

Putting the learning organization into practice

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This regular issue of *The Learning Organization* offers a wide array of topics ranging from promoting sustainability through learning characteristics to an assessment of higher education's response and learning from a pandemic. One central theme appearing across articles is the power of experience (sometimes even hardships) and reflection in the learning process. Throughout this issue, articles point to methods that can be placed into practice inside any organization.

The issue commences with an opportune topic – how organizations learn through sharing or imitating of best practices, ideas or technologies. In these trying times, many organizations find themselves dealing with new approaches to working in settings with imperfect face-to-computer-to-face connections. These deviations to how and where we work do not change the underlying need to learn and adapt in an increasingly competitive global environment.

The first article in this issue offers a theoretical overview of how organizations learn from others. In *Understanding change in circulating constructs: Collective learning, translation, and adaptation*, Wæraas (2021) provides a view of how circulating constructs (practices, ideas or technologies) initiate learning across organizations. Wæraas explains how organizations change the construct during adoption and capture benefits from transformation into localized best practices. To illustrate the process, the author explores translation and adaptation. The author set out to explain how these two separate constructs originating from different traditions come together with greater similarities than differences. And, as the author states:

‘The similarities seem to have implications not only for how the approaches can enrich each other but also for our understanding of the connections between organization learning and the continuous transformation of circulating constructs’ (p. 7).

The author intends to “stimulate cross-fertilization between translation and adaptation studies” (p. 9). But for practitioners the study does much more. It provides a case for viewing the translation and adaptation step together during a new best practice implementation. From these steps one can even begin to understand how to improve upon current working environments. The author concludes by offering an idea for practical application and empirical study. Evaluate construct adoptions such as new management ideas or information technology across your organization.

Another topic that Wæraas could have suggested for analysis as a circulating construct is that of sustainability. The second article in this issue enters into that topic from a slightly different perspective. Battistella *et al.* (2021) aim to answer the question, which organizational learning characteristics align best with promoting sustainability practices



across the organization? The authors answer that question through case studies of three Italian food and beverage companies in their article *Sustainable organizational learning in sustainable companies*. The authors' objective is to uncover sustainability practices linkages to learning characteristics. For practitioners sitting in organizations pursuing sustainability initiatives, understanding how to promote organization learning may lead toward best sustainability investment decisions. As the authors state, how to best use learning dimensions to identify the environmental and social issues with greatest benefit.

In understanding how learning companies learn to become sustainable, Battistella *et al.* (2021) provide an organizational learning literature review. Table 1 outlines the learning type, dimension and skills as defined by the authors. Table 2 expands the dimensions to sub-dimensions and characteristics. The tables offer readers a clear foundation for sustainable practice overlay with the learning characteristics. To align characteristics with actual practices within sustainable companies, the authors conduct manager interviews and document reviews. Their findings are insightful for practitioners. First, although contextual learning orientation appears important, few sustainability initiatives appear at the individual and collective learning level. The authors uncover much more sustainability focus in learning processes with focus on internal structure and networking through use of training and experimenting in new techniques. The result of these findings among others indicate that sustainability practices are diffused across the organizations and enacted differently based upon business practices, which is useful for practitioners. Although organizations enact sustainability differently and based upon the context of their situation, one characteristic appears missing – reflection, which is insightful in itself for practitioners. When you implement sustainability practices, expand on reflective practices and understand context. And, likely the most valuable practitioner aspect of the study is Table 3. As the authors conclude, “practical implications target organizational self-assessment through both the framework of analysis and collection of actual examples” (p. 27). Use the author's Table 3 in your organization.

The next article in this issue of *The Learning Organization* offers practitioners a method of understanding the mechanisms that cause learning outcomes. Brix and Kringelum (2021) in *Critical realism and organizational learning* offer an explanation of how researchers (and potentially practitioners) can study the context in which organizational learning occurs during a period of change. As a starting point to understanding the author's arguments, they explain the following, “critical realism is oriented toward explaining the mechanisms that cause certain outcomes to be created” (p. 33). Clarity on this point is important because the authors explain how “researchers aim to explain why the world may be unfolding as it is through causal analysis” (p. 34). For practitioners, the six analyzable organizational learning sub-themes (p. 35) and figure offer immediate clarity of the authors' critical realism approach. As the authors describe the method, “critical realism enables researchers to study organizational learning as processes, outputs and outcomes that exist owing to a complex interplay between structure and agency on multiple levels” (p. 40).

The authors' linkage of theoretical discussion to an empirical method of assessing intentions, processes and outputs produces a practical application appropriate for leaders in any organization. The figure and six questions (analyzable sub-themes) turn into tools for empirical study of any organization and a great starting point for any practitioner in understanding her organizational learning influences on desired outcomes. In doing so, the authors show how applying critical realism to the study of organizational learning “moves organizational learning theory a step close to its theoretical sibling, the learning organization” (p. 41).

The next article in this issue is the second part to a study of power asymmetry, egalitarianism and team learning. [Sinha and Stothard \(2021\)](#) in *Power asymmetry, egalitarianism, and team learning part II: Empirical examination of the moderating role of environmental hardship* clarify which conditions and mechanisms in power asymmetry likely affect team learning. They counter the argument that team power asymmetry inhibits team learning through data collected from 4,637 Australian Army personnel across 143 teams ranging in size from 6 to 121 members. The authors hypothesize that a positive association exists between team learning and egalitarianism. They also hypothesize an association between team power asymmetry and team egalitarianism is contingent upon environmental hardship. And, it is under this environmental hardship condition that the study context best fits. Of those Army participants within the study, almost half had been deployed at least once to severe and adverse military driven environments within the past five years.

[Sinha and Stothard \(2021\)](#) found, “that teams with high levels of power asymmetry along with a high level of hardship show higher egalitarianism and thereby more team learning” (p. 52). For practitioners, this study expands understanding of context in team learning, and in particular the impact of hardship, or as the authors state, “it (research) identifies both the contingency (hardship) and the explanatory mechanism (egalitarianism) to explicate the complicated relationship between power asymmetry in teams and team learning” (p. 53). The fact that shared adversity, which is prevalent in military forces, breeds cohesion is not a novel idea. Military leaders and even coaches and athletes know the power of adversity and cohesion. However, by expanding to team learning as the authors have done, leaders can understand more clearly how to highlight experienced hardships during team learning experiences. For example, explicit introduction of shared hardships into training situations expands team learning. Through use of methods explained by [Sinha and Stothard](#), leaders can balance the benefits of hierarchy and learning in a way that does not inhibit the learning experience.

The idea of using prior experiences to reinforce learning is further explored in [Elkjaer’s \(2021\)](#) article *The learning organization from a pragmatist perspective*. Elkjaer proposes a pragmatist philosophy as a method to expand upon Örténblad’s fifth version of the learning organization. In doing so, she creates a sixth version based upon inquiry into tensions in experiences. Or, as she states, “learning begins and ends in experiences as a continuous reconstruction of experiences through inquiry into tension” (p. 59).

To illustrate the concept, the author turns back to a case study undertaken over 25 years ago as the Administrative Case Consideration (ACC) department of the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs underwent a joint transition in a total quality management project and learning organization cultural change.

But, first as an introduction to the pragmatist concepts, the author explains the interplay of experience and inquiry in opening learning and organizing. As she states:

[...] “commitment is not to be understood as personal choices, but is grounded in the recursive relations of people and the affordance of the situations at hand. It is in these organizing processes experiences are had and inquiry put to work in tensional situations and, in turn, experience be re-constructed” (p. 66).

These pragmatist concepts allow the author to re-interpret the prior case study through a social perspective that clarifies reconstruction of experiences of inquiry, tension and commitment.

Through case analysis, the author shows the importance of holding the individual and the organization as equal in importance. Elkjaer describes through the case, “experiences of

the people involved were not included but silenced, which meant that it was not possible to inquire into tensions” (p. 68). The pragmatist view illuminates how prescriptive versions of the learning organization fail. And point toward adaptive movements of experiences, inquiry and commitment between people and organizations. For practitioners these concepts are not foreign. They exist in the ideas of meaningful learning, action learning or simply the ideas of linking learning to strategic purpose. As Elkjaer eloquently concludes, “it (learning) is not just a matter of an abstract developing of people learning to be creative, learning and creativity is always directed toward something, consequences, ends-in-view” (p. 68). Those are wise words for any practitioner.

Keeping with the theme of experience and learning from the individual perspective, Akella (2021) in *A learner centric model of learning organizations* focuses on the learner agent and more specifically how individuals actively build competencies while evaluating their own benefits versus those benefits placed on the individual from the hierarchical organization. As the author states, “how is it possible for the individual to fulfill his/her learning agendas determined by himself/herself without flaunting the organizational governance within the corporation remains unanswered (p. 75). To explore the question, the author uses empirical data from a higher education institution to create a theoretical framework linking structure and agency in a way that allows for autonomous choice by the learning under minimal structural influence. Stated otherwise, the author answers how an individual can seek and obtain personal mastery on his or her terms and remain organizationally aligned.

To explore the question, Akella uses a case study in a higher education institution that creates a collaborative dialogue space for faculty members to reflect and discuss their perspectives on position requirements. As the initiative was voluntary, the case study explores what strategies would ensure faculty participation in this individual learning collaboration bounded by organizational learning structures.

As the author describes, the outcome of the case, “provides evidence of how learner agents can autonomously develop themselves professionally, within the parameters of their job roles and responsibilities, to add toward organizational learning and growth” (p. 78). Additionally, the study shows that self-reflection on one’s role can create dialogue, collaboration and completely autonomous learning, all within organizational learning.

Akella nicely highlights the implication for practitioners in the statement:

[...] third spaces, or transformation opportunity structures need to be conceived which mediate between the structural and agency interests to create one world or common ground where learning is conducive for all parties (p. 79).

Just as the case illustrates, any organization can create these third spaces. And, if created with both the interests of the learning agent and the organization, a learning centric model evolves. For practitioners this may lead toward more self-organizing, independent teams centered on open, reflective dialogue. Or as the author concludes, “inserting the learning agent back into center of the entire learning process” (p. 80).

In the most timely article of this issue, Miller (2021) explores how learning organizations respond to COVID-19 in *Do learning organizations learn?: Higher education institutions and pandemic response strategies*. The central tenet focuses on the outcomes of learnings from two distinct yet interrelated activities during higher education institutions reaction to COVID-19. First the author evaluates the emergency response strategies, much of what is similarly implemented in other emergency situations. Then, more closely to learning, how institutions implement practices as a result of the response. From understanding these two

areas, Miller aims to obtain greater understanding of learning and reaction from past and current situations.

To explore the questions, Miller uses a 28 question survey administered to 93 faculty governance leaders. Tables 2 and 3 outline the questions. Table 2 outlines the perceptions of satisfaction in institutional decision-making. Practitioners can easily convert these to any organization. Table 3 lists questions pertaining to:

- mission modification, which again can be easily modified to different context;
- teaching/research, which can be revised with process activities;
- student expectations, which can be replaced with customer expectation; and
- faculty involvement, which can be replaced with employee involvement.

For practitioners, much of the author's methodology can easily transfers to any organization with some insight into the interrelatedness of the organization's emergency response protocols and actual pandemic responses. Did the mission remain resilient? Were the employees involved in the decisions? Did the activities change? All good questions that Miller answers for higher education institutions and practitioners should answer for their organizations.

Miller's concluding statement creates an interesting question:

[...] the institutions have responded quickly by moving instructions into online and remote environments, yet other than temporarily modifying business practices have they attempted to change and evolve into the institutions that they might become (p. 92).

The question for practitioners is how has your quick response changed your organization temporarily and what will remain long-term?

The issue concludes with Timothy Shives' book review of Edward Hess' book *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization* (2014). In his review, Shives outlines how Hess divides the book into sections on "The Science of Learning" and "Building the Learning Organization". From the book review, it becomes apparent that the book lives up to its title – learn or die.

This issue of Learning Organization Journal provides multiple ideas for practices. Ranging from how to integrate learning and sustainability to how to better explore your businesses pandemic response and learning during that period. The theme of experiences and reflection linking to learning thread throughout the articles and offer practitioners some insights into how to explore learning more deeply within their organization.

References

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Wæraas, A. (2021), "Understanding change in circulating constructs: collective learning, translation, and adaptation", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 1-14.

Further reading

Shives, T. (2021), "Book review: Learn or die: Using science to build a leading-edge learning organization", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 100-102.

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