

**The Changing View  
Of Learning**

**By Dr Peter Hawkins**

## THE CHANGING VIEW OF LEARNING

### INTRODUCTION

There is a change at the heart of our understanding of learning: a shift from viewing learning as being about facts, to learning as a far more multi-faceted and dynamic process.

We are beginning to learn more about how we really learn. It is not that we, as humans, actually learn differently now than before, but that our understanding of how we learn has begun to catch up with what happens in practice.

No longer is learning being seen as something that happens to children or the ignorant in classrooms. Learning is not only a process that permeates all of our individual lives, but can be seen as a process that is critical for the lives of teams, organisations and communities.

This chapter describes some of the important shifts in our thinking about learning and explores implications for organisations.

The final section looks at some tentative ways of integrating the various shifts in learning, not in any attempt to provide a final model of learning, but as further exploration about the heart of learning itself. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of John Chesney in writing this section.

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## **1. FROM LEARNING FACTS TO LEARNING BEING DIALOGICAL.**

Traditional learning was seen as "knowledge banking" (Friere 1970), where learning was storing information, which could be measured by exams. In this view of learning there is a learner and an objective world that is learnt about through breaking the world down into digestible facts.

Most of us were taught about how the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066 and as children we imagine that this is one of those objective truths. Yet for the people who were involved in the event, they did not think "we are now fighting the Battle of Hastings of 1066". Some of Harold's men were probably exhausted at the end of a long campaign and saw this as another bloody engagement. The Normans, as the day they invaded England. What we are actually learning is about a cluster of events, which at some later date a historian has called the Battle of Hastings and which has been dated by means of the Gregorian calendar as 1066. We are not learning a fact, but our learning is part of a relationship between a series of events, how these have been labelled and framed by past historians and our own perspectives. The learning resides in the relationship, not in the label, which is a shorthand exchange within the relationship. The history of a period changes over time, not because the events that took place in the past change, but because the way they are perceived and understood changes, as historians always see history through the lens of their own perspective which is shaped by their own present history. Thus history can be viewed as not residing in the past events, nor just in the heads of the historians, but in the three way relationship between the events, previous historians and present historians.

How does this dialogical perspective change how we work with organisations? A good example is team development, where team learning was seen as an internal aspect of the team's functioning. Some organisations would take their teams off by themselves for "wood meetings" or "away-days", for the team to explore their process and learn how to function better. These events can still be useful, but taking a dialogical perspective it can be seen that the learning of the team does not just reside within the team, but also in the relationships of the team to those stake holders, customers, suppliers etc, with whom their work is inextricably linked. Thus to change the team without facilitating learning on its boundary, between the team and its significant others, is like trying to change a marriage by only working with one partner.

## **2. FROM LEARNERS AS RECIPIENTS TO LEARNING BEING A CO-CREATIVE PROCESS.**

I invite you to stop reading and do a short exercise. I would like you to look at your left hand and write down exactly what you see. Now you can compare your observations with those of others with whom I have tried the exercise:

"Five fingers, a palm and a wrist."

"Lots of lines."

"I see aging and wrinkled skin."

"I see three rings."

"I see nails that need cutting."

Each of these statements probably tell you more about the personality of the person observing than they do about the nature of hands, for much of what we see is a projection of our current concerns, be it about aging, adornment, how we are seen etc. What we see is also created by our expectations and the way we have been trained to look. Bateson has long argued that we are trained to see separate objects, like five fingers, and not to see pattern and relationship. Very few people who do this exercise observe the relationship between the eye looking and the hand moving into a position where it can be seen at the right distance from the eyes, opening itself up for inspection, turning around etc.

Others will project upon the object their own feelings, like I see aging, or tiredness. What we see is co-created by our looking. There is the story of the tribe who believed that the world ended a mile beyond their village. When taken to this boundary and shown the world beyond the villagers said: "but there is nothing there". We see what our belief system trains us to see.

Thus it is important that organisational learning is seen as a reflexive process. I am not just learning about the world out there, but also about my own way of construing the world, which co-creates the reality in which I live. This has implications for personal learning in organisations and for how the whole organisation learns.

## **THE REDUNDANCY STORES**

A manager in an action-learning set had recently been given the task of re-organising the redundancy stores of an aircraft manufacturer. He described visiting this large aircraft hangar which was a veritable museum of parts of aeroplanes, going back over forty years, that had been rejected as unserviceable and sent down to the redundancy store. He wanted help in strategically redesigning this store so that parts were properly catalogued and located, and the man hours in storing and re-accessing parts could be made far more efficient.

The group eagerly engaged on this issue with him and began to chart up an Ishikawa fish of the problems presented and brain-storming possible solutions. It was only when the set facilitator stopped them and asked them about the purpose of the store that the learning went in a new direction.

The manager explained the process of how parts arrived at the point of aircraft assembly and those that are damaged or incorrect are labelled "redundant" and assigned

to the store, to be kept there in case bits of them can later be used or the part as a whole can be re-serviced to make it useful. The "set" began to turn its attention away from the product problem and to explore and chart the process. The eventual solution was to aim to do away with a redundancy stores altogether, by a process that ensured that parts that were not usable at assembly were either immediately redirected to be corrected by the parts production division, with clear information of what needed amending and by when; or labelled, sold and removed from the site as scrap.

The managers had to learn about how they were co-creating the problem by the way they were framing it, and how to switch from trying to re-order a specific place or unit, to understanding how the problem was an assumption of the wider process.

Organisations also co-create their own reality. This has been written about by Morgan in applying the ideas of Maturana and Varela on "Autopoiesis" to organisations. He illustrates how we are affected not just by changes in the environment, but by our way of construing the environment. (Morgan 1986)

### **3. FROM SEEING LEARNING AS RESIDING IN INDIVIDUALS TO UNDERSTANDING THAT IT ALSO RESIDES IN SYSTEMIC PATTERNS**

You may have had the experience of returning to your family of origin many years after leaving home. Each member of the family may have greatly changed and hopefully matured since the time you all lived together and their ways of relating are now very different. However, gradually as the reunited family spends time together, the family gradually slides back into old ways of relating: teasing each other, indirect put downs, arguing intensely about issues that you are not really concerned about. Each member of the family may dislike the fact that this is happening and wish that they were relating more from how they are now in the rest of their lives. But each feels as if they are sucked into a vortex of old patterns of relating, and may well blame the others for causing this. This process is dramatically portrayed by T. S. Eliot in "The Family Reunion" and also by J. B. Priestley in "Time and the Conways".

One way to understand this phenomenon is to realise that each member of the family may have learnt and developed, but the family system itself is at the same stage of learning that it was previously in ten years or more ago. The relationship pattern of the family has not evolved and is strong enough to pull the individual back into its influence.

When I worked as a psychotherapist and met with couples, I learnt that the number of clients I had to attend to had not just doubled, but trebled. Instead of working with the psyche of an individual, I was dealing with two individuals and a third client, which was their relationship or couple system - the psyche of the system that they had both created, but which also constrained them. Their couple system, like that of the family, may be partly created by its members, but it also constantly affects not only the behaviour, but also the perceptions and the emotional flow of feelings that happen

within its orbit.

The family or couple system has no material form. It cannot be seen or touched, but we can witness its effects. It will be reflected in the material artifacts of the couple: the decoration of their home, their car, garden, clothes etc. It can be seen mirrored in the rituals of how they divide up money, allocate tasks, entertain others, and in their private verbal and non-verbal language. It is also represented in the stories they tell themselves and how they construct their private history.

But the couple system does not reside in these artifacts, rituals or stories. Nor does it reside in the individuals. It can be considered as a force field that surrounds and flows through the individuals that both create it and reside within it.

This collective psychic field is similar to Rupert Sheldrake's notion of "the morphogenetic field" (Sheldrake, 1981, 1988, 1990,) and also Bateson's "circuits of mind" (Bateson, 1979 and 1988). Sheldrake was by no means the first scientist to use the term and describe the nature of morphogenetic fields, for since 1923 work on morphogenetic fields has been produced by such scientists as Weiss, Waddington and Thom. But his big contribution has been in exploring how these fields are not eternal, transcendent entities, but immanent, evolving entities. Not, for example, eternal scientific laws that transcend time, but entities that evolve and therefore learn in their own right. This has been formulated by Sheldrake in his theory of "formative causation".

These psychic fields have no known material form, but they have a pattern and rhythm, which constrain and influence the patterns and rhythms of behaviour, thought, perception and feeling of those within its orbit.

The psychic fields are co-created by the members within the field, although clearly some have more influence than others, such as parents in relation to children. But the fields are not just created by those within its realm. The field will be directly influenced by the patterns of families and couples in the social peer group. These social norms exist in a higher psychic field of the cultural norms concerning families and couples which is carried in the stories, films, unwritten rules, written laws and rituals of the culture. These in turn exist in an archetypal field, for cultural patterns are acted upon by the archetypal patterns of the family, the couple, Mother, Father, Child, etc. (Hillman, 1973, 1979, 1983.)

This systemic perspective radically shifts the perspective of the organisational change agent. Instead of focussing on the parts of the organisation, they start to focus on the patterns that connect the parts: the interfaces, relationships and contacts between individuals, teams, departments and between the whole organisation and those with whom it relates.

This perspective requires a new language, a language that is more analogic, metaphorical and stems from the right brain, rather than the scientific defining of parts that stems from the digital thinking of the left brain. It focuses on the wave-like

connections that flow throughout the whole organisational processes, rather than on the functioning of the parts.

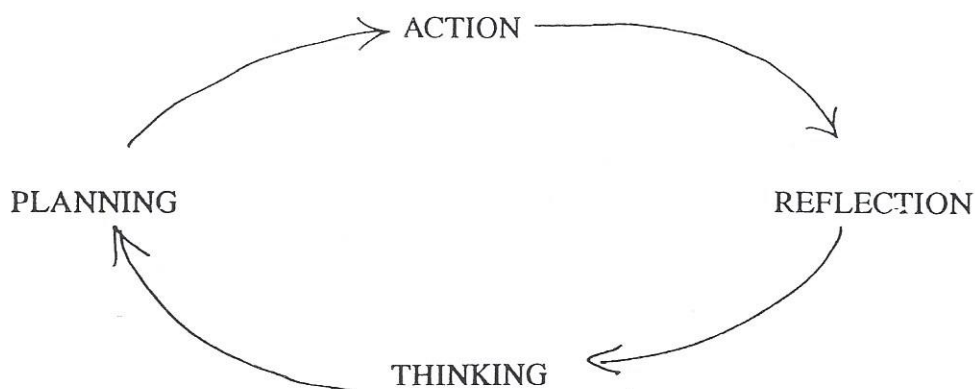
#### 4. FROM LEARNING IS LINEAR TO LEARNING BEING CYCLICAL.

Old concepts of learning were often one-dimensional: I would meet a problem I could not solve or something I did not know and through learning I would acquire the knowledge or skill necessary for my needs or to solve the problem. Learning is seen as an acquisition to meet a felt or recognised deficiency.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, learning is not that straightforward and is often a complex process of continual trial and error. Learning is an ever-present element in all we do, woven into the very fabric of action. Stop reading and take up a pencil and place the pencil point on the dot beneath as if you are about to write.

If we now slowed down the process of what you just did onto a slow motion film, you would discover that the journey of the pencil point was not in a straight line aiming for its target, but that you were creating a zig-zag path as you constantly corrected your trajectory from going off course, a bit like a sailboat tacking against the wind, or a heat seeking missile. You hopefully got to the right place but you got there, not by aiming for it, but by avoiding going to the wrong place. You were constantly learning all the way down.

It is as if you are relearning the simple art of placing a pencil on a specific point every time you start to write. Bateson (1979), Kolb (1984), Revans (1982) and many others have shown how learning is a constant process of moving around the cycle:



Sometimes people talk as if they are engaged in a cyclical process because they go through all four stages, but all they have done is a linear process with the ends joined up. This is particularly relevant in the design of training and development in organisations. Often such design still creates a split between doing on the job, and thinking in the lecture room or on the training workshop. Even some of the better designed training events, involving a short sandwich course with an action learning project back at work between parts one and two of the course, only achieve one cycle of the learning process. In my forthcoming book, I look more fully at how training can be designed to create a process of multiple learning cycles, so that participants are moving around the cycle both during the training event and back in the work place. This enables action to become a key part of training and reflection, thinking and planning become key in action on the job.

## 5. FROM ALL LEARNING IS OF THE SAME LEVEL TO DOUBLE LOOP LEARNING

If the concept of cyclical learning shifts our understanding of learning from one dimension to two, then the notion that there are different levels of learning moves us on to a three dimensional model. It was Bateson, in his classic paper of 1964 in which he used the theory of logical types of Russel and Whitehead to explore different types of learning, who most forcibly showed how all learning is not of the same level . This was taken up by organisational theorists, most notably Argyris and Schon, in their theory of single-loop and double-loop learning, and more recently by Garratt in his two books on the learning organisation.

Bateson chose to see learning in an evolutionary context and define it as a process that led to change in the learning organism. Thus the receipt of facts may lead to learning, but is not learning in itself, and thus he termed it zero learning.

**LEARNING LEVEL I** This is the area of skill learning, as described in the cyclical learning section above. It is about making choices within a simple set of alternatives. It is the basis of Argyris's single-loop learning and Garratt's operational cycle learning.

**LEARNING LEVEL II** This happens when we move the level of learning to that of choosing between sets within which Level I Learning takes place. This, in conjunction with Level I learning, is Argyris's double-loop learning and Garratt's strategy cycle learning.

Argyris' distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning is based on Bateson's seminal work. He combined Bateson's notion of levels with the principle of learning being cyclical to produce his theory of single-loop and double-loop learning.

Garratt's (1987) development of the Argyris theory represents the double-loop of organisational learning in a very useful and simple model, which I colloquially refer to as Garratt's egg-timer. (See Figure 1)



In this model operational learning (Argyris' single-loop) begins with a plan, which like all plans never turn out quite as you expect. The deviations from the intended results are monitored and learnt from and the plan is redrawn and freshly implemented. So it continues, the stoacastic cycle of trial, error, correction and re-trial. But in this cycle one only learns to carry out the initial plan in a better way. There is no room for questioning the plan itself. One is constantly focussing on **how** to carry out the operation more efficiently, never whether one is carrying out the right operation.

Sooner or later any organisation needs to move into the strategic learning cycle, where the focus moves from efficiency to effectiveness and from the **how** to the **what**. In operational learning, the focus is on how to do things more quickly and how to ensure a closer alignment of what is produced with what was planned. In the strategic learning cycle, the focus shifts to whether we are heading in the right direction at the moment. The strategic cycle involves reflecting on operational performance and relating that performance to the requirements of the changing external environment. This includes changes in customer needs, the supply chain, the law, health and safety and public attitudes and preferences.

By focusing on the alignment between the external environment and the internal organisational processes, organisational leaders can develop new visions, directions and priorities. These new approaches then need to be processed back through the next operational cycle. Double loop learning only occurs when both the operational and strategic cycle are involved. Working at the strategic level alone, without looping the learning back into the operational cycle, is single loop learning at the strategic level. Similarly, working at the operational level alone, without looking to see whether the current operations are still of value in the environment, is single loop learning at the operational level.

I find this model particularly useful in the way it pictorially represents the stress in the middle of the organisation. The business brain in the Garratt model is not at the head of the organisation but at the heart; it is not carried by the Directors but by the people who need to straddle the domains of strategy and operations. These are the people who are the life blood of the learning organisation; the people who need to be effective at educating upwards as well as translating new vision and direction into operational reality.

Unfortunately this critical area is absent in many organisations. In one large manufacturing company where I am consulting the middle managers do not 'educate upwards', but merely pass operational problems up the line; the senior managers usually fail to give time to strategic thinking as they are constantly 'descending' to manage the single-loop operational cycle.

In another leading organisation, this time in computing, there is initially a very impressive picture of a great deal of learning. Much time and resources are given to learning at all levels. Many project groups are exploring new strategic approaches to organising the business and they are constantly engaging in future scenario scanning,

attempting to keep one step ahead of the game.

In terms of Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne's (1991) definition of the learning organisation, I might conclude that here is a true learning company, for it is indeed one which actively promotes the continual learning and development of all its members, and also attends to trying to transform itself. However, looking a little closer we find that there are important flaws. First, there is little harvesting of the learning of individuals back at work. Managers go on many personal and skills development courses, but their learning often stays within them and is not networked back into their teams, divisions and organisation. They may achieve many new insights on the culture of the organisation when they attend a course but these insights are not feeding back into the two separate projects, one internal and the other external, that are looking at the organisational culture.

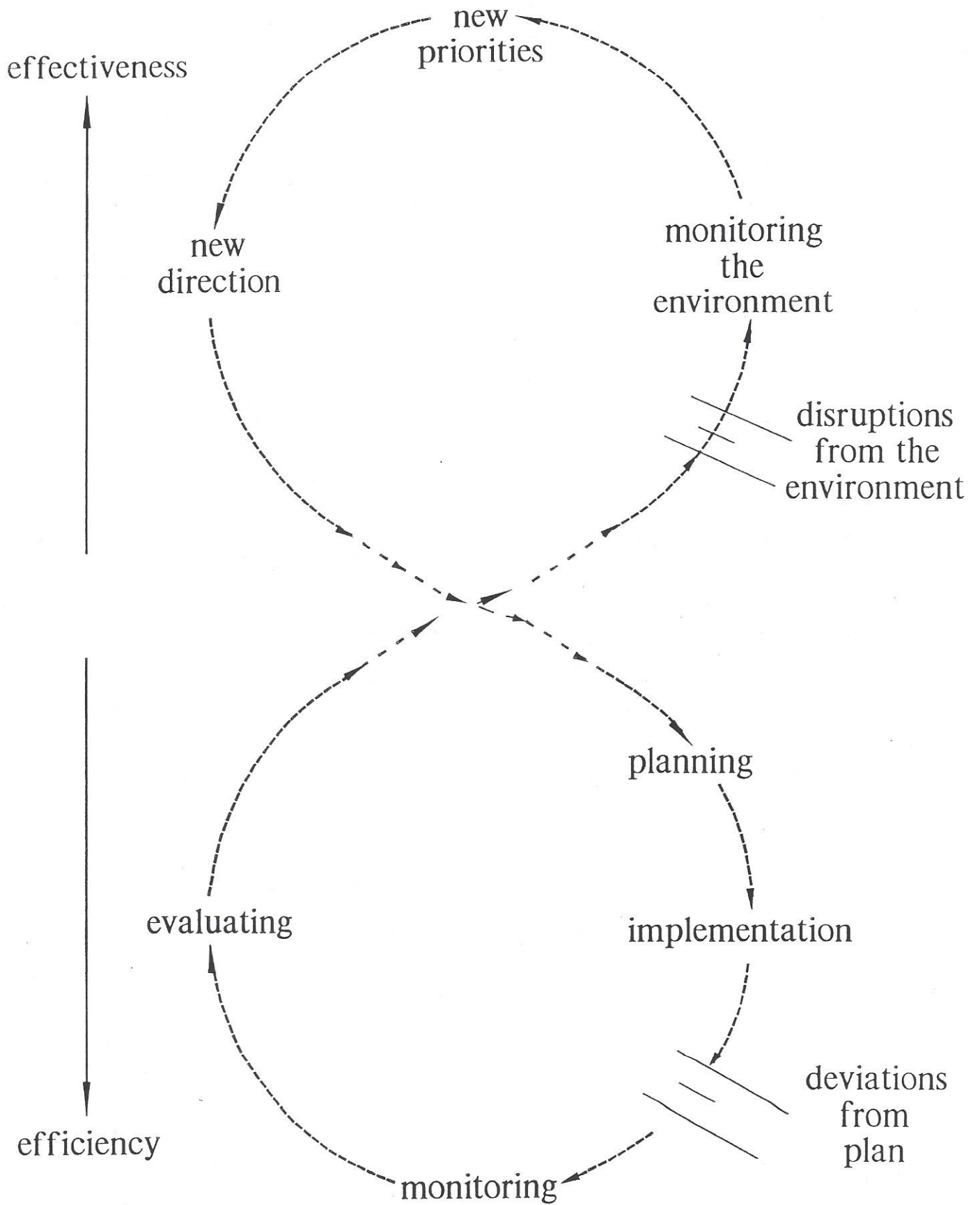
This leads me on to the second problem. There are a myriad of strategic project groups, all of which constantly re-design aspects of the organisation, without there being either a structure for these strategy groups to dialogue and co-create the new organisation together, or an over-arching vision that holds together the diversity of these endeavours.

The greatest danger lies not in the lack of integration within the operational learning or strategic learning loops, but in the lack of the "business brain" that integrates the two cycles. Without this linkage, the most likely outcome is that there will be single-loop learning within both domains.

A similar phenomenon of the strategy domain and the operational domain working effectively within themselves but in isolation from each other was found by my colleagues Adrian McLean and Judi Marshall in their study of the Wrekin District Council (1989). Here was a local government organisation that was clearly one of the most progressive and forward looking in the country. It had a visionary chief executive, was interested in getting close to the customer, in quality and in constant self-improvement. Yet:

"A concern expressed most frequently by those in the middle of the organisation is that the Chief Executive and his team of Directors form an elite that is separated from middle level management by a sort of vacuum. The fear, in the form of speculation, is that the team may be prone to a form of "group think"."

I worked briefly with a Police authority who wished to develop themselves as a learning organisation. The first step in moving forward was to be to bring together the internal management development team and the organisational development team and help them develop a joint understanding of their interlocking task.



INTEGRATING OPERATIONAL AND POLICY LEARNING

Figure one

## 6. FROM DOUBLE-LOOP TO TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

This dimension of learning in the individual, group or whole organisation, transcends the level of skill acquisition and operational learning (Argyris' single-loop) and personal development and strategic learning (Argyris' double-loop). This is the level of spiritual development in the individual and of purpose and service in the organisation. I have previously written about this level (Hawkins 1986 and 1991) based on the explication of Bateson's learning level III.

Double-loop learning helps us move from asking operational efficiency questions such as: "How can we carry out this process more efficiently?", to asking strategic questions about effectiveness: "What should we be concentrating our efforts on to be most effective?" or "Where is our competitive advantage?"

Treble-loop learning takes us even further and poses teleological questions about purpose: "To what end or for what purpose are we doing this work?", or "Who or what are we serving in this endeavour?". Transformative learning is about aligning the operational, strategic and service levels of learning. Greater efficiency without effective strategy can become self-defeating, as it might be achieving greater productivity of goods no longer needed; better strategic effectiveness which is divorced from higher purpose may be effective at winning competitive advantage in the short term, but will lose its reason for being and in time will become an alienated organisation, making money but with no sense of relatedness and of doing something worthwhile.

In this dimension of learning on the individual level it is necessary to move into exploring the fundamental perspectives through which we view the world and the paradigms which shape our understanding. Level III learning is not just about personal insight and reframing our experience, but involves a fundamental 'metanoia', a turning around of where we look from, a shaking of the foundations of our beliefs and perspectives.

At the organisational level it involves change in the collective mind-sets of the organisation's culture and the emotional ground in which these are rooted. In Bath Consultancy Group, through whom I do my consulting, one of the main areas in which we have applied learning organisation approaches is that of facilitating change in organisational culture. Many of the companies we have worked with had jumped on the "excellence bandwagon" and had tried to keep up to date by changing their culture. They had invested in new logos, published glossy mission statements and had their leaders make fervent exhortations to the workers about quality, customer care and new attitudes.

On some occasions we have been invited in when the senior management were wondering why this approach had not produced the hoped for change in performance and instead had produced growing amounts of cynicism and suspicion among the work force, with glossy mission statements ending up in the waste bin.

The approach we have used to help them reflect on and learn from this experience has been to show how their culture change was at the level of changing the high-profile symbols of the culture, the cultural artifacts, rituals and ceremony, whilst leaving the low-profile symbols of everyday lived behaviour untouched. This inevitably widens the rift between the rhetoric and the reality and creates a breeding ground for cynicism.

These two levels correspond with zero learning and learning level I, for in changing the outward face of the culture there is no real learning. Real learning only begins when the leaders of the company change not what they preach, but what they do; when, in Argyris' terms, there is a change not just in the "espoused theory", but in the "theory in action".

In running culture change workshops we found that even when senior managers made real commitments to a shift in the organisational culture and also in their own behaviour - in how they carried the culture - some of the changes were short-lived. For a while managers would be managing by walking about, rewarding positive behaviours, speaking with images and vision and not just facts; but soon the old culture would begin to reassert itself, despite good intentions.

We discovered that it was important in culture change work to help those within the organisational culture step outside their normal perception and assumptions and view their organisation with fresh eyes. The work required a change in their mind sets, their personal and collective way of viewing what is around them, so that they could once again see aspects of their culture that they no longer noticed. An old Chinese proverb points out that "the last person to know about the sea is the fish."

This required us to develop a new range of learning methodologies (George, Hawkins and McLean 1988) to help those in organisations to become flying fish, to step outside their taken-for-granted ways of viewing reality and see their organisation with new eyes. By so doing they discover the spectacles they were previously using.

We also discovered that even attending to the collective "mind-sets" was not enough, for these mind sets were not something that one could take out and replace at will. The mind-sets were firmly rooted in the emotional and motivational ground of the organisation. Without attending to this underlying emotional ground, mind-sets would only be tinkered with, not transformed.

I worked with a large aircraft manufacturer where most of the staff, from senior managers to shop floor fitters, had grown up reading "Biggles" books and making "airfix" aircraft models. They were in love with planes and with building them. The particular site where we worked had shifted from building a supersonic "high-tec" aeroplane, to being an assembly plant putting together bits of aeroplanes. We were there to help the organisation change its culture to become a lot more commercially orientated, but the emotional ground of the company was still in mourning for the beautiful aeroplanes they used to build. Without working through this mourning process and helping the organisation find a new fundamental purpose, any attempts to change the culture were going to run aground on deep-seated emotional resistance.

## **7. FROM LEARNING AS UTILITARIAN AND VALUE-FREE: TO LEARNING HAVING AN ETHICAL DIMENSION.**

Learning takes place in a network of inter-connection. In the third dimension I explored how seeing learning as systemic involved working with the learning of a team and organisation in relation to its key stake holders, its; suppliers, customers, shareholders, competitors etc. In this dimension it is necessary to take the systemic inter-connectedness much further and see that the learning of an organisation is related to and part of its aesthetic and ecological environment. How we learn impacts on our environment and our environment pervades every aspect of our work.

Transformative learning cannot be value-free, for how we see and construe the world affects how we live and relate to our surroundings. If we see the world as a limitless store of resources to be exploited we will act exploitatively. If we perceive animals as having no feelings we will relate to them unfeelingly.

Once we move from an instrumental learning to transformative learning, then we have to consider the ethical dimension, that asks to what purpose or end are we learning and how does our purpose disturb the aesthetic and ecological balance of the environment in which it happens. Is the disturbance creative or destructive?

There are four dimensions of the ethical perspective that I use to help organisations explore this aspect of their learning organisation. These are:

**Utilitarian:** Does it provide the greatest good to the greatest number? Does it meet the needs of the customers?

**Aesthetic:** Is it pleasing to the senses and does it provide an increase in beauty and harmony to the world in which it resides?

**Ecological:** Does it use resources (energy, material and human) in a way that is sustainable and renewable? How do we become aware of it and limit the damage caused?

**Spiritual:** Does it serve a higher purpose and contribute to the universal good?

## **8. FROM LEARNING BEING FOR KIDS TO LEARNING BEING A LIFELONG BUT DISCONTINUOUS PROCESS**

"Lifelong learning has become a necessity." R Smith (1983)

"If we are not learning and teaching we are not awake and alive. Learning is not only like health it is health." Ferguson (1981)

Earlier in this chapter I commented on the now outdated notions that learning was

something that happened prior to doing; that learning was for children before they entered the grown up world and that only the ignorant needed to learn. This is similar to my cousin who, when younger, said that he did not need a bath, for only dirty people washed!

As fast as we learn so our ignorance increases too, for the more we know the more we are aware of how much more there is to learn. Also any field of endeavour is changing and developing at such a rate, it is easy to find that as your own learning stood still the whole world had changed around you and that you are unable to do the work that your changing job now requires.

Success is often a time of great danger, when the individual or organisation think that they now know how to perform and are confirmed in their perceptions of the world. This leads to complacency and less emphasis on learning. Being cited by Peters and Waterman as an "excellent company" was probably to be cursed, for as the research showed (in Pascale 1990) many of those "excellent companies" started to go down hill.

As I have previously emphasised, learning is not just adaptive to external circumstances, but also creates the circumstances that constrain it. In my doctoral research (Hawkins 1986) I discovered that personal learning and development was often at its most intense at the times of transformation. At work many people described their learning as being the most intense when they first joined the team, or when they got promoted and had a whole new range of relationships and skills to contend with. When asked about important learning in their personal lives, many talked of times of personal transition or even times of crisis. Such times as leaving home, being made redundant, getting divorced, or at a time of personal bereavement.

Life transitions often take away our comfortable set patterns of acting and perceiving, our set ways of coping with the world. They provide the disconfirmation that initiates a new cycle of learning. To put it another way, crisis creates the heat in which new learning is forged. I have elsewhere developed a model of short-term counselling that has been used in work-placed counselling services, for helping individuals focus on the life-transitions they are currently engaged in and how these are being affected by unfinished issues from previous life-transitions (Hawkins 1992).

Life transitions are also key foci of learning in teams and organisations. Pedler et al (1991) provide a very useful system for helping organisations look at their "company biography", the life transitions and the key learnings at each stage.

## **9. FROM LEARNING BEING A MEANS TO AN END TO LEARNING BEING AT THE HEART OF ALL WE DO**

Many of us were brought up in school to see learning as a means of passing exams. Some of the excited interest about the learning organisation means learning as providing "the leverage for competitive advantage". Learning becomes viewed as always a means to an end.

However, it is also possible to reverse this perspective. Exams exist in order to focus and increase learning. True competition is not about winning but about the engagement between both parties creating an atmosphere in which both learn to perform at a higher level than would be possible without competition. It is possible to see how, in our western culture, many activities that were originally routes to learning have become ends in themselves.

There is an old Sufi story about creation, which states that God was complete unto itself and knew itself completely in its own "oneness" or "ipseity". However, it did not know itself in its form of particularisation or fragmentation. "I was a hidden treasure and I longed to be known." Thus God embarked on creation as a way of learning about itself through its fragmented and particularised self. The hunger for learning was at the core of creation.

In order to complete the cycle of creation, God needed an aspect of creation to know God not just in its own aspect, in the way a blade of grass knows the blade of grassness of God. The story tells how God offered this covenant to the mountains and the mountains refused. he offered it to the birds of the air and the birds refused. He offered it to the animals and they too refused. Finally he offered it to humans and they in their foolishness accepted the covenant.

This covenant that is both a blessing and a curse gives us the ability and responsibility to be self-reflective and self-aware. All aspects of creation are part of the evolutionary learning process. Some species may also learn how to learn or deutoro learning. But for us as humans, learning and constantly attending to improving the quality of this learning is a central responsibility of our lives.

As learning resides not just within us but in circuits of mind of which we are part, so our responsibility is to constantly attend to improving the learning of the worlds in which we exist.

The motto of my children's junior school was "learning to live". In the new learning epistemology we must equally focus on "living to learn", to see living and learning as inseparable processes.



## INTEGRATING THE NEW THINKING ON LEARNING

In this chapter we have noted a shift in thinking about learning:

From	To:
1. learning facts	being dialogical
2. learners as recipients	being co-creative
3. learning resides in individuals	also residing in systemic patterns
4. learning is a linear process	being cyclical
5. all learning is of the same level	integrated loops
6. learning to be efficient and effective	transformational learning
7. learning is utilitarian and value-free	having ethical dimensions
8. learning is for 'kids' and beginners	a lifelong but discontinuous process
9. learning is a means to an end	at the heart of everything.

As we assimilate the new thinking it can help us to spot our current assumptions around learning and open us up to different perspectives and foci for further exploration. We can double loop our learning about our current learning operations and strategy to see how new shifts in our thinking may warrant shifts in what we do in practice.

It is also possible to begin to play with putting some of these factors together. What might it be like to be involved in dialogical double-loop learning within a functional system in an organisation? What would be the result of running several cycles of co-creative action learning within a department? The permutations are many.

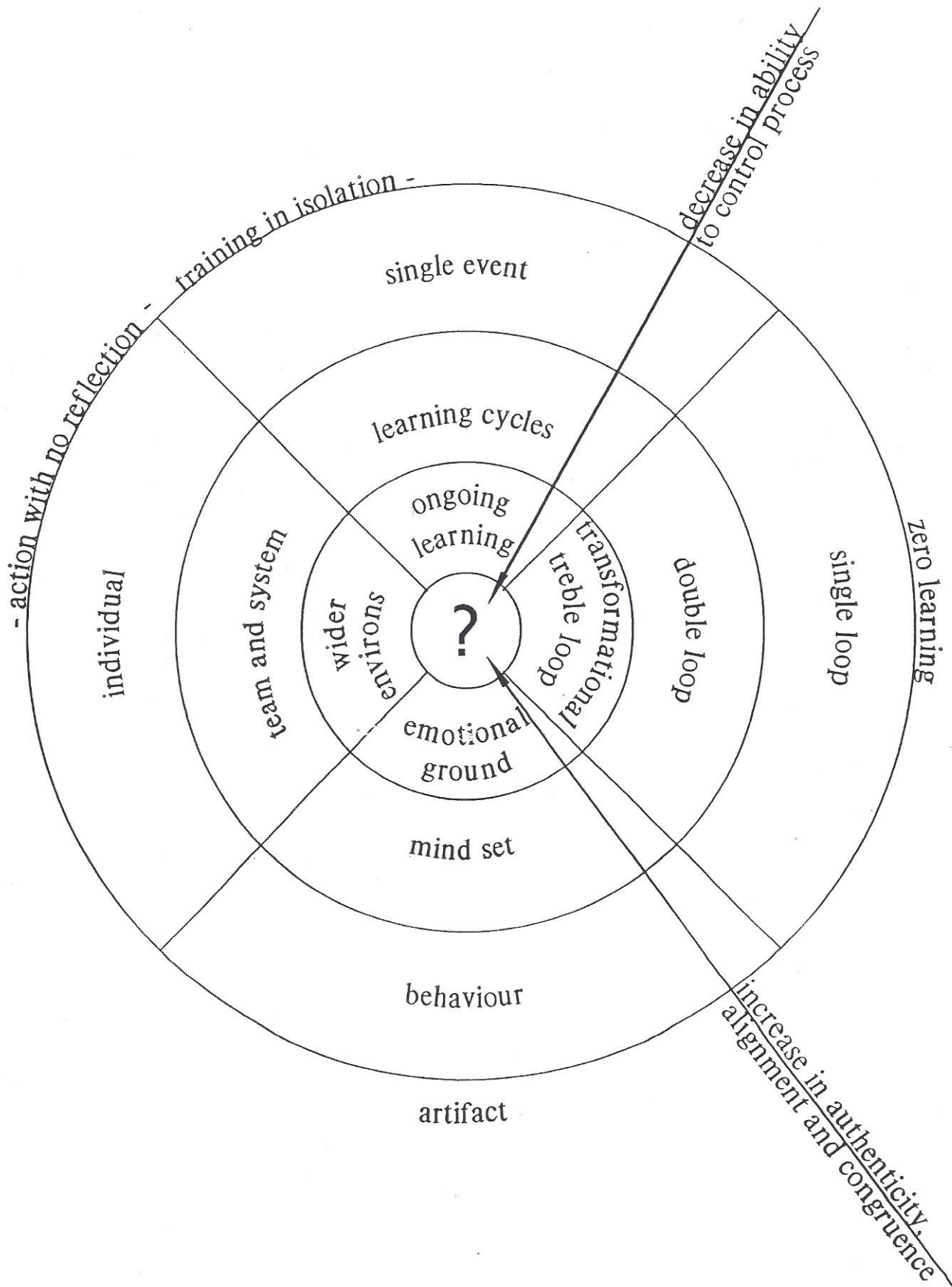
It would, of course, be premature and dangerous to offer an overall synthesis of the new thinking that traps the further expansion of our thinking within the confines of some grand meta-model. However, it can also be constructive to engage in creative cartography - playing with possible schematic maps rather than searching for the 'Holy Grail'.

One such model comes from a colleague in the Bath Consultancy Group, which I offer as an illustrative example to encourage you to also play with your own maps. (Fig 2)

### What the model suggests and offers

1. It may be helpful to use this tentative map as a way of locating current styles of learning within organisations to see what the next step forward might be. For example, we were recently invited to give a workshop on Change Management to a public sector organisation. They were looking for a one-off event for middle managers, aimed at informing them about change management practice. At the same time, the organisation, a District Council, were using consultants to help them think through ways of becoming more proactive as an organisation. We were informed that they did not want to have any flow of ideas or new learning from the policy group to the workshop on change management, or vice versa. Locating this proposal on the map

# THE CHANGING VIEW OF LEARNING



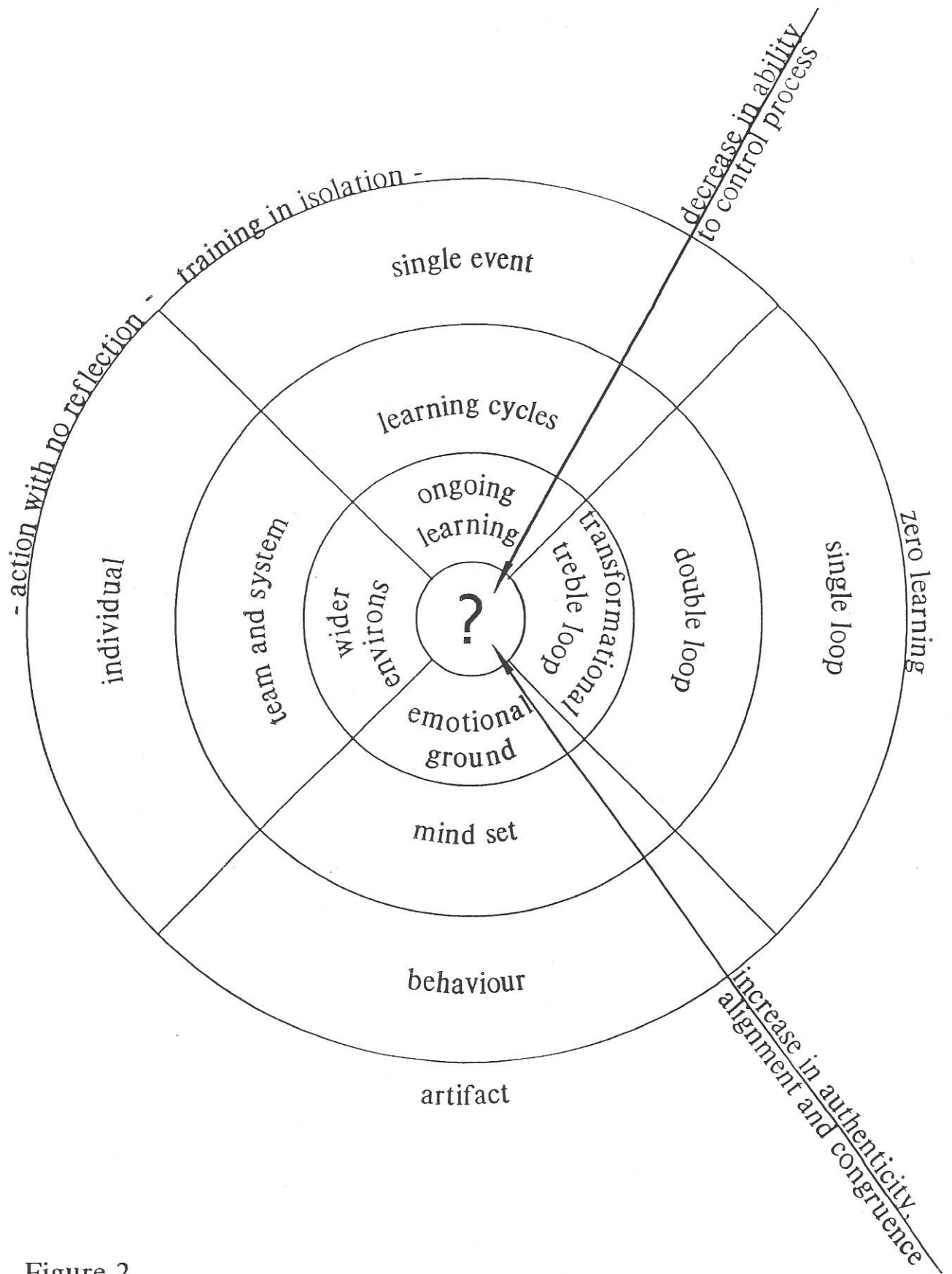


Figure 2.

(Figure 2) suggests that this was aimed at individuals as a single event and would most likely lead to zero learning, as no follow up or action was envisaged from the training. Further discussions implied that the main focus for the organisation was at the level of changing artifacts rather than behaviour. Their attention appeared to be focussed on demonstrating that they were a proactive District Council, through events such as the workshop, rather than by exploring the lived reality of employees' working experience.

Referring back to the model, then, this would place the suggested event at the perimeter. The map suggests possible ways forward, through spiralling in towards the middle by encouraging cycles of learning, involving functional teams and looking at current behaviour. The model suggests that it would have been too much of a jump to have gone from the perimeter into the centre in one quick movement. A spiralling in may be more possible and helpful.

2. As the style of learning moves towards the centre, two factors come into play, in our experience. Firstly, the momentum for change moves from being mainly external (i.e. consultants) to being mainly internal (i.e. employees at all levels). There is a sense in which you know that change has really taken hold when you are no longer in control of what happens next. In some ways it is a similar process to push-starting a car. Once the engine fires up, it takes over in a way that no amount of external 'pushing' could achieve. Secondly, as learning nears the centre, there is an increase in the alignment between what is espoused and what is enacted, what is said happens and what happens in people's experience. As the learning becomes transformational and in tune with individual and organisational purpose, there is also an increased alignment between aspiration, vocation and actual practice. As the learning involves more and more of the people who have a functional relationship with the organisation, there is an increased alignment, or congruence, between different people, teams and departments.

3. It is possible from the model to speculate on some of the links in learning approach. For example, it seems common sense to see double loop learning as benefiting from a learning cycle approach, so that the learning process goes round the operational and strategic cycles more than once. It also makes sense to talk about double loop learning being associated with learning at the level of mind sets, since reviewing strategy often calls for a review of current perceptions and assumptions. It also makes sense, it seems, to think about this level of learning involving teams and functional systems, because reviewing which operations and strategies to pursue is likely to have an impact on a wide range of people within an organisation. You may care to look at some of the other links the model offers and, equally importantly, some that it misses, for example transformational learning with the individual.

4. It is possible to map a schematic representation of a period of organisational learning on the chart. It would most likely begin at the perimeter, concerned with individual requests for development and policy making about new structures within the organisation. To produce the possibility of a real and sustainable shift in learning, the process would then need to spiral in towards the centre until clarity was reached about the emotional ground that might otherwise resist further change, and the implications of the new learning were seen in the context of the organisation's purpose and

environmental setting. Then, most importantly, the learning would need to begin to spiral out again, so that the impact of the full learning was finally enacted in individuals and had a lasting impact on the artifacts that echoed the new lived reality.

#### **What the model does not do**

1. It does not cover all the nine points outlined in this chapter, it is only a partial model.
2. It does not encourage the reader to view the myriad of relationships that may exist between the outlined factors, for example, the possible dialogical nature of work at the level of mind set. In short, it is not a comprehensive overview, but an interesting example of one way of viewing the learning process. The fact that it has short-comings is reassuring. It would be a contradiction in terms to pretend that we could give some inclusive and authoritative meta map of learning. Learning is, after all, ultimately a continuous journey of exploration. The journey is exciting and interesting and involves us all. You may like to contribute now by summing up your thinking from this chapter in your own way, using the space provided below. Whether it is by 'playful cartography' or some other form, I would invite you to continue your own double looping of learning now.

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