Reinterpreting the learning organisation

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Abstract

Examines the theoretical and practical development of the concept of the learning organisation (LO). Some theorists have used the term LO interchangeably with organisational learning, while others have drawn distinctions between the two. Provides a brief review of the current LO literature in the context of learning and organisational learning, and the theoretical tensions existing between these concepts. Treats the LO as a metaphor in order to explore the possibilities for its re-interpretation. Establishes the centrality of narrative to all human endeavours and that every organisational aspect is anchored in narratives. Holistically re-interprets the LO using narrative theory. Suggests the LO needs to be re-interpreted in the context of power relations and Bourdieu's social theory. Claims that the use of metaphor, narrative and social theory enhance our thinking about the LO conceptually and will open up practical possibilities for practitioners and consultants.

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Introduction

The concept of the learning organisation (LO) has gone through many combinations and permutations over the last decade in terms of theoretical development and attempts at practical application. The fervent interest in the LO stems from what Senge (1990; Senge *et al.*, 1994) calls the age of globalisation where one source of competitive advantage is the ability and rate at which an organisation can learn and react more quickly than its competitors. Some writers have used the term LO interchangeably with organisational learning (OL) while others have attempted to draw clear distinctions between the two. There appears to be little consensus about what a LO organisation looks like or what OL means. Furthermore there seems little agreement on the relationship between individual learning and collective learning in organisations and how one translates into the other. This paper initially provides a cursory glimpse at the current literature on the LO in the context of learning and OL and in particular the theoretical tensions and dilemmas existing between these concepts.

Management theorists have under-utilised the insights and practices from other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy and anthropology. As Burrell (1994) argues:

> Sooner or later organisation studies must enter an area where philosophy and social science meet. Organisation studies must also enter intellectual theory where the well-established French and German traditions of social theory meet.

Morgan (1993; 1997) has been one organisation theorist who has drawn on sociology and philosophy to explore organisation phenomena metaphorically. After establishing the important role metaphors play in our understanding of organisations, the LO is treated as a metaphor in this paper, in order to explore the possibilities for a broader interpretation of the concept, with the recognition that metaphors can both illuminate and obscure.

Since Morgan's early work on metaphors, a small number of researchers have explored organisations metaphorically, for example, Bolman and Deal (1997) and Palmer and Dunford (1996). Surprisingly, this theoretical development has not extended to the perspective that it is because we employ narratives to portray the world that we use

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metaphors, even though these may be only partial, to assist in our account of organisations and to convey meanings and interpretations. Organisations are described and redescribed through the continually changing narratives members inherit, produce and reauthor. If we accept narratives are central to all human endeavours, we can see that every aspect of organisational life, from leadership to conflict, and from learning to change is anchored in narratives. The LO is reconceptualised holistically using narrative theory with significant input from the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. Furthermore, what seems to have been left unattended in the consideration of the LO is the issue of power in determining what learning takes place in organisations. The insights of the French sociologist and anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu, contribute to our understanding about the operation of power in organisations generally and the LO specifically. No only will the use of metaphor, narrative and social theory enhance our thinking about the LO conceptually, but it will open up practical possibilities for practitioners and consultants alike.

Learning in organisations – a glimpse at the literature

Underpinning the development of management perspectives on learning in organisations is what Hawkins (1994, p. 9) calls "a change at the heart of our understanding of learning. A shift from viewing learning as being abrupt facts to learning as a more multi-faceted and dynamic process". As Hawkins suggests, it is not that we are learning any differently than before but "our understanding of how we learn has begun to catch up with what happens in practice" (Hawkins, 1994, p. 9). Researchers have been challenged to develop and massage different notions of learning and how they may be applied to organisational settings. Practitioners and consultants have taken up the baton and intervened in an attempt to create a learning ideology and culture throughout their host organisations.

At the developmental backdrop of learning in organisations are models of individual and organisational learning. There are numerous differences and inadequacies in understanding what "learning" means. Research on learning initially concentrated on the individual learner and the conditions by which learning is promoted. For example, Bateson (1979), Revans (1982) and Kolb (1984) all developed models of individual learning incorporating a process of thinking, planning, action and reflection, which they considered to be cyclical, but which in effect was more linear in reality (Hawkins, 1994).

Bateson (1979) first mooted a multi-dimensional view of learning recognising different types and levels of learning for the individual. In an organisational context, Argyris and Schon (1978; 1991; 1996) adopted this multi-dimensional view with their single and double loop OL. They, amongst others, believe organisations learn through the agency of individual members. In single loop learning, errors are detected and corrected in a "continuous improvement" process which may fail to question and challenge taken for granted assumptions. In double-loop learning, the success formulas and theories of the organisation are questioned and challenged, leading to a "deeper" level of collective understanding of values and assumptions in the organisation (Altman and Illes, 1998). Other models of OL adopted this concept of different hierarchical levels of learning. For instance, Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992 in Altman and Illes, 1998) added a third level i.e. triple-loop learning, where there is questioning of essential principles on which the organisation is based, and where the organisation's mission, vision, market position and culture are challenged. Senge in his development of the LO distinguishes between adaptive and generative learning. "Adaptive learning is concerned with developing capabilities to manage new situations by making improvements and amendments; generative learning focuses on developing new perspectives, options, possibilities and definitions" (Altman and Illes, 1998, p. 45).

The approach taken by OL theorists is that those organisations that learn can manage the change process more effectively than can those who do not (Cullen, 1999; Massey and Walker, 1999). OL is said to be about increasing an organisation's problem-solving capacity and about changing behaviour in ways leading to improved performance at the individual, team and organisational levels (Buckler, 1998; Burgoyne, 1995; Reynolds and Ablett, 1998). Argyris and Schon (1996), in Steiner (1998, p. 193) assert:

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> Learning must become embedded in the images of organisation held in its members' minds and/ or in the epistemological artifacts embedded in the organisational environment. The expectation is that new knowledge, attitudes and skills will be acquired and applied in existing or new contexts.

When reviewing the literature on learning in organisations, what becomes evident is an inherent difficulty to bridge the conceptual and practical gap between individual and OL. We see a propensity for some theorists to consider collective learning to be independent of individuals, and expressed in terms of organisational memory, cognitive systems, knowledge bases, and specific competencies and routines (Altman and Illes, 1998). Alternatively, other theorists (e.g. Overmeer, 1997) emphasise the importance of individuals learning from experience combined with the integration of individual skills into a competence for OL to become a competitive advantage in an organisation. Similarly, Altman and Illes (1998) focus on the transformative processes deemed necessary to link OL and individual learning, especially through leadership and teamwork.

The concept of the LO popularised by Senge (1990) has received heightened attention recently because it is thought to embrace many of the vital qualities for today's organisations, i.e. teamwork, empowerment, participation, flexibility and responsiveness. The LO is defined by Senge (1990) as one where: people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire; new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured; collective aspirations are set free; people are continually learning to learn together. Senge (1990) visualises the LO to continually expand its capacity to create its future. His five disciplines constituting a LO, namely, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking, have received much attention. He sees "systems thinking" at the heart of his LO model, where all organisation members develop an understanding of the whole rather than just fractional parts of the organisation in terms of structures, processes, thinking and behaviour. Team learning is seen to be crucial "because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental teaching unit in modern organisations" (Senge, 1990, p. 10). Moreover, he argues that an organisation's commitment to and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members.

Many attempts have been made to define this enigmatic concept. According to Overmeer (1997), for example, the LO is a particular organisational environment facilitating individual learning, which in turn is harnessed by the organisation, and encourages the continuous development of new behaviours and practices. Drew and Smith (1995) in Teare and Dealtry (1998) characterise the LO as a social system whose members have learned conscious, communal processes for continually generating, retaining and leveraging individual and collective learning leading to improved performance of the organisational system. Reynolds and Ablett (1998) consider a LO to be one where learning takes place that changes behaviour in the organisation itself and where OL has reached the stage of successful adaptation to change and uncertainty through development of new solutions.

The transformative nature is proclaimed by Calvert *et al.* (1994, p. 40) who sees a LO emerging:

> ... as a result of the intentional action of the organisation in its attempts to transform itself through a variety of learning. All learning is directed towards some desired result, involves the encouragement of thinking and group learning, and is a transformative process.

Likewise, Teare and Dealtry (1998) stress the transformative importance of self-organising, learning communities in their understanding of the LO. Finally, Steiner (1998) interprets the LO as an organisation continually expanding its capacity to create its future.

Many researchers have adapted Senge's original LO model, prescribing how to create a particular LO or describing already formed ones as blueprints for managers to follow. Watkins and Marsick (1993) in Cullen (1999), for example, identified six imperatives for building LOs. These were creating continuous learning opportunities, promoting dialogue and inquiry, establishing systems to capture and share learning, empowering people towards a collective vision, connecting the organisation to its environment, and developing leaders who model and support learning at the individual, team, and organisation levels. Rifkin and Fulop (1997) comment that the different models of LOs refer to organisations designed to enable learning (i.e. have the capabilities to learn) as well as organisations within which learning is already occurring.

A number of theorists have attempted to draw distinctions or, alternatively, establish a

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relationship between the concepts of learning, the LO and OL. For instance, Jones and Hendry (1994) in McHugh *et al.* (1998) argue that OL emphasises Human Resource Management, training, knowledge and skills acquisition whilst the LO links to "organisational capability" i.e. the tacit, experiential learning that often goes on unnoticed in organisations. Tjopkenkama and Wognum (1996) in Reynolds and Ablett (1998), on the other hand, argue that the LO responds to and anticipates changes in the environment by proactive OL. In their view, a LO deliberately aims at improving its ability for learning and in order to learn on an organisational level it makes use of the learning of all employees, therefore striving to create a work environment which stipulates and supports learning. In contrast, Ikehara (1999, p. 65) comments:

> The spirit of the LO is founded on the learning processes of the individuals in the organisation. However, it does not necessarily mean that it will automatically lead to OL. A LO exists when the individuals in the organisation continually learn not only to realise efficiency in the work role but also to develop as an individual and be creative in the organisation as it pursues its unknown future . . . It is not enough to learn to survive; one must enhance one's capacity to create.

What can be gleaned so far from this perusal of the literature is there is little consensus on what a LO organisation might look like, what OL is, how organisations learn (if they learn at all) and what if any is the relationship between LO, individual learning and OL.

Tensions and shortfalls

The literature is not devoid of criticism for the current usage of the LO and related concepts. These criticisms fall within the parameters of an ill defined concept, unclear processes and practices, inappropriateness of a particular organisation's structure and culture for the successful implementation of the LO and management's attempts to control the learning agenda in their organisation. As Reynolds and Ablett (1998) argue, many organisations have accepted a variety of interventions promising competitive advantage as being the LO and in the final analysis have been disappointed by unfulfilled promises which they partially attribute to a lack of a clearly defined concept and tangible practices.

One dominant view espoused in the literature is the idea that a manager can create a LO. Rifkin and Fulop (1997) argue such a belief has the effect of shaping the perception of managers as the mandators of OL and that such a view will influence the judgement of many as to which organisations should be labelled an LO and who should do the labelling. As McHugh *et al.* (1998, p. 219) comment:

> It may be that a formalised, management-led learning process can never lead to a LO. 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.

In the example of the company BAA (Pedler (1991) in McHugh *et al.* (1998)) the LO became a self-centred activity rather than a shared ideology and training and development was seen as a form of control rather than employees controlling their own learning.

Argyris and Schon (1978) and Senge (1990) suggest groups of employees can learn as a collective and engage in "community building" (Kofman and Senge, 1993). Problems in their collective behaviours are identified and changed, in order for the organisation to learn and culturally change in an interrelated and holistic manner. These changes are a "Galilean Shift," from "the primacy of pieces to the primacy of the whole, from absolute truths to coherent interpretations, from self to community, from problem solving to creating" (Kofman and Senge, 1993, p. 2). Learning is assisted through a bringing together of employees within one organisation's shared culture. This, however, implies a corporate cultural mentality where organisations strive for homogeneity and conformity, through the "socialisation" of their members into a unified culture, in order to reach competitive excellence. Organisations "won't learn" if there are disparate assumptions and values or "organisation disabilities" residing in an organisation and its culture. This view does not take into account the complex nature of organisations and misses much of the rich narrative landscape of organisations.

To the extent that organisations often are built on the premise of self-interest and theories of economies, this leads them to become obsessed with achieving high performance (measured through fiscal accumulation and financial profits) "rather

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than to develop a commitment to the intrinsic value of learning. In doing so, there is the real danger that the transformative, democratising and liberating aspects to which Senge has made reference may be ignored or minimised" (Battersby, 1999, p. 59). McHugh *et al.* (1998) explore the notion that the building of a LO is essentially a practice in the regulation of individual learning with the aim of its integration into strategic routines. They expect such regulation will be channelled by "cultural norms and strategic guidelines in a manner which might be effectively antagonistic to self-managed or informal experiential learning" (McHugh *et al.*, 1998, p. 209). The danger therefore is that the learning culture will embody managed learning, and as a consequence will be controlling rather than developmental, and managers will determine what is accepted as learning or not learning in the organisation.

Organisations that experienced unsuccessful attempts to become a LO had, as Shawatt and Fields (1993) in Reynolds and Ablett (1998) discovered, structures to be too rigid for this to be achieved. Further, they found managers had limited awareness of the potential to support learning. Similar findings were discovered by Towler (in Teare and Dealtry, 1998) who observes that many of the organisations trying to build a LO did so on top of a culture that was traditionally hierarchical and competitive and then wondered why their efforts failed:

> Who for example, is going to commit themselves to action learning, building a shared vision and team learning if they see their colleagues engaging in old culture politics and succeeding, possibly, at the learners expense (Teare and Dealtry, 1998, p. 54).

Much of what is written about the LO appears to forget the irrational and emotional dimensions of learning in organisations. "Learning cannot only happen on a cognitive level 'but also happens on emotional and spiritual levels'" (Ikehara, 1999, p. 65). The extent to which the conceptual and practical development of the LO has given appropriate acknowledgement to these dimensions as rich storehouses of knowledge is questionable. We must accept that "a lot of decisions, although one pretends they are scientifically balanced (e.g. we look at balance sheets, complex financial reports, marketing reports etc.) are due to a final 'emotional' hint from the decision maker" (Tran, 1998, p 100). The emotional climate is where everything gets played out: power games, contempt, envy, despair, but also joy, pleasure, interest and enthusiasm. The emotional climate will deeply influence organisational dynamics, for example creativity and the generation of ideas, the organisation's readiness for change, and the facilitation of learning.

The learning organisation as a metaphor

We can conclude from the previous discussion there still is a great deal unsaid and unsung about the LO concept. After establishing the important role metaphors play in our understanding of organisations the LO will be treated as a metaphor to enrich the current debate in both theoretical and practical terms and open up possibilities for an enhanced re-interpretation of the concept.

Morgan (1997) and others have extensively used philosophical and metaphorical thinking to explain organisations in different ways. Morgan's metaphors of organisations range from "machines" to "organisms" to "psychic" prisons, spider plants, strategic termites, political arenas, football, and blobs of water (Morgan, 1993; 1997). Other theorists have used a host of metaphors for organisations, for example: sailing, seesaws, space stations, roller-coasters, garbage cans, marketplaces, savage tribes, clouds, songs, and soap bubbles.

Morgan (1997) argues that the use of metaphors implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally and that we use metaphor whenever we attempt to understand one element of experience in terms of another. He suggests metaphors both illuminate and obscure and our understanding of a variety of phenomena is framed by metaphors in distinctive yet partial ways. Metaphors illuminate in the sense they can tell us how employees perceive organisation life, though this may only provide a partial insight. Metaphors render opaque the complexity of organisations. For example, the metaphor of organisation as "machine" renders simple that which is complex and plural. If we consider an organisation as if it were a "family", for example, the initial image may conjure up a picture of warmth and caring for one another, between managers and employees. But this picture may provide only a partial insight into the organisation, for it may gloss over the fact

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that the organisation does not accept divergent views from employees who speak out about vital but contentious issues. Morgan (1997, p. 5) argues:

> Metaphor is inherently paradoxical. It can create powerful insights that also become distortions, as the way of seeing created through a metaphor becomes a way of not seeing.

We use metaphors which are embedded in our narratives (to be discussed later) to help explain our experiences. Ricoeur (1984) describes metaphors as the capacity of "seeing-as-if." It is as-if what we are interpreting and writing concerns "learning". It is as-if we actually see "organisations learn". It is as-if there is a "LO". Metaphors are defined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. They argue metaphors are "pervasive in everyday life ... in thought and action" (p. 3) and we experience things and act upon them through a conceptual system that is mainly metaphorical. Contemplating the metaphor "argument is war" we see it reflected in everyday conversations, for example, "their criticisms were right on target" or "you shot down all my arguments". Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest the way we argue is partially contoured by the notion of war and the *argument is war* metaphor is one we live by in Western culture. A culture conceiving the metaphor *argument is dance* would argue in a way incomprehensible to us (Cresswell, 1997). Metaphors illuminate some aspects of a concept but also obscure others. Thus, metaphor may be contemplated as a thought as well as an act "that is implicated in everyday life. This extends metaphor beyond rhetoric or theoretical understanding and into the realm of practice and experience" (Cresswell, 1997, p. 333).

Considering organisation as the metaphor *learning organisation* allows us to problematise and question what we understand by "learning" in the context of organisations. Embedded in the metaphor of the LO is the perspective that somehow organisations are capable of learning and are able to be attributed with human qualities and characteristics. Smith and Tosey (1999) point out, however:

> Arguably it is impossible to perceive "learning"; we can observe and discriminate between various kinds of human activity, but in a sense "learning" is not observable and always has to be inferred (p. 71).

"Learning" within the perspective of the LO has the potential to become reified as an "ideal". This view is supported by Ikehara (1999) who envisages an inherent danger of the learning process in LO because it tends to give the impression learning is the end rather than the means to the LO. Furthermore, the metaphor of the LO simplifies that which is realistically far more complex, non-linear and dynamic. It is as if organisations can be measured in terms of whether they have reached LO status. But as Smith and Tosey (1999) argue:

> We tend to measure what is measurable, as a way of representing difference in the phenomena in which we are interested. When the job of measurement is tough, we tend to measure what we can measure – which is not necessarily a reliable representation of change in the phenomenon itself (p. 71).

What also is left unanswered is how does a particular understanding of the LO sit with an organisation's particular strategy, structure, culture and power relations? Obscured from view is the complex, messy and recursive nature of learning that may occur differently through the multiple levels of an organisation.

Narrative theory and the learning organisation

While Morgan (1997) and others highlight metaphors of organisations, they neglected the issue that we use metaphors because as human beings we use language and therefore narratively construct "social reality". Schafer (1992, p. 148) argues that language offers a:

> ... set of perspectives rather than a clear glass window on the world, an ideological process rather than a universal mode of exchange (p. 148).

The "LO" may be considered in this linguistic context. Champions of the LO concept, Kofman and Senge (1993), argue there is no such thing as a "LO" because it is a category we create in language.

Our understanding of the world is anchored in stories and the way we deal with our experiences is through the use of narratives.

> It is because we use narratives to describe the world that we employ metaphors however partial they may be, to assist in the description of organisations and to convey meanings and interpretations. Organisations are described and redescribed through the ever-changing narratives which organisational members inherit, generate and reauthor (Drummond, 1998, p. 94).

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Narratives and metaphors therefore are integrally entwined in each other's existence. The concept of the LO has metaphorical status because it is embedded in the multiple narratives of organisations in all their complexity, though it becomes taken for granted, reified, and treated as though it always existed. Before we reinterpret the concept of the LO in narrative terms we need to establish the centrality of narratives in our lives generally and in organisations specifically.

Drummond (1998) argues there is a human readiness to tell stories to make sense of experience and to retell stories to guide subsequent action. Embedded in our memories are narratives, and although we may be unaware of them, they continue to guide our actions. The centrality of narrative in all our human endeavours commences in our early childhood when as children we are told stories that are acted out in playgrounds. These are tales, for example, of real and fantasy characters, heroes and villains, goblins and fairies. These stories are not just the domain of our children but also of adults who repeatedly see them in the cinema and read them in the newspapers. MacIntyre (1981, p. 201) argues:

> Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted anxious stutterers in their actions and their words. Hence, there is no way to have an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.

As individuals and leaders we bring meanings to our experiences by way of stories and these may be personal while others are collectively cultural. There are multiple narratives in our lives incorporating the rational, irrational, emotional, present and past feelings and thoughts. For example, from early childhood we hear desperate and heroic stories about Robin Hood and Maid Marion. We are brought up with the belief that as fair maidens in distress someone like Robin Hood will be our saviour. In our subconscious is embedded the belief that good will come to us through our philanthropic and humane actions in society or in our institutions that mirror Robin Hood's actions in days gone by. Personal and collective cultural narratives guide our actions and we use narratives to attend to our anxieties, particularly during any major change in our lives. We continually emplot our experiences to keep these anxieties at bay. The narratives we create influence how we comprehend our organisations, and our understanding of our actions within these organisations. Thus, as Ricoeur (1984) argues, narratives are central to all human endeavours, and we constantly author and reauthor our lives.

Some of our narratives may remain with us, unchanged, throughout our lives, while others are forged and reforged at different times although there is considerable consistency between our narratives. We struggle when we face a crisis or when our life narratives fall into incoherence in relation to our daily actions. We find ourselves enmeshed in competing narratives that cause deep anxiety and amidst confusion, we must refigure new narratives to make sense of our new life's challenges. Carr (1991, pp. 90-91) writes, "Life becomes a constant struggle to maintain and restore narrative coherence in the face of an ever-threatening, impending chaos." Kerby (1991) argues we are experiences and narrators at the same time.

Human experiences are held in our minds as pre-narratives or as Ricoeur coins, narratives in the making. The articulation or narration of an experience is its emplotment or configuration that creates the potential for the experience to be re-authored and better understood. Carr (1991, p. 68) argues:

> No elements enter our experience unstoried and unnarrativised (p. 68).

Narrative making involves the act of articulating experience that opens up the plot, and hence through this process the meaning may be apprehended. Within organisations narrative making is to answer the question, "what happened?" (Drummond, 1998). In a LO sense, if members are able to answer this question narratively, what may be unearthed and learned about are the deep-seated issues (particularly in relation to processes and practices) facing the organisation including the formal and informal, rational, irrational and emotional dimensions.

One of the perplexing questions facing organisations is how do they build up their repositories of knowledge? Nonaka (1991, in Swain, 1999), for example, argues one reliable source of competitive advantage is the knowledge latent within the organisation itself in the memory and potentiality of employees. Listening to the stories of employees is a key to unlocking this latent knowledge and tapping into the commitment gathered through the constant sharing of information and ideas. Swain (1999) argues that managers

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operating in an uncertain environment can no longer only rely on strategic approaches based on historical data. "The problem becomes one of unlearning and we need new ways to analyse the internal environment. A problem facing business is how to evaluate the knowledge. It is intangible, and resides within the people and information processes and relationships of the organisation. Its value cannot be measured by traditional accounting methods" (Swain, 1999, p. 33). The perspective of the LO should incorporate the practice of employees being able to question, review, challenge and criticise strategic and operational decisions enacted on their behalf.

The transformative nature of re-authoring is highlighted by Ricoeur, and involves the listener of a narrative (which could include yourself) achieving a new assessment of themselves or a particular situation. When an experience is rethought it is in effect re-authored. The experience can be viewed in new light opening up the potentiality for different ways of acting. "There are obvious implications for management in terms of articulating experiences and then creatively re-authoring those experiences in order to open up new possibilities for action. Within the business context, to re-author an experience is to answer the question, 'What will we do now?'" (Drummond, 1998, p. 97). In a LO context, there is the potential for this process to lead to the adoption of new and innovative practices.

We have established that a central feature of narrative theory is the intricate linkage between metaphor and narrative and that as human beings we use language and hence use narratives. We infer metaphors, and what they are like, from what we observe and experience. Furthermore, people within organisations take action on the basis of the inferences they make. They infer the multiple relationships existing in organisations and use narratives and metaphors to make this inference. If this is so, we can only talk about organisations in narrative and metaphoric terms. Consequently narratives and metaphors will shape our understanding of organisation. Organisation and language therefore are deeply interconnected. The narratives and metaphors we use contour our understanding of organisations and the meaning we attribute to them (Drummond, 1998) and this is very difficult because narratives and metaphors often have multiple meanings. LO is a metaphor used within the narratives of organisations. Our understanding of the LO is enhanced when we consider it as a metaphor located in narratives. Rhodes (1997) argues that "organisation learning":

> is not an observable phenomena determined by some external model; it is encased in how people recount and interpret their organisational experiences. This perspective does not see organisational learning as being about whether or not events can be universally called "learning" based on a set of legitimated criteria espoused by managerial or authorial voices. It sees that learning is legitimated through the telling of a story of organisational change in a way that is unique to the storyteller and is embedded in the complexity of their story (p. 19).

Importantly, narratives and action are intricately connected because narratives (whether they are personal or cultural) lead individuals to intently act in new ways, for example, physical acts or even the act of developing new thoughts. Action includes "the moral transformation of characters, their growth and education, and their initiation into the complexity of moral and emotional existence. It also includes purely internal changes affecting the temporal course of sensations and emotions, moving ultimately to the least organised, least conscious level introspection can reach" (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 10). Significantly, managers' actions are contoured by their narratives, of which they may or may not be conscious. The reauthoring of an organisational situation will alter their narratives leading to a change in their actions and potentially bringing about a different future. Cullen (1999) portrays learners as active constructors of meaning in contrast to a transmission model of learning. In these terms, learning occurs through the negotiation of meaning, which is a narrative process. Social dialogue or, in the context of narrative, the sharing stories, becomes an important component of learning and all knowledge is constructed in social contexts, and is inseparable from shared understandings. "The shared thinking which evolves from effective communication during collaborative activities and team work constructs the collective vision which guides action" (Cullen, 1999, p. 46). This view embodies the uniqueness of individuals, and learning as a reflective and narrative activity.

We have established the centrality of narrative to learning in organisations which has advanced a more enriched understanding of the LO. The multiple narratives that exist

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in organisations provide a rich reservoir for learning. Through the work of Ricoeur we have seen how narratives can lead to action, for example in the form of new innovative processes. We have yet to fully address the issue of power and what effect this may have on establishing a learning ideology and processes and practices in organisations. The work of Bourdieu and his Social Theory will be instructive here.

Social theory – enriching the learning organisation

For researchers, managers and practitioners, the perspective of the LO would be enhanced with the recognition that learning has to happen within the power nexus of the organisation. As power will operate differently throughout the various and sometimes contrasting domains of the organisation, there will be different interpretations of the notion of LO in the context of that particular organisation and different degrees and shapes of learning. In earlier discussion of the literature, we alluded to the situation where there is the possibility of managers imposing a particular style of learning on the members of their organisation, i.e. a mode of learning given privileged status in the organisation. The LO, therefore, needs to be reinterpreted in the context of power relations and Bourdieu's social theory, a theory of power and action, is employed for this purpose. Bourdieu offers a critical reflection on organisation life because his "analyses of social practices elucidate the workings of social power and offer a critical, not just neutral, understanding of social life" (Calhoun *et al.*, 1993, p. 10).

Bourdieu's primary concern is the role culture takes in the reproduction of social structures, and in particular, how unequal power relations, "unrecognised as such as thus legitimated, are embedded in the systems of classification used to describe every day life – as well as in cultural practices – and the ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of society" (Johnson, in Bourdieu, 1993, p. 2). Bourdieu's social theory combines three concepts, habitus, field and capital, to reveal the penetrable role power plays in our society, our institutions and personal lives. These three concepts will be discussed in broad theoretical terms before they are brought to bear on our understanding of the LO with the recognition that learning is embedded within cultural and historical practices and beliefs.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus embodies the idea of people's habitats and habits and highlights the deeply woven tapestry of individuals in the social context (Drummond, 1998). Habitus is a system "of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without predisposing a conscious aiming at ends or an expressed mastery of the operations necessary to maintain them" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5). These dispositions incline agents to act in particular ways and are acquired through a gradual process of inculcation, through training and learning, in early childhood, and in later life (for example, our speech patterns, our gait, our reactions to people in authority, and how we learn). These dispositions are structured and structuring, as they reflect the social conditions within which they were acquired. They are durable because they are ingrained in each individual operating in a pre-conscious way not readily amenable to conscious reflection or modification. They also are generative and transposable because they are able to generate a plethora of practices and perceptions in fields other than those in which they were originally acquired (Thompson, in Bourdieu, 1992). By the time we reach adulthood we have acquired many different dispositions which enable us to act in socially and organisationally acceptable ways.

Habitus guides us to play the "game" within a field or social space, that is to learn the right local knowledge or "savvy," what is appropriate in a situation and what is not. These games need strategies that are nearly always consistent with a person's habitus. The active presence of past experiences is mediated by each person's habitus. Personal experiences can cause anxiety when they clash with the active presence of past experiences. Habitus represents an embodied past that is vital to our narrative identities and which implicitly gives us a feel for how to play the social game spontaneously "without consciousness or will" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56).

Bourdieu locates human action and experience within fields. Fields are

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competitive arenas of social relations functioning according to their own logic and regularities. These fields are numerous, for example, the social, academic, political and artistic fields. Effective players within a field exhibit a feel for the game, such as in a sporting contest. In Bourdieu's terms (1990), a field(s) "provide(s) (itself) with agents equipped with the habitus to make them work . . . (and) is to the learning of a game very much as the acquisition of the mother tongue is to the learning of a foreign language" (p. 67). Social agents may share some of the same habitus but they may not be identical depending on class, gender and ethnicity. Any field is structured by a series of "unspoken" and "unspeakable" regularities for what can legitimately be said or perceived within a field because a field is a certain distribution of a specific kind of capital. Those "who dominate in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage but they must always contend with the resistance, the claims, the contention, 'political' or otherwise, of the dominated" (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 102). Individuals (such as leaders in organisations) obtain power through the accumulation of the various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) used in a particular field, with a habitus consistent with this field.

Managers in organisations are primarily concerned with the creation and maintenance of meaning (Sievers, 1994). "Through words and images, symbolic actions and gestures, leaders can structure attention and evoke patterns of meaning that give them considerable control over the situation being managed" (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 263). Cresswell (1997) argues that the "creation and maintenance of metaphorical understanding is an inherently political process and one that is likely to be produced by people in power than by people who are relatively powerless. Power, at least in part, involves the ability to impose metaphors on others" (p. 333). Managers often enact narratives that are rarely challenged. They obtain solace and strength in a habitus they share with many other leaders with similar dispositions. Because of their particular habitus infused with personal and cultural narratives, and the various forms of capital they have accumulated, managers have the legitimate power and capital to privilege a particular view of learning in their organisations.

Smith and Tosey (1999) argue that assessment of the LO is not principally a scientific or technical issue but a political one. By political they mean that "learning" is not an objective, measurable entity. It is not a concept that can be operationalised scientifically. "The activity of assessing learning and of making progress towards the LO ideal is . . . essentially a social process" (Smith and Tosey, 1999, pp. 71-2). They contend attempts to link progress towards LO ideals with demonstrable "bottom line results" is a social need not a scientific obligation. Secondly "learning" is political in the sense that "what counts as learning, or what types of learning are valued, may be defined differently by different actors" (Smith and Tosey, 1999, p. 72). Much of the literature advocating LOs attempts to discriminate between desired and non-desired learning, suggesting the term is more rhetorical than actual.

In research on the LO there are many gurus in pursuit of the Holy Grail, who present their wares as an "ideal" state an organisation should and can achieve. Schwartz (1995, in Rhodes, 1997) argues these ideals are given a privileged position in organisations because of their apparent harmonious, unconflictual and anxiety-free persona:

> To focus purely on the idealism of the heroes of organisational life inadvertently suppresses alternative interpretations which are filled by ironic, tragic or comic themes (Rhodes, 1997, p. 18).

The dominant, however, still hold on to their privileged positions and narrative identities as they fear losing control. Carr (1991) writes:

> We are . . . in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end. We are constantly having to revise the plot, scrambling to intercept the slings and arrows of fortune and the stupidity or stubbornness of our uncooperative fellows, who will insist on coming with their own stories instead of docilely accommodating themselves to ours (p. 166).

An advanced perspective of the LO will recognise that storytelling or narrative processes can nurture and create meaning and learning or reinforce control and manipulate meaning and learning.

Managers have the potential power and capital to take into account the multiple narratives of their organisations and members, including the multiple narratives of learning that may exist. In a reinterpretation of LO we can take on board Rhodes' (1996) suggestion to use

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diversity and difference as refractory devices to see and comprehend the multiple narratives of "organisation learning". Instead of categorising an organisation in a particular way, these refractory devices will illuminate the multiple learning narratives existing. Exposing learning in the context of power relations and using a narrative approach to facilitate our understanding of learning in organisations will allow the voices of all members to be seriously heard. In order to forge new narratives in organisational learning research, it must be recognised that all narratives are products of concrete, dynamic, historical and cultural specific relations of power. The multiple narratives of and between individuals and the cultural and political narratives of organisations, can act as rich sources for learning.

Future possibilities

After a cursory glimpse at the literature on the LO and its shortfalls in the context of learning and OL, there is no question that the concept of the LO is complex. This paper has established the centrality of narrative in human endeavours and how we understanding our world through narratives, including their rational, irrational and emotional dimensions. Narratives elevate the often forgotten human side of organisations to centre stage. A reinterpretation of the LO will acknowledge, first, our complex narrative identities and, second, organisations having multiple narratives. An advanced perspective of the LO will acknowledge that learning is based on the "multiple, differing and potentially conflicting [narratives] interpretations and representations of organisational life" (Rhodes, 1997, p. 19). In order to create new narratives in organisation research, we must recognise that all narratives are products of concrete, dynamic, historical and cultural specific relations of power. Illuminating the metaphor of "learning" and the "LO" in the context of power relations, through the social theory of Bourdieu, and using narrative through the work of Ricoeur to help our understanding of learning in organisations enriches our understanding of the LO concept.

In a practical sense, for organisations to become Learning Organisations, what better way to learn than from the narratives kept within the memory of every employee? Managers, consultants and researchers have largely ignored stories as a source of knowledge. Narratives are the collective reservoir of knowledge in the organisation, knowledge about the organisation's processes and practices for example. By conversing with employees and gathering stories from them both individually and in their teams and executive groups, managers and consultants (particularly those using action research) will develop a more extensive and deeper understanding of what is going on at a rational, irrational and emotional level in their host organisations. This dialogic and narrative process will allow members of an organisation to reauthor particular situations that in turn may lead to new organisational narratives, for example new and innovative practices and strategies and increased creativity throughout the organisation.

Mirvis (1996) calls for a "sixth discipline" that seeks to synthesise conscious and unconscious, and reason and emotion, and boundaries drawn between our social organisations and the natural world. As Handy (1997, p. 159) writes "An organisation that leaves the individual souls imprisoned and unlit fills itself with smoke". Emotions need to be brought out of their private closets to the centre stage of organisations through the stories and conversations of members. A new way of working and learning needs to be fostered, where emotions are allowed to be given expression and where questions about how one feels are freely asked.

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