Nader N. Chokr’s book *Unlearning or ‘How NOT to Be Governed’* aims to show why unlearning should be viewed as crucial for education reform. Challenging the prevalent doctrines in the tradition and the enlightenment philosophy, Chokr contends that unlearning enables us to realize and tackle the “problem of governmentality” (p. 18), which has become manifest after the 2008 financial crisis (Pedler, 2014). Unlearning, which is about “unshackling oneself” (p. 6) and rejecting the false assumptions that belong to obsolete knowledge, provides the means to liberate ourselves from entrenched ways of thinking, by posing questions such as: How are we governed? Do we wish to be governed or to be self-governed instead? The author asserts that unlearning is a pivotal component of education that helps to bring out critical and self-reflective citizenship and thus contributes to radical and inclusive democracy or democracy-to-come. I found many of Chokr’s arguments interesting as they offer important implications for the organizational learning and unlearning perspective.

The book starts with a provocative prelude that sets the tone for the rest of the chapters. Arguing against the tradition (Chapter 1), the author sketches out the paradoxes of treating education as ideology or indoctrination or rational critical thinking (Chapter 2). Therefore, he proposes a new way of looking at the education system, which views education as *paideia* instead of *educare* or *educere* (Chapter 3), and demonstrates the crucial role of education-as-*paideia* in realizing the democracy-to-come (Chapter 4). He continues with explaining how this realization process exposes the problem of governmentality (Chapter 5) and proposing how we can go from the current state of (mis)education to education-as-*paideia* (Chapter 6). In Chapter 7, Chokr revisits Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in an effort to articulate the approximate meaning of unlearning, and concludes by discussing the relationship between unlearning and the role of philosophy (Chapter 8).

I will discuss this book neither through the lens of philosophy nor from the perspective of the ideology of democracy-*cum*-capital, but rather from the viewpoint of
organizational learning and unlearning. There are some striking similarities between unlearning from the social perspective Chokr describes and unlearning from an organizational perspective. My aim is to depict these analogies and argue that the notion of unlearning in this book can, thus, offer important implications for the organizational unlearning literature.

The first similarity lies in the argument that unlearning is important for counteracting potential negative effects of learning. From the social perspective, education is expected to fulfill two different purposes: providing disciplined and productive members for the society’s workforce (education-as-*educare*); and producing individuals with well-trained minds who are capable of questioning and innovating to act in the best interests of both themselves and their society (education-as-*educere*). However, the current political-institutional framework sets up theories and practices that only serve to promote the first purpose which, in turn, impedes the second one. For example, the practice of evaluating teachers based on the students’ performance in standardized examinations leads to the problem that many teachers only “teach to the test” (p. 31) so that their students can get satisfactory scores and their job positions are secured. As a result, the second purpose of education is barely attained. Therefore, the education system should unlearn these perceptions or practices, and focus on training the students in the ability to think critically and figure out the problems by themselves, i.e. the unlearning capability. By the same token, organizations face similar challenges when designing their learning mechanisms. Organizational learning aspires to facilitate both exploitative learning – which focuses on refinement, efficiency and execution – and explorative learning, which pertains to search, discovery and innovation (*March, 1991*). However, while the basic learning mechanisms such as standard operating procedures (SOPs) and routines help to foster efficiency and consistency, they also promote rigidity, complacency and inertia (*Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984*), attributes that crowd out exploration and lead organizations to failure. To survive, and to avoid crises, organizations must unlearn their outdated practices (*Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984*).

The second similarity relates to the important role of failure and crisis as triggers for unlearning, which is a precondition of learning. By revisiting Plato’s well-known Allegory of the Cave, Chokr asserts that only a sudden jolt can initiate the unlearning process, which he compares to the act of setting the cave dweller free. When seeing things differently, the freed prisoner would at first try to go back to the shadows, seeking the comfort of familiarity. Yet, later he would become more perplexed and thus begin to step on the painful path of acquiring understanding that leads to freedom or enlightenment. Therefore, unlearning is a precondition for education-as-*paideia*, as it can compel us to “throw off the shackles of the entrenched ‘beliefs’, ‘ideologies’ and ‘heteronomous practices’ of our time” (p. 51). In comparison, organizational unlearning also starts with crises and failures. Only crises and failures can make people question their current beliefs and practices before thinking about major changes (*Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984*). Put another way, failures and crises trigger organizational unlearning by providing evidence that the current routines and knowledge are seriously deficient. It is painful for top managers of organizations to unlearn because they live in a world formed by the collection of their past successes, never doubting their beliefs or perceptions, and hence stuck in their cognitive structures. Without crises and failures, organizational unlearning would not materialize; as a result, past knowledge would continue to inhibit new learning from occurring. For this reason, unlearning is a
precondition for organizational learning: “Before organizations will try new ideas, they must unlearn old ones by discovering their inadequacies and then discarding them” (Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984, p. 53).

These two analogies serve as a rationale for arguing that the unlearning model in the educational and social context in this book can provide lessons and implications for organizational unlearning. From the social perspective, a paideia education system can achieve its goals of capability expansion, human development and self-creation by creating “the enabling conditions for learning how to learn, radical questioning, discovering, connecting, unlearning, creating and inventing” (p. 48). By doing so, education equips citizens with an unlearning capability so that they can think critically and question the dominant social paradigm and its intrinsic knowledge, thus becoming self-governed and self-determined. Applying this perspective to the organizational context opens up the possibility of building a radical unlearning organization (Hsu, 2013). Similar to the objective of paideia education, an unlearning organization aims to establish a mechanism for its members to learn and to unlearn institutionalized knowledge. To do so, the organization should be designed to inspire employees to come up with new thoughts and actions that are free from the suppression of prevailing procedures. Therefore, it does not only strive for “discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge” (Hedberg, 1981, p. 3), which is the seminal definition of organizational unlearning, but also endeavors to retrieve the knowledge that is suppressed under the predominant routines and practices (Hsu, 2013).

In sum, this book presents the concept of unlearning as a crucial capability for education and society, which should stimulate the reflection of organizational researchers as well as managers. By proposing that unlearning is the way to reform the current education system, the book lends itself to the conceptualization of a radical unlearning organization where members are equipped with both learning and unlearning capacities. Managers can use this book as an inspiration for designing their companies in a way that liberates employees’ unlearning power, that is, their ability to recognize and challenge an outdated status quo, to discard misleading knowledge and to experiment with new practices that help unleash the full organizational potential for creativity and innovation. Suggestions from the book that might be helpful in constructing the unlearning mechanisms include systematically encouraging employees to embrace new ways of knowing and new forms of knowledge through open discussion and debate, through radical questioning and through continuous deliberate experiments. The ultimate goal is to create enabling conditions for everyone to build and exercise their unlearning capabilities.

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Notes
1. Chokr explains that “According to Greek etymology, ‘education’ is best understood as paideia or ‘the process of educating man into his true form, the real and genuine human nature’” (p. 33).
2. These are two different Latin etymological roots for the English term “education”: “educare” (which means “to train” or “to mold”) and “educere” (which means “to lead out” or “to draw out”) (p. 30).
References


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