Toward an Understanding of the Learning Community

Dori Digenti, Learning Mastery

Originally published in *Organization Development Journal*, V. 16, N. 2, May 1998. Reprinted with permission.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with understanding how learning takes place in community. The continuing transformation of workplaces in the U.S. from command-and-control, individual motivation and rewards, and a business model run primarily from a spreadsheet, to team-based, flatter organizations, has revolutionized the concept of learning in the organization. Leading proponents of the learning organization have written extensively about what is and what is not a learning organization, and similarly what constitutes organizational learning (cf. Schein, 1996; Senge, 1990; Argyris, 1991). But, to quote Peter Senge (1997, p. 17), "There is no such thing as a 'learning organization.' " That is, the learning organization is none other than the learning beliefs and practices of its individual members. Organization learning, therefore, appears to lie somewhere between the individual and the organization as a whole (Cole, 1993; Kim, 1993).

This paper will explore 1) the vision of the *learning community* and its chief attributes, 2) prosocial behaviors that have been connected to effective community formation and functioning, and 3) cognitive strategies which promote the formation of learning communities. The conclusion will offer areas for further investigation into the learning community.

Vision of the Learning Community

The process of creating a learning organization is a direct challenge to how individuals in the organization perform "business as usual." The precepts of the learning organization ask us to be non-defensive, open, questioning, willing to make mistakes, able to work with others very different from ourselves, and to continually learn from our experience. This comes on top of the pure survival aspects of organizational life: i.e., getting the job done. Small wonder that change in organizations, and creating a learning organization, are difficult and long-term scenarios. We are asked in effect to give up key aspects, albeit dysfunctional aspects, or our individual egos. This is not something we can do alone.

The learning community provides the support for implementing deeper levels of learning in the organization. By combining intellectual and emotional learning, the learning community fosters a vision of *wholeness* – the ability to bring one's whole self to the organization. This wholeness occurs on several levels simultaneously:

Of the individual's learning – wholeness in individual learning implies that the brain, mind, body, and emotions are fully engaged in the learning process

Of the group's mission – wholeness of the mission includes the work task, the processes of community formation and maintenance, and the continuous learning of the community

Of the organization's benefit – wholeness here implies that learning communities are open systems, and that they are links across learning communities that allow a free flow and synergy of learning in the organization (Jain, 1997).

A successful learning community is based on the felt *inclusion* of all members. The inclusion process, however, does not preclude efforts to link with other learning communities that are crucial to the learning goal of the group. As in any group formation process, considerable time is spent on exploring and appreciating differences in the community, differences based on racial, gender, generational, national, religious, cognitive, temperamental, and other factors. This exploration is ongoing, and the ability to explore the more subtle differences increases over time.

Supporting these explorations is a *commitment* to learning and trust-building through listening, clarifying by checking assumptions, giving and receiving feedback, and reflection (Seashore, Seashore, and Weinberg, 1992). In particular, the skill of *reflection* is often underdeveloped in the workplace due to the pace and focus on constant new knowledge acquisition. If one takes time for reflection, it implies introverted tendencies, or at the extreme, anti-social tendencies. Reflection as a learning device is not well-respected, and so learning risks either being lost or remaining at the level of data acquisition. Yet, both intrapersonal and interpersonal learning suffer when the learning cycle does not include reflection. The function of the learning community, then, is to encourage individual reflection, and support the individual in acquiring, reflecting upon, and remembering learning.

Building a learning community requires meaning that is based on combining intellectual and emotional learning. Extensive use of the technique of "reframing" a perceived shortcoming in oneself or others to a less pejorative understanding (e.g., "he's really stupid" becomes "he's a bit naïve," "I feel ignorant" becomes "that information surprised me"), is a cognitive technique which allows one to move beyond blockages to learning (Seashore, Seashore, and Livingston, 1997). When combined with one-on-one dialoging to explore interpersonal sticking points, a powerful combination of learning methods results which unites emotional growth with intellectual knowledge.

Learning communities can be based on "communities of practice," where the community forms around the *sharing of tacit knowledge*. A community of practice involves members who share a vocabulary and work with similar tools, and will tend to function collaboratively for learning. In other words, learning within a community of practice is a social process that involves integrating learning in the routines of the professional practice (Schein, 1996). In the workplace, the professional subgroupings within a company form a natural meeting ground for community, and the particularities of professional "type" can be explored and shared between groups (Schein, 1996a). The strongest potential in communities of practice for building learning organizations lies in cross-fertilization between communities of practice to create understanding of the values and beliefs inherent to a profession.

The one danger in the notion of the communities of practice is that valuable learning concerning difference, on all levels, could be lost if they are allowed to evolve with no external inputs. That is, the community of practice is the informal network that allows real work/learning to take place, but may tend to involve those with whom we feel most affinity. True learning communities are *intentional*, that is, the membership has been formed to incorporate a range of views, backgrounds, etc. They are not based on "those I am most comfortable working with" -- blankets, according to Seashore and Seashore -- but also incorporate difference -- sandpaper. Most recently, the importance of sandpaper or "creative abrasion" has been re-emphasized by Leonard and Straus (1997) as a critical ingredient in promoting reflection and innovation.

In sum, the vision of a learning community comprises the following attributes: wholeness, inclusion, commitment, reflection, sharing of tacit knowledge, and intentionality. For the community basis of the learning to form successfully, there needs to be a commitment to *prosocial behaviors*. These behaviors, studied only in the past twenty years, are linked to eliminating the defensive routines which limit learning in organizations, as described by Argyris (1991). The research on prosocial behaviors is useful for understanding the behavioral

foundation of a learning community.

Prosocial Behaviors and the Learning Community

Prosocial behavior has been defined as "voluntary actions which are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals" (Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989). Prosocial behaviors include helping, caring, cooperating, and interdependence. These behaviors may not be purely altruistic, but may be performed for many reasons -- some clearly focused on success-, reward-, or approval-seeking motivations. In the formation of a learning community, prosocial behaviors allow the realization among the members that each members' learning is as important, if not more important, than one's own. Only through these behaviors can the positive environment for learning take place, for the intelligence and insights of each member are critical to the "whole is greater that the sum of the parts" goal of learning in community. A growing body of evidence shows that prosocial behavior can be researched, taught, and learned, and positive learning outcomes have been recorded (Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989).

In their landmark book *Towards a Caring Society*, Pearl and Samuel Oliner (1995) define eight processes for forming a caring society based on prosocial behavior: bonding, empathizing, learning caring norms, practicing caring behavior, diversifying, networking, resolving conflicts, and global connectedness. In particular, the last four processes are directly applicable to the current need for successful learning strategies in global organizations. When combined with proven cognitive strategies, the learning and teaching of prosocial behaviors would form a strong basis for an effective learning community.

Cognitive Strategies in the Formation of the Learning Community

In order for the learning community to provide enhanced learning opportunities for the individual members, there must be a full use of the natural abilities of members and an ever-broadening base of cognitive skills. It is easy to acknowledge the truth of the preceding statement while glossing over its significance. That is, without an extremely strong base of basic skills, the cognitive aspect of learning community work will be limited. Again, it is easy in a white-collar corporate environment to make assumptions about basic skills levels, yet the uneven distribution of these skills should be openly acknowledged and accounted for in the work of the learning community. Many Japanese organizations, while possessing members with a proven high level of basic skills, track skill acquisition in publicly displayed charts and graphs as a component of total quality management. In the context of a learning community, this type of potentially ego-damaging information is viewed as data for the learning community's collective effort in raising the base of knowledge of the whole group. One further reference point involves the perception of learning basic, or any, skill, as a finite act. That is, once the skill is acquired, the focus of learning moves to the next level, rarely if ever returning to the fundamentals. In Japanese learning logic, even basic skills are constantly revisited at an ever-deepening level, so that learning is continuous, and knowledge is constantly refreshed. This cycle of intelligent repetition (Digenti,1996) does much to equalize the cognitive base for the learning community.

In the educational theory and practice work of Campione and Brown (1994), learning communities are set up in the classroom based on principles of distributed expertise, students as designers of their own learning, reciprocal teaching, and cooperative learning. Distributed learning in the community allows for exchange of information across research teams through reciprocal teaching and *jigsawing*. For example, five teams of students each are set up to explore facets of a scientific concept, and each team becomes expert in a subtopic through guided discovery research. The guided discovery consists of research materials that are made available to the students, both in print and through the World Wide Web, to help them form their expertise on the topic. The teacher acts as coach and facilitator in the discovery process, rather than purely as the expert. When a level of expertise is attained by each group, the teacher then asks the students to jigsaw, so that one

expert from each team comes together to form a new team composed of an expert in each subspecialty, and this process is repeated until a complete mix of students has occurred in the community. In other words, the jigsawed groupings combine the expertise in the five subtopical areas, and each member educates the others through answering questions, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting (these being the components of the reciprocal teaching method). Students are inspired to "major" in a subspecialty in this process, and they become a community resource on that topic. The product of this process is a curricular manual that summarizes the learning of the total community.

This method elegantly supports both skills broadening and natural ability activities. In addition, the cognitive work supports inclusion, trust-building, tolerance of difference, and in particular the ability of the student to explore wholeness in terms of developing both an individual and collective "take" on the subject of inquiry. Through verbal exchange and multiple team formation, the primary mode of instruction, students are presented with challenges in problem solving, differing communication styles, and support and channeling of weaker and stronger learners, respectively.

Campione and Brown's approach also nicely reflects a number of learning strategies from Japan, including the tradition of the *benkyokai* (study group), where each member has responsibility for a subtopical area of research, and brings that knowledge into the group in regular meetings. Similarly, the reliance on and full exploitation of expertise within the organization in Japan is well known, as the vast majority of learning takes place through a generational transfer of knowledge within the organization (Digenti, 1996). Finally, learning and cognitive development are used as a medium for developing community and prosocial skills, in particular through the sharing of knowledge and formation of meaningful relationships across generations. These one-on-one intergenerational relationships and strong bonds between individuals must be encouraged and also balanced so as not to overshadow the cohesiveness of the community.

Learning across Institutional Boundaries

The learning community, no matter how successful in the cognitive field, cannot sustain itself without communication with other learning communities. These interdependencies are of course essential within an organization, and may arguably constitute a successful model of organizational learning altogether, but perhaps more critical are those relations with learning communities outside the home organization (Schein, 1995). An essential component of the Japanese career system is the secondment (*shukkoo*) of individuals from their home institution to subsidiary companies, national labs, universities, or government bureaucracies. It is believed that the learning of the organization is dependent upon the diverse experience and learning of the individual members, coupled with strong emotional and career (read: survival) motivations to disseminate the acquired information to the home organization.

In the learning community, a similar willingness to "learn by doing" through experiencing in person the learning process of other is essential. There have been some successful "learning consortia" formed in the past decade which involve interorganizational learning, for example the Center for Quality of Management in Cambridge, Massachusetts. These efforts are seeded by experts who "tell the organizations what they need to do," create modeling behaviors and expertise among the consortia leaders, and tend to be limited to sharing among commercial enterprises. In the learning community, the members themselves would decide their learning needs, and seek out the appropriate interorganizational connections. These connections in theory would span other commercial enterprises, educational institutions, community groups, government organizations, or ethnic/cultural groupings, and the mechanisms for ensuring that individual learning becomes community learning would be a critical component. This is an area of learning research that cries for case studies, methodologies, and models.

Conclusion

As with all evolving concepts, the learning community needs refinement. It is perhaps still a daring statement to claim that learning takes place most effectively in community, that emotional learning and prosocial behaviors will be essential ingredients for success in the 21st century, and that the acquisition and support of cognitive skills, both basic and advanced, are the work of the community.

There are more questions than answers here: How does one build community in an organization, where "professional" and "expert" typically mean not whole? What is the role and contribution of information technology to the learning community; and how significant is face-to-face contact in building and sustaining community? Will organizations continue to demand further blurring of the public/private boundary, and is that a good thing? What are the limits of the learning community in supporting inclusion, wholeness, sharing of tacit knowledge, and so on? It appears that the answers to these questions can only be found in the work of forming and sustaining the learning community itself, with the requisite theory, models, and methods evolving out of the process.

References

Argyris, Chris (1991). "Teaching Smart People How to Learn." *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1991, 99-109.

Campione, J. C. and Brown, Ann L. (1994). "Guided Discovery in a Community of Learners," in McGilly, Kate, ed. *Classroom Lessons: Integrating Cognitive Theory and Classroom Practice*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 229-272.

Cappelli, Peter, and Iannozzi, Maria. (1995) "Rethinking the Skills Gap: Is It Craft or Character?" The National Center on Educational Quality of the Workforce, *EQW Issues*, Vol. 9, 2-7.

Cole, Robert (1993). "Individual and Organizational Learning: U.S. and Japanese Experiences," Speech given at MIT, May 1993.

Digenti, Dori. (1996). "Zen Learning: A New Approach to Creating Multiskilled Workers," MIT Japan Program Working Paper No. 96-29.

Jain, Manish (1997). "Constructing Open Learning Communities to Inspire a Changing World," Paper presented *at CIES '97, Education, Democracy and Development at the Turn of the Century*. March 18-23, 1997.

Kim, Daniel (1993). "Creating Learning Organizations: Understanding the Link," MIT Organizational Learning Working Paper 07.006.

Leonard, Dorothy and Straus, Susan. (1997), "Putting Your Company's Whole Brain To Work," Harvard Business Review. July/August 1997. 11 pp.

Oliner, Pearl M. and Samuel P. Oliner. (1995). *Toward a Caring Society : Ideas into Action.* New York: Praeger.

Schein, Edgar H. (1996). "Organizational Learning: What Is New?," MIT Sloan School of Management Working Paper #3912, July, 1996.

Schein, Edgar H. (1996a). "Three Cultures of Management: The Key to Organizational Learning in the 21st Century," MIT Organizational Learning Working Paper 10.001.

Schein, Edgar H. (1995). "Building the Learning Consortium" MIT Organizational Learning Working Paper 10.005.

Seashore, Charles N., Seashore, Edith Whitfield, and Livingston, Roland. American University/NTL Course in "The Use of Self as an Agent of Change," taught August 1997, Bethel, Maine.

Seashore, Charles N., Seashore, Edith Whitfield, and Weinberg, Gerald M. (1992). *What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback*. Columbia, Maryland: Bingham House Books.

Senge, Peter M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Senge Peter M. (1997). "Creating Learning Communities," *Executive Excellence*, Vol. 14, 3, 17-18.

Stamps, David (1997). "Communities of Practice: Learning is Social. Training Is Irrelevant?" *Training*, V. 32, 2, 34-42.