



The Learning Organisation: An idea whose time has come?

George Pickering explores the usefulness of the notion of the learning organisation to ELT institutions. The article is based on a talk given at the IATEFL Conference in 1998.

Why do organisations such as the British Council, the Bell Institute and the Cultura Inglesa, Rio refer to themselves as Learning Organisations? Is it because the concept indicates the kind of characteristics an organisation requires to compete successfully today in an idiom that appeals to the academic mind? All great leaders have used the power of appropriate metaphors to inspire their followers. Jesus Christ did not exhort his disciples to make Christianity the leading global religious brand by the year 500, rather he told them he would make them "fishers of men." The right metaphor can be inspiring and compelling whereas the wrong metaphor can be demotivating and depressing. Bad management is often expressed in metaphorical terms, for example seagull management, wherein a manager swoops down on a member of staff, dumps a load on them and then flies off leaving the person to clear up the mess!

Gareth Morgan's book *Images of Organisation* (1997) outlines some of the general metaphors that are applied to organisations. He suggests that "all theories of organisation and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that lead us to see, understand and manage organisations in distinctive yet partial ways. To illustrate, consider the popular idea that 'the organisation is a

machine.' The metaphor may create valuable insights about how an organisation is structured to achieve predetermined results. But the metaphor is incomplete. For example, it ignores the human aspects. The metaphor is biased. For example, it elevates the importance of the rational and structural dimensions. The metaphor is misleading. For example, the organisation is *not* a machine and can never really be designed, structured, and controlled as a set of inanimate parts."

If you view your company in a mechanical way then it is very easy to see the people that inhabit it as replaceable cogs in a machine, as resources to be exploited and presumably discarded when they are no longer useful. Isn't there something de-humanising about having something called a human resources department? Is it any wonder that some staff are alienated by management speak?

Morgan highlights a number of... metaphors commonly used to describe organisations:

- Machines
- Organisms
- Brains
- Culture
- Political Systems
- Psychic Prisons

- Flux and Transformation
- Instruments of Domination

I have come across other colourful metaphors used by staff to describe the organisations they work for:

- Dinosaur
- Brothel
- Rottweiler
- Headless chicken
- Ivory Tower
- Spanish Inquisition
- Warm bath
- Family
- Private army
- Jazz band
- Tightrope
- Circus

My favourite is "headless dinosaur" and I am also amused by the description given of one organisation as "like a swan, which from above appears to be sailing serenely through the water, but from below can be seen to be paddling like mad just to keep moving!"

Questions

What metaphor describes your organisation today?

Is there another metaphor you would prefer to use?

The learning organisation has become a powerful metaphor for inspiring individuals and organisations to transform their activities.

learning organisation

What does the term "Learning Organisation" mean to you?

To what extent is your organisation a "Learning Organisation"?

What is a Learning Organisation?

A Learning Company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself. (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1991, p. 1)

The concept of the learning organisation is not easy to define or describe, partly because it is relatively recent idea and is subject to competing interpretations. However, the definition above encapsulates a number of the key ideas commonly associated with it. There is a focus on learning as part of a continuous process rather than a series of discrete events. The reference to continuous transformation points to the need for "double loop learning", the latter term referring to an organisation's ability to adapt and change the assumptions, values and beliefs that underlie its structure and culture.

Peter Senge's name and work is widely associated with the idea of the learning organisation. In his book *The Fifth Discipline* he states that "The organisations that will truly excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels within an organisation." Senge claims that learning organisations have been invented but not innovated. By this he means that they cannot as yet be replicated reliably on a meaningful scale at reasonable costs. He believes that the following "five component technologies" are converging to create learning organisations:

1 Personal Mastery

This goes beyond competence and skills and refers to people who are continually expanding their ability to create the results in their life they truly

seek.

2 Shared Vision

This creates a shared sense of purpose that permeates the organisation and gives coherence to diverse activities. Senge contrasts a shared vision with a top down vision statement that is unlikely to gain commitment from staff.

3 Team Learning

Senge argues that teams, as well as individuals, are important learning units in modern organisations. He distinguishes between "discussion" and "dialogue". Discussion is concerned with specific solutions to particular problems, whilst dialogue is used to explore current assumptions and paradigms.

4 Mental Models

The process of testing and refining the assumptions and theories that guide action.

5 Systems Thinking

Seeing the "big picture", which involves understanding complex interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains and seeing processes of change rather than snapshots.

Seven Learning Disabilities

Senge claims that many organisations have traditionally been poor learners and suffer from learning disabilities.

1 I am my position

When asked what they do for a living, most people describe what tasks they perform, not the purpose of the greater enterprise in which they take part.

A Learning Company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself

2 The enemy is out there

The propensity to blame something or someone outside ourselves when things go wrong.

3 The illusion of taking charge

Proactive actions that take the form of aggressively fighting the "enemy out there".

4 The fixation on events

Focusing on events rather than processes.

5 The parable of the boiled frog

If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water it will try to get out, but if you place it in room temperature water it will stay put, even if you heat the water to boiling point. The frog allows itself to be boiled alive because its sensory apparatus is designed to detect sudden changes in its environment and not gradual ones. Companies endanger their own survival if they fail to predict and respond to the long term changes in their competitive environment.

6 The delusion of learning from experience

We learn best from direct experience but never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions.

7 The myth of the management team

Teams that function well with routine issues but fall apart when confronted with big challenges or crises.

The Characteristics of an ELT Learning Organisation

So what does an ELT learning organisation look like? Different individuals and groups will and do define this term differently. John Whitehead, of the British Council Poland, stressed the importance of, "Clarity of purpose, openness about values and mission and a willingness to allow differences of opinion." Frank Heyworth, the recently retired Director-General of Eurocentres, emphasised, "The systematic questioning of what's done and how

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The Characteristics of an ELT Learning Organisation

Characteristic	Exist	Possible
Senior Management Commitment to Continuous Learning		
Policy on Continuing Professional Development for All		
Adequate Resources for Training and Development		
Staff Development Programme for All Staff		
Comprehensive Induction Programme for All Staff		
Upwards Appraisals		
Personal Development Plans		
Coaching and Mentoring Systems and Skills		
Consultative/Democratic Management Style		
Performance Management		
Customer Focused Orientation		
Customer Feedback Mechanisms		
Benchmarking Activities		
Cross-Functional Teams		
Project Mentality		
Teaching		
er Observations		
Action Research		

Which of these characteristics does your organisation currently possess?
Which of these characteristics might be introduced?

and the importance of acting upon feedback from both internal and external customers". Other factors mentioned by Richard Rossner, head of The Bell Institute, included outward focus, excellent communication systems and a flexible response to change.

At a more procedural level, I would suggest that some of the following policies and practices might be found in an ELT institution committed to being a learning organisation.

Steps to a Learning Organisation

As Peter Senge has pointed out, becoming a learning organisation is not about emulating a model. It is about creating something on the basis of the specific personalities, culture, customers, markets and challenges of your particular organisation. In their book *Ten Steps to a Learning Organisation*, Peter Kline and Bernard Saunders outline ten broad steps that can facilitate this process.

- Step 1: Assess Your Learning Culture
- Step 2: Promote the Positive

- Step 3: Make the Workplace Safe for Thinking
- Step 4: Reward Risk-Taking
- Step 5: Help People Become Resources for Each Other
- Step 6: Put Learning Power to Work
- Step 7: Map Out the Vision
- Step 8: Bring The Vision to Life
- Step 9: Connect the Systems
- Step 10: Get the Show on the Road

The Learning Organisation Fieldbook is replete with "strategies and tools for building a learning organisation" and one such exercise is reproduced in the next column.

Designing a Learning Organisation

Step One: Establishing the Groups

Divide the group into two sections:
Group one will develop the vision of a learning organisation
Group two will concentrate on the current reality.

Step Two: Divergent Thinking

Each team considers the following questions:

Group One

- 1 What would we have, that we don't currently have, if we had a learning organisation?
- 2 What action steps might we take to achieve those visions?
What policies and practices would be worthwhile?

Group Two

- 1 What are the present barriers and obstacles to becoming a learning organisation?
- 2 What would we want to change or eliminate?
What policies and what practices should be abandoned?
What elements of the organisation already support learning?

Step Three: Clarity

In the same teams consolidate your ideas from Step Two into 10 or 12 coherent points. Number each point.

Step Four: Convergent Thinking

Still in teams, reduce your list to three items. Allow people the time and space to defend particular items.

Step Five: Presentations and Priorities

Group One presents its top three suggestions for what to create.
Group Two presents the three most significant barriers or obstacles.
Follow each presentation with a discussion. The object is to have three key projects from each session for starting to build a learning organisation - goals to pursue or obstacles to overcome.

Step Six: Implementation

Assign champions and/or task forces to carry out projects, carried out as experiments, who will report back at agreed future date.

(Adapted from The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook pages 53-57)

learning organisation

Whatever the precise mechanisms adopted, it might be advisable to heed the words of Campbell and Cairns (1994), who argue that the creation of a learning organisation requires positive management, which in turn requires the ability to measure in order to assess, plan and monitor progress. There is therefore a need to operationalise the definition into specific features.

Final Thoughts

"Forget your old tired ideas of about leadership," Fortune Magazine advised its readers in 1990. "The most successful corporation of the 1990s will be something called the learning organisation." This prediction may well hold true for the twenty first century. But it may be worth noting that the learning organisation is only a metaphor. Organisations don't learn, individuals do. The successful organisations of the future will be peopled with individuals who demand creative, fun and challenging working environments. According to Proust, "The voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes but in seeing with new eyes." Learning organisations can help provide that fresh perspective. Bon voyage!

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