

## Introduction

The learning organisation is a well-recognised part of the contemporary management lexicon. Although the concept has been around since the time of Moses (Pedler *et al*, 1991), the term “learning organisation” was first used by Garratt (1987). However, it was the publication of *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990a) that sparked interest in the concept. Since that time, while there has not been the spectacular growth (and subsequent decline) experienced by Total Quality Management, there has been a steady growth in literature devoted to the term. However, a close examination of that literature does not provide the degree of clarity that might be expected. In fact, there are diverging views about the meaning of the concept, even though much of the divergence is tacit. There are those who explicitly follow the lead established by Senge, but there are others who imply they are doing so, by virtue of using the term learning organisation, yet seem to be suggesting something quite at variance with Senge’s model.

This paper examines that divergence of meaning in order to demonstrate the point that the divergence is significant, and that it is important in the context of management theory and practice. It then describes a transcendental phenomenological investigation of the essence of the experience of the learning organisation. These two strands are then interwoven to build a case for the discrimination of different kinds of “learning organisation”.

## The Learning Organisation in the Beginning

There are three identifiable starting points for the concept of the learning organisation in the literature. These are Garratt’s (1987) description, Senge’s (1990a) popular version, and Pedler *et al*’s (1991) conception: *The Learning Company*. Each of these versions of the learning organisation is described briefly below.

Garratt (1987) was the first to publish a book entitled *The Learning Organisation*, in which he developed a model of the concept. Although the desire to create organisations that are capable of conscious and continuous learning can be traced to antiquity, according to Garratt, “all the necessary conditions to create both the intellectual and practical basis of a learning organisation were in place by 1947” (1995: 25).

Garratt proposed the following characteristics of the learning organisation:

1. A three-level hierarchy of policy/strategy/operations
2. A double loop of learning which allows multiple feedback from information flows, direction-giving, and the monitoring of changes in the external and internal environments

3. A means of processing and integrating these information flows by positioning the direction-givers at the centre of the organisation's learning (1994: 61).

Garratt's concept of the learning organisation appears to be a structural and cultural view. It implies that the establishment of an appropriate structure, with learning as the intended outcome and encouraging the adoption of values underpinning a learning culture will suffice to create a learning organisation. Senge (1990a) on the other hand suggested that a learning organisation is not so much a product of structure as it is a product of the way in which the members of the organisation behave, which is of course linked to culture.

Senge's learning organisations were "organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (1990a: 7).

Senge also defined the learning organisation implicitly with his five "disciplines". A discipline is "a body of theory and technique that must be studied and mastered to be put into practice. A discipline is a development path for acquiring certain skills and competencies" (Senge, 1990a: 10). Senge's learning organisation:

1. has a shared vision;
2. promotes personal mastery;
3. recognises its mental models;
4. encourages team learning; and
5. applies systems thinking in its approaches to planning and problem solving.

Although not one of his disciplines, the concept of appropriate leadership was recognised by Senge (1990b) as a vital component of the learning organisation. Senge wrote of the disciplines that "these might just as well be called the *leadership* disciplines as the learning disciplines. Those who excel in these areas will be the natural *leaders* of learning organisations" (1990a: 359, italics added).

The learning organisation described by Senge is one that is characterised by the learning behaviours exhibited by the members, and by the organisation as a collective, rather than by the way in which the organisation is structured. It shares with Garratt's model the emphasis on a culture of learning.

Pedler *et al* (1991) defined *The Learning Company* as "an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and **consciously** transforms itself **and its context**" (1991: 3, bold

theirs). In the book they identified eleven distinguishing characteristics of a learning organisation. These characteristics are:

- a learning approach to strategy;
- participative policy making;
- informing;
- formative accounting and control;
- internal exchange;
- reward flexibility;
- enabling structures;
- boundary workers as environmental scanners;
- inter-company learning;
- a learning climate; and
- self-development opportunities for all (1991: 15).

Clearly Pedler *et al* have a concept of the learning organisation that is quite different from that of Senge. Although it is possible to identify some similarities, the primary emphasis of the learning company is on ensuring that (individual) learning is a pervasive function throughout the organisation. They give little detailed attention to the personal and organisational transformations required in order to facilitate this learning. These transformations are central to Senge's discourse.

The Pedler *et al* version of the learning organisation is much more like a development of Garratt's description. It, too, is more about structure than the behavioural characteristics of the members of the organisation, both individually and collectively. It is only in their final characteristic (self-development opportunities for all) that we see any significant overlap between their model and Senge's.

As the literature has grown over the years, it is possible to identify that which has built on the Senge perception and that which has developed from the Garratt and/or Pedler *et al* versions. A number of these are discussed in the following section.

## **The Learning Organisation as it has Developed**

Over the eighteen years since *The Fifth Discipline* was first published, the concept of the learning organisation has expanded to include organisations that promote individual learning through to organisations that can transform the dominant culture in a radical fashion.

In the former category, Watkins and Marsick initially offered a relatively simple definition, in suggesting that a learning organisation is one “that learns continuously and transforms itself” (1993: 8). Subsequently they expanded their learning emphasis, making it more consistent with a knowledge management framework (Watkins and Marsick, 1996). In a later work, they suggested that all organisations learn but learning organisations are characterised by “proactive interventions to generate, capture, store, share and use learning at the systems level in order to create innovative products and services” (Marsick and Watkins, 1999: 206). Garvin (1993) also followed a knowledge management framework. Burns (1995) picked up some of Garratt’s radical structural and cultural emphasis although he did adopt Senge’s shared vision discipline. Marquadt (1996) adopted the knowledge management approach, and then almost immediately moved to an emphasis on technology and performance improvement (Marquadt, 1997). Huysman’s (1999) version is hard to distinguish from mainstream strategic management approaches. Örtenblad (2004) was able to distinguish four different kinds of learning organisations, none of which explicitly embraced any of Senge’s five disciplines.

The great majority of these and other authors have focused on the process of learning (individual, team and/or organisational) within the conventional context of command-and-control, rather than challenging that context as did Senge, and to a lesser extent Garratt.

On the other hand, Drew and Smith (1995) (reported by Grieves) suggested that the concept of the learning organisation should be viewed as a metaphor for “a social system whose members have learned conscious communal processes for:

1. continually generating, retaining and leveraging individual and collective learning to improve performance of the organisational system in ways important to all stakeholders; and
2. by monitoring and improving performance” (Grieves, 2000: 63).

In this definition, Drew and Smith have acknowledged Kofman and Senge’s (1993) idea of communities of commitment, and provided a snapshot of how a learning organisation behaves as well as what it is.

Similarly, Starkey claimed that “the ‘learning organisation’ is a metaphor, with its roots in the vision of a search for a strategy to promote individual self development within a continuously self-transforming organisation” (1996: Introduction). The value of this definition is the reinforcement of the connection between individual self-development and a continuously

self-transforming organisation. It implicitly acknowledges not only the necessity for this, but also its elusiveness.

Ikehara claimed that a learning organisation exists “when the individuals in the organisation continually learn not only to realise efficiency in the work role but also to develop as an individual and be creative in the organisation as it pursues its unknown future... It is not enough to learn to survive; one must enhance one’s capacity to create” (1999: 65). This is a rather concise summary of what a learning organisation *does*, and what the desired *outcomes* of those activities are, but is silent on what the organisation must *be*.

Snell suggested that the various properties of the learning organisation can be summarised in seven categories, which are a mixture of things that the organisation *is* and things that it *does*:

1. Free exchange in, across and between communities of practice
2. Networked knowledge and expertise
3. Continual improvement
4. Learning leadership
5. Open dialogue
6. Continual transformation
7. ‘Protean’ psychological contracts (2001: 320-322).

Protean psychological contracts are those that:

... support members’ growth and competence enhancement by exposing them to challenges, by giving access to environments rich in know-how, information and learning support, and by fostering developmental relationships between colleagues. For their part, members are expected to take opportunities to avoid obsolescence, engage in lifelong individual learning, share individual know-how, and contribute to collective knowledge development (Snell, 2001: 322).

This idea of protean psychological contracts once again emphasises the interdependency of individual learning and organisational culture or climate in a learning organisation. It points to the perceived importance of enrolling the members of the organisation in the shared vision. It also emphasises the developmental aspect that is implied by Senge’s personal mastery, as well as the sharing included in team learning.

Reflection on each of these descriptions of the learning organisation indicates the distinctiveness of the Senge model of the learning organisation. However, it also provides a perception that there is a variety among definitions that is liable to lead to confusion, particularly for practitioners who are attempting to create or nurture a learning organisation. As has already been mentioned, Örtenblad (2004) was able to distinguish four different

versions of the learning organisation, none of which explicitly embraced any of Senge's five disciplines.

It was in this context that a transcendental phenomenological investigation of the essence of the experience of the learning organisation was launched. This investigation is explained briefly in the next section.

## **Investigating the Essence of the Learning Organisation**

In phenomenological research, the "investigator collects data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation" (Creswell, 1998: 54). The aim is to describe the essence and "meaning" of the experience for a small group of people. Typically, the sample size is between one and ten subjects (Creswell, 1998: 122).

The reasons for using a sample rather than collecting data from the entire population are fairly obvious. With large populations, it is practically impossible to examine every element, as well as being prohibitive in terms of time and costs. Studying a sample is also sometimes likely to lead to more reliable results. Indeed Deming has argued that "[s]ampling possesses the possibility of better interviewing (testing), more thorough investigation of missing, wrong, or suspicious information, better supervision, and better processing than is possible with complete coverage" (1960: 26).

This research project was centred on understanding and analysing interviews investigating the co-researchers' experience of the learning organisation. Added to this are the self-reflections of the investigator made just prior to the data collection and during the data explication. The study used a sequential, purposive sampling plan, with each selection intended to meet the criterion of balance in the final sample.

Eight co-researchers were recruited for this project. The co-researchers were all known to the investigator prior to the research project. This kind of "criterion sample" works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomena under investigation.

Participants were therefore recruited from managers, consultants and educators who had some significant exposure to organisations that exhibited many of the characteristics of learning organisations. This qualification was confirmed by a short (10 minute) preliminary interview of the selected participants along with another four potential candidates, each of whom was deemed not to have sufficient exposure to learning organisations.

Prior to conducting each of the in-depth interviews, the investigator undertook a "bracketing" or "epoche" process (Moustakas, 1994) focussed on the research question. This consisted of

a quiet time spent in solitude, during which the investigator endeavoured to “let go” of pre-conceptions about the phenomenon under investigation, as far as possible.

This epoche process was used to identify personal biases, pre-conceptions and stereotypes that may have interfered with the investigator taking a “naïve” or fresh view of the research data as it emerged. According to Moustakas “the challenge of epoche is to be transparent to ourselves” (1994: 86). Levine has provided support for the need for and value of this transparency by referring to Steiner.

By comparison, Steiner (1947) talks about achieving this larger access and free-flow of meaning using terms like soul, silence and selflessness. He describes it as: ‘... listening ... to one’s colleagues in exactly the way one would listen to the spiritual world ... making one’s own soul a seedbed for others’ germinal ideas (1947: 46). He says, ‘When the inner self is absolutely silent ... (and you) listen to the words of others quite selflessly ... then (you) hear through the words into the soul of the other (1947: 47). This connection, he says, is available only to those ‘who by selfless listening, train themselves to be really receptive from within, in stillness’ (1947: 48) (Levine, 1994: 65).

Each of the participants was interviewed for approximately two hours. The interviews were audio-taped. The questions that were asked of each participant are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview Questions

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Please think about a significant personal experience of a learning organisation that you can remember.</li><li>2. Try to describe what you thought or how you felt during that experience of a learning organisation.</li><li>3. Please continue to describe this experience until you have expressed all the thoughts and feelings you consider to be relevant.</li><li>4. Now repeat steps 1 to 3 until you have expressed all the thoughts and feelings about learning organisations that you consider to be relevant.</li></ol>
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Data explication consists of examining, categorising, tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study. Hussey and Hussey (1997: 248) endorse the point made by Robson (1993: 370) that the main challenge to qualitative data explication is that there is “no clear and accepted set of conventions for analysis corresponding to those observed with quantitative data”. However, this is not the case for transcendental phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) is very prescriptive regarding the conventions and procedures to be adopted for explication of the data. The interviews were explicated by following the phenomenological explication framework outlined by Moustakas (1994). This framework is reproduced in Table 2.

Table 2: Phenomenological Data Explication Framework

<p>Phenomenological reduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Bracketing the topic or question</li> <li>b) Horizontalisation: Every statement has equal value</li> <li>c) Delimited Horizons or Meanings: Horizons that stand out as invariant qualities of the experience</li> <li>d) Invariant Qualities and Themes: Non-repetitive, non-overlapping constituents clustered into themes</li> <li>e) Individual Textural Descriptions: An integration, descriptively, of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant</li> <li>f) Composite Textural Description: An integration of all of the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural description</li> </ul>
<p>Imaginative Variation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Vary possible meanings</li> <li>b) Vary Perspectives of the Phenomenon: From different vantage points, such as opposite meanings and various roles</li> <li>c) Free Fantasy Variations: Consider freely the possible structural qualities or dynamics that evoke the textural qualities</li> <li>d) Construct a list of structural qualities of the experience</li> <li>e) Develop Structural Themes: Cluster the structural qualities into themes</li> <li>f) Employ Universal Structures as Themes: Time, space, relationship to self, to others; bodily concerns, causal or intentional structures</li> <li>g) Individual Structural Descriptions: For each co-researcher, integrate the structural qualities and themes into an individual structural description</li> <li>h) Composite Structural Description: An integration of all of the individual structural descriptions into a group or universal structural description of the experience</li> </ul>
<p>Synthesis of Composite Textural and Composite Structural Descriptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Intuitively-reflectively integrate the composite textural and composite structural descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience</li> </ul>
<p>Source: Moustakas, 1994: Appendix C</p>

All of the elements were synthesised and the investigator created a description of the *essence* of the phenomenon under investigation. The investigator intuitively and reflectively integrated the composite textural and composite structural descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomena (Table 3).



This final step in the process required an intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of each phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994: 100). The composite summary must reflect the context or horizon from which the themes emerged (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). This is the point where the researcher “transforms participants’ everyday expressions into expressions appropriate to the scientific discourse supporting the research” (Sadala and Adorno, 2001: 289).

Table 3: Composite Description of the Experience of *the Learning Organisations* – Essence or Essential Invariant Structure

In the first instance, a learning organisation is a creation of the mind. A learning organisation is palpably different from a non-learning organisation. There is a distinctive culture in a learning organisation, and it is a change seeking organisation that is goal directed. The leadership in a learning organisation has confidence in the system, and so risk-taking and individual development are common characteristics of learning organisations.

A learning organisation synergises individual learning and members seek to learn from others. In learning organisations, osmosis ensures individual learning becomes organisational learning, even in the absence of formal knowledge management systems. Learning organisations engage in double- and triple-loop learning and in team learning.

There are a number of barriers to the creation of a learning organisation. These include a “closed” culture and commitment to the status-quo, as well as other forms of inertia. These prevent the transformation into a learning organisation, even though there may be significant learning taking place within the organisation.

A learning organisation operates in a spiritual context. It is continually searching for meaning, while accepting that meaning is continually emerging from the unknown as if by magic. The members of the organisation recognise and contribute to a profound sense of interconnectedness.

The essence of the experience of the learning organisation for the participants in this investigation is the palpable difference from a non-learning organisation, which is a manifestation of its spiritual context. Learning organisations are experienced as change-seeking and goal-directed organisations that facilitate individual development. There is a widespread feeling in members of a learning organisation of being interconnected, of being valued, of being empowered to make decisions and learn from the consequences, and of being liberated to take calculated risks on behalf of the organisation.

It is important to recognise that the essences or essential invariant structures presented above represent the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomena of learning, development and the learning organisation (Moustakas, 1994: 100). The essences of these or any other experiences are never exhausted, as “every physical property draws us

on into infinities of experience; and that every multiplicity of experience, however lengthily drawn out, still leaves the way open to closer and novel thing-determinations; and so on, *in infinitum*” (Husserl, 1931: 54-5).

The task now becomes to relate this essential invariant structure to the multiplicity of descriptions of the learning organisation represented in the literature. This task is described in the next section.

## **Building on the Essential Invariant Structure**

The findings of the investigation that relate to the learning organisation are quite consistent with the Senge (1990a) perception of the learning organisation. They are less consistent with less radical descriptions of the phenomenon.

Senge’s (1990a) description of the learning organisation, which incorporates elements like personal mastery, *metanoia*, challenging mental models, shared vision, dialogue and systems thinking is quite consistent with the findings. Writers who have embraced the spirit of Senge’s version of the learning organisation (e.g. Cook and Yannow, 1993; Nyhan *et al*, 2004, Upadhyaya, 1995; Vaill, 1996; 1998; Weick and Westley, 1996) sit relatively comfortably with the findings.

The findings included that “a learning organisation is a creation of the mind”, that “it is palpably different from a non-learning organisation”, and that “this is a manifestation of its spiritual context”. These findings are consistent with the view that the learning organisation is a metaphor (e.g. Drew and Smith, 1995; Morgan, 1997; Romanyshyn, 1989). They are further supported by Dirkx seeking “the ambiguity, complexity, richness, and just plain messiness that is at the heart of the learning organisation” (1999: 128). The idea that a learning organisation exists in a spiritual context is well supported in the literature (e.g. Druhl *et al*, 2001; Fisher and Torbert, 1995; Flood, 2001; Ikehara, 1999; Levine, 1994; Neal *et al*, 1999; Porth *et al*, 1999; Senge, 1990a; Steiner, 2001; Vaill, 1996; 1998).

Another important finding was that “there is a distinctive culture in a learning organisation”. This is more general than those discussed in the previous paragraph, hence it is not surprising that there are many examples from the literature that support it (e.g. Allee, 1997; Cook and Yannow, 1993; Drew and Smith, 1995; Garratt, 1987; Popper and Lipshitz, 2000; Weick and Westley, 1999). The nature of that culture includes the dimensions that “it is a change-seeking organisation that is goal-directed”. This is supported by Dodgson (1993); Garratt (1987); Marquadt (1996); Pedler *et al* (1991); Senge (1990a) and many others.

The finding that “the leadership in a learning organisation has confidence in the system”, is supported explicitly (e.g. Shelton and Darling, 2003; Vaill, 1996). However, it is also supported indirectly, for example, by emphasising the importance of trust in the system (e.g. Peters, 1992; Shelton and Darling, 2003). The finding that “risk-taking is a common characteristic of learning organisations”, is consistent with the confidence dimension, as well. The confidence in the system attenuates the perceived risk, and thus more “risky” behaviour can be engaged. This finding also has good support in the literature (e.g. Chiva-Gómez, 2004; Coble, 1998; Garratt, 1999; Sinkula, 2002; Tosey and Gregory, 1998).

“Individual development is a common characteristic of learning organisations” according to the findings of this investigation. This developmental aspect has been explored by a number of writers (e.g. Ellinger *et al*, 1999; Fisher and Torbert, 1995; Garratt, 1999; Nyhan *et al*, 2004; Porth *et al*, 1999; Stewart, 2001; Steyn, 2004). It is also consistent with the Senge (1990a) prescription of personal mastery as one of his five disciplines.

The Senge discipline of team learning is consistent with the finding that “osmosis ensures individual learning becomes team learning”. However, there is further specific support for this in a number of places (e.g. Levine, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Peck, 1987; Vaill, 1996; 1998). The finding that “a learning organisation synergises individual learning” is also consistent with the osmotic transfer of learning. It is further supported by Senge’s fifth discipline, systems thinking, as well as specific identification of the synergy of collective learning (e.g. Flood, 2001; Senge *et al*, 1994).

The idea of team learning (e.g. Flood, 2001; Ikehara, 1999; Senge, 1990a; Sigler, 1999; Watkins and Marsick, 1993) is essentially interwoven with the finding that “learning organisations engage in double loop-learning and triple-loop learning”. The literature on the importance of double-loop learning is extensive (e.g. Allee, 1997; Dixon, 1999; Lindley and Wheeler, 2001; Weick and Westley, 1999). While the literature on the importance of triple-loop learning is less extensive, it is well documented, nevertheless (e.g. Bierly *et al*, 2000; Kim, 1993; Romme and van Witteloostuijn, 1999; Wang and Ahmed, 2003).

Finally, the finding that “there are a number of barriers to the creation of a learning organisation” is well supported in the literature (e.g. Jackson, 2000; McHugh *et al*, 1998; Othman and Hashim, 2004; Sugarman, 2001; Yeung *et al*, 1999).

The findings of this investigation challenge the literature in respect of the idea that a learning organisation is a knowledge manager. The much more organic view that flows from the findings does not sit comfortably with the management of knowledge, and by implication, the management of learning. In other words, the findings challenge the most frequently

expressed view in the literature that a learning organisation can retain a command-and-control culture. They challenge the idea that learning is something that fits neatly into the predominant organisational cultures in contemporary organisations. All of the main findings of the investigation support, or are at least silent on, the radical aspects of the learning organisation expressed by Senge (1990a) and others following his lead.

Nevertheless, a majority of the writers on the learning organisation examined as part of this investigation have adopted a view of the learning organisation which is more consistent with a “command-and-control” view. Their primary focus is on specifying the conditions under which individual learning can be harnessed for the benefit of the organisation (e.g. Burns, 1995; Marquadt, 1996; 1997; Pedler *et al*, 1991; Sun and Scott, 2003; Watkins and Marsick, 1993; 1996), with minimal regard for the individual members. The idea that the learning organisation should be perceived as valuing, empowering and liberating its members is at variance with the common perception contained in the literature.

## **Implications of the Findings**

The essence of the learning organisation incorporates the widespread feeling in members of that organisation of being interconnected; of being valued; of being empowered to make decisions and live with the consequences; and of being liberated to take calculated risks on behalf of the organisation. This finding implies that the primary focus of those who aspire to create learning organisations should be on the development of the members of that organisation, so that they become more adept at making decisions that encompass an organisational and/or societal perspective rather than a self-centred personal one (Hall, 1994). Senge’s (1990a) discipline of personal mastery is consistent with this view. This discipline seems to be aligned more than any other of his five disciplines with the essence that makes a learning organisation for the participants in this research.

Personal mastery is also required for leadership to have confidence in the system. If the leaders of the organisation are not embedded in a sense of personal mastery, they will not have the confidence required to empower others and set them free to take the calculated risks required for the organisation to thrive.

Recognition of this central role for personal mastery emphasises the link between the learning organisation and underpinning phenomena of learning and development. Personal mastery is the outcome of a combination of deep learning and cognitive and spiritual development.

Once again recall that Örtengren distinguished four types of learning organisation:

1. one where the learning takes place at work (that is, on-the-job learning and training) instead of at formal courses.
2. an organisation where one continuously improves existing routines (that is, single loop learning) and evaluates and questions what one does (double-loop learning).
3. one that has a climate that facilitates the learning of the individual (for instance, it provides time and space for learning) but does not actually control the learning.
4. an organisation with a flexible, organic structure. The learning is a precondition for the flexibility rather than an object in itself. The structure is designed to make the organisation as flexible as possible. The organisation members are organised in teams, and the structure is decentralised, which is not necessarily in accordance with an organic structure (2004: 348).

Although he has not embraced the Senge characteristics of the learning organisation, he has raised the idea that there may be more than one kind of “learning organisation”. Indeed, perhaps these four types are the starting point for a classification of learning organisations, which will provide a developmental framework for the creation of the kind of learning organisation envisaged by Senge and supported by the co-researchers in this investigation.

Örtenblad’s Type 1 learning organisation fits the traditional model of an organisation that provides on-the-job training. Even when other learning has occurred outside the organisation, for example in a TAFE college or a university, there is a need for socialisation or enculturation, to ensure that the policies, standard procedures and practices of the organisation are adopted. It is proposed that such an organisation could be designated a “training organisation”.

The description of Type 2 by Örtenblad is consistent with the most common description of the learning organisation. Almost all writers allow that a distinctive feature of a learning organisation is that it does engage with double-loop learning. While for some this is the only essential characteristic, others see it as just one of many. Hence, it may be of value to allow that a “learning organisation” is one that engages in double loop organisational learning.

However, as the discussion above has indicated, there are “learning organisations” that go beyond double-loop learning. At this point, Örtenblad’s types provide little assistance. His Type 3 organisation is simply one that encourages learning, and his Type 4 is self-contradictory. He claims it is an organisation that has a flexible and open structure, which may assist individual and organisational learning, but then he also suggests structural imperatives that limit flexibility.

This research indicated, among other things, that the radical version of learning organisation requires the cognitive and ego development of the organisational members to the point where

they are able to operate and allow others to operate as learners first and adherents to the “one best way” second (Fisher and Torbert, 1995). An organisation that has embarked on this journey towards the personal mastery of its members, and by implication to its own freedom to learn, it is suggested fits the title of a “developing organisation”. In one sense, it incorporates Örtenblad’s Type 3, but it is much more than the facilitative organisation that he suggests. It provides the balance of challenge and freedom to choose that is the province of spiritual development frameworks in institutional religions.

Finally, an organisation that is able to operate, as a matter of course, in the space where “[t]here is a widespread feeling in members of a learning organisation of being interconnected, of being valued, of being empowered to make decisions and learn from the consequences, and of being liberated to take calculated risks on behalf of the organisation”, deserves a different designation. The term “liberating organisation” seems a fitting one for such an organisation. Once again, there is a hint of this in Örtenblad’s Type 4, because it most certainly is an organisation that has a flexible and open structure. However, a liberating organisation also has flexible and open goals and objectives, as well as flexible and open processes and practices, including flexible engagement of members. It is the shared vision that provides the glue that holds it together into a paradoxical kind of organisation.

## **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that there is a range of conceptions of the term “learning organisation”. The literature on the subject provides at least two basic approaches to the learning organisation as a concept. On the one hand there is the commonly held view that a learning organisation is a variation of the traditional command-and-control approach, with learning and knowledge as aspects of the organisation which need to be commanded and controlled. On the other hand there is the more radical approach espoused by Senge and followers that recognises that learning is something that is antithetical to command-and-control.

In attempt to provide more clarity regarding these differences, a transcendental phenomenological investigation was carried out. This investigation sought to identify the essence of the experience of a learning organisation for eight co-researchers. The results of this investigation supported the radical view espoused by Senge. In addition, it provided evidence that indicated that there was more than one type of learning organisation.

Örtenblad had suggested that there are a number of different types of learning organisation. An examination of his work in conjunction with the findings of the investigation described above indicated that is value in distinguishing four types of “learning organisation”.

Although there is some commonality between Örtenblad's types and those suggested in this paper, there is also a degree of variance.

This paper has proposed that the range of organisations that claim the title of learning organisation can be usefully categorised into four types:

- Training organisations;
- Learning organisations;
- Developing organisations; and
- Liberating organisations.

Further investigation of the validity of these types is encouraged.



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