

# ACTIVE LEARNING IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

## Toward an autonomous and shared learning

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### **Abstract**

Starting with our work on organizational redesign in different Colombian organizations, we have advanced in the concepts of *Learning Communities*, *Shared and Permanent Learning*, *Flexible Organizational Structure*, *Participative Design*, among others ideas. These concepts are a fundamental part of the TESO (Systems Theory in Organizations) approach developed and implemented by Ernesto Lleras in different Participative Organization Redesign processes. From this approach we attempt to tackle organizational issues taking into account the cultural background of *domination* inherited from our Colombian colonial tradition, which we consider to be detrimental to the effectiveness of Colombian organizations.

Through the TESO approach we aim to promote an organizational learning focused on two main elements: the strengthening of people's autonomy and responsibility capabilities, and in this way enable the emergence of autonomous and flexible organizational structures.

We consider that the strengthening of both organizational and personal capabilities will enable the emergence of a permanent and shared learning environment that is what we call 'Learning Community'.

### **Key Words**

Learning communities; Shared and permanent learning; Flexible organizational structure; Participative design; Domination.

### **Workshop Topics**

Autonomous learning; The role of emotions in learning.

## I INTRODUCTION

Belonging to a highly complex and dynamic world makes it important to design organizations with flexible and autonomous structures that enable effective responses to the environment challenges. Different organizations' theorists had suggested the development of capabilities for adaptation and permanent learning as

a requirement for the emergence of flexible organizational structures. An example of these approaches is the *Viable System Model* proposed by Stafford Beer (1979, 1985). This model advises about the structural conditions needed in order that an organization could face and adapt to its environment and achieve an autonomous and flexible existence.

On the other hand, some authors have mention the importance of incorporate the notion of learning to organizational design as an strategic issue that enables innovation and effectiveness in knowledge management, understood as one of the main assets in contemporary enterprise.

In this ideas order, different organizational learning approaches aim to promote spaces where the people can develop their potentialities and share with others the experiences that have enable effectiveness in their own work tasks. Below, we present some of the learning notions that have been proposed by different organizational redesign approaches.

## **II THE LEARNING NOTION IN ORGANIZATIONAL REDESIGN APPROACHES**

From some approaches knowledge is seen as the action that constructs reality, and the action of knowing as related to the capabilities and abilities one needs for acting effectively in a situation or for transforming one situation into another considered most beneficial. The possibilities of learning could be evaluated by observing the interaction mechanisms that enable to deal with practical problems.

In some cases active learning have been understood from a modern notion of "mechanisms" that takes advantage of "systemic concepts" (as the feedback) to provide a logic of behavior and methodologies for understanding and deal with the complex facts of the organizations (biological, psychological and social organizations, among others). Here the learning opportunities are basically determined by structural changes that depend on the same organizational structure, which means that a change can be induced by the organization interactions but never by the organization external environment.

In biology we can find examples as the work of Maturana and Varela (1980) where the autopoiesis (self-production) is seen as the way of organization of living beings. In psychology we find the work of Keeney (1983) where the self-reference is conceive as the central element for the construction and maintenance of our experience universe. In systemic therapy there is the work of Halbwirth and Olsson (2007) which focuses on the patient not as a solitary being but inside a primary social nucleus with feedback relationships that may induce his behavior.

The TESO Organizational Approach we present here is linked to different approaches that aim to improve the organizations effectiveness based on the notions described above. Some examples are the works in the field of "systems dynamic" that study how the information feedback mechanisms influence decision making and

the actions oriented to enterprise effectiveness (Senge, 1994). Other studies seek to understand the enterprise as a permanent conversational network which is continuously produced by the "speech acts" carried out by people who are part of the organizational environment (Flores, 1994, Echeverría, 1995).

In the field of "organizational cybernetic" we find methodologies as the syntegeation developed by Stafford Beer (1994) which is intended to construct a feedback space where the work team can interact in an intelligent, self-organized and democratic way. At the individual level we have examples derived from the "individual learning model" developed by Reyes and Zarama, where learning happens in a "circular process" that allows to incorporate distinctions, and where knowledge has to be with one's individual ability to perform effective actions under an environment disturbance (Reyes & Zarama, 1998).

At this point we want to present some of the conceptual and methodological aspects of the TESO approach developed in Colombia for working in organizations (Lleras, 1997), as well as the reasons why we understand these organizations as Learning Communities. We will show some of the aspects underlying the conception of learning of the approach and finally present an example of application of the approach on a Knowledge Management Organization in Colombia.

### III LEARNING COMMUNITIES

We understand a 'community' as a social group with the capability of sharing actions to achieve a purpose. The fact of suggest a community as a 'Learning Community' has to be with our intent of promoting the development of individual and collective abilities and mechanisms for designing new realities or transform the current conditions according to the expectations of the organization's members and the environment requirements. This necessarily implies the emergence of explicit relationships between people based in cooperation, loyalty and solidarity, and in the other hand, it requires dialogue and conversational permanent spaces as an active way for collective construction.

The Learning Community notion that we present in this paper was developed by Ernesto Lleras (2003), and it is based on the understanding of the Colombian situation where the relationships between individuals and social groups are usually framed in dynamics of domination which, depending on how the "other" is conceived, are configured either as paternalistic or authoritarian coercive schemes. Here are two examples of paternalistic and coercive schemes:

- In State relations under paternalistic patterns is common that the State is seen as a "father" who must respond and solve the needs of people who passively wait for orders and gifts from the "daddy government" instead of assuming their responsibility of participating actively in the country building.
- In labor relations under coercion patterns is common that the employer, afraid of losing control, has the need of oppress the employee. On the other side, the

employee in fear of losing his job behaves in a servile way while at the same time seeks for ways of resistance such as disloyalty with the company.

The personal and social problems related to domination have been widely discussed, especially in post-colonial societies as ours (i.e. Paulo Freire in the case of Brasil and Orlando Fals-Borda in Colombia). Some of the implications of domination dynamics at the personal level are lack of autonomy, responsibility, joy and impossibility to develop talent, at the social level we face the impossibility of building realities collectively and based on trust and solidarity principles.

Our thesis is that a good number of organizational designs correspond to an authoritarian scheme that restrain the recognition and valuation of the person's capabilities and lead to relationships of power 'over others'. As a result, people tend to develop ways of resistance that follow the domination dynamics of coloniality: scant interest in work, low self-esteem, bosses with necessity of domination and employees who look for the 'reprisal' of being dominated. Framed into these dynamics is the fact that people either do not have autonomy or responsibility or the capacity for designing organizations as comfortable habitats for the development of their daily work life and their personal expectations.

What we propose for dealing with the aforementioned problems, is to reconfigure and transform the current relations based on domination for others based on cooperation, trust and solidarity, meaning, the proper relations of living in community, which could be built by means of interaction in emancipatory spaces where the mentioned problems must be treated.

## **IV EMANCIPATORY SPACES DESIGN AND THE LEARNING NOTION**

Heidegger's (1951) conception on what is "being human" has been very useful for emancipatory spaces design. According to Heidegger, we are talking about a being that is indefinable, constantly open, and in a permanent "becoming" process in which the being makes use of the "equipment" he was born with, this is, his potentialities.

This becoming process could be either oriented to the authentic being encounter or to what is constantly settled by society. In both cases, the being is "thrown into the world", meaning that the body is thrown into a space of social practices that give meaning and motivation for what potentially can be done. As we call "practice" to the "actions with sense", we understand we are always in practices enabled by "practice spaces" and it is in these spaces where knowledge takes place. Consequently, we recognize that the action of thinking is not in the head but more related to the body transformation that occurs since the very first moment the being was thrown into the world.

The aforementioned elements have consequences over the way the motivation-for-action is understood. In the dualistic tradition, the abstraction process that occurs

when thinking prevails over the action. This turns the individual into an abstract entity, which leads to the loss of the "concrete other" and in this way domination relations are potentially reproduced. According to Aimé Césaire (2006), in Cartesian Division the essential problem for one who wanted to know was the "evil genius" that might cloud the thought, which could be easily overcome by following the Method. Descartes did not belong to dominated societies where the fundamental problem is not the "evil genius" that could cloud reason but the "other" with whom a colonial relationship was established. We can say that the fundamental issue for Descartes was the monologue, as it allowed the reflection from the reason. For Césaire (2006) the fundamental matter is the dialogue since is by means of understanding the other that the domination and colonial oppression situations can be also understood.

We believe that a one of the central concerns on Heidegger was the preservation of a not-deprived-of-experiences life, that is, remain maintained and maintain the others as concrete entities, indefinable, open to the possibilities of the world and to the self-construction according to their potentialities. Beings are constantly seeking for the meaning of actions, this is why we need practices that allow assessing our meaning-seeking effectiveness, at the same time we should constantly try new ways of acting in the social space. This is what we call "to learn" as we consider every social space as a learning space; we always learn, whether consciously or not.

The human being is also a being who "cares" of himself, the others, the things and the world, this means that humans feel the need of "take charge" on their own lives and thus the responsibility to himself, with others and finally with the world. This makes it possible to construct world with others, either to keep the current world conditions or transform them into a habitat conducive to the expected world. Is in the second scenery (of transformation) where we can talk about the emergence of an emancipatory space, which is only possible when dialogical relationship are established to propose the configuration of new spaces and situations in a conscious way.

## **V CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL HABITAT**

In a Learning Community people is always pretended to be aware on the permanent process of learning, on the meaning of being part of the social space, and on building habitat. For this reason it is important that people improve their abilities of observing the relations in which they are immersed (Lleras, 2003) and explore the meaning attached to their actions. The emphasis on relationships rather than in objects is proper of the systemic issues that the approach takes into account, issues that in our experience have shown to be useful for working with individuals as well as for organizational redesign.

Based on this observation, we have worked in two directions: first in the strengthening of the organizational capabilities which means that each person must stand out as a manager of his own work area; second, strengthening personal

capabilities focused on the development of communication and observation abilities, the design of a work with meaning and sense for the person involved in it, and the construction of the work tools each person requires for an effective development of his activities.

It is recognized the importance of the organizational capabilities development as well as the use of technological tools that allow the community to build intelligent and flexible organizations, which is considered as a fundamental issue in modern management.

In this sense there is a concern for building knowledge that enables the community to deal with the individuals' concerns but also with the community needs and requirements. In this ideas order, knowledge is built from the interaction and participation, and not only by "experts" consultants who are supposed to assume the responsibility of building community for others.

The same applies in relation to technology. It is pretended to exploit the full possibilities offered by technology as people strengthen their capabilities to act through them, keeping in mind that technologies are useful as long as they do not affect the dialogically constructed habitat. This understanding seeks for a suitable technology for the construction of situated contexts.

## **VI STUDY CASE: BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY IN A "KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT" ORGANIZATION**

Presented below is an example of the approach application made in a Colombian public institution dedicated to the "knowledge management", with over 200 employees highly skilled and with a high level of schooling average.

What was initially asked to the consultant group was to design and implement an information system according to the traditional interpretation of these devices, namely a technological platform to support the organization processes. What the consultant group proposed was to understand and construct the organization as a human-growth habitat capable to adapt to a changing environment.

As a starting point for the habitat construction, an individual interview with each of the organization members was proposed. The main purpose was to raise a reflection with each member on what gives meaning to his life and how his work contributes to this effect.

Simultaneously, we worked with the organization directives on the Institutional Identity that later was also discussed in dialogue workshops with all the staff and people in the close environment. Basically, the resulting identity stated that this organization plays a role as a catalyst of the country's knowledge by means of offering articulation spaces for the actors of the called "National System of Science, Technology and Innovation" (SNCTI, for it Spanish initials). These actors are basically research institutions, corporations and government entities.

The next step was to continue the debate among community members at the individual level (as managers of their "job place" which is their habitat) and at the collective level through the development of communication skills, the "production relations" and the transformation of the "power relations". In these workshops each person began to build his "house" (individual workspace) and "neighborhood" (the own workspace articulated to others' workspaces) in terms of social relationships and using their abilities, skills and technological tools needed for their jobs.

The technological tools are configured as fundamental matters for the collective construction of the world since they allow people to supply their habitat. The habitat is constructed from these tools and is in this construction process that the technological tools acquire meaning for those who use them. Consequently, for the participative design of technological tools it is necessary to understand the habitat of the "user", his expectations, capabilities and potentials, in general terms, how the user constructs habitat with others and interact with the world.

The technological tools are presented as "Lego Pieces" which each user put together according to his convenience and may change over time. These "pieces" are processing information elements that, after a comprehensive inventory of the organizational needs, are used throughout the organization and offered as work options. For example, search engines, making-lists programs, tables, among others, are to become part of the linguistic universe and they have the same properties of language. This is an important issue for the design since design itself arises from "compositions" of significant parts that make up new meanings.

Some workshops were held to further deepen in the observed relationships. In terms of production relations, the products and services portfolios from the different "functional units" as well as the portfolio of the entire organization were defined. During these workshops we basically emphasize on the importance of the consistency between the offered portfolio and the context (needs and requirements) of the SNCTI. The resulting portfolio was mainly related to the organization's role in designing public policy and supporting the politics implementation of the STI (Science, Technology and Innovation) system.

Concepts as holography and organizational autonomy, were especially useful since the same tools used for defining the individual workspace portfolio were also used to define the portfolios of any functional unit, seeing these work spaces as "enterprises within the enterprise" which in interaction constitute a "productive network".

Skills related to the observation of power and communication relations were also developed during these workshops. Primarily we emphasized on four basic speech acts (request, statement, declaration and promise) and in the psychological compromises acquired by engaging in these speech acts. The agreements and commitments began to appear as a useful strategy for coordination actions more effectively than the "command line" provided by the hierarchical organizational structure. This strategy was also considered as an effective starting point on the way

to construct dialogical capabilities based on sincerity, authenticity, active listening and awareness of community belonging.

## VII CONCLUSIONS

The concluding phase of the process was to set up a group within the organization conformed by people from different functional units. The objective of this group is basically to enable the continuation of the process so that the organization can constantly develop new practices according to the personal and collective needs and expectations, as well as effectively respond and adapt to the environment challenges and requirements. In sum an organization with a flexible structure.

What was observed after the process was that once the emancipatory space began to emerge, the individuals immersed on it easily began to construct the sense of their work in line with the skills they possess, the capacities they seek to develop, and their personal and collective goals. This is what we call a Learning Community where an active, autonomous and shared permanent learning process takes place.

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