

## The Learning School

- A school culture in which the entire staff is encouraged to engage in personal learning which feeds organisational transformation, and vice-versa.

By Adrian Underhill, Embassy, UK \_Followed by Underhill-Rinvolucris dialogue on The Learning School

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### Problems with in-service training initiatives

After 25 years working on **in-service training initiatives** (INSET) I think I have concluded that just about all INSET initiatives suffer from at least one of the following: \_The initiative is 'add-on' and does not infuse ordinary everyday work;\_It involves teachers and not managers or other staff (which is not to say they should learn the same things);\_The content is arbitrary or self-referential, and not founded on individual teachers' more objective needs;\_The learning is not systematically followed through into class;\_There is no assessment of whether the time was well spent or the effort worthwhile for students, teachers and school.

In recent years we have seen increasing reference to **Continuous Professional Development** (CPD) schemes in which teachers take responsibility for their own professional learning. CPD schemes emphasise life-long professional learning and generally encourage a reflective approach to professional practice. However, CPD content and quality generally remains an individual matter, lacking structured opportunity for other perspectives on one's own learning. Nor does CPD link individual learning with organisational learning.

## **Definition of Learning Organisation**

An organisational culture known as the **Learning Organisation** (LO) aims to transform these problems, and is becoming known amongst leading-edge businesses, organisations and schools etc. Here is one kind of definition of a Learning Organisation ...

- . *"an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself". (Pedlar)*

Many of the related concepts revolve around the organisation getting its work done through the learning of its people. So you don't just learn things to do your job better (though you do that too) but you actually do your job by learning. A spirit of inquiry is THE work tool, and the workplace becomes a huge adventure play-park in which you learn your way into and out of tasks and challenges. To generate this culture everyone must be involved, with managers personally and visibly committed.

Since I work with schools I coined the term **Learning School** which provocatively suggests a school that not only teaches, but that teaches by its learning. Indeed the quality of teaching may be seen as related to the quality of learning being carried out by the organisation and its staff.

## **Questions a Learning School might ask of its staff**

A Learning School aims to integrate staff/management learning with organisational development, making one connected-up system-wide approach to learning, linking previously departmentalised efforts, like INSET, management training, organisational change and flexible response client and market requirements. And it aims to do this by exploiting the learning opportunities that lie just below the surface of everything they already do. Questions a Learning School might ask of its staff include:

- . *Are you, the teacher, demonstrating the quality of learning you want your students to develop?*
- . *Are you, the academic manager, demonstrating the quality of learning that your teachers need to demonstrate?*
- . *Are you, the director, demonstrating the quality of learning that you expect from your managers, teachers and administrative staff?*
- . *Does your school demonstrate a quality of flexibility and organisational learning that can only come from an attitude of curiosity and openness to learning demonstrated by all its staff?*

When a school adopts such learning at the core of its operating system then the staff set themselves up to demonstrate through their daily work the same quality of learning that they hope to develop in their students. Thus learning flows through the whole system, enhancing school reputation, client relations, organisational creativity, work performance and work pleasure.

Perhaps you have worked in places that were like this, at least for a while. A Learning School aims to create conditions in which this kind of learning culture can flourish intentionally and sustainably.

### **Growing a learning culture in a school**

So, how can you get started? I think this question is most usefully phrased as "How can you 'grow' a learning culture in a school organisation?" In the last three years I have been involved in developing, initiating and helping to maintain two Learning School projects, one with EmbassyCES in the UK, and the other ASC International House in Switzerland. Each project involves about 80 managers, administrators and teachers (who are the majority). In both cases we took the annual staff appraisal as the ideal starting point for developing transformational learning dialogues.

First we overhauled the annual appraisal scheme, stripping out inappropriate features of 'production line quality control', creating a structured space for reviewing each individual staff member's

professional learning on a one-to-one basis. Re-named the Professional Development Review, it provides a marvellous opportunity to find out what people want to offer, what would enable each person to flourish in the organisation, and how the organisation can help them do that while also benefiting itself

### **This annual learning review has three focuses**

In both of the projects I mentioned we have established three focuses

#### **1. Your relationship with your work and the school**

This is explored through responses to 14 key areas such as the pleasure you get from your work, the sense of being valued and making a contribution, giving and getting feedback, communication, trust, open talk about difficulties, and so on.

#### **2. Learning in the past year**

This explores what has been going well or not in your work, your formal and informal learning from your work, and how that relates to what you need and to your longer term aims.

#### **3. A learning plan for the coming year**

This pulls together the conversation and grounds the situation by developing a simple and realistic 'individual learning contract' for the coming year. This involves concrete and 'do-able' ways of exploiting workplace opportunities for learning that add value for you and for the organisation. Where possible and appropriate the school tries to help to create some of the opportunities needed.

### **Conducting the learning review**

Throughout this learning review process the reviewer offers facilitation and creative challenging, and contributes their perspectives, including feedback on performance, to add to the individual's learning. The aim is a rigorous and grounded review that leaves both parties focused and, hopefully, optimistic. The learning contracts become working documents followed up throughout the year, informing all in-service and CPD learning

activities.

Those who conduct reviews (usually the 'line manager') participate in ongoing training to develop their facilitative and directive helping skills, and their ability to create opportunities for life-long learning in the everyday workplace.

### **Other factors to consider**

These two projects are in their second year, and contain other strategies for growing a learning culture. But the Review is at the core, and although it's early days, a range of indicators suggest we are pointing in a worthwhile direction. Crucial to all this is the manner in which the project is developed, encouraging maximum participation and buy-in from the earliest moments, and possibly drawing on the catalytic qualities of an outsider project facilitator at certain key stages.

And what is the dynamic behind it all? Learning has a special dynamic, and when systems are connected up in a 'learningful' way, they become more informed, more intelligent, more responsive, and more fun.

**For information** on Learning Organizations see Pedlar, Burgoyne, Boydell "The Learning Company" 1991 and Peter Senge "The Fifth Discipline" 1990. Or enter Learning Organisation or Learning Company into Google.

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Adrian Underhill-Mario Rinvolucris Dialogue

### **How Marvellous!**

**MR** If I had belonged to the kind of Learning School you describe over these past 35 years I would have had a much happier

professional life. As I think about it, the muscles at the base of my neck begin to relax. Therefore I greet your proposal with open arms. How marvellous to be in school where the managers share a genuine learning wish with students and teachers. How marvellous to be in school where there is TRUST not only between students and teachers but also between teachers and managers.

**AU** I, like you Mario I'm sure, have been in teams, or subsets of organisations where, for a time at least, the whole working atmosphere was quickened by a pervasive quality of learning, by which I mean a learning that is characterised by curiosity, engagement and a shared thrill in working at the edge of what one knows. A thrill that is brought about by the act of learning itself, not just by the content of the learning. In our experiences this was probably brought about by the chance coming together of certain people, rather than by specific organisational strategies.

Of course, though we may have glimpses of this, to actually be part of an organisation where this is built-in to the organisational operating system is another matter. As you say, trust is one of the key ingredients. But from glimpses can come visions, and powerful visions can help shape reality.

### **Trusting Hirers-and-Firers?**

**MR** Trusting the hirers-and-firers? Trusting school owners whom you have to divide the cake with? Trusting people whose basic interests seem to be at least 50% opposed to yours, the teacher's?

With how many of my managers/employers have I enjoyed anything like the level of trust necessary to make the Learning School a reality?

Over thirty five years I achieved this level of trust with my second employer, John Barnes, at the New School, Cambridge and with James Dixey in the first 6-7 years of Pilgrim's rise. ( 10-12 years in all, out of 35)\_With John I felt he was more of a colleague and teacher than a school owner. He looked after us, his staff, and the students too, extremely well. He really hated

the “management” side of his job. I trusted him 98 %. \_With James Dixey , in the early years of Pilgrims, I shared a vision of us becoming the best school in UK. In those days his wish was to pay Pilgrims teachers 10% above the market rate. And he did. There was also the harmony and trust of a firm friendship. Maybe, in those early years, Pilgrims did move towards the ideal of the Learning School. We certainly had much to learn. \_By the early 80's aggression( mine), lying (his) and distrust(ours) began corroding the good feeling and there was no return to the earlier “feel-good” state. Yes,..... it is sad.

**AU** Yes, I know this kind of situation well. One could add that many others do not even have this degree of fortune, they do not even start out in situations with any initially promising 'feel-good' factor. In their case the LS vision remains a dream, perhaps even hardly expressed (because 'this sort of thing doesn't happen in reality, where making money is incompatible with creative staff relationships'). In your case, though the vision was dreamt, and no doubt discussed and consolidated (and perhaps even agreed to by the key parties) as a concept many times over, nevertheless there was nothing to 'fix' those words and agreements into the organisational reality. In other words we dream the dream but don't put into place the systems that can gradually realise or materialise or concretise the dream. This was the case in my experience too. And I think the reason for this is not lack of sincere and high quality intention, nor even that some people own the school and others don't, but simply because we have lacked practical know-how about how human systems organise, change and develop, and how to make humane and meaningful work together.

However, that is changing, because in the last 20 years, people and organisations have been exploring and developing and implementing all sorts of change efforts, and some, like Total Quality Management, have become very well known. And what we have learnt from all these change efforts is that most of them fail because: they are imposed and lack buy-in and ownership, or they do not take account of why people behave in the way they do, and assume that outer change in the way things are done will lead to inner change in attitude, or they use mechanical rather than living metaphors to underpin their philosophy, hence change

becomes a mechanical rather than systemic/organic enterprise, or they disregard the complexity of situations and simplify unrealistically, that is, they fail to take a systemic view, or they view change as simply the messy bit between one stasis and another, rather than the only state that there is.

As these lessons have been recognised and learnt, new experiments have been taking place in organisational change, and some of the new feeder fields have been complexity science, and the notion of continuous reciprocal transformational learning at individual and organisational level.

### **Neo-Thatcherianism of New Labour does nothing to provide "good weather" for the Learning School**

**MR** Adrian, I think people are influenced by the things that are going on in their society, and the Thatcher changes in UK fiercely accentuated the "them and us" state of mind of teachers through the 80's and early nineties. I guess Tony Thatcherson has modified what was passed down from Margaret but certainly not rejected it. The Neo-Thatcherianism of the New Labour period does nothing to provide "good weather" for the Learning School ideal in UK, which, of course, is not a reason for giving up on it.

**AU** I agree, and one way of viewing it is that they have devalued process and relationship, and valued product and things. So, unless something can be measured easily, it is not important. All bottom lines have been collapsed into one simple bottom line, financial profit, with consequent loss of value of diversity and valuing of the systems that we are all part of and on which we depend (international justice, planetary maintenance, social equity, or just living and working well together)

Story:

Before Christmas I heard the following exchange on the radio which in essence went like this.....Announcer: The world price of coffee has dropped so much that Ethiopian producers cannot survive. ....We have a spokesperson here from Maxwell House: " You acknowledge that world prices are now so low that producers are reduced to poverty, the question everyone wants to know is: How come those low prices are not being passed on by Maxwell



House to us the consumers?"

I was shocked, because I was sure that the question everyone wanted to know was going to be about injustice and seeing the consequences of our consumerism on third world farmers who had been tricked into ploughing up their subsistence farms to provide the West with coffee. But no, it was a much more local and selfish sense of injustice, if Maxwell House could screw such low prices out of producers, why weren't the reductions being passed on to us?

However, it is also true that (more?) people are wanting better ways of working, (or international trade, or environmental protection etc) and they do not take for granted that work should be an unpleasant grind. As a result there is pressure developing in some places to explore working arrangements that are enjoyable and fulfilling and that get work done well

### **The Learning School must be based on a perceived common interest**

**MR** Despite all the "once-bitten-twice shy" reservations expressed above, the Learning School idea needs to be given a whirl, but to be solid, it must be based on a perceived common interest, and a bedrock of trust.

**AU** Yes, let's ground this now. What I am proposing bringing to this is a concrete and tangible approach that might develop the roots needed for the growth of such an organisation. And that is the learning review. It requires participatory setting up, it requires skilling for those who will carry out the reviews and assist others in the development and implementation of their learning contracts, and it requires a commitment by the organisation to actively support the whole thing.

But this is not going to happen over-night, it is an ongoing and open ended process. If one can get this going for an entire teaching staff, plus the people immediately around them, supported by management even if they are not overtly participating, then that is a start, and something in the organisation may be changed, and as some of those people are promoted, they take these ideas into new positions.

But let's look at the key issue of trust and of management participating equally. For the LS/LO to work fully all must participate. If some management do not, actively participate, then they at least need to fully back the enterprise and be transparent about not participating. Even that can be a kind of participation. We need the maximum voluntary participation to start. Then as it develops it becomes more robust. Of those who did not participate at the beginning, some will join in as they see what emerges. And others won't for various (not necessarily sinister) reasons.

As to trust, that really is the life blood of new approaches to dispersed leadership, of new self-organising work practices and of the emergence of permission for intelligence and creativity to flourish throughout an organisation. It seems that the first step to this is transparency, and respect for difference, which can take people a long way where agreement is not possible. People have got different interests (at least superficially), so how can we make those visible and discussible? I would argue that we have not given ourselves a framework to have real discussions about what we want from working, and that the learning contract can contribute to ways of spending working time together that have more meaning, and that begin to make a space in which trust can flourish.

### **Is the cooperative school the only way forward?**

**MR** Isn't the only decent organisational frame for the Learning School a cooperative? I am thinking of the old Yugoslav model and of the Lake School in Oxford.

**AU** In many ways yes, but we don't have that, and perhaps it suits many 'workers' not to have it, to be able to move freely around different work. But the key point on which you and I may disagree is perhaps this: You say that where there are hirers-and-firers who are also the owners of the 'wealth' of the school, there will be sufficient opposition of interests to prevent the development of the trust needed to make a LS work. And I say that while that situation indeed brings difficulties, neither the fact of hiring and firing, nor the fact of ownership by a few, makes the development of trust, or of a learning school, impossible. The

trouble is that we lack sufficient examples of good practice, and sufficient experience of the few examples there are.

A question that really interests me is how can we make the very best of the situations we do have, and how can we start new conversations in areas that have not got stuck? How can work become a site of learning, and how can learning become a core part of the way an organisation does its work? How can work be not only transactional, as it is at the moment, but transformational too?

**MR** Thank you, Adrian.