



A Literatur Review in Learning Organization

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ABSTRACT

The learning organization idea represents a shift in how organizations are developed and grow. Within the training and development literature, staff development and individual learning were emphasized. This review undertakes a critical review of the confused and confusing literature on the learning organization. Draws on both psychological and organizational perspectives and focuses on the distinction between organizational learning and the concept of the learning organization. The discussion is centered around the issues of learning organization and the nature of learning organization. The issues include the neglect of intra-organizational phenomena and a lack of clarity regarding the treatment of the organization, the nature of learning itself, the lack of an accepted theory of what constitutes a learning organization's culture and climate, the impact of organizational size, the role of teamwork within the learning organization concept, and the fundamental question of whether the learning organization is a variable or a root metaphor. This article looks at some of the problems with the learning organization literature and then asks whether the learning organization is a concept that is applicable to organizations. Much of the literature on organizations doesn't take into account the unique nature of organizations in terms of their membership and the people with influence within them. Collaborative learning allows employees to gain new knowledge, skills, and attitudes by working together. Finally, it concludes with a consideration of the issues involved in creating a learning organization.

Keywords: learning organization; organizations; bibliometrics

INTRODUCTION

The notion of the “learning organization” has become one of the new buzzwords in the management, psychological and human resource development literature. Senior management in many organizations have also come to believe that the way in which an organization learns is a key index to its effectiveness and potential to innovate and grow.

The question must be raised: why an interest in the learning organization at this time? This is not an easy question to answer, however. It may represent a corrective to the many efficiency driven concepts presented in the 1980s, specifically total quality management and business process re-engineering. These ideas emphasized the notion of the lean organization (Burgoyne, 1995). Burgoyne argues that such organizations may become vulnerable because they have little spare capacity to come through a crisis. Therefore, the learning organization idea represents a shift to organizational development and growth. Within the training and development literature, however, there was a strong emphasis on staff development and individual learning. The learning organization is viewed as representing a shift to collective learning.

There is a great deal of confusion in the way the learning organization concept is considered within the literature. Shrivastava (1983) suggest that the learning organization is often a piece of shorthand to refer to organizations which try to make a working reality of such desirable attributes as flexibility, teamwork, continuous learning and employee participation and development.

The literature on the learning organization falls into two broad categories: first, that which treats the learning organization as a variable and something that can be designed into an organization and which has a significant influence on other organizational outcomes. Second, that which treats the learning organization as a metaphor to describe an organization. It basically views the organization as culture and sees the learning organization as a particular variant of culture.

Beyond this, however, the concept is very elusive and the extant literature illustrates a multiplicity of perspectives. A central conundrum of the learning organization concept is the issue of whether learning can be managed. Imran et al., (2016) insist that one has to be prescriptive on the meta-level in order to keep the organization a learning one, especially where the handling of learning principles is concerned. They contrast the effort required to sustain learning with the temptation to sink into the calm security of the prescriptive organization and, because of this, they advise that the desire to remain a learning organization should be non-negotiable. The precise meaning of the phrase "remain a learning organization" is, therefore, difficult to ascertain. It could mean that the organization is continually changing and, therefore, in a state of continuous learning, or that it is even responsive to learning opportunities when they arise but in the meantime is in a state of flux. This perhaps represents a fatal internal contradiction in the concept of the learning organization and is one of the many problems with the concept which tend not to receive the discussion they merit within the literature.

Much of the current literature on the learning organization relates to manufacturing or private sector organizations. There is also a tendency to use the term "learning company" in some of the writings. (March, 2021) argue that the use of the word "company" is more appropriate than the word "organization" because they view the latter as essentially a mechanical concept. The former allows for the idea of any group of people who seek to explore collectively how best people may work and learn together. The word "organization" is preferred in this paper because not many non-profit or public sector organizations readily view themselves as companies.

This article undertakes a critical review of the learning organization literature drawing on psychological and organizational perspectives. The article initially examines some of the general problems inherent in the learning organization literature and then considers the possible differences between organizational learning and the concept of the learning organization. It finally focuses on the issue of whether it is possible to create a learning organization.

Some general problems with the literature on the learning organization

Many notions of the learning organization are emphasized. Some writers put emphasis on the learning of all an organization's members (Nicolini & Mezner, 1995); others on the organization's competitiveness in all functions (Askim et al., 2008; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Fisher & White, 2000; Lei et al., 1999), while others put emphasis on the skills and functions of the business (Ganawati et al., 2021). Some authors such as Senge (1990) adopt a broader approach and bracket all of the other perspectives together. Senge tends to suggest a composite theoretical ideal. There are a number of specific difficulties with the literature. These include the neglect of intra-organizational phenomena and the lack of clarity with respect to the treatment of the organization, the nature of learning itself, the lack of an accepted theory of what comprises the culture and climate of a learning organization, the influence of organizational size, the role of teamwork within the learning organization concept and a fundamental question of whether the learning organization is a variable or a root metaphor. Some of these issues are worth considering here. The learning organization as variable or root metaphor Those who view the learning organization as a variable tend to have an objective and functional view of reality, whereas those who see the learning organization from a root metaphor approach view organizations as if they are essentially learning cultures. Those who treat the learning organization as a variable also believe that specific traits can be identified and such traits influence the behaviour of employees and the performance of the organization. The idea that a "strong learning organization" has a distinct and positive impact on performance is very popular, and commentators have identified a range of benefits of developing such an organization (Boateng et al., 2009; Dörner & Rundel, 2021; García-Morales et al., 2012; Lei et al., 1999; Tamayo-Torres et al., 2016). The key question from this perspective is how to design the organization so as to create a learning organization. The less popular perspective stresses that the learning organization is a type of culture and that the organization is essentially a culture. It views the organization as an expressive, idealistic and symbolic phenomenon (Slater & Narver, 1995). Treating the learning organization from a root metaphor perspective essentially means conceptualizing organizations in terms of their expressive, ideological and symbolic aspects. Effectively the learning organization is not viewed as a piece of the puzzle, but the puzzle itself. The research issue is then one of exploring organizations as subjective experience, a phenomenological rather than an objectivist perspective. The learning culture is not seen as objective but as constructed 19 The learning organization: a review and evaluation Thomas Garavan by people and reproduced by a network of symbols and meanings that unite people and make shared learning possible. A root metaphor view of the learning organization, therefore, plays down the pragmatic results that may follow from having one in favour of a more general understanding of what it is. This, however, is not the way in which many of those who embrace the learning organization notion think about it.

The nature of an organization

While there is a tendency to state that organizations do not learn, people do; many writers emphasize the organization as the basic unit of analysis. Sitkin (1992) points out that it is not possible to investigate the notion of a learning organization without considering whether the organization has an existence of its own which is separate from those of its members, or whether it is simply a sum of the component parts. The problem is further compounded by what Bierly et al.,(2000) describe as an "indiscriminate application of psychological theory to organizations".

They specifically highlight the tendency to use the language of stimulus-response theory (Ismail, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988), among others, consider the notion that organizations learn, as opposed to individuals in organizations learning together, which introduces an unnecessary level of abstraction to the debate. The notion of the learning organization is unhelpful if it leads to the attribution to the organization of systems properties which are in some way independent of its members.

Viewing organizations as systems is essentially adopting the metaphor of organizations as organisms. Such a metaphor has significant limitations primarily its assumption of functional unity, whereas in reality organizations are not normally characterized by harmony. Organizations are products of visions, ideas, norms and beliefs so that their shape and structure is much more fragile and tentative than the material structure of an organism. (Santoso, 2018), in recognition of this problem, invoke the notion of agency to suggest that organizational learning can and does occur. They argue that members act as learning agents for the organization. They act as agents when they detect a match or mismatch of outcome to expectations. By means of collaborative inquiry, individuals identify the sources of error and attribute them to the theory in use within the organization. It may also be argued that the learning organization idea represents an acknowledgement that the vision movement has failed, in that there was a tendency to overdo vision with the result that people fail to learn because they are blind to other ideas.

(Brandi & Elkjaer, 2011) suggests that to speak of organizations learning is in effect a shorthand way of articulating that organization members are not only individual learners but also have the capacity to learn collaboratively. Such collaborative learning allows organizational members to become more knowledgeable, skilful and more open to future learning opportunities. There is a considerable body of research which highlights the effectiveness of learning in teams, for example. However, as we shall see later, attitudinal problems may inhibit team learning. Hoyle also draws attention to the problems of collaborative learning in the form of structures, procedures and cultures which can be regarded as properties of the organization. Other contributors explore learning in descriptive-organization-level terms (Chiva et al., 2014) or focus on specific aspects of the organization such as procedures and regulations intended to control the flow of information (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Much of the literature fails to recognize the uniqueness of organizations in terms of their membership and those with influence within the organization.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions and implications for research The notion of the learning organization, as presently advocated, is an illusive concept and is represented both as an ideal rather than a reality and as something which can be The advertising material for the then new journal The Learning Organization (1994) described the learning organization as the “Holy Grail”. This characterization still holds. This has not stopped the flow of literature on the learning organization, which is extensive and expanding rapidly and, presently, as a concept it is located somewhere on the path from invention to innovation. The expansive literature tends to view learning as a hierarchically ordered sequence of levels of learning.

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