
Editorial

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The learning organisation is one of the concepts that all organisations are strongly recommended to adopt. However, the universality of this concept could be called into question. In fact, many of the authors who claim that all organisations should become learning organisations also say that the concept has to be adapted to fit the individual organisation (see Örtenblad, in this issue). However, no guidelines are presented with regard to how the concept should be adapted, that is, exactly how the concept has to be changed to fit specific contexts.

After all, in recent years, the level of interest in a contingency approach seems to be increasing. The learning organisation has been examined in many different contexts. When it comes to nations/cultures, Asia seems to have received more interest than other parts of the world. There are studies on the learning organisation concept in a Far Eastern context, e.g., China (Elkin et al., 2009; Wang and Yang, 2007; Zhang et al., 2004), Hong Kong (Lam and Pang, 2003) and Taiwan (Lien et al., 2006), as well as in a Southeast Asian context, e.g., Malaysia (Sta Maria, 2003). Studies were also conducted on the suitability of the concept of the learning organisation in a Middle Eastern context, e.g., Jordan (Bates and Khasawneh, 2005; Khadra and Rawabdeh, 2006), Yemen (Abdullah and Kassim, 2008) and Lebanon (Jamali and Sidani, 2008; Jamali et al., 2009). There are also studies on the learning organisation in South America (Hernandez, 2003; Hernandez and Watkins, 2003), in Europe, e.g., Estonia (Mets and Torokoff, 2007a) and Ireland (Birdthistle, 2008; Birdthistle and Fleming, 2005), and in Eurasia, that is, Turkey (Aksu and Özdemir, 2005; Basim et al., 2007; Ögüt and Berber, 2003).

One reason for the seemingly relative lack of interest in connecting the learning organisation to contexts other than the Asian might be that scholars do not see any need to adapt the concept to contexts that might appear similar to that of the Anglo-Saxon context, where the learning organisation/company concept was originally developed and coined (by e.g., Pedler et al., 1991, and Senge, 1990). This could explain at least why there are few works on the suitability of the learning organisation in the North American, Australian (but see Dymock, 2003) and European contexts.

Another possible explanation is that Asian scholars might be more used to publishing articles in international journals, particularly those in English, than scholars in other parts of the world. This could explain, for instance, why there are few articles on the usefulness of the learning organisation in South American countries. There might be works on this topic that are published in Spanish journals, which I therefore do not have access to (because of language limitations). Another explanation for the uneven distribution of works between different parts of the world could be that interest in the learning organisation for some reason has been lower in some parts of the world than others.

Quite a few works relate to different sectors, trades or types of organisations. School (Agaoglu, 2006; Austin and Harkins, 2008; Bowen et al., 2006; Lam and Pang, 2003;

Torokoff and Mets, 2005) and university (Dill, 1999; Franklin et al., 1998; Ögüt and Berber, 2003; Patterson, 1999; Rowley, 1998; Watkins, 2005; White and Weathersby, 2005) seem to have been the most popular types of organisations over the years. Other areas that have been studied, which also are connected to the public sector, include the public sector *per se* (Finger and Bürgin Brand, 1999; Sta Maria, 2003), state-owned enterprises (Wang and Yang, 2007; Zhang et al., 2004), local government (Sharma, 2005), healthcare (Rushmer et al., 2004; Sheaff and Pilgrim, 2006), academic libraries (Abdullah and Kassim, 2008; Fowler, 1998) and bureaucratic organisations (Jamali et al., 2006). Some other contexts have also received attention, e.g., the construction industry (Raidén and Dainty, 2006), the family business (Birdthistle, 2008; Birdthistle and Fleming, 2005), nonprofit organisations (McHargue, 2003), hotels (Aksu and Özdemir, 2005), industrial organisations (Dymock, 2003; Khadra and Rawabdeh, 2006), banking (Jamali et al., 2009), IT (Jamali et al., 2009) and the private sector in general (Mets and Torokoff, 2007b; Wang and Yang, 2007).

Some of these studies see the learning organisation as a universally applicable concept, while others consider it a concept whose definition has to be changed to fit a specific context, such as a specific nation, culture or industry.

Essentially, the papers comprising this special issue contribute to previous knowledge concerning whether or not the meaning of the learning organisation concept needs to be changed before it can be adopted by organisations in various contexts and, if so, exactly how the meaning of the concept has to be changed. Do the relatively general definitions of the learning organisation, which are often used as starting points (see Örtenblad, in this issue), make sense in different contexts or will we have to develop local variants for each particular context? In this sense, this special issue is about a particular type of translation – which all concepts necessarily undergo when travelling in time and space – that could be called ‘intended translation’ (cf. Røvik, 1998). Some elements may be added as the concepts travel or are taken away from the idea that is being translated. It is also possible that the idea is changed radically (see Røvik, 2007). The issue is not (just) that the concept of the learning organisation could be interpreted in different ways by actors in different organisations; rather, it is that the idea of the learning organisation is being intentionally adapted to different contexts, e.g., different cultures, nations, industries or religions.

In this special issue, I have the honor of presenting the first (as far as I am aware) study of the learning organisation in a religious context. Aini Ahmad, at Lancaster University, UK, comments on the learning organisation from an Islamic perspective in her article, ‘Commentary of Senge’s fifth discipline from Islamic perspective’. Ahmad claims that Senge’s version of the learning organisation is more or less applicable in the Islamic context, without any major changes.

The next paper also deals with a context that has not received much attention. Devi Akella, at Albany State University, USA, makes a critical analysis of the ideology of the learning organisation and its negative consequences for Africa based on a case study in Botswana. In her article, ‘The ideology of learning organisations in Africa: a critical analysis’, Akella is quite skeptical regarding African organisations’ adoption of the learning organisation; however, she also gives a few recommendations to organisations in Africa that are adopting the idea anyway.

Daniel Belet, at the La Rochelle Business School in France, presents a very rare study of the learning organisation in a European context. In his article, ‘The LO model and the traditional French organisational culture: a paradigmatic contradiction leading to a

limited implementation', Belet describes obstacles against the adoption of the learning organisation by French organisations in terms of a hierarchical and centralised French organisational culture. Belet claims that French organisations would benefit from becoming learning organisations.

In 'Students' perceptions on intrapreneurship education: prerequisites for learning organisations', Juha Kansikas, at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and Linda Murphy, at the University College Cork, Ireland, add to current knowledge about the university as a learning organisation. In contrast to some of the other studies conducted in this area, Kansikas and Murphy's study focuses on the students and not on the staff. They conclude that intrapreneurship education could benefit from being arranged in accordance with the learning organisation.

The fifth and final contribution in this special issue, 'Who needs contingency approaches and guidelines in order to adapt vague management ideas?' written by this author, is a more philosophical discussion about the need for guidelines for the adaptation of concepts such as the learning organisation in various contexts. I argue that the usefulness of such guidelines is probably relatively limited when it comes to the managerial perspective, but that employees might gain from being introduced to such guidelines.

The articles have various starting points when it comes to defining the learning organisation. They are also different in other senses. For instance, some of the authors seem to express a fundamentally positive attitude towards the learning organisation, while others are more skeptical. Some would probably argue for the concept's general and universal applicability, while others would say that the meaning of the concept has to be changed to fit the individual context, before it can be adopted.

Perhaps it is this variety of views on the topic that makes it so interesting. This is also the reason why it is a pleasure to guest edit this special issue. However, lots of work remains to be done. There are many contexts – religions, nations/cultures and industries – that remain to be studied with respect to the learning organisation concept. And, of course, the works that are presented in this issue could, as well as previous works, be criticised; there are always other perspectives and approaches. I look forward to conferences on this topic, or at the least, conference streams. I also look forward to more special issues and books in this field.

For me, the aim of research is to make the world a little better. I think that an open discussion about whether or not the learning organisation is suitable for different religions, nations/cultures and industries could help us to accomplish this. Many scholars (as well as consultants and organisational actors) view the learning organisation as the salvation of many of the problems of our time; yet there are those who remain unconvinced about the concept. I believe in a free academic debate.

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