



VIEWPOINT

Of course organizations can learn!

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Abstract

Purpose – This is a comment for all those writers who claim that organizations cannot learn. The author consistently rejects this notion. Rather the author contends that organizations can learn, in at least two different ways.

Design/methodology/approach – The author reviews some of the common arguments against organizational learning, and tries to answer the opponents.

Findings – The main argument against the critics is that they are too busy to look for evidence that organizations are not like individuals and that organizations therefore cannot learn. Instead, the author argues that it is a question of level of analysis.

Originality/value – The author also suggests that theories as well as knowledge in general are metaphoric, implying that organizations as such of course are able to learn.

Keywords Learning organizations, Individual development, Learning, Metaphors

Paper type Viewpoint

Many writers have argued that organizations, as such, are incapable of learning. This perspective has nearly become accepted as a mainstream point of view. They claim that only individuals are able to learn (e.g. Belasco, 1998) or that organizations only can learn through individuals (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1978; Hedberg, 1981; Mumford, 1994). A few examples are shown below:

Truth is: The “learning organization” doesn’t exist. Save your time, energy and dollars. The critter is mythical. Organizations don’t learn. People learn. You can have a collection of learners in an organization, but you can’t have a collection of organizations that learn (Belasco, 1998, p. 17).

We all know of individuals who manage to learn with little or no contribution from “the organization”. It is, however, impossible to conceive of a learning organization, however defined, which exists without individual learners. The learning organization depends absolutely on the skills, approaches and commitment of individuals of their own learning (Mumford, 1994, p. 77).

The main argument that the opponents of organizations as learning entities put forward seems to be that organizations are not human, and can therefore not learn. To the contrary, I will be arguing in this Viewpoint that organizations, in fact, are living entities that indeed are capable of learning.

Most probably, opponents of this view believe that organizational learning theorists see organizations as being superpersons (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). However, besides the view that organizations learn as if they were individuals, and besides the perspective of organizational learning as simply being the sum of the organization members’ individual learning, there are some perspectives that more effectively make sense of “organizational learning” and thus of organizations as being entities that are capable of learning. In the traditional perspective of organizational learning,



organizations are viewed as learning in the sense that knowledge that individuals have learned as agents for the organization is stored in the organization's memory (see, e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1978, p. 19; Kim, 1993, p. 37). Here, knowledge is viewed as being stored outside single individuals, in routines, rules, SOPs, symbols and dialogues – knowledge is embedded, encultured and encoded (Blackler, 1995).

There is also a newer perspective of organizational learning. Cook and Yanow's (1993, p. 378) cultural perspective on organizational learning implies that the organization as a collective learns – not as a superperson, nor as a collection of individuals:

In this respect, organizational learning, as we use the term, refers to the capacity of an organization to learn how to do what it does, where what it learns is possessed not by individual members of the organization but by the aggregate itself. That is, when a group acquires the know-how associated with its ability to carry out its collective activities, that constitutes organizational learning.

For instance, Cook and Yanow argue, a symphony orchestra learns how to play a specific symphony in a specific way, as a collective. It is impossible to take a person from another symphony orchestra and let her or him play the symphony without practicing with the new orchestra, even if that person has learned to play the same symphony with her or his former orchestra. A perhaps more common variant of this perspective, where collectives are seen as the learning units, is where communities of practice (COPs), are the learning entities (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi *et al.*, 1998; Wenger, 1991).

Many of those who argue that the individual is the only actual entity of learning, would probably protest against the description of the traditional perspective of organizational learning, where the organizational learning is brought about in that knowledge that the individuals have learned as agents for the organization is stored in the organizational memory. They would probably argue that this process of storing is handled by individuals, trying to force everything into the level of the individuals, i.e. a strong belief in individuals as the smallest components. The same could be argued against the perspective of “new organizational learning” (in which collectives learn). In the same way as the opponents argue that organizations are incapable of learning without their individuals, one could, however, argue that individuals are incapable of learning without their brain cells and nerve cells. This way of arguing would, of course, end up in reductionism, in the sense that smaller and smaller units are claimed to be the ones that really cause learning to happen. Nonetheless, it is a powerful argument against the opponents of organizational learning perspectives; can we really prove that individuals learn?

Consequently, organizational learning theorists could be criticized for anthropomorphism, i.e. that human traits are applied to inanimate objects. But in what way are organizations not animate? If organizations consist of individuals, they are certainly animate. As collectives, I would also say that they are animate. And if they are ways of structuring people, they would still be alive, as is the case if they are norm systems that guide people's behavior. As I see organizations, they are more or less planned relations among people and their actions, emotions and cognitions – like traffic, for instance. Universal or national traffic laws, materialized in signs and symbols, are the basis for traffic relations, together with people's knowledge about them. Traffic rules change continuously, though, and people break the rules daily and interpret them locally. And it happens quite often that a couple of people choose not to stick to rules or locally developed norms, and instead decide together – often by subtle

ways of communicating – how the specific situation is handled best. I would therefore not say that traffic is an inanimate object. Moreover, we often attribute actions or behavior to entities that “in fact” are incapable of action or behavior without the help of individuals. There is, however, seldom anyone who complains about that we say that potted plants grow, although they would not grow if we did not water them. Some pedagogical researchers claim that humans do not learn without stimuli. In spite of this, it seems to be reasonable to say that humans learn.

One could also argue that there in fact are forms of learning that can take place without the direct involvement of individuals (depending, of course, on how one defines learning) – i.e. that organizations can learn autonomously. When an individual leaves an organization, he or she leaves sediments, since he or she has taken part in the continuous conservation and creation of culture. In this way, the particular individual still takes part in the cultural learning, although not being a member of the organization any more.

Why, then, do so many prefer to see the individual as the only entity of learning? The most obvious explanation to the fact that so many make objections against organizational learning, may simply be that they know too little about what organizational learning might be, or lack an image of how organizational learning come about. One objective of this viewpoint has been to point at some possible ways of understanding organizational learning.

Another explanation of the fact that so many oppose the organization as a learning entity, has to do with power and politics. Leymann (1989) claims that the organizational perspective of learning neglects the question of who has power in the organization, and suggests that the focus instead should be on whom it is that learns. He argues that “[i]t is patently obvious that ‘organizational learning’ is not only a meaningless concept from a scientific point of view, it is also a naïve one, particularly in countries with a brutal distribution of power” (Leymann, 1989, p. 290). Since many organizational learning theorists come from the business administration area (like myself), and perhaps view increased effectiveness for companies as their primary mission, they might – consciously or unconsciously — neglect the power issue, and do therefore not oppose the view that organizations can learn. Other, more humanistically-oriented scholars, may, though, agree that the organizational learning perspective hides power issues, which Leymann argues, and therefore oppose the view that organizations are capable of learning in favor of the individual as the only learning entity.

I am not arguing against such a critical standpoint – there might very well be negative sides of organizational learning perspectives – but I want to acknowledge that there is also a third, less political, explanation. It may simply be that, unless we are trained as sociologists or anthropologists, we so easily think of humanity and society in terms of individuals, not as collectives, and therefore view organizational learning in such terms with which are most familiar. This is probably something that we learn when being breast-fed, at least in the western society. Therefore, I recommend researchers and others to try to accommodate the organizational learning perspectives, and view them as possible levels of analysis, which may or may not be appropriate in different situations. In the same way as some claim that “organizations are not capable of learning without any of its individuals”, and that it therefore is necessary to analyze the individuals, one could argue that “as long as there is a group of people there is always some kind of organization”. But would that necessarily mean that we have to analyze the group of people from an organizational perspective?

Hence, instead of discussing which the “actual” learning unit is, the discussion should consider which level of analysis that is appropriate. There are lots of possible levels of analysis. For instance, if we aim at studying learning (as a process, not as an outcome) in an organizational context, one could choose to study changes in: behaviour, action, impulses in brain cells and nerve cells, routines, dialogues, rules, praxis, culture, etc. And in some of these cases, it may seem to be a better idea to talk about organizational learning than about individual learning. In conclusion, the claim that organizations learn should not always be taken as an argument for organizations’ capacities to learn without any individuals, but as a choice of level of analysis, in contrast to an analysis on for instance the individual level.

In order to facilitate the accommodation of organizational learning perspectives among learning theorists, I suggest that we look at those who view organizational learning as a metaphor (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1978, p. 11; Coopey, 1996, p. 364; Kim, 1993, p. 37; Salaman, 2001, p. 346), meaning that “though organizations do not literally think or learn, and though organizations are not merely a collection of individuals, organizations learn only through the experience and actions of individuals” (Thatchenkery, 1996, p. 4). In the same way, one could argue that Argyris and Schön (1978) do not really see learning as loops and do not really see the organization as a thermostat, but that these metaphors help us understand organizational learning better.

I want to take the metaphor argument one step further, though, and, as some contemporary metaphor philosophers fairly recently have argued, hence I suggest that all knowledge (Brown, 1977) and all theories (Morgan, 1980) are metaphoric, implying that we always use knowledge about something more known to us, in order to understand that which is less understood. This means that all knowledge is metaphorically created, and – hence – that there is no such thing as differences between true knowledge and metaphorical knowledge. In this way all new knowledge is created from existing knowledge. As soon as we, for instance, find a new “thing” that has never been seen before, we socially construct it (i.e. create it) by using existing knowledge – i.e. knowledge from more well-known areas. Thus, knowledge can be “true” only in that it helps us to make sense. Accordingly, the claim that organizations learn is a very understandable way of reasoning, as long as it makes sense. I think it does.

From this perspective, organizational learning cannot be wrong. We constitute a phenomena that until 1958, when the term “organizational learning” was (as far as I know) used for the first time (March and Simon, 1958, p. 37), was not known to us. Furthermore, to claim that organizations really have brains, memories and experiences, as opponents have been criticizing organizational learning theorists for, would not be a problematic issue. The metaphors should, in fact, be interpreted literally (see Davidson, 1978)!

The opponents, though, claim that we need to know more about in what ways organizations are similar to individuals. In fact, even some organizational learning theorists call for evidence in this respect (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993, p. 377; Hedberg, 1981, pp. 3, 20; Lähteenmäki *et al.*, 2001, p. 116). If we only were to use theories based on empirical studies of the objects of our attention, we would, however, have difficulty in using at least some of the theories developed for understanding animal learning, on how human beings learn. To a large extent, the behavioral learning experiments were executed on animals, and the understanding of animal leaning was transferred to theories of how people learn. The similarities between animals and human beings are,

of course, not obvious. Even in the cognitivistic tradition, knowledge from other subjects has been used in order to understand learning. For instance, Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation originate from biology (Floden, 1986). Besides, Piaget did not use these concepts for learning, but for the development of children (Luck, 1982). Accordingly, metaphorical knowledge creation is both a natural and indispensable process.

In conclusion, I hope that fewer writers confuse the ontological question whether organizations are capable of learning or not, with the political and/or methodological question whether it is an appropriate level of analysis or not. I also hope to convince some of the most obstinate defenders of the individual as the only learning entity of organizations, that groups, collectives and organizations also can learn.

Finally, where does all this take us when it comes to implications for practice? I think that both of the organizational perspectives of learning will bring about other views. It will no longer be a question of providing the right conditions for individuals' learning, but, in the traditional perspective of organizational learning, also a question of how to store knowledge in the organizational memory. One would thus have to consider how, for instance, routines are established, and how the processes in which they are established can be improved.

The cultural perspective of organizational learning will probably have even more extensive consequences for practice. This perspective certainly takes much of the focus away from the individual, in favor of the collective. Managers who have assimilated such a perspective would certainly go for collective knowledge development among the staff, instead of developing the individuals' knowledge. However, the cultural perspective of organizational learning also takes the focus away from the image that we actually can affect organizational learning processes – i.e. that learning happens as well as how, where and when it happens – and its outcomes. To the contrary, learning is, in this perspective, something that always takes place, in that the collective learns how to perform its task. Managers would thus lose their sense of being in control, at least over learning processes. One can, though, always struggle to improve the performance of the collective, but the point is that learning happens whether one likes it or not, and that a conservation of current knowledge – for instance when a newcomer enters the organization – also is a form of learning (Cook and Yanow, 1993). Consequently, such a perspective of organizational learning may be devastating for they who earn their living from making organizational learning processes more effective. This, and that managers might lose their sense of control, may, of course, decrease the probability that the cultural perspective of organizational learning becomes popular – at least among certain groups of interest.

Even the so-called “practitioners” should, though, also consider which level of analysis that is appropriate. The organizational learning perspectives can, of course, be used by employers and managers in order to avoid efforts that help the individuals to learn. But, again, they can also be appropriate perspectives of learning that, for instance, help in avoiding large investments on organizational learning efforts that might be unnecessary and worthless.

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