

*Weaving the Strands of Individual
and Organisational Learning*

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Introduction

The concept of organisational learning is one that we have all been hearing a lot of during the past few years. The concept emphasises teamwork in the modelling of complex problem situations, increased flexibility in organisational roles, team decision making, and continuous learning through direct experience with problem solving. The general idea behind “organisational learning” is that it is possible to increase the knowledge base and the expertise of the organisation if a broader array of employees engage in problem solving activities traditionally carried out by various kinds of managers. As a result of this broadening of employee participation, we expect that the organisation will become more capable of creative change in response to challenges from its environment.

This is an exciting prospect if it can become a reality. However, discussions of organisational learning are often rather vague on details about how to put it into practice. Just what do individual employees do when they are engaging in organisational learning? Can we teach people to be effective organisational learners? What skills do they need?

Educators possess a good deal of knowledge about individual learning. Can we weave together what we know about individual learning with what we believe is effective organisational action? If we try, we might create a richer picture of the *social* dimensions of learning. Furthermore, we might learn more about how to use collaborative action to bring about social change as well.

Engaging People in Organisational Learning

Let’s look at what organisations are expecting of their employees these days. First, skills for teamwork are highly valued. Through teamwork, organisations get more accurate definitions of what their organisational problems are, a more complex analysis of what the factors are that contribute to problems, and potential solutions that take into account how various changes might actually impact all aspects of the organisation.

To be good team members, individuals need to be able to engage in open dialogue and to participate in debate about the pros and cons of different action alternatives. To be an effective team member means a willingness to be part of critical conversations in which we examine our *own* point of view and well as others’ points of view. This is how we create a view of reality that is larger and more complex than the view of any

one member. However, dialogue and debate are usually far more demanding than the simple social conversations we are used to. Groups that successfully share and challenge each member's point of view can be a wonderful source of learning as they question each member's perspective and weigh the evidence that each member provides. On the other hand, in the normal push and pull of debate, conflicts between group members can escalate to destroy group cohesiveness and trust. Fortunately, skills for dialogue and debate can be successfully taught and practiced so that novices can develop a growing expertise. As individuals gain more experience with the demands that team problem solving makes on people, they begin to value and trust the wisdom of the group, and they rely on and value team decisions. However, appreciation for diverse points of view and values is an essential characteristic for team members to possess.

A second skill that is highly desired by organisations has to do with the management of complexity. As the pace of change accelerates with technical innovation, individuals need to tolerate a lot of ambiguity in situations where action is required. Also, they need to take into account the broadest possible context surrounding decisions and actions. As the world grows smaller, we are asked to "think globally and act locally." A lot of organisational learning includes the development of a more complex and differentiated view of the environment in which the organisation needs to function. The cognitive challenges are inviting but also daunting. Again, there are relevant personal capabilities that we can deliberately cultivate.

Finally, organisation learning involves the stockpiling of experience gained via continuous learning and evaluation. In order for the knowledge base of the organisation to grow and be refined, individuals are being asked to learn from their own experiences within it. Individuals who are self-reflective and who use metacognitive strategies to assess the effectiveness of their own ways of learning are valuable contributors because they can increase their expertise without the need for constant supervision. Trainers and teachers can help individuals to become better self-directed learners and to learn from their own experiences.

Suggestions for Teachers and Trainers

If our goal is promoting organisational learning, teachers and trainers need to focus on the individual skills that will help people become effective team members. For example, some individuals are adept at speaking, others are good listeners, but we need to ensure that trainees and students have focused practice at both skills because both are needed for productive discussion. Furthermore, both are needed to contain and manage conflicts between people. Listening involves being able to find the logic behind what another person is trying to say, while speaking in an articulate way is essential to surface all the possible perspectives that may be relevant to problem solving. In classrooms and training sessions, activities that give participants practice in 1) reflecting on their own speaking and listening skills; 2) analysing the logic, reasoning and evidence behind statements; and, 3) containing but also exploring conflicting points of view all serve to give individuals valuable practice in skills that will be called on as part of organisational learning.

Increasing an individual's capacity for dealing with complexity can also be enhanced through training and teaching. By planning learning tasks that move deliberately in an

increasingly complex sequence, learners can expand the number of factors they can grapple with simultaneously. For example, comparing and contrasting two speakers' points of view is a start at looking at the complexity of an issue. A more complex assignment requires students to evaluate which view they prefer with accompanying reasons for their choice of one over the other. An even more complex assignment might require the student to write up reasons for why someone might choose the least preferred alternative. In this last assignment, a student is required not only to consider his/her own preferences but also to take the role of someone unlike themselves by trying to think as a different person might. Similarly, teaching via an array of diverse tasks produces more complex conceptualising than does sameness. It is important to note that as the complexity of tasks increases, so does anxiety. As a result, teachers and trainers need to be sensitive to the unpleasant, frightening and demoralising aspects of learning as well as to the fun, exciting and self-esteem building aspects.

Individual learners can also be encouraged to address the issue of self-directed and continuous learning through a deliberate emphasis on self-reflection. People generally need to know more about the process of learning, how their own learning strategies differ from others, and how they can vary their own strategies to produce better results. When learners can progress to the point of self-questioning their own everyday perceptions in order to extend their own understandings, we know that we have succeeded in helping them to become more aware of the impact of daily events on their points of view. Such self-awareness provides a valuable basis for teamwork because it is a basis for understanding how experiences create differing points of view. Armed with such understanding, people are better able to tolerate diversity and to use it effectively to improve our understanding of complex problem situations.

Individual and Organisational Learning in a Global Context

Organisational learning is often presented to us within the context of globalisation. Educators are trying to come to grips with the implications of the emerging global economy for education. The implications are often double-edged. On the one hand, increasing economic dislocation is affecting families in sometimes very negative ways. On the other hand, we are experiencing exciting opportunities to grapple with diversity and communicate over greater distances. While organisational learning can be viewed as a tool for increasing the already disturbing domination of large multinational corporations over the setting of national and local priorities, there is another side to organisational learning. It is not just for corporations and other large organisations. As local communities struggle to assert themselves in policy development, and professional educators struggle to keep up with the implications for curriculum of the emerging global technologies, we need to remember that organisational learning is for them as well.

Sometimes people feel very locked out of opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Educators can respond to some of the challenges that they themselves are feeling, and the citizens of their local communities are feeling by seeing change as an opportunity for both individual and organisational learning if we can only seize the moment. The issue of how we view learning as a social engagement has implications for the organisation of schooling, for the organisation of professional development for educators, and for local community development. Furthermore, the connection between local community development and globalisation

is as yet a very big question mark. How do we “think globally and act locally?” The answer may very well reside in how we as educators link individual learning with organisational learning and enact that in our own local communities.

One caution has emerged from my many conversations with educators about these challenging issues. This caution relates to how we experience and work with the vast diversity that we find amongst ourselves, the people we serve, and the world’s human communities. It is all too easy to silence some of the voices as they try to enter into our conversations and debates about what our problems are and how we might go about solving these problems. I have been often surprised at how valuable it can be to simply listen to people talk about the reality of their lives, their dreams, their fears, their hopes for their children and the future. I have found that many people have so little opportunity to be heard because they can not be heard through the noise of local prejudices and habits, through differences in social power and through exclusionary practices. In our effort to facilitate learning for both individuals and existing organisations, we need to be mindful of the organisations that do not yet exist, of the individuals who have not yet been heard and the value of a kind of silence that allows something to quietly emerge out of what is often experienced as a kind of cacophony of words. Some of the solutions to besetting problems may reside in the corners of our communities, with people who seldom have a chance to speak out, and whose perspective on events, while very different from our own, may provide just the impetus we need to truly embrace a new thought, a new way of doing things, and a new vision of a shared future that is bright and promising. Liberating new ideas about how and why we learn as well as what we learn so that we can create a better world for our children seems to me to be a goal that all nations and communities have in common. We differ about the specifics, but meanwhile, the world is challenging us and we are in need of all the opportunities to learn that we can possibly muster. My own sense of interest in organisational and individual learning has been fuelled for many years by visions and hopes as well as the abiding belief in human beings to create for themselves sustaining communities and a shared knowledge of who and what we are all about. Educators sometimes forget that this is the larger world to which we all belong by choice and by commitment. I sense that the time is ripe for us to think big about how we weave a community tapestry of our shared learning.

Reference

Link to Marcia Salner’s home page <http://www.uis.edu/~ade/salner.htm>