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A practice-based path for inquiring communities of practice: the case of a commercial port

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The paper focuses on the use of practice-based interventions for launching assessment processes in organizational work contexts. The case we present shows how we based an assessment process and organizational inquiry on work practices on a locally developed ethnomethodological approach, with the support of reflective tools.

The context is a global company that manages the biggest commercial port of Europe, based in South Italy. The managers asked for an assessment process involving middle managers working on the port wharf and aiming at the recognition of specific work practices and specialized knowledge, as well as career development purposes. The top management believed it could be strategic to address the lower levels of the organizational population, also in order to sustain organizational commitment by giving each worker the possibility to consider his own professional project. The hypothesis was that going deep inside people's experience of everyday work, it would have been possible to recognize specialized skills, knowledge construction and shared meanings around the job.

In order to assess the competences and knowledge circulating among the workers, we understood that it was not enough to just use generalist tools such as questionnaires. Instead, we planned to construct specific tools coming from the observation of the "real" side of the work organization, as it appeared while living in the large square in front of the port. We therefore replied to the request by firstly accepting to work with the team chiefs, considered a key organizational level.

Evaluation and assessment approaches, we believe, must be adjusted to different contexts and locally developed. Assessment processes in particular must be adapted so as to focus on the specific competences which develop locally, stemming from situated work practices. In our contribution we then sustain the hypotheses that general theories of knowledge management must be interpreted to meet local applications and we give an account of an assessment process which, starting with the recognition of general theories on knowledge assessment and work evaluation, focused on the study of specific work practices in order to develop specific, locally adapted assessment tools.

In the paper we explore the opportunities that this intervention provided us with, in terms of research and knowledge creation around the possibility to base assessment processes on the detection of work practices and on a process of reflection carried out with the organization around them.

During the process we first observed the workers in their natural context (the harbour) through an ethnomethodological approach (Gherardi 2006). Every piece of observation was noted down in

ethnographic papers (conversations, exchanges within teams and between workers, direct observation work practices). This inquiry allowed us to gather precious information about what people believed to be the most important strategies and actions in their work, and how they coped with critical situations or work conflicts.

The paper will point out what this case-study can tell around tacit knowledge in workplaces. Our assumption was in fact that inquiring and assessing in organization could not be done without considering the local and situated knowledges that characterize the real organizational context.

We will show and discuss what came out as a short and long term outcome of the time spent as ethnographers in the field. This constituted for us the initial possibility to think about (together with the top management) what sorts of other assessment tools seemed to be more appropriate in that context.

The detected practices allowed us to create new assessment tools with the organizational actors, validated by the workers that accompanied our process of organizational understanding. It thus started a shared process of inquiry and evaluation of the paths for further development and of the good practices and competences already in place. The paper explains the details of the methodologies and approaches used for conducting this process, and it develops a reflection on the power of the tradition of practice-based studies also in the assessment field.