The Learning Organization, Power, Politics and Ideology

Introduction

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Introduction

Learning has a long history as a concept in organization theory. The essential concern is to enhance processes of learning which can be used within organizations to improve individual and collective actions through better knowledge and understanding (Shrivastava, 1983; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Dodgson, 1993). The notion of the learning organization is of more recent origin, focusing on organizations designed deliberately to facilitate the learning of their members and, hence, much freer collective adaptation: ‘An organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself’ (Pedler et al., 1991: 1, original emphasis).

In this paper the notion of a learning organization developed by its most active proponents is first summarized and then placed within a framework of assumptions about power and political activity that is seemingly lacking in current literature. Arguments are developed regarding the likely incidence of political activity within a learning organization and its implications for employee empowerment that are deemed important for learning. Finally, we examine the potential use which may be made of the language and symbolism of the learning organization to create new ideological representations.

The discussion of a learning organization is centred on the prescriptions of Gerrat (1987), Pedler et al. (1988, 1991), Senge (1990) and Hawkins (1991), bringing together two main themes: levels of learning and the organization as a complex system. A theoretical concept of individual learning related to feedback loops at three levels (Argyris and Schon, 1978) is translated prescriptively into three levels of ‘control’

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of learning in a learning organization. At level I, the operational level, errors are corrected against norms built into operating plans (Garratt, 1987; Pedler et al., 1991); at level II, ‘strategic learning’ occurs when existing goals and transformation processes are perceived as no longer matching external challenges (Garratt, 1987). Level III learning relates to purpose (Pedler et al., 1991) when an organization’s leaders share wider community perspectives, tapping new sources of spiritual energy (Hawkins, 1991: 183).

Systemic claims are also made, as when Senge (1990) visualizes a learning organization as an organic system within which subsystems interact in complex ways, converting inputs into outputs. The conversion processes are transformed over time to ensure survival of the overall system in the face of changing environmental conditions. Pedler et al. (1991) have integrated the concept of levels of learning into a systemic view of a learning organization in their ‘energy flow model’, where individual ideas and actions interact freely with the collective determination of policy and conduct of specific operations (see Figure 1).

In the Pedler model individual employees are given opportunities for self-development and self-management within minimum, flexible structures and organic processes which operate spontaneously, guided by a common purpose and shared vision. Information systems are such that all employees can participate in the development of strategy
and policy, adding their own data gleaned through their roles as environmental scanners. Formally authorized rewards are made through flexible systems, open to employee scrutiny, in which account is taken of the accrual and use of knowledge. Coordination is achieved in a collaborative mode through an internal market operating between the organization’s units, while semi-autonomous groups facilitate collective learning and mutual adjustment between members. Hence, control is exercised through learning, distributed among local networks.

A ‘learning culture’ encourages the development of individuals and the transformation of the organization by nurturing a questioning spirit, experimentation, differences, openness and a tolerance of disequilibrium. Shared mental models of how the organization might best function within its environment inform the processes and structures.

Unlike the ‘hero’ as leader of traditional organizations, giving directions and making short-term decisions, the leaders of learning organizations are designers of the learning process; stewards of the vision (a ‘purpose story’ of ‘governing ideas’); teachers to the organization’s members; and managers of the creative tension between what is and what might be (Senge, 1990, emphasis added). Senior managers also identify commonly shared resources, accessed by distributed units run by local managers.

As described, there seems to be a void in the literature concerning the form of government suitable for a learning organization and the role of political activity which, within the framework provided by that form, might facilitate the essential spontaneity of activity and relationship while safe-guarding the interests of the organization’s members. For example, no-one seems to question whether traditional forms of authority over private-sector organizations, enshrined in the legal rights of proprietors in preference to those of employees, are relevant and legitimate for a learning organization. Nor is it acknowledged that a culture associated with proprietal prerogatives delegated to a managerial cadre subject to inadequate social control might have spawned a belief in the ‘managerial hero’. And yet when Senge argues that such heroes should give way to leaders who develop and steward the governing ideas of the learning organizations he, like Garratt (1987), does not question whether such a transformation is feasible given two constraints: first, the current legal framework and institutional arrangements within which private enterprise organizations operate; and, second, the propensity of leaders to crave power and to lack the self-criticism sufficient to prevent that craving translating into a contempt for the rule of law (Kets de Vries, 1991) and into an unwillingness to give up power (e.g. Boeker, 1992).

So it is difficult to see from Senge (1990), for example, how challenges will readily be mounted to improve ‘the strategic insights’
conceptualized by the new wave of leaders; to contest their decisions on ‘commonly shared resources’ and how they will be managed; to offer an alternative set of ‘governing ideas’ to those which leaders have a right to develop and steward; and, ultimately, to determine who the leaders should be.

Pedler et al. (1988, 1991) discuss the need to involve other stakeholders, including employees, in key decisions. But they offer no insights into how these others might be formally empowered along with shareholders to provide a legislative and institutional context within which a learning organization might thrive. Hawkins (1991) sees the need for legitimacy but implies that this will be provided by ‘the men and women of wisdom an organisation needs on its board, among its trustees and facilitating its learning environment’ (p. 183). He does not acknowledge that the role in government of such ‘guardians’—a notion inherited from the early Greek philosophers—has given way to democratic forms in most western societies (Dahl, 1989).

Looking inside the learning organization, the literature cited raises various issues about differences of interest, value and belief. Again it is not clear how these differences will be resolved in the learning context where, compared to their peers in more traditional organizations, individuals have more to gain or lose in terms of their own development and associated rewards and where, if the organization structures and processes are established as planned, individuals and semi-autonomous groups will have greater scope to negotiate. Pedler et al. (1988) anticipate debate that implies a ‘recognition of differences, airing disagreements, tolerating and working with conflicts’, a debate that raises the need to ‘democratise corporate policy making so that all members are involved in important matters of organisational directions-finding, and learn to tolerate a much higher level of constructive conflict’ (p. 67, original emphasis). On the other hand, in none of the works cited is any serious attempt made to suggest that political processes in the learning organization should be legitimized within some sort of democratic framework as a means of facilitating the learning that comes from difference, challenge and conflict. Instead, those who are most active in prescribing a learning organization as the way ahead tend to accept the unitarist perspective offered by Argyris and Schon (1978), within which political activity is seen as a pernicious means of resolving conflict, through power play involving interpersonal and intergroup conflict which leads to error rather than organizational learning. People use defensive forms of reasoning, creating win–lose situations in which ‘competition dominates over cooperation, mistrust over trust … and lead to the coalition groups and the organizational politicking’ that have been described by various writers (Argyris, 1992: 30).

Senge (1990) takes up this theme; for him, the ‘traditional’ organiz-
ational politics 'is such a perversion of truth and honesty that most organisations reek with its odour' (p. 273), to be transcended only in a learning organization built around a 'shared vision', where merit, not politics, is dominant and 'doing right' is the norm.

Senge's position contrasts with that taken in this paper, where it is argued that the absence from the learning organization model of specific features to facilitate changes in the framework and institutions of governance, and in the political processes constrained by them, detracts considerably from the model's prescriptive value, especially as it affects the interests of rank-and-file employees. To make this case, we go on to use the assumptions implicit in the learning organization literature to frame a very different but, we would argue, just as persuasive account of how behaviour in such an organization might evolve, evoking the worst fears of Argyris and Schon (1978), Senge (1990) and Argyris (1992) as reflected in their pejorative use of the term 'politicking'.

Power and Control Within a Learning Organization

In this section, the assumptions which seem to underlie a learning organization are considered critically within a theoretical framework of power and political behaviour. In defining power we rely initially on Giddens (1979) whose starting-point is shared by the proponents of a learning organization: structure and system. Specifically, power is determined by the relationship between an institution's structure—a framework of rules and pattern of resource distribution—and its systemic aspects, consisting of regular social practices deriving from relations between various actors or groups deploying the resources to which the structure gives access. The pattern of access to resources is biased in that the relationship between structure and system favours certain actors over others.

Actors within an organizational setting are involved in a 'dialectic of control', attempting to maintain some semblance of control over their work lives. To safeguard their interests through relationships of mutual dependency, they take advantage of imbalances in personal access to resources—raw materials, finance, equipment and information; of opportunities to command the use of those factors; and of 'authorization', which enables one person to exercise command over another. Over time, the dialectic serves as an adaptive process through which structures and their associated systems are confirmed or transformed and, with them, the bias in the distribution of resources.

Consistent again with the learning organization, knowledge is a central element of the dialectic, both knowledge skilfully applied in practice—'practical consciousness'—and explicit knowledge which can be expressed in discourse and, therefore, used more freely to influence meanings in social relationships—'discursive consciousness'.
More crucial still as a source of personal advantage is knowledge of the social system within which an individual relates to others within this dialectic of control—a person’s knowledge of his or her organization, say, that enables penetration of its dynamic processes intellectually and in action. Giddens argues that the penetration that a person’s ‘organizational knowledge’ allows them is typically limited, especially by the boundaries of the action and its situation within the institution.

Power is only one of three elements which comprise all social practices, the others being the communication of meaning and the use of normative sanctions. While power is moderated by the facilities used by actors to draw upon or to frustrate the imbalance of resources within the structure, communication depends upon the meanings which can be articulated and shared within the constraints of structure and ideology, and sanctions rely on the application of norms which are institutionally legitimated. In totality, those involved in social interactions can attempt to exercise control of the dialectic through their discursive facility linked to any combination of resources and any negative and positive sanctions of coercion and inducements on which they can draw.

On this central issue raised by Giddens, the proponents of a learning organization envisage that control will be vested in the learning processes but do not clarify who has ultimate responsibility for the control of the organization. Pedler et al. (1988) stress the importance of control of the learning process but do not prescribe who should exercise control; implicit, however, is that ‘managers’ will play key roles. Garratt (1987) is unashamedly elitist: of the three necessary roles—operational planning and action, external monitoring and integrating and direction-giving—the latter is the directors’ ‘brain function’ which, ‘monitors what is happening in day-to-day operations, checks what is happening in the wider environment, and then takes decisions on how best to deploy the limited resources it controls to achieve its objectives in the given conditions’ (p. 33). Hawkins (1991) accepts the ‘brain function’ category and adds the ‘business soul’. Here, ‘at the translation point between strategy and integrative awareness’ are his ‘key members of an organization’ whom we have characterized earlier as ‘guardians’. They can ‘act like the salt in the soup, to draw out the awareness of the deeper purpose which contains and informs the strategic thinking and operational realities’ (p. 193). No role for ordinary mortals, this.

Senge (1990) provides the most complete explanation of control processes within a learning organization. For him, the notion of a chief executive being in control is ‘an illusion’. Instead, the dynamic and complex nature of a large organization requires that control be dispersed to those who are close to the environmental challenges and
responsible for the processes available to deal with them. Overall control then depends on the quality of local decision-making. As with the metaphoric control processes found in nature, this can be assured through the ‘learning disciplines’; central is a shared vision, not imposed from above but emergent from a process such that ‘local visions and organisational visions will continually interact with and enrich each other’ (Senge, 1990: 293), assuring a ‘common identity’ among the people in the organization. The key task of organizational leaders is to foster this common identity by understanding the organization as a system and the forces driving change in it, and by developing a learning process for managers who have to deal with local issues.

How do these accounts of relationships envisaged within a learning organization square with Giddens’s control dialectic? Differences are certainly an important element in the learning organization’s internal market, but any conflicts are to be settled via constant dialogue. Collaboration based on trust rather than competition is the essence, enabling conflict to be used constructively. So whilst control is an essential element, it is not an overtly political process. The learning organization seems to be placed within a unitarist framework of relationships, a utopia to be ushered in through the pursuit of shared goals in a climate of collaborative high trust and a rational approach to the resolution of differences.

Such an approach might well yield unobtrusive control devices, mitigating the level of political activity. But in circumstances of external turbulence and internal transformation, where greater uncertainty and dissensus might be expected, such devices are not likely ‘to be wholly effective in producing a coherent and unified set of goals and definitions of technology’. Instead action is just as likely to ‘result from bargaining and compromise (where) those individuals or groups with access to the greatest power will receive greatest rewards from political interplay’ (Pfeffer, 1981: 28). This position, stemming from the view that organizational goals result from a ‘continuous bargaining-learning process’ (Cyert and March, 1963), is supported by Kanter’s (1989) finding that, in new forms of organization designed to deal with external turbulence, political action increases considerably and political skills are at a premium. Such an outcome fits Clegg’s (1989) view that political activity and decision-making are correlated because of the effect decisions generally have on resource allocation and, consequently, on power relationships.

Pfeffer (1981) suggests ways of moderating the extent of political activity. Slack resources can be created to reduce competition for them; a set of decision-makers can be established, homogenous in respect of attitudes and skill level; and the importance of decisions can be reduced. How far these steps are possible or desirable in a learning
organization is questionable. If slack resources existed, organizational leaders might perceive a turbulent external environment as less threatening and conceive of more conventional, less risky ways of adapting to it than implied in a learning organization. Second, homogeneity in decision-makers would potentially threaten the very interpersonal differences judged so essential to learning and creativity. Finally, it might be possible to reduce the importance of decisions—for example, by avoiding them, relabelling them, breaking them down into less crucial elements—but the scope for such tactics would probably be limited in a learning organization where decision-making to create new meanings and actions is, presumably, central.

Within the political model, managers construct and operate disciplinary practices to ensure that employees perform as expected and to sanction forms of creativity (Clegg, 1989). Such creativity-enabling processes are at the heart of a learning organization, as managers seek to construct consent through the employee’s internalization of control needs in ways that are typical of self-disciplined professionals. Certainly, mutual investment in the process of learning on the part of management and other employees should enable the former to move the frontier of control, as noted by Buchanan (1992) in his study of a computer manufacturer, where ‘boundaries of what were once considered acceptable worker control are being expanded by new environmental pressures’ (p. 138).

But in constructing permissive forms of control, managers face a tension in the employment relationship, seeking to minimize unit labour costs in the owners’ interest as against the employees’ interest in maximizing financial rewards. This tension is resolved through political processes via which rewards and other conditions of work are determined, disagreements over substantive issues are fought out, and the boundary of control is contested between managers and workers (Storey, 1983). It is a political arena that provides ‘the obvious channel into which discontents over the more intangible aspects of work can be displaced’ (Brown, 1989: 249). And given the relatively ambiguous context of the learning organization—with its turbulent external environment and its minimal and flexible internal structures and processes—such intangibles are likely to be more numerous than in traditional forms.

Despite this, we are assured that the difficulties and conflicts traditionally associated with the determination of rewards can be overcome in a learning organization by opening up assumptions which govern reward policies so that they can be shared and examined, enabling alternatives to be ‘discussed and tried out’ (Pedler et al., 1991). This is ‘likely to involve changing not only the distribution of reward, but also the distribution of power . . . from the “top pyramid” to the wider company’ (Pedler et al., 1991: 22). But again, apart from
proposing that Human Resource Management (HRM) strategy should be central to business policy (Pedler et al., 1988), there are no provisions within the framework that might facilitate this redistribution. On the contrary, Keenoy (1990) argues that HRM is neutral as regards the benefits it brings to employees of any particular strategy followed; what makes HRM strategic ‘is not how personnel management policies translate into practice but whether or not these policies represent a good fit with the prevailing product and labour market constraints’ (p. 6, original emphasis). Keenoy quotes the withdrawal of recognition from trade unions in a company where this action supported the overall business strategy—a specific example that bodes ill for notions of redistribution of power from the apex downwards as part of the creation of a learning organization.

Pressures to intensify employees’ work effort are likely to exacerbate disputes about the pay–effort relationship, and yet those business leaders consulted by Pedler et al. (1988) and to whom Garratt (1987) provides guidance on the learning organization seem certain to expect that changes proposed within the context of a learning organization should create increased productivity. This implies that, wherever the frontier of control is drawn, time will be a critical element in constructing forms of control. Even given accounting systems which are user-orientated, learning organizations will probably not escape the pressures to introduce further time-related control mechanisms. The likely outcome is more automation or techniques such as: ‘just in time’, enabling increased control of operations; the employment of man–year indices to regulate the efficient use of white-collar staff; further inroads of ‘chronarchy’ into managerial autonomy through devices such as ‘time management’ (Scarborough and Corbett, 1992); and, at the strategic level, the monthly monitoring of ‘key control ratios’ (Garratt, 1987).

These pressures on managers to minimize labour costs by manipulating the relationship between financial rewards and effort expended might moderate how far the frontier of control will be displaced within learning organizations. In Giddens’s (1979) terms, employees are likely to attempt to exert control over their work and pay by making use of their discursive facility, including new knowledge, other organizational resources to which they have access and any negative or positive sanctions on which they can draw.

So, from this analysis, it can be argued that the notional moving outwards of boundaries of control implied in a learning organization can be seen as a dependent variable, one of a variety of strategies available to the management of an organization in response to environmental turbulence. Hence the ‘learning organization’, like the notion of ‘organizational culture’ (Meyerson, 1991), might well be destined to be transformed from a root metaphor within the organizational learning literature—helping to explain the nature of organizational activities
and performance—into a prescription to help managers retain control under dramatically changed external circumstances.

**Power and Agency in a Learning Organization**

In this section theories related to institutional setting (Giddens, 1979; Clegg, 1989) are used to examine how the members of a learning organization, especially its leaders, might use their discursive capacities and penetrative knowledge of the organization’s structures and systems in attempts to build up agency, both alone and in collaboration with others. While Pedler et al. (1988, 1991) do not discriminate between the degree of organizational knowledge which different actors or groups enjoy or require, or the level of skills they bring to social relationships, Hawkins (1991) differentiates between the penetration sufficient to handle operations at level I of learning, to enhance organizational effectiveness at level II, and to relate the organization to evolutionary needs at level III. Hawkins here provides an example of the general proposition that penetrative knowledge is limited in terms of the actor’s position in the organization and his or her capacity to make tacit knowledge explicit and, therefore, discursive (Giddens, 1979).

Wherever they are situated, participants will attempt to articulate their knowledge, developing explanations for the activities in which they are involved and trying to persuade others to accept their rationalizations. Given that learning organizations are, by design, less structured than more traditional forms, and that structures themselves provide socially accepted rationalizations for specific types of activity, we should probably expect to find a high volume of informal communications as people seek to resolve the uncertainty created by ambiguous situations and the relative dearth of structural cues to behaviour (Pfeffer, 1981). As Kanter (1989) noted, managers engaged frequently in informal networks to achieve influence within ‘modern’ organizations with less structure and more flexible systems than usual. Within such networks those who have high levels of Giddens’s (1979) discursive capacity are more likely to build up a reputation for persuasiveness, for creating new knowledge successfully through their skills in presentation, argumentation and debate (Pfeffer, 1981).

Other personal characteristics that are important in influencing collective meanings include actors’ self-efficacy and associated beliefs in the validity of positions they are proposing; through such self-confidence considerable commitment is built up so that conscious self-dealing is rarely necessary. Knowledge of the distribution of interests and power is also an advantage, and of decision processes, as a basis for successful political activity: the penetrative ‘cynical knowledge’ that provides cues to deciding where to invest resources and with whom to collaborate in agency-building (Pfeffer, 1981).

While personal characteristics are likely to differentiate one actor
from another in their potential to become ‘influential’—even off-setting, to some extent, the constraints of bias built into structures—probably more crucial is the access to penetrative knowledge that comes from position within structures. By definition, learning organizations are likely to be less hierarchical than conventional forms, with fewer managerial levels and positions. Even so, the incumbents of such positions will typically occupy key boundary roles with access to deeper penetrative knowledge than is open to non-managerial colleagues. This will be in addition to any formal authority they are granted, enabling them to command other people and to allocate conventional, collective resources.

Clegg (1989) would argue that, potentially, such managers are a ‘key agency’, with scope to further their interests through control of membership and meaning within alliances and coalitions. That control is achieved because they operate at organizational ‘nodal points’ where two circuits of power intersect:

- a circuit of power within the organization—‘dispositional power’—out of which organizational forms are created, based on membership and shared meanings; and
- external circuits of ‘facilitative power’ through which socially derived forces flow in the external environment, engendering innovation in techniques of production and discipline.

Within the learning organization Pedler et al. (1991) argue that all members who operate at the external boundary act as ‘environmental scanners’, bringing interpretations of external events into the organization as potentially useful knowledge. But this formulation obscures the degree of penetration which different roles allow and, therefore, the scope they give for accumulating organizational knowledge and personal influence. It is one thing, for example, to bring back information about the pattern of a competitor’s local petrol prices, but insights into that organization’s overall market strategy, or the government’s position on competition policy as it affects that market, would constitute much more significant knowledge. This conclusion is most important when focusing on the power of managers at the apex of an organization, at key nodal points in the interlocking internal and external circuits of power.

The set of institutions that constitute the pathways of the facilitative circuit of power in the wider society, and hence the external environment of any one organization, has its own structure of rules, resources and systems regulating relationships between the separate institutions. As at the level of the single institution, there are asymmetries which favour certain organizations over others in, for example, their dealings with government or the financial system. In effect, at societal level, networks of agencies control nodal points within an economy’s circuits
of power so as to establish relatively stable and privileged sets of relationships which enable them to safeguard their access to power and, hence, to build and maintain formal organizational structures (Clegg, 1989). As Scarbrough and Corbett (1992) recognize, ‘the considerable power which management exercise over technology, for instance, is linked to their relations with external constituencies of owners, technology suppliers and providers of capital’ (p. 26).

Senior managers are almost certainly at the most salient nodes when considering strategic decisions involved in raising finance, securing new markets, reaching agreements with major suppliers, and influencing government. This seems to be the reality of Hawkins’s (1991) levels II and III of a learning organization, concerned with strategy and evolution, and of Senge’s (1990) corporate leaders as being responsible for designing the systems through which their followers learn. Individuals operating at those levels can use increments of corporate knowledge created through the learning process in their dealings with other agencies in the external environment. It is a conclusion which parallels Kanter’s (1989) finding that chief executives of modern forms of organization tend to retain their identity, status and control, occupying positions which still yield considerable power, despite the difficulties they face in creating agency through networks of stakeholders rather than simply controlling subordinates.

Here is reflected institutional bias in the distribution of resources and access to them (Giddens, 1979; Clegg, 1989). And since knowledge is such an important resource in a learning organization, we might expect much political activity to be associated with how it is acquired and stored and how access to the collective databank is controlled. Despite Pedler’s protestations that information will be widely available in a learning organization (Pedler et al., 1991), limitations are inevitable. Organizations are, after all, social arrangements in which specialist roles are coordinated to create and use knowledge, overcoming through collective action some of the informational and cognitive constraints faced by individuals, summed up in the term ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1976). Role specialization is modelled in corporate information systems designed to meet the specific task needs of organizational members and to prevent the ‘leakage’ of commercially sensitive information. While the data in such systems are built up from individual contributions, ‘rules expressing hierarchical access to information have come to be incorporated in the provision of levels of access and “security”, complete with elaborate passwords and gates’ (Scarbrough and Corbett, 1992: 14, original emphasis). The ‘rationality’ embedded in the protocols gives potential power to those experts who devise and incorporate the rules into the system and to their client senior managers who make decisions as to access. Together, they will probably be the only ones able to penetrate in a
holistic way the knowledge which can be used to provide meaning for the organization's members in a strategic and evolutionary sense.

The experts' understanding of their organizational role will almost certainly ensure that they identify with those at the apex of the organization and devote their expertise to helping managers there to use the holistic knowledge which, accruing from individual learning within the organization, has been distilled within the information system. Incorporation of experts in this way is achieved through expensive trust-building processes of training, indoctrination and social assimilation (Armstrong, 1989); and the use of ambiguous criteria for appraisal of their performance places them under pressure to conform to the values of their superiors (Van Maanen and Barley, 1985).

Looking downwards, the same experts will be tempted to use their understanding of the system and the holistic knowledge to which it gives them access to enhance their control over others. Even given no overriding commercial sensitivity and a willingness on the part of experts to help other employees to form a holistic understanding of the organization, the effect of this is likely to be constrained by the effort required and the limited existing penetrative knowledge of the organization which those others have. Senge (1990) exemplifies this in arguing that local managers cannot design the organization's learning processes 'because local managers are too involved in running their own businesses and because local managers generally have less breadth of perspective to see the major, long-term issues' (p. 300).

Hence directors' access to the increasing stock of collective knowledge intended to be generated in a learning organization and their control of nodal points of relationships within the broader circuits of facilitative power would enable them to create 'networks of control, of alliance, of coalition, of antagonism, of interest and structure' (Clegg, 1989: 204).

Kanter (1984) provides an example of how this dynamic operates within an organization, describing how the 'integrated' flexible organizational forms which she surveyed facilitated innovation in the body of the organization which could then form part of corporate learning. 'Experiments by middle-level innovators make possible the formulation of a new strategy to meet a sudden external challenge of which even the middle-level innovators might have been unaware. Then the new strategy, in effect, elevates the innovator's experiments to the level of policy' (Kanter, 1984: 290). If a learning organization operates as expected then this, presumably, is how powerful people would translate internal phenomena into resources to use in exerting stronger agency in the internal and external environment. By rewarding so tangibly the internal innovators, by bringing their 'brain-children' centre stage, the latter would probably be incorporated into the agency of the top strategists, turning latent opposition into support.
The relatively sparse structure of a learning organization will advantage some and disadvantage others. Those who might lose managerial positions in any structural change would probably attempt to create alternative sources of advantage and power, an assumption supported by Kanter’s (1989) insights into managerial behaviour in modern forms of organization. Giddens (1979) argues that ‘in modern bureaucracies there are more openings for those in formally subordinate positions to acquire or regain control over organisational tasks than Weber recognised. The more tightly-knit and inflexible the formal relations of authority within an organisation, in fact, the more the possible openings for circumventing them’ (Giddens, 1979: 147). If this is the case, it is not surprising that some members of a learning organization might feel vulnerable within its supposedly more open and facilitative framework. As Kanter (1989) observes, while hierarchy might be a thing of the past in the modern organizations she studied, senior managers wielded power in ways which their subordinates perceived as arbitrary.

Senge (1990) argues that the role and, implicitly, the power of the ‘traditional leader’ as hero is based on an assumption of the powerlessness of followers, of ‘their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied by only a few great leaders’. Yet he goes on to heap great responsibilities, and by implication to project considerable intellectual and charismatic qualities, onto leaders of learning organizations as the designers, stewards and teachers ‘responsible for building organisations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models’ (p. 340, original emphasis).

Like Argyris (1992), Senge assumes that top people in organizations will be able and willing to help their followers overcome the ‘defensive routines’ in social interactions designed to protect those involved from threats to their identity and which, therefore, inhibit learning. According to Argyris, only corporate leaders can start the revolutionary process of questioning their own assumptions and behaviours and, hence, open the cognitive and emotional door to ‘double-loop learning’. In response to this position it can be conceded that leaders may be autonomous in deciding to act in that they have the formal authority to do so; but are they likely to feel any less vulnerable than other employees in the emotional and cognitive ‘unpeeling’ process?

Argyris suggests that preparedness to be vulnerable to others requires that people ‘examine their feelings about what others may do to them’ (1992: 10). Presumably, the effect of what others may do to someone is a function of what the focal person feels he or she stands to lose in the exchange. And does not a ‘top person’ stand to lose more than anyone else in the organization in terms of power, status, public respect and financial rewards?
In this context, Argyris, Senge—and especially Hawkins (1991), with his ‘men and women of wisdom’ on boards of directors—seem to be assuming Plato’s ‘philosopher king’, willing to inquire into his own competence for kingship. According to Kets de Vries (1991), this requires an ‘ability to recognize the danger signs which go hand in hand with being a power holder’, and to avoid the dangers by being able to ‘strengthen one’s self-reflective, empathetic and listening capacities, as well as to accept the transience of one’s role, acknowledge different views and, most difficult of all, to face succession’ (p. 349).

Given this picture, it is not surprising that we crave the philosopher king figure as leader. But the roots of this craving for leadership, and our vulnerability concealed within that strong wish, become part of the dynamic which explains why leaders are rarely philosophers. First, research based on the use of projective tests suggests that people in leadership positions tend to have a higher need for power (Shackleton and Fletcher, 1984). And, second, the socialization of those with a strong desire to exercise the power of leadership has left them with an unusually strong, lifelong hunger for acceptance and confirmation (Kets de Vries, 1991). Followers oblige by a process of ‘idealized transference’, a way of dealing with their own feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. Wishing to merge with an omnipotent other to share his or her power, they make every effort to please. Unless sufficiently self-centred and self-distant, the leader, mirroring the adulation, can come to believe that it is justified. Feelings of ‘greatness’ which result can, in extremis, translate into contempt for the rule of law and into abuse of power.

While recognizing that this analysis tends towards the worst case, evidence of such behaviour in the world of organizations—of Machiavellian behaviour generally (Shackleton and Fletcher, 1994) and of the ‘scapegoating’ of subordinates by chief executives in particular (Boeker, 1992)—suggests that the Argyris strategy is flawed as a general approach to double-loop learning and that we should look to constitutional forms of checks and balances within organizations to ensure that leaders do look after the interests of their constituents.

In summary, the agency that individuals and groups might be able to build up in a learning organization depend on a variety of factors. Personal characteristics such as learning style and self-efficacy will determine to some extent the influence which can be exerted through relationships. Probably more important will be the level of organizational knowledge which individuals, making use of their unique qualities, are able to develop through formal position, boundary-spanning activities and expert technical knowledge. Those at the apex, despite the difficulties they might face in exerting control in a learning organization, could be expected to have their power enhanced through
occupation of nodal points of power and the holistic nature of the organizational knowledge which this makes possible. Co-optation and patronage of lower-level innovators would also probably enable them to disarm those with expertise critical to the extension of their agency. Others sited less advantageously in a learning organization would probably be active in developing their own agency through similar but less potent tactics. People perceiving themselves to be especially disadvantaged might defend any erosion of their status and influence by restricting the scope for their tacit knowledge to be translated into objective collective knowledge which, potentially, others could use within the dialectic of control.

**Ideology and the Learning Organization**

Much of the new knowledge generated by members of an organization attempting to deal with perceived turbulence in the external environment will probably have a strong normative element, concerned with the cultural patterns of values and beliefs deemed relevant to solving problems posed by that turbulence (Schein, 1985). We go on to consider how the use made of new knowledge might be constrained by an ideology constructed from the language in which the concepts of a learning organization are couched.

For Geertz (1964), ideology refers 'to that part of culture which is actively concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of belief and value' (pp. 71–2). Ideology provides individuals with 'maps' of behaviour, thought or feeling for navigating strange terrain. The 'ornate, vivid' style of ideological language, and the psychological pressure of the rituals and settings within which it is employed, help the construction of situations that encourage commitment and motivate action.

Geertz construes ideology as a means of reducing social strain and individual tension in times of turbulence, when the level of cultural, social and personal dislocation is such that patterns of shared understanding start to break down. Newer ideologies can then become crucial as sources of revised individual and collective meaning. The concept of a learning organization fits well into this strain theory of ideology. In language that is certainly 'ornate, vivid and deliberately suggestive', managements are offered a new formula for dealing with organizational strain produced by turbulence in the external environment, enabling employees to be given some means of reducing the personal tension brought about by that same turbulence. Corporate reassurance is provided by a belief that organizational flexibility and responsiveness will be enhanced by collective learning. Its source in the learning of individual members will enable them to feel more secure about their own identity, especially as it is fixed by their employment, work status and career prospects.
Within his strain theory of ideology, Geertz (1964) accepts that it is possible to argue an ‘interest-based’ process as proposed by Giddens (1979) and Clegg (1989). For them, the conflicting interests of key actors determine the course of events during a time of rapid change, when political tactics and strategy become paramount. In a turbulent period, competing individuals and groups attempt to enrol others to the values and beliefs which they offer as explanations of collective experience—i.e. to emergent elements of ideology. But the playing-field is not level (Giddens, 1979; Clegg, 1989) in this competition; instead, there are institutional asymmetries, created historically through ‘economic-based structures and systems of discursive monopoly’, which provide the management of organizations with tactical and strategic advantage (Deetz, 1992).

As argued in the previous section, there seems no reason why a learning organization as defined should differ in this respect. Existing asymmetries of power are likely to be buttressed by the learning process, giving senior managers access to newly generated corporate knowledge and language, strengthening their hands in internal and external dealings. Through their control of strategic planning activities, senior managers should be able to influence strongly insiders’ perceptions of the external environment and outsiders’ reciprocal perceptions, moderating any strain and tension by marginalizing representation of interests other than their own, reducing unacceptable alternative courses of action to economic costs—e.g. the time-consuming aspects of worker participation in management (Strauss, 1992)—by further socialization of members, and by shifting extra responsibility to the individual (Deetz, 1992).

In this context, the language of ideology mediates between individuals and the conditions of their existence. They are positioned as subjects and, as such, assume that they are the authors of the ideology which they speak, as if in control of the meanings which that ideology carries (Deetz, 1992). To this end, the management of a learning organization could embark on a process of resocialization within an overall ‘ethos of self-responsibility’ fulfilled through collaboration rather than competition. The organization’s members would probably be encouraged to see themselves as critical providers of organizational knowledge through their enhanced learning capability; as responsible for experimentation; as wise interpreters of collective knowledge; as honoured participants in decision-making; as responsive to the needs of internal and external customers. In imagining themselves as these types of person, individuals would be accepting a revised personal identity, taking on more responsibility for providing solutions to corporate problems and for self-surveillance, enforcing norms which constrain the expression of doubts or disloyalties reflecting differing belief structures. In the process, the increased level of organizational
commitment induced in employees might place at risk some of their other commitments, e.g. to family and close friends (Randall, 1987). To increase organisational commitment involves creating a greater tension and, by implication, places a strain on the other life-worlds in which there is partial inclusion’ (Höpfl, 1992).

This perspective takes account of the language used in proposals for a learning organization; but equally important is what is not said, especially about goals and preferences, their origins and the criteria used in decision-making to further their achievement (Pfeffer, 1981). Directorial competence in these areas is not questioned by Garratt (1987), Senge (1990), Hawkins (1991), or Pedler et al. (1991). As for managerial prerogatives, Hawkins’s (1991) hierarchical view provides implicit support for the notion, while Garratt (1987) does not question directors’ prerogatives, seeing learning organizations as a means of improving directors’ performance through better control over organizations made much more productive via individual and collective learning. Pedler et al. (1988, 1991) do not address the issue directly, blurring distinctions between managers and other employees: ‘Managerial acts are seen as conscious experiments rather than set solutions’ as part of ‘the learning approach to strategy’ (1991: 18) and ‘all members of the company have a chance to take part, to discuss and contribute to major policy decisions’ (p. 19). In any but the smallest organization this would seem to be impracticable and implies, at best, only a process of consultation.

Pedler et al. (1991) provide an example of the constraints that managerial prerogatives place on employee discretion even within a learning organization. In reviewing the implications of an extensive learning initiative in the Rover Car Group, its Chairman, Graham Day, is quoted as saying, ‘We realise that by encouraging continuous learning and development among all our employees, they will start to question more and more the way we manage things. We will have to learn to respond appropriately to that, but we are not a democracy—the buck stops with management’ (Pedler et al., 1991: 195).

Ideology is expressed not only in language but in artifacts, especially those that constitute an organization’s technology. Those who are privileged in the design and implementation of technology are well placed to translate their interests into ideologies, embedded and invisible in the technological process. All those who use the technology are then influenced strongly by the ideology of its controlling logic, made subject to it. There is a circuit of meaning: ideology helps to shape the meanings and perceptions of technology; these influence the development of technological artifacts and language; and in turn, these reflect and reinforce ideology as a natural, taken-for-granted part of the control process (Scarborough and Corbett, 1992).

Whether the ethos of a learning organization takes root or not will
depend crucially on its adoption by those who make key decisions concerning the introduction or modification of technology. If committed to the learning ethos of Pedler et al. (1991), they are likely to involve users in the design stage, providing scope for operator discretion, allowing for experimentation and learning, ‘informating’ as well as automating. But there is a long history ‘of the hegemony of rational, science-based principles, of people’s subordination to the ideology of scientific rationality, to the conservative values and rationality of science and its enframement of the technology process’ (Scarborough and Corbett, 1992: 89).

In summary, ideology is central to questions of choice, and especially whether choices are to be made privately by members of dominant coalitions or as the outcome of some more public challenge within an open democratic process. Potentially, the ethos and language of the learning organization provide ideological raw material which people in organizations can use to accommodate to the collective and personal strains of an external environment perceived as turbulent. The language and symbolism, explicitly or by omission, uphold managerial prerogatives in expressing strategic preferences and in pursuing goals. Within the framework of explicit and tacit legitimation which the metaphor of a learning organization provides, those managements who realize its ideological potential will be able to make use of the prescribed language and practices to maintain their hegemony. In the process, employees risk being subjected to further socialization, encouraged to adopt aspects of identity which, as Clegg (1989) anticipates, would ensure their continued obedience not only in a prohibitive sense but also creatively.

**Conclusion**

This paper has enabled certain problematic aspects of the learning organization as a prescription to be considered within a theoretical framework related to power, politics and ideology. A certain confusion in the learning organization literature was examined, concerning the extent of political activity within a ‘dialectic of control’ and where the ‘control boundary’ between management and other employees might be drawn. Given continuing pressures on organizations operating in turbulence to become ever more productive, it was argued that boundaries are unlikely to be moved anything like as far as implied in the more utopian prescriptions.

This conclusion relates to a further point about the likely effect of the characteristics of a learning organization on the distribution of power. It seems that the changes in structure and the increments in collective knowledge associated with this and other features will tend to favour those formally appointed as managers, especially at the apex of organizations. In making use of their enhanced penetrative organizational
knowledge at the nodal points where internal and external circuits of power intersect, they are likely to build up and safeguard their power.

Finally, it is probable that the prerogatives of such individuals within enterprises where the principles of a learning organization are put into practice will be bolstered and safeguarded by the ideology implicit in the literature of the learning organization. This leads us to conclude that those who propagate the principles of a learning organization risk opening the latest phase of a long history of metaphors which have been used manipulatively (Giddens, 1979) by managers with a long pedigree of instrumental interest in social science as a means of solving industrial problems (Pfeffer, 1981). The force of the metaphors employed stems from the rational, conscious level of explanation and at a deeper level where versions of social science—‘the orthodox consensus’—provide commonsense explanations of lived experience which it serves to justify (Giddens, 1979).

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