Elements in Management Learning: From Individual to Organisational Learning

Professor Chris Rowley and Dr Irene Poon

Centre for Research in Asian Management, City University, HEAD Foundation, Singapore

Introduction
The concept of ‘learning’ was traditionally applied to individuals and across different settings, such as school, etc. However, more recently, learning has become more organisational-related. This is partly because greater global competition and technological advances, as well as a growing knowledge-based economy, have pressurized organisations to try to respond more quickly to changing environments. Consequently, organisations need to become better at learning and managing knowledge to sustain their competitiveness. Such trends have changed the focus of learning from a mechanism for achieving individual aspirations towards being more a mechanism for creating organisational values. In other words, the organisation does not only facilitate learning for individual employees, but it is also a ‘learner’ itself. The development of capacity to transfer knowledge across the organisation, the sharing of expertise and information as well as the emphasis on continuous adaptation have all lead to the emergence of organisation learning (OL). This is also often linked to the ‘learning organisation’. These developments have key implications for management and human resource management (HRM) especially.

Key ideas of an emerging new management paradigm and the depth, breadth, vision and challenges inherent in modern organisations, can be seen in Chawla and Renesch (2006). A synthesis of the debates surrounding the different concepts of OL and the learning organisation can be seen in Easterby-Smith and Burgoyne (1999). It provides an integrated framework of concepts and theories that draw in insights from management cognition, theories of knowledge and learning, as well as work psychology.

Towards a Learning Organisation?
Knowles (1990) identifies the defining characteristic of learning as ‘change’, by either acquiring something new or modifying something that already exists. The change must be long lasting to ensure that learning really has occurred. The focus of learning can include behaviour, cognition, affect; or any combination of them. Learning outcomes can be skill
Arghris and Schön (1978) distinguish between single-loop learning and double-loop learning which relates to Bateson’s (1972) concepts of first-order and second-order learning. Single-loop learning or first-order learning occurs when errors are detected and corrected without altering organisation’s present policies. Double-loop learning or second-order learning occurs when, in addition to detecting and correction of errors, the organisation is involved in the questioning and modification of existing norms, procedures, policies and objectives. We can see these ideas diagrammatically in the figure.

Source: developed from Knowles (1990); Argyris and Schon (1978); Bateson (1972).

Senge (2006) uses these concepts and creates a management tool called the ‘learning organisation’. This is a set of principles of associated techniques applicable to the management of organisations. A learning organisation is one where: 1) people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire; 2) new expansive patterns of thinking nurture; 3) collective aspiration is set free; 4) people are continually learning how to
learn together. Pedler et al. (1997: 3) concur with the view and also suggest that a learning organisation can: ‘facilitate the learning of all members and consciously transform itself and its context’. Sharing knowledge, experience and ideas become a habit in a learning organisation. In a nutshell, all organisations learn, whether they consciously choose to or not – it is a fundamental requirement for their sustained existence (Kim, 1993).

The learning organisation is an instrument for connecting learning and knowledge so as to enhance and maximize OL. According to Marquardt (2002), the most important core element of the learning organisation is the learning itself as it has the power to change people’s perceptions, behaviours and mental methods. This, then, facilitates, encourages and maximizes learning at individual, team and organisational levels.

HRM practices can be the primary tools to facilitate learning. HRM practices, through training and development, can be considered as the first step to build OL capabilities. Investments in training and development by organisations are likely to have a positive impact in developing the skills and knowledge of their people. These learning programmes can help employees learn and recognize the specific context and prepare them for future changes (D’Netto and Sohal, 1999). When people have the ability to learn within an organisational setting, this will in turn enable the organisation to adapt more quickly to environmental changes than do their competitors (Hodgkinson, 2000).

**Perspectives on OL**

OL has been increasingly recognized as a critical factor for an organisation’s ability to create ongoing economic value and to maintain competitive advantage (e.g. Senge, 2006; Garvin, 1993). The OL process consists of the way people learn and work together to overcome changes and lead to better knowledge and performance improvement. It involves experimentation, observation, analysis, willingness to examine both successes and failures, and knowledge sharing among individuals (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). OL is also a human process involving individual willingness and social interaction to detect and correct the errors for continuous improvement. Consistent with the knowledge management (KM) literature, knowledge can be codified, stored and shared. When the knowledge transfer occurs, organisational knowledge is then created. OL becomes part of KM procedure to process, interpret and improve representation of reality through knowledge.
OL Processes

How does the OL process occur? There are debates in the literature about learning in an organisation. For example, according to the socio-cultural perspective, learning is always embedded in local organisational cultures, norms and values that influence activities and OL is a highly contested concept embedded in power relations within organisations (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

In contrast, cognitivist theory assumes individuals as processors of information. Given limited capacity to process information, individuals rely on representations of an outer environment to learn. Learning takes place through a negative feedback mechanism of adaptation through trial-and-error.

The behavioural aspect supports the view that organisations become more efficient at doing something by repeatedly doing it. The problem is that organisations can become constrained by their own experience.

A more recent practice-based view suggests that knowledge and know-how are shared through activities where individuals tell and show how certain operations are carried out in the best way. Thus, OL is always examined in terms of being based on practical undertakings and standard operating procedures (Gherardi, 2000).

These various perspectives of OL are useful in that they encourage organisations to pay attention to different aspects of OL. If any of these views is adopted in isolation, the full picture of OL cannot be entailed.

According to Senge (2006), the practices of OL can be expressed through five lifelong OL disciplines. Here a discipline is seen as a development path for acquiring certain skills and competencies. These five disciplines are as follows:

1) Personal mastery - described as learning how to generate and sustain creative tension. It continually expands one’s ability to create the results in life one truly seeks.
2) Mental models - illustrated as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how people understand the world and how they take action.
3) Shared vision - described as the capacity to hold a shared vision of the future of ‘what we
4) Team learning - vital because working together to gain insights from many team members can take innovative and coordinated action and engage in dialogue.

5) System thinking - integrates the four above and fuses them into a coherent body of theories and practices to enable collaborative interactions among organization employees.

It is acknowledged, however, that there exists a growing literature that raises some issues regarding the OL concept. This is illustrated by the fact that organisations are a collection of people who each has a unique learning style and motivation to understand and plan for their interactions. Some other studies (O’Connor, 1997) show that there are at least 32 different learning styles and hence, not all the people would concur on the same learning perspective.

**Electronic Learning (E-Learning)**

The widespread availability of the internet has revolutionized the way organisations train their employees and transfer knowledge, and hence promote learning. The term ‘technology’ usually refers to the development of hardware; when using technologies for employee development, they are often referred to as ‘e-learning’. Today, technology makes it possible to facilitate traditional training tools, combine learning methods and deliver them as an integrated learning system, such as one that combines computer-based quizzes, video, interactive simulations, among other elements (Derouin et al., 2004). E-learning usually involves the use of the internet or an organisational intranet to conduct training on-line.

The role of e-learning in OL can be viewed in many ways. First, e-learning enables more employees to access training in a convenient manner. This is likely to facilitate organisation knowledge transfer and sharing, even to those beyond the formal boundaries of the organisation at relatively low cost.

Second, an e-learning system has the potential for speeding up communications within large organisations, ensuring consistency of presentation and allowing flexibility in delivery, pace and distribution of learning.

However, while e-learning is good for communicating facts, areas of complexity and feedback might be better left to human trainers (Angel, 2000) through traditional instructor-led training, or e-learners may be unable to sustain their momentum and motivation.
Recently, organisations have attempted to capitalize on the benefits of both e-learning and traditional instructor-led training by creating training programmes that involve a combination of both classroom and computer-based training techniques. In these programmes, learners are able to interact in classroom settings while working on training tasks at any time and at any place via e-learning methods.

Conclusion
In sum, we have outlined the concept of OL, its aspects and key debates, as well as perspectives, processes and methods, in the area. We conclude that no matter what types of OL methods are adopted, certain critical questions have to be answered. These include the following. Is OL a solution to enhance people skills and hence improve organisation performance? Is there sufficient top management support and funding to develop and implement OL process? Are current employee development methods adequately meeting OL needs? Are potential learners geographically separated and hence travel time and costs are concerns? Bearing these questions in mind will allow managers to be in a better position to make more informed and efficient decisions in this key area.

References


