

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The concept of the university as learning organization: Its functions, techniques and possible ways of making it effective

E. D. Nakpodia

Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria. E-mail: [michaeltaban@luxmail.com](mailto:michaeltaban@luxmail.com).

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Learning organization is a concept that is becoming an increasingly widespread philosophy in our contemporary society. It has a strong humanistic orientation, being a place where people continually expand their capacity to produce results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured and where people are continually learning how to learn together. In order to implement learning organization techniques, universities tackle some disciplines which are essential to a learning organization. Such techniques are team learning, shared vision and systematic thinking. As a result, the paper is confined to how universities are committed to creating continuous learning opportunities, encouraging collaboration and team learning, establishing systems to capture and share learning, and connecting the university organization to its environment. It also proposed the need for a radical rethinking of the core functions of the university.

**Key words:** Learning organizations, university, aims, techniques.

## INTRODUCTION

University education as a learning organization started in Europe in the eleventh century. Universities are learning organizations at the higher level.

In a bid to develop learning for natural development in the learning organization, countless universities have sprung up all over the globe. The university is a complex social organization occupying a strategic position in the education ladder.

Within the university context as learning organization, there is a *prima facie*, fertile group for the development of the individual. University education is the culmination of a long process of human development which starts formally from the elementary level, running through primary and secondary school organizations in the Nigeria setting, for instance. Indeed, it is a very long drawn process, spanning chronologically and sequentially through several years of studies in all kinds of knowledge and skills.

The successful completion of one level leads ultimately to the next level. Under normal circumstances, a learner in any of the organization is required to have completed other lower levels of education before commencing the search for a university place for further studies in the

academic or learning organizations. Between these levels and the university are a number of requirements to be met before being considered for admission into any University (Nakpodia, 2006).

A university is both explicitly and implicitly built on notions relating to the importance of learning at an individual level, and the idea of learning as the basis for and driver of development is well recognized within universities. Unlike concepts such as knowledge management which pose an implicit threat to intellectual property rights and academic autonomy, the idea of organizational learning to produce a learning organization is likely to be one which goes easily with staff within a university. The fact that the attractiveness of the chosen professions of many academics lies in their opportunity to explore new territory and to learn from these explorations, it seems likely that involvement in organizational learning would act as a significant motivator and satisfier within the work-place. Within the wider organization context, the learning organization concept and organizational learning processes are also likely to be attractive because, in their indeterminacy, they offer the possibility of context-sensitive permutations of both processes and

desired outcomes.

The university is made up of people with different backgrounds in terms of needs, skills, talents, status, competencies, knowledge, behavioral styles, interest and perceptions (Nakpodia, 2003). In fact, the skills and high level manpower needed for the growth and development of any nation are produced by the universities, which are seen as learning organizations. According to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), universities as learning organizations are centers of excellence, teaching, research and store houses of knowledge. The aims of university education are:

1. The acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value orientation for the survival of the individual and the society.
2. The development of the intellectual capacities of individual to understand and appreciate their environment.
3. The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skill, which will enable individual to develop into useful members of the community.
4. The acquisition for an objective view of the local and external environs.

### **The Concept of Learning Organizations**

Organization is a system skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and also modifying people's behaviors to reflect new knowledge and insights. Learning organization is the organization that turns new ideas into improved performance. Learning organizations are organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. A learning company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself (Peddler et al. 1991).

Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles (Watkins and Mesick, 1992). According to Kerka (1995), most conceptualizations of the learning organization seem to work on the assumption that "learning is valuable, continuous, and most effective when shared and that every experience is an opportunity to learn" (Kerka, 1995). The following characteristics appear in some form in the more popular conceptions. Learning organizations:

- i. Provide continuous learning opportunities.
- ii. Use learning to reach their goals.
- iii. Link individual performance with organizational performance.
- iv. Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.

v. Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.

vi. Are continuously aware of and interact with their environment (Kerka, 1995).

The emergence of the idea of the "learning organization" is wrapped up with notions such as "the learning society". Kerka (1995) provided a theoretical framework linking the experience of living in a situation of an increasing change with the need for learning.

### **Characteristics of a Learning Organization**

The following are the characteristics of learning organizations:

- a. A Learning culture: This refers to an organizational climate that nurtures learning. There is a strong correlation with those characteristics associated with innovation. A learning culture implies future and external orientation. These organizations develop understanding of their environment and senior teams take time out to think about the future for widespread use of external sources and advisors.
- b. Free exchange and flow of information: Systems which are in place to ensure that expertise is available where it is needed through individual network and crossing organizational boundaries to develop their knowledge and expertise.
- c. Commitment to learning and personal development: This implies support from top management and people at all levels are encouraged to learn.
- d. Valuing people: This implies that ideas, creative and "imaginative capabilities" are stimulated, by making use of and developing diversities which are recognized as strength.
- e. Climate of openness and trust: Individuals are encouraged to develop ideas, to speak out and to challenge actions.
- f. Learning from experience: This implies that learning from mistakes is often more powerful than learning from success. Failure is tolerated, provided lessons are learnt.

### **Technologies used by Learning Organizations and Universities**

Organizational learning refers to the processes or means by which an organization learns, while a learning organization is defined as the capacity of the organization to learn and the outcomes of learning. The learning organization makes "intentional use of learning processes at individual, group and system levels to transform the organization in a way that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholder" (Dixon, 1994). A learning organization is underpinned by some fundamental disciplines, each of which contributes to the improvement of life within an

organization and the capacity of an organization to learn.

a. Team learning- dialogue leads to creative thought and recognition of patterns that undermine learning. Virtually, all important decisions occur in groups. Teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning units. Unless a team can learn, the organization cannot learn. Team learning focuses on the learning ability of the group. Adult learns best from each other, by reflecting on how they are addressing problems, questioning assumptions, and receiving feedback from their teams and from their results. With team learning, the learning ability of the group becomes greater than the learning ability of any individual in the group.

b. Building a shared vision –leadership that develops commitment through shared “pictures of the future”. To create a shared vision, large numbers of people within the organization must draft it, empowering them to create a single image of the future. All members of the organization must understand, share and contribute to the vision for it to become a reality. With a shared vision, people will do things because they want to, not because they have to.

c. Awareness of mental models- assumptions and generalizations that affect ways of seeing and interacting with “the world”. Each individual has an internal image of the world, with deeply ingrained assumptions. Individuals will act according to the true mental model that they subconsciously hold, not according to the theories which they claim to believe. If team members can constructively challenge each others’ ideas and assumptions, they can begin to perceive their mental models, and to change these to create a shared mental model for the team. This is important as the individual’s mental model will control what they think can or cannot be

### **Alternative Pictures of Learning Organizations**

Watkins and Mesick (1993) provide a practice- practice-orientated, people- focused sketch of the learning organization. In their view, the learning organization is defined by and dependent upon structures and processes that:

- i. Create continuous learning opportunities.
- ii. Promote inquiry and dialogue.
- iii. Encourage collaboration and team learning.
- iv. Establish systems to capture and share learning, to empower people toward a collective vision and to connect the organization to its environment.

### **Development of a Learning Organization**

Various approaches are taken in developing learning organization such as:

- a. Leaders who model calculated risk taking and experi-

mentation.

- b. Decentralized decision and employee employment.
- c. Skill inventories for sharing learning and using it.
- d. Rewards and structures for employee initiatives.
- e. Consideration for Longman-term consequences and impact on the work of others.
- f. Frequent use of cross-functional on a daily basis and Opportunities to learn experience on a daily basis.

Dixon (1994 -1998), who eschews use of the term “learning organization” and refers to it as organization that is learning, takes a similarly people-focused approach to the learning organization, emphasizing the need for dialogue, continuous and collaborative learning and involvement in organizational governance processes. To the discourse on how to promote learning in organizations, she adds the concept of an organizational learning cycle, which may be used as a process tool for development or evaluation purposes.

Argyris and Schon’s (1978) original conception of organizational learning, however, focused primarily on the quality of learning and learning outcomes in an organization. They argued not for a single cyclical learning process, but for the existence of three levels of learning: single loop learning, characterized by correction of errors but no fundamental change to the underlying system; double loop learning, characterized by questioning of the assumptions that gave rise to the error and subsequent change to the system, and deuteron double loop learning, which relates to metacognition or learning how to learn (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

### **Constraints to Learning by and within Organizations**

Learning organizations such as the universities, at one time or the other passes through challenges; hence, it is necessary to systematically analyze them. While schools and colleges are familiar objects to us all, our ability to explain and generalize issues about how they work in any degree of depth is still severely limited by the shortcomings of organizational analysis itself and by the paucity of worthwhile empirical studies within education. The conceptual, theoretical, empirical and even ideological obstacles to organizational studies in education are, therefore, real in different parts of the world. Some of the challenges that are most likely to occur in most universities, especially in Nigeria are briefly discussed.

1. Fragmentation, resulting from linear thinking, specialization, independent, warring fiefdoms.
2. Another challenge is placing all attention or fixation on problem facing it, rather than concentrating on creativity and innovation.
3. Competition, creating an environment in which looking good is more important than being good; measurable, short-term gains count more than long-term achievement,

and problems are solved by individuals in isolation.

In addition to the above, issues of power, politics and time are also factors that fundamentally determine the amount and nature of learning than can take place in any learning organization. An organization that is facing stress, having challenges to find new directions and responding to frequently changing environmental pressures as well as increased scrutiny, it is likely that much time will be spent on 'fire fighting' and 'window dressing' than on development of the system.

## Recommendations

Putting forward some well-articulated aims does not bring success to any organization unless such aims are married with good management and effective teaching and learning atmosphere.

The university sector, being an important contributor to a nation's industrial, political, technological, and economic growth, calls for a conducive learning atmosphere which permits management and staff to function in order to achieve set goals and objectives.

The necessary resources to bring about more skilled university graduates will not be achieved without a fundamental recommendation of the proper role of university education as learning organization. Regrettably, the emphasis of more university places in Nigeria, for instance constitutes an initiative, which is superficial and fails to examine the actual problems, which are seriously inhibiting the task of universities. Clark and Ramsey (1990) pointed out that for universities as learning organization to be successful, both in their studies and in the world of work, another pre-requisite is a need to bridge the all – too- frequent gulfs between educational research and education or professional practice. Shun (1987) suggested a more successful university teaching, which provides a closer link between undergraduate experiences and real life practice. There is the need for proper implementation of programmes if the aim of producing high level manpower will be achieved in the learning organizations.

Learning company is a vision of what might be possible. It can only be brought about by simply training individual; it can only happen as a result of learning at the whole organization level.

The literature on the learning organization and organizational learning consistently cannot be complete without its leadership, which identifies appropriate structures and culture as keys to unlocking the possibility of ongoing learning (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Within the scope of structure, recurring themes are the need for teamwork (Watkins and Marsick, 1993), work across traditional functional and other boundaries, a systems approach, and organizational structures that encourage openness and bottom-up as well as top-down flow of information

(Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Within the scope of culture, recurring themes are the need for involved leadership and openness, a risk taking and action learning approach, awareness of existing mindsets, empowerment and continuing education (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Across the university, leadership, human resource development and knowledge management strategies act as systematic keys that able to open the door to organizational learning.

Absolutely critical to the development of a university as a learning organization is the Vice-Chancellor's commitment to providing the time, support and role modeling necessary for organizational learning as well as his/her commitment to 'servant leadership' – democratic behavior, competence and concern for the well being of those being led (Nakpodia 2000).

Good leadership, while essential at the top, needs also to be seeded throughout the organization. Thus, leadership training and team building activities, focusing on enhancing interpersonal communication, conflict resolution and problem- solving skills must involve people from the highest to the lowest levels of staffing if an institution-wide learning potential is to be created. Teams need to be established with reference to what is known about the enabling factors associated with effective, self- managing teams – namely, clear goals, decision-making authority, accountability and responsibility, effective leadership, training and development, resources, and organizational support. Many university staff is used to working in research teams or on committees, but if teamwork is to be used successfully to develop learning organization, training for effective teamwork must be supported by the conscious development of teamwork strategies in each new teamwork context. Rewards and performance management strategies must also be tied to effective teamwork, especially in the initial phase of any attempt to change work patterns, and it is probably helpful to ensure that enthusiast for teamwork undertakes the initial teamwork projects.

## Conclusion

A review of an existing field of knowledge ought always to show a positive and generous face. There is certainly too much of value in the available variety of organizational approaches for them to be dismissed as useless or trivial. Finger and Brand (???) conclude that there is a need to develop a true management system of an organization's evolving learning capacity. This, they suggest can be achieved through defining indicators of learning (individual and collective) and by connecting them to other indicators. In our view, organizational learning is just a means in order to achieve strategic objectives. But creating a learning organization is also a goal, since the ability, permanently and collectively, to learn is a necessary precondition for thriving in the new context.

Therefore, the capacity of an organization to learn, that is, to function like a learning organization, needs to be made more concrete and institutionalized, so that the management of such learning can be made more effective. Such an approach offers universities a way of focusing on differences stemming from the relatively unique tasks of organizations or broad types of organization.

If we take the importance of these realizations seriously in our framing of organization questions of the university, then we shall go along way towards a more sensitive, practical and demystified awareness of how much socially organized knowledge is transmitted.

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