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ABSTRACT

The development of the "learning organization" may be traced to three converging trends: the tradition of organizational development; economic shifts to globalization, deregulation, and information-based industry; and total quality management. Learning organizations are generally characterized as follows: organizations that create continuous learning opportunities, promote inquiry and dialogue, encourage collaboration and team learning, establish systems to capture and share learning, empower people toward collective vision, and connect with the organizational environment. Empirical research documenting the implementation of learning organization concepts in Canada remains sparse. Despite the rhetoric regarding the potential benefits of learning organizations, several problems and paradoxes of learning organizations have been identified: the potential collision of continuous learning through exploratory experimentation and innovation with organizational norms of productivity, accountability, and results-based measurement. The following are among the actions that adult educators might take to become part of the learning organization vision: ask critical questions about the basic assumptions of the learning organization concept; teach learning theory to business and other sectors; help clarify the links between organizational and individual learning; produce/analyze empirical documentation of learning organizations; and rethink the adult educator's ethical role in workplace learning. (Contains 56 references.) (MN)

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# Limits of the Learning Organization: A Critical Look

by Tara Fenwick

Tara J. Fenwick  
St. Francis Xavier University  
Department of Education  
Box 5000  
Antigonish, Nova Scotia  
B2G 2W5  
Office phone: (902) 867-5404  
Fax: (902) 867-3887  
E-mail: tfenwick@stfx.ca

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## Limits of the Learning Organization: A Critical Look

by Tara Fenwick  
St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia

Hit the ground running or you won't keep up! - shouts Nuala Beck (1995), a Toronto economist and popular speaker-consultant in Canadian human resource circles. Beck warns that only workers who keep learning new skills, and keep changing to accommodate the demands of the marketplace, will survive in the "New Economy". Continuous employee learning is often touted as the new panacea for coping with the most perplexing and frightening changes swirling about the labor market: runaway technological innovation, an aging workforce, obsolescent organizational functions, stagnating government bureaucracies, threats posed by swelling corporate conglomerates, proliferating consumer taste and demands for service, and exponentially increasing information. Adult educators (Marsick and Watkins, 1993) and human resource developers (Dixon, 1993) have taken up the urgent rhetoric characterizing popular business management literature, and announce that "learning is the necessary response to change" (Dixon, 1993, p. 18).

But how are people and organizations transformed into the continuous learning communities that will supposedly save the workforce and the economy? The concept of "learning organization" has become increasingly accepted in business and industry, and increasingly in public institutions, as an ideology of values, structure, and prescriptive strategies. The learning organization concept offers a warm vision of a "community" workplace in which staff share knowledge and learn together continuously. "Continuous learning" and "learning organization" are not presented by their advocates as rigid models or monolithic philosophies: there are variations. However, certain common principles are reiterated among learning organization theorists and practitioners who believe that organizations should implement these actions, as follows: a learning organization (1) creates continuous learning opportunities, (2) promotes inquiry and dialogue, (3) encourages collaboration and team learning, (4) establishes systems to capture and share learning, (5) empowers people toward collective vision, and (6) connects the organization to its environment (Watkins and Marsick, 1993).

Certainly such principles hold promise for creating a more humanitarian, egalitarian workplace offering development possibilities for its members. But amongst the enthusiasm attending flurried efforts to implement these principles, important questions remain unasked in the dominant literature on the subject -- questions about "what" is a "learning organization", what it values, its assumptions about learning and the nature of knowledge, and how its discourse structures the relations and practices of the workplace. Because organizations are increasingly

coming to view themselves as existing in continual flux in an unpredictable global economy, the place of the worker subject has been relegated -- apparently without contest -- to one of eternal, slippery deficiency: workers must learn continuously, thrive on chaos (Peters, 1987) and embrace instability as the normal order of things. That the workplace is the locus for significant individual development and “continuous learning” and even spiritual growth (Kofman and Senge, 1995), is a construction adopted apparently without question by many organizations, workplace analysts, organizational developers, and even opportunistic educators.

This chapter critically examines the nature of the learning organization ideology and discourse in three sections. The historical context, principles and purpose, and the people involved in developing the learning organization concept will be outlined in the following section. The second section uncovers and challenges certain assumptions embedded in learning organization ideology. In the third section, implications for adult educators are addressed. Questions are raised for further examination towards archiving and mobilizing those aspects of the learning organization concept that may promise genuine improvement of workplace learning and adult development.

### **Historical Contexts of the Learning Organization**

The phenomenon of “learning organization” must be understood in context of three important currents which converged in its origins: the tradition of organizational development (OD) and particularly concepts of organizational learning; economic shifts to globalization, de-regulation, and information-based industry; and Total Quality Management (TQM).

First, organizational learning is not a new concept. Finger and Woolis (1994) argue that five schools of thought about organizational learning led to the appearance of Senge’s (1990) “learning organization” concept. The earliest notions of organizational learning were concerned with organizational continuity, and assumed the essential stability and coherence of the organization. Learning was viewed conservatively as a process to “encode, store and retrieve the lessons of history despite the turnover of personnel and the passage of time” (Levitt and March, 1988, p. 319) or to continually improve existing procedures for adaptation. Later approaches viewed organizational learning as a transformative process. Organizational development (OD) -- a process which actively implements planned change to help organizations self-reflexively examine and change their own routines and cultural norms -- has been well-established in the work of Donald Schon and Chris Argyris (1978). The OD goal was to develop the organization’s ability to self-correctively maintain a pattern of homeostasis despite fluctuations in the external environment, through an action science approach. Because the organization was to encouraged to incorporate critical thinking into continuous evaluation of its routines and norms - what Argyris called “double

loop learning” - the change process was dynamic and even subversive, although fundamentally conservative. Finger and Woolis (1994) argue that a third group theorizing about organizational learning in the 1980s has a more sophisticated view of learning (Shrivastava, 1981; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Hedberg, 1981). These writers distinguish between organizational change on the one hand and learning on the other, two different concepts which have been conflated by many management theorists. They describe different levels of learning and different learning systems, and acknowledge the complex dynamics of the organization interacting with the various communities and forces comprising its environment. Thus, the concept of learning organization was incubated during growing interest in the nature of collective learning and the notion of an organization as a continuously adaptive and proactive agent.

The second trajectory associated with the emergence of the learning organization concept is the economic shifts of the 1980s. These shifts had raised considerable alarm: business viewed itself in constant jeopardy in a new competitive climate that moved at fiber-optic speed, embraced global dimensions of cultural and market influences, and communicated through constantly changing technologies. Processes of globalization and de-regulation, argue Finger and Woolis (1994), had substantially accelerated competition especially among larger international companies. Businesses envisioned themselves caught in a “paradigm shift” and looked for new organizational structures and leadership approaches. Continuous learning, both of individual employees, of employee groups, and of the organization as a dynamic entity, attracted interest as a survival strategy.

During this period the third contributing influence to learning organization notions, the movement towards Total Quality Management (TQM), gathered momentum among both private business and public bureaucracies. Attributed to William Deming, the TQM approach embraced change and centered an organization’s attention on the shifting unpredictable target of its customers’ needs. Thus the organization itself became flexible and highly responsive. TQM recommended dramatic changes to overturn stable hierarchical structures devoted to status quo maintenance, unseat “taken-for-granted” procedures and top-down regulations, and insist on accountability for outcomes. Under TQM dictates organizations were restructured to become flatter and more fluid, action-oriented, mission and culture-focused. People were grouped in multi-skilled teams that ideally defined, regulated, and were accountable for their own work. These changes prepared the way for the principles of the learning organization ideology.

## **Principles, People, and Purposes Related to the “Learning Organization” Concept**

The learning organization concept presumes continuous change to drive the center of the organization’s activity, and continuous innovation and adaptation to characterize the organization’s response to change. Peter Senge (1990), whose book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art of Practice of the Learning Organization* is often credited with popularizing the notion, defines learning organization as “a place 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 how to act together” (p. 3). Senge is rooted in a business administration perspective, examining human learning from the site of the organization and the motive of enhancing or transforming workplace organizations as necessary to improve productivity and effectiveness.

### Principles of the learning organization according to various people

For Senge and his associates (1994), there are five interwoven forces or “disciplines” to cultivate when “building” a learning organization: (1) personal mastery, or coming to understand personal capacities and dreams; (2) mental models, or examining and overturning deep personal beliefs; (3) team learning, or collaborating to work and develop knowledge effectively in small groups; (4) shared vision, or building a collective dream to guide future action; and (5) systems thinking, or coming to view the organization from a big picture perspective that recognizes how one’s own actions affects everyone else. Central to these disciplines is the assumption that employees need to engage in critical reflection and open dialogue, exposing their own belief systems and critically challenging others’ belief systems, to break free of thinking patterns which perpetuate dysfunction and prevent innovation. People learn in groups and collaborate in “teams”, in a learning organization. A flexible, self-reflexive, but vividly clear vision is essential to carry the organization through the rapids of tumultuous change. Everyone and everything within and without an organization needs to understand how they are interconnected, according to the doctrine of “systems thinking”. The key is to think “big picture”, to liberate employees from their stovepipe departments and their narrow vision of themselves engaged in an isolated practice, and to “help” people to understand and work with each other.

Adult educators Karen Watkins and Victoria Marsick (1993) claim that “the promise of continuous learning is innovation. . . innovation is at the core of productivity” (p. 25), and present what they call an “action-reflection” program to help managers “sculpt” organizations to foster continuous learning. Like Senge and his associates, Watkins and Marsick (1993) promote organization-wide and organizational critical reflection at various stages of the problem-solving

processes which they say constitute most activity in knowledge-based workplaces. They claim that creativity, proactivity, and critical reflectivity are the key characteristics of the “continuous learners” that today’s organizations need. Like Senge, Watkins and Marsick emphasize talk as the essential medium for employee and organizational learning. Organizational-sponsored dialogue that balances “inquiry” and “advocacy” supposedly makes a worker’s thinking clear to self and others. Knowledge is supposedly created when learning is made conscious to the rational mind and then critically questioned -- turned inside-out to investigate the knowledge lens itself, the individual’s beliefs and worldview that shape perception and interpretation.

In the business community, the tantalizing notion of continuous learning embedded in the very regulatory mechanisms of the organization’s production has become represented by the concept of “intellectual capital” (Stewart, 1993). Writers from this perspective tend to adopt a management perspective from which they advocate “learning” not as critical reflection, but as acquiring and sharing new information that is useful to the organization’s purposes. Garvin (1993) for example, explains what he claims to be “the key management practices of a learning organization”: systematic problem solving, experimentation (encouragement and reward for pilot projects and innovation), building on past experience (recording, reviewing, and learning from past successes and failures), learning from other organizations (benchmarking and borrowing), and transferring knowledge (sharing ideas and spreading knowledge quickly throughout the organization).

*The Fifth Discipline* was cited so often in seminars and business journals of the early 1990s that its status became not unlike that of a manifesto. The continuing challenge for organizational developers of restructuring organizations, changing the organizational “culture” and generally convincing staffs to embrace the “new paradigms” of change, was often merged into the project of creating a “learning organization”. To meet the new demands for strategies and practical examples, a flurry of “practical” workshops, books and articles, and Internet dialogue began appearing throughout Canada and the USA (i.e., see Gavin, 1993; Shaw and Perkins, 1991; Wick, 1993; Ulrich, Jick, and von Glinow, 1994; Redding and Catalanello, 1994; Senge et al., 1994).

Senge, Watkins and Marsick, Dixon (1993) and Argyris (1993) are all programmatic in their orientation. They all present practical “tools” to intertwine pedagogy and production, and create a flexible, personally accountable staff who can thrive in chaos. Towards this goal, activities are designed to enhance workers’ predilection to innovate, self-assess, and enter open, sharing, honest, authentic, democratic, ideally communicative relationships (Senge et al., 1994). These activities are generally structured and facilitated by an organizational representative cast in a

somewhat omniscient and not necessarily self-reflexive role. Some exercises “help” people gain a “systems” view of their work as interlinked with colleagues’ efforts. Other exercises reveal “mental models”, encouraging people to examine and challenge their deepest guiding beliefs. Many activities promote learning in teams and understanding multiple perspectives, (Senge, 1990), doing “action-reflection” projects where action experiments are periodically deconstructed in group dialogue (Watkins and Marsick 1993), or performing “double loop learning” exercises where individual and group assumptions and “dysfunctional understandings” are publicly exposed, challenged, and often overturned (Argyris, 1993).

One example of this technician orientation is a popular exercise, developed by Chris Argyris and borrowed by Peter Senge’s (1994) consultants, called the “left column” activity. People write down their memories of an interpersonal incident in one column, then in the second column they write the subtext (those “hidden” thoughts and feelings they imagined interplaying) of the incident. The organization’s facilitator then helps these workers to critically analyse what they’ve written to expose their “faulty” inferences and their illogical “leaps” of interpretation, showing people how such leaps are based on cultural assumptions which the organization would like to eradicate. Thus subversive thinking is exposed and rejected, and new assumptions are constructed in patterns and linguistic categories more felicitous to the health of the organization. The facilitator’s “mental model” appears to transcend the need for deconstructive analysis.

#### Purposes of the learning organization

The search for best ways to build learning organizations has been connected with different purposes. One is to create an inspiring philosophy of lifelong learning and living, embedded in the workplace, that will “empower” employees to release their potential and find fulfillment. Another is to replace traditional train-and-transfer practices (Cervero, 1992) with a holistic approach to worker development. A third purpose is to resuscitate workplace organizations through change, dismantling static hierarchies to become more flexible and responsive.

Recently, terms such as “deep learning,” “community”, and “generative language” (Kofman and Senge, 1995) extend the purview of workplace learning to the deepest parts of individuals’ needs, spirituality, identity, and desire for strong connection to family and community. This extends the learning organization discourse into private worlds, offering in exchange for employees’ confession and consent to participate in organizationally mandated ritual the promise of transcendent personal fulfillment to human beings who often feel groundless and abandoned in this shifting world. Like many religions, the learning organization ideals require individuals’ surrender to the greater will (systems thinking), their ritualized confession of



innermost beliefs and sins (mistakes and dysfunctional assumptions) in reflective group dialogue, and their allegiance to the organizational mission. Yet this religion is based not in relationship with the divine, but in the profit margins of a hyperactive market economy. The goal of learning organization discourse is presented as liberation and empowerment of individuals, but liberation with a catch: people are promised emancipation through their cooperative participation in a learning organization to maximize their full potential as innovative, intelligent workers -- as long as this learning ultimately serves the prosperity of the organization. Beliefs subversive to the organization's health and essential structures can hardly be tolerated, and thus the orientation which encourages employees to fundamentally accept their need to transform their deepest beliefs and personal meaning structures (their "mental models") becomes a crucial part of learning organization ideology.

### **The Learning Organization Concept in Canada**

Despite the plentiful rhetoric, empirical research documenting efforts to implement learning organization concepts in Canadian workplaces is still sparse at the time of this writing. Some published case studies are available, but most other evidence of implementation is available only through electronic newsgroups, informal reports about efforts-in-progress distributed through newspaper stories and organizational newsletters, and oral presentations delivered in public forums. A 1992 report to parliament by the Auditor General of Canada stated that organizations must learn to continually enhance their structures and competencies in order to improve and maintain their effectiveness, or a rapidly changing environment would render them obsolete. Following this report, a Canadian consortium for organizational learning was launched in early 1995 by the Center for Public Management, inviting any private or public organizations to join who wished to collaborate in systematic learning exchanges as they worked through issues in becoming a learning organization: "developing evolved practices from designed procedures, making organizational paradigms visible, . . . resolving dilemmas, developing learning partnerships with customers, . . . 'learning from the future' or scenario planning, creating organizational structures that encourage learning, . . . experimenting with empowerment" and other "learning abilities" (Centre for Public Management, 1994, p.3). The federal government's PS-2000 Task Force on Training and Development appeared soon after, recommending that the public service of Canada develop a "culture of continuous learning" and adopting a lengthy report outlining learning organization principles, activities and ways of restructuring to promote learning (CCMD Report, 1994). One department which took this report seriously was Public Works Canada, an enormous super-department which charged its Human Resource Department with the task of designing a program of continuous learning in early 1995.

Prominent Canadian companies who become converts to the way of the learning organization continue to announce their good intentions. For example, the chairman and CEO of Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce proclaimed in 1993 that "CIBC has made learning its business", and described the principles of a learning organization that the bank had adopted: employees' attitudes of humility, tolerance, and responsibility for their own learning and career (Flood, 1993, p. 4). The multi-national NOVA Corporation reported the commitment of its senior management to transform itself into a learning organization, beginning with discussions to define and describe just what was this concept they had adopted (Sass, 1996).

### **The Problem with the Concept of a Learning Organization**

So what is wrong with the concept of a learning organization? Arguments from the left, such as Finger and Woollis (1994), criticize the human capital orientation of learning organization literature which regards people as "resources" to be exploited in serving the organization's pursuit of profit. The power structures of the marketplace and the selected knowledge it values remain unexamined, and learning is distorted into a tool for competitive advantage. From a different perspective, a learning theorist might legitimately argue that the concept of learning organization largely ignores current knowledge about adult learning and development<sup>1</sup>. The highly complex nature of people developing new understandings in the workplace -- an individual and social process, where knowledge shapes and is shaped by office politics and relationships as well as slippery human dimensions such as emotion, spirit, and intuition -- is reduced to a romantic image of honest dialogue and caring. From a neo-Gramscian perspective (i.e., see McKay, 1994), the learning organization concept might be critiqued for its ideals of continuous learning in teams as a hegemony, representing itself as essentialist, closed, and complete to ensure the continuing power of the elite served by such an ideology -- and obscuring the non-reducible nature of people struggling to keep their jobs and stay sane in a chaotic workplace. These people act out overlapping identities and speak from positions that move around, and try like hell to figure out what it is they need to figure out most to survive the day. Ultimately, the learning organization ideal is challenged by one little problem: whose interests are being served by the concept of a learning organization, and what relations of power does it help to secure?

To answer this question, an analysis is required not only of the learning organization ideal as an artificial construction within the prevailing socio-economic power structures governing the

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<sup>1</sup>Adult learning theories of situated cognition (Lave and Wenger, 1994), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990; Daloz, 1990), emancipatory learning (Freire, 19\*\*), holistic learning (Griffin, 1988), intuitive learning (Mott, 1995), and women's learning (MacKeracher and McFarland, 1994) contradict many of the precepts of learning organization.

corporate blocks so enamored with this ideal, but also the assumptions about learning embedded in the concept of learning organization: how the nature of the learner and the process of learning is understood, and subverted. What follows is a critical examination of six premises of the learning organization. These are (1) the organization as a site and frame for learning; (2) the dominant role of managers and educators; (3) the subordinate role accorded to employees as undifferentiated learners-in-deficit; (4) the emphasis on problem-solving and instrumental knowledge; (5) the organization's appropriation of critical reflection; and (6) the reliance on "open" dialogue for group learning in the workplace.

### 1. The organization as a site and frame for learning.

From the organizational focus, learning in the workplace is spatially and temporally bounded by the organization's contours. The individual's learning becomes understood as a 9-5 phenomenon that is motivated by the job, developed through the job, and measurable only through observable behaviors on the job. Valuable knowledge is defined according to competencies that benefit the organization. Learning tends to be recognized mostly in knowledge that the organization has access to, knowledge which can be spoken, deconstructed, and shared (i.e. through dialogue), rather than knowledge which remains tacit and embedded in practice, social relationships, visions, intuition, emotional responses, or spiritual divinations. Learning from the organization's perspective is that which can be "fostered", "facilitated" or otherwise schooled by the well-intentioned researcher or educator.

The problem here is the confusion of individual and organizational learning, which is often glossed over in learning organization literature. Dixon (1993), for example, is careful to note that organizations don't learn, people learn -- then she proceeds to outline methods for fostering learning in organizational groups extrapolated from teaching techniques for individual adults. The leap from individual learning processes of action and reflection, constructing and transforming meaning perspectives, to apply such concepts somewhat cavalierly to an organization is to pretend that an organization is a definable, intelligent entity. It is not, nor is it stable and bounded. Consider the multiple sub-groups comprising an organization, each characterized by distinct cultures, each changing according to its dynamic interplay with other groups inside and outside the organization, and each shifting shape with the nomadic movement of individual workers in (and more usually, out). Can anyone truly consider the fluctuating combination of these sub-groups as a single monolithic organism that somehow "learns" and has memory? Individual learning undoubtedly alters the whole inner fabric and outward characteristics of the organizational system, but where does the "knowledge" created by all this learning reside? When masses of people are

dismissed from the organization, what happens to all the learning (and skills and culture of continuous learning?)

In the individual's spheres of activity a single workplace organization is only one (and sometimes a very small one) part of the individual's purposes, growth curve, dilemmas and preoccupations. People often have more than one job simultaneously, take temporary and volunteer work, or work at home while visiting many different organizations to conduct business. Thus they often flow among many overlapping organizational communities. When learning is defined in terms of what perspectives and skills one particular organization most values, such as its own shared vision and need for multi-skills, each person's multiple identities (and knowledges) are obscured in the push for centralized internal organizational coherence. People's multitude of changes, meaning-makings, and realizations comprising their daily experience both inside and outside that organization are thus often invisible, unnamed and un-valued -- because these knowledges don't fit the organization's perception of itself as a unified bloc under the learning organization ideal. Marsick and Watkins (1990) go so far as to describe as "dysfunctional" a person's on-going "incidental" learning which does not advance the organization's purposes. Too rigid and narrow a formulation of what counts as knowledge in the organization's gaze potentially alienates the individual from his or her own meanings, and fails to allow these meanings to flourish and contribute to the community -- however defined.

## 2. The dominant role of managers and educators

Literature about the learning organization tends to be written by and for those most concerned with the overall health and existence of the organization, those whose own identity is most closely aligned to the organization's goals and success. These are the managers of the organization and educators who serve them, not individual worker-members of the organization. Two issues attending this circumstance deserve attention.

First, the production and consumption of the learning organization discourse seems to be exclusionary. The individual workers' perspectives and agendas and visions appear not pertinent except insofar as these serve the organization. This is ironic given the recognition in this literature of the importance of "multiple perspectives": but while worker perspectives apparently are welcomed in the dialogues that learning organization managers facilitate, workers are not addressed in the literature nor are individual workers' workplace learning processes studied. The small body of empirical evidence supporting learning organization precepts tends to be organizational case studies (i.e., Marsick, Watkins, and O'Neil, 1994). Learning organization studies and anecdotal evidence are focused on corporations and institutions interested in self survival, and able to afford

educator-consultants and training programs to design improvements in their workers' learning. Small businesses, and particularly independent contractors, are neglected except by inference. Important to note in this regard is that many of the writers of learning organization literature seem to have a personal financial stake in constructing an ideology that requires their presence as interventional agents. (Marsick and Watkins, Senge's Innovation Associates, Argyris, and Dixon are all consultants listing major corporations and multi-nationals (who can pay high-priced consultants) as their clients.) The initiatives designed by and reported through case study research by these consultants logically reflects the particular needs of the large organization.

Second, the readers and writers of literature promoting continuous learning in the workplace typically approach the learning project as one of "empowering" others, or "helping" others to learn. The voice of the learning organization sculptors is not self-critical. The agenda and vision of the leader or educational agent is bracketed out, obscuring the partiality and positionality of the voices calling for continuous learning and learning organizations. This situation is parallel to the position of the critical pedagogue who wishes to emancipate the "oppressed". Post-critical writers such as Gore (1992) and Ellsworth (1992) have thoroughly critiqued the problem of the non-reflexive educator "doing to" others. Their questions can be posed to learning organization sculptors: Who is controlling the vision, the goals, the definitions of learning -- and for what purposes? The pragmatic issue attending such myopia is the inevitable incongruence between the workers' perspectives and those of the manager or educator. For example, a primary dimension of Senge's (1990) prescription for a learning organization is "systems thinking". Ideally all workers should, according to Senge's gospel, strive to view the "big picture" -- thus encouraging everyone to adopt the leaders' perspective. But why should a broad, global perspective be automatically privileged over one that is narrow and deep, such as the view of a worker tackling a particular problem?

The educators' view (prominent writers promoting continuous workplace learning, such as Marsick and Watkins and Dixon, are educators) is similarly idiosyncratic, bearing similar potential for insensitivity and ultimately incongruence or even conflict with other views. Educators of all people are the most likely to be interested in learning themselves, to value creativity, continuous learning, to enjoy reflective activity and dialogue, and to be secure enough in their own positions, status, intelligence, identity, and knowledge that they can willingly and enthusiastically embrace transformational change of assumptions and belief systems. Can the educators' project of imposing this perspective on all other workers be justified in the name of ensuring organizational survival (assuming that their untested claims may someday prove accurate, that continuous workers' learning is related to organizational productivity)? The role of adult educators in the "learning organization" would seem to be subverting their practice to preserve the market economy and

enhance the domination of the elite groups of professionals, technocrats, and management within this system.

### 3. The subordinate role accorded to employees as undifferentiated learners-in-deficit

If managers and educators are the architects of the learning organization, employees are to comply with the vision from a subaltern position. As “learners” who are exhorted to take risks and keep learning new things, employees are in a particularly vulnerable position. In a climate of “continuous” innovation the individual theoretically can never be grounded in a sense of expertise or stability. Nor does the individual have control over pronouncing what counts as knowledge, including personally constructed knowledge. From the continuous learning perspective, the individual is supposed to learn more, learn better, and learn faster, and is therefore always in deficit. An ideology of “constant improvement” tends to create a competitive track where the racing dogs never reach the mechanical rabbit. The pressure of “being left behind” is sometimes deliberately used in workplace learning literature to generate anxiety and paranoia among employees -- perhaps in the belief that pressure and fear provides incentive to learn. Meanwhile the organization’s knowledge -- considered the key to success -- is linked directly to the employee’s demonstrable ability and willingness to learn. The worker becomes responsible for the organization’s health without the authority to determine alternative frameworks to “learning” through which this health might be considered and measured.

The focus of the learning organization is on employees whose work is knowledge-reliant: “Innovation is at the core of productivity” (Marsick and Watkins, 1993, p. 25). Thus the only individuals who are explicitly included in continuous learning initiatives are those whose learning power and stock of learnings are valuable to their employing organization as commodities that can help accelerate the productivity, improve the competitive performativity of the business, and generate profit. Non knowledge-generating workers, who according to Paquette (1995) are increasingly the kinds of employees most hired and required to fill Canada’s job openings, are excluded from or outside the borders of the maps being constructed of today’s marketplace by the continuous learning promoters. Many writers are currently drawing attention to technology’s dehumanizing impact in today’s workplaces, diminishing the need for workers who think, create, change, and proactively generate new knowledge (Zuboff, 1988; Swardson, 1992). Continuous learning and growth, evidently, is required most among the technocratic-professional-managerial elite who are the small group in the workplace likeliest to be most educated, have most access to learning opportunities, and to most value learning as problem-solving, accumulation of formal knowledge, and dialogic critical reflection (since their post-secondary training and practice dilemmas are rooted in these conventional approaches to learning).

Learning organization literature also makes little attempt to distinguish meaningfully among the unique learning processes of individual worker-learners. Watkins and Marsick (1993) emphasize the importance of helping individuals to understand their own learning style and needs, but predicate their suggestions upon general descriptions about how people learn such as:

Continuous learning is typically triggered by a problem or challenge on the job . . . To maximize the benefits of much workplace learning, people need to bring what they are learning into conscious awareness. They learn more effectively through a process of questioning, reflection and feedback from others. (p. 26-27). Through action and reflection, people process what they perceive when they learn. . . . (p.33)

Many assumptions about learning are reified in such statements. Learning is understood to be essentially problem-solving, “deeper” learning supposedly transpires through processes of critical reflection ( especially through verbal disclosure and deconstruction of belief systems), and a self-directed approach to learning becomes an ideal towards which employees should be encouraged to strive. These assumptions ignore literature showing that self-directed learning is *not* a generalizable approach among adults (Pratt, 1988; Collins, 1990) and that activity and tools more than dialogue affect what and how people learn (Lave and Wenger, 1994). Gender, race, and class dimensions, all ignored in the learning organization discourse, create important distinctions among individuals in what holds meaning for them and how they construct these meanings. For example, studies in women’s workplace learning (MacKeracher and McFarland, 1994) report complexities in relational learning and the centrality of self that contradict many learning organization assumptions. Individuals’ workplace learning has been shown to vary dramatically according to how they value work, how they think of themselves in position to the workplace community, their jobs, and the goals and knowledge of the community, how they think of themselves as knowers, how they function in small groups, how and for what purposes they naturally interact with other people, their core driving intentions in their own lives, their priorities, and their capabilities (Fenwick, 1996). The target group for continuous learning in the workplace neglects huge groups of people who are implicitly “other” but whose individual work-learning struggles continue to produce knowledges, whether or not these are recognized by the “learning organization”. Meanwhile, learners with special needs, disabilities, low literacy skills or other characteristics which don’t fit the learning organization’s preferred approaches (self-directed learning, critical reflection, risk and innovation, and dialogue) are in danger of being dismissed from the picture altogether.

#### 4. The emphasis on problem-solving and instrumental knowledge.

The learning organization literature emphasizes two kinds of knowledge: innovative and problem-solving (Schon, 1983, 1987) or “detecting error” (Argyris, 1993). The problem-solving

orientation frames learning as continually seeking freedom from difficulty, which is a negative orientation to understanding cognitive construction of meaning (Prawat, 1993). When the understanding of learning becomes driven by a metaphor of problem-solving and product innovation, the learning process tends to be limited to what Habermas (1984) would call “technical” knowledge, for instrumental purposes. Productivity is thus used as the ultimate criterion to evaluate personal growth efforts, building relationships in teams, or building cultures and close communities. All meaning-making is subjected to this criterion, and what becomes defined as “learning” is narrowed to a means-end conceptualization of life. The usefulness of what is being produced is removed from the question. Worse, the unpredictable, fluid emergent process of learning is linked to production of goods, which depends on certainty, bounded time periods, and concrete products. Strange fruit is produced from the union of learning and production, evident in business literature that discusses “intellectual capital” (Stewart, 1994) as though the ephemerality of meaning-making could be packaged, measured, bought and sold.

The purpose of “continuous learning”, indeed the very term, promotes an expansionary view of development. The question, “Learn what?” is rarely addressed. Employees might discern that the organization will premise future staffing decisions based on particular skills or work experiences, but these aren’t clarified. The question “Learn how?” is the programmatic focus of most learning organization literature, which provides lots of advice about learning process derived from romanticized humanistic principles of holistic learning and building family-like communities who care and share, and notions modeled from action research. Because there is no explicit curriculum (naturally in the ideology of constant change, the learning architects can defer commitment to particular content: content emerges unpredictably), decisions about the “what” of learning presumably are never made, and thus presumably don’t exclude employees. Innovation to “keep up” with constant change is the focus. This not only ties employee learning to the bumper of the overall company direction controlled by management, but also privileges breakthrough thinking and “new” (profitable) knowledge over other kinds of knowledge, such as relational, cultural, procedural, or personal. From such a perspective alternate views of learning are invisible. For example, learning might include deepening inward rather than expanding outward; learning might be enriching existing meaning structures, confirming and extending them, rather than adding to them or transforming them; learning might be recursive, circling back to concepts and internalizing them into behaviors and beliefs, rather than generating new concepts. MacKeracher and McFarland (1994) describe five types of “working knowledge” identified by women, only one of which parallels the prominent workplace focus on instrumental knowledge.

Hart (1990, 1993) offers an elegant critique of the current imperatives driving the workplace and its learning orientation. She raises questions about what is truly important and



productive work, and to what extent the expansionary, innovation-oriented perspective fits how individuals view their own learning in the workplace. Hart's vision of "sustenance" work, predicated upon communicative dimensions rather than the hyper-active productivity driving the industrial machine, is only one example illustrating the possible alternatives driven to the margins by the domination of "continuous learning" initiatives for organizational competitive advantage, which situate the employee as perpetually "in deficit".

##### 5. The organization's use of critical reflection

Watkins and Marsick (1993), like Senge (1994) and Argyris (1993) emphasize reflection, especially critical reflection through small-group talk, as a key vehicle for sculpting a learning organization. One assumption here is that learning occurs when understandings become shaped through conscious rational thought and language. This cognitive bias is evident in Bohm's (cited in Senge, 1990) description of the importance of talk to clarify an individual's ambiguous, disordered, contradictory, or "inaccurate" meanings. Thus knowledge that is generated and embodied through sensual, kinesthetic, intuitive, relational, spiritual or emotional meaning systems would not count as "learning" until it is made explicit and conscious to the rational mind. Strands of research exploring intuition (Mott, 1995) and the "feeling-sense" developed by practitioners through non-rational learnings (Boreham, 1992) refute this dominance of cognitive reflection in learning organization precepts. The question emerging for other researchers is, how do other capabilities of the learning-being self besides conscious reflection direct learning in workplace practice?

Critics of the strong emphasis placed on reflection in workplace learning, such as Selman (1988) and Schulman (1988), have raised other concerns. First, the emphasis on reflection assumes all individuals find reflection useful or even comfortable, a premise that side-steps broad differences in learning styles. Second, the concept of reflective practice assumes that the individual's reflection is structured through intervention by educational agents, raising issues of control and the sorts of knowledge produced by pedagogical intention. Third, the notion of reflective practice dichotomizes reflection from action, as though kinesthetic, sensual, intuitive, and emotional processes were not embodied and entwined together with the reflective cognitive-interpretive processes, in all apprehension of experience that unfolds in the conscious activities of work.

"Critical reflection" in learning organization literature presumes that if people could just detect their dysfunctional and paralysing taken-for-granted assumptions and deep-seated beliefs, they'd be free to find new and more creative ways to frame the problems of practice and thus

improve their performance in the workplace. In demanding explicit confessional critical reflection of its employees, the organization appropriates for its own purposes the most private aspects of individuals' worlds -- their beliefs and values -- and conscripts these for the organization's purposes. A good example are the personal development exercises described in popular learning organization handbooks (i.e. see Senge, 1994), leading individuals through intensely private scrutiny.

Assuming that all people can reflect critically -- a shaky premise in light of cognitive and psychosocial adult development theory (Benack and Basseches, 1989; Belenky, et al., 1986; Perry, 1970) -- serious questions need to be raised about the goals of critical reflection in the learning organization ideal. The assumption is that a person's current beliefs and moral structures, which make up that employee's identity and whatever stability he or she can manage to create in a whirling workworld, aren't good enough. Whatever perspectives exist in a person probably need to be critically challenged and changed. But it is incumbent only on the individual employees to critically reflect upon and change their mental models. Thus the CIBC chairman declares, "Learning is now everybody's business", and the organization's job is to "encourage" people to "adopt different mental models that better reflect competitive and workplace realities". The objects for critical focus are carefully delineated to exclude the fundamental structures of capitalism, the CIBC's and other corporate interests, and assumptions like 'life serves economic imperatives', and 'learning will save business'. Employees are supposed to reflect critically on the operational procedures of the corporation, but only its surface. From a radical left perspective (i.e., see Noble, 1990; Cunningham, 1992), employees' minds are expected to remain colonized and loyal to the imperial presence of their employing organization. Critical scrutiny is deflected away from the power structures and the learning organization ideology itself, and focused on the individual.

The organizational perspective is status-quo oriented and self-serving: it can't conceive its own death or life after its death. Workers' learning is to be innovative and critically reflective so long as the outcomes ensure the survival, indeed the prosperity, productivity and competitive advantage of, the employing organization. Learning that threatens the existence of the organization, such as liberated workers finding ecological and communicatively nurturing ways to achieve their purposes that begin with dismantling the organization, are not possible from the organization's perspective. Meanwhile the focus is on changing the individuals to become the kinds of workers corporations demand. From the organization's perspective the "continuously learning" individual is in perpetual deficit, harnessed to Beck's (1995) vision of the "powerful engines" of the economy and struggling to "keep up".

## 6. The reliance on “open” dialogue for learning in the workplace

The most-promoted vehicle for reflection in learning organization literature is team dialogue (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994; Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Extensive strategies are offered to promote a balance between “inquiry” and “advocacy”, to create open, trusting climates where honesty is not punishable and personal disclosure is permissible, where communication is clear and authentic, where people are exposed to multiple perspectives, and where challenges to one another’s assumptions are encouraged. This literature accepts the possibility of an “ideal speech situation” where, according to Habermas (1984), participants communicate accurate and incomplete information, they are free from coercion or deception, they are able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, they are open to alternate perspectives, and they are able to reflect critically on own assumptions. Dixon (1993) recommends the “ideal speech condition” as the best way of an organization to help staff turn all experience into learning: presumably they will listen to each others’ experiences, find causal relationships and overall consequences, talk about failures, and analyze each others’ mistakes. Emphasis is on achieving “transparency” through talk.

Thus talk and words is privileged over other means of expression between people, such as kinesthetic, sensual, oral non-verbal, artistic, or intuitive. All complexities of meaning are supposedly reducible to the linear stream of language structures. This is an orientation of management and control that raises questions about agenda as well as the links between all kinds of languages and learnings. Is it true that most valuable workplace learning is produced in the dynamic of interchange? Is it true that giving voice to experience is necessarily a useful process or a necessary part of learning? Usher and Edwards (1995) argue that a related problem with dialogue is its disciplinary function. To disclose one’s opinions, and particularly to disclose for the purpose of critical scrutiny one’s belief systems and values, is to surrender the last private space of personal meaning to the public space of workplace control. The demand for such disclosure could be construed as exercise of surveillance and disciplinary regulation constituting gross violation of an individual’s rights.

Another major problem with simplistic understandings of workplace dialogue is that it brackets out the issues and dynamics of relationships as these configure the communication process. Power and rapport are always complex and multi-layered dynamics in group dialogue situations; in the workplace this is especially so when conversations and relationships are structured according to politics of gender, class, age, job status, and other positionalities. Feminist poststructuralists such as Ellsworth (1992) have shown the difficulties of achieving truly democratic “ideal” speech situations when little or no attention is given to what Orner (1992) describes as the multiple social positions, multiple voices, conscious and unconscious pleasures,

tensions, desires, and contradictions which are present in all subjects in all historical contexts. The reality in the workplace is that all people do not possibly have equal opportunity to participate, reflect, and refute one another in a “team dialogue”. The ideal of egalitarian teams trained to function in normative patterns to achieve organizational goals ignores the reality of multiple discourses and shifting identities of individuals and cultures within the organization. Brooks (1995) reports contradictory meanings, conflicting interests, and subversion in her studies of workplace teams. Shaw and Perkins (1991) show that in many organizations there are many barriers to reflective talk that genuinely promotes learning: pressure, “competency traps”, bias toward activity, people’s sense of powerlessness, a focus on measurable performance, and strong intergroup boundaries.

The notion of dialogue is grounded in Senge’s “fifth discipline”, of teaching employees in an organization to view themselves as connected in a webwork of groups that function interdependently and benevolently to achieve a common purpose. Systems thinking essentially equates a social and cultural entity structured by power and comprised of complex constantly shifting human relations, with physical phenomena. Thus the organization is conceptualized as a biological system. A short jump allows ideologues to envision a “learning system” where all system components are equitably and functionally interlinked. Systems thinking is a-structural, a-contextual, a-historical and a-political. Knowledge is considered to be freely available to all; conflict is viewed as resolvable differences between equally competing individuals; and culture is treated as a set of environmental conditions which can be manipulated through thoughtful leadership. Such assumptions cannot reasonably be validated against organizational reality.

### **Paradoxes of the Learning Organization Concept**

Herein lies the fundamental problem with the concept of learning organization. The popular notion of “empowerment”, while prevalent in learning organization literature, is not critically examined to ask, whose empowerment, and to what ends? West (1994) concludes in his critical review of this literature that the learning organization meets the learner’s needs only if these are not in conflict with the organization’s needs. He shows that despite rhetoric representing itself as a worker-centered philosophy, the learning organization concept in fact emphasizes productivity, efficiency, and competitive advantage at the expense of the worker. And as Shaw and Perkins (1991) point out, these goals orient the company culture to values and activities which actually inhibit learning.

Another paradox is that learning organization literature is often prescriptive, performing a normalizing and regulatory function while claiming to emancipate workers. Thus the very

hierarchies of power and technical knowledge that are supposedly democratized in the learning organization are in fact wielded by the organization to control and subvert worker resistance to corporate downsizing and restructuring, and probably also the corporate agenda of continuous learning. A third paradox is created by context: the warm rhetoric in the literature of connectedness, trust and opportunity is unfurled in a climate darkened by an ethos of anxiety, a darkness that is not acknowledged in the rosy visions of the learning organization. Employees, told to trust in the corporation's benevolent human growth-centered agenda, are invited to confess and transform their innermost desires and beliefs, to stick out their necks and keep learning -- and forget that they are in constant danger of being summarily ejected.

Fourth, a paradox can be speculated to reveal itself in the implementation of learning organization concepts: assumptions of continuous learning, based on a theory of knowledge produced through exploratory experimentation and innovation, collide with organizational norms of productivity, accountability and results-based measurement using predictable outcomes. Rough (1993) shows how traditional assessment measures of organizational performance and training are still prevalent, and distort the holistic and dynamic notions of learning in the "new paradigm". Fifth, the learning organization concept, based on administrative control of staff dialogue, paradoxically precludes the assumptions of open, provisional, relational knowledge which the technologies of learning organizations are supposed to produce. Multiple perspectives are urged by the learning organization ideology, but the ideology itself is a universal coherent set of simplistic ideals. What perspectives and differing abilities truly would be tolerated? That the organization ceases to serve a useful purpose and should be dismantled?

These paradoxes and the problematic implications of the six focuses of learning organization become internalized in the workers, creating a problem in the constitution of worker identity and knowledge. Workers struggle to find/create an identity, meaning and purpose within their work (Fenwick, 1996). The learning organization discourse presents itself as a romantic ideal encouraging workers' personal growth and imaginative engagement -- yet this discourse continues the workplace tradition of dictating which kind of growth counts most, what imaginative endeavors are most valued, what kinds of talk, relationships, and identities are allowed, and what are "undiscussable" or even meaningless. Perhaps the situation is rendered even worse by the learning organization's ubiquitous adjuration to workers to be "open and honest" and name the "undiscussables" (Argyris, 1993). The reality of workers' multiply situated and continually shifting identity, as well as the complexities of their workplace learning (Fenwick, 1996), is not valued or even acknowledged. The practical outcome may be the precise opposite of what the learning organization ideal hopes to achieve: rather than cooperation, commitment, and community, what may be produced is workers' withdrawal or cynicism, confusion, and alienation.

## **Implications and Possibilities for the Future:**

The learning organization ideal, while problematic, yet seems to offer great promise for organizations seeking ways to change rigid hierarchical structures, clogged communication patterns, inefficient procedures and authoritarian leadership. Continuous learning appears to be a wonderful ideal. Even if the links between learning and organizational change have not yet been clearly established, still it's exciting to consider that the adult educator's project of promoting holistic, lifelong education has become prominent in the workworld. The premises of the learning organization also promote democracy in the workplace, and underline the importance of reflective learning, experiential learning, relational learning, critical thinking, mentorship, and other activities that adult educators have been trying to foster where these are appropriate to learner needs and program goals. Most important perhaps, the learning organization ideal confirms the interweaving of learning and doing. It questions more traditional thinking which compartmentalizes education separate from work and life, and directly opposes competency-based skill training. Finally, the learning organization acknowledges the importance of group process and community-building -- ideals which are fundamental to the North American tradition of adult education. So how might adult educators situate themselves to help realize the possibility of at least part of the learning organization vision? Below are outline four suggestions for response in action that adult educators might consider:

Ask critical questions about the basic assumptions of the learning organization concept: Is learning the best response to change? Does more learning create more productive, competitive business? Who is speaking in the learning organization literature, from what understandings and with what interests? Educators need to problematize the seamless "commonsense-ness" of the learning organization ideal, raise questions about its assumptions and ethics, and communicate their concerns to their clients, to consumers of business and management materials, and to learners and workers.

Teach learning theory to business and other sectors. Adult learning theory, while inconclusive and constantly changing, is sophisticated and likely new for many non-educator audiences. Now that interest in workplace learning has been dramatically increased through the learning organization phenomenon, educators are needed to teach people what they know about how learning happens and what facilitates learning.

Help articulate more clearly the links between individual and organizational learning. Both theory and empirical research is needed to work out the generalized and problematic links underpinning the learning organization ideology. Educators can help point out the current confusions between

individual and group learning processes, distinguish learning processes and organizational change processes, and between epistemology and cultural change. Educators also can outline research programs to address gaps and areas of confusion.

Encourage more thoughtful approaches to dialogue. Educators have theorized among themselves about participant voice, marginalization, the contradictions and ambiguities of group talk, the importance of power relations and the intersections of dimensions like gender, race, class in dialogue. Others who want to encourage dialogue situations can benefit from working with educators to understand these issues. Educators can help others see the need to clarify the complexities of dialogue, to examine deep differences and work towards coalition building across differences. Educators themselves stand to learn much about dialogue by working with those experimenting with learning organization implementations.

Produce and analyse empirical documentation of learning organizations. Educators are needed to examine the reality of what really happens in workplace learning implementation. More case studies and research such as Brooks' program (1994) are needed to provide insight into the nature of workplace teams, critical reflection through dialogue, ways to accommodate special learner needs in the workplace, and the process of collective learning.

Reclaim power for the worker-learner. Educators are needed to show that individual learners not only have different approaches to learning, but come with special needs that don't fit many learning organization assumptions about learning. Educators can help raise learners' and managers' awareness about dominant power structures being maintained, show how knowledge is socially constructed, and ask about who is excluded. Educators can focus attention on big issues of the worker-learners' Voice, Identity and Self, helping identify how people occupy multiple subject positions - and thus are embroiled in many different power relations and culture struggles simultaneously. Educators also can help worker-learners articulate their interests and demands for liberation, and re-focus attention on learning in the workplace as serving people, not the organization.

Rethink the ethical role of the adult educator in workplace learning. Who should the educator serve? Finger and Woolis (1994) criticize the motives of consultants promoting learning organization ideology, charging that these educators have confused their role with the agendas of management. Should educators become thoughtful human resource developers serving organizations, or adopt a more radical posture? Cunningham (1993) calls for a choice: all adult education is about politics, she claims, and educators must decide their allegiance in the workplace: to maintain current power relationships or to challenge the present "way of doing business". The

critical roots of Canadian adult education charge educators to offer emancipatory alternatives to the way learning in the workplace has been conceptualized by the learning organization literature. Educators might help people to implement its precepts more thoughtfully and inclusively in a pedagogical framework which always locates the relations of power and the practices which maintain or disrupt these relations. Educators can assist human resource developers, managers, and workers to ask questions: What kinds of knowledge are valued and encouraged most, and what kinds are rendered invisible in a learning organization? Whose learning and development is really the focus? Who is excluded? What sorts of human subjects are being molded or repressed by organizational “learning” cultures? What are the legitimate justifications of emphasizing, in such a powerful institution as the provider of the paycheck, values such as innovation, “continuous learning”, “team” work in its diverse manifestations, “systems thinking”, and critical reflection? What is produced by a learning organization that stresses these values and perspectives?

Issues around these questions are explored not to destroy the promise held by learning organization approaches to workplace learning, but to clarify its discourse. Until its premises become clear, efforts to implement the learning organization ideal will continually be challenged by the real human beings and their needs which weave together to create an organization. Meanwhile educators need not discard precepts of continuous learning, but continue to work with interested others to explore their potential. Educators can provide fresh new perspectives towards truly empowering work-learning activities, such as Hart (1993) who outlines a vision for “sustenance work” borne through in reciprocity and caring relationships rather than production of capital, and which weaves together work, learning, and life in nurturing ways. Whatever role educators choose for themselves, they must ground their practice in a moral stance that reflects a carefully-considered vision of people learning in work. As Collins (1990) argues, we need “a renewed sense of vocation and a critically informed pedagogy” (p. xii).



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Address: <i>Box 5000 Antigonish NS B29 2W5</i>	Telephone Number: <i>902, 867-5404</i>
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