

AUTHENTIC LEARNING IN BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract. *The knowledge economy has brought learning outcomes and processes to the centre of organizational activity. However, traditional business organizations are not naturally conducive to authentic learning – a condition which is likely to undermine, in the long run, efficiency advantages gained in the short term. This paper introduces nine learner roles defined in relation to learning objectives, and conceptualizes authentic learning as a combination of five learning dimensions: single competence, multiple competence, situational-adaptive, interactive-collective and innovative-progressive. It then recommends a more open perspective on learning and innovation to be adopted by the HR strategist and the business leader of the knowledge economy, and examines some of the challenges and dilemmas raised by the implementation of this perspective. In particular, it discusses the significance of business leaders' abilities to successfully moderate between political and epistemic authority within their organizations.*

Keywords: human resource strategy, innovation culture, knowledge economy, leadership, learning organization.

1. Introduction

With human capital appreciated for its intellectual (rather than physical) dimension, information and knowledge have become the central values of contemporary business. This development, generally referred to as the knowledge economy, is changing the nature of business itself.

If human capital skills are so crucial to success in the new economic environment, are today's business organizations producing an adequate climate for honing such skills? This paper explores the scope and limits of a traditional business organization in creating a human capital oriented culture, in particular in identifying and developing authentic learning skills in their (prospective) employees. As a result, it suggests recommendations for business leaders regarding strategic action to facilitate the cultivation of authentic learning skills in their organizations.

2. Learning objectives and learner roles

For any business organization to increase knowledge capital, learning becomes a key process. And as a process, learning is essentially goal-oriented (Mezirow, 1991).

In this context, I propose for discussion nine *learner* roles relative to objectives, as observed over fifteen years of teaching and training experience. These are as follows: A. *the pupil-worker* (who learns *mainly* in order to overcome a definite obstacle, e.g. pass a test, get a university degree, win a race or competition, obtain a job); B. *the*

entrepreneur (who learns *mainly* in order to earn more money, to gain material profit, to accumulate wealth); C. *the high flyer* (who learns *mainly* in order to achieve more status and/or power); D. *the professional* (who learns *mainly* in order to master a profession, to achieve excellence in an area of knowledge and/or practice); E. *the fair goer* (who learns *mainly* in order to behave honestly, justly and ethically in all circumstances); F. *the parent* (who learns *mainly* in order to fulfil responsibilities and care for others); G. *the child* (who learns *mainly* in order to achieve happiness and/or personal fulfillment – this may include learning for personal enjoyment or contemplative learning, for its own sake); H. *the social humanist* (who learns *mainly* to improve society and the human condition); and I. *the innovator* (who learns *mainly* to produce something new and original).

These roles are not mutually exclusive, and they can relate to or interact with each other in different ways (e.g. final versus instrumental, dominant/overriding versus subordinate, independent versus interdependent). Also, each one of us could assume more than one role at the same time, or different roles at different times (where these *different times* can be accidental circumstances or longer periods of our lives). The above list is by no means intended to be exhaustive. It is simply the start of a classification which may help us determine predominant learning objectives for learners in particular circumstances, and thus interpret their *prevailing* attitude towards learning through an (indeed, a posteriori) examination of their behaviour *at a particular point in time and in particular circumstances*.

In this context, current stereotypes of business success in Romania, for example, (as reflected in frequently publicized comments by business leaders, employees and HR specialists) may easily lead us to infer that the preferred learner roles, from the perspective of the business organization, should be B – the *entrepreneur* (which reflects profit-making as the key imperative of any business), A – the *pupil-worker* (required for the success of prescribed operations) and C – the *high flyer* (required for the continuing motivation to perform). A meaningful concept of business success, however, must be founded on a more complex perspective on the societies and cultures in which businesses operate. Thus, B-A-C may well be a relatively accurate description of the business success formula for Romania in the unsettled and confusing period of economic transition it continues to experience, but it may not hold true for other periods and/or other cultures.

Furthermore, longer-term business vision and strategy requires a more refined understanding of the importance of other learner roles. This is especially relevant in the context of imminent changes in the Romanian market as well. With the increasing demand for improved services to attain EU standards, and with the political alignment of Romania to the Lisbon Strategy objective for the EU to achieve a knowledge economy by 2010 (as outlined in CEU, 2000), two other learner roles are likely to become relevant in securing the competitive edge: F- the *parent*, and D – the *professional*. Furthermore, considering current perceptions of the Romanian business climate (Precupețu, 2006), one can conclude that more serious attention to learner role E – the *fair goer* is overdue. One can also predict that emphasis on the learner role G – the

child is similarly likely to occur, but perhaps within a more extended timeframe, as employees see their immediate material needs regularly satisfied and progress to more diverse and complex aspirations for self-fulfillment. Finally, it is apparent that Romanian business practices cannot for long remain sheltered from current international debates on corporate social responsibility (for a detailed description of these debates, see Du Plessis, McConvill *et al.*, 2005). Corporate social responsibility issues will inevitably contribute to shaping objectives for business organizations in Romania in the not too distant future, and thus bring into focus learner role H – the *social humanist*.

In the hereby constructed framework, learner role I – the *innovator* has a special significance and must be treated separately. Given that emphasis on the production of new intellectual value is the crucial distinctive feature of a knowledge economy, learning for innovation becomes the most significant condition for competitiveness in this environment. This may contradict the widely accepted idea that business organizations are (as they are expected to be) primarily focused on profit-making and that, therefore, nothing could possibly override learner role B. Here I would like to point out that each of the learner roles proposed in this paper has a well-developed psychological dimension, and as such applies to individuals only. While the organization itself may be profit-driven, the application of a learner role to an organization can only be notional. The question is whether an individual learner whose thinking and behaviour are dominated by profit-making objectives could achieve the *best* learning performance from the perspective of the innovator. While further studies are required to provide a comprehensive and documented position on this issue, our common experience may suggest that situations of conflict between the two priorities are not so difficult to identify. In advocating enlightened self-interest or longer-term vision at the level of business strategy, organizations aiming for success in the new economy have come to realize that taking risks with non-entrepreneurial but innovative learners may make good business sense, and that (with sufficient resources) short-term tensions between profit-making and innovation may converge into harmony when planning longer-term outcomes.

3. Authentic learning: the business case

Considering all of the above, what constitutes *authentic learning* from the perspective of a competitive business organization in a knowledge economy? I propose the following defining elements: (1) competitive performance in pre-established roles (single competence learning); (2) ability to perform competitively in more than one pre-established role (multiple competence learning); (3) flexibility and adaptability in switching between learner roles according to circumstances (situational-adaptive learning); (4) ability to transform individual knowledge into organizational knowledge capital, through teamwork and sustainable knowledge management systems (interactive-collective learning); and (5) ability to align current individual (and group)

learning objectives with the learning objectives required to ensure the viability of the business (innovative-progressive learning).

With respect to element (1), let us begin with the notion of learning as cognitive change leading to behaviour that is well-adjusted to goals and circumstances. For the business case, this adjustment translates into behaviour that adds value for the organization. Today's businesses (in Romania and elsewhere) continue to need people who can perform at a competitive level in any of the nine learner roles (A to I) described above. Consequently, business leaders continue to approach the issue of learning skills assessment in staff hiring processes as a matter of matching each organizational function (or, more specifically, job description) with a corresponding learner role: e.g. role A – line processing worker / front desk operator; role B – salesperson; role C – manager; role D – technician / consultant / specialist; role E – strategist / policy maker; role F – customer service officer; role G – employee relations manager; role H – public relations manager; and role I – researcher / inventor. Depending on the organization's preparedness to invest in employee training, recruitment decision-makers may choose to select individuals who either *have a predisposition for* or *demonstrate an ability to quickly adjust their behaviour to* a particular learner role. The former situation is generally considered to be more favourable than the latter, as it leads to savings in training costs.

In relation to element (2), emphasis on the advantage of hiring individuals with multiple skills and experiences requires a substantial transformation of traditional recruitment approaches, by including in the selection criteria desirable features which may not be directly relevant to the job description in question but respond to more generic, long-term developmental needs of the organization. For example, faced with two candidates with comparable skills as required by the job description, but where only one of them displays an inclination for other types of learning (not emphasized by the job requirements but relevant to the longer-term needs of the organization), a good HR development strategist should select the multi-learner-profile candidate on the basis of this consideration, even if it is not a pre-established selection criterion. This wider perspective on the selection process is likely to pay attention not only to identifying different learning inclinations in candidates, but also to developing those inclinations through further training.

Element (3) emphasizes a meta-learning skill of crucial importance in a dynamic and uncertain business environment, namely situational learning versatility. A skilled individual in this respect is able to promptly identify the learner role required by a particular situation, adopt it and perform under the new conditions. This approach is at the core of an adaptability strategy which breaks away from the stereotype of competition-based strategies. This learner realizes, in a timely manner, that the competitive edge for his or her organization is likely to be obtained not through engaging in the dominant race sustained by the market competition at the time but by promoting the parameters of an alternative race, whose criteria are likely to be validated by the market later on. This is indeed a matter of vision and risk-taking, but specialists have already concluded for a while now, from compelling empirical evidence, that this

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kind of strategy has more chances of longer-term success in emerging business environments than traditional, pre-established competence approaches (Ghoshal, Bartlett *et al.*, 1999; Kim and Mauborgne, 1999).

With knowledge becoming the vehicle of choice by which organizations produce value in the new economy, another key aspect of authentic learning is element (4), which refers to the individual's ability to share the acquired knowledge, empower the organization and its members, and thus generally enhance performance through improved systems and behaviours. According to Jones (1996), adjustment to dynamic business environments requires more open knowledge-sharing attitudes, where there is no privileged locus of knowledge to correspond with formally accepted organizational structures. Each employee of the organization is a potential source and producer of new knowledge and wisdom, and should be valued as such within the organizational learning system.

As a validating corollary, element (5) connects authentic learning performance with sustained viability as the ultimate aim of business organizations. In doing so, it leads to a profound change in our perspective on the process of learning. Knowledge and skills should no longer be regarded as acquired 'goods' residing in individuals. Accordingly, 'learning can better be understood as participation in situated practice, as expansion of objects and ideas, as "translation" and mobilization, and as embodied emergence' (Fenwick, 2006, p.691). The long-term viability objective, combined with the uncertainty that defines the development of markets in the new economy, justifies the promotion of innovation, vision and irreverence to pre-established power structures within organizations as desirable skills which are representative of the authentic learner.

Although literature conceptualizing the need for developing elements (3), (4) and (5) in the authentic learner of the knowledge economy has informed research in the field for almost a decade, surprisingly little has been done to apply these perspectives on learning and produce coherent HR strategies for the identification and development of the relevant skills in prospective and/or actual employees. On the other hand, situational-adaptive, interactive-collective and innovative-progressive learning have in common a superior level of creativity, which by its very nature challenges the limits of skills development by design. Therefore, the question 'What can the business leader and/or HR strategist do to identify and develop creative meta-learning skills?' requires well-considered answers, reflecting the complexity and subtlety of the issues involved. While the production of specific techniques and instruments for assessing the three types of skills discussed here is awaiting further research, it should be noted that such efforts are generally likely to be far more successful if they focus less on the mechanics of work skills acquisition and more on the identification of work environments and forms of participation naturally conducive to desired systems of activity and knowledge production. This perspective is presented and illustrated in detail by Billett (2004).

One important challenge arising from the encouragement of innovative-progressive learning in organizations under the long-term business viability imperative is the potentially subversive character of this kind of learning and, especially,

of the work environment required to foster the relevant skills. The following section elaborates on this issue.

4. Innovative learning and organizational power structures

It has been observed for some time that organizations are complex social systems which produce their own internal power structures and belief systems, independent of the power agendas and belief systems of their individual members (Adler, 1999). Although the organization cannot exist separately from the individuals who act within it, it can be said that the power and vision outcomes resulting from interactions and negotiations that take place among its members are different from those produced by any particular member (notwithstanding individual power differentials), and form the organisation's separate identity. It is also commonly recognized that organizational power structures develop at two levels: a formalized level, which is deliberate and strategically justified by the business leadership on the basis of economic and professional considerations; and an informal level, resulting (less controllably) from interactions among the individuals' skills, personalities, behaviours and/or performance, as validated by market results.

What also becomes apparent in the new economic environment is that the same power relations that have emerged from previous business success (and have probably maintained it for a while) are likely to become an obstacle to future creativity and adaptability within the organization. Consequently, it has been recommended that learning and formula consolidation should be followed by a process of *unlearning*, characterized by re-opening entrepreneurial receptivity to a range of possibilities comparable with the one enjoyed by the organization prior to a major market success. Wang and Pervaiz (2003) define this process as triple loop learning. Because "power relations structure hierarchies of knowledge and skill within a community, determine who gets to judge skill, determine who has access to knowledge and who can participate in knowledge creation" (Fenwick, 2006, p.702), this means that, to allow unlearning, the organization's leadership should encourage an internal culture in which power structures and/or relations are maintained in a state of flux. Visions of future market success entertained by non-dominant members of an organization may contradict current visions supported by dominant members or groups. To the existing organizational power structures, this will necessarily appear as subversive. However, the exigencies of the knowledge economy demand that business leaders not only listen more carefully to the opinions and suggestions of their followers, but also actively encourage followers to disregard existing power relations when it comes to long-term business viability – and this may mean undermining the power base of their own leadership. Or does it? The new business leader's dilemma is how to preserve the motivational authority of his or her leadership while relinquishing authority with respect to investments of trust in business ideas.

A conceptual distinction between *political authority* and *epistemic authority* may help resolve this dilemma. Whereas the former is conventional and requires

uncritical acceptance for reasons of expediency and efficiency at the operational level, the latter derives from an overriding focus on valuable predictions or anticipations of successful business formulas. Importantly, leaders and followers are drawn together by a common awareness and understanding of this distinction. No amount of political authority, however legitimate, could act as a substitute for epistemic authority. On the other hand, epistemic authority, obtained through market validation, may not automatically bring about claims to political authority. The terms and conditions in which the two types of authority could inform each other must be negotiated by all members of the organization in an effort to preserve a transparent climate of fair access to reward and merit recognition. The wisdom of the new business leader may lie in his or her ability to find the level of interplay between political and epistemic authority which is most beneficial to the organization. This would involve, among other things, openness to input by other members regarding future business ideas, the ability to evaluate 'objectively' (that is, a-politically) the quality of each projection, willingness to take risks and create conditions for alternative business plans to emerge, and treatment of the organization's culture as an open system in which everyone's creative potential is stimulated.

But there is another important element in this equation. As previously mentioned, our natural reaction to market success is to entrench the emerged formula in a formally accepted structure of authority. This creates a dominant culture which may stifle future alternatives. On the other hand, natural reactions to failure are similarly restrictive: when error occurs, the natural reflex of leaders and followers alike is to call for the *formalization* of processes and structures, in order to increase control over an adverse situation (Phelps, Adams *et al.*, 2007, pp.10-11). This move is bound to be detrimental to the development of a healthy innovation culture. Hence, the wisdom of the new business leader may also lie in his or her ability to select privileged moments in which their strategic decisions may contradict their natural impulses – and to inspire followers to do the same. In conclusion, further research is required to equip business leaders and HR specialists not only with refined instruments for identifying and developing authentic learning skills but also with more reflective (one can say, philosophical) leadership behaviours.

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