

## 30th anniversary of Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*

In this year, 2020, it has been 30 years since Peter Senge's seminal and enormously popular book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990) was first published. This is certainly something that is worth celebrating. *The Fifth Discipline* has helped to establish the learning organization – and maybe also organizational learning – as a research field in its own right. This journal (i.e. *The Learning Organization*) may not have existed if it was not for that book. According to personal communication with Diane Nakashian, Peter Senge's executive assistant (January 2019), *The Fifth Discipline* has sold around two million copies, which is *a lot* for a book of this kind. Even if there are other very influential books (and articles) on the learning organization (especially, but not only, Garratt, 1987; Garvin, 1993; Marquardt and Reynolds, 1994; Pedler *et al.*, 1991; Watkins and Marsick, 1993), of which a few even were published before *The Fifth Discipline* was first published in 1990, no other book has had such an impact within the area as this book has had.

Another reason for returning to the origin of the idea of the learning organization (*The Fifth Discipline* made, at the least, a major contribution to coining the idea of the learning organization), which we do in this issue of *The Learning Organization*, is today's increasingly broad definition that the concept of the learning organization seems to be given. This is a personal observation (future research could favorably investigate it further) – mainly from my own communication with so-called “practitioners” – that when “learning organization” is mentioned, many of them relate it to other concepts such as “lean,” “quality” or “knowledge management.” While it is easy to agree that these concepts definitely are related, they are by no means synonymous. It is also easy to agree that practitioners always have had a tendency to relate different fashionable management ideas to each other, but this phenomenon is – according to my own experiences. That the fashionable management ideas are related to each other – and maybe sometimes even mixed up – is not necessarily the (only) problem, but it does give reason for us to return to the origin of the idea of the learning organization.

Returning to the origin does, however, by no means imply a denial of any development that the idea and practice of the learning organization have gone through during its 30 years of lifetime. To the contrary, there is always a need to critiquing the origin (especially when it has had such a huge impact as *The Fifth Discipline* has had), because without such critique, there will be no development of either the concept or practice. Thus, in this issue, there are both articles that mainly praise *The Fifth Discipline* and articles that are more skeptical in relation to the book. As academics – and especially when editing a journal such as *The Learning Organization*, which welcomes manuscripts dealing with how organizations continuously (could) learn – we believe that critique is necessary and even fruitful. We should, in fact, be happy if anybody values our work to such an extent that they care to criticize it. Thus, to critiquing is to show appreciation, and thus critique does definitely belong in an anniversary issue of *The Fifth Discipline*.

All articles in this issue are not only strongly connected to *The Fifth Discipline* but also authored (or in some cases co-authored) by associate editors of this journal, *The Learning Organization*. Each one of the six eminent, hard-working and truly contributive associate editors connects to *The Fifth Discipline* in their own, individual and unique way, dealing with different aspects of the book. Because the articles are presented and summarized in the



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“Implication for Practitioners” article (Reese, 2020a) (which appears in each issue of *The Learning Organization*), I will not deal that much with the content of the articles but instead take the opportunity to present what each of the associate editor does for *The Learning Organization*, in some more depth than I have previously done (Örtenblad, 2017).

The first article in this issue, “Taking the learning organization mainstream and beyond the organizational level: an interview with Peter Senge,” contains an interview with Peter Senge himself, conducted by *The Learning Organization’s* associate editor Simon Reese (Reese, 2020b). Simon writes “Implication for Practitioners” pieces for the journal, a task he shares with Nataša Rupčić. Simon and Nataša also administer the journal’s LinkedIn group, where they inform about the journal and anything else that may be connected to the areas that the journal covers and stimulate debate on these issues. Every member of the group is free to post in the group discussion forum. To request access to *The Learning Organization* group, select the link from the journal home page ([www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/products/journals/journals.htm?id=tlo](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/products/journals/journals.htm?id=tlo)) or search us on LinkedIn.

After his successful series of interview articles for *The Learning Organization* (of which many were co-authored by Yusuf Sidani, e.g. Reese and Yusuf, 2018; Sidani and Reese, 2018), with thought leaders in the areas of the learning organization and organizational learning, Simon Reese has kindly agreed to also take on the responsibility for coordinating the continuation of the interview article series, a project to which scholars other than Simon and Yusuf will also contribute. This means, thus, that more interview articles are soon to be published in *The Learning Organization*.

In this particular interview article, authored by Simon Reese, Peter Senge gets an opportunity to himself comment on his famous book, *The Fifth Discipline*, 30 years later. It is, of course, not more than fair that he gets such an opportunity to comment in his own words. As a matter of fact, Peter Senge is hereby given a standing invitation to get an “invited article” published in *The Learning Organization*, an offer that is valid at least as long as I am the Editor-in-Chief of the journal. To mention a few of the many interesting issues dealt with in this interview article, it was particularly interesting to hear Peter Senge comment on the idea of the learning organization as a fashion and point at the importance of “unlearning,” which is an issue that has been dealt with extensively in *The Learning Organization* for the past few years (e.g. the special issue on organizational unlearning, Issue 5, 2019). During the interview, Peter Senge also mentions the importance of “presence” – and indicates that presence could have been a sixth discipline in *The Fifth Discipline* – which leads us to the next article in this anniversary issue.

The second article, “Learning organization: organization emerging from presence,” is authored by associate editor Nataša Rupčić (Rupčić, 2020). Actually, Nataša, who has a strong interest in humanistic organizing, starts with Peter Senge’s work on “presence” and discusses the role presence could play in problem-solving and in the creation of learning organizations. As an associate editor of *The Learning Organization*, Nataša authors “Implications for Practitioners” pieces for every second issue (Simon Reese writes the other ones) (for a recent example, see Rupčić, 2019). She and Simon Reese also administer *The Learning Organization’s* LinkedIn group together. Furthermore, Nataša guest edits the special issue of *The Learning Organization* on value creation that will be published soon, and she is also working on a project on “consulting on the learning organization,” which also will be reported on in *The Learning Organization*.

The third article in this issue, “Still in search of learning organization? Towards a radical account of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*,” is co-authored by Shih-wei “Bill” Hsu (Hsu and Lamb, 2020), who is the most recent one to join the editorial team of *The Learning Organization*. In his role as associate editor for the journal,

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Shih-wei will – at least to start with – focus on guest editing special issues. He is currently editing an issue for which he wants contributions that criticize the idea of the learning organization, “Envisioning a Post Learning Organization: Learning in the name of what?” (for more information about that special issue, see here: [www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/products/journals/call\\_for\\_papers.htm?id=8693](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/products/journals/call_for_papers.htm?id=8693)).

As a matter of fact, Shih-wei does himself, together with his colleague, take on quite a critiquing position in his article for this anniversary issue. He and his colleague argue that Senge’s version of the learning organization is about structure, rather than about learning, and regard Senge’s learning organization to be a project attempting to, simply, remove bureaucracy. However, Shih-wei and his colleague not only criticize in a constructive manner but also suggest a new account of the learning organization, and in that, a sixth discipline is added to Senge’s original five disciplines. They actually come across “presence” – please see above – in their struggles to find a fruitful way to redirect the idea of the learning organization, but they are not entirely positive toward Senge’s version of presence either. Thus, we will have to wait and see what exactly Shih-wei and his colleague will nominate as the sixth discipline of the learning organization (see also Örtenblad, 2019).

The fourth article, “The journey of team learning since *The Fifth Discipline*,” is authored by Teresa Rebelo and colleagues (Rebelo *et al.*, 2020). In her associate editorship, Teresa is responsible for the book and media reviews section that appears toward the end of every issue of *The Learning Organization* (it is at least the ambition to include a review piece in each issue). The section is aimed for reviews of other media also but usually contains reviews of books. The preferred type of book that is reviewed for this section is typically newer books that explicitly deal with any of the concepts that *The Learning Organization* publishes works on (i.e. “learning organization,” “organizational learning,” “organizational unlearning,” “group learning,” “team learning”). It happens, though, that Teresa decides to include reviews of older books – books which she judges still to be important – and reviews of books on themes that only indirectly connect to any of the concepts that *The Learning Organization* publishes on. For each special issue of the journal, Teresa has an ambition to include a review of a book (or any other media) that tightly connects to the theme of the special issue at stake. The book review that is included in this anniversary issue is certainly no exception (Sidani, 2020).

Teresa has also launched a call for papers for a special issue of *The Learning Organization*, which she thus will guest edit. The theme of it is group and team learning, which is one of Teresa’s main research interests; thus, no wonder that she choose that theme for her piece in this anniversary issue. More particularly, Teresa and her colleagues reflect on the journey that “team learning” – the fourth of the disciplines in *The Fifth Discipline* – has taken since Senge’s book was first published, in 1990, in terms of definition, research and its link to organizational learning and the learning organization.

The fifth article, “Digitalization in practice: *The Fifth Discipline* advantage” (Hoe, 2020), is authored by Siu Loon Hoe. His main responsibility as an associate editor is to see to it that all articles in which any kind of *quantitative* method has been used, holds a high quality method-wise. His article in this anniversary issue deals with digitalization, which is one of Siu Loon’s main research interests. More particularly, Siu Loon discusses how especially systems thinking, but also the four other disciplines brought up by Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*, can help any organization in its struggles to become successful in the digital era.

The sixth, and the final, article, “The responsible learning organization: can Senge (1990) teach organizations how to become responsible innovators?,” is co-authored by Nhien

Nguyen (Hansen *et al.*, 2020). This article offers a conclusion that is maybe a bit surprising to at least some of the scholars who are well familiar with *The Fifth Discipline*. Nhien and her colleagues investigate whether the learning organization – as presented by Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* – facilitates responsible innovation and conclude by suggesting that *The Fifth Discipline* may be more valuable for its ethical perspective than it is for how to achieve business success.

Nhien Nguyen has recently been, in her role as an associate editor for *The Learning Organization*, involved as a Guest Editor in several special issues (several of them were published in *The Learning Organization* in 2019). She has also authored interview articles for the journal (Nguyen, 2017) and has recently agreed to take on the responsibility for the journal's relations with academic conferences – that is, anybody who is arranging a conference on a theme that closely connects to any of the themes *The Learning Organization* publishes on and would like to discuss any form of cooperation is welcome to contact Nhien. She is currently developing a strategy for the journal's both in-reach and out-reach in relation to academic conferences.

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### Further reading

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