
Towards universities as learning organisations

*Peter Franklin
Myra Hodgkinson and
Jim Stewart*

The authors

Peter Franklin, Myra Hodgkinson and Jim Stewart are all based at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham, UK.

Abstract

The notion of “learning organisation” is, arguably, gaining credibility. This article takes this position as a starting point and, in the context of the authors’ own declared assumptions and beliefs, explores the meaning and potential application of the concept. This is achieved through examination of the literature on “learning organisations”, especially as it connects with emerging thinking on strategy and strategic management, and postmodern analyses of organising. The examination is then used as a comparison with conventional practices in UK universities. The argument is advanced that universities, as providers of management education, have both privileged opportunities and critical responsibilities to seek to adopt the ideal and practices associated with the concept of “learning organisation”. Some initial suggestions are included on what this might mean, and “look like”, in practice if the attempt to move towards learning organisation status is taken seriously.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to open a discussion about the relevance of the concept of “learning organisation” to UK universities providing management education.

The paper is based on a literature search of work on the “learning organisation” and “organisational learning”, published work concerning postmodernism as related to strategic thinking and management practice, and research and writings of the three authors.

As we survey the literature and our knowledge of organisational practices associated with “organisational learning”, “organisational development” and “human resource development”, we are sensitive to the view that the development or nurturing of a learning organisation requires a long-term commitment to the ideals and implied actions which we explore here.

The paper is in six main parts:

- (1) Part 1 begins with a declaration of the authors’ beliefs and opinions about the nature and importance of individual and collective learning.
- (2) Part 2 provides the case for exploring the concept of “learning organisation”.
- (3) Part 3 links and expresses these characteristics in the context of universities. We therefore touch on matters of “structure” and “culture” which inevitably affect our work today, and any future possibility of nurturing the development of a learning organisation within UK universities.
- (4) Part 4 looks at potential strategies for the development of a learning organisation.
- (5) Part 5 provides glimpses of the behaviours we believe are consistent with the ideals of a learning organisation.
- (6) Part 6 provides a summary and conclusion.

Part 1: Beliefs

At the centre of our thinking, and as the basis for this paper, we share a number of beliefs about the importance and nature of individual and collective learning. For clarity these beliefs can be summarised in the following ways:

- (1) We believe that learning is a natural human behaviour, and education is a human right.
- (2) By the first statement we mean that we believe that individuals have a “responsibility to learn” (Dixon, 1994, p. xviii) responsibly, to engage in learning, practice and dialogue[1] both for their own good,

- and for the potential contributions which they can make to the good of the society, of which we are all a part.
- (3) By the second statement we believe that education is a fundamental human right, open to all. However, we believe we are privileged to have been educated and to have received a formal education. We believe that we remain privileged in being part of a social and political system which values education sufficiently to want to employ us! We also consider it to be a privilege to be part of a system which gives us an opportunity to facilitate others' personal development and learning[2].
 - (4) We see learning as a lifelong process which begins at birth and proceeds in perpetuity. We see learning as being experiential (like at work or play), and programmed (like at school). We see both sources of learning as potentially equally powerful and valuable. We believe that our role as professional teachers, educators and facilitators, is to encourage individuals to be more aware of, and exploit, their learning opportunities. We believe that we should encourage individuals to gain insight into "double loop" learning, and to develop insights and skills about how they best learn.
 - (5) Following Bateson's work (1979), we see learning as being based in, but not bounded by, the relationships between individuals, ideas and values. We see the learning medium as the spoken and written word, pictures, sounds and artefacts, and involving all the knowing, sensory, imagining and spiritual senses.
 - (6) We see learning as reflective and action based. We see learning from others, discovery and experimentation as ways of exciting people's imagination, insight and knowledge. We see excitement and curiosity as just two ways to encourage individuals to learn. Following Argyris (1994), we see "error" as a potential source of learning.
 - (7) We believe that learning helps to transform and emancipate individuals. We believe that both experiential and programmed learning provide individuals with a potent source of influence over their own lives and others for whom they are responsible, or to whom they are related. Learning is transformative, affecting individuals' personal understandings and meanings, both about day-to-day routines, and higher order

issues including, for some, "the meaning of life" itself.

- (8) We see organisational learning as having many of the characteristics we attribute to learning by individuals. Following Senge's work (1990), we are impressed by the potential which "team learning" holds for complex knowledge-based organisations. We are persuaded by Dixon (1994, p. xviii), that "collective learning" has the power to "transform the organisations we have created". We are certain that we need to review and begin to amend current conceptions of organisation (cf. Alvesson and Wilmott, 1996; Chia, 1996). Applied to universities and, in particular, schools of business and management, and adopting language in Burgoyne *et al.* (1994), we believe we should seek to develop a learning community which is more open, flexible and "metaphysical" than those normally adopted by universities.

Part 2: The case for a learning organisation

We begin our definition of a learning organisation by referring to an influential contribution. According to Senge (1990, p. 3), a learning organisation is one where:

people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

Here, as Senge (1990, *passim*) and others have pointed out, "learning" is characterised by the mutual interaction of numerous individuals in search of processes and outcomes which are essentially stretching, enabling and transforming; interdependent processes and outcomes which are consistent with, support, inform and impact on the purposes and values of the organisation as a whole.

While initially commanding and alluring, this vision of organisational life contrasts bitterly with the practices and attitudes demonstrated by most organisations. Indeed, turning to casual enquiry, or to deeper desk research, with few exceptions, most writers will admit that they have "never seen" a learning organisation (Waterman, 1994, p. 65), or alternatively, creating one "is easier said than done" (Pedlar *et al.*, 1991, p. 2). So why the fuss?

The essence of our argument follows Senge's, where he challenges people in

organisations to acknowledge and actualise the human (and business) capabilities which can be emancipated by attention to “organisational learning”. In itself, Senge’s argument might be considered to be nothing new; that organisational learning could be interpreted as being hardly different from organisation-wide approaches which institutionalise (so to speak) the personal development of employees matched to an organisation’s strategic objectives.

However, Senge and others take a contrary stance[3]. Hawkins (1994a, p. 76), for instance, considers “organisational learning is more than the sum of ... individual learning” – and in another contribution (Hawkins, 1994b, p. 20) he makes the telling remark (consistent with our own beliefs), that “Learning takes place in a network of interconnection” which is related to its “ethical, aesthetic and ecological environment.”

In this interpretation, organisation learning involves complex interactions between an individual and his/her own learning “styles” [4], interactions between two or more individuals, and continuous interactions between and among “coalitions” (March and Simon, 1958), “teams” (Senge, 1990), “collectives” (Dixon, 1994) or “groups” (Franklin, 1996a); sometimes with the known, alternatively with the implicit purpose of achieving enhanced capability, satisfaction and meaning for people individually, and collectively for the organisation as a whole.

Such an emphasis on capability reflects our own preoccupations with the “formal” world of education and learning, where we seek to imbue a love of learning (and learning how to learn better) through workshops, seminars, reading, research, lectures, coaching, nurturing, experimentation, etc. In this context, and in this interpretation, our personal development, and the development of our immediate colleagues (“staff development”?) is a natural and central feature of our work as professional educators, teachers, facilitators and learners. In this way, with others in and beyond the university, we are seeking to develop and nurture a sort of wisdom (Cunningham, 1994, Chapter 4), which goes beyond intellectual curiosity, having knowledge for its own sake, or for that matter, learning about learning for its own sake!

Viewed in this way, at the very least the concept of a learning organisation becomes a metaphor which binds our understandings about what we, collectively, might aim to

achieve. At its very best, the concept of a learning organisation provides images and ideals about processes and behaviours, attitudes and aspirations which (we believe) should colour our approaches to our own learning, and affect all of those with whom we mix[5].

All of this puts organisations on a sort of pedestal, attributing to organisations a sort of metaphysical character which goes beyond the experiences of many who work in organisations. Arguably, such reification of organisational purposes and processes needs to be justified by reference to more “concrete” experiences to which workers in organisations can, so to speak, relate. For, without there being a realistic belief that individuals in organisations could be encouraged to behave more like those idealised in a “learning organisation”, the rhetoric of Senge and others will remain an empty vision.

Dixon (1994, pp. xiii-xxi) gives us some scope to believe that “learning” and “learning organisations” are part of the same discourse by claiming that “learning is a part of work and work involves learning”. For those of us who have taught managers, and facilitated sessions using experiential and action learning, we can intuitively relate our own experiences to Dixon’s claim. But how far is her claim one which invades our own learning and our own work?

A different approach is to take Senge’s view about the importance of teams in organisations. This has the distinct advantage of making reference to social constructs to which most readers can relate. It also has the advantage of reifying the contribution of “teams”, for in Senge’s words (Senge, 1990, p. 10) “teams, not individuals are the fundamental learning unit in modern organisations”.

Senge’s clarification is vital. By seeing “team learning” as the pivotal unit within the learning organisation, and by imagining numbers of organisation-wide teams embarked on “bottom-up” and “top-down” projects which link work and learning, we can begin to get a sense of the potential energy[6] which could be aggregated holistically, i.e. “organisation-wide”.

Whether or not one becomes convinced about the possibility of the learning organisation emerging as a force for personal, organisational and social development[7], the adoption and diffusion of a learning organisation is not a quick fix, nor another fad. Indeed, in a methodological sense, it is about a different way of looking at the possible behaviour of

organisations. Normally, it is about nurturing a different culture – a different way of behaving and a different way of judging what is important.

Furthermore, for those interested in epistemology, the learning organisation is consistent with the emerging “postmodern” paradigm, which privileges “actions, relationships and processes” over the “end states” of shape, size and structure (Chia, 1995, pp. 600-1). In this post-modern interpretation, the idea of organisation itself loses status, being seen more as a “coming together of inscriptional acts and interactions” (Chia, 1995, p. 598), than a “technology developed as a ‘taxonomic urge’ to fix the flux and flow of the world in temporal and spatial terms ...” (Chia, 1995, p. 597). In a parallel way, in postmodernism the status of learning is enhanced by emphasis on the learning process – by emphasis on styles of thinking which dwell on the ontology of becoming, where “emergent relational interactions and patterning ...” are the nature and source of “reality” (Chia, 1995, pp. 581-2).

Useful parallels can be drawn with recent literature (e.g. Handy, 1995), on the emergence of virtual organisations as expressions of psychological and professional relationships which arise from the duality of searching-learning processes, coupled with the crude economic necessity of “making a living” (Franklin, 1996b). When these insights are applied to remote electronic learning, when there become global communities of learners brought together (virtually) by real-time technologies pursuing disparate ends but similar means, the modern concept of organisation clearly dulls the mind and obscures the wealth of possible “emergent relational interactions and patterning”.

Part 3: Towards application in universities

As we leave the philosophical issues discussed in Part 2 and move forward towards the possibility of application in UK universities, we are immediately faced with the need to reconcile our understandings of the idealisations contained in the literature on learning organisations and postmodernism, with our experience of observing and working in modern organisations.

As observers and members of organisations, daily we are confronted with language and practice which derive from modern discourse. Daily we are confronted by (and mostly unthinkingly use) language and practice which

touch on “structures”, “reporting lines”, “bosses”, “subordinates”, “control” and “co-ordination”; language and practice which are based on an implicit (but misplaced) certitude about time, space and human relationships (Giddens, 1990). The dominant modernist discourse is inherited from generations of cumulative experience, language and behaviours based on the work of Taylor, Ford and others (see Legge, 1995) who have embraced a machine metaphor of organisations; a metaphor which requires people to be arranged in logical mechanical relationships so as to “fit” the strategies and needs of the business, to “take instructions”, to “implement orders” and to act unthinkingly, robot-like in pursuit of “rational” objectives set top-down by others. In this order, human emotions, foibles and mistakes are assumed away, and where they exist, they are treated as “noise” to be eliminated from the system – deviances to be removed swiftly and economically. In this order, time is essentially static and only single loop learning is permitted[8].

In UK universities we can sense something of these modernist characteristics. We speak of “heads of department”; we operate a “line” staff appraisal process; the titles “director” and “co-ordinator” are part of our vocabulary; and “key objectives” and “performance indicators” are part of the operating routines of these organisations. As further evidence of our assumed modernist stance, some of our behaviours and groupings are institutionalised in the form of a “board of governors” and “executive” committees; groupings drawn from élites with delegated powers to describe futures which others will be explicitly and implicitly required to interpret, and through their daily activities, “implement”.

Whether these judgements are deemed to exaggerate the adoption of the machine metaphor of organisations, there can be little doubt that if the idealisations of a learning organisation are to find expression anywhere, then a potential home should be one where the learning process itself figures as a dominant theme in the activities and discourse among members of the organisation. Or put slightly differently, if the practice of organisational learning is to find expression anywhere, then arguably we should be able to observe it, or nurture its potential development, in an organisation committed to scholarship and the learning of others. Such an aspiration, even for a university, is likely to be difficult to achieve, for the organisational cultures, with the

emphasis on the plural, can be expected to vary both across and within different subject areas, and different faculties, departments and subject groups.

We postulate that one source of this variation is entirely pathological and (given current scientific method) incapable of ever being eradicated. We postulate that the adoption of scientific method requires individuals within subject disciplines to be sceptical and testing about one another's approaches and findings. With the common adoption of falsification as the dominant methodology, which affects the sciences and social sciences, we see consensus being naturally rare[9]. Indeed, in the quest for new discoveries, in working on the boundaries of our intellectual understanding, in the development and application of new technologies, we might caricature individuals as being naturally (i.e. intellectually) argumentative and behaviourally competitive, wanting to assert their supremacy in the field of study, and in the methods and methodologies adopted.

A second source of this variation in cultures is endemic within the expert language, symbolism and jargon which accompany different disciplines. Not only does this set up barriers to communication between individuals in different fields of study, but also (as the authors can testify) even in the same field of study (for our part "management"). In our communicating we are, thus, cursed with misunderstandings owing to different interpretations derived from different contexts and different inflexions of a single technical term[10,11].

A third source of variation stems from the first, and is heightened by the second, and is best explained as differences in views about what is considered most important. In one sense this source of difference can be likened to the differences one finds in non-university organisations, where "hierarchy" and "functional silos" present cultural and communication barriers and where, as a consequence, there emerges a sort of insidious preciousness felt and expressed by each hierarchy and each function about their unique contribution and importance to the business. In university businesses, at the micro subject level these differences are manifested in claims about the importance of one disciplinary area versus another, or one methodology versus another. At the macro university-wide level these differences are manifested in claims about strategic and cultural matters such as the balance and (relative) importance of teaching, research and consultancy[12] – and at the

public policy level, these differences are expressed economically and sociologically, by politicians (with a small and large "P") developing arguments about science and education being seen and funded as if they were public or private goods.

On a slightly different tack, at the public policy level these differences are also compounded by accountability and audit requirements imposed by statutory instruments which, when coupled with externally determined performance indicators, de-limit the strategies, objectives, behaviours and attitudes of universities[13].

Looked at this way, looked at systematically, it is clear that the development of a generic culture which wishes to nurture and sustain a learning organisation, will be neither easy nor swift. Even assuming that some of the "inhibitors" that we have outlined above can be overcome, there is a final matter which we would need to resolve, and that is colleagues' views about the possibility and net value[14] of being a passive or active member of a learning organisation.

This confronts us with a final problem, and that is the difficulty of expressing purposefully the gains which might result, or for those with more sensory needs, how much better it might "feel" to be a member of a learning organisation.

Stewart (1996, p. 77) puts it bluntly by writing: "... The concept of a learning organisation is not easy to describe or define" – and even Pedlar *et al.* admit (1991, p. 2):

We can't take you out to visit a learning company... [But] the keyword is "transformation" – a radical change in the form and character of what is already there.

We are almost back full circle. If, as Dixon argues, the world of work and the world of learning overlap, and at the limit can be seen as one and the same thing; if at the very least learning helps to transform people's understandings of "what is"; and if at the very best also helps to improve people's abilities to learn, then by extension we can argue that, as individual learning and transformation are an integral part of our purpose as "educators", we have a duty to ourselves and our students to engage in a collective learning process which transforms "the form and character of what is already there".

As Pedlar *et al.* (1991) express, this is a "radical" agenda which, taking a postmodern stance, has no end game.

Part 4: Potential strategies for the development of a learning organisation

As we look towards the identification and exploration of potential strategies for the development of a learning organisation, it is important to recall Legge's advice (1995, p. 302) which is to avoid "prioritising structure over process".

Accordingly in this section, we encourage readers first to "forget the reality that you have previously constructed" (von Krogh *et al.*, 1994, p. 53), then second to join us in acknowledging that "language and text are not so much a means of communicating pre-existing 'facts' or thoughts, but a set of sounds and marks on which meaning is imposed" (Legge, 1995, p. 302). Finally, we take the point of view offered by Krogh *et al.* (1994, p. 67), who propose that as "knowledge development depends on 'both the writer and the activities of the reader' ... we urge you to begin to read this article again!".

Conceptions and contexts of the strategies for developing a learning organisation

From our previous discussion it should be evident that in our conception, the ideals of a learning organisation should be interpreted in terms of the processes (ideally consciously) mutually adopted by a group of people. For the moment this conception deliberately avoids any sort of "misplaced concreteness" (Chia, 1995, p. 590), either in the form of "facts" of organisation as *fait accompli* states", or as the organisation of work or society (Chia, 1995, p. 597). This initial conception also deliberately refuses to refer to the number of people who constitute the "group", but we are happy for readers to take the implied innuendo and deduce that what "glues" (Morgan, 1986, p. 135) the group of people together and defines their boundaries, is a shared culture.

So, as a second step into our exploration of strategies for the development of a learning organisation, we assert that our conception of a learning organisation is based on organisational culture, where this is defined and explained as "a phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly created and enacted by our interactions with others" (Schein, 1992, p. 1), manifested and expressed "primarily through language" (Watson, 1994, p. 112).

These two conceptions provide part of the theoretical basis for our discussion of the emergence of learning organisations. The second conception, for instance, will help to explain

why some individuals will want to see themselves as part of a particular learning organisation, and why some will feel less comfortable in claiming membership. The first conception expresses the metaphysical properties of a learning organisation; that one never becomes a learning organisation; one is always seeking to become [15].

This leads us to our third conception, which takes account of the "flux and flow of the world in spatial and temporal terms" by recognising the "impermanence" (Peters, 1987) of members. As Franklin (1996b, p. 20) has written:

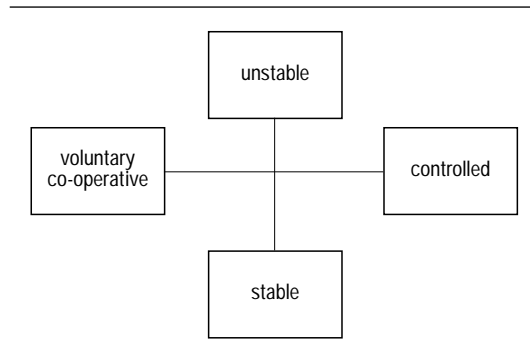
... tribes (i.e. organisations) can therefore be seen as transient vehicles for the pursuit or expression of shared values. Such tribes can be seen as having transient lives, for as the value sets change through constant interaction (both within and between tribes), the final possibilities of admission, or alienation and abandonment give members urgency to resolve the implicit conflicts either through dialogue (and hence gain amendment of the tribe's espoused purpose, glue and values), or alternatively, by creating barriers to admission, or alternatively by determining to leave and join (or create) a "new" tribe based on shared perceptions, past and potential relationships.

In the same way, over time the learning organisation can be expected to attract and alienate some its members, some moving on to other learning organisations, others attracted to ours more than others. In the meantime, the particular values and processes which caricature any one learning organisation can be expected to change over time, influenced by dialogue among "loyal" members, themselves influenced by the dialogue and learning being expressed by members of other learning organisations.

Finally, this brings us to our fourth conception, and that is learning organisations are essentially open and dynamic systems, sensitive and informed by the many worlds which their members occupy. Being open, learning organisations are inherently unstable, affected as they are by exogenous influences and shocks, as well as endogenous processes.

On this basis we might caricature behaviour in learning organisations in the space depicted in Figure 1 [16]. Here, learning organisations are depicted along two axes. The vertical axis measures the degree of stability – instability associated with the learning organisation, while the horizontal axis measures the extent to which learning organisations can be seen to emerge and die naturally, according to their members' co-operative wishes, or at the other

Figure 1 Behaviour within learning organisations



extreme, established, designed and controlled by a patron or leader.

In Senge's construction of the learning organisation, leadership, vision and dialogue are held together within the ideals of "building shared vision" in a context where open, systemic consciousness dominates individuals' thinking and approaches to problem solving. One potential consequence is that people participate in the visioning of their future, and the mutual setting of mutual goals. Another is that overall, within the learning organisation as a whole, people are more committed, more focused on the importance and pattern of relationships. Put in the vernacular, the team is "more together" and operates more openly.

This open system, this openness to alternative views of the world, has one further important consequence. In Stewart's (1996, p. 83) words:

An essential characteristic of learning organisations is the ability to formulate alternative perspectives and characterisations of their business and the world in which they operate.

This openness to new ideas, new conceptions and interpretations of the worlds we occupy and create, is surely a core characteristic of university organisations which provides those of us who work in universities with a head start in developing strategies for a learning organisation

Strategies

Strategies for developing a learning organisation need to be grounded in some understanding of individual learning. Conceptualisations of learning organisations focus on individuals as learning entities and individual learning as being a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for their creation. Thus, we need to articulate a view of learning processes to inform the formulations of strategies and implementation activities.

Our paper has already established a belief that individual learning is natural, inevitable and continuous. Such a belief is consonant with and supported by well-established and widely-applied theories of learning. Two theories of particular interest are the experiential learning cycle proposed by Kolb and his colleagues, and System Beta suggested by Revans (Stewart, 1996). The implication of both of these theories is that learning and work, and work and learning, cannot be separated. Learning, therefore, should not only be associated with formalised and planned events or activities such as programmes of education, training or development. Such programmes should rather be seen as deliberate interventions in the naturally occurring learning processes of individuals (Stewart and McGoldrick, 1996). This interpretation of learning allows us to consider the possibility of interventions, deliberate or otherwise, occurring in, at and through work itself. It also allows for the possibility of individuals themselves, and their work colleagues, acting as "intervention agents", and, thus, consciously and deliberately facilitating, improving and directing their own learning and that of their colleagues.

The arguments of Kolb *et al.* and of Revans (1980) also, implicitly at least, support a second view which has implications for strategies and implementation activities. This is that "assessment" is an essential and integral part of the learning process. The focus of assessment in individual learning is, naturally, the self. Since learning is natural, inevitable and continuous, so too, therefore, is self-assessment. The argument is supported by the work of other writers, including that of John Heron, who devised the development method known as Self and Peer Assessment (SAPA) (Stewart, 1996). Heron and others also argue that assessment of "others" is also a natural feature of human behaviour. The "other" in this context can be colleagues, managers or indeed "the organisation" constituted by its institutionalised practices. Assessment of "self" can be informed by the assessment reached by "others". Thus, "my" assessment of "you" can inform "your" self-assessment, and "your" assessment of "me" can inform "my" self-assessment. Organising and work processes which facilitate, support and direct individual learning will, therefore, enable and value self-assessment, supported and informed by others.

Strategies and implementation activities which reflect these principles will have the effect of "surfacing" individual learning. They

will also support and make more probable “dialogue” and team learning. Learning processes and outcomes will become more visible and thus individual and organisational learning will be enhanced.

All of this though may stay at the level of single loop learning, although double loop learning becomes both possible and probable. Development methods such as action learning, devised by Revans, and SAPA, devised by Heron, are based on and reflect the principles. Such methods formalise the potential of individuals themselves and their colleagues acting as “intervention agents”. The potential benefits of these methods are, though, put at risk by their very formalisation. What are needed are strategies, activities and methods which question and challenge established perceptions and “mindsets” of where and why learning is directed. The established and prevailing perception is that learning “serves” the achievement of pre-existing, or pre-determined, organisation mission and goals within a pre-existing structure. Formalised development methods, even those such as action learning and SAPA, can and do reinforce and perpetuate such a mindset. More fruitful in the journey of becoming a learning organisation are organising and work processes which recognise that individuals, through learning individually and collectively, can and do create the organisation they desire. Concepts such as structure and mission are, in this interpretation, simply constructions to inform attempts to control and direct behaviour and learning. The attempts usually fail, though the failure is seldom noticed. Constructive engagement in mutual and collective learning, which requires constructive engagement in mutual and collective assessment, is in the end the process which creates structure and mission and is, therefore, the arbiter of survival and success.

Part 5: Glimpses of a learning organisation within UK universities

This section is concerned with glimpses of activities and processes which would support the development of a generic culture to sustain a learning organisation, within which the worlds of work and learning develop, to allow engagement in a collective learning process. We have talked about groups of people coming together within a culture which recognises the validity of such a process, where there would be a recognition of the activities of groups where some group members may leave to form

separate groups and where group membership is of a temporary nature.

In university life, the reasons for group membership are often formally defined. The membership of a course team, for example, represents membership of a formal team with defined responsibilities including pastoral care and the design, delivery and evaluation of a curriculum. The natural coming together of informal groups, however, can be illustrated by the way individuals form voluntary networks; people who share a common interest and act in mutually supportive ways, as can be evidenced by, for example, full-time researchers.

Reasons for group membership may be organisational and here, as an example of what we generally understand by course teams, can be used to illustrate formal groups. The opposite can be illustrated by networks where individuals voluntarily form a group because of a shared interest, which may be relevant to some aspect of their work. There is, however, another type of group which may be labelled as semi-formal. These groups could, we argue, have particular significance in supporting the concept of a learning organisation. Glimpses of such groups will help to provide insights into how these could then be identified within a learning organisation and indeed within a system of appraisal. Such “glimpses” may also indicate the potential for application of the concept of “communities in practice” (Hendry, 1996).

Where groups have been formed to gain an understanding of an activity is described in Hodgkinson (1994, 1995). Members of academic staff voluntarily formed teams of three or four with the purpose of providing a network of support by observing each others teaching performance. The objectives were to develop, sustain and enhance the quality of teaching. When participants were asked to reflect and review their experiences as a member of one of these groups they revealed that new approaches to teaching had been made, that they had built effective working relationships with each other and that such activity had been supportive and positive. In this example aspects of appraisal were evident as the total responsibility for the quality of teaching performance was with the group members. This initiative was led by an enthusiast with support from senior colleagues, these colleagues did not, however, participate in the initiative.

Groups of academic staff can form task-centred teams (Edgar, 1992) where a common problem is identified and a common solution is

the objective of the group. In this example specialist advisers may be invited to join the group. Building on this type of activity, it is possible for several groups to be formed, all with different problems, being independent of one another, but with some group members being a member of more than one group. Indeed, it is suggested here that membership of such groups need not be confined to academic staff. Support staff, by necessity, may need to be key players in such a group. The disbanding of the group would normally denote successful completion of the task, but would be likely also to result in closer relationships having been fostered between academic and support staff, with a greater understanding of each other's world of work.

The final glimpse in this trilogy is to review how mentoring may be used in a similar situation to provide support for particular groups of staff. These could be new members of academic staff, or academic staff registered on part-time research degrees. Mentoring in this context is taken to mean providing support while people are in transition, which can be from a state of crisis to a state of understanding. There is a growing body of knowledge concerned with mentoring systems [17], which have been described as a "complex, multi-dimensional activity" (Harnish and Wild, 1994). They may be formal, semi-formal or informal. The value of informal systems has been recognised by Mumford (1989), Kram (1985) and Clawson (1985). The crucial factors which have been identified to ensure success include confidentiality, the mentor and mentee having regular access to each other and that the expectations of both parties are explicit. Recorded success of mentoring systems note that mentees should be able to choose their mentors, and outcomes include the support and advice provided for mentees, who record the help and encouragement provided by the mentors.

An interesting example of an innovative approach is a scheme which utilises mentors from a variety of external organisations. To demonstrate the value attached to the scheme, each mentee is provided with a set of "tokens", each worth £20. These tokens are used to negotiate and "buy" time from the mentors, each of whom is paid £40 per hour of contact. The scheme also allows mentees to choose their own mentor from those available and it makes extensive use of development and briefing days for both mentors and mentees.

Part 6: Conclusion

We have noted that in creating a learning organisation there are no simple answers to the question of how? We are equally certain that the concept is more than a passing fad, and that it is worthy of acceptance and has potential in challenging established conceptions of organising and associated management practices. Universities are arguably pivotal in promoting and perpetuating conceptions and practices of organisation through their role in management education. Our argument, tentatively advanced here, is that universities are also uniquely privileged to explore, apply and advance the concept of "learning organisation" in their own organisation practices. In doing so, the potential for "making a difference" through management education might be more effectively realised. The notion of a "learning organisation", if deliberately promoted in organising and managing, may permeate teaching and learning practices and thus, following the dictum that "the medium is the message", have a more direct impact than either the Oxford Tutorial or the Harvard Case Method on the beliefs and behaviours of UK managers. Organisations in other sectors of the economy are attempting to adopt and apply the ideals and language of "learning organisation". Universities, therefore, given their more privileged position, have a unique opportunity to lead development of the concept in "practice" as well as "theory".

Notes

- 1 Following Senge (1990, p. 236), "In dialogue, there is the free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues and ..."
- 2 ... through this process, influence their relationships with others, and by extension, the collectives, groups, teams and organisations to which they belong.
- 3 After Fisher (1996).
- 4 By this we mean all of those methodological approaches, values, relationships and material things which matter to the individual.
- 5 We acknowledge that readers may object to the suggestion that the concept of a learning organisation can be linked to the established discipline of organisation development (OD) (Stewart, 1996). One of the problems with OD is that it continues to be subject to criticism and controversy (Legge, 1995). However, such criticisms are often founded on partial conceptualisations or understandings of OD. Essentially the discipline of OD rests on four key propositions:
 - 1 the possibility of achieving constructive agreements on organisation mission and values;

- 2 the possibility of each organisation achieving its own ideal form;
 - 3 the centrality of applying humanistic values in organisation and managing;
 - 4 the centrality of organisation learning in achieving organisation survival and effectiveness.
- These features of OD have resonance with most, if not all, conceptions of the learning organisation. It is, therefore, possible to argue that the learning organisation idea represents the most recent and perhaps the ultimate articulation of the aims and values of OD (Stewart, 1996).
- 6 Much of the recent literature on strategy and on organisation learning has adopted the word “energy” (see Hamel and Prahalad (1994)).
 - 7 Dixon (1994, p. xiv): “I have an abiding belief in the power of collective learning to address ...
 - 1 the development of the organisation itself;
 - 2 the development of the individuals who comprise the organisation; and
 - 3 the development of a larger system of which the organization is a part, the community, the nation, and planet”.
 - 8 Giddens writes (1990, p. 39): “... when the claims of reason replaced those of tradition, they appeared to offer a sense of certitude greater than that provided by pre-existing dogma. But this idea only appears persuasive so long as we do not see that the reflexivity of modernity actually subverts reason, at any rate where reason is understood as the gaining of certain knowledge.”
 - 9 We are conscious of a paradox which might arise from a casual reading of Kuhn’s (1970) work. However, Kuhn is quite clear: even when a paradigm has settled down; even when scientists are reluctant to dismiss existing explanations and embark on a scientific revolution, the progress of science is achieved through continuous testing and intellectual argument. While the core values of a scientific community may well be the need to deny consensus, in research, teaching and consultancy we observe the development of groups and communities who share common goals. We would explain these as being in the nature of temporary teams.
 - 10 Two terms which are particularly troublesome, and ironically at the heart of management thinking and practice, are “strategy” and “competence”.
 - 11 See Richmond (1996) for another view of this problem.
 - 12 Incidentally, thinking of a university as society, we are reminded of Legge’s review of Lyotard. Legge writes (1995, p. 304): “... in a postmodern society, actors struggle with an infinite number of language games within a society characterised by diversity and conflict. It is the contest between competing discourses which gives vitality to social life”.
 - 13 As examples of each we can assert the purchase and sales of assets are affected by financial memoranda, student numbers are determined centrally, staff contracts including appraisal continue to be influenced by “moral suasion”, and increasingly all political parties are looking to HE as a source of developing individuals to support the country’s long-term economic development.

- 14 Here we have in mind the application of colleagues’ natural scepticism towards another fad – another initiative on top of others which already exist – and concern about the opportunity costs of pursuing this fad versus current preoccupations, for example on research, or teaching, or consultancy.
- 15 This form of words is deliberately chosen to reflect Peter Senge’s vision. He writes (1990, p. 11): “To practice a discipline is to be a lifelong learner. You ‘never arrive’”. “You can never say: ‘We are a learning organisation,’ ... the more you learn, the more acutely aware you become of your ignorance.” “A corporation is always in the state of practicing the disciplines of learning ...”
- 16 Insights from this diagram are also taken up in Part 5.
- 17 For further reading “Facets of mentoring in HE”, SEDA Paper 94 (1996) provides a comprehensive view of different mentoring systems.

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