researcher that was present.

Practices can be studied and analysed in two ways: from outside or inside (Gherardi, 2009). When studying and analysing a practice from from inside the researcher's focus is on the knowledge and methods used inside a practice. Our study is from outside since we understand practices as patterns of actions. Our understanding of actions is however not only what individuals do (visible actions) but also what is being said and how language is used in interactions and dialogues (Czarniawska, 2004; Czarniawska, 2005/2015).

Data was also collected through participant observations in 17 meetings to which different groups in the municipality were invited by the project managers as part of the process of setting up of the new organisation. These meetings were of different kinds and were held for different purposes. Participating in these meetings were a team of the managers from the units affected by the re-organisation (in table 1 called manager team meetings), different groups of professionals and the steering committee. Most meetings

lasted for one hour and have been digitally recorded (i.e. when it has been possible) and transcribed. All meetings were also documented through the taking of notes.

In total, empirical data was gathered during a ten months-period, between March and December 2015 (Table 1).

Month	Meetings
March	3 Weekly project managers meetings
	2 Steering committee meetings
	1 Workshop with employees
	1 Workshop with the manager team
April	1 Weekly project managers meeting
May	2 Weekly project managers meetings
June	2 Weekly project managers' meetings
August	1 Meeting with a group of professionals
	2 Manager team meetings
September	1 Weekly project managers meeting
	1 Manager team meeting
	1 Steering committee meeting
October	2 Weekly project managers meetings
	1 Steering committee meeting
	1 Manager team meeting
	1 Meeting with a group of professionals
November	1 Steering committee meeting
	1 Manager team meeting
	1 Meeting with a group of professionals
December	1 Steering committee meeting
	1 Workshop with a group of professionals
	1 Weekly project managers' meeting

Table 1. Observed meetings during the project, 2015.

In addition to the observation of and participating in meetings, various documents regarding the process have also been collected, such as notes and PowerPoint presentations. We have also been able to take part of most e-mails concerning the re-organisation project. The text is anonymised so that neither the name of the municipality where the study was carried out, nor the names of the project managers, the people who participated in the various meetings or geographic locations are mentioned by their real names. In this paper we call the project managers Anna and Bosse.

The analysis has been carried out through the lens of a practice-based understanding of learning in organising where the re-organisation process was understood as a setting for learning and inspiration. In order to understand the learning practice that was developed by the project managers when developing the new organising we focused on the actions' regularity, i.e. the patterns that emerged, and the common understanding that have made the actions recurrent (Gherardi, 2009).

We started the analysis by listening to all recorded meetings and completed the written notes when any information that was missing. This was followed by a systematic reading of the material in chronological order to elucidate patterns of actions related to learning, i.e. learning practices. When writing about these, as they emerged out of the reading, it became necessary to go back to the data to confirm or nuance the writing, as well as to practice theory, and an iterative process followed that may be described as abductive (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2014).

Initially eight different patterns of actions were discovered and identified. To facilitate the analysis process we used different colours for the different patterns and marked quotes that matched the patterns with matching colours. Quotes were then selected and checked with the recorded material to avoid misquotings and finally placed in chronological order per theme.

After finalising this, it became clear that the learning practice that drove the learning in organising the purposeful organising forward was constituted by five patterns of actions. The five patterns of actions will be described below, highlighted through key empirical illustrations in the form of quotes.

## **RESULTS: THE PACING OF THE LEARNING PRACTICE THROUGH FIVE PATTERNS OF ACTIONS**

Out of the five patterns of actions that emerged through the abductive analysis process described above four seemed to be important in organising the purposeful organisation, i.e., that were related to the objective of the project managers' work. These were: *navigating*, *planning*, *communicating* and *documenting*. These patterns of actions were recurring and synchronized in time through a fifth, overarching pattern of actions that we call *pacing*, inspired by the project managers who used this expression when talking about their actions. In the following we describe the patterns of actions and provide empirical illustrations of each of them.

### **Navigating**

The navigating-pattern involved staying in tune with the rest of the organisation in order to identify and make the identification and making use of people, functions, skills and processes relevant for the managing of the project as well as expressing themselves orally and in writing. This pattern of actions was needed since the context in which the project took place, the municipality, is a politically controlled organisation which made understanding the officials' politicians' as well as the officials' views and actions essential for the progression ensuring of resources for the project.

Below one of the project managers, for example, talks about how providing the politicians with too detailed information may give them a feeling of having enough information to decide project matters on a detailed level. That could in turn lead to changes in the officials' original proposals with consequences beyond the politicians understanding and knowledge, according to the project managers. Anna's conclusion is therefore that information given to politicians should not be too specific:

Anna: It is difficult. Because the more specific and clear you are, the larger is the risk that the politicians interfere on a detailed level... What I feel worried about is when they go in too soon and want to remove parts, instead of keeping with the larger picture.<sup>4</sup>

Here we see how Anna expresses the need to navigate the project in such a way that the politicians do not hinder its development, since she believes that this will impede the project.

To be able to navigate seemed to be particularly important when unforeseen problems arose that needed to be solved. One such unforeseen problem was an unexpected cost saving program of 100 000 000 SEK (about €10 000 000) for 2016 that affected the whole municipality and thus also the re-organisation project. One of the project managers explained below how they had been navigating by discussing with people in

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<sup>4</sup> Weekly meeting 03-16-2015

the municipality, by taking one step at the time and sometimes also by changing a planned direction. In the quote, she even uses the term “navigate” to describe her and the other project manager’s actions:

Anna: The process has been cut into pieces [shows with her hands] in time and space. We have talked a lot, in many ways, both officially and unofficially. There have been many... we have had to ‘cook by location’, by-and-by. We haven’t been able to plan, but we have had to navigate. [We have thought] ‘here we must do a bit different’...<sup>5</sup>

This quote shows how the project managers learn by talking to several people in various contexts and situations and thus were able to choose new and more effective ways in their navigation towards a new organising compared to if they had simply followed a pre-set project model.

The navigation pattern also included an understanding of the importance of tactics and strategies, which can be linked to the fact that the two project managers sustain positions as strategists, and usually work with such issues on a high organisational level. They thus had a general understanding of how the municipal organisation works that enabled them to make decisions about which specialists in the municipal organisation were to be approached for different issues and when. Below the project managers explain in a manager team meeting the importance of understanding the political side of the project as they were discussing which parts of the municipality should be selected as the two pilot districts:

Anna: We have a lot of knowledge, but tactics are important. Our choice [of districts] is also a tactical question that we mustn’t underestimate. There is tactics in this.

MTM1<sup>6</sup>: What do you mean ‘tactics’?

Bosse: Let’s call it ‘politics’. We need to think carefully... We can’t deny that there is politics that you need to consider, but it mustn’t control us..<sup>7</sup>

Here, we see how the project managers illuminate the importance of appreciating the role of politics and being tactical in their navigation throughout the project.

## Planning

A central task for the project managers was to plan when and in what order they were to take various steps in the project. The planning took place in the weekly meetings as well as in spontaneous meetings whenever they felt the need to discuss with each other. The quote below represent one of these planning discussions at a weekly meeting in the beginning of the project:

Bosse: ...think about the next step, but then I think we need to set a number of parallel projects in motion. How are they to be staffed? How are the support systems to be organised? How do we coordinate them? How do we provide the right support to those in the field? How do we mobilize the people? How do we create knowledge about how to work?<sup>8</sup>

Here, Bosse uses the planning pattern of actions to explore questions pertaining to the organising of the project in relation to others, in order to learn and understand the different activities that need to be organised; when they should be carried out and by whom (i.e. what kind of competence they will be needing in the project).

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<sup>5</sup> Weekly meeting 25-05-2015

<sup>6</sup> Manager Team Member no 1

<sup>7</sup> Manager team meeting 27-08-2015

<sup>8</sup> Weekly meeting 18-05-2015

The planning pattern of actions involved gaining a holistic view of the entire project and the organising as a whole as well as gaining an understanding of how the organisational parts and the whole influenced each other and how this facilitated the project. In another weekly meeting in the beginning of the project one of the project managers stressed the importance to understand when during the project things should be done and by whom:

Bosse: We must create some sort of process maps showing all the different parts [of the project] in order to see how they are connected, when and how [...]. We need support in order to find the right path, when things are to be done, who is to do it and how is it to be done and so on. Otherwise there is a risk that we loose focus and do the wrong things. That's where we are when it comes to planning. I think we should try to do that this week.<sup>9</sup>

The quote above shows how Bosse is planning by trying to get an overview of the whole project in order to be able to understand how the organisation could be affected by the new organising.

Planning also involved prioritizing between issues and dividing the work between the project managers in order to enable the daily actions to run efficiently and smoothly. Examples of daily tasks were: creating PowerPoint presentations, writing memos and emails, keeping each other informed about dates and times for important meetings where the decisions could affect the progression of the project, organise the meetings they found to be necessary for the project etc. In a weekly meeting in the beginning of the summer one of the project managers describes that they had defined some tasks that needs to be taken care of in August, after the summer holidays:

Anna: Bosse and I package things. We have defined a number of sub-tasks. We are in a planning stage now. Planning, what do we need to do? Nothing will happen until August. Then we start working with six-seven sub-processes.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Anna describes how she and Bosse plan by defining sub-tasks and prioritizing between different activities. In this way, they navigate between the various activities that need to be implemented, positioning the activities in relation to each other.

### **Communicating**

External communication, i e inspiring, informing, discussing, listening and establishing new ideas, were key actions in the communicating pattern of actions. The project managers also valued their internal, mostly oral, communication as an important tool. Their weekly meetings and their dialogues in between these meetings about various issues and dilemmas that emerged during the project facilitated navigating and planning. In the end of the project the project managers reflect upon their internal communicating process:

Anna: I mean that what we have achieved during this year hadn't come as far if there hadn't been two of us who could discuss and help and support each other when it has been hard and difficult.

Bosse: Lena [the boss of the project managers'] has been a great support and had helped us see new things and has never questioned our way of working.<sup>11</sup>

It is obvious that they have found a way of working as colleagues and that they feel that their internal communication as well as their communication with their boss has included learning (i e "see new things") moved the project forward.

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<sup>9</sup> Weekly meeting 16-03-2015

<sup>10</sup> Weekly meeting 08-06-2015

<sup>11</sup> Meeting with a group of professionals 02-12-2015



In addition, their internal dialogues supported and encouraged them when problems needed to be solved. Below the project managers discuss how to communicate the effect of the cost savings at the same time as trying to mobilise employees to get involved in the new organising:

- Bosse: The decision is to be made on Wednesday – we must think through how this is to be communicated. We have a pedagogical problem since [the municipality] at the same time needs to save 100mSEK. It'll be tough for these departments [that also are involved in the project]. On the one hand we are supposed to focus our resources and create social sustainability in the city, on the other hand we reduce our budget. This is tricky. That's where we are.
- Anna: Yes, how do we do this really? We are not at all there. It's about a first, initial work....
- Bosse: Mmm...
- Anna: ...about how we are to formulate the strategy and things for this work in the long run. That's one part, the other is how we are to set up the organisation and there there are two parallel processes that must be set in motion.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the project managers discuss the communication challenge that they are facing a time when the municipality needs to cut expenses, while at the same time expecting people to stay involved in re-organising processes like the one they are responsible for.

Another form of communicating was confirming each other's arguments or helping each other to discuss different issues in various meetings. Below is an example of a meeting with a group of professionals where the project managers confirm each other's statements:

- Anna: But we don't need an expressed political decision. That's how we see it.
- Bosse: Yes, that's how we see it.
- Anna: We need a political "nod", but not a decision.
- Bosse: Exactly. So that's what we are trying to get this week..<sup>13</sup>

Above, Bosse confirms and underlines Anna's statement; making them appear in agreement about what is on the agenda for them as project managers.

The communication with the steering committee and with the manager team often served as an opportunity for information about the current situation in the project. The meetings enabled them to become involved in the progression of the project and the project managers gained the new input (knowledge) they needed from the groupmembers to make proper decisions in order to develop the project further. The quote below is from a workshop with a group of employees involved in the new organising and shows how one of the project managers urges the group to discuss their opinions about opportunities and threats regarding the new organising:

- Anna: We want your input. You are all here because you work with the citizens in different ways. You are to discuss opportunities and risks both for the citizens and for you as employees.<sup>14</sup>

Here, Anna uses the communicating pattern of actions to involve employees and also to make use of their input (learn) for the progression of the project.

## Documenting

Documenting was about managing "material" aspects of the project i.e the creating of documents, reports and PowerPoint-presentations; the writing of memos and protocols,

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<sup>12</sup> Weekly meeting 18-05-2015

<sup>13</sup> Meeting with a group of professionals 26-10-2015

<sup>14</sup> Workshop 25-03-2015

and the sending of emails. The project managers' documentation pattern of actions also included preparing and documenting meetings, writing propositions and draft decisions. The quotation below is from a meeting with the manager team and illustrates the project managers' decision to write a draft for the next meeting. This kind of intention was frequently expressed by the project managers before the ending of a meeting, such as in the following example:

Bosse: Let's do so...we develop a draft so what we have something to discuss next time we meet in this group.<sup>15</sup>

At each meeting with the management team and steering committee the project managers used PowerPoint-presentations to support the discussions. This was much appreciated by the participants as shown in the quote below:

MTM2<sup>16</sup>: A question: will you distribute the slides later?  
Anna: Yes, we will.  
MTM2: Good!<sup>17</sup>

The various documents and presentations supported the development of the project, primarily since different concepts and abbreviations enabled a common understanding of the project for the project managers as well as for the group members. In the excerpt below a steering committee member does not appreciate the project managers' formulation as clear enough:

SCM1<sup>18</sup>: It's important that it's a clear task. Not vague; many people are to work with this and understand it.  
Bosse: It will be difficult to be clear and specific on a general level. It will have to be expressed in the specification of the function. That's why the strategic dialogue is important. I think it needs to be done in steps.  
SCM1: Mmm  
Bosse: Do we need to concretize this? Maybe we need to develop a suggestion that you can react to when we know that you are thinking like this.<sup>19</sup>

Here, Bosse expresses the project managers' willingness to concretize the issue further in their efforts to accomplish specific and clear formulations. In this way the project managers enhance their learning by developing the documenting pattern of actions and adjusting the formulation of the suggestion to what is understood as a clear formulation by the employees.

### **Pacing**

The four learning patterns of actions introduced above were linked together in a rhythm or a pace, forming the basis for the development of a fifth, overarching pattern of actions that we have called "pacing". The pacing of the patterns of actions depended on the status of the project in terms of what kind of issues that were important to work with and which needs were to be met at particular points in time (e.g. finding ways to overcome problems and challenges that arose, dealing with deadlines for various activities, providing information or documenting the project). In a weekly meeting one of the project managers stresses the importance of keeping the organisation together and to coordinate the project's parallel processes:

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<sup>15</sup> Manager team meeting 11-11-2015

<sup>16</sup> Manager Team Member no 2

<sup>17</sup> Manager team meeting 27-08-2015

<sup>18</sup> Steering Committee Member no 1

<sup>19</sup> Steering committee meeting 21-09-2015

Anna: We have agreed upon the most important thing – we have made a decision! With that we can be specific. What does this mean for the organising of this municipality... ? Things are happening already. Then it's about how we pace it. We talked about it already in the steering committee and in the manager team meeting. Now it's about keeping the organisation together so that people don't run in different directions. [...] We must coordinate the parts.<sup>20</sup>

Anna talks here about coordinating which is one part of pacing. Pacing the other patterns of actions were a way for the project managers to do the “right things” in the “right order”, involving the synchronising and monitoring of parallel processes within as well as outside the project. The work with the city's brand strategy is an activity outside the project, but the strategy affects what the departments and units in the project may be called. During a steering committee meeting the following discussion illustrates the pacing pattern of actions:

Anna: How may this be paced with the work with the city's brand strategy? We need to communicate, where we are in the work with the change of the names [some of the departments and units were to change names next year as a consequence of the reorganising].

Anna: We must do it in a coordinated way.

Bosse: Let's bring the question with us.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the quotes show how the project managers are striving for coordination and synchronization both with internal (inside the project) and external (outside the project) processes. Bosse's last comment shows that they need to investigate the question further to be able to use the pacing pattern of actions for coordination and synchronization.

There were also times when the project managers and the manager team members had different ideas regarding when activities should be completed in time. The selection of the two process managers for the pilot districts in the final phase of the project, was one of those times. A manager team member expresses her opinion about the negative effects of the late handling of personnel issues, particularly the selection of the process managers. The project managers did not have the same view and perceived the coordination and synchronization as adequate and were therefore interested in listening to her arguments:

MTM2 The issue about the process managers must be solved first. We need to speed up this now otherwise there is a risk that competent people will start looking for jobs elsewhere.

By appreciating the manager team members arguments the project managers enhanced their knowledge about the importance of the “personnel issue” which enabled the pacing of the final phase of the project.

The pacing of the other patterns of actions were also influenced by the project managers' experience (previous activities), their attention to the needs that arose and their ideas and learning processes regarding how these needs were to be met. In a weekly meeting in the beginning of the project one of the project managers expresses an overwhelming feeling regarding all the different needs they had identified as central for the progression of the project, needs that had to be met during the project as synchronized (i.e. paced) activities:

Bosse: The scope is so wide, financially, organisationally, coordination within the house [with other activities inside the organisation], the political process so that there is a risk that it's only what we work with and talk about when we really should talk about multi-

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<sup>20</sup> Weekly meeting, 25-05-2015

<sup>21</sup> Steering committee meeting 09-11-2015,

professional collaboration; collaboration across organisational borders; work close to the city-parts, meeting the citizen and meeting external forces and co-production issues.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Bosse shows his awareness of the large quantity of processes and activities that could affect the project and therefore have to be paced during the project's progression. The project managers' holistic view (i.e. planning) combined with the navigating, communicating and documenting patterns of actions, enables the pacing of the learning processes.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANISING OF THE PURPOSEFUL ORGANISATION BY UNDERSTANDING THE PACE OF THE LEARNING PRACTICE**

It was through the project managers learning process that the new organisation took shape, an observation supporting previous claims regarding the role of learning in relation to the renewal of organisations (Crossan, Lande, and White, 1999; Huzzard and Wenglé, 2007).

The organising process happened through a learning practice that included on-going interaction between the two project managers, and between them and the other actors involved in the dialogue about the need for a new different kind of purposeful organising (Gherardi et al., 1998; Raz and Fadlon, 2005)). In these meetings, the participants were able to understand each actors' part in the big picture and inspired to participate in and contribute to the creation of the new organising. The feedback and the engagement that the participants showed, inspired the project managers to further develop their ideas on how the new organisation was to be set up. Thus we understand the meetings as learning activities or "windows of opportunity", i.e. organised time for reflection and learning (Berends and Antonacopoulou, 2014).

The continuous learning enabled the project managers to use and develop the learning practices, but the rhythm or intensity of the patterns of actions that constituted the learning practice in the project varied over time. The pattern of actions of navigating was most intensely used in August and September, 2015, the pattern of actions of planning in May and June, 2015 and the pattern of actions of communicating from August to December, 2015. The pattern of actions of documenting was used throughout the whole project, following the rhythm of the project and did not vary over time.

We perceive the four patterns of actions as being linked to each other in a rhythm, through the pattern of actions of pacing. This pattern of actions facilitated the project managers' overview of internal and external processes and activities and enabled the synchronizing of the other patterns of actions.

But how to use the pacing pattern of actions was not always simple and obvious. Peoples' different perception of time sometimes led to difficulties in pacing. The occasion mentioned above about how and when the staff would be informed about their new positions as process managers, shows different opinions of how to pace. A manager felt that the information to the employees, especially about the process managers' position was delayed, while the project managers did not have the same perception of rhythm and how the activity would be synchronized in relation to the development of the project's rhythm.

Additionally, there were also activities outside the project manager's control that made the pacing complicated. As a consequence it affected the project's rhythm and made it slow down. This happened in the absence of decisions on various issues on the

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municipality level and when unexpected decisions were made, as the cost saving program for the whole municipal organisation. In other cases, when unexpected things happened, the project managers used their experience of practice from previous projects, i.e. their feeling of how things should be done (Gherardi, 2015), as a complement to the other patterns of actions, to achieve pacing.

By using the the four patterns of actions the project managers avoided unwanted and unexpected rhythms and as a consequence they were able to keep the activities in a desired rhythm (i.e. pacing). In conclusion, then, the four patterns of actions seemed to have the following role in pacing the learning practice:

- The project managers *navigated* to find relevant people who had influence over the activity that disturbed the rhythm.
- They *planned* for the future, to be able to manage pacing and to avoid that new and similar situations arose.
- They *communicated* with people with the influence over activities which interfered with the project's rhythm, and discussed with them in order to manage the unsynchronized activity to enable pacing.
- They *documented* the project process to involve and inform the manager team and steering committee of the project's current status, and also for making use of the experiences and learning from mistakes in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose with this paper was to understand how the creation of a new purposeful organising within the public sector developed by exploring the nature of the learning practice that was deployed. Five patterns of actions were found in the empirical material four of them: navigating, planning, communicating and documenting were recurring and synchronized in time through pacing, the fifth overarching pattern of actions. Pacing was used by the project managers responsible for the work, and together they constituted the rhythm of the learning practice that drove the purposeful organising forward.

Not only have we shown the role of dialogue, interaction and co-operation in learning, and how learning practices are performed as social and relational processes between individuals and between individuals and artefacts (Jacobs and Coghlan, 2005), but we also show how these practices were connected and synchronized in and across time. We believe that in this way we advance the understanding of learning in organising (Gherardi, 1999).

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