Integrating informal learning processes

Learning in complex systems

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Learner driven learning has become a buzzword in the pertinent discourse on Corporate Learning and Development, for a variety of reasons. For one, many of us are confronted with budget constraints and are looking for ways to foster self-organized learning that arguably saves a lot of costs. At the same time, we begin to realize the limitations of structured learning environments, such as classroom instruction or traditional e-learning tools, and their comparatively low return on investment. Last not least, we witness the emergence of the "Web 2.0" with its social media technologies and applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging, social bookmarking, and more, which allow participation and networked connectivity among people in ways we have not seen before, but which also pose a number of threats and opportunities which we do not yet thoroughly understand.

All this is putting the learner center stage. It challenges the traditional approach to learning, and it has massive consequences for the current configuration of the key players of the value chain of learning and education. A comprehensive learning practice that is supposed to have an impact on the capabilities of large scale systems is no longer just about the design of learning programs and learning interventions, sophisticated as they may be; it is about understanding and shaping the underlying social infrastructure of learning so that it supports individual, organizational, and strategic development in an integrated way. To put this challenge into context, it makes sense to quickly review a few fundamental perspectives on learning as a social practice.

Most of today's learning activities in large organizations take place in more or less elaborated settings that focus on the qualification of the workforce and the development of leadership bench strength to assure a strong pipeline of future executives. They follow a narrow paradigm of learning, one that takes its identity from the institutional educational sector at large, with its focus on individual qualification. Consistent with this paradigm, learning is usually perceived as a people domain which belongs to the human resource function. However, to master the learning challenges of the 21st century, we need to look at the notion of corporate learning with new eyes. We need to readjust our lenses and look beyond the traditional boundaries of the practice, thus redefining its identity.

The common notion is that learning happens through the transfer of knowledge or information from experts and teachers to "ignorant" learners. This Cartesian perspective does not do justice to the complexity nor to the important social implications of learning. It takes learning out of the rich interactive context and treats the process as a mechanistic transaction. A more appropriate approach is to conceive of learning as a highly contextual process that is closely linked with the organizational culture and its structural manifestations. At the same time, this process also actively shapes its context, which makes learning not only a tool for qualification but also a powerful transformational force in organizations.

Also, the current educational system in the Western world is almost obsessively focussed on developing intellectual, cognitive, and analytical competencies. This obsession is closely linked with the dominant paradigm of scientific inquiry designed around the rational explication of the world and results in a mechanistic approach to dealing with it. Although the emphasis on linear rationality has been the dominant way of Western thinking since René Descartes, we know that the cognitive domain is only one part of the equation – and not always the most important one. Creating impact on our environment – i.e. putting learning into practice – requires emotional, social, and political competencies that enable us to make things happen in a context of competing interests. Furthermore, acting blindly in our own interest without a

thorough understanding of the interconnectedness of systems and the long-term consequences of puts pressure on the balance of systems and is ultimately destructive. To assure our long-term survival, we need to put knowledge and what we can do with it into the context of moral responsibility and universal ethical standards. Learning must address much more than skills and knowledge.

Finally, if corporate learning wants to be a core practice for assuring an organization's ability to compete in complex and fast-changing environments, it needs to play in domains that reach beyond individual learning. We all agree that there is no great organization without great people, but the best people cannot unfold their potential if they are hamstrung by poor organizational structures and cultures. People excellence and organizational excellence are two sides of one coin that need to be addressed together if they should come to life. But there is more: even great organizations with great people are doomed to failure if they rest on their laurels. Corporate learning that strives for a sustainable competitive advantage needs to foster the ability to continually challenge the rules of the game, transcend existing business models, and orchestrate the organization's stakeholder network in a way that leverages the firm's core competences.

Impactful learning architectures in large scale systems need to address all three domains – people excellence, organizational excellence, and the strategic excellence. Looking at learning interventions from these three angles opens up a new universe for corporate learning and allows us to envision new development paths for its practice. The following figure illustrates the expanded universe of such a comprehensive learning paradigm (see Deiser 2009, pp. 21–40).
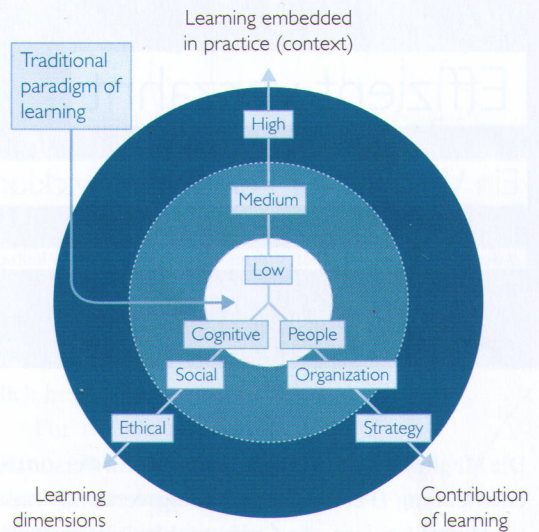
The more we leave the traditional paradigm of learning and expand into the larger universe that unfolds in the figure, the more important become organizational designs for informal learning, designs that create an organizational architecture that fosters deeply contextualized learning at spaces where practice happens. This requires a shift of focus and attention: today, still 90% of learning budgets are dedicated to formalized learning activities, leaving the so important informal processes unattended and anarchic. It is important to keep in mind however, that it would be fatal to approach informal learning with traditional management tools. Rather than being planned, informal processes by and large just emerge and are thus self-organized. Too much structural intervention destroys their potential. What is needed are learning interventions that focus on the organizational design of enabling and fostering highly contextual learning experiences whose dynamics are driven by the learner, not by instructors and experts. //

Reference: Roland Deiser: Designing the Smart Organization: How Breakthrough Corporate Learning Initiatives Drive Strategic Change and Innovation. San Francisco 2009.