

Organisational learning and competence for boundary crossing

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Organisational learning and competence for boundary crossing

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Organisational learning and competence for boundary crossing

Introduction

Issue 2 explores several perspectives relevant to learning organisations in various contexts, from customer focussed organisations, through school systems, higher education institutions, third sector and public sector organisations more widely. Still, what all articles seem to be touching on is the increasing challenges to manage complex and not easily definable aspects of the organisational learning. Various aspects of human-systems-structures-technology interactions highlight the complex set off adaptable competences that employees, leaders and those in charge of organisational learning need to develop and use with nuanced awareness of the ever changing contexts (Snowden, 2002). The complexity present in the organisational learning can present various boundaries between different sources and even cultures of knowledge (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). The fluid nature of the factors explored in Issue 2 point to sense making needed to adapt one's own (or team's) abilities (Weick, 2000) in order to reach outcomes in the interest of various stakeholders that might have different values, contradicting priorities and ways of working. Articles explored complexity and boundary crossing from various perspectives. Schechter et al. (2022) explored organisational learning mechanisms (OLMs) as a key feature of making schools into learning organisations. Engström et al. (2022) further added findings on the importance of cultural factors while helping customer order based context (COBC) companies become ambidextrous. The complexities of establishing a learning culture when the individual and organisational level views of change differ is explored in the study by Koo et al. (2022). Anand and Brix (2022) paper explored recent tendencies and emerging themes within the public sector exploring the intersection of organisational learning and learning organisation. Corvino et al. (2022) explored the use of dialogic evaluation (DE) as a participatory evaluation tool to foster inter-organisational learning (IOL) across public and third sector organisations involved in sport as a developmental and social activity. Finally, the individual ability to deal with various aspects of complexity was tackled in Törmänen et al. (2022) through the concept of systems intelligence (SI). This article synthesizes some of the key findings and implications for practitioners arising from TLO Issue 2.

Processes vs. culture in organisational learning

As an important acknowledgment of complexity, Schechter et al. (2022) described OLMs as consisting of both technical and cultural perspectives where mechanisms go beyond the tools and processes which are the more visible and apparent features. The study starts by criticizing the overemphasis placed on the content of what needs to be learned instead of developing a culture where collective and continuous collection, creation, dissemination and integration of knowledge happens in a dynamic manner. The study further confirms that the teachers' sense of collective efficacy and commitment to their organisations is significantly and positively related to the extent of OLM in their schools. The authors synthesize perspectives from three different organisational levels using their previous studies: primary school level, secondary school and principal's learning mechanisms. Each of the instrument they developed is validated and could be easily used in similar contexts, or in other contexts with

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3 adaptation. One of the key implications for practitioners is positioning the learning systems
4 clearly in the wider context of a learning culture where continuous learning can be achieved.
5 Accountability, issue orientation, transparency and integrity play a key role in achieving the
6 desired learning effect. In fact, without such a value driven learning culture, the authors warn
7 that a well-developed OLM could even have negative effects or no impact on development.
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10 The information gathering and sharing processes in a well-functioning OLM can become a
11 self-maintaining, self-reinforcing pattern that avoids change. For example, without
12 transparency and integrity, individuals' defensive routines could lead to OLM becoming a tool
13 for maintaining the status quo (Argyris & Schön 1997). Therefore, without sufficient emphasis
14 on these learning values, even the best-intentioned learning mechanisms could paradoxically
15 reinforce stereotypical thinking and limit change. Practitioners working with and
16 implementing learning systems should have this advice in mind, since an overt and visible
17 OLM might be wrongly taken as a sole indicator of successful organisational learning. The
18 authors duly encourage critical review of the philosophical and political aspects of an OLM
19 exploring questions such as: Who's interests are being served by an OLM? Is system used for
20 administrative hegemony or change? Does an OLM acknowledge power dynamics, abuse of
21 data and similar?
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26 Although the article points out the complexity and multifaceted challenge of managing the
27 boundary between technical and human factors as well as different organisational layers, it
28 does not leave practitioners unaided in the uncertainty. Their OLM diagnostic tools (primary
29 school, secondary school and principal's OLM) offer a way forward in exploring the strengths
30 and areas to develop if an organisation wants to develop sustainable and holistic learning
31 approaches. The study also offers advice on timing for introducing a learning system and
32 conducting cultural change activities. Since it takes considerable time and effort for
33 employees to come to grasps with collective learning forums, it is important to explore
34 learning values before initiating structural and tools changes. This advice can be relevant for
35 other sectors which try to wholesale update their learning systems and learning culture at
36 one go with variable results.
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41 Continuing the exploration of processes vs. various organisational cultures, Engström et al.
42 (2022) study customer order based context organisations (COBC) and different leaning
43 priorities that departments might have. The authors tackle the concept of ambidextrous
44 learning in order to examine the flow between exploitative and explorative learning in their
45 customer-focussed context. The COBC brings about challenges and potentials for learning in
46 organisations where complexity is high and the priority of the front office (responsiveness)
47 and the back office (efficiency) might create contradictions. Yet, these very contradictions
48 could be opportunities for organisational learning if tackled strategically and holistically.
49 Contradictions in the COBC can be manifested as disturbances in information flow, lack of
50 coordination, challenges in communication or even conflict. The paper proposed a conceptual
51 model of *integration* rather than only *interplay* between exploitative and routine learning on
52 the one hand and explorative and reflective learning on the other, using customer orders and
53 needs as boundary objects that can trigger adapting the learning approach. The paper offers
54 a useful classifications of the degree of flexibility based on customer orders that might require
55 different aspects of ambidextrous learning. What is crucial is that the complexity of a work
56 task is not just dependant on the type of company or department but also the nature of the
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3 task/customer demand, existing knowledge and awareness of it, interactions between
4 organisational sections (most notable front and back office) as well as individual employee
5 characteristics. This implies that judgement on the degree of routine vs. innovative practice
6 application happens throughout the process and a high number of factors need to be
7 considered when making work decisions.
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11 Such uncertain and fluid tasks require collaboration between several competences to create
12 new knowledge or to reach a new solution, including situations where executive learning co-
13 exist with explorative perspectives (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Considering back and front
14 sections of service industry with their competing priorities in parallel the authors referred to
15 as paradox thinking (Smith & Lewis, 2011) where two or more different interests are
16 considered at the same time. The proposed model of cycle between executive and explorative
17 learning could aid practitioners distinguish what strategy might be most suitable for the task
18 at hand, rather than go with the typical approach for their department/unit. The cultures of
19 knowledge (Nerland & Jensen, 2014) that develop within organisational structures might
20 present challenges to such case-by-case learning adaptability, since these cultures can both
21 aid and hinder decision making on what approach is most suitable. In other to alleviate the
22 internal knowledge boundary crossing, the authors propose a 'mid-office' in the form of a
23 learning focussed organisational unit. Although the study highlights the intrinsic complexity
24 and contradictions within the sector, it also offers analytical tools to understand the processes
25 at play. These models can be useful not only to organisational learning specialists but also to
26 all employees in order to help them map and understand what is going on and what strategy
27 might best suit the context.
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33 Koo et al. (2022) paper explores organisational culture through the effect communication has
34 on moderating the impact of individual-organisational attitudes to change on learning. At a
35 higher level of communication, aligned openness to change between the individual and
36 organisation showed a positive effect on learning organisation. However, when the
37 organisation's openness to change was higher than that of individuals, higher level of
38 communication actually decreased the level of knowledge sharing. Openness to change,
39 therefore, needs to be viewed at both the individual and organisational levels. The study
40 reaffirms the need to include individuals' view in addition to organisational and system level
41 factors. Notably, the study shows that good communication systems are not sufficient or can
42 even have detrimental effect on change especially when there is a high difference between
43 individual and organisational level attitudes. For example, members of case study universities
44 tended to share their knowledge to a lesser degree when an organisation's openness to
45 change was higher than that of individuals in cases of over-communication.
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51 The study offers useful considerations and measuring surveys to check and further
52 understanding the person-organisation (PO) fit in order to use appropriate communication
53 strategies according to the context for successful organisational innovation. Alignment
54 between change perceptions is crucial to the learning efforts of an organisation so this should
55 be considered in recruitment, promotions and rewards, professional development, and
56 overall change strategies (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). An important lesson for other
57 companies is that communication strategy should be differentiated according to PO fit and
58 desired organisational outcome, rather than looked at independently. An effective
59 communication strategy and practice that works well in more stable times or even in parts of
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3 the organisation where the change views are more aligned, might not work or have negative
4 effects in cases where the organisation and individuals do not see eye to eye.
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6 7 **Organisational learning in the public and third sector** 8

9 Anand and Brix (2022) paper provided a needed overview of key literature on the public
10 sector, identifying key organisational learning issues and proposing a way forward. Although
11 most of organisational learning and learning organisation concepts and studies originated in
12 the private sector, the paper uses meta-analysis of literature to confirm the need to explore
13 how these concepts are manifested in the public sector due to high levels of professionalism,
14 learning through collective action and complexity of issues. There is rising number of
15 publications exploring this context, and further understanding how knowledge is created,
16 shared and maintained within public sector is crucial with mounting challenges for
17 accountability and sustainability. Using established criteria, the article reviews studies that
18 looked at organisational learning, learning organisation or both between 2010 and 2020,
19 when the increased interest for these concepts was demonstrated in the public sector. A
20 range of themes and tendencies is identified across the shortlisted literature, alongside
21 identifying the most productive authors, institutions and regions, highlighting both strengths
22 and gaps where more studies are needed.
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27 This study also highlights the complexity of learning organisation issues in various contexts
28 and intricate challenges for leadership and developing individuals that can tackle the
29 complexity productively. For example, some of the emerging themes are paradoxes and using
30 learning organisation theory to aid public sector employees meeting multiple and conflicting
31 demands. In addition to contradicting demands, an important theme is also learning across
32 organisational boundaries, both internally and inter-organisationally. The article proposes a
33 useful roadmap pointing out areas which need further investigation: organisational learning
34 and learning organisation in emerging economies, comparative studies between West and
35 East region due to unbalance in published studies, operationalization of organisational
36 learning and learning organisation in the public sector as well as critical studies in how this
37 operationalisation differs between public and private sectors. Lastly, the authors highlight the
38 need to empirically and practically develop inter-organisational learning (IOL).
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43 Following in this tread, Corvino et al. (2022) explore the use of dialogic evaluation (DE), as a
44 participatory evaluation tool to foster IOL in between public and third sector organisations
45 involved in sport as a developmental and social activity. They propose DE as a facilitative
46 framework to guide practitioners in increasing IOL relationship building, redefinition of
47 sectoral boundaries and awareness of relevance of the partnership for learning. IOL is
48 becoming an increasingly relevant theme not only for the private sector but also multi-
49 stakeholder constellations such as sport for development and peace, aiming at non-sporting
50 outcomes (for example social inclusion, intercultural exchange and conflict resolution). The
51 study explores further complexities when learning needs to happen across organisational and
52 sectoral knowledge boundaries, in order to achieve organisational learning. This is no easy
53 feat as many studies have attested (Rupčić, 2021) and the challenges that internal
54 organisational learning poses are amplified when external sources of learning are involved in
55 the form of other organisations and sectors. Some of the issues that can arise are different
56 goals, overlapping areas of responsibility, forms of tacit knowledge that is difficult to express
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3 in a boundary crossing forum, unequal expertise levels and different organisational cultures
4 shaping professionals. In order to tackle some of these challenges the paper recommends
5 informal balanced contacts, fluid communication and information exchange, sharing of
6 resources, joint participation in managerial processes and decisions, and alignment between
7 organisational cultures. The key difference of DE as opposed to other participative and action-
8 research like methodologies is the use of dialogue to set common ground and address
9 contradictions. Through the proposed method, participation, reflexivity and power shifts
10 (Spaaij et al., 2018) could help IOL become a reality.

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14 To facilitate the boundary crossing, the authors introduced an intermediate workgroup
15 composed of multiple professionals belonging to different sectors and disciplines. The
16 researcher acted as boundary crossing facilitators. Similar roles could be integrated by
17 organisation's staff, provided they have competences that would aid dealing with inter-
18 organisational learning complexity. The study provides useful guidelines in fostering such
19 exchange of knowledge and developing new ideas. The paper provides recommendations for
20 each of the three phases of the process:

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24 1. Evaluation planning - discuss the aims of the common project and the related
25 divergences, include voices of all stakeholders, use dialogue as a source to co-build
26 shared representations, structure innovative evaluation planes based on established
27 common ground;
- 28
29 2. Monitoring phase – boundary crossing groups with regular meetings, safe space for
30 exploring criticisms in a constructive manner, re-evaluating joint goals if needed and
31 developing new approaches; and
- 32
33 3. Evaluation of results, discussion and interpretation – use data as a source of
34 knowledge and utilising results as a source for new learning transferability.

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36 The authors acknowledge that establishing an evaluation based on reciprocity requires time,
37 which constitutes a challenge in an environment that prioritises speed and productivity. But
38 if we want to reap the long term benefits of IOL needed for complex societal problems
39 (expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in particular goal 17. Partnership
40 for the goals, see for example Dzhengiz (2020)) the effort to establish this as part or regular
41 organisational practice is worthwhile.

42 43 44 45 **Organisational complexity and systems intelligence**

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47 At the centre of all of the aspects of organisational learning complexity lie individuals who
48 might be struggling how to deal with it. Törmänen et al. (2022) explore organisational
49 complexity and individual ability to handle through the concept of systems intelligence (SI).
50 The study proposes an instrument to measure the perceived SI - a first personnel-level peer
51 evaluation tool of its kind – which could be used as a tool for personnel development
52 programs. SI goes beyond the concept of systems thinking and assumes intelligent behaviour
53 in the context of complex systems where an individual engages successfully in complex
54 organisational interplays, recognising multi-directionality of such a process. The concept is an
55 attempt to operationalise Senge's (1993) seminal work, paying particular attention to
56 dimension that have rarely been discussed more pragmatically – personal mastery and
57 systems thinking interaction. Following Senge's line of thinking, systems intelligence is
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3 understood through seeing relationships, deeply-human qualities of care and compassion
4 rather than a clinical view of systems. Rather than relying primarily on control and
5 management systems, it is important to look into human understanding of organisational
6 dynamics, systems and being able to intelligently interact with them.
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9 This study does not only point at complexity of human-system relationships but again offers
10 pragmatic tools for practitioners. The identified building blocks of SI - systemic perception,
11 attunement, attitude, spirited discovery, reflections, wise action, positive engagement and
12 effective responsiveness – were all strongly correlating with perceived performance. The
13 authors offer a validated peer instrument measuring those blocks of SI that can be used as a
14 diagnostic tool. Grasping the situation quickly as part of systemic perception and responding
15 effectively appeared to be particularly linked with leaders' roles. Criticising the learning
16 organisation models that over-rely on top-down approaches, with agency mostly left to the
17 leadership of the organisation, the authors attempt to look at the problem with bottom-up
18 and multilevel perspectives (Chou & Ramser, 2019). With that intent, the paper builds on the
19 previous studies exploring SI of leaders and SI of organisations, and zooms in employees and
20 their perception of high and moderately performing colleagues. The focus on the middle level
21 perceptions reaffirms evidence that that in some cases, employee-perceived leadership
22 appears to be a more useful metric than the leader's own self-evaluation. The results are
23 found to be reliable across various settings so the tool developed could help highlight
24 developmental needs within a complex learning organisation. The study showed that highly
25 successful leaders consistently exhibit high level of SI so current and aspiring leaders could
26 look into SI as a self-reflective and developmental tool. Still, the tools' strengths lie in the
27 applicability and relevance for all levels of the organisation where factors of SI can be used to
28 identify gaps, limiting perspectives and a way forward. In that sense, the study points at
29 complex demands placed on individuals to contribute and operate in a learning organisation
30 and offer a tool that would help staff make sense out of a current situation with steps that
31 could help improve it.
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39 **Conclusions**

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41 The articles presented in Issue 2 all tackled relevant factors in their respective organisational
42 contexts and dissected various aspects of organisational learning complexities. It would
43 appear that the case for organisational learning as a process and the learning organisation as
44 goal, are a tricky playfield where multitudes of human, system, technological and context
45 factors weave many relationships. Individuals and teams face various knowledge boundaries,
46 be it between process and cultures, internal knowledge cultures, inter-organisational
47 knowledge boundaries, as well as contradictions at every step of the way where certain
48 factors could have both positive and negative effects. How is an individual able to cope in the
49 sea of complexity and develop their abilities to make out what is going on and what to do?
50 Despite the challenging task that learning organisations have, all of the included studies are
51 not fazed by the difficulty and provide concrete pragmatic tools as ways forward within the
52 complexity. Some of the tools provided in the current issue are meant to reduce the
53 uncertainty (Ellis & Shpilberg, 2003). Others embrace the innovation and exploratory nature
54 that diverse knowledge sources bring. But all papers discussed here demonstrate intrinsic
55 optimism, recognising that humans deal with complexities and contradictions on a daily basis.
56 Brining light to and helping label, understand and affect aspects of such organisational
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3 complexity can aid learning organisation both deal and benefit from their nature. What is
4 important is that the abilities leaders and employees need to deal with those complexities
5 (such as SI, adapting learning types, crossing inter-organisational boundaries and similar) are
6 *competences* rather than traits! Which means they are developable abilities. Even though
7 some individuals might have natural propensities that can help them deal with these
8 challenges, the concepts discussed in Issue 2 are all largely developable abilities and careful
9 reflection, professional development and a continuous learning focus for all levels of the
10 organisation can lead to developing the competences needed. Increasing the understanding
11 of organisational learning should therefore be the job not only for leaders and professionals
12 formally in charge of learning, but for all employees in order to help them understand what
13 is happening and what they can do about it. In short, crossing knowledge boundaries and
14 dealing with organisational complexity is extremely challenging, but we can do it and get
15 better at it!
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