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# Guest editorial: The link between learning organization, organizational learning and innovation: new and unusual perspectives

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In this Special Section we have endeavoured to shed some new light upon the link between all matters “learning” and “organization” on one hand, and “innovation” on the other.

This link appears to be a recognized and established topic in the literature: a search on Web of Science for “Learning Organization” or “Organizational Learning” and “Innovation” as a topic returns just under 3,800 results, with some of the papers published up to three decades ago, very highly cited, and written by some of the most renowned authors in the LO/OL field, e.g. [Brown & Duguid \(1991\)](#); [Levinthal & March \(1993\)](#) or [Grant \(1996\)](#).

In general terms, the positive link between LO, OL, and innovation performance, innovativeness, etc. has long since been established ([Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002](#); [Chen, Lin, & Chang, 2009](#)). The research community, judging by the recent five years’ worth of publications, is now focusing on narrower questions such as the role of leadership ([Gil, Rodrigo-Moya, & Morcillo-Bellido, 2018](#); [Asif, 2019](#)), internationalization ([Thakur-Wernz & Samant, 2019](#); [von Delft, Kortmann, Gelhard, & Pisani, 2019](#)) and the green agenda ([Zhang & Zhu, 2019](#)) in the relationship between LO/OL and innovation.

While the field’s evident maturity has its positive sides, such as the strength of the accumulated empirical basis, or the sheer research momentum behind it, there are also downsides. Some perspectives and viewpoints have become dominant over the years, such as the innovation–creativity–knowledge creation logic ([Liao, Fei, & Liu, 2008](#)), whereby the OL/LO–innovation link is modelled as a manifestation of the Socialization, Externalization, Combination and Internalization (SECI) spiral ([Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995](#)). Another popular perspective is the “cultural” one ([Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011](#)), either portraying organizational (learning) culture as a key moderating factor between LO/OL and Innovation ([Ghasemzadeh, Nazari, Farzaneh, & Mehralian, 2019](#)), or simply equating LO with “organizations with learning culture” ([Gil et al., 2018](#)).

The question remains, however, whether they provide a sufficient view on it. Is there potential in a more critical look at the LO/OL–Innovation relationship? Is it *always* positive? Do we understand the mechanism of it well enough? Are there any areas that have been under-explored so far, such as the role of gender ([Martin, Lord, & Warren-Smith, 2018](#)) or power ([Hao & Feng, 2018](#))? In this Special Section we endeavour to enhance understanding of the link between LO/OL and Innovation by addressing it from new and critical perspectives, under-explored subject areas within the field, and fresh philosophical and methodological positions.

The Section comprises five academic papers, an industry perspective and a book review. We open with a conceptual paper by Marcus Peschl, “Learning from the future as a novel paradigm for integrating organizational learning and innovation”. In this piece, Prof Peschl challenges the fundamental premise of all things learning: that it is to be done on the basis of the *past experience*, arguing that the relevance of this premise is much



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more limited in a world where volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) characterize the context faced by most organizations. Instead, the author proposes a number of key principles of a future-oriented approach towards organizational learning as innovation. First, *Learning to see* means broadening one's focus of attention to include not only the context of an organization, but also the adjacent, and possibly not obviously and immediately relevant ones, thus enhancing the range of sources for future development. Second, *Understanding the core* requires a deeper engagement with a newly identified field; not examining it from an outsider's view, but rather, aiming to know its "deepest meaning and purpose". Third, *Getting in resonance with future potentials* entails not only understanding the present state of the aforementioned core, but understanding its dynamism as well, in order to see potentials in the core that may not be recognized. Fourth, *Wisdom, phronesis, and future purpose* argue that wisdom, as the knowledge of the higher order, related to understanding of the underlying fundamental principles behind observed phenomena, offers a source of stability in a VUCA world by transcending the chaos and the instability; something that *knowledge* is incapable of doing due to its inevitable obsolescence in the face of the reality's dynamism. *Phronesis*, however, is an important element, as it bridges the gap between the more abstract wisdom, and the "how", the practical and the applied aspect – i.e. "how to deal with the current situation in a wise manner", leading to decisions that are wise, benevolent, and have future purpose. Fifth, *Creating new niches enabling the emergence of novelty* calls on organizations to create sub-spaces, in a conceptual sense, where new products, services, or their uses and/or purposes, can be found. This is not a causal, linear or deterministic process; rather, it is a recursive interplay between the creator, the conditions of the niche and the environment. Finally, the *Acknowledging the important of the external environment and reducing control* principle calls on organizations to reverse their "humans control the environment" viewpoint on innovation, and to accept instead that the external environment can be a more active – and much less controllable – source of novelty and creativity. The paper provides a novel perspective on Learning and Innovation, challenging the classical frameworks based on Deweyan pragmatism (Elkjaer, 2003) and experiential learning theories such as Kolb's (Kolb, 2014), proposing that organizations update their approaches to innovation and learning.

The second paper in the special Section, "Authentic leadership: boosting organizational learning capability and innovation success" by Emilio Domínguez-Escrig *et al.* focuses not only on the Learning–Innovation link, but also Authentic Leadership. Authentic Leadership is founded upon and is promoting a positive psychological climate based on positive ethical values, greater self-awareness and transparency. Being a comparatively recent development in Leadership studies, it has attracted considerable attention within the past few years, including its impact on innovation and innovation-related matters such as creativity. However, as the authors point out, there is not enough evidence to say that the theoretically predicted link actually exists. Furthermore, some research indicates that mediating factors can be involved, and they require a more specific research.

The paper attempts to shed some light on the links between learning, innovation and authentic leadership, with organizational learning capability as a mediator. Indeed, having surveyed 293 Spanish companies, the authors applied structural equation modelling to confirm that authentic leadership does have a positive effect on learning capability, and learning capability – on innovation success. They also found that learning capability mediates the link between authentic leadership and innovation success. The findings, which are the first of their kind, deepen our understanding of the authentic leadership–innovation link, in contradiction to some existent literature dismissive of the former as a mere fad.

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The third paper is “Learning organizations in emerging economies: The effect of knowledge management on innovative culture in Chilean companies” by Juan Acevedo and Ivan Diaz-Molina. The novelty of the perspective adopted in this paper lies in the direction of the link between organizational culture and knowledge management; there is plenty of evidence to say that the former affects the latter (De Long & Fahey, 2000, among many others). The authors, however, hypothesize that the link works in the opposite direction as well; namely, that knowledge management leads to “routinisation” of knowledge in organizations, and thus facilitates the creation of innovative culture. Having carried out a quantitative study involving in excess of 10,000 respondents from almost 70 Chilean companies, the author has found significant evidence in support of the hypotheses that knowledge management (acquisition, dissemination and responsiveness to knowledge) are all strong predictors of innovative culture.

The fourth paper, “Organizational ambidexterity and the learning organization: the strategic role of a corporate university” by Raphael Lissillour and Javier Alfonso Rodriguez-Escobar, is a longitudinal qualitative study investigating the role of a Chinese technology-based firm’s corporate university in creating ambidexterity in exploration and exploitation. Examining data spanning a decade and comprised of archival documents, direct observations and semi-open interviews, the authors demonstrate that such a corporate University can, indeed, play a positive role in it by orchestrating unique and valuable combinations of skills and capabilities. An even more interesting finding is that despite the host company being technology-based, the technological and R&D capabilities played a comparatively minor part in the University’s activities. It concentrated instead on matters such as service delivery improvement, playing, therefore, a key role in the organization’s strategy operationalization. It is in this capacity of a “catalyst” for converting strategy into action, the authors argue, that the University maintained the balance between the strategic and the operational levels, therefore facilitating the creation of a culture supportive of both exploration and exploitation.

The fifth paper, “Roles of organizational learning culture in promoting innovation” by Isnaeni Achdiat *et al.*, is a systematic literature review covering just over a hundred empirical peer-reviewed articles containing Organizational Learning Culture/Learning Organization/Organizational Learning *and* Innovation as keywords. It provides a thorough and comprehensive summary of the literature in key areas: the interrelationship between OLC/LO/OL constructs; organizational learning culture vs innovation culture; organizational learning culture vs organizational learning capability; organizational learning culture as a variable for innovation; internal organization process as an organizational learning culture construct and innovation; the external environment of the organization as an organizational learning culture construct and innovation; and the information acquisition, distribution, interpretation, as well as behaviour cognitive changes as organizational learning culture and innovation constructs.

The Special Section also includes an Industry Perspective paper. It is an opinion piece by Norman Wijker, Chief Technology Officer at ARC Aerosystems, a British aerospace SME. The author discusses a number of the most prominent theories in the LO area, such as Senge’s LO model, and the SECI spiral. The author’s view of the latter is particularly noteworthy, since the case discussed in the paper – the design of one of the Company’s airplanes – appears to highlight fundamental limitations to SECI’s use as a model of *innovation*, which is often done in the literature by equating (or conflating) ideation and creativity with new knowledge creation. This point may serve as a starting point for creating alternative knowledge creation models. Furthermore, the author also discusses the

practicalities of learning, innovation and creativity in a real-life corporate setting, which also poses significant challenges that should be of interest to researchers. The paper is followed by an academic discussion authored by Pavel Bogolyubov, one of the Section's Guest Editors.

We hope that you will not only enjoy reading the contributions to the Special Section as we, the Guest Editors, did, but will also find them thought-provoking and challenging enough to inform your research.

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