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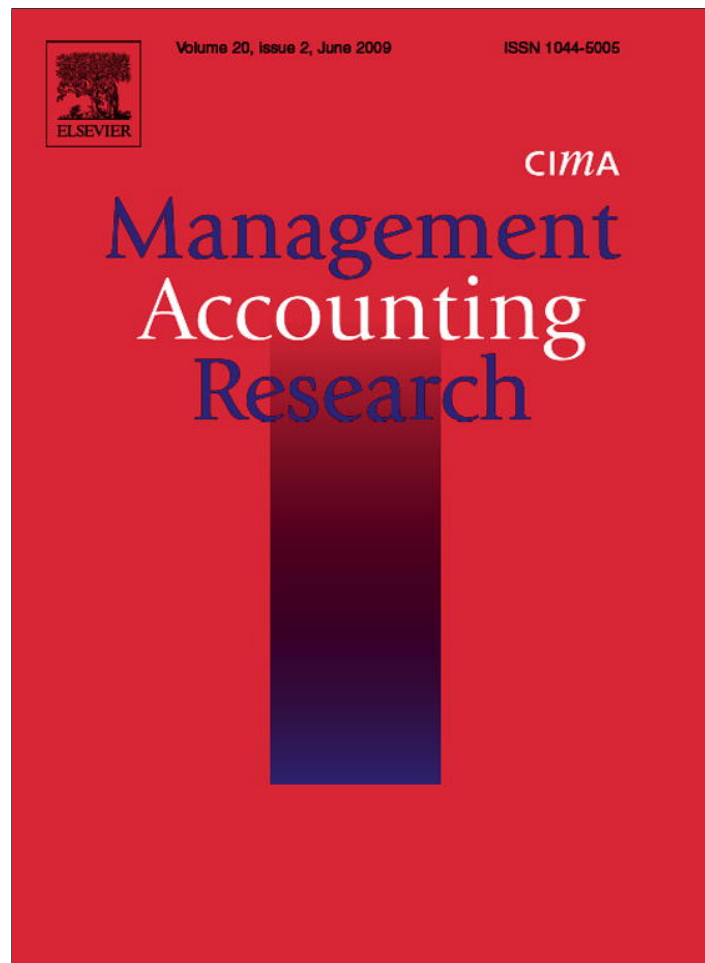
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Interactions between control and organizational learning in the case of a municipality A comparative study with Kloot (1997)

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ABSTRACT

Control systems are frequently described as hindering organizational learning. The reality is far more complex. In this framework this article tries to complete Kloot's work (1997) by coming up with a more comprehensive approach. Indeed, it highlights through an analysis grid the impact of controlling systems on the questioning of organizational methods and objectives. In this research on a local community our standpoint consists notably in taking account of the political aspect, more concretely, of the influence of elected representatives whose role is predominant in questioning the validity as well as the rationality of controlling tools.

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1. Introduction

Control systems are often viewed as hindering organizational learning. The apparent contradiction between organizing and learning has prompted Weick and Westley (1996) to describe organizational learning as an oxymoron. The way organizations deal with this contradiction is crucial: they have to face up to ever more rapid and unexpected environmental changes whilst keeping their operations under control. The relationship, even the interaction, between control and organizational learning is therefore becoming vital although it was hardly an issue when control only focused on surveillance.

However, though this issue is often studied (Lorino, 1995; Simons, 1995; Burlaud and Simon, 1997), it is seldom approached in a systematic way. Such an approach as identified by Bouquin (1999) is all the more promising

as the main source of information is provided by control systems (Huber, 1991). Only Kloot (1997)¹ has investigated this interaction further. She shows notably that the use of an appropriate control system can facilitate organizational learning driven by organizational changes. In the first place, analysing the relationships between control and learning should involve a theoretical synthesis that takes three important elements into consideration: (1) the extension of the notion of management control to that of organizational control; (2) the existence of both cybernetic and non cybernetic controls; (3) the fact that learning can be considered as organizational if it gives rise to the collective acquisition of knowledge and modifies the behaviour of the entity concerned (Huber, 1991)². This concept is particularly relevant in the case of a public organization: the fragmentation into centres of responsibility and in particular the vertical

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¹ Bollecker (2000, 2002) has also shown interest in this problem within the particular framework of the analysis of the management accountant's role in terms of organizational learning.

² Koenig (1994) asserts that the implementation of new skills rests either on the circulation of ideas and the dissemination of practices or on the creation of relationships between pre-existing entities.