

**Taking Stock,
Facing The Challenge**

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Organizational Learning Taking Stock and Facing the Challenge

The launch of this new journal seems an appropriate time to take stock of the field of organizational and management learning. At first sight one might be tempted to believe that we are celebrating the coming of age of this important area of study and practice. Certainly there is a lot of evidence in the worlds of business, academia and consultancy that the notions and ideas in this area are emerging prominently and being noticed and talked about. However, as somebody who has been involved in this area both as a researcher and practising consultant for the past 15 years, I believe that the field is still in its infancy and that the celebration is more akin to the transition of first leaving home and going to school.

So I believe that at this stage in the development of organizational and management learning it is a good time to explore both the dangers that are faced as the half-developed ideas go out into the world, and the major challenges that should form the curriculum of this next phase of learning and development.

The Dangers

The area of organizational learning has a burgeoning interest among progressive companies, academics and consultants as well as the professional press. Like many 'latest ideas' this is accompanied by a great deal of 'hype'. The notion becomes the latest visible solution, the intellectual product that will get you one step ahead of your competitors. All too quickly, rigorous exploration of the concept and the careful development of workable models give way to evangelism and

**Management
Learning**

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Publications (London,
Thousand Oaks, CA
and New Delhi)
Vol 25 Number 1
Pages 71-82

commercialization. A bandwagon is set in motion and many jump aboard. There is a great deal of evidence surrounding us about what happens to ideas that get turned into bandwagons, from the recent history of such ideas as organizational excellence, organizational culture or Total Quality Management (TQM). The important ideas become superficialized. In a drive for pithy nuggets of advice, the juices of the rich perceptions of the new perspective become dried out and no longer generative of new thinking and action. Ideas like TQM or 'Investors in People' start out as flavour of the year and end up as espoused badges of merit, worn for decoration. In some companies last year's answer is discarded as a failure as the latest bright solution is brought in as this year's fashion. Other organizations just layer one new idea on top of the other, or have multiple parallel but separate initiatives all happening at once. One manager recently said to me: 'Our organization is suffering from death by a thousand initiatives'. For us, as consultants involved in the field, it is important not to make the learning organization the thousand-and-first initiative, the final bright idea that breaks the organization's back.

Some organizations can take new perspectives which challenge old patterns of thinking and behaviour, and incorporate them in a way that turns them into another tool of control or another part of the corporate armoury. Anthropological insights into corporate life and culture which encouraged us to stand outside our taken-for-granted work realities and see them anew, were soon developed by some into guides on 'Getting control of the corporate culture'.

Peter Senge's (1990) radical and enlightening book on the art and practice of the learning organization, has this danger entwined within it. He provides us with exciting ways of perceiving organizations and their problems systemically and from new paradigm and post-Cartesian epistemologies, and yet constantly writes with a mechanical perspective about gaining leverage on the organizational learning in a way that dualistically separates us from that which we are trying to control. His first chapter is a quote from Archimedes: 'Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world'.

The challenge is how we can re-vision our perspectives so the world can move us, but even that is to see the world and ourselves as dualistically separate. A new tool used with an old outdated mind-set, becomes either a blunt instrument or an anachronistic ornament, such as having a television before you have acquired electricity.

Another danger that comes from concentrating on a new perspective as a tool, rather than seeing the tool as part of a relationship process, is that it becomes easy to start to act as if the tool is a good thing in itself. Managers will talk about the need for everybody to learn faster. Organizational strategists will talk about the organization needing to learn quicker than its competitors in order to achieve competitive

advantage. It is as if all learning is a good thing, whatever you are learning. In the rush to focus on learning we might fall into the common trap of ends-means confusion. Learning is a means to an end and not an end itself. Its value is dependent on where your learning is taking you. It is like discovering a new fuel that makes your car go even faster and in your joy at the speed you are travelling not notice that you are accelerating in the wrong direction. Learning to be more efficient does not necessarily lead to you becoming more effective.

Even becoming more effective can be limited in itself. Being more effective and out-stripping the commercial opposition, can end up being done in a way that is harmful to the wider society and in the end unsustainable. An example of this is the cigarette companies that learn how to make deals with third world countries to allow open advertising of their products in return for investment in the country.

Learning can so easily become a catch-all phrase that means whatever you want it to mean. When exploring with some senior managers how they could become a learning organization, we came to realize they already were a learning organization, for if they were not learning they would not still be in existence. We then changed the whole focus of the dialogue and went on to explore what they were learning and what they wanted to learn which was presently missing in their organization. Only after this exploration was it possible to audit their learning processes for individuals, teams, between teams and departments, in the whole organization and how the organization was learning in relation to its environment. We looked at what was blocking the learning process in all these different domains and what would help unblock the natural living learning process. By the time we had finished this lengthy and engaging dialogue we had come a long way from believing the learning organization was something other organizations had and that it was time to catch up and acquire it.

Hamel and Prahalad (1989) in their paper on 'strategic intent' well illustrated the danger of playing catch-up:

Too many companies are expending enormous energy simply to reproduce the cost and quality advantages their global competitors already enjoy. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it will not lead to competitive revitalization. Strategies based on imitation are transparent to competitors who have already mastered them. Moreover, successful competitors rarely stand still. So it is not surprising that many executives feel trapped in a seemingly endless game of catch-up—regularly surprised by the new accomplishments of their rivals.

To have the form of conversation that I had with the company quoted above, entailed moving away from seeing 'the learning organization' as something out there to be acquired, and instead to turn the attention back on what was actually happening in the company itself. I fundamentally believe you cannot buy or import other people's solutions.

Careful study of the processes that other organizations have already been through can help you to see your own issues in a new perspective, but your organization's creative way forward has to be self-generated.

I also believe there are several necessary prerequisites to having the sort of conversation that effectively refocuses on one's own organization's learning process. First, there is the need to re-vision the common perceptions of what is learning and how it happens. To move away from seeing learning as being the knowledge banking of factual information and something that is done separate from, and normally prior to, doing. To be able to see learning as a multi-level concept, which involves interlocking cyclical processes of skill learning, personal awareness and transformational change.

The second important revision of how we see learning is to move away from believing that learning just resides within people, and to become aware that learning is also held between people. Relationships, teams and organizations learn and that this is not the same as the sum of the learning of all the individuals. Peter Senge asks the provocative question:

How come you meet so many management teams where the individual IQs are all over 120 and yet the team functions at a collective level of an IQ of 63? (Senge, 1990)

Understanding the process by which collective systems learn is far more complex than understanding individual learning processes and this understanding leads to criticisms of concepts of organizational learning which are very reductive and of ways of seeing the organizational learning either anthropocentrically (like individual learning writ large) or simply as a sum of all the individual learning.

The field of organizational learning needs to develop a number of sophisticated but understandable maps that distinguish the subtleties and differences within the various types, levels and domains of learning. Only then is it possible to have a diagnostic system for finding out where the learning flows are getting blocked within the different circuits of relationship. From this can be developed a number of tools for unblocking the learning flows.

Taking Stock of the Current Field

A number of important maps and models of complex learning processes have been developed over the last 20 years. The first and most seminal was Gregory Bateson's classic paper on levels of learning (Bateson, 1973). His basic ideas have been developed by the work of Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) in the United States in their much quoted but often poorly understood models of 'double-loop learning' and by Bob Garratt (1987, 1990) in his application of double-loop

learning to the policy and operational cycles of learning within organizations.

Revans's (1982) work on action learning and Kolb's (1984) learning cycle have widely informed the practice of making learning problem centred and rooted in continual learning through digested experience. This work has been developed by Honey and Mumford (1989a, 1989b) in their development of instruments both to look at styles of individual learning which can illuminate the personal blocks to effective learning; and also instruments for looking at the development of learning opportunities in organizations.

More recently, Robert Fritz (1989, 1991, 1993) has challenged the emphasis on learning being problem centred, which he points out can lead to the underlying aim being the removal of problems and a return to a status quo, rather than the creation of something new. He argues powerfully for learning processes based on a training in creativity and generative thinking.

Senge (1990) has written the most widely read book in this whole area, arguing that the five building blocks for creating learning organizations are:

- systems thinking
- personal mastery
- mental models
- building shared vision
- team learning

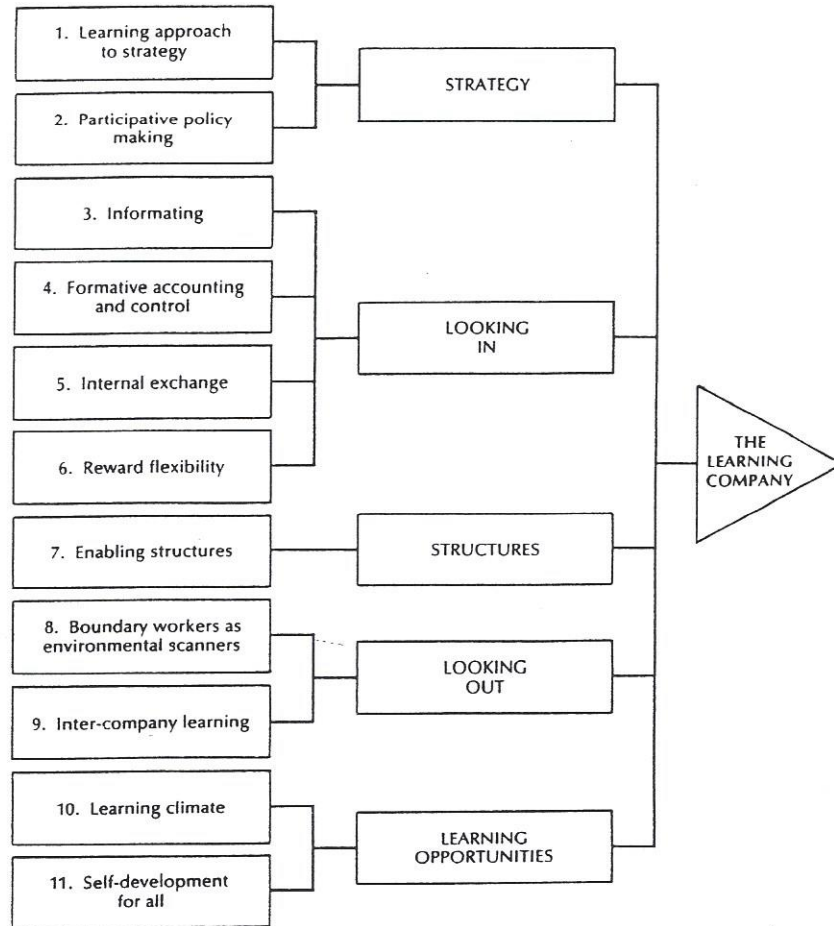
He provides a wealth of quotes from enlightened chief executives and examples of the application of one or more of these approaches. The book does not attempt to take the next step of providing a unifying theory that shows the inter-relationship of the various elements in a wider whole.

Pedler et al. (1988, 1991) have carried out some of the most comprehensive work on learning companies (they argue strongly that learning companies is a better nomenclature than learning organizations). Their definition of the learning company is:

A Learning Company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself.

They have produced eleven key characteristics (Figure 1). These are currently being used as the basis for diagnostic instruments for looking at company-wide learning processes by their Learning Company Project. They also have developed a four interlocking cycles model of company learning (Figure 2), which, although it still needs more developing, has the potential to bring together the work on double-loop learning and learning cycles mentioned above in a new and powerful way.

Figure 1 The eleven aspects of the learning company (from Pedler et al., 1991; reproduced courtesy of McGraw-Hill).

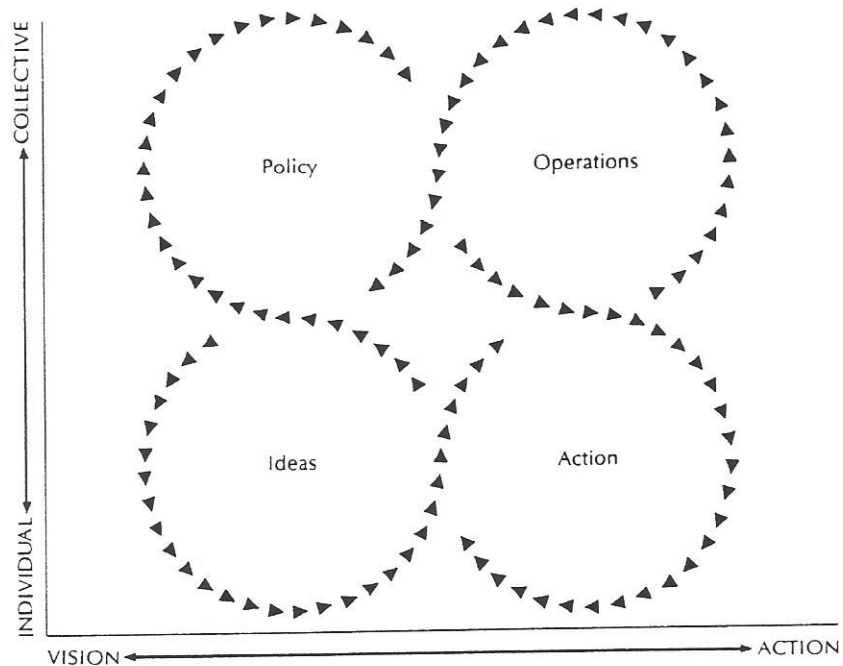


As I have written elsewhere (Hawkins, 1991) their definition makes the important point that learning organizations combine the facilitation of individual learning with the learning of the whole organization, but it does not tackle the key question of how the two processes connect. How does individual learning create organizational learning? If organizational learning is more than the sum of the individual learning within the company, how does the organization learn and where does the learning reside?

These key questions provide the cutting edge for the development of the whole field. There is a need to move beyond thinking that you create learning organizations by just increasing the quantity of learning that is happening for individuals and the amount of team and organizational development that is happening. In the same way that you can have a team whose members all have an IQ over 120 and yet the team performing as if it had an IQ of 63; so I have worked with

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Figure 2 The learning company energy-flow model (from Pedler et al., 1991; reproduced courtesy of McGraw-Hill).



organizations that had enormous investments in personal, team and organizational development and yet somehow the organization did not seem to learn. It was as if the company culture was caught in a belief that 'more' automatically led to 'better' and the organization was unable to learn about the belief system through which it was learning.

A Suggested Agenda for the Field of Organizational Learning

So far I have taken stock of the field of organizational learning, pointed out some of the traps and pitfalls that have ensnared other innovatory approaches to organizational development, and have described the limits of the present thinking in the theories and models that are currently available. From this base I now tentatively propose an agenda that I believe comprises the key issues that need to be addressed by workers in the field, whether as writers, consultants or those working directly in organizations.

1. A New Understanding of the Nature of the Systemic Learning of Whole Organizations

Without a new understanding we will continue to reductively view organizational learning as the learning of individuals, or as the sum of individual learning within it. Elsewhere (Hawkins, 1992), I have written about how some of the notions from new paradigm physics and biology might inform the quest for understanding the learning of complex systems.

2. Development of an Integrative Model that Shows the Inter-connection of the Various Approaches

Without this the illuminating ideas of Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne, or of Senge, will be reduced to check-lists. This may provide the bricks for building the shell of a learning organization, but it will neither build the shell nor know how to turn the shell into a living-learning reality. Learning cannot be atomized, despite the attempts of the more evangelical adherents of competency based learning, for the whole will always be more than the sum of the parts.

3. Revisioning our Basic Metaphors for Describing Learning

I believe that we have to move away from language that describes learning as something we acquire, give to people or introduce to organizations. What is needed are metaphors that see learning as a flow process that needs to be released and unblocked, within individuals, teams and organizations, and between organizations and their environments.

Perhaps the learning organization consultant is not the builder but the plumber, who taps the pipes to discover where the blockages in the system are located and then helps remove the blockage, so that the system can once again work smoothly. We must remember that individuals and organizations learn naturally and that experts sometimes do more damage to people's innate learning abilities than good. Plumbers not only unblock systems, they also design and build new ones, and the organizational learning consultant also has a role in these processes. However, such a consultant can never become an expert selling prefigured solutions; they must themselves be constantly in a learning process, testing the limits of their understanding, discovering their own blinkers and learning in relationship with their client organizations.

4. Positioning the Learning Organization in Relation to Other Approaches to Organizational Understanding and Development

It is important to avoid collusion in the learning organization becoming the one-thousand-and-first/initiative, the latest 'good idea' which will become tomorrow's discarded/failure. To do so it is important to develop ways which demonstrate how organizational learning can be an umbrella concept that can integrate pre-existing modes of working with organizations, rather than replacing them.

At the same time as attempting to use the learning organization as an integrative framework for working with organizational development, it is important not to become intellectually imperious and try to use one perspective to gain the intellectual high-ground. It is necessary to have a pluralistic dialogue between the various perspectives and windows on understanding organizational life, so that each can illuminate not just a different aspect of organizations, but the limits of the other perspectives. Gareth Morgan (1986) very powerfully points the way towards pluralistic theorizing in this field.

5. Producing Company-wide Case Studies of Organizational Learning

There is still a dearth of in-depth case studies to show the complexity of the interlocking learning processes of individuals, teams and the organization as a whole. So much of the literature is full of anecdotes and short examples that illustrate one of the many elements. What we must also avoid, however, is setting up companies as 'the' exemplars of what it is to be a learning organization, for each company must develop its own unique process, rather than try to recreate someone else's solution. Case studies are needed to show how companies have managed their unique integration of learning processes and struggled with their own challenges and learning blocks.

6. Moving Beyond a 'Social-Darwinian' View of Organizational Learning

Much of the literature on learning organizations stresses its importance for organizational survival and emphasizes that organizational learning is in the service of achieving a competitive advantage over one's competitors (Hampden-Turner, 1990; Peters, 1987; Senge, 1990). Indeed, Revans' (1982) often used quote—'Learning must equal or be greater than environmental change or the organization will not survive'—is grounded in this Social-Darwinian thinking. The trouble with this way of thinking is that learning based on the struggle to survive is rooted in fear, fear of death. Learning rooted in fear can produce a paranoid culture that sees not only one's competitors, but the wider environment as the enemy, which is out to destroy you. But if learning is something that happens between people, between teams, between organizations, between organizations and their environments, then what is needed is collaborative learning and not one based on fear and paranoia.

This is not an argument against competition, but that competition needs to be of the nature where each person, team or organization competes to take their opponent beyond their previous limits of performance, achievement or understanding. In this form of competition there is still a ruthlessness that gives no quarter, but it is balanced by a deep respect and honouring of the opponent.

Such an attitude of learning in competitive collaboration with the world around necessitates the development of a higher purpose than our own survival as individuals, teams or organizations. As a culture we can often cling to the survival of the team or organization that we are a part of, even when from an external perspective it is clear that death of this institution is the healthiest outcome. In the same way, we cling to our own mortality and place survival and growth as higher goals than alignment with the natural cycles of growth, decay, death and new birth.

7. Beyond Organizational Learning

I have repeatedly argued for a relationship-based view of learning rather than one which is atomistic and egocentric. The natural corollary to this is that organizational learning approaches cannot stop at

the boundaries of organizations. Important organizational learning will be taking place at the interface of the organization and the world surrounding it. Recently in South Africa and working with a large public utility company, I was asked the question:

We are very committed to providing literacy classes for all our employees, does that contribute to us being a learning company?

Without thinking about it, I replied:

That clearly makes you a training organization and one that is socially committed, but to be a learning organization you would need to be actively concerned with how the company is learning as much from its illiterate employees about their own limited perspectives as the employees are learning about how to read.

This approach to organizational learning still has much to learn from the pioneering work of Paulo Freire in liberation education in South America (Freire 1972a, 1972b).

In South Africa only now is it possible to work at the interface between the first-world large corporations and the third-world culture that is liberating itself from the apartheid ghetto. South Africa is facing, in a challenging and at times frightening way, the issues that need to be a part of a world learning agenda. We need to urgently learn more creatively at the interface between white, western first-world multinational companies and the third-world cultures that they now live and work in.

So many of the world's largest corporations have moved their manufacturing into third-world cultures and often the environmental issues that accompany such work. To tackle the world's extreme environmental issues, we need to be able to improve the learning at this interface. Thus South Africa is facing in microcosm what is an urgent world issue.

Conclusion

The whole field of organizational learning is one of great excitement, activity and potential. However, if the field is to avoid the many traps and pitfalls that have beset the many other recent approaches to organizational development and transformation it is important that it proceeds with caution and humility and does not overstate what it can do.

Most essential is that the many writers, consultants and managers who are working with these ideas and approaches work together as learning communities, practising what they preach and constantly learning from and with each other. This is already being modelled by the learning company consortia and networks that have been or are being established in Britain, the USA and in South Africa.

In our work and our learning communities it is essential that we 'double loop' our learning about organization learning, and constantly examine the perspective and models that we are using. Otherwise organizational learning will become another fixed and outdated mind set, rather than a constantly evolving and developing approach.

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Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Tom Boydell, John Chesney and Robin Snell for their useful comments on the first draft of this paper.

Figures 1 and 2 are taken from Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991) *The Learning Company*, published by McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead, and appear here with their permission.

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