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Taking stock and looking forward

Paper proposal form

Deadline 3 August 2015

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Marieke Janssen is Head of the Quality Care and Educational Development Unit of the Faculty of Science and Technology at University College Ghent and member of the EURASHE's working group "Quality in HE". As a quality manager Marieke Janssen looks after the intrinsic quality concern of everybody involved in the educational process. She stimulates the responsibility of all participants by focusing on the underlying values and needs that motivate students, lecturers and other stakeholders in order to optimize the educational processes and to maximize their results. Her focus is on the transformation of the educational setting in such a way that it arises the spontaneous interest and curiosity of students and the genuine enthusiasm of the lecturers by appealing to their own values and by installing an organizational culture that attracts highly motivated people and that inspires all programme members to surpass themselves.

After the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.



Proposal

TITLE:

THE LEARNING PARADOX IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Although the main focus of a higher educational institution is on learning, it's far from evident that every university or university college functions as a "learning organization".

ABSTRACT (150 WORDS MAX):

Learning from the animal kingdom we stipulate that the mission for HEI's that want to persist beyond the 21st century is simply: *"how not to be a dinosaur, a frog or a turkey"*. By transforming themselves into learning organization HEI's can adapt in order to fulfil this mission and thus survive all possible futures.

In this paper we first characterize the ideal learning organization. Secondly we explain the learning paradox and the difficulties for a HEI to become a learning organization. We then summarize some ideas on how to resolve this learning paradox and we explore how HEI's can learn to learn.

We conclude that there is a growth potential for those HEI's that succeed in bringing their theoretical knowledge into practice within their own organizations and thus transforming themselves into learning organizations. Within EURASHE's working group "Quality in HE" we agreed on the desirability of further exploring this domain.

The paper is based on: research / policy / practice (select one)

Text of paper (3000 words max):

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HOW NOT TO BECOME A DINOSAUR, A FROG OR A TURKEY

There are three tales from the animal kingdom that are especially instructive for Higher Educational Institutions (HEI's):

1. Going back in time to the Mesozoic era, the big dinosaurs were very successful animals. They seemed invincible but when confronted with sudden environmental changes they were more vulnerable than small mammals and other species
2. The parable of the frog describes a frog slowly being boiled alive. The evidence is that if a frog is placed in boiling water, it will jump out, but if it is placed in cold water that is gradually heated, it will not perceive the threat and will be cooked alive.
3. Taleb tells us a story of a turkey that is fed for a thousand days by a butcher: *Every day confirms to its staff of analysts that butchers love turkeys "with increased statistical confidence". The butcher will keep feeding the turkey until a few days before Thanksgiving. Then comes that day when it is really not a very good idea to be a turkey....* (Taleb, 2012).

For HEI's we retain the following lessons:

1. The bigger a HEI becomes, the less adaptive it will be once it overgrows its span of control.
2. HEI's need to be sensitive to environmental changes even if they are incremental.
3. HEI's may not mistake absence of evidence for evidence of absence. They must learn *"to expect the unexpected"* (Taleb, 2012).

The mission for a HEI that wants to persist is simply *"how not to be a dinosaur, a frog or a turkey"*. By transforming themselves into learning organizations HEI's can adapt in order to survive the 21st century and beyond. They can learn to learn not only in order to survive as a species but mainly to maintain their societal role and significance.

In this paper we first characterize the ideal learning organization. Secondly we explain the difficulties for a HEI to become a learning organization. We finalize by summarizing some ideas to resolve the learning paradox.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST: THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

In today's world of turbulent conditions and intense competition, the ability of organizations to consistently track environmental changes and undertake timely and appropriate responses is considered as an important source of sustainable competitive advantages (Akhavan, Sanjaghi, & Rezaee, 2014); Sustainable self-preservation is intrinsically linked to lifelong learning. Schein states that organizations as well as their managers must become "perpetual learners" (Schein, 2004).

Garvin describes a learning organization as an organization in which employees continually create, acquire, and transfer knowledge helping their company adapt to the unpredictable faster than rivals can (Garvin, Edmonson, & Gino, 2008).

The learning cycle

Organizations go continuously through leaning cycles in which they take the following steps:

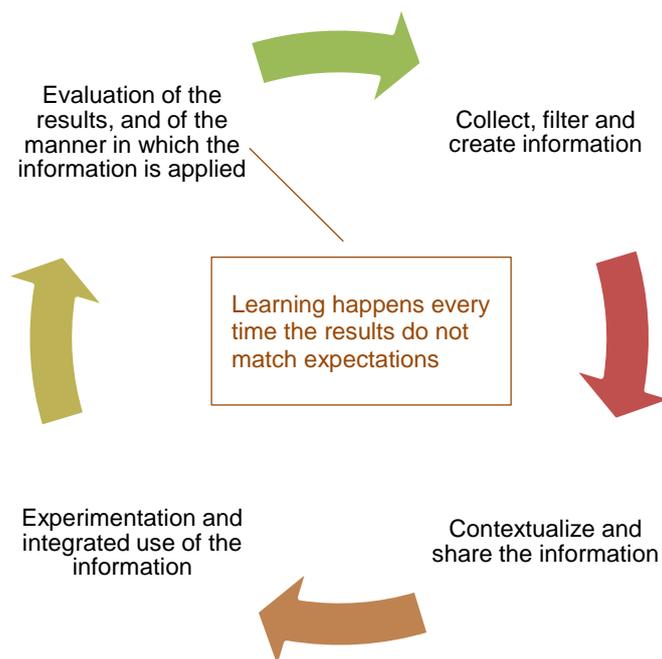


Figure 1: The learning cycle

The more unpredictable the changes in the environment, the faster an organization has to move through different learning cycles in order to use appropriate behaviours and tactics in function of the environmental turbulences. Compare it with sailing in stormy weather rather than in a calm sea with a gentle breeze. The advantage is that you can move faster to get somewhere but you will have to think carefully about the design of your ship (Senge, 1990) and you will have to be more skilled and agile to deal with any possible environmental influences.

Single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop learning

Organizations that deal successfully with unpredictability not only learn by trial and error. They not only control the result of their actions but also reflect on the reason for those results. Learning is then more than a simple feedback loop (Single-loop learning). More advanced organizations are able to double-loop learning. This means that the

organization not only tests its assumptions but also reflects on the causes and builds complex models of possible cause-effect relationships (Argyris, 1976).

Organizations can realize incremental improvements by making continuous small adjustments using single- and double-loop learning. Triple-loop learning dares to put the whole system into question.

It involves constantly questioning existing products and systems by strategically asking 'where the organisation should stand in the future marketplace' and how to superpose organisational competency to create value in the target market. Triple-loop learning is accompanied by organisational ambition, wisdom and courage, and involves knowledge creation. The triple-loop learning process incorporates a higher degree of creative input and organizational unlearning, and is an interactive and iterative process (Wang & Ahmed, 2002).

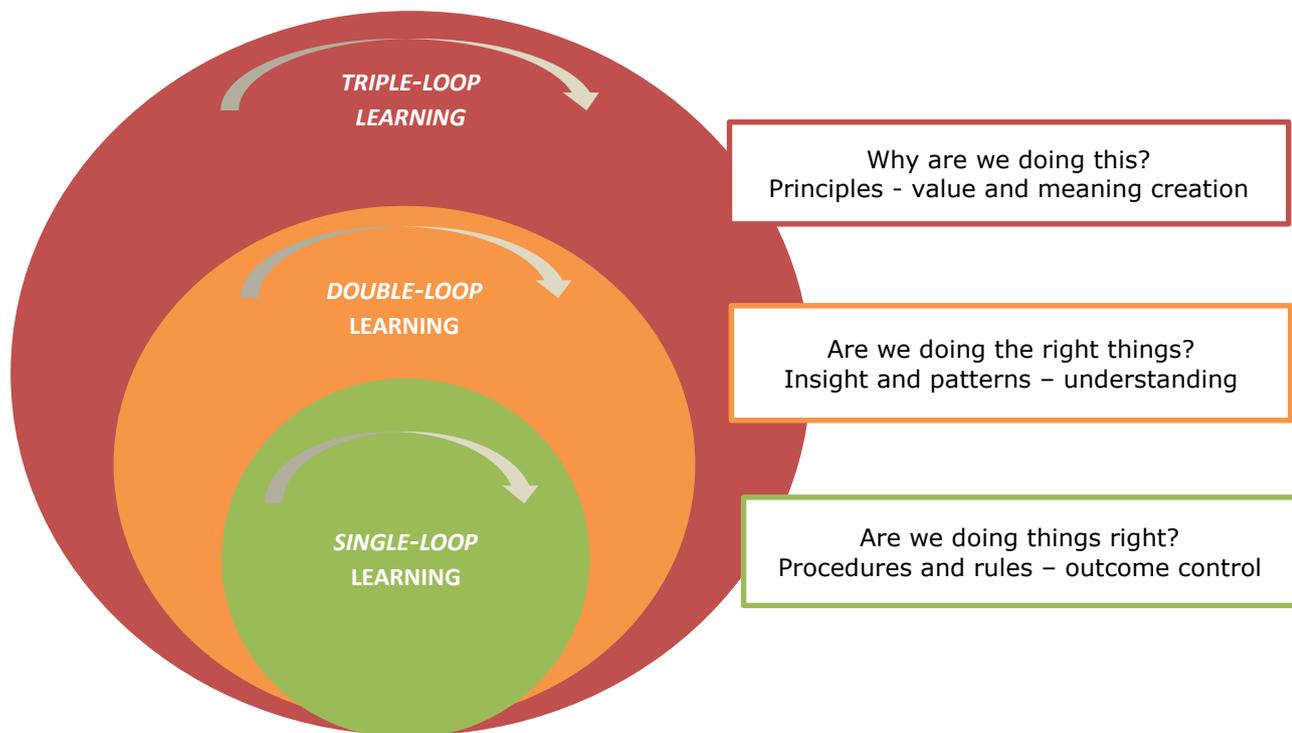


Figure 2: Single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop learning (based on Argyris 1976)

The building blocks of a learning organization

Garvin e.a. (Garvin et al., 2008) identify three building blocks of a learning organization:

1. A supportive learning Environment:
Employees
 - Feel safe disagreeing with others, asking naïve questions, owning up to mistakes, and presenting minority viewpoints.
 - Recognize the value of opposing ideas.
 - Take risks and explore the unknown.
 - Take time to review the organizational process.
2. Concrete learning processes:
A team or company has formal processes for
 - Generating, collecting, interpreting and disseminating information.
 - Experimenting with new offerings.
 - Gathering intelligence on competitors, customers, and technical trends.
 - Identifying and solving problems.
 - Developing employees' skills.
3. Leadership that reinforce learning:
Managers
 - Demonstrate willingness to entertain alternative viewpoints.
 - Signal the importance of spending time on problem identification, knowledge transfer and reflection.
 - Engage in active questioning and listening.

For Senge (Senge, 1990) learning organizations and their members must practice the following '*disciplines*':

1. *Personal mastery*: Organizations learn through individuals who learn. This is the discipline by which the members of an organization continuously clarify and deepen their personal vision, they focus their energies, develop patience and see reality objectively.
2. *Mental models*: The competence by which members of an organization recognize and work with their deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations and 'pictures' of the world that influence how they interpret things and take action. This mental models must be recognized and adjusted to allow new ideas and behaviour changes due to learning processes.
3. *Shared vision*: This is the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future. A shared vision inspires the organization members and stimulates the enthusiasm and the engagement in learning and other activities that contribute to the realization of the shared vision.
4. *Team learning*: Senge states that some management teams with a mean IQ above 120 demonstrate a collective IQ of 63 while other teams who learn how to learn together develop extraordinary capacities for coordinated action. In those teams individual members grow more rapidly than could have occurred if they worked separately.
5. *System thinking*: An organization is a complex system composed of multiple, often complex, interdependent parts. It is important that the different parts act together in a harmonious way.

It is crucial that the disciplines are applied in an integrated manner. Therefore Senge considers system thinking as the cornerstone of the learning organization (The Fifth Discipline). It is the ability to overview the whole and to understand that the whole is more than the separated parts.

THE LEARNING PARADOX

Senge (Senge, 1990) ask the question of why, on average, individuals live longer than businesses. He proposes that businesses that don't learn proactively and that are stuck in old models of reactive top down decision making disappear. This seems true for organizations that are active in a competitive, entrepreneurial and commercial environment but perhaps not in the same way for the field of higher education. Public HEI's get most of their funding from the tax payers and although the competition and the demand for accountability becomes tougher, it is still a different reality compared to the private sector

In his research on how HEI's might better support student achievement Jeffery (Jeffery, 2015) cites Dill (Dill, 1999) who says that while businesses are motivated by profits and must continually adapt to changing consumer tastes, universities are motivated by a core set of principles that must be conserved if they are to maintain their social significance.

This leads us to question whether the learning organization concept can be applied to educational institutions. The learning organization model consists of a highly collaborative, creative organizational model with a main focus not only on problem solving but on innovation. Garvin argues that many universities fail to qualify as a learning organization. Although these organizations have been effective at creating or acquiring new knowledge they are notably less successful in applying that knowledge to their own activities. (Garvin D. A., 1993).

Other scholars explicitly question the possibility for a HEI to become a learning organization: "*The academy as learning community: Contradiction in terms or realizable future?*" (Senge P. M., 2000); "*Is the learning organization idea relevant to higher educational institutions? A literature review and a "multi-stakeholder contingency approach"*" (Örtenblad & Koris, 2014); "*Can universities become true learning organizations?*" (White & Weathersby, 2005). For White and Weathersby few of the underlying values that serve as the underpinnings of the learning organizations are actually honoured in universities (White & Weathersby, 2005).

We agree with Senge that the main problem for HEI's is that their focus is primarily on teaching and not on learning. It are knowing institutions instead of learning institutions (Senge P. M., 2000).

It's clear that for many scholars it's not an evidence that institutions centred on learning automatically develop themselves into learning organizations. Jeffery sums the most frequently identified features of institutions of higher learning that make this transformation especially difficult: "*tenure, departmentalization, scholarly scepticism, weak management, competitiveness, and acute specialization.*" (Jeffery, 2015)

HEI'S AS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Despite Jeffery's concerns mentioned above, he concludes that even the most sceptical literature he reviewed suggests that HEI's can become learning organizations and might benefit from doing so.

We will summarize here some ways that –in our view- HEI's could take to expand in the direction of a learning organization.

Towards an open learning culture

A learning culture is a participatory, open culture in which employees are encouraged to take risks and where it is possible to learn from mistakes.

In his inspiring book *"Organizational Culture and Leadership"* Edgar Schein notes *"When we pose the issue of perpetual learning in the context of cultural analysis, we confront a paradox. Culture is a stabilizer, a conservative force, a way of making things meaningful and predictable. Many management consultants and theorists have asserted that "strong" cultures are desirable as a basis for effective and lasting performance. But strong cultures are by definition stable and hard to change"* (Schein, 2004)

Learning is only possible in a psychologically safe culture where transformational leaders give the example and reward behaviours that are consistent with their vision. In such a culture everything can be questioned at every moment as long as the organization keeps moving in the desired direction which is monitored closely.

We synthesize some ideal characteristics of an adaptive, learning culture (not in order of importance but the first two are conditional for the latter):

- A visionary, inspiring leadership
- A clear focus and decisiveness
- Enthusiasm, commitment and engagement
- A holistic perspective, a system approach.
- Focused on internal and external collaboration
- Share and reflect on good practices
- An open communication that encourages trust
- A constructive critical attitude and openness to feedback
- Objectivity, alignment and systematics
- Relative autonomy and freedom, empowerment
- Acceptance and appreciation of diversity
- Competence development, investment in lifelong learning
- A problem-solving attitude and innovativeness
- A strong external orientation

HE managers will however need to work with the dominant culture which rarely embodies (all) those idealistic characteristics.



The culture of HEI's is commonly considered as a democratic and participative culture given that the academic management is elected and that all decisions are debated within the numerous consultative bodies within the institutions.

At the same time we notice that most HEI's are organized hierarchically with a division between academic and administrative staff. It's perfectly possible that the democratic processes forward those managers which are the least likely to make changes and that conservative trends prevail. Moreover the time-consuming meetings might not be the best way to stimulate real participation. Most meetings within HEI's are organized in such way that the power distribution determines the decision making and that they are vulnerable for groupthink (Irving, 1982) In many HEI's problems are discussed in formal elitist and ritualistic committees, where decision making processes are strongly affected by the pursuit of consensus and the balance of power. If we really want an open participative culture we will have to look for alternative ways to engage all concerned parties in the problem solving and decision making processes. It's no doubt essential to gather the internal expertise and knowledge that can lead to more adaptive solutions and more intelligent decisions. All decision can be discussed on information platforms or social media forums in order to get sufficient feedback and support from all concerned parties (academic and administrative staff, students, workfield, ...) so that enhancements can be implemented without too much constraint.

Transformational leadership

To make the transition in the direction of a learning organization the institutional leaders must look for change agents within the prevailing culture to examine where there are levers of positive dynamics. Course leaders are important in this sense.

Transformational leadership means that managers design organizations that can renew themselves. James states that *"in a learning organization leadership may be found at many levels, from knowledge workers to senior management. The focus of leadership is to learn, to teach and to transform the organization. Leadership tends to be more transformational and visionary than transactional. Leaders focus on influencing change within the organization rather than on efficiency of transactions and tasks. They provide incentives and rewards that encourage teamwork, personal mastery, system thinking, and decision-making. They utilize powerful visions that transform the organization"* (James, 2003). For Senge leaders in a learning organization are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for *"building organizations where people continually expand their capacities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – that is, they are responsible for learning"* (Senge P. M., 2000).

Smart missiles

For Bauman a HEI must be able to act as a *smart missile*. Such smart missiles cannot suspend, let alone finish the gathering and processing of information as it travels – as its target never stops to move and to change its direction and speed, and plotting the place of encounter needs to be constantly updated and corrected (Bauman, 2011).

In order to realize such an adaptive organization there is the need for empowerment and engagement on all levels. This means that a HEI not only has to empower the academic staff but also the administrative and technical staff. We see a huge potential for growth for HEI's on condition that they fully exploit all available human capital. The intrinsic



concern by everybody involved in the educational process is only possible if a HEI develops the human resources by stimulating all the participants in the educational process to take full responsibility and to act (fast) when necessary. Therefore HEI's need to root out bureaucracy and to decentralize control in order to enable everybody to act (in time). In this regard we don't agree with Örténblad and Riina who believe that the HEI's market can hardly be categorized as "turbulent," and for whom a more bureaucratic structure is an advantage in order to mass-produce education efficiently and to ensure and maintain fairness, equality and justice for the employees.

Strategic processes and quality management can be oriented towards control and alignment, rather than on problem solving, adaptation and evolution. There is then a risk that the organization reacts to slow on possibilities and threats because the members won't depart the initial paths and procedures because they do not question them in time. HEI's should orientate their quality management and strategy implementation on continuous adaptation and innovation. Their leaders should reassure that at each moment agreements can be questioned if there is good reason for and when there are alternatives available with more potential or unforeseen threats. HEI's should reward those who dare questioning the current practices in order to engage in double-loop and triple-loop learning.

Learning communities, networks and strategic partnerships

Although the environment of HEI's is more stable than other societal arena's Bauman's Lecture given at the Coimbra Group in 2011 warns us for rapid and undeniable societal evolutions with enormous impact on HEI's and the way they function (Bauman, 2011). The liquid times that Zygmund Bauman describes asks for a total rethinking of our educational practices in order to take into account the uncertainty and unpredictability which today prevails.

It is of huge importance that HEI's by means of their contributors' track of this persistent societal evolutions so that they can respond in time and even play a leading role in the development of the HE sector and the wider society anticipating as much as possible on future evolutions.

HEI's need therefore to engage in learning communities, networks and strategic partnerships and they should stimulate their staff to take leading roles in those alliances. Within those cooperation's the members work with peers and learn informally by sharing their own experiences and expertise with others. Through this formal or informal- possibly virtual- external bounds the members of HEI's can feed their own team, their institution but also the community, network or partnership that they support.

CONCLUSION

It seems that there are vast possibilities for growth if HEI's succeed in bringing their theoretical knowledge into practice within their own organizations and thus transforming themselves into learning organizations. In the beginning it will probably be difficult to progress, but once HEI becomes more "learning" it will move more and more quickly in the desired direction. Within EURASHE's working group "Quality in HE" we had a first brainstorm on the theme and we agreed on the desirability of exploring this domain. We



would like to analyse and assess HEI's capacities for learning and explore shared strategies and tools for transformation and growth in this field.

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Expected learning outcomes for participants:

- Participants will reflect critically on their own organization's capacity as a learning organization and will look for possible ways to help the transformational process within their own HEI.
- Participants will share successful practices and pitfalls that they experienced so they can learn from each other's concrete practice.
- Participants can debate on the possible learning disorders they encounter and their remedies.

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 3 August 2015 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.