

A radical agenda for enabling organisation transformation through work-applied learning

Organisation
transformation

65

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to challenge how we have traditionally thought about organisations and introduce two frameworks to enable us to understand how change in organisations might be facilitated better.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper discusses organisations as complex adaptive systems and uses complexity theory to inform two new frameworks for facilitating organisational learning and change.

Findings – In order for organisational learning to occur we need to change our mind-set of how we see organisations and to think of learning not just as individual but also as generative “communicative action” that emerge out of collaborative relationships.

Research limitations/implications – The frameworks proposed are grounded in organisational learning literature and the experience of the author. The proposed agenda for organisational learning has yet to be acted upon and evaluated.

Practical implications – The frameworks can be used to enhance understanding of learning and change in organisations. The agenda for enabling organisational transformation identifies key steps to put the ideas developed in the paper into practice.

Social implications – The approach advocated for use within organisations is one of empowerment and collaboration rather than top down direction.

Originality/value – The paper introduces new frameworks and a practical agenda to bring about organisational transformation through work-applied learning.

Keywords Organizational learning, Learning organization, Complex adaptive systems, Work-applied learning

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The concept of “organisational learning” was developed originally by Argyris and Schon (1978) and provides exciting principles and possibilities. In practice it has proved difficult to “operationalise” because in the end traditional views of what comprises an organisation limit our capacity to put idealised principles about “organisational learning” into practice (Critten, 2006). Patricia Shaw writes that Argyris himself “became rather pessimistic about our capacity to engage in the kind of collective learning processes he advocated” (Shaw, 2002, p. 132). She argues that the failure was due to Argyris seeing learning “as ‘in’ individuals’ minds” rather than “emerging communicatively between us”. This is a theme that is at the core of this paper where it is argued that evidence of organisational learning not only requires us to view organisations in a different way but also that we need to think



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of learning not as belonging exclusively to individuals but as generative “communicative action” that emerges out of collaborative relationships (Habermas, 1984).

Before we can produce an agenda for action I argue that we need to change our traditional mind-set of how we see organisations and how learning can be enabled to “reach” out to others to make change happen. In order to do this I am bringing together two frameworks informed by complexity theory, which I believe can help us step outside traditional comfort zones.

2. Imagining organisations as complex adaptive systems

Gareth Morgan has written:

[...] we need to develop new images of organisation that can help us imaginize new forms. This is especially important in an era of rapid change, where free-flowing, organic images that have more in common with brains, webs, cells, balloons, bubbles and umbilical cords are more likely to be relevant than the static blueprints found in typical organisational charts (Morgan, 1993, p. 64).

In *Images of Organisation* Morgan (2006) introduces a range of “images” which can help us literally “see” our organisations differently – as a “machine”, as a “brain” as “flux and transformation”, etc. He invites us to challenge the traditional “machine” image of an organisation – top down led and hierarchical in structure – as the only way of thinking about organisations and “imagine” what an organisation would be like where no one person or department seems to be in control. Imagine an organisation where “New patterns emerge unpredictably, through the unfolding logic of self-organizing forms of control and without any single governing set of rules or schemas” (Shaw, 1997, p. 238). Welcome to the world of complexity theory and organisations as complex adaptive systems:

Complex adaptive systems are networks of large numbers of agents [...] Through their interaction, such networks create systems of mutual and so non-linear influence [...]. The networks are therefore adaptive – they learn in both simple and complex ways (Shaw, 1997, pp. 237-238).

In the UK Patricia Shaw and her colleague Ralph Stacey pioneered the exploration of “complexity” theory as applied to organisations and management through the Complexity and Management Centre, University of Hertfordshire. Shaw (1997, 2002) has written about the implications of complexity theory for her consultancy practice which I find particularly relevant for understanding why after so many years since Argyris first introduced the notion we are still no nearer to seeing evidence of organisational learning. Shaw is critical of well-known traditional approaches to organisation development as put forward by Lewin (1947), Schein (1988), Burke (1992) and Senge (1990) as her basic contention is that underlying all these models “is an unquestioned assumption that a system can be moved from one dynamic equilibrium to another [...] It is assumed that the existing organisational dynamic came into being through some central purpose, however, participatively arrived at, and can be changed in the same way” (Shaw, 1997, p. 237). The most well-known example might be Lewin’s theory of change of unfreezing, moving and refreezing the system to re-establish “equilibrium” (Lewin, 1947); “all these models emphasize the need for ‘fit’, congruence or alignment between different aspects of the system, between different systems and between an organization and its environment” (Shaw, 1997, p. 236).

As a consequence, Shaw argues, these theories have inevitably led “OD to focus largely on participative and consensual decision making, improving teamwork and

communication and ‘transition management’ (Shaw, 1997, p. 236). In such conditions learning would tend to reinforce the status quo to maintain equilibrium (which Argyris refers to as Mode 1/single loop learning) rather than be the source of change.

3. How does complexity theory make a difference?

The key word is “difference”. It all began with an accident in 1961 when Mathematician and Meteorologist Lorenz got fed up with typing into a computer the same sequence of six decimal figures and rounded it off to just three decimal places and went away to have a cup of coffee. “When he returned, he saw something unexpected, something that planted a seed for a new science” (Gleick, 1987, p. 16). Instead of seeing an old, familiar weather pattern, all he could see was “chaos”.

Margaret Wheatley summarises the process that led to this change rather neatly:

It is not the law of large numbers, of favourable averages that creates change but the presence of a lone fluctuation that gets amplified by the system. Through the process of autocatalysis, when a small disturbance is fed back on itself, changing and growing, exponential effects can result (Wheatley, 1992, pp. 95-96).

Wheatley reminds us that “not all systems move into chaos, but if a system is dislodged from its stable state, it moves first into a period of oscillation, swinging back and forth between different states” (Wheatley, 1992, p. 117). These “states” were originally called “attractors” which we cannot see but then through the magic of modern computers (as described above) a pattern emerges which is also called a “strange (i.e. out of the normal) attractor”. Wheatley refers to these strange attractors as “basins of attraction” into which “the system is magnetically drawn into, pulling the system into a visible state”.

In this section we have focussed on how the principles behind complexity theory can open up organisations once we recognise them as being “complex adaptive systems”. And at the heart of it all is being able to recognise “disturbance”. Remember the words of Margaret Wheatley “when a small disturbance is fed back on itself, changing and growing, exponential effects can result” (Wheatley, 1992, pp. 95-96). In the next section we explore how making explicit patterns of learning in the workplace can lead to disturbance which in itself can lead to transformation.

4. Nothing disturbs a system more than learning about itself

Besides introducing the notion of “organisational learning” Argyris and Schon also popularised the concept of three types of learning which were first introduced by Gregory Bateson (1972). They referred to them as Single, Double and Deutero learning. Single Loop is the learning most common in organisations and the goal of most training which aims to ensure everyone performs to a common standard and that any errors, deviations from the norm are detected and corrected. Double loop learning, on the other hand, calls into question so-called norms and standards if there is a better way of doing things. Many organisations purport to promote such learning through processes like “quality” circles or action learning sets but the outcomes from such free-thinking usually end up being diluted and “normalised” when it comes to putting the lessons into practice.

“Deutero” learning, or third-level learning which has always been a kind of “holy grail” in the field of HRD, has often been described as “learning about learning”. I have defined it as “the ability to value and learn from the process of learning which would lead to improvements in the process itself” (Critten, 1993, p. 215). A kind of double-loop learning

applied to double loop learning. For me such a process must be at the heart of “organisational learning” or what I chose to call “corporate capability”: “the capacity of an organization to add value to *all* its members and for *everyone* to recognize the difference” (Critten, 1993, p. 238). Each level of learning, I will argue, has its place and I will seek to bring them together in a final model.

But of the three it is only Level III that has the capability of bringing about organisational transformation. I like this description of the process by Peter Hawkins: “I am not just learning about the world out there but also about my own way of construing the world which co-creates the reality in which I live” (Hawkins, 1991). For him this is a kind of spiritual dimension: “to enter the world of Level III is to step outside the normal dimensions that contain and restrain our perspectives” (Hawkins, 1991). And how can we enter this world? By reflection and reflexive inquiry. And what learning best embodies reflection and reflexive inquiry within an organisation? I suggest work-based learning, a process I have been closely involved with for over 20 years.

Middlesex University has been a pioneer of work-based learning which offers the opportunity for adults with substantial work experience to use reflection on what they have learned from their work experience as a basis for a learning portfolio which is then assessed by the university and accredited against the same academic standards as apply to traditional university taught programmes. I was fortunate enough to be a member of the team that created a framework for enabling learners in the workplace to achieve not just degrees but also master’s qualifications and professional doctorates. But at the same time I have consistently argued that the experience of reflecting on one’s learning in the workplace is a powerful and transforming process not just for the individual but for the organisation in which the learning takes place (Critten, 2008).

Unfortunately in over 20 years promoting this idea no organisation I have been involved with has, to my knowledge, pursued it. To do so, I argue, requires organisations, and in particular senior management, to “think” about their organisation as a “complex adaptive system” (as outlined above) but also to “think” about learning in the work place as a source for transformation. Abraham’s model of “work-applied learning” (WAL) an amalgam of both action learning and action research goes some way to bring this about. He claims that “In addition to creating learning in the workplace by individuals or as teams, the use of this WAL model has also resulted in the collective learning of the teams to create organisational learning and change” (Abraham, 2012, p. 4).

A typical WAL program comprises a number of AR (Action Research) cycles and the phases within each AR cycle are as follows (Abraham, 2012, p. 11):

- AR group meetings;
- knowledge workshops;
- work based phases;
- joint observations and reflections; and
- monitoring and evaluation of the cycle.

The action research group which starts off the process “normally includes a facilitative consultant, appointed by the client organisation, the managers involved in the program as participants, the chief executive and relevant stakeholders”. The group’s aim is to “clarify” what is the nature of the problem(s) facing the organisation and “identification of the organisational change project” (Abraham, 2012, p. 11). In the knowledge workshops managers are introduced to business concepts

relevant to the project and then in work-based phases they return to their workplaces and through the process of action learning work with their respective teams to explore how change can be brought about. The facilitative consultant is on hand to help teams reflect on outcomes and what changes if any are needed. Finally all the parties come together to evaluate the outcomes.

There is also a parallel here, I suggest, with what John Kotter has called a “Dual Operating” system where what he calls a “Guiding Coalition” is created to tackle a critical organisational problem (Kotter, 2012). He writes:

The strategy network [Guiding Coalition] meshes with the hierarchy as an equal. It is not a super task force that reports to some level in the hierarchy. It is seamlessly connected to and coordinated with the hierarchy in a number of ways, chiefly through the people who populate both systems. [...] The network cannot be viewed as a rogue operation. It must be treated as a legitimate part of the organization, or the hierarchy will crush it (Kotter, 2012, pp. 50-51).

In 2012 in an article co-authored by the Director of Research at the Institute for Work Based Learning at Middlesex University I produced a model aimed at Business Leaders to make a business case for work-based learning (Costley and Critten, 2012). I drew on my experience of introducing work-based learning to organisations starting at the very top. And I made the case that in talking with the CEO we never started talking about work-based learning. The sequence of events were as follows:

- (1) The conversation starts with a question, as to what is the greatest challenge/problem the business is currently facing.
- (2) We then move on to encourage the CEO to identify a core group of staff inside the company who have the necessary capabilities to tackle this challenge.
- (3) It is then a small step to helping the CEO “imagine” the kind of project this core group might work on if they were to tackle the corporate issues identified and, most importantly, what evidence, outcome would indicate that they really had made a difference.
- (4) And with the introduction of the notion of “project” we are into the field of work-based learning and how the kind of processes for critical reflection and appreciative inquiry Middlesex has developed over the years could help.

I have tried to encapsulate these steps in a model below which also goes on to suggest how the “learning conversations” in which the core group are involved can have an impact on their colleagues which in turn could lead to directions of inquiry on a company-wide basis and, who knows, steps towards that most ephemeral of all visions, “the learning organisation”. The Model I was proposing was under the auspices of Middlesex University and so I was also drawing attention to the benefits for individuals engaged in projects in being able to use their learning to gain academic qualifications. So a win-win for both organisation and individual.

There are key similarities between the three models (i.e. Abraham’s, Kotter’s and Figure 1):

- The starting point is to focus on a central challenge that is currently facing the organisation.
- The creation of a “guiding coalition” or action research group comprising key stakeholders who together have the capability of tackling the challenge and bringing about change.

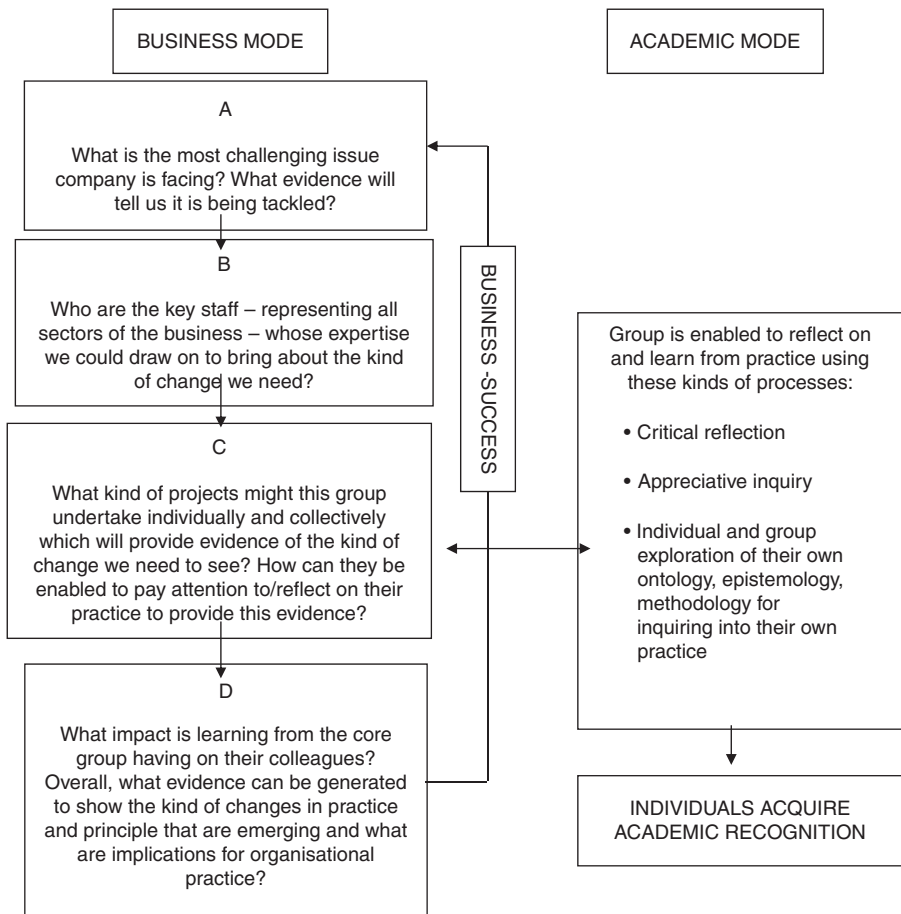


Figure 1.
Top-down inquiry as
a process of change

But there is also a crucial difference or rather addition which is the question posed in the last box (D):

What impact is learning from the core group having on their colleagues? Overall, what evidence can be generated to show the kind of changes in practice and principle that are emerging and what are implications for organisational practice?

In the case of Kotter and Abraham there is a reporting back to “the top team”. Kotter writes “The network team settles on a practical solution [...] Then its members take their thinking to the CIO who gives feedback” (Kotter, 2012, p. 54). This is the same kind of thinking, I suggest, that has dominated 20 years of propositions on what constitutes a learning organisation where learning is filtered back through what Stacey calls the “legitimate” zone of an organisation and which Shaw has criticised for what she calls “an unquestioned assumption that a system can be moved from one dynamic equilibrium to another”.

The focus of my interest is in how far the process of reflecting on their practice extends beyond the individual to influence colleagues who in turn do not simply

“absorb” the new learning but contribute to it and change it which mirrors Senge’s definition of a learning organisation:

A learning organisation is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it (Senge, 1990, pp. 12-13).

The question, though, is just how an organisation recognises and captures this learning. As this paper suggests this requires a rethinking of just what comprises an “organisation” and the learning that goes on inside it. To bring the two together I have an image of learning being generated in an organisation rather like an earthquake and my mission is to work out some kind of “Richter scale” which can measure what I call “learning reach”.

To explore this notion I am going to cite examples of work I am currently undertaking with sales executives of an international mobile phone organisation who are working through a work-based learning master’s programme on “Sales Transformation” jointly offered by Consalia (Sales Performance Improvement Company) and Middlesex University.

The programme comprises five modules, run by Consalia after which the sales executives are supervised by Middlesex University staff who take them through an advanced practitioner research module and a final project. A key focus of the Consalia modules is to encourage busy analytical sales executives to stand back and reflect on their practice.

It is clear from their learning so far how transforming an impact the process of reflecting on their practice has had on them as individuals and, indeed, on their teams. I recently had the opportunity to interview each of the executives before they attended the final Consalia module. Prior to the interview I sent them a briefing note around the notion of what I call “learning reach” and what I hoped we could explore at the interview. This is an extract from that briefing:

Initially I would like up to an hour of your time to get a sense from you of who in your organisation (and indeed outside) you think the initiatives you’ve taken so far in the projects you’ve carried out have impacted in so far as you can detect a change in mindset or behaviour, and whether there has been a measurable financial impact as a result.

I’d like you to think of people in three categories: your team and/or those you manage; your colleagues and those in more senior positions. I would also like you to describe the nature of the influence and have suggested we might represent the kind of changes across the organisation according to a colour code. So on attached chart a contact who you believe has changed their attitude would be coloured blue; one who you believe has changed their behaviour would be coloured red and (the ultimate change!) one whose learning has led to improved performance measurable in financial terms would be coloured green. This could then help us represent extent and nature of change across the organisation. When everyone lights up green we’ll know we’ve cracked the enigma of the so-called “learning organisation” which your company could then justifiably call itself!

I’d also like you to reflect on whether you think any of the people you’ve influenced have in their turn influenced others and how.

In the event, of course, the exercise I had proposed was far too ambitious. I heard stories of individual change but because of the rather complex structure of the organisation and reporting relationships it would have been difficult if not impossible to map out the

extent of their “learning reach” as I had envisaged. For one thing, though I had the buy-in and support of the HR director, there was no “strategic intent” as reflected in Figure 1, whereby change was an expectation. Also, I was collecting individual stories – if they were to make a difference they would need to be shared – which, in fact, they would be (see later).

I also recognised that implicit in what I was doing (which is also true of questions posed in Boxes A-C of Figure 1), I was making the same assumption Shaw articulated: “It is assumed that the existing organisational dynamic came into being through some central purpose, however, participatively arrived at, and can be changed in the same way” (Shaw, 1997, p. 237).

If we were ever to get closer to “organisation transformation” my “learning reach” exercise needed to embrace the lessons of complexity theory outlined at the beginning:

Complex adaptive systems are networks of large numbers of agents [...] Through their interaction, such networks create systems of mutual and so non-linear influence [...]. The networks are therefore adaptive – they learn in both simple and complex ways (Shaw, 1997, pp. 237-238, my underlining).

5. Towards a framework within which organisational learning and transformation can be examined from a complexity perspective

We have already alluded to Ralph Stacey’s distinction between what he calls the “legitimate” side of organisations and what he calls the shadow side which first appeared in a publication by Stacey in 1996, “Complexity and Creativity in Organisations”. Stacey argues that organisations are inherently “adaptive and non-linear” but they tend to be run as if they were “linear” and predictable – this he calls the “legitimate” system which “consists of links that are either formally and intentionally established by the most powerful members of an organisation or established by well understood, implicit principles that are widely accepted by members of the organisation – that is a shared culture or accepted ideology” (Stacey, 1996, p. 24).

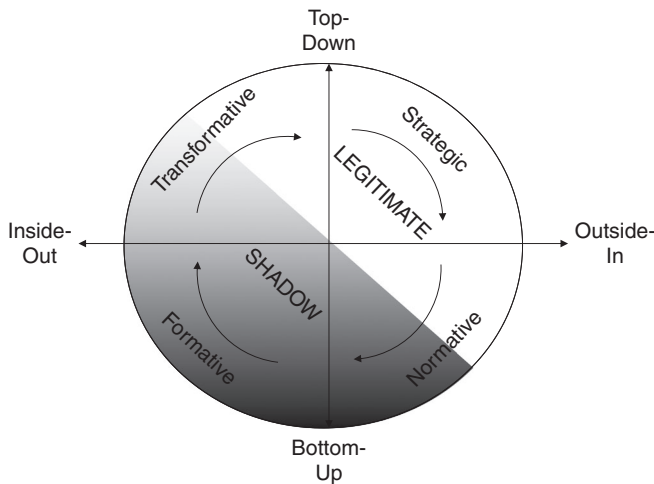
But, as anyone who has ever worked in an organisation knows, these conditions are not always satisfied; surprises occur out of what Stacey describes as “idiosyncratic behaviour of the agents” which, potentially, “would endanger the predictability that the legitimate system exists to occur”. Stacey gives the name of “shadow” system to those links in an organisation which are:

[...] spontaneously and informally established by individual agents among themselves during the course of interacting in the legitimate system. The result is another network, a kind of shadow of the legitimate system consisting of informal social and political links, in which agents develop their own rules for interacting with each other in the course of their interaction (Stacey, 1996, p. 26).

Ten years ago (Critten, 2006), I put forward a model for facilitating sustainable organisational change based on Stacey’s notion of an organisation comprising both “legitimate” and “legitimate” zones. It occurred to me that we could examine organisations from four perspectives if we compared internal dynamics along two dimensions: top/down v. bottom/up and outside/in v. inside/out which reflected different forces capable of bringing about change.

The Figure 2 shows how these dimensions lead to the creation of four quadrants and how they are influenced by the legitimate and shadow zones.

Below I summarise the characteristics of each quadrant and relate them to arguments already put forward in this paper.



Notes: Top-Down (Directions cascading down from senior management v. Bottom-up (Views from staff influencing policy from below). Outside-In (Influences from market and external environment) v. Inside-Out (Capacity of organisation to create and enact its environment)

Figure 2.
Inquiry into
organisational
practice and change
from a complexity
perspective

Strategic: this is defined by “top-down” and “outside-in” dynamics. This is how business is usually perceived and embraces the kind of disciplines offered at most business schools – marketing, performance management, etc. Within Stacey’s definition of “legitimate” this falls wholly within a legitimate domain “formally and intentionally established by the most powerful members of an organisation”.

Questions posed in Box A of the model proposed in Figure 1 fall within this quadrant. As we’ve indicated in our report on work on “learning reach”, if organisation change is to take place the CEO and top team need to be involved.

Normative: this is defined by “outside-in” and “bottom-up”. This is the centre of cultural norms and the domain of HR matching requirements derived from “strategy” in response to market forces with capacity from within (bottom-up). It closely follows a second feature of how Stacey describes “legitimate” – “established by well understood, implicit principles that are widely accepted by members of the organisation – that is a shared culture or accepted ideology”. The model depicts this as being half within the legitimate and half in the shadow side.

Questions posed in Box B and the first question Box C of the model proposed in Figure 1 fall within this quadrant. If organisation change is to happen it has to involve representatives from across the organisation. But all too often, change often stops at this point. So, the CEO starts off change initiative which then becomes “the norm” and everyone is “trained” in new ways of doing things (i.e. only calls on “single” loop learning).

Formative: this is defined by an “inside-out” view of the world which follows a “social constructionist” view whereby we create and enact our environment rather than be shaped by it (which is the “outside-in” end of the dimension). This is the zone where what Stacey calls potentially transforming conversations are started. This is where ideas are shaped but, because it is wholly within the shadow side, these ideas may never ever get to the “legitimate” side. This is why the last quadrant is critical.

The second question in Box C of model in Figure 1 falls into this category. If change is to be sustainable, I suggest, it needs to involve not just “reflection” and “action” but what Habermas calls “communicative action” (Habermas, 1984). The question then is “How can an organisation enable learners in the work place to pay attention and reflect on their practice not just as individuals but as a group?”

This was the question I followed up on after interviewing the sales executives of the International Mobile Phones company. I used the opportunity of their coming together as a group on the final accredited module of their masters to encourage them to share their individual experience of “learning reach” with a view to creating some kind of shared picture in which their individual “maps” of learning reach would be not just incorporated but changed as a result of “communicative action”. This was part of their brief:

The way you “map” out your zones of influence could take a number of forms. You could each create your own representation of who you think you’ve influenced and post it up to be compared with “zones” of influence of others; you could draw “lines” between yourself and a pre-selected list of stakeholders inside and outside the company’ or you could simply draw lines between yourself and stakeholders you choose inside and outside the company. We could then see if there are certain stakeholders who are represented more than others. And it would be then for you, together, in the spirit of action research, to make sense of any emerging patterns and I would hope that you would all be able to use this evidence in your final project at Middlesex.

The exercise led to second loop learning (a characteristic, I suggest, of the formative zone), encouraging them to challenge and question the status quo. How far they have been able to follow up these challenges I will only know when I read their final projects.

This is the zone where questions, challenges are encouraged – again, a characteristic of the learning organisation which most organisations shy away from. Sadly, as with changes that end in the normative zone, an organisation is usually never made aware of what goes on in this quadrant which falls wholly in the “shadow side”. That is why the final quadrant is so critical.

Transformative: this is where ideas developed in the shadow zone can be enabled so as to influence the formation of policy (and, indeed, organisational learning) in the strategic zone. But for this to happen there has to be dialogue between the leaders at the top who alone are in a position to create new policy and representatives from the Shadow Zone. The arrows on the model reflect a cycle which it is suggested any intervention to bring about change in an organisation has to follow if the consequences of the intervention are to be sustained and embedded within the organisation. The proposition is that most debates about change begin and end in the strategic zone with the assumption that eventually the organisation will “normalise” the process so that it becomes “the way we do things”. However, it is suggested that the locus for real transformation (rather than cosmetic changes) can only come from the engine room of change, the formative zone. The problem is that ideas emerging here cannot directly impact on an organisation; they have to be mediated through the transformative zone. This requires people who have the ear of the managing director and the board but who are also close to what is emerging in the shadow side.

It is here where our Figures 1 and 2 need to come together. In Figure 3 I have combined them. This is the zone where the level of learning can be raised to Level III which I have defined as “the ability to value and learn from the process of learning which would lead to improvements in the process itself” (Critten, 1993, p. 215).

Following up the case study I have shared of an organisation I have worked with to take “learning reach” as far as I can, we would have reached this stage, I suggest, if at the meeting where the group was sharing its reflections there were present senior managers who were in a position not just to translate ideas into practice but to engage in Level III deuterio learning with the group drawing lessons from the learning to improve practice in the future.

Our proposition is that this four-stage model can also be the vehicle whereby we can both recognise and evaluate organisational learning because:

In complex adaptive systems all knowledge making is bottom-up in origin, in that it involves individual and group learning. There are no chief knowledge makers, dictators, commanders or autocrats. There are leaders in such systems, but they derive their authority from the fact that they are the “attractor basins” (i.e. surrogate focal points) of self-organised knowledge processing (McElroy, 2003, p. 115).

And of the four zones we have explored it is in the formative zone, at the core of the shadow side of an organisation, where one might expect to detect the traces of learning and it is here that research of organisational learning should begin.

6. An agenda for enabling organisation transformation through WAL drawing on principles of complexity theory

Having now explored alternative ways of thinking about organisations and the learning embedded within its various workplaces it is time to propose an agenda for enabling organisation transformation. The various stages in the process described below draw upon the various ideas and principles we have explored so far and bring together the two frameworks (Figures 1 and 2) within an integrated model (see Figure 3):

- The starting point, we suggest, should be from the top-down (the strategic zone – see Figure 2) by engaging with the one person whose vision should be guiding the

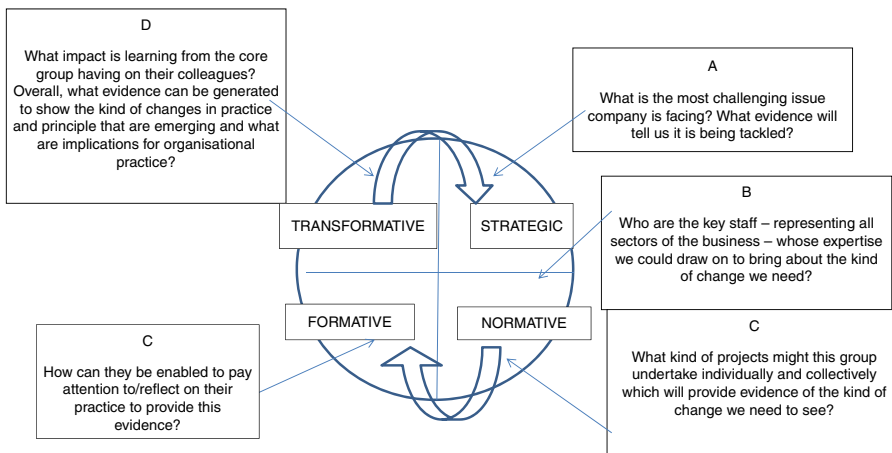


Figure 3. A model that brings together a linear route for change (Figure 1) with a model reflecting the complexity underpinning all organisational learning and practice (Figure 2)

organisation and thereby get a sense of a key issue/challenge that by pursuing would involve key personnel/department across the organisation (see Figure 1).

- The next step would be to bring these stakeholders together and with the CEO identify what kind of projects this group might take on individually and collectively to address these issues as well as identify other key stakeholders across the organisation who would also need to become part of the project for change.
- What should happen next is perhaps what we would consider the most “radical” part of our agenda for bringing about organisation transformation: it would involve immersing ourselves in what we have described as the “formative” zone of an organisation where we would seek to identify and articulate the ways in which the workforce learns every day, comes up with innovative ideas and shares their knowledge to solve problems and makes decisions. I have previously talked about “learning reach” and am in the process of finding ways to depict this in the form of pictures, maps whereby new learning can trigger a chain reaction across another International Hi-Tech organisation linking up and influencing stakeholders who hitherto may not have been connected.
- The last and most crucial step is how the outcomes from the above processes, being carried out in the formative zone, can be “enabled” to “influence” the strategic zone. This is the function of what we have called the “transformative” zone. This is where what Abraham calls “Knowledge Workshops” might play a key role where stakeholders from both the shadow and legitimate sides of an organisation are introduced to the principles we have explored in this paper and to new and subtle ways of mapping “learning reach” in the formative zone.

7. Conclusion

I have been critical of Kotter for reverting back to the normal “reporting” process whereby ideas emanating from below have to be approved and validated by those in the “legitimate side”. It seems that the professional management establishment is also now coming to the same view. In an article entitled “The Evolution of Change” in “Professional Manager” (the journal of the UK’s Chartered Management Institute) Paul Arnold considers Kotter’s eight steps towards change as “rigid and formulaic” and writes:

Organisations today are trying to create a culture of change, where constantly evolving is needed. People must be open and receptive to change and leaders empower the organisation to live that culture. They set the tone. While Kotter focused on top-down change, nowadays change can emerge bottom-up (Arnold, 2016, p. 52).

But what is the alternative to the kind of “dual operating” system Kotter describes? My suggestion is that the new networks being created in the formative zone are recognised for what they are – a new organisation emerging out of the old. At the same time this does not need to affect the day-to-day affairs happening in the legitimate side. One form of organisation is not going to “replace” another but who knows what can emerge out of their co-existence.

At the beginning of this paper I reviewed just some of the theories that I think are relevant to our discussion. Davide Nicolini has gone much further in “Practice Theory, work and organisation” (Nicolini, 2013), and explored in the context of how “practice theory” has evolved from Aristotle right up to Bourdieu. After such an exhaustive study in his concluding chapter “Bringing it all together”, far from proposing yet another theory of practice he proposes what he calls a “tool-kit” approach: “the core

suggestion here is that understanding and representing practice requires a reiteration of two basic movements: zooming in on the accomplishments of practice and zooming out of their relationships in space and time” (Nicolini, 2013, p. 213). His approach he describes as “rhizomatic in nature – a rhizome being a form of bulb that extends its roots in different directions”. He goes on to suggest a course of action:

I propose that studying practices starts in one place with an in-depth study of that particular location and then spreads following emerging connections. These connections lead to other practices, which become in turn the target of a new round of zooming in [...]. It proceeds with a zooming out movement which exposes the relationships between practices and continues with a new effort of zooming in on the new site and so on (Nicolini, 2013, pp. 238-239).

The theories he has examined have mostly shown that practices are social and relational. Like learning and knowledge, as we have seen, they cannot – or should not – be isolated and examined as a “thing in itself”, but are “involved in a variety of relationships and associations that extend in both space and time and form a gigantic, intricate and evolving texture of dependencies and references” (Nicolini, 2013, p. 229). And in order to explore more deeply the nature of any practice, Nicolini maintains that:

Zooming on practices can only be achieved by trailing connections on the ground, following people and artefacts as they move, chasing them wherever they go. Zooming is thus about moving around and amid practices, not hovering above them (Nicolini, 2013, p. 239).

I suggest that most of the literature around the learning organisation and change have been “hovering above” rather than getting to grips with “trailing connections on the ground” and I hope that the agenda and models I have proposed may contribute to an ongoing debate about how WAL can bring about organisational transformation.

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