

Cultural Learning Organizations: A Model

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I. Overview of literature and debates

Many authors have tried to define the concept of 'learning organization' (LO) but it seems to be a very slippery concept despite its apparent simplicity. Having its roots in theories on 'organizational learning' (OL)¹ it has been commonly misinterpreted, misunderstood and mixed up with it. However, both terms touch on different ideas.

The concept of OL was firstly introduced in organizational theory in the sixties by authors such as Crozier, Herbst, Simon and Argyris (Argyris & Schön (1996: xvii)). In the seventies Argyris and Schön (1978) published their seminal book *Organizational Learning: A theory in action perspective* that has had a huge influence in the subsequent literature. Other authors² also dealt with this subject in those years but it was only in the 1990s that the OL idea became a common concept in organizational theory. A current explanation of this phenomenon given in the literature is related to the fact that in the beginning of that decade the business environment suffered sudden changes and subsequently there were many companies that failed to survive. Therefore, management theorists and gurus looked for a formula to help companies adapt to these changes and subsist. Learning, meaning in this context the ability to draw conclusions from past experiences and subsequently to change organization processes to adapt

¹ In order to facilitate reading, I will use LO for 'learning organization' and OL for 'organizational learning'.

² Like March & Olsen in: March, J.G. and Olsen, J.P. (1975) The uncertainty of the past: organisational learning under ambiguity. In: J.G. March (1988), *Decisions and Organisations*. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp.335-58; and Duncan & Weiss in: Duncan, R. and Weiss, A. (1979) Organisational Learning: implications for organisational design. In: B.M. Staw and L.L. Cummings (eds), *Research in Organisational Behavior*, Vol.1. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press. Pp. 75-123. Both of them mentioned in Easterby-Smith et al. (1999:24).

to changing environments and to innovate, was seen, then, as the key to subsistence. Organization success³ was, then, directly linked to OL.

Literature on OL mostly concentrates on the learning process in organizations. According to Prange, authors interested in OL focus their research, from an academic point of view, on the definition of 'organizational learning', 'learning subject', 'content of learning', 'incentives and motives for learning', 'efficiency and effectiveness of learning and processes of learning'. They try to find out and to provide answers to "what organizational learning means"; "who is learning"; "what is being learned"; "when learning takes place"; "what results learning yields and how learning takes place" (Prange (1999: 26)). They try to understand learning and unlearning within organizations (Easterby-Smith et al. (1999:8)). As the subject of this dissertation is LO, I will only touch on OL when necessary to explain some of the ideas linked to my main topic.

Although the LO concept was not a new concept and had been promoted by a number of academics and consultants at the end of eighties and the beginning of nineties (Garret, 1987; Pedler et al., 1989), it became a widely used term since the publication of *The Fifth Discipline. The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990). Whether this success is due to the use of organizational and rhetorical strategies (Jackson, 2000) or marketing strategies is not being considered here, but what is true is that this book catalyzed and boosted the concept in the last decade, having become an important management idea for practitioners. Simultaneously, Peter Senge, his author, has become the LO guru.⁴ This book, together with Pedler et al.'s

³ Organizational success was defined "as depending on the organization's ability to see things in new ways, gain new understandings, and produce new patterns of behaviour - all on *continuing* basis and in a way that engages the organization as a *whole*" (Argyris & Schön (1996: xix)).

⁴ Since the publication of this work and Pedler's book (1989), terms like 'organizational learning', 'learning organization,' and 'a learning organization' have been abundantly used in the last decade, having been considered transposable in many cases. In my opinion, this confusion is due to the fact that the 'learning organization' concept has its roots in organizational learning theories, as I explained previously. In fact, Peter Senge, the main acknowledged promoter of learning organizations, founded in 1991 the MIT's Center for Organizational Learning and in 1997 the Society for Organizational Learning. Oddly, both organizations do not include LO in their name but OL. This curious fact, however, is not

work, was seminal in initiating a trend, grounded, in principle, in coeval OL theory, that tried to introduce a more practical perspective that could be of interest to management practitioners, more concerned about learning tools that helped them to make their organizations capable of adapting to environmental changes than in learning theories.⁵

The LO term is not a homogenous concept in literature. It has been used from several perspectives and with different meanings. This makes highly difficult to define and portray it. Örtenblad (2002) offered a very illuminating literature typology of the idea of LO according to four understandings of this concept⁶. First, some authors use the LO term meaning an organization where “individuals learn as agents for the organization and the knowledge is stored in the organizational memory” (Örtenblad (2002:217)). According to this understanding

mentioned in any of the literature sources I have used for this study. The mission of the MIT’s Center for Organizational Learning was “fostering collaboration among a group of corporations committed to fundamental organizational change and advancing the state of the art in building learning organizations; its initial focus was on developing new learning capabilities in the areas of systems thinking, collaborative inquiry into tacit mental models, and nurturing personal and shared vision.” (<http://www.solonline.org/aboutsol/history/20-07-06>) Thus, the main center for researching about LO theory was devoted to OL research with the goal of ‘building learning organizations’. According to this statement, OL would be considered as a tool for LOs. A LO would seem to be, then, consistent with those words, an organization which put into practice the principles obtained through research on organizational learning processes. Other authors have considered, however, that OL is the kind of learning that is promoted by the LO (Bennet & O’Brien, 1994).

⁵ Most of authors who have tried to make a distinction between ‘organizational learning’ and ‘learning organization’ agree that the former term have been predominantly used by scholars from different disciplines as business, economics and sociology, more interested in studying the individual and collective learning processes inside the organization from an academic theoretical point of view; whereas, the latter has been mostly boosted by consultants that are more concerned about praxis and models for organizations and about providing “evaluative methodological tools which can help to identify, promote and evaluate the quality of learning processes inside organizations” (Tsang, E. (1997) Organizational learning and the learning organization: a dichotomy between descriptive and prescriptive research. *Human Relations*, 50 (1): 73-89. Quoted in Easterby-Smith et al., 1999). Thus, ‘organizational learning’ would be the processes of learning in organizations (DiBella, 1995; Easterby-Smith et al., 1999) whereas ‘learning organization’ would be seen as a form of organization (DiBella, 1995) or an ideal organizational form (Finger and Bürgin Brand, 1999). The ‘learning organization’ term would be “a concept and a subject for study and research. . . . It functions as a guiding vision that pictures an organization as a living organism with an open, powerful learning environment which inspires, facilitates and empowers the learning of its members so as to enhance its capacity for change, adaptability, improvement and competition” (Sun, 2003). Some authors have even made the distinction between ‘learning organization’ and ‘a learning organization’, when the former would be a concept, a vision, and the latter would be an organization which has some of the main features of that vision of ‘learning organization’ but not all (Sun, 2003). I find that this last distinction is extremely important to understand all the literature about learning organizations where the abstract idea of ‘learning organization’ and the pragmatic application of tools to become ‘a learning organization’ are mixed up and confused.

⁶ These understandings are: ‘organizational learning’, ‘learning at work’, ‘learning climate’ and ‘learning structure’.

the storage of knowledge would be the main trait for a learning organization. Thus, this perspective has been, in my opinion, the origin of an important LO literature trend about 'knowledge management' and 'information management' systems that became key issues in the building of learning organizations (Brown & Brudney, 2003; Hansen et al., 1999; Jensen, 2005). Second, other authors focus on the idea of an organization where employees learn in their current work activities, through experience. This would be the 'learning at work' understanding. Third, the 'learning climate' perspective would be an organization that promotes a learning environment and makes learning possible for all its workers. Due to the difficulties in articulating learning in the work place through direct experience and the ease of providing theoretical courses by external trainers, these two last perspectives ('learning at work' and 'learning climate') have been frequently misinterpreted and can both be considered the sources of a trend in LO literature⁷ that mainly focuses on formal training organized by human resource management departments (Kepczyk, 2004; Little, 2003; Kelleher, 2004).⁸ The fourth understanding, the 'learning structure', would be the flexible organization. Authors that follow this perspective are concerned about what kind of organizational structure promotes learning inside the organization more easily. This perspective has been the origin of other literature trends concentrated upon organizational design, project-based learning and team learning (Ayas & Zeniuk, 2001; Barker & Camarata, 1998; Bresnen et al., 2004.; DeFillippi, 2001).⁹

Thus, LO appears as a very flexible, ambiguous and volatile concept which has been used with different meanings and purposes. This has caused a vast amount of literature trying to track

⁷ Particularly followed by consultants.

⁸ The simple fact of providing courses to the employees has been interpreted by many practitioners and companies as the bottom layer of a LO. However, as we will see later, this formal training is only one aspect of learning in organizations.

⁹ Thus, 'learning organization' term has been often mixed up with 'knowledge management', 'information management', 'training in organizations', 'team learning' and 'project-based learning'. However, these other concepts would only be, in my opinion, useful elements, concepts and/or tools of reflection to be taken into account by organizations that aspire to be LO, but they can not be the key principles or pillars of a LO, as I will explain later.

and categorize the diverse trends and define the LO (Örtenblad, 2002; DiBella, 1995; Easterby-Smith et al., 1999; Sun, 2003).

Most of writers on LO are focused on the private sector and therefore most of the examples they provide are from the business sector. Although there have been numerous attempts to introduce the model in public and non-profit sectors¹⁰, specific literature about learning organizations (and even organizational learning) and its implementation/performance in the public and non profit sectors is limited (LaPalombara, 2001a; LaPalombara, 2001b; Fry & Griswold, 2003; Thayer & Hunter, 2005; De las Heras, 2004; Brown & Brudney, 2003; Finger & Brand, 1999). We find a similar situation in literature about management in the cultural sector. There are very few articles which deal with the LO concept in this sphere, although unexpectedly most of them are written in a museum context. However, surprisingly the concept of LO has been commonly misunderstood and misinterpreted in this domain as an organization that provides learning to the general public (Rossetti, 2005; Soren, 1998; MacLulich, 1999), connecting the LO concept to the literature about learning in museums. Yet, none of these interpretations corresponds to the organizational and managerial concept of a learning organization. There are, however, a few articles which use the term in a closer understanding to LO theory, though, mainly focused on one of the LO aspects: career planning and training for its workers (Sternal, 2003; Teather et al., 1999), knowledge management (Page, 2005) or learning across organizational boundaries (Dixon, 1999). There are also some cases of museums that are seriously trying to implement the LO management model in their organizations as a part of their strategic planning¹¹. However, there is no literature about the specific characteristics of cultural/art institutions that can foster or obstruct learning inside these organizations and/or the implementation of LO model.

¹⁰ To see some examples: <http://www.solonline.org>

¹¹ For example, San Diego Natural History Museum www.sdnhm.org/strategicplanning/kra3.pdf