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# Conceptual frameworks beyond the learning organisation

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## Abstract

The learning organisation is a concept and, as with any complex concept, embodies sets of values, goals and beliefs. As consensus grows about these values, goals and beliefs, the probability increases that the concept will be translated from representational status to action and behavioural change. This paper argues that the organisation that attaches its strategic development to the highest level of conceptual framework will be the organisation best suited to manage adaptation to change and challenge in the future. It is suggested that the learning organisation concept can be thought of as the lowest of a three-stage conceptual hierarchy of learning-wisdom-enlightenment. The paper explores the characteristics of the wise organisation and enlightened organisation and suggests that this sequence of development is not accidental but intimately related to the evolution of the human mind (that gives rise to the conceptual frameworks in the first place), from prepersonal to personal to transpersonal.

## Introduction

This paper explores the idea that the human mind is evolving and that the quality of awareness experienced by the individual will be intimately related to their position on this evolutionary trajectory. In particular, the quality of awareness is related to the development of the model the individual has of their self. This line of argument is then supported and elaborated on by exploring the evidence and theories arising from the fields of cognitive science and neurophysiology. Here, the paper argues that the human brain is of vast potential, but that the realisation of this potential is highly dependent on the model of self on which the individual's self system operates.

On these foundations it is suggested that the learning organisation concept can be thought of as the lowest of a three-stage conceptual hierarchy of learning-wisdom-enlightenment. Wisdom can be thought of as a special case of learning culture that is of a higher order than a general learning culture because it provides the conditions for coming to know reality rather than the increased sophistication of representational systems that is a characteristic outcome of other learning environments. The enlightened organisation can be thought of as an ultimate goal or a condition in which reality is known. As such, no attempt is made to describe this as the author cannot make a claim to know reality and it is almost certain that it cannot be described (because that would require representing something that is only present), while it is certain that it is experienced and quite possible that it can be experienced consciously.

The case for doubting the primacy of representational systems as the means of knowing and learning about the world is supported by brief descriptions of knowledge in the fields of physics and mathematics. In the light of this evidence, it is argued that the dualistic mode of knowing is redundant and a second, non-dualistic mode of knowing is described. It is argued that a wise organisational culture is the most suitable for

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promoting this form of knowing and the characteristics of the wise organisation are described.

### The evolution of the human mind

Wilber (1993; 1996) proposes that conscious awareness is evolving in humankind and provides convincing evidence through his careful and extensive study of the remnant trail of clues over tens of thousands of years. He offers a framework for conceptualising this development of conscious awareness that starts at the palaeolithic age, where the individual has not differentiated their self from their environment (calling this earliest stage of awareness “prepersonal”), moving to the individual differentiating their self from the environment (calling this stage “personal” and being the stage at which the contemporary human mind operates), and with the potential to move to the highest stage where self is seen as part of a seamless universe (calling this stage “transpersonal”).

There is a rich array of supporting evidence for Wilber's views. He cites the work of Jaynes (1976) on the evolution of human language which reflects these developments. Equally impressive, we can look to the physiological structures of the human brain. In doing so we find a number of discrete and yet co-operating layers of brain, laid down over the long course of human evolution, from the reptilian system, to the limbic system to the cortex and neocortex. Each additional layer represents an increased capacity for the human organism to operate or behave in contrast to its immediate ecological circumstances. The reptilian brain has little capacity for planning, creating models of itself and environment or even governing its own body temperature. The limbic system (associated with the arrival of mammals in the evolutionary scale) allows for regulation of body temperature among other new capacities, and essentially (supporting Wilber's thesis) allows for the organism to have an increased independence from its ecological circumstances, e.g. it no longer has to move out of the sun the moment its body temperature rises above a threshold. The limbic system allows the organism to act on its environment and a likely corollary of this is that it starts to create models of itself in relation to its environment. The arrival of the cortex and neocortex gives the organism the capacity for conscious awareness, of building

sophisticated models of itself and environment, transcending time and space, thinking about what might take place somewhere else tomorrow or what happened yesterday in another place.

We see the evolution of the human brain as a progression of physiological changes that allow for an increasing quality of awareness of greater differentiation of organism from environment. Talking about the modern human brain Mahoney (1991, p. 425) says:

We are, literally, more attuned to and engaged with our “inner selves” than to our external worlds.

And yet, internal and external co-exist in reality. The arrival of these layers of human brain through the journey of evolution gives rise to qualitative changes in human awareness that correspond exactly with qualitative changes in the models we have of who or what we are, from prepersonal and undifferentiated from the environment, to personal and differentiated from the environment. Wilber suggests that a few individuals have reached a higher level of conscious awareness, which he terms as superconscious. The model of self required for this superconsciousness is self as transpersonal or as connected with environment and the quality of this awareness is one in which subject and object are one and the same.

### The potential of the human mind and the self system as a regulator of this potential

The brain of the modern human being is extremely complex. Here are just a few surprising facts: the brain is made up of 100 billion neurons (nerve cells); each neuron can have as many as 10,000 connections with other neurons; neurons are so interconnected that you can get from one cell to any other cell in the brain in seven steps or fewer; there are more potential interconnections in the human brain than there are known particles in the known universe; electrochemical messages are sent along the pathways of neurons from 40 to 1,000 × per second. The majority of these processes take place without our conscious awareness and many of these processes operate in parallel, rather than serially as in standard computers (see Churchland, 1993; Griffey and Claxton, 1997). Retaining the computer analogy, unlike standard comput-

ers, the brain can change its own software. We might conclude that the human brain is remarkable and yet individuals, groups, organisations and societies can experience severe problems in learning even at the simplest levels. The proposal being made here is that something limits our access to these vast mental resources, and that something is the model we have of who/what we are, our self system. Contemporary research (Claxton, 1994) suggests that the self system and intelligence are intimately related.

How can the “self” or self system be conceptualised? The earliest emergence of a sense of self is likely to have been associated with the development of the self-organised system of the cell. Even for the simplest of organisms, Dennett (1991, p. 414) says, “This minimal proclivity to distinguish self from other in order to protect oneself is the biological self”. At this biological level, the boundaries of the biological self are porous and indefinite (Dennett, 1991 p. 414). If the organism has a model of itself, it is in a better position to recognise changes in its circumstances such as the new arrival of an unwelcome parasite, bacteria or virus. Developing out of the model provided by the biological self is a model that supports the co-ordination of the senses and body, the tacit knowledge of the body’s current configuration (Claxton, 1994, p. 80). With this sense of bodily self, we can locate ourselves within the world about us which enables us to create an implicit representation of where things other than us are in the world about us. From this vantage point, the organism is able to learn about its own behaviour and the behaviour and features of its environment. In humans, the sense of self is elaborated through implicit and explicit presentations of ourselves to each other in our social lives, principally mediated by language. Although language could offer an infinite array of possibilities, our brains seek to recognise patterns and make predictions. Our requirements for being able to recognise patterns and make predictions lead us to seek out consistency in the words we hear or use about our self. As Dennett says (1991, p. 417):

Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate, but words, words, words. These words are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective strings of narrative.

The self may be conceptualised as a knowledge-system that provides a model of who we are as differentiated from the world about us. If we have such knowledge we are better able to make decisions about what aspects of the world about us to engage in or avoid and how to go about this. Our self is usually experienced as a coherent and lasting thing rather than a process associated with a stream of “discontinuous moments of feeling, perception, motivation and awareness” (Valera *et al.*, 1993, p. 72) that closer examination of our experience reveals. This model of self as continuously differentiated from the world about us corresponds to Wilber’s personal stage of evolution of human consciousness and our representational systems, especially that of language, reinforce this model of self. Although this self model gives us all the advantages of clarity, prediction and control in our conscious awareness, it also limits us to knowing the world about us only representationally; with this model of self we cannot know the world from the perspective of being a seamless whole because in effect the self system’s moderation of our awareness disengages us from the world.

What evidence is there for the proposal that the “personal” self model limits our conscious access to the vast resources of the brain? Even when we are attempting to utilise conscious awareness to experience the immediate moment rather than some representation of the past or future, “a substantial duration of appropriate cerebral activity (up to about 0.5 seconds) is required for the production of a conscious sensory experience” (Libet, 1993, p. 123). In effect, the conscious awareness of the personal self has the characteristic of being an awareness of events that are not currently occurring. Is the brain capable of learning in the absence of conscious awareness of that learning? Research evidence indicates that we can be aware as demonstrated by our remembering or our registering an understanding of a particular circumstance without being conscious of what we are aware of (Marcel, 1993), even in extreme non-conscious states such as under general anaesthesia (Andrade, 1995). Also, research evidence indicates that very complex forms of learning can take place unconsciously; that such learning may even be more complex than consciousness is capable of detecting; that such learning may not even register as

changes in the content of consciousness (Lewicki *et al.*, 1992).

In addition, there is evidence that conscious awareness in certain circumstances may impede learning (Masters, 1992). Contemporary theory and research in cognitive psychology (Baars, 1997) suggest that for conscious awareness to arise the brain has to inhibit large areas of neurons, doing so by throwing an inhibitory loop around only those neurons only that are to contribute to the product arising in consciousness. If this is the case, then the contours of this inhibitory loop become all-important in determining the degree of access the person has to the resources of their brain; the narrower the loop the fewer resources can be accessed. The contours of this loop are determined by the self model operating.

Learning cannot occur without awareness, but the most complex learning can take place without conscious awareness. It is clear that there is a range of degrees of awareness and that intelligence, behaviour and learning no longer can be regarded as only arising as a product of conscious forms of awareness. In fact, the arrival of conscious awareness can be thought of as a departure from the inseparability of sensation and action, conscious awareness separating sensation and action. Claxton (1994, p. 44) says of this continuum of awareness:

We might contrast two extreme modes of attention; one focused, sharp and serial, with each thought or sensation following another in clear order; the second broad, diffuse and parallel or holistic. The first would be like a spotlight with a narrow beam; the second like a floodlight or a candle.

We may take the spotlight to correspond with conscious awareness, arising from a subgroup of brightly lit neurons, and the floodlight to correspond with unconscious awareness, a diffuse and holistic awareness, arising from the collective of the individual awareness of each of the neurons. This intelligent unconscious awareness arises from the layers of the self system associated with very early life, that of biological self. As argued earlier, this layer of the self system does not represent or simulate internal or external experience. When this layer of the self system is engaged, the resultant awareness and learning that proceed from this awareness are immune from any process of transformation or

distortion of events as is so when subject (personal self) regards object.

### The redundancy of dualism and the second mode of knowing

Why is the personal self model inadequate? It has been argued that such a model represents the person as distinct from their environment, and as such will only give restricted conscious access to the vast resources of human mind and all aspects of this awareness will be coloured by the differentiation of subject from object. If the real world is in fact seamless, then this personal self model will always prevent conscious access to reality.

Kindness and wisdom are not qualities that can be sought by a mind that is governed by the self system; they are naturally revealed in a mind that is progressively disidentified with this system (Claxton, 1994).

Recent evidence from many Western scientific disciplines indicates that the world is seamless. For example, in mathematics Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem demonstrates that every encompassing system of logic must have at least one premiss that cannot be proved without contradicting itself. In physics, following the work of Planck and Einstein, Schroedinger formulated quantum mechanics which revealed that even the smallest/lightest measuring device will affect the position of the electron in the act of measuring. Schroedinger (1964, p. 137) concluded that:

Subject and object are only one. The barrier between them cannot be said to have been broken down as a result of recent experience in the physical sciences, for this barrier does not exist.

Western scientific endeavour has reached the conclusion that reality has the quality of observer and observed or subject and object as being inseparable. Dualism as a mode of knowing has become redundant. As Wilber (1993, p. 34) says:

if we are to know reality, it is to the second mode of knowing that we must eventually turn. Enough is it now to know that we possess this daybreak knowledge; more than enough it will be when at last we succeed in fully awakening it.

What is this non-dual, non-representational mode of knowing? Clearly, it is a mode of knowing where subject and object are undifferentiated. Wilber (1993, pp. 33-4) lists others' descriptions of this second mode of knowing:

intuition, fusion, cotention, carnal (in the sense of subject and object uniting), stoned, awareness, inseeing, intimate, direct, non-symbolic, non-representational. These may be brave attempts to describe this second mode of knowing but in essence it cannot be described but only experienced because to describe it would require the paradoxical task of representing something that is non-representational (perhaps we should turn to the artist for the best approximation representations).

### From learning organisation to wise organisation

The concept of the learning organisation is perfectly adequate for learning within the confines of dualism and for the production of dualist knowledge. And, although we may view Taylorist organisations as “prepersonal”, vocational education and training programmes as “personal” and learning organisations as moving towards the position of “transpersonal”, it is argued that the characteristics of a wise organisation are those most likely to lead to the abandonment of dualism and the path of the second mode of knowing, i.e. the path leading to knowledge of reality.

Research (Sternberg, 1990) indicates that the following characteristics are associated with wisdom: balance between subjective and objective attributes, problem finding, questioning, balance between knowing and doubting, tolerance of ambiguity, knowing that one does not know, valuing direct experience, accepting the conditional characteristics of knowledge, avoidance of premature cognitive commitments. A model of self that embodies these characteristics is a model that is least likely to restrict access or distort the products of the vast resources of the human mind to conscious awareness. The wise organisation will have structures, strategies and a culture (beliefs, attitudes, values, goals) that support learning in the direction of the second mode of knowing. These organisational features will reflect a valuing of intuition and spontaneity, awareness, mindfulness, direct experiencing, ecological and systemic perspectives, space and time for reflection and incubation of thought, meditation, intrinsic worth of learning, anthropocentric perspectives, kindness, the transpersonal model of self, the dissociation of self-esteem and competence. It is through these sorts of characteristics that the

vast resources of the human mind can be most efficiently put to the task of learning to experience and know reality.

### From wise organisation to enlightened organisation

An enlightened organisation can be conceptualised as a goal rather than a learning or transitional stage which the learning and wise organisations are meant to represent. The goal is to know reality. As I do not know reality I cannot comment on this, much as I would like to! I have selected a few of the platitudes given by Wilber (1996, pp. 346-7) of the social, economic and cultural characteristics of society as it moves from a culture of wisdom towards knowing reality or becoming enlightened: people starting to understand their common humanity transcending roles based on bodily differences of skin colour and sex; policy and strategy based on intuition as well as rationality; findings of higher motivations in people that will drastically alter economic incentives and economic theory; will understand psychological growth and learning as evolutionary transcendence and develop organisations to foster this growth and learning; will use mass media, instant telecommunication, and human-computer linkages to foster this growth; will use appropriate technology to free the exchanges at the material level from chronic oppression; will see organisational-cultural-national differences as perfectly acceptable and desirable, but set those differences on a background of common consciousness, and thus view radical isolationism or imperialism as criminal; will view all people as ultimately one in consciousness and provide support for the actualisation of this, thus limiting mindless and undeserved entitlement; will realise that leaders such as politicians and managers will have to demonstrate understanding and mastery of all aspects of life – body to mind to soul to spirit.

### Conclusions

Interest in the concept of the learning organisation has provided a welcome shift from the prepersonal or Taylorist models of organisational functioning towards organisations with a more transpersonal perspective. However, if the ultimate aim or priority for the learning organisation is to know reality, then it is

suggested that the wise organisation moving towards the enlightened organisation provides a more sophisticated and layered conceptual framework for achieving this. The features of the wise organisation will become clearer and elaborated on as current research and theoretical understanding develop.

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