



Why we should abandon the idea of the learning organization

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose that the idea of the learning organization should be abandoned on the grounds that it was an imaginative idea that has now run its course. The paper seeks to explore the roots of the definition and provoke debate about the wisdom of retaining the concept. The argument is a challenge to readers to explore their own views in order to open up debate.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on an investigation of definitions of the term “learning organization”, the paper explores the theoretical premises of the learning organization concept. The relevance of empirical examples or applied nature of the concept is defined as the principal focus.

Findings – The literature review reveals two basic premises. These are, first, that the learning organization is an ideal worth striving for and, second, that systems theory provides a sound theoretical underpinning for the concept. The concept has resulted in confusion because of the theoretical and methodological premises on which it is based. Each premise is explored and found wanting.

Originality/value – The implications for research and publication are significant in that, whilst the paper seeks to open up debate about taken for granted assumptions related to the concept of the learning organization, it proposes that the concept should be abandoned and research should be focused instead on more pragmatic issues related to organizational learning. The argument uses a brief case example of Siemens to explore the difficulty in applying the “learning organization” concept.

Keywords Learning organizations, Reasoning, Research

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

According to Nicholas Humphrey, Bertrand Russell’s most dangerous idea was to propose the obvious. That is:

I wish to propose for the reader’s favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear wildly paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe in a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true (quote from Bertrand Russell cited by Humphrey, 2006).

The book of writings from which the quotation, mentioned previously, comes is devoted to dangerous ideas. A dangerous idea is not necessarily a bold idea. It is, to quote Gilbert (2006), “the idea that ideas can be dangerous”. It is with this very point in mind that I have proposed that we should abandon the idea of the learning organization. I am, naturally concerned that my academic colleagues, friends and acquaintances will find my idea prejudiced, vulgar and ignorant or, to be blunt, dangerous. Indeed I can understand why they might find the idea of abandoning the concept of the learning organization dangerous. The very idea of abandoning the concept does more than provoke conversation. It challenges colleagues’ hard work and in some cases even their careers. What makes an idea dangerous, according to Pinker



(2006), is the possibility of an “imaginable train of events in which acceptance of the idea could lead to an outcome that only recently has been recognized as being harmful”. As a previous editor of *The Learning Organization* I was asked by Peter Smith to make a contribution to the journal that would, in some way, express how I felt now about the concept. I am therefore in a somewhat unusual position in that I am grateful for his invitation and I am aware that he did not balk at the possibility of writing a critique in this way. Indeed he positively encouraged it on the grounds of academic freedom. As a result I feel less worried that I will be vilified. I hope that I can provoke debate on this subject, which, I believe, is long overdue.

Premise one: the learning organization is an ideal worth striving for

This argument emerges from writers whom, it would appear recognize the intangibility of the concept but who nevertheless wish to retain it as a concept which all organizations should strive to achieve. These are mythical templates towards which “real organizations could attempt to emulate” (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1999, p. 2). In this sense the learning organization is an ideal, “towards which organizations have to evolve in order to be able to respond to the various pressures” faced by them (Finger and Brand, 1999, p. 136). Whilst academics may feel slightly uncomfortable with the impenetrable impossibility of the learning organization, consultants, by contrast, can make a living from selling intangibility. They do this by focussing on creating a commercially attractive template and presenting it to clients.

I must concede that there were some sound arguments that moved Organizational Development (OD) practitioners in this direction. The reasons usually provided were related to the changed world economic climate. Thus, in the 1980s Peters and Waterman (1982) talked of organizational bureaucracy as the dead weight holding back organizational change. Such organizations were, to paraphrase the authors, dinosaurs destined for extinction. New micro electronic technology was one reason but the other was the challenges of globalization. The new economic and business environment was characterised by the opposite of stability. That is, by continual innovation, incessant competition, and technology that was creating the possibility of constant reinvention. Academic life came to be filled with recycled terminology from other areas. Thus, Lenin and Mao’s concept of “permanent revolution” was articulated in a disembodied phrase which failed to reflect the Marxist politics from which it emerged. The guru generated watchwords for the new business environment were to be “developing capacity” for “fast-paced innovation” to which people in organizations had to acquire a new mental mind set by learning to love change. Hamel and Prahalad (2002) reflected the neo Darwinian biological analogy of open systems thinkers in describing the new competitive environment as more complex and variegated than that of the recent past requiring greater genetic variety. Essentially people in organizations had to “reinvent themselves”, develop new repertoires as they went on their journeys. We therefore had to reduce control and increase lifelong organizational learning. This language of adaptation, mutation and change had a plausible ring to it but it was, after all, just an analogy.

So just what is useful about the concept of the learning organization? Is it its model building capability for which hard systems thinkers are renowned? Is it a theory designed to be tested by application? Is it a framework upon which we can hang our

management hats with pride because we can offer sound advice to those not quite as far along the road of organizational enlightenment?

An early definition is suggested by Watkins and Marsick: "Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles" (Watkins and Marsick, 1992, p. 118). But what does total employee involvement look like? And, for that matter, to what extent can values be shared by all?

The definition by Pedler *et al.*, 1991, 1996 (1997), that the learning organization (company) is an "organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself" (p.1) comes close to persuading us that it is a worthy goal to which we should subscribe. There are two obvious drawbacks with this definition, however. First is the problem that only certain types of organizations, such as golf clubs, have members. Unless we work in a cooperative, there is little sense in which most people could confirm their egalitarian identity. The second problem is with a recommendation for how we might structure an organization to achieve learning organization status. This raises a dilemma because it is not possible to answer this conundrum because; if we could identify a structure then we are faced with the problems levelled at Classical Management theory. That is, that a blueprint for designing an organization contradicts the principles of continual transformation.

Some authors, such as Garvin (2000), have suggested that the exponents of the learning organization concept need to satisfy three objectives in order to create a tangible result we can subscribe to. These are:

- (1) A clear definition.
- (2) Practical operational advice which managers can use.
- (3) Tools and assessment instruments to measure their achievements.

However, the difficulty here is that each of these requirements dissolves into subjectivity. That is, for managers to call their organizations a learning organization is not something the rest of us would find plausible unless each of these issues were demonstrated incontestably. Even for advocates like Garvin (2000, p. 9) the learning organization concept "has proved to be elusive". However plausible it is for consultants to construct concepts such as the learning organization for their audiences, when academics do so they require clear, unambiguous definitions, which their academic colleagues can test, probe and contest. When this does not happen we end up with a barren discourse because it does not possess a shared language. Furthermore, without a shared language we end up in a relativistic diatribe. To explore this analogy further, it is like walking with a man in an open field when all of a sudden he stops and says that you have now reached his house. Although there are no physical structures to recognise, he then adds that the next time you come this way you will know where to find him. If he means find him physically then you have a problem because it is unlikely you will fall upon the exact location a second time. If he means metaphorically then he may be referring to a spiritual journey. Either way he expects your perception to match his. Ultimately the problem we have is one of linguistic relativity. And this is the problem with the learning organization.

The relativity of the concept has been outlined in a recent paper by Jamali and Sidani (2008). Table I illustrates this lack of consensus. This failure is not for the lack of effort on the part of empirical researchers. As Jamali and Sidani (2008), point out, the

Author	Identified characteristics	Most frequently mentioned characteristics
Watkins and Marsick (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous learning Dialogue and inquiry Team learning Embedded system Empowerment Leadership Financial performance Knowledge performance 	
Pedler <i>et al.</i> (1991, 1996, 1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A learning approach to strategy Participative policymaking Informing Formative accounting and control Internal exchange Reward flexibility Enabling structures Workers as environmental scanners Inter-company learning Learning climate Self-development opportunities 	
Griego <i>et al.</i> (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training and education Rewards and recognition Information flow Individual and team development Vision and strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership Learning strategy Participative policymaking Enabling structure Learning climate Learning opportunities
Porth <i>et al.</i> (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee development/continuous learning Information sharing and collaboration Team building and shared purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rewards for learning
Tannenbaum (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning opportunities Tolerance of mistakes High performance expectations Openness to new ideas Policies and practices support training Awareness of big picture Satisfaction with development 	
Sarala and Sarala (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Philosophy and values Structure and processes Leading and decision making Organizing the work Training and development Internal and external interactions 	
Gardiner and Whiting (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-development Learning strategy Learning climate Participation in policy making Use of information Empowerment Leadership and structure Links with external environment 	

Table I.
Characteristics of
learning organizations

Source: Jamali and Sidany (2008)

“Complete Learning Organization Benchmark” was a comprehensive diagnostic instrument constructed by Mayo and Lank (1994). This was followed by Rosengarten’s (1995) meta analysis of 30 approaches to developing learning organizations, and Nevis *et al.* (1995) who sought to understand organizations as learning systems, and Sarala and Sarala’s (1996) diagnostic tool for evaluating the learning organization. Watkins and Marsick (1998) identified seven core dimensions of the learning organization whilst the instrument produced by Pedler *et al.*, 1991, 1996 (1997) identified 11 dimensions that were grouped into five categories. Later research by Griego *et al.* (2000) refined earlier diagnostic instruments whilst Armstrong and Foley (2003) produced an instrument that investigated four core dimensions of a learning organization (see Jamali and Sidani (2008) for a full account of these instruments).

Despite this variation in studies seeking to measure the learning organization, there remains a persistent belief that the parameters can be found. This appears to be futile because of the variety of potential intervening variables that can intrude on the realization of the concept. For example, Maria’s (2003) study suggests that learning culture impacts on innovation whilst Dymock’s (2003) study of the development of a learning environment is itself based on trust, openness, empowerment and self-managed teams. This reveals the myriad of interweaving variables and potential barriers. The difficulty of identifying a useful assessment methodology results from the empirical underpinning.

Premise two: systems theory provides a sound theoretical underpinning

The work of Senge (1990) has undoubtedly done more than most to underpin the concept of the learning organization with a rigorous methodology. Paradoxically, there is a tendency in the learning organization literature to present his work as a series of clichéd aphorisms. He may even be guilty of this himself by making statements to suggest that a learning organization is an organization that “can create the results it truly desires”. It is a place “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole (reality) together” (p. 3).

A much greater appreciation can be gained from the roots of his work in System Dynamics. This academic underpinning owes much to the work of Forester’s Systems Dynamics Programme at MIT in the late 1990s (Jackson, 2003). As Jackson points out, Forester’s interest in learning was in the ability of complex systems to develop learning potential. This meant that managers needed to learn how complex systems worked. Indeed, we can see the possibilities with flight simulators since learning is derived from reflecting on our responses to stimuli presented to us. The flight simulator is, of course, a physical structure or environment in which we learn how to fly. Using this analogy enables us to think of organizations similarly. That is, as learning laboratories. The real advantage of system dynamics lay in the construction of feedback loops to facilitate learning. If managers of organizations could therefore learn how to understand their own systems dynamics then they could understand the complex relationships and underlying properties of their own systems.

Senge’s work on reinforcing and balancing feedback loops was subsequently applied to organizational contexts. This appeared to demonstrate the potential to model sophisticated social systems and seemed to account for delays of feedback

resulting usually from contradictions in the system dynamics. In this way, he argued, it was possible to develop archetypes showing regular patterns of behaviour (Jackson, 2003). The learning organization was Senge's attempt to get managers to construct archetypes of behaviour that may have functional and dysfunctional consequences for organizations.

This was intended to be a long-term goal and he appeared to criticise simplistic models and frameworks that tended to be applied to complex systems. Managers therefore needed to appreciate the greater complexity inherent in system dynamics. Thus, he argued that:

The systems viewpoint is generally oriented toward the long-term view. That's why delays and feedback loops are so important. In the short term, you can often ignore them; they're inconsequential. They only come back to haunt you in the long term (Senge, 1990, p. 92).

If we examine the argument that managers and work colleagues should become more knowledgeable in their application of systems theory then we can see a superficial plausibility in the argument. Thus, by learning about interrelationships through feedback loops that illustrate causality we become more reflective about the processes of change and, in particular, the time delays it takes to change things. The difficulty with this argument is that we can never be sure of causality. Furthermore as he argues, it takes a long time to recognize the effects of relationships. Clearly, the longer the time, the less certain we can be about intervening variables that obscure causal relationships.

Systems thinking is, of course, only one of the five disciplines upon which an learning organization is built. The others are "personal mastery", "mental models", "shared vision", and "team learning". Essentially, these appear to be little more than aphorisms designed to put a structure around the systems dynamics. Thus, we read that the idea of mental mastery is the formulation of a coherent picture of the results people most desire to gain as individuals and to learn how to cultivate the tension between vision and reality. In a later book Senge *et al.* (1999) illustrate this tension with a diagram of an elastic band. Similarly, mental models are said to reflect enquiry skills enabling reflection. This represents a rather simplified version of Argyris and Schön's (1996) discussion of flawed mental models produced by gaps between espoused theory and theory in use.

The argument that the Fifth Discipline is the culmination of systems thinking mixed with Organizational Development initiatives reaches its fruition in *The Dance of Change*. Here Senge argues that the methodology of the Fifth Discipline is able to achieve "profound change". Unfortunately, the book offers little more than conservative conventional wisdom and fails to reveal any awareness of the real behavioral dynamics of working life. This is because the work is based on a single underlying metaphor of organicism which is ultimately driven by assumptions of consensus, order and stability.

Systems theory has led to the view that a sophisticated model can be built and applied. However, whilst Senge has argued for a holistic model of learning to provide feedback loops, this rests upon an assumption that sophisticated modelling will, in itself, bring about a learning system, which can be called the learning organization. Unfortunately most systems models construct a predominantly conservative functionalist approach to conceptualising their subject matter.

The problem with the learning organization concept

Both premises cited previously suggest that the concept of the learning organization appears to be fundamentally flawed. There are a number of reasons for this. The first reason is that there is no practical underpinning framework for a learning organization that we can all agree to. The second reason is that even if there were a framework, this would constitute a contradiction to continuous innovation and to the very principle of the learning organization concept. The third reason is because of the conservative bias underlying the concept.

If this is the ultimate fusion of systems thinking with Organizational Development, then is it the end of the metaphor? Has the underlying discipline of critical social science and ethical values, upon which OD was based, simply become diluted into change aphorisms? Has system dynamics run its course because it is flawed by the one-dimensional nature of organicism?

The main difficulty with the concept of the learning organization is that it can be an instrument for continual transformation. References in the literature to transforming organizations through learning are naïve if all we have to do is guide, influence and manage these transformations, as Schön implies. This is not simply a theoretical point. Schön's belief that we must invent and develop institutions as learning systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation (Schön, 1973, p. 28) assume that politics can be managed when wisdom prevails. Unfortunately, empirical evidence suggests the opposite. For example, research by Finger and Brand (1999) reported that it was not possible to transform a bureaucratic organization by learning initiatives alone.

The most critical objection to the learning organization was raised by Salaman and Butler (1994) when they state that not only may employees resist organizational learning, the learning organization concept ignores the way that power is exercised, and the behaviours that are rewarded and penalised. Similarly, Weick and Westley (1996) argue that the concepts are contradictory. On the one hand, the concept of organization implies stability, order, and structure whilst learning, on the other hand, implies disorganization, variety and change.

If we take this argument to its logical conclusion we could say that the problem with the learning organization is that it fails to recognize the limitations of its own paradigm. Thus, the consensus, inherent in the organicist analogy, pretends that the legitimacy of its conceptual language is a universal truth. This discourse depends upon the legitimacy of managerial authority, which is, in turn, a function of maximizing efficiency and effectiveness in the interests of capital. This represents a political interest, which raises a much more fundamental problem: for whose interest does the organization exist? For example, voluntary, public sector and commercial organizations have different motives for their existence. Whilst those who argue for the concept of the learning organization may reject the machine analogy as too controlling, they fail to account for the differences that emerge in all organizations including the most democratic.

The concept of the learning organization ignores the potential "iron law of oligarchy" outlined by Michels as far back as 1915. For example, how do we deal with the existence of executive and managerial elites who control organizations? Pursuing this point a little further, we might ask how, in a potential scenario that forces managers to reduce labour costs through redundancy, a learning organization would

employ the concepts of mental mastery, team learning, systems thinking to its advantage. The answer may, of course, be to resolve the problem to the mutual satisfaction of all. However, this would require a political decision by management that such a solution favours the interests of the organization. Whilst this is possible it is by no means inevitable. Owners, managers, employees, shareholders and stakeholders may often give the appearance of being value neutral but in reality they have different economic interests. The paradox for Senge is that whilst such things could be drawn onto his feedback loops they would contradict the other four concepts of personal mastery.

The learning organization concept is naively apolitical. This is because it assumes that people share the same interests, are not abused by exploitative managers, are not driven by systems that seek to maximize effort at the expense of rewards. Take the case of Conrad Black, the man who exploited his own news and communications empires to suit his own financial interests. This may well be characterised as the dark side of leadership but we cannot say that such rampant exploitation of employees and business associates would be all right if only he had a learning organization. It would be useful to explore this point a little further with the recent court case of Siemens.

The case of Siemens as a learning organization

In a recent court case in Frankfurt, Siemens was accused, and found guilty, of operating slush funds. Siemens was found guilty of making several regular payments of between £50 million and £70 million a year to the Nigerian dictator Abacha and his family in the mid-1990s. This was a so-called secret slush fund which had been transferred to various bank accounts including Zurich and London. In Britain alone Abacha had 42 separate bank accounts. German prosecutors believed that Siemens operated a worldwide network of bank accounts and front companies in Liechtenstein, America, Austria, Switzerland and the Virgin Islands. This process was discovered when an anonymous informant revealed evidence. In January 2008, 200 police and tax officials raided 30 addresses, both offices and private homes, in and around Munich. Although the chief executive, Klaus Kleinfeld, was regarded as a witness they took 36,000 files in a fleet of lorries and vans from his office. So far, prosecutors believe they have identified £280 million in suspicious payments.

The secret system could be regarded as the result of an effective learning organization which had discovered that to win big contracts, senior executives, needed to win favour with political regimes whose business practices were, at best, not as developed or as robust as most in the West, and at worst, were unethical. After all, should a company of this size simply avoid dealing with dictators and with national governments when it is aware that its major competitors are doing the same? Thus, it appears that business on this scale involves political game playing in which business contracts are the ultimate prizes. Such companies therefore have “arrangements” through which they can channel millions of pounds into the pockets of individuals and government officials. The alternative is to lose the game.

One could, of course, argue that Siemens could choose to operate in a more ethical marketplace but it is in this market for the time being. Siemens has proved that it is a winner in this marketplace. In 2004, Siemens won a £30 million contract for rebuilding the Nikola Tesla power station in Serbia. This also involved a corruption scandal when police arrested a Serbian national in a Belgrade hotel who admitted being paid a

“commission” of £300,000 for securing the deal against a bid from a British consortium. Despite the bid being millions higher than its UK rival Siemens won the contract.

In another case at the same time, Greek authorities investigated how a Siemens’s senior manager in Athens moved millions of pounds sterling between Athens, Switzerland and Germany through private accounts. In the Swiss account alone he had paid in a total of £27 million. He argued in his defence that the money belonged to Siemens and was for developing new markets. His defence may well be true since a more recent case involving two managers in Darmstadt, Germany were accused of paying £4 million to win a contract £230 million with an Italian utility company. A further investigation is also under way in Hungary.

The point is a simple one. How does one know if Siemens is a learning organization? After all, one can see evidence of Senge’s “personal mastery”, “mental models”, “shared vision”, and “team learning”. It may also be possible to find evidence of Watkins and Marsick’s 91998 “shared values or principles”. Even the definition of Pedler *et al.*, 1991, 1996 (1997), of an “organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself” may fit the bill.

Given the case of Siemens, there are some simple questions we can ask. First, what learning organization criteria can we use to judge such companies? Second, can diagnostic measures really be constructed to provide success to companies like Siemens without resorting to strategies that require unethical competitive political game playing? Third, is the learning organization concept driven excessively by strategic rationality and would its future development be limited by an ethical code of practice and commitment to change through human values similar to that employed by Organizational Development practitioners?

Conclusion

Would we be worse off if we stopped referring to the learning organization? Would initiatives run into difficulty without it? Would organizations go out of business or make less money. Would learning in organizations stop? Would consultants stop selling the idea? Has the learning organization had its 15 minutes of fame? My challenge to readers is deliberately provocative. I wish to suggest that, to mix my own metaphors, it has not even “run out of steam” because it never had any. It is, in fact, a metaphor too far.

The greatest problem with the concept of the learning organization is that it is based on instrumental rationality. That is, it has suffered from its unsuccessful attempt to transcend modernism because it is stuck in an organicist systems paradigm that restricts its critical message. The paradigm is functionalist but its message is postmodern. This is, of course, a completely irretrievable position. It therefore suffers from a crisis of legitimation. For example, in seeking to reflect postmodern organizational forms of flexibility, fluidity, boundaryless, adaptable, and future oriented work organizations, it neglects some obvious criteria. These may include its position on cultural pluralism, social justice, freedom from exploitation and domination. It may also include its position on change. Should it have a position on developing sustainable employment? Should diagnostic measures also include a fairer distribution of resources? Should it seek to develop new organizational forms based on humanistic values and an ethical code of practice?

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I suspect the answers to most of these questions will be an emphatic “no”. I believe this because the concept is caught in a tension between commissioned improvement, by which consultants sell its very intangibility, and a type of critical discourse that seeks to transcend the present. The ideal of the learning organization, to which organizations could aspire, is an impracticable and unobtainable myth precisely because it is constructed as a social fact. That is, as an entity with assumed objective evidence based knowledge. Consequently, it is committed to the fallacy of scientific discourse by pretending to be objectively neutral. It is weak in demonstrating the type of knowledge it seeks to pursue and it is unable to provide rules for its discourse which should clarify what type of problems it seeks to explore in the organizational world and what type of methodology it requires for doing so. This is my dangerous idea. To be provocative, this is why I believe we should now abandon the idea of the learning organization.

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