
Managing learning: what do we learn from a learning organisation?

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Abstract

Sets out the agenda for, and examines the findings from, the initial stage of a longer-term project aimed at identifying the constraints which guide what are portrayed as self-managed learning initiatives leading to the creation of "learning organisations". At this stage the project has focused on qualitative research with informants and groups of practitioners in North-West UK companies which have involved themselves in learning initiatives and analyses of official discourses and data relating to the criteria inherent in appraising such initiatives. The project has examined tacit agendas in training and development and concludes that the attempts to link individual development with organisational strategy inherent in the human resource practices necessary to underwrite a learning organisation can serve to restrict the possibilities of creating such an organisation.

Introduction

For many in the pursuit of organisational excellence, the learning organisation is the Holy Grail (MCB University Press circular advertising *The Learning Organization*).

For the purposes of this paper the idea of the learning organisation can be viewed at base as a basic shift in values from what Senge (1990, p. 5) calls the "traditional authoritarian 'controlling organisation'", based mainly on "survival" or "adaptive" learning, to an organisation which utilises a "generative" learning approach to continually expand "its capacity to create its future" (1990, p. 14). Jones and Hendry (1994) make a distinction between *Organisational Learning* and the *Learning Organisation*, the former emphasising "HRM, training, knowledge and skills acquisition" (p. 154) while the latter they link to the expansion and development of what Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) term "organisational capability", the tacit, experiential learning that often goes on unnoticed in organisations.

This project started from the initial suspicion that Jones and Hendry's hypothesised distinction is inaccurate in operational terms and that, in practice, learning organisation initiatives are still more adaptive than generative in nature. The research questions developed below are aimed at exploring the notion that the building of a learning organisation is essentially an exercise in the regulation of individual learning and capabilities with the aim of their integration into strategic routines. Our expectation would be that such regulation is channelled by cultural norms and strategic guidelines in a manner which might be effectively antagonistic to self-managed or informal experiential learning.

Problematising learning organisations

Harrison (1993), examining aspirations to learning organisation status in one of the classic cases in the area (the Rover Group) comments that such organisations "seek to relate people's learning and development continuously to corporate vision, mission and strategy" (p. 317). Such initiatives are contrasted with learning and development in industrial relations negotiation where they should be viewed more as a "fringe benefit to the employee" (p. 305). The crucial issue for the learning organisation in linking individual

development to human resource processes and corporate strategy is that of engendering a “learning culture” as otherwise, “processes like these will become controlling rather than developmental” (p. 320). On this basis we would argue that the most fundamental definitional concept driving the learning organisation phenomenon is that of “co-operative learning processes” which represent a re-emergence of systems thinking into debates on how organisations respond to environmental pressures and maintain the levels of innovation necessary to remain competitive. This focus on systems, “that both control behaviour within the company and sense the conditions inside and outside of it” (Easterby-Smith, 1992, p. 24), is contrasted with the emphases on reorganising structure and redefining culture which have dominated the last decades. The need for “flexible” and “transient” structures is still recognised, as is the need for carefully regulated cultural communication and commitment, this latter demanding the control of organisational socialisation and learning processes to maintain and reinforce gains assumed to come from questioning the basic criteria of organisational success.

At the level of the individual the language of the learning organisation is experienced as a discourse of empowerment which ranges from the straight provision of training and development, through enabling autonomy and creativity to extremes which talk of “transcending the mind’s normal operations” (Gustavsson and Harung, 1994, p. 39). The linking factor here is the contribution of individual change to organisational transformation, the characteristics attributed to new-style, “generative” organisations connecting the rhetoric of empowerment to the operational demands of competitive business. These demands are informed by the assumption of a need to respond to “turbulent environments”, which is one of the major paradigmatic presuppositions of everything from process re-engineering to plain old HRM.

Typologies of the definitional characteristics of learning organisations, such as those in Table I, developed by McGill *et al.* (1992, p. 14), typically focus on strategic and structural factors, HRM practices and managerial behaviours. What they do not examine in any detail is employee behaviour and the experience of learning in both formal and informal systems. In this we find the tacit agenda which

indicates that the learning to take place is managed learning and that the empowerment involved is of an exogenous rather than an endogenous nature, growing by external addition rather than from within.

Autonomy in learning and action is secondary to the strategic demand that “groups at all levels need to be empowered to achieve new ways of achieving and doing” (Limerick *et al.*, 1994, p. 38). Limerick *et al.* claim that learning organisation theorists tend to focus on metastrategy, linking strategy, structure and culture (configuration design) and systems of action, the operational aspects of this latter consisting of the recognition of environmental discontinuities at different levels and overcoming what Argyris (1976) termed “defensive routines”. Such routines “enable managers and others to stay within the relative comfort zone of the current deep structure” (p. 34) and it is the skills and feedback from the learning community which are proposed as the transformational trigger which can bring down such barriers to change.

In terms of Lewin’s (1948) classic model of the learning curve, empowerment here could be seen as a classic “unfreezing mechanism”, to be empowered is to be shaken out of the culturally learned routines of the current structure and propelled into new circumstances where the only certainties are to be derived from shared vision and targeted achievement. The literature is almost unanimous in decreeing that learning organisations have to be built on individual empowerment, eventually encompassing the involvement of all in the organisation. A major weakness in this scheme is the extent to which it potentially undermines managerial control systems in moving away from learning which monitors deviance from normal procedure as is claimed to be characteristic of most organisations (Argyris, 1976; Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992). The concern driving this paper was that where the “learning organisation” approach is adopted it would tend to use the rhetoric and practices associated with what appears to be an empowering undertaking to write control (gained over organisational socialisation processes) into formal systems of rules and obligations aimed at the integration of goals and objectives. This formalisation of learning within human resource strategy contains contradictions in that training and development initiatives might inhibit learning

Table I Typologies of the definitional characteristics of learning organisations

	Adaptive	Generative
<i>Strategic characteristics</i>		
Core competence	Better sameness	Meaningful difference
Source of strength	Stability	Change
Output	Market share	Market creation
Organisational perspective	Compartmentalisation (SBU)	Systemic
Development dynamic	Change	Transformation
<i>Structural characteristics</i>		
Structure	Bureaucratic	Network
Control systems	Formal rules	Values, self-control
Power bases	Hierarchical position	Knowledge
Integrating mechanisms	Hierarchy	Teams
Networks	Disconnected	Strong
Communications flow	Hierarchical	Lateral
<i>Human resources practices</i>		
Performance appraisal system	Rewards stability	Flexibility
Reward basis	Short-term financial	Long-term financial and human resource development
Focus of rewards	Distribution of scarcity	Determination of synergy
Status symbols	Rank and title	Making a difference
Mobility patterns	Within division or function	Across divisions or functions
Monitoring	Not rewarded	Integral part of performance appraisal process
Culture	Market	Clan
<i>Managers' behaviours</i>		
Perspective	Controlling	Openness
Problem-solving orientation	Narrow	Systemic thinking
Response style	Conforming	Creative
Personal style	Blame and acceptance	Efficacious
Commitment	Ethnocentric	Empathetic

Source: McGill *et al.*, 1992, p. 14

through a focus on what Jones and Hendry call “acceptable learning” (related to structure and expected behaviours, 1994, p. 158). The actual experience of empowerment for individuals and groups would be expected to more commonly take place within the tacit and informal learning of capacities and capabilities in everyday work.

The learning organisation approach is one that advocates self-management of the learning process, i.e. in intent. However, the principles for making decisions (heuristics) embedded in the approach contradict this intent by containing little not constrained by strategic considerations centred on cultural change and the rationalisation and transformation of values and structures. Likewise the rhetoric of empowerment presupposes an heuristic process centred around the development of capabilities, but this process is at the

same time concerned with shared visions, inspiring commitment and enabling good decisions (Limerick *et al.* 1994, p. 38) and is, thus, constrained by heuristics defined by what strategy and culture will allow as acceptable learning. In the end the difficulty for the learning organisation approach is the same as that facing attempts to humanise work, i.e. how to balance strategy and control with demands for autonomy and the barriers of resistance.

Research questions

The problems we identified with the learning organisation approach led us to frame research questions broad enough to support a longitudinal study and examine multiple sources of evidence. These were initially pursued through a mixture of qualitative

methods ranging from analysis of documentation relating to learning and training initiatives, interviews with key personnel in selected organisations and material developed from discussions with a focus group of personnel practitioners. The interviews and focus group sessions were carried out by different members of the research group to supply some degree of researcher and method triangulation.

Based on the issues raised above the project was framed around a number of initial research questions which were to be pursued through a mixture of qualitative methods ranging from analysis of documentation relating to learning and training initiatives, interviews with key personnel in selected organisations and material developed from discussions with a focus group of personnel practitioners.

The research questions as given below were not prioritised and were drawn fairly widely so that we could refocus on to areas developing useful information with the aim of reframing the research agenda:

- (1) How are learning organisations conceptualised in practice?
- (2) What operational differences are there between learning organisations and more traditional training and development approaches?
- (3) Do employees already acknowledge needs for development and change in their organisations?
- (4) How do practitioners conceptualise learning organisations?

The reframing we sought through these questions was both to advance more specific research problems in line with the aim of identifying the heuristics which constrain learning processes in organisations and to develop new areas of research in the overall project. In essence our approach here represents the kind of exploratory study recommended by Saunders and Lewis (1997, p. 295, following Bennett, 1991) as needed to refine research ideas.

Learning or changing?

To facilitate analysis of the possible confusions over how learning organisations are conceptualised in practice we went back to examine documentary descriptions of the classic case mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that of the Rover Employee Assisted

Learning programme (REAL). This initiative has been characterised by observers such as French and Bazalguette (1996, pp. 120-1) as demonstrating a “clear commitment to learning” by attempting to move away from what had been characterised internally as the remedial approach to training, the difference in attitude being characterised by statements such as “Training is something you have done to you. Learning is something which you do for yourself” (Vallely, 1992, p. 3). The project was launched in 1990 by Rover Learning Business (RLB), an internal company within Rover, “with a £35 million budget and a mission to sharpen Rover’s competitive edge” (Argyris, 1976). The REAL programme gave employees an entitlement of £100 a year to attend accredited courses on subjects of their choice. This was backed up by RLB “learning products” such as the personal development files (PDFs) which used both self-assessment techniques and negotiated development plans. The rationale behind these initiatives was to “get people back into the learning mode by enabling them to reach their own personal goals” (Vallely, 1992, p. 2). This appears as a clear example of a self-managed learning process but the underlying cultural heuristics are revealed by the emphasis on “getting people back into learning mode”. The aim here is to unfreeze current practices as an introduction to what is described by the RLB learning development manager as “management-led learning” (Oxtoby, 1992), this in a document which actively describes Rover as a learning organisation. In fact the learning process within this learning organisation is characterised variously as a “primary driver” supporting corporate vision and business objectives, and as a “corporate learning process”. Likewise, the use of the PDFs for individuals to record the management and accredited achievements of their learning is represented as a mechanism for building an information system which, “should avoid duplication and achieve competitive advantage”.

The corporate learning process is described as “the sharing and application of knowledge and experience by people who add value and eliminate waste at work” with line management-led “total quality leadership ... coaching employees in all aspects of their learning” (Oxtoby, 1992). That this programme is guided by “acceptable learning” is confirmed by the comment that:

Many managers refer to the process as the “change management process” which is symptomatic of a natural way of life within Rover ... What is interesting is that is that the words “change” and “learning” are substitutional within our vocabulary (Oxtoby, 1992).

The final link in the chain from the rhetoric of a learning organisation to the actuality of a transformational change process is given by the *Pocket Guide to the Change Management Process (Corporate Learning)*, “All learning undertaken should contribute directly to bottom-line performance. Without this, there is no justification for doing it” (RLB, 1992). The substantive change management process encompasses the identification and development of “best practices”, benchmarking and employee involvement, the latter seen as important in the classic sense of learners needing to be motivated before engaging in the change process.

The benefits accruing to Rover from RLB’s programmes were in the creation of a learning environment which overcomes resistance to change by challenging values and beliefs while replacing “confrontational attitudes” with an “open, team-based culture”. The PDFs reveal employee talents and aspirations and help to develop and harness hidden skills and knowledge (Vallely, 1992). While elements of unfreezing and eliminating defensive routines are clear here, as are the formalisation of a learning process which attempts to gain control over organisational capability, there is no doubt that this has been effective for Rover, the internal perception of the learning process being that “Access to learning is perceived by employees as good and their hunger for learning is growing” (Oxtoby, 1992). However, the level of participation and empowerment in this learning process appears to be more on the order of what you “do to yourself rather than for yourself” in that they are expected to actively seek learning experiences but to passively accept the rationales for specific learning activities.

The purchase of Rover by BMW in 1994 might have been expected to put a strain on learning programmes, since we might expect more than the kind of cultural changes that Burnes has identified as coming from the changes in Rover CEOs over the years, “... just as Musgrove succeeded Edwardes, so co-operation succeeded conflict; and just as Day succeeded Musgrove, so partnership succeeded co-operation” (1996, p. 250).

However David Bower (personnel director of Rover) notes (1997) that though the transition from John Towers to Walter Hasselkus, in 1996, has meant that accommodations have had to be made with the traditional, hierarchical style of BMW, RLB, REAL and the use of PDFs are still key development initiatives. These are now supplemented by emphasis on “psychological contracts”, “critical success factors” and the Investors in People programme, all of which are viewed internally as facilitating stages in the process of becoming a learning organisation.

A new system?

We next needed to ask, what is different about the kind of process seen in operation at Rover to that in companies offering more traditional training and continuous development processes. Using documentary information from key informants in a major national retailing operation we found that their training development policy emphasised training to cope with continuous change and quality improvement and training in personal skills to help the employee develop for the future. The examples cited of training in this policy focused on new product ranges, new systems and new procedures. Examination of the standardised training plan for their large stores showed that this consisted almost exclusively of product and sales information with no mention at all of any activities directed at non-specific personal skills development. The training strategy utilised a formally documented system of “performance contracts” which identified highly specific key responsibilities linked to competence standards. This was backed up by a system of individual training plans (similar to Rover’s PDFs) which were aimed at building up records of personal achievements to be reviewed with managers to identify development objectives, success criteria and development activities. The role of “learning” as a concept in documents related to this strategy was evident in only three main areas. These were in the keeping of progress records, the development of others by managers and in training evaluation. In the first instance, individual training plans utilised helpful “learning points” which encouraged the employee to reflect on the “most important thing achieved”, what helped them achieve it, what difficulties they encountered and how they might do things differently in future. In

developing others, managers were encouraged to identify opportunities for on-the-job learning in which to apply coaching and mentoring skills. Where learning featured more prominently was in regard to the training and development strategy. Here inappropriate training and development methods and design were identified as sources of inefficiency in training and, more importantly, learning was given as a key factor in delineating levels of evaluation. These consisted of assessing reactions to learning in terms of participant perceptions of training effectiveness; assessing the extent of learning; assessing changes in behaviour and the extent to which company objectives were met. However, these “levels of assessment” only corresponded with the actual evaluation methods in one respect, that of the extent to which training objectives are met, all other methods emphasised cost effectiveness, optimum allocation of resources and whether training investment compared favourably with other possible investments.

On the face of it, this programme, in comparison to Rover's, is the typical training plan of the “adaptive” organisation where learning is not “substitutional” with transformational change in the organisation, only with behavioural change as a method of self, managerial and organisational assessment. However, at the metastrategic level (Limerick *et al.* 1994) the focus on personal skills and environmental scanning is no different in its linkage to “bottom-line” definitions of the role of training and/or learning in the organisation. At the operational level the only real differences between the learning “products” such as personal development forms, plans and training programmes, appear to be Rover's emphasis on identifying hidden capabilities and the retail organisation's more formal documentary linkage of these techniques into appraisal, though both retain the overall concern for recording competency accreditation. The retailing organisation seems to have no difficulty in incorporating more “generative” interpersonal techniques such as mentoring whereas Rover's focus on benchmarking and best practices would appear to eschew the more informal elements of the learning process. Where the self-avowed “learning organisation” does differ is in its need to employ a level of empowerment through learning as a trigger to change, i.e. the £100 credit for “enabling people to return to learning mode”. Both organisations promote

acceptable learning but it is only Rover which seeks to apply the gloss of empowerment. The retailing organisation is completely straightforward in its linkage of training to company objectives, whereas Rover seeks to justify the same linkage through an appeal to individual development. The relation to strategy and human resource processes is practically identical, the differentiation lies in the transparency of the methods of achieving behavioural change and the extent to which it is linked to overall organisational change.

Who wants to learn?

To approach the question of whether employees already acknowledged a need for development and change we referred initially to an annual employee opinion survey conducted by a subsidiary of a large national manufacturing company. This was again supplied by informants and is not available outside the company. This company does not identify itself as a leaning organisation but is involved in “open learning” initiatives which were moving towards a system similar to Rover's. The survey reported high levels of involvement in the job itself, high to median in decision making and problem solving, but only median levels of satisfaction with degrees of responsibility and influence. High to median levels of concern for and contribution to quality improvement were reported, but this was balanced by much lower levels of satisfaction with quality performance. Very high levels of commitment to skill development and recognition of its importance to organisational performance were also reported, but these contrasted with very low levels of satisfaction with development and career opportunities and low levels of belief in organisational commitment to individual development, for example in that promotion was not seen to depend on individual performance.

More detail and feedback on these data were sought through semi-structured interviews carried out with a senior management development manager and a senior training manager in this organisation, these revealing that though the training manager believed employees at all levels recognised the need for change and development, the manager saw differences between attitudes to skill development and differential responses to change from operational and administrative staff. In terms of skill development, though it was well recognised, no linkage was necessarily made

between personal skills and organisational needs. People were not always aware of developmental opportunities and skills training was sometimes used as a “comfort blanket”, rather than as a developmental process, there being a lack of self-reflexiveness, particularly in relation to non-job specific skills. The latter point was echoed to some extent by the training manager who commented that informal learning could not at present be formally directed because the organisation did not have “a culture of self-monitoring”. The differential attitudes to change existed because the production staff had experienced a greater deal of visible change in recent years. The difficulty appeared to be in how people recognise whether change is taking place, with changes in sites, manning levels and practices making the production staff more aware of the necessities of change than is the case with administrative staff, for whom surroundings, processes and structures had not altered appreciably. Although there was agreement between both managers that progression within the company was not linked formally to learning, there was recognition from the training manager that development could not proceed without adequate backup in career incentives and “extrinsic rewards”. Both managers noted that opportunities for both learning and progression were linked to individual manager’s assessments of personal “drive” or ambition in relation to how employees used their capabilities, with the management development manager commenting that learning opportunities were more often offered through horizontal movement within and between specialist areas. Comments from the training manager on the Rover initiative revealed a concern that introduction of anything similar to Rover’s REAL system should not get “out of hand”, as was the perception with Rover, with the corollary that learning should be more tightly tied to organisational objectives.

Overall, the survey data give the picture of a workforce with high intrinsic motivation and a recognition by them of the importance of quality and skills development to the organisation. However, this recognition is of an essentially conceptual nature and does not extend to satisfaction with the operational aspects of the labour process. From the point of view of the employees, they value the organisation and their work more than the organisation values them. The interview data

tend to confirm the notion that there is more recognition of the need for development and change than there are systems to support it. Though there is the possibility that the recognition of the need for change is prompted by reduced aspirations in the form of what Frese (1982) termed “resigned satisfaction” for operational staff. In terms of resistance to change, it would appear, then, that if there are people dependent on “zones of comfort” in this organisation, it would appear to be more in the administrative staff who have less direct experience of change.

This was partially confirmed in the interviews through the comments on self-monitoring and in relation to the survey the implications for the necessity of environmental scanning in a learning organisation. The survey indicates that there is some overall level of self-monitoring and reflexiveness, but the interviews show this as not capable of being utilised developmentally in that there is no formal link either to strategy, opportunities or skills. What self-monitoring there is relates to job security and the continuity of structural, cultural and experiential factors. Informal socialisation (Thompson and McHugh, 1995, pp. 337-8) dominates what appears to be an unintegrated HRM process in which the only empowerment accrues to managerial prerogatives. In this case it would appear to be the organisational systems of action that need to be unfrozen, rather than employee attitudes, especially in relation to career incentives and provision of developmental opportunities.

We are a learning organisation, honestly!

Our initial interest in the practitioner’s perspective on the learning organisation stemmed from discussions on this topic, with personnel/HRM practitioners attending IPD courses wherein a considerable majority claimed that they worked for and within learning organisations. Some spoke with such conviction, bordering occasionally on Messianic zeal, that we had to wonder whether “the dream – that we can design and create organisations which are capable of adapting, changing, developing and transforming themselves in response to the needs, wishes and aspirations of people both inside and out” (Pedler *et al.*, 1991) was apparently being realised within our catchment area.

Dismissing the collective analyses as syllogistic (learning organisations change, organisation *x* has changed, therefore *x* is a learning organisation), seemed only to antagonise members of the group. Using the Jones and Hendry (1994) model of development phases, practitioners were claiming that organisations were moving towards the transformation stage. A number of paradoxes emerged here, the first being that despite the definition posited by Pedler *et al.* (1991), that, “a learning organisation facilitates the learning of all its members”, there was a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence that learning within the organisations represented in the group was élitist development for employees at senior levels. Arguments raged during the taught programmes about the value of continuous development for all staff, on the well-rehearsed arguments about the dangers of training staff who would then leave the company. Second, development activities were taking place within the organisation, but learning strategies could not be identified with any coherence by the group. Moreover, that learning appeared to be a self-centred activity rather than “a shared ideology which values both independence and interdependence with a sense of public self” (Canning and Martin, 1990, p. 212). Finally, training and development was apparently seen as a form of control, rather than as a way of employees controlling their own learning.

These comments were made with too much vehemence to be dismissed too readily as vacuous. Given that there is a certain cachet attached to the learning organisation concept, were group members too uncomfortable to admit that their organisations were light years away from achieving the sobriquet “learning organisation”? Was it “groupthink” or have these local Lancashire companies created a new reality? The first thought is that what exists is a *trompe-l'oeil* effect, an illusion of reality in which the, “irresistible paradox of the learning company concept is that it is both prescient and pedestrian, providing interesting insights and tedious platitudes” (Ross, 1992). Personnel managers in the group seemed to need to “manufacture meaning” to give this illusion mass and in Ross’s terminology, the pedestrian and platitudinous seem to have been elevated to dizzying heights. Keenoy and Anthony (1992) identify this process as the “mystification of the prosaic” (1992, p. 241) and for some time we had been

struck by how closely this appeared to represent the language used by our IPD students. We are treated to exemplars of downsizing, process re-engineering, strategic HRD, etc., but have found like Keenoy and Anthony that, “... scepticism is no competition for passionate conviction” (1992, p. 248), and it appears that the notion of the learning organisation is espoused along with other weasel words of the “managerial meta-narratives” (p. 238).

To disentangle espoused theory from theory-in-use in the representative organisations, our practitioners were asked to participate as members of focus groups. Initially, two groups joined a discussion about learning organisations and completed a brief initial analysis of their organisations. From this we identified a number of smaller groups which centred around different sectors and services, a retail group, a financial sector group and one group comprising five/six members of one multi-site manufacturing company.

The first trawl demonstrated that some people had shifted position on whether they were indeed working in a learning organisation. Being much more cautious in responses which were committed to paper, the majority identified that theirs were not yet learning organisations, although holding to the view that individual and organisational learning issues were frequently considered. Of the 25 in the focus groups, four identified the use of the phrase “learning organisation” as a descriptor (three from one organisation). Using Pedler *et al.*’s (1991, pp. 26-7) learning company profile (presented in a jigsaw format) 12 were able to identify activities carried out by their organisations. Few of these activities were being monitored in any way. Ten identified their organisations as either having begun to consider aspects of learning organisations and taking initial steps to achieve it or clearly identified the necessary steps moving towards it.

The group was next asked to identify characteristics of different types of learning organisation based on McGill’s (1992) typology, mentioned above. This raised more questions which were pursued through the smaller focus groups:

- Public service provider – identified as having clearly identified the necessary steps and moving towards learning organisation achievement status then selecting from the McGill typology characteristics denoting a

- hierarchical, controlling, bureaucratic, adaptive organisation.
- National retail operator – high street store identified more generative than adaptive characteristics and a large number of activities in the profile. Training and development are seen as linked to organisational goals. This is the same organisation as the one mentioned in the section headed “A new system”, above) that furnished apparent documentary evidence that the training and development undertaken by the store are almost exclusively product based.
 - Government agency – (which was derided by other members of the group in discussion, particularly by those people from private sector organisations) has produced a large number of examples of learning company profile activities, e.g. reward flexibility, self-development for all, participative policy making, etc.
 - Energy producer – indicated a range of activities within the profile, and offered a majority of generative characteristics. It was perceived as concerned, primarily, with individual learning, organisational learning issues being considered only infrequently.
 - Small manufacturing company – identified as having begun to consider aspects and taking initial steps towards a learning company and offering evidence of “management training and trying to get greater involvement” to support this assessment of the company’s progress.
 - University sector – the organisation as a whole was not seen as a learning organisation, but the section within which the respondent works was identified as taking initial steps, based on the evidence of self-development activities.
 - Subsidiary of a large national manufacturing company – described as considering organisational learning issues very frequently, but considering individual learning infrequently. Assessed as beginning to take the initial steps, offered evidence of self-directed learning, competence assessment, modular training initiatives. Half the responses to the McGill typology were classed as generative (this in the same organisation as in the section headed “Who wants to learn?”, above).

There was clearly a degree of confusion about the conceptions of the learning

organisation and an apparent lack of clarity about what is happening in organisations. Within one company, two or three people hold strong views that the company is clearly demonstrating its achievement of learning organisation “status” and yet others from the same group hold cautious, sceptical views. These initial findings indicate that there is training and individual development aplenty happening in organisations, but it is still largely piecemeal and seldom part of an integrated process. Such activity is taken by a significant number of focus group members to be evidence of movement towards learning organisation-type goals and like Cinderella’s ugly sisters, they will make the glass slipper fit at any price.

This can be possibly understood in terms of the the implied dualism present in Garavan’s (1997) review of the area, where the literature is categorised around the notion of whether learning organisations are viewed as a root cultural metaphor describing subjective experience of learning organisations or as a variable in the process of organisational design. As a root metaphor a learning organisation is described culturally and symbologically, whereas, as a variable, it would be seen typologically in terms of a set of traits influencing employee behaviour. Though the practitioners in the focus groups make no conscious analysis of the symbology of the learning initiatives in their organisations they initially appeal to the metaphorical components of the learning organisations notion. However as they are exposed, via the focus group, to the variable factors and activities involved they move towards more restricted conceptions which in some cases lead to further confusions of the status of their organisations.

Findings

Our overall findings so far from this project might best be summarised in relation to Senge’s (1992) notion of “learning waves”. The first wave involves “changing front-line workers”, continual improvement, removing impediments and supporting new practices. The second is concerned with improving how we work, think and interact with a focus on changing managers. The third is the institutionalisation of learning as an “inescapable way of life”. In presenting the idea of learning waves as analogous to “waves of quality”

Senge asserts that in the USA at least, companies are still locked in the first wave (p. 31) and this would appear to be substantiated by the use of the learning organisation approach by Rover. The employee opinion survey would seem to indicate that workers in the section headed “A new system” at least represent themselves as sympathetic to the ideals of the first and second waves and that, indeed, the focus necessary in this organisation is one which will require “second wave” changes in managerial attitudes and practice in order to support what their workforce are willing to offer. Curiously, the only evidence of any element of “third wave” thinking or practice comes from the retailing organisation, where an institutionalised and product-driven training programme does indeed make formalised learning an inescapable way of life.

The focus group evidence underlines these findings in that enthusiasm for the vision of a learning organisation is easier to achieve than the necessary skills and practices needed to get the approach into place. All of the data seem to confirm that there is a tendency to what Senge terms, “a conditioning towards performing rather than learning” (1992, p. 38) and it is the attempted but often unsuccessful linkage of learning initiatives to strategy which lies at the root of this. Whether in “management-led” learning, or in the “development of others” the learning culture engendered is characterised by “the identification of boss with teacher” (Senge, p. 38) which is antagonistic to co-operative learning. There does, indeed, appear to be a hunger for learning but where that learning only has intrinsic rewards for the organisation (e.g. in the acceptance of change) and few extrinsic rewards for the learner (e.g. in progression) the likelihood of promoting anything but acceptable learning seems low. The linkage to strategy demands support for flexibility of organisation and open-ended intrinsic commitment, but for the learner the “locus of control” is still exogenous in that learning must be shown to achieve objectives related to their task and role. The move from the adaptive to the generative organisation apparently involves the abandonment of bureaucratic controls only where they are related to rewards and “job ladder” style progression, but maintains them where they relate to self-monitoring of commitment driven by concerns for job security.

Senge comments that: “Learning and intrinsic motivation have always been the roots of quality” (1992, p. 32) and eventually this only serves to underwrite the feeling that within the learning organisation approach the elements of heuristic process and empowerment are in their “goal-setting” style of motivation more in the way of what Thompson and McHugh (1995) term “technologies of regulation” than realistic attempts towards “nurturing and harnessing this drive” (Senge, p. 32). Honey (1991) like Limerick *et al.* (1994) found many descriptions of learning organisations to be “visionary rather than pragmatic” and this may be understandable in that implementation of the vision is forced to accede to the imperatives of managerial control. In terms of application the learning organisation devolves into a simple goal-setting exercise underwritten by an appeal to the superordinate goal of organisational survival.

Discussion

The investigation of our research questions and the subsequent discussions in the research team lead us to conclude that what we apparently learn from a learning organisation is that we have to adapt to and collaborate with the transformation of organisational structures and processes by showing how we can change our own behaviour and attitudes. The heuristic element of the process lies only in that we are allowed to decide whether we want to learn, not what we want to learn. The heuristics in operation may, in fact, have more in common with what Watson (1996, p. 338, following Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978) refers to as potential theories-in-use, “which would guide actions were their holders free to use them”. In any case, the material presented here indicates that the heuristic determinants of acceptable learning would appear to be driven not so much by the vision of co-operative learning but by the extent to which corporate objectives can be turned into individual “needs”, and this is, in turn, mediated by the intervening variables of managerial control strategies.

As such, what is represented by learning organisation initiatives is much closer to Pettigrew and Whipp’s notion of organisational learning in that they simply act to link training and skills development to human resource strategies. They will utilise

behavioural techniques which could be classed as generative, but locate them within adaptive appraisal structures, often in an *ad hoc* manner, which serves merely to promote commitment and effort without tangible incentives. Indeed Dovey (1997, p. 334) claims that failure to achieve “best practice” in this area stems from organisational inability to transform power relations and leadership incomprehension of interdependence. This is seen by Dovey to lead to confused attempts at *ad hoc* transformation which might achieve short-term productivity gains but can result in eventual loss of competitive advantage. We would further assert that learning is assumed to be politically neutral in that individual decision-making about objectives is not a matter for negotiation in the industrial relations sense and is often, at best, no more than a fringe benefit for most employees.

A related issue arising from the focus group evidence, above, is the question of how to transfer and assess the skills necessary to underwrite a learning organisation, and from this, how the interactional aspects of learning initiatives are conducted and why they succeed or fail. The “behavioural steps” to the group-based rather than strategy-led creation of learning organisations proposed by Honey (1991) offer one possible avenue of exploration of how people can learn for themselves and with each other. Though these “steps” encourage “wanted behaviours” and interactional “triggers” to learning as incremental changes gathering momentum into transformational changes and, thus, could be construed as acceptable learning, they also offer greater scope for learning driven by individuals’ own perceptions of their capabilities and needs. Easterby-Smith’s (1992) suggestions on how to promote experimentation and avoid punishing failure in learning can also be followed-up through a further programme of interviews and survey research to examine more closely how the linkage between learning and strategy can be antagonistic to the creation of a culture of open learning.

The barriers to what a project like this can uncover are signalled by the organisational factors which learning initiatives are patently not antagonistic to. These can be seen in work such as that of Winfield and Kerrin (1994) and Shrivastava (1983) which link organisational learning programmes directly to the implementation of total quality management (TQM), just-in-time (JIT) and other “new”

production practices, as well as the introduction of management information and control systems. These form contextual variables which further research needs to be sensitive to in order that the somewhat Utopian tone of some of the commentary on organisational learning should be tempered by a perspective that keeps sight of their place in the deployment of production and control strategies.

Conclusion

This study has offered support for the notion that the principles of self-management embodied in the learning organisation approach are not accurately reflected in the practices and attitudes enacted in building such an approach. It may be that a formalised, management-led learning process can never lead to a learning organisation. To have fully open learning requires that it is the people involved in the learning process that transform the organisation, and not that it should serve as a device to transform and mould them. What we have not found in this project, however, is evidence of successfully systematic attempts to gain control over organisational socialisation processes through self-monitoring, dressed as empowerment. However, this appears to be because these attempts are only systematic about assessing strategic outcomes and what the individual learns is subordinate to required changes in behaviour and attitudes. The study provides indications that the inherent contradictions in learning organisation initiatives may be best explained through reference to variance in factors such as the uptake of “new working practices” and through further exploration of the interactional aspects of learning processes.

The aim for the next phase of this project is to examine, in broad detail, the issues raised in this paper, relating mainly to training and development, new working practices, responses to failure and learning practices. Initially, the project was followed up by conducting semi-structured interviews with individual members of the focus groups mentioned in the paragraph headed “We are a learning organisation, honestly!”, above. The themes emerging from these interviews were used by members of the project team to produce a more structured scheduled interview questionnaire with which to survey attitudes to organisational learning practices in a sample of North-West organisations. The

questionnaire is, in turn, intended to lead to a structured interview schedule designed to allow in-depth follow-up questioning in organisations from the questionnaire sample which has been constructed using Pinpoint survey design and analysis software and the interviews will also be taped to allow follow-up questioning.

It is hoped that contacts made in this next stage of this project will allow the setting up of further focus groups through which to conduct comparative case study investigations which will emphasise the interactional aspects of learning processes while at the same time opening up discussions with practitioners about how to investigate the impact of learning initiatives on employees and employment practices.

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