

The Relationship Between Organizational Learning Practices and the Learning Organization

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This paper explores the relationship between organizational learning practices and the learning organization based on a literature review. A conceptual framework is provided to analyze the relationship. When organizational learning processes are fulfilled, the organization has more opportunities to approach becoming a learning organization. The study found that there is a need for greater comprehension of organizational learning practices that, in turn, contributes to a better theoretical implementation of becoming a learning organization.

Keywords: Organizational Learning, Learning Organization, Learning

Learning is a constituent process of human resource development and organizational change. Marsick and Watkins (2003) pointed out that organizations often expect learning and knowledge creation to take place continuously for individuals and that they will share what they know in ways that promote learning in groups and throughout the organization. Organizational learning is particularly significant in today's workplace where employees may feel that sharing knowledge could be detrimental to their success (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). Gorelick (2005) pointed out that an effective learning organization requires a deep learning cycle and recognition that it will take time.

If organizational learning is seen as a continuous learning cycle, then an organization can not arrive at a point in time when it declares itself to be a learning organization (Gorelick, 2005). It is obvious that the learning organization refers to an entity exhibiting directed changes at the macro-level, and organizational learning refers to the persons changing from one knowledge state to another as a micro-level function of acting within a network of interacting people (Jensen & Rasmussen, 2004). In addition, Jensen and Rasmussen (2004) argued that the relationships and movements at both the macro- and micro-levels are complex. Therefore, the purposes of this paper are to examine through a literature review the relationship between organizational learning practices and the learning organization, to create a conceptual framework, and to explore and connect the components of organizational learning practices for fostering a learning organization.

Problem Statement

Prange (1999) commented that one of the greatest myths of organizational learning is the target issue; that is, the way in which learning might be considered organizational. Nevertheless, some have argued that it is individuals, not organizations, who learn. In other words, learning refers to the processes of thinking and remembering that take place within an individual's brain (Salomon, 1993). So it becomes important to explore how individual and organizational learning may connect in the work of Argyris and Schön (1978; 1996). They stated that individual members are continually engaged in attempting to know the organization and to know themselves in the context of the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

The concepts of organizational learning and the learning organization have been debated as to whether they refer to different or to the same phenomenon (Goh, 2003). However, Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999) indicated that, although theorists of learning organizations have drawn on ideas from organizational learning, there has been little traffic in the reverse direction. Moreover, the two sets of literature have developed along divergent tracks. The literature on organizational learning has concentrated on the detached collection and analysis of the processes involved in individual learning inside organizations; whereas the learning organization literature has an action orientation toward using specific evaluative methodological tools to promote and evaluate the quality of learning processes inside organizations (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Tsang, 1997).

Therefore, in order to create a learning organization that is good at organizational learning, we need to have a more conceptual understanding about the processes of organizational learning (Huysman, 2000). Furthermore, greater understanding of the relationship between organizational learning practices and the learning organization would be a profitable contribution to organization and human resource development.

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Research Question

This research explores three questions related to organizational learning practices and the learning organization based on a literature review:

1. What is the relationship between organizational learning practices and the learning organization?
2. What are the components of organizational learning practices for fostering the learning organization?
3. What is the conceptual framework for connecting organizational learning practices and the learning organization?

Significance of the Research

Three significant facts were explored in this research. First, identifying the connection between organizational learning practices and the learning organization allows us to tap into some interesting organizational improvements and some helpful research implications. Huysman (2000) commented that, with a learning organization, one generally refers to a specific type of organization that is organized—both culturally and structurally—such that innovation, flexibility, and improvement can be more likely to emerge. Consequently, the learning organization provides HRD with a picture of how things could be within an organization.

Second, four notions of learning were used at the stage of input in the research framework to emphasize that organization learning is the process through which an organization constructs knowledge or reconstructs existing knowledge (Huysman, 2000). The four notions of learning, which include experiential learning (Prange, 1999), action learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), and informal learning (Cole, 2004; Dale & Bell, 1999), offer organizations the opportunity to undertake a journey to becoming a learning organization.

Third, the dimensions of the learning organization (Marsick & Watkins, 2003), single- and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), and the systems model in organizations (Swanson, 1996) were utilized to demonstrate the value of organizational learning practices. The concept of the learning organization is well established to promote individual, team, and organizational learning. Such enhanced learning should yield performance effects (Day, 1994; Hunt & Morgan, 1996; Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991).

Research Methods

An integrative literature review was performed. We first identified the theoretical background in terms of three key terms: organizational learning, the learning organization, and notions of learning. Second, we identified databases to search; all of the several electronic databases available in the university's electronic library, including EBSCO Host's Academic Search Preimer, MasterFILE Primer, Business Source Primer, Regional Business News, and EBSCO megaFILE databases were used, as well as Google Scholar and Google.

In addition to the literature review, the single- and double-loop learning model (Argyris & Schön, 1974) and the systems model in organizations (Swanson, 2005) were used to connect the relationship among notions of learning, organizational learning practices, and the learning organization. At the input level, the literature of notions of learning was explored; the literature of organizational learning practices was analyzed at the processes level and the learning organization was put at the outputs level from reviewing the literature.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background concerning organizational learning, the learning organization, and notions of learning were explored by defining the key terms, reviewing the related literature, and illustrating the complementary concepts.

Learning

According to Collins (1999), learning is the step of gaining knowledge through effort. Of course, learning is a highly context-dependent concept with many competing definitions, and the meanings of learning may vary widely in different contexts and different fields (Sun, 2003).

Lachman (1997) suggested an improved definition: Learning is the process by which a relatively stable modification in stimulus-response relations is developed as a consequence of functional environmental interaction via the senses (Ramsden, 1992). Thus, Ramsden concluded that learning involves comprehending the world by reinterpreting knowledge. In order to satisfy different contexts in different fields, there have been a

number of suggested learning types. Smith (2001a) described four notions for theorizing learning in terms of organization. *Experiential learning*. Experiential learning is learning from experience and reflecting on that experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking. Kolb and Fry (1975) created the famous model out of four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts, and testing in new situations. Prange (1999) noted that, “when we review the processes of organizational learning, we encounter learning from experience as a genuine component of almost all approaches” (p. 27).

Action learning. Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organizations that takes the task as the vehicle for learning (Pedler, 1991). Argyris and Schön (1974) argued that people have mental maps with regard to how to act in situations. Based on the theories of action learning, Argyris and Schön created the single- and double-loop models to link governing variables, action strategies, and consequences together. Such learning may then lead to an alteration in governing variables, and, thus, a shift may occur in the way in which strategies and consequences are framed in the context of organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Communities of practice. The use of communities of practice is the idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community. The concept has gained significant ground in recent years (Smith, 2003). A community of practice involves much more than the technical knowledge or skill associated with undertaking some task. Members are involved in a set of relationships over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and communities develop around things that matter to people (Wenger, 1998).

Informal learning. According to Dale and Bell (1999), informal learning is defined as learning that takes place in the work context, relates to an individual’s job performance or employability, and is not formally organized into a program or curriculum by the organization. In order to develop the opportunity of informal learning in the organization, all learners are required to keep up to date with unfolding nature of their area of practice, it is in practice that they apply that knowledge and hence develop expertise (Core, 2004).

Organizational Learning Practices

Argyris (1999) summed up learning within an organization as stemming from two conditions. First, learning is said to take place when a planned action has been accomplished, and, second, if the plan was not accomplished, the reasons are identified and corrected. Pérez López, Peón, and Ordás (2005) defined organizational learning as “a dynamic process of creation, acquisition and integration of knowledge aimed at the development of resources and capabilities that contribute to better organizational performance” (p. 228).

Gilley and Maycunich (2000) conceived the organizational learning process as consisting of five phases:

First is preparation for learning. Second is information exchange, allowing employees to obtain content necessary to improve their knowledge, skills, or behaviors. Third is knowledge acquisition and practice; learning occurs when certain activities cause an individual to transpose information into new awareness. Fourth is transfer and integration; if the organization fails to assist employees in integrating learning and transferring skills or knowledge on the job, the organization will experience difficulty, and opportunities for change will be lost. The last is accountability and recognition. Individuals must be held accountable for their learning and be recognized for their efforts and improvement. (pp. 130-149)

Thus, the learning environment must support the free exchange of ideas and feelings and allow learners to feel secure and to participate in open two-way communications (Hiemstra, 1991). This requires a move from simply putting more knowledge into databases to leveraging the many ways that knowledge can migrate into an organization and impact business performance (Cross & Baird, 2000).

The Learning Organization

Senge (1990b) defined learning organizations as 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. (p. 3)

He pointed out that the dimension that distinguishes learning from more traditional organizations is the mastery of certain basic disciplines. There are five disciplines identified to converge on innovating learning organizations: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning (Senge, 1990a).

Watkins and Marsick (1993, 1996) defined the learning organization as one that is characterized by continuous learning for continuous improvement, and by the capacity to transform itself. The following are seven dimensions of the learning organization form the basis of the DLOQ (Marsick & Watkins, 1999, 2003; Watkins & Marsick, 1993, 1996): 1) Create continuous learning opportunities; 2) Promote inquiry and dialogue; 3) Encourage collaboration and team learning; 4) Establish systems to capture and share learning; 5) Empower people toward a collective vision; 6) Connect the organization to its environment; and 7) Use leaders who model and support learning at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

Furthermore, Watkins and Marsick (1993, 1996) argued that there are three levels of the learning organization in performing learning: the individual level that is composed of two dimensions of learning organization (continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry); the team or group level that is reflected by team learning and collaboration; and the organizational level that has four dimensions of learning organization (embedded systems, system connections, empowerment, and provide leadership for learning).

Findings

There is increased awareness that valuable learning happens informally on the job, in groups, or in conversations (J. M. Huber Institute for Learning in Organizations, 2002). In this research, the single- and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974) and systems (Swanson, 2005) models were utilized to build the conceptual framework for the relationships among notions of learning, organizational learning practices, and the learning organization.

Conceptual Framework

We suggest that there are several relationships among learning, organizational learning practices, and the learning organization. The various roles and activities that comprise the path to the learning organization are represented as an open system in the systems model of organizational learning practices. These relationships are shown in Figure 1, the conceptual framework with descriptions that follow.

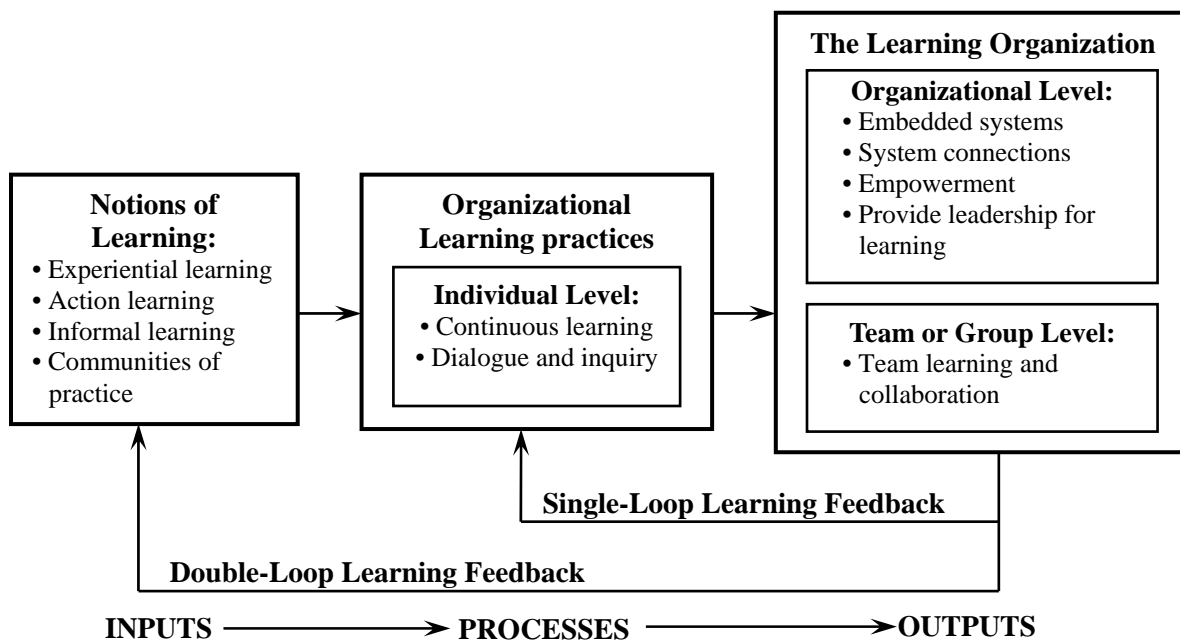


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

The Notions of Learning for Organizational Learning Practices

Based on Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action, the four notions of learning are inputs as governing variables for improving organizational learning practices in the framework in Figure 1. In addition, the individual, team or group, and organizational levels are motivated by the notions of learning.

Experiential learning. According to the concept of Kolb (1984), experiential learning theory can help us to understand the cyclical process of learning. For organizational learning practices, learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Kolb and Fry (1975) argued that the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points and that it should really be approached as a continuous spiral. This concept is very helpful to organizational members in fulfilling continuous learning, dialogue, and inquiry.

Action learning. According to Marquardt (1996), one of the most valuable tools for organizational learning is action learning. He described action learning as both a process and a powerful program that involves a small group of people solving real problems, while at the same time focusing on what they are learning and how their learning can benefit each group member and the organization as a whole (Marquardt, 1999). Additionally, Senge (1990a)

believed that action learning transforms organizations into learning environments. Thus, by using action learning, organizations have more opportunities to approach organizational learning practices.

Informal learning. Learning should not be limited to organizations or the workplace. It may be recognized by the different parties involved and may or may not be specifically encouraged. Accordingly, organizational learning practices at the individual level would pay more attention to informal learning in order to gain knowledge flexibly. Besides, organizations need to increase the informal and formal intersections of learning into the learning process in order to create an agreeable environment of organizational learning practices.

Communities of practice. The idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice has gained significant ground in recent years. Communities of practice have also become an important focus within organizational development (Smith, 2003). Smith argued that some communities of practice are quite formal in organization; others are very fluid and informal. However, members are brought together by joining in common activities and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger 1998). Communities of practice are advantageous to organizational learning practices in team or group level.

Single-Loop Learning

In the organization, according to Argyris and Schön (1978), single-loop learning will be present when goals, values, frameworks, and action strategies are taken for granted. Based on Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978) and Watkins and Marsick (1993, 1996), individual, team or group, and organizational levels are included in the function of organizational learning practices in this research. Moreover, the seven dimension of DLOQ were assigned to the three levels of organizational learning practices according to their characteristics whereas these dimensions of the learning organization are necessary for promoting learning in organization (Marsick & Watkins, 2003).

Individual level for learning. In the framework, two dimensions of learning organization, including continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry, were included at the individual level. Marsick and Watkins (2003) noticed that individuals select a learning strategy or action based on their cognitive and affective understanding of the meaning of the initial trigger. The actions individuals take are often constrained by their capacity. In order to improve their skills, authority, resources, and power, individuals need to create continuous learning opportunities and promote inquiry and dialogue; consequently, any individual learning endeavor is directed toward making the learning strategy more effective (Smith, 2001a). In the learning organization, they identify skills they need for future work tasks, give time to support learning, help each other learn and give open feedback to each other, and treat each other with respect. Finally, they are rewarded for learning and get money and other resources to support their learning.

Team or group level for learning. In the framework, one dimension of the learning organization, learning and collaboration, was included at the team or group level. By encouraging collaboration and team learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2003), work is designed to use groups to access different modes of thinking; in addition, groups are expected to learn together and work together. In the learning organization, teams or groups have the freedom to adapt their goals as needed and treat members as equals, regardless of rank, culture, or other differences. Besides, teams or groups revise their thinking as a result of group discussions or information collected, and, finally, teams or groups are rewarded for their achievements and are confident that the organization will act on their recommendations.

Organizational level for learning. Marsick and Watkins (2003) pointed out that what is most significant at the organizational level is that learning is now a collective experience. The stages of learning may be similar, but learning is now the result of an interactive, interdependent process. Consequently, to transform an organization, it is necessary to attend to structures and the organization of work, as well as the culture and processes (Finger & Brand, 1999). In the framework, four dimensions of learning organization, including embedded systems, system connections, empowerment, and provide leadership for learning, were included at the organizational level.

For embedded systems, the learning organization uses two-way communication on a regular basis; enables people to get needed information at any time quickly and easily; maintains an up-to-date database of employee skills; creates systems to measure gaps between current and expected performance; makes its lessons learned available to all employees; and measures the results of the time and resources spent on training.

For system connections, the learning organization recognizes people for taking initiative, gives people choices in their work assignments; invites people to contribute to the organization's vision; gives people control over the resources they need to accomplish their work; supports employees who take calculated risks; and builds alignment of visions across different levels and work groups.

For empowerment, the learning organization helps employees balance work and family; encourages people to think from a global perspective; encourages everyone to bring the customers' views into the decision making process; considers the impact of decisions on employee morale; works together with the outside community to meet mutual needs; and encourages people to get answers from across the organization when solving problems.

For providing leadership for learning in the learning organization, leaders generally support requests for learning opportunities and training; leaders share up-to-date information with employees about competitors, industry trends, and organizational directions; leaders empower others to help carry out the organization's vision; leaders mentor and coach those they lead; leaders continually look for opportunities to learn; and leaders ensure that the organization's actions are consistent with its values.

Double-Loop Learning

We noted from the systems model that the research conceptual framework is reversible. It is also important for the learning organization to review the initiation of learning by double-loop learning feedback. Leadbeater (2000) argued that companies need to invest not just in new machinery to make production more efficient, but also in the flow of know-how that will sustain their business. Organizations need to be good at knowledge generation, appropriation, and exploitation (p. 70). We can perceive that a failure to attend to the learning of groups and individuals in the organization spells disaster in this context (Smith, 2001b). Connecting the organization to its input environments and notions of learning is helpful for encouraging the opportunities of experiential learning, action learning, informal learning, and communities of practice. This kind of connection supports collaboration, commitment, ready access to knowledge and talent, and coherent organizational behavior (Cohen & Prusak, 2001).

For double-loop learning, reflection is more fundamental (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Argyris (1982) argued that double-loop learning is necessary if practitioners and organizations are to make informed decisions in rapidly changing and often uncertain contexts. Subsequently, we have seen very significant changes in the nature and organization of production and service. Smith (2001b) concluded that companies, organizations, and governments have to operate in a global environment that has altered its character in significant ways. Finger and Brand (1999) believed that, by referring to the notions of the learning organization, it is possible to make change less threatening and more acceptable to participants. Finally, the learning organization links individual performance with organizational performance (Kerka, 1995).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research utilized a systems model to connect relationships among notions of learning, organizational learning practices, and the learning organization. In the framework, the four notions of learning are included as the inputs. They support one-loop and double-loop learning processes of organizational learning practices with experiential learning, action learning, informal learning, and communities of practice.

By analyzing the relationships for one-loop learning feedback, organizational learning practices are seen as the activities and the processes by which organizations eventually fulfill the ideal of the learning organization. The individual level of organizational learning practices, composed of two dimensions of learning strategies (continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry) are included as the processes of learning; The team or group level, reflected by team learning and collaboration, and the organizational level with four dimensions of the learning organization are included as the consequences at the position of outputs.

The single- and double-loop learning and systems models were utilized to explore organizational learning practices in performing the processes toward becoming a learning organization. This research found that, without organizational learning practices, the model will be incomplete, and the outputs of the learning organization will not be fulfilled. To this extent it holds the possibility of achieving a more holistic understanding and systematic thinking (Senge, 1990a).

For future research, this study provides two recommendations. First, there is a lack of critical analysis of the theoretical framework which was constructed using literature review research. It is necessary to verify the relationships with empirical research. Second, the performance of consequences for the organizational learning and the learning organization is hard to confirm. Although the DLOQ has also included financial and knowledge performance well supported by many empirical research studies, there still exists the difficulty of finding generalized performance factors to meet the needs of all organizations.

For practice, this study has two suggestions. First, learning is important not only for individuals, but also for organizations. Thus, organizations should pay more attention to organizational learning in order to obtain organizational effectiveness. Second, industries should use organizational learning practices to develop business and recognize opportunities as soon as possible before they start their organization development. Finally, organizational learning practices are the long-term processes for individuals and organizations in the workplace.

Implications for HRD

Learning is the crucial component in the transformation from the traditional organization to the developmental

organization (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). From this research, we learned that the organization learning processes and the learning organizations themselves promote continuous organizational renewal and improved performance capacity. We believe that without learning, individual, team or group, and organizational growth and human resource development cannot occur.

To summarize, reaching an ideal learning organization is the most significant motivation for organizations to learn. From organizational learning practices, individuals and organizations learn how to create continuous learning opportunities, promote inquiry and dialogue, encourage collaboration and team learning, establish systems to capture and share learning, empower people toward a collective vision, connect the organization to its environment; and use leaders who model and support learning at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

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