

The Learning School:

a school culture in which the entire staff is encouraged to engage in personal and professional learning which feeds organisational transformation, and vice versa.

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Problems with in-service training initiatives

During 25 years of working on in-service training initiatives (INSET) I have frequently observed that most of them suffer from at least one of the following:

- The initiative is 'add-on' and does not infuse ordinary everyday work
- It involves teachers and not managers or other staff (which is not to say they should learn the same things)
- The content is arbitrary or self-referential and not founded on individual teachers' more objective needs
- The learning is not systematically followed through into class
- There is no assessment of whether the time was well spent or the effort worthwhile for students, teachers and school

In recent years we have seen increasing reference to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) schemes, in which teachers take responsibility for their own professional learning. CPD schemes emphasize life-long professional learning and generally encourage a reflective approach to professional practice. However, CPD content and quality generally remain an individual matter, lacking structured opportunity for other perspectives on one's own learning. Nor does CPD link individual learning with organizational learning.

The definition of a Learning Organisation

An organisational culture known as the Learning Organisation (LO) aims to transform these problems, and is becoming known amongst leading-edge businesses, organisations and schools, etc. Here is one kind of definition of a Learning Organisation...

"an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself"
(Pedlar).

Many of the related concepts revolve around the organisation getting its work done through the learning of its people. So you don't just learn things to do your job better (though you do that too) but you actually do your job by learning. A spirit of inquiry is *the* work tool, and the workplace becomes a huge adventure play-park in which you learn your way into and out of tasks and challenges. To generate this culture everyone must be involved, with managers personally and visibly committed.

Since I work with schools, I coined the term Learning School which provocatively suggests a school that not only teaches, but that teaches by its learning. Indeed the quality of the teaching may be seen as related to the quality of the learning being carried out by the organization and its staff.

Questions a Learning School might ask of its staff

A Learning School aims to integrate staff/management learning with organisational development, making one connected-up, system-wide approach to learning, linking previously departmentalised efforts, like INSET; management training; organizational change; and flexible responses to client and market requirements. And it aims to do this by exploiting the learning opportunities that lie just below the surface of everything they already do. Questions a Learning School might ask of its staff include:

- Are you, the teacher, demonstrating the quality of learning you want your students to develop?
- Are you, the academic manager, demonstrating the quality of learning that your teachers need to demonstrate?
- Are you, the director, demonstrating the quality of learning that you expect from your managers,

teachers and administrative staff?

- Does your school demonstrate a quality of flexibility and organisational learning that can only come from an attitude of curiosity and openness to learning demonstrated by all its staff?

When a school adopts such learning at the core of its operating system, then the staff set themselves up to demonstrate through their daily work the same quality of learning that they hope to develop in their students. Thus learning flows through the whole system, enhancing school reputation, client relations, organisational creativity, work performance and work pleasure. Perhaps you have worked in places that were like this, at least for a while. A Learning School aims to create conditions in which this kind of learning culture can flourish intentionally and sustainably.

Growing a learning culture in a school

So, how can you get started? I think this question is most usefully phrased as “How can you ‘grow’ a learning culture in a school organisation?” In the last three years I have been involved in developing, initiating and helping to maintain two Learning School projects, one with EmbassyCES in the UK, and the other with ASC International House in Switzerland. Each project involves about 80 managers, administrators and teachers (who are the majority). In both cases we took the annual staff appraisal as the ideal starting point for developing transformational learning dialogues.

First, we overhauled the annual appraisal scheme, stripping out inappropriate features of ‘production-line quality control’, creating a structured space for reviewing each individual staff member’s professional learning on a one-to-one basis. Re-named the Professional Development Review, it provides a marvellous opportunity to find out what people want to offer, what would enable each person to flourish in the organisation and how the organisation can help them do that while also benefiting itself.

The three focuses of the annual learning review

In both of the projects I mentioned we have established three focuses:

1. Your relationship with your work and the school

This is explored through responses to 14 key areas such as the pleasure you get from your work, the sense of being valued and making a contribution, giving and getting feedback, communication, trust, open talk about difficulties, and so on.

2. Learning in the past year

This explores what has been going well or not in your work, your formal and informal learning from your work, and how that relates to what you need and to your longer-term aims.

3. A learning plan for the coming year

This pulls together the conversation and grounds it by developing a simple and realistic ‘individual learning contract’ for the coming year. It involves concrete and ‘do-able’ ways of exploiting workplace opportunities for learning that add value for you and for the organisation. Where possible and appropriate, the school tries to help to create some of the opportunities needed.

Conducting the learning review

Throughout this learning review process, the reviewer offers facilitation and creative challenging, and contributes their perspectives, including feedback on performance, to add to the individual’s learning. The aim is a rigorous and grounded review that leaves both parties focused and, hopefully, optimistic. The learning contracts become working documents followed up throughout the year, informing all in-service and CPD learning activities. Those who conduct reviews (usually the ‘line manager’) participate in ongoing training to develop their facilitative and directive helping skills, and their ability to create opportunities for life-long learning in the everyday workplace.

Other factors to consider

These two projects are in their second year and contain other strategies for growing a learning culture. But the Review is at the core and, although it is early days, a range of indicators suggest we are pointing in a

worthwhile direction. Crucial to all this is the manner in which the project is developed, encouraging maximum participation and buy-in from the earliest moments, and possibly drawing on the catalytic qualities of an outsider project facilitator at certain key stages. And what is the dynamic behind it all? Learning has a special dynamic, and when systems are connected up in a 'learningful' way, they become more informed, more intelligent, more responsive and more fun.

For information on Learning Organizations, see:

Pedlar, Burgoyne, Boydell, 1991 "*The Learning Company*", Peter Senge, 1991 "*The Fifth Discipline*" or enter 'Learning Organisation' or 'Learning Company' into Google.

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