

*Review*

# Universities as learning organizations: Implications and challenges

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The learning organization is a concept that is becoming an increasingly widespread philosophy in modern organizations, from largest multinationals to the smallest ventures. As initially conceived by Senge (1990), the learning organization has a strongly humanist orientation, being 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 how to learn together. In order to implement learning organization techniques, public universities should tackle the five disciplines essential to a learning organization – team learning, shared vision, mental models, personal mastery and systems thinking. This paper poses the following questions: how are public universities committed to the following: creating continuous learning opportunities; promoting inquiry and dialogue; encouraging collaboration and team learning; establishing systems to capture and share learning; empowering people towards a collective vision, and connecting the organization to its environment? The paper proposes the need for radical re-thinking and re-engineering of the core functions of public universities in developing countries.

**Key words:** Learning Institutions, Learning organizations, Leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

No justification needs to be offered for the expenditure of effort upon systematic analysis of educational organizations. While schools are familiar objects to us all, and colleges to many, our ability to explain and generalize about how they work in any degree of depth is still severely limited by the shortcomings of organizational analysis itself and by the paucity of worthwhile empirical studies within education. The conceptual, theoretical, empirical and even ideological obstacles to organizational studies in education are, therefore, real though not greater than those existing in other areas.

### The learning society and the knowledge economy

The emergence of the idea of the 'learning organization' is wrapped up with notions such as 'the learning society'. Perhaps the defining contribution here was made by

Schön (1973). He provided a theoretical framework linking the experience of living in a situation of an increasing change with the need for learning.

The loss of the stable state means that our society and all of its institutions are in continuous processes of transformation. We cannot expect new stable states that will endure for our own lifetimes. We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations. We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our institutions.

We must, in other words, become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation (Schön, 1973).

### The learning organization

Definitions of a learning organization: A Learning Organi-

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sation is an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. Learning organisation is the one that turns new ideas into improved performance (Kreitner, 2000). Dwivedi (2003) defines Learning Organisation as an organisation which facilitates the learning of all its members, and continuously transforms itself.

Learning organizations [are] organizations 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 together (Senge 1990).

The Learning Company is a vision of what might be possible. It is not brought about simply by training individuals; it can only happen as a result of learning at the whole organization level. A learning company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself (Pedler et al. 1991).

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).

According to Kerka (1995) most conceptualizations of the learning organization seem to work on the assumption that 'learning is valuable, continuous, and most effective when shared and that every experience is an opportunity to learn' (Kerka, 1995). The following characteristics appear in some form in the more popular conceptions. Learning organizations:

- i. Provide continuous learning opportunities.
- ii. Use learning to reach their goals.
- iii. Link individual performance with organizational performance.
- iv. Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.
- v. Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.
- vi. Are continuously aware of and interact with their environment (Kerka, 1995).

### **Characteristics of a learning organization**

A Learning culture – This refers to an organizational climate that nurtures learning. There is a strong similarity with those characteristics associated with innovation. A learning culture implies:

Future, external orientation these organizations develop understanding of their environment; senior teams take time out to think about the future. Widespread use of external sources and advisors e.g. customers on planning teams.

Free exchange and flow of information - systems are in place to ensure that expertise is available where it is

needed; individuals network extensively, crossing organizational boundaries to develop their knowledge and expertise.

Commitment to learning, personal development – support from top management; people at all levels encouraged to learn regularly; learning is rewarded. Time to think and learn (understanding, exploring, reflecting, developing).

Valuing people - ideas, creativity and "imaginative capabilities" are stimulated, made use of and developed diversity is recognized as strength.

Climate of openness and trust - individuals are encouraged to develop ideas, to speak out, to challenge actions.

Learning from experience - learning from mistakes is often more powerful than learning from success. Failure is tolerated, provided lessons are learnt ("learning from past failure").

### **Learning organizations, organizational learning and universities**

Organisational learning refers to processes or activities by which an organization learns while a Learning organization is the organizational form defined by the capacity to learn and outcomes of learning (Ortenblad, 2001). As initially conceived by Peter Senge, the learning organization has a strongly humanist orientation, being 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 how to learn together (Senge, 1990).

The learning organization makes 'intentional use of learning processes at individual, group and system level to transform the organization in way that are increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders' (Dixon, 1994). A learning organization is underpinned by five fundamental disciplines, each of which contributes to the improvement of life within an organization and the capacity of an organization to learn.

Team learning- dialogue leading to creative thought and recognition of patterns and undermine learning. Virtually all important decisions occur in groups. Teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning units. Unless a team can learn, the organization cannot learn. Team learning focuses on the learning ability of the group. Adults learn best from each other, by reflecting on how they are addressing problems, questioning assumptions, and receiving feedback from their team and from their results. With team learning, the learning ability of the group becomes greater than the learning ability of any individual in the group.

Building a shared vision-leadership that develops commitment through shared 'pictures of the future'. To create a shared vision, large numbers of people within the organization must draft it, empowering them to create a single

image of the future. All members of the organization must understand, share and contribute to the vision for it to become reality. With a shared vision, people will do things because they want to, not because they have to.

Awareness of mental models- assumptions and generalizations that affect ways of seeing and interacting with 'the world'. Each individual has an internal image of the world, with deeply ingrained assumptions. Individuals will act according to the true mental model that they sub-consciously hold, not according to the theories which they claim to believe. If team members can constructively challenge each others' ideas and assumptions, they can begin to perceive their mental models, and to change these to create a shared mental model for the team. This is important as the individual's mental model will control what they think can or cannot be done.

### **Personal mastery**

This can be defined as clarifying and deepening personal vision, focusing energy, developing patience and seeing reality objectively. Personal mastery is the process of continually clarifying and deepening an individual's personal vision. This is a matter of personal choice for the individual and involves continually assessing the gap between their current and desired proficiencies in an objective manner, and practising and refining skills until they are internalized. This develops self esteem and creates the confidence to tackle new challenges.

### **The fifth discipline - systems thinking**

Systemic thinking is the conceptual cornerstone ('The Fifth Discipline') of Peter Senge's approach. It is the discipline that integrates the others, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice (Senge, 1990). Systems theory's ability to comprehend and address the whole, and to examine the interrelationship between the parts provides, for Peter Senge, both the incentive and the means to integrate the disciplines. The fifth discipline shows us that the essential properties of a system are not determined by the sum of its parts but by the process of interactions between those parts. He concludes:

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).

### **Alternative pictures of learning organizations**

Watkins and Marsick (1993) provide a practice-oriented, people-focused sketch of the learning organization. In their view, the learning organization is defined by and dependent upon structures and processes that:

- i. Create continuous learning opportunities
- ii. Promote inquiry and dialogue
- iii. Encourage collaboration and team learning
- iv. Establish systems to capture and share learning
- v. Empower people toward a collective vision and
- vi. Connect the organization to its environment.

### **A learning organization is developed through:**

1. Leaders who model calculated risk taking and experimentation
2. Decentralized decision-making and employee empowerment
3. Skill inventories for sharing learning and using it
4. Rewards and structures for employee initiatives
5. Consideration for long-term consequences and impact on the work of others
6. Frequent use of cross-functional on a daily basis
7. Opportunities to learn from experience on a daily basis
8. A culture of feedback and discourse.

Dixon (1994, 1998), who eschews use of the term 'learning organization' and refers instead to 'an organization that is learning', takes a similarly people-focused approach to the learning organization, emphasizing the need for dialogue, continuous and collaborative learning and involvement in organizational governance processes. To the discussion on how to promote learning in organizations she adds the concept of an organizational learning cycle, which may be used as a process tool for development or evaluation purposes (Figure 1).

Argyris and Schön's (1978) original conception of organizational learning, however, focused primarily on the quality of learning and learning outcomes in an organization. They argued not for a single cyclical learning process, but for the existence of three levels of learning: single loop learning, characterized by correction of errors but no fundamental change to the underlying system; double loop learning, characterized by questioning of the assumptions that gave rise to the error and subsequent change to the system, and deuterio double loop learning, which relates to metacognition or learning how to learn (Argyris and Schön, 1978).

### **Universities as learning organisation**

Within the tertiary education context there is, prima facie, fertile ground for the development of a learning organization. A university is both explicitly and implicitly built on notions relating to the importance of learning at an individual level and the idea of learning as the basis for and driver of development is well recognized within universities. Unlike concepts such as knowledge management which pose an implicit threat to intellectual property rights and academic autonomy, the idea of organizational learning to produce a learning organization is likely to be one

which sits easily with most staff within a university. Given that for many academics the attractiveness of their chosen profession lies in the opportunity to explore new territory and to learn from these explorations, it seems likely that involvement in organizational learning would act as a significant motivator and satisfier within the workplace. Within the wider organization context, the learning organization concept and organization learning processes are also likely to be attractive because, in their indeterminateness, they offer the possibility of context-sensitive permutations of both processes and desired outcomes.

### **Impediments to learning by and within organizations**

Fragmentation, reactivity and competition: Reflecting on the impediments to learning by organization and within organizations, Kofman and Senge (1995) identify factors which they argue also form the basis of learning disabilities in society as a whole, namely:

1. Fragmentation, resulting from linear thinking, specialization, an independent, warring fiefdoms.
2. Reactiveness, reflecting a fixation on problem-solving, rather than creation and innovation.
3. Competition, creating an environment in which looking good is more important than being good, measurable, short-term gains counts more than long-term achievement, and problems are solved by individuals in isolation.

### **Power, politics and time**

In addition to the impact of societal characteristics such as fragmentation, reactivity and competition upon learning capacity, within universities, as within other organizations, issues of power, politics and time also fundamentally determine the amount and nature of learning that can take place. In an organization under stress, challenged to find new directions and respond to frequently changing environmental pressures as well as increased scrutiny, it is likely that much time will be spent on 'fire fighting' and 'window dressing'.

### **Learning across the university**

The literature on the learning organization and organizational learning consistently identifies appropriate structures and culture as keys to unlocking the possibility of ongoing learning (Senge, 1990; Watkins and Marsick, 1993; Garavan, 1997; Applebaum and Reichart, 1998; Reynolds and Ablett, 1998; Grieves, 2000). Within the scope of structure, recurring themes are the need for teamwork (Senge, 1990; Watkins and Marsick, 1993), work across traditional functional and other boundaries, a systems approach, and organizational structures that

encourage openness and bottom-up as well as top-down flows of information (Senge, 1990; Watkins and Marsick, 1993; Rolls, 1995; Applebaum and Reichart, 1998; Goh, 1998; Teare and Dealtry, 1998). Within the scope of culture, recurring themes are the need for involved leadership and openness, a risk taking and action learning approach, awareness of existing mindsets, empowerment and continuing education (Redding and Catalanello, 1994; Senge, 1990; Watkins and Marsick, 1993; De Geus, 1996; Applebaum and Reichart, 1998; Teare and Dealtry, 1998). Across the university, leadership, human resource development and knowledge management strategies act as systemic keys able to open the door to organizational learning.

### **Leadership**

Absolutely critical to the development of a university as a learning organization is the Vice-Chancellor's commitment to providing the time, support and role modeling necessary for organizational learning as well as his/her commitment to 'servant leadership' – democratic behaviour, competence and concern for the well being of those being led (Kofman and Senge, 1995).

### **Human resource development**

Good leadership, while essential at the top, needs also to be seeded throughout the organization. Thus, leadership training and team building activities, focusing on enhancing interpersonal communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills must involve people from the highest to the lowest levels of staffing if an institution-wide learning potential is to be created. Teams need to be established with reference what is known about the enabling factors associated with effective, self-managing teams – namely, clear goals, decision-making authority, accountability and responsibility, effective leadership, training and development, resources, and organizational support (Hunter et al., 1996; Yeatts et al., 1996). Many university staff is used to working in research teams or on committees but if teamwork is to be used successfully to develop a learning organization, training for effective teamwork must be supported by the conscious development of teamwork strategies in each new teamwork context. Rewards and performance management strategies must also be tied to effective teamwork, especially in the initial phases of any attempt to change work patterns, and it is probably helpful to ensure that enthusiasts for teamwork undertake the initial teamwork projects.

### **What does the concept of learning community offer Universities?**

It could be argued that the notion of the learning organization provides managers and others with a picture of

how things could be within an organization. Along the way, writers like Peter Senge introduce a number of interesting dimensions that could be personally developmental, and that could increase organizational effectiveness – especially where the enterprise is firmly rooted in the ‘knowledge economy. However, as we have seen, there are a number of shortcomings to the model – it is theoretically underpowered and there is some question as to whether the vision can be realized within the sorts of dynamics that exist within and between organizations in a globalized capitalist economy.

It might well be that ‘the concept is being oversold as a near-universal remedy for a wide variety of organizational problems’ (Kuchinke, 1995; Kerka, 1995). The concept of the learning organization has three major limitations: first, it focuses mainly on the cultural dimension and does not adequately take into account the other dimensions of an organization. To transform an organization it is necessary to attend to structures and the organization of work as well as the culture and processes. ‘Focussing exclusively on training activities in order to foster learning favours this purely cultural bias’. Second, while it favours individual and collective learning processes at all levels of the organization, it does not connect them properly to the organization’s strategic objectives. Popular models of organizational learning (Dixon, 1994) assume such a link. It is, therefore, imperative, ‘that the link between individual and collective learning and the organization’s strategic objectives is made’ (*ibid.*: 147). This shortcoming, Finger and Brand argue, makes a case for some form of measurement of organizational learning – so that it is possible to assess the extent to which such learning contributes or not towards strategic objectives. Third, it remains rather vague. The exact functions of organizational learning need to be more clearly defined.

## Conclusion

A review of an existing field of knowledge ought always to show a positive and generous face. There is certainly too much of value in the available variety of organizational approaches for them to be dismissed as useless or trivial. Finger and Brand conclude that there is a need to develop ‘a true management system of an organization’s evolving learning capacity. This, they suggest can be achieved through defining indicators of learning (individual and collective) and by connecting them to other indicators. In our view, organizational learning is just a means in order to achieve strategic objectives. But creating a learning organization is also a goal, since the ability permanently and collectively to learn is necessary precondition for thriving in the new context.

Therefore, the capacity of an organization to learn, that is, to function like a learning organization, needs to be made more concrete and institutionalized, so that the management of such learning can be made more effective. Such an approach offers universities a way of focusing on differences stemming from the relatively unique tasks of organizations or broad types of organization.

The critical challenge of the university is attracting and more importantly retaining senior competent staff highly committed to the future of university leadership development. If we take the importance of these realizations seriously in our framing of organization questions of the University, then we shall go along way towards a more sensitive, practical and demystified awareness of how much socially organized knowledge is transmitted.

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