A Review of “Revisiting the roots of learning organization” by Roland K. Yeo (2005)

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**Introduction**

Roland K. Yeo’s (2005) article is a synthesis of published literature about learning organizations. Yeo examines other scholarly articles on the topic of the learning organizations that were published between the years 1990 and 2004. The intent of Yeo’s review is to provide leadership practitioners with the various perspectives of the learning organization beginning with the theoretical roots and identifying several common themes that have been presented throughout the years. Many theories Yeo discusses contain practical connections that practitioners could implement in their organizations.

**Thesis**

Yeo begins his article by discussing the notion that organizations are organic systems, compared to mechanical systems. Noting that Peter Senge (1990) popularized the concept of the learning organization, which emerged in the mid-1960s and again in early 1990s, Yeo explores the various perspectives of the concept in an attempt to gauge the significance of Senge’s five disciplines, specifically the fifth discipline of systems thinking. Senge’s five disciplines have provided practitioners with applications of the learning organizations throughout the years.

**Main Points**

Yeo’s literary synthesis begins with the idea that organizations are organic. The idea of organic systems emerged in the 1960s. Organic systems are those organizations in which “relationships between and within groups involving mutual confidence, trust, interdependence and shared responsibility” are emphasized” (2005, p. 369). With this in mind, Yeo continues to define the difference between a learning organization and organizational learning. He defines a learning organization as “a collective entity which focuses on the question of ‘what’” (p. 369). In other words, a learning organization is one that values the collective learning of information both
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internally and externally. Yeo is sure to differentiate the learning organization from organizational learning as he defines organizational learning as “a process which answers the question of ‘how’” (p. 369), meaning how an organization learns. These are different concepts--a learning organization is a type of organization, while organizational learning is a process (2005).

According to Watson (1994), as cited by Yeo (2005), organizational learning is a product of both committed individuals and an organization’s culture. It is assumed that through the organizational learning process an organization will experience a behavioral shift and its overall performance will increase. Another view of organizational learning is that of Stewart’s (2001), in which it is a type of “collective cognition where individuals constantly make sense of the environment and negotiate each other’s learning experiences” (Yeo, 2005, p. 371). The remaining scholars that Yeo cites in regard to organizational learning, Fearon and Cavaleri (1994), Marquardt, (1996), and Braham (1996), all indicate that organizational learning is a natural, organic, process that takes place concurrently with daily work, and is integrated into all positions among all levels of management, rather than “something extra” added on to the organization’s function (Yeo, 2005, p. 372).

A learning organization, on the other hand, has a variety of definitions. Yeo (2005) presents nine definitions noting all have a common theme--"viewing organizational learning as a driver of organizational performance and competitive advantage” (p. 372). Yeo notes that this view is consistent with the idea that members of an organization learn collectively in order to react to external challenges more strategically and successfully than their competitors. Using this idea as a spring-board, Yeo reviews the significance of systems thinking in the learning organization.
Presenting models and concepts created by Buckler (1996), Steiner (1998), and Reynolds and Ablett (1998), Yeo discusses how each of them are tied to Senge’s (1990) five disciplines. For example, Steiner proves the five disciplines empirically ineffective; however, both Steiner and Senge emphasize the importance of systems thinking in an organization and how it is used to view the organization holistically, or as a big picture, and enforce organizational learning. Looking at Buckler’s learning process model, Yeo connects Buckler’s ideas of adaptive and generative learning to Senge’s theory of organizational learning. Both Senge and Buckler are concerned with a shared vision; however Yeo believes that Senge’s discipline of building a shared vision does not articulate who should communicate the shared vision, while Buckler’s model is clear that leaders of the organization should communicate a group’s vision and/or strategic objectives (Yeo, 2005). Finally, Yeo looks at Reynolds and Ablett’s (1998) molecular development model, which “seeks to integrate the diverse range of organizational activities for achievement of organizational learning” (Yeo, 2005, p. 375). According to Yeo, Reynolds and Ablett’s model reflects Senge’s five disciplines, but rather than focusing on the organization as a whole, it focuses on the business the organization does; Yeo considers the molecular development model a “catalyst for the integration of organizational learning practices” (p. 376).

In the latter half of Yeo’s (2005) article, he discusses the different stages of learning using Senge’s (1990) approach, which is comprised of individual, team, and organizational learning. Describing the states, Yeo states that stage one in the learning process is learning that is “associated with activities managed by individuals” (2005, p. 377). These activities include daily tasks, problems solving independently, and maintaining structure. The second stage of learning is when “individuals often try to solve problems by drawing on the strengths of other members in a team with the aim of altering existing rules, structures or systems” (p. 377). Stage two is less
routine than stage one and the activities are generally more complex. Finally, stage three of learning, activities “are associated with the organizational level and its external environment” (p. 379). At this stage, problems must be solved collectively using resources outside of the organization; they often result in the development of new roles, positions, and/or principles.

As Yeo (2005) concludes his article, he states that “learning involves a variety of contexts and paradigms involving individuals, teams, processes, structures, and strategies” (p. 379). This is consistent with the belief of the featured scholars that systems thinking is the “unifying force” that creates a learning organization (p. 379).

**Critical Assessment**

In his abstract, Yeo states that the purpose of his article is to simply provide a review of the theoretical concepts associated with the learning organization; however, he quickly moves to compare and contrast several scholars’ organizational learning models to Peter Senge’s (1990) five disciplines of the learning organization, as well as the idea of systems thinking. Regardless, Yeo (2005) cites 57 scholarly works and has offered the academic community a brief overview of how the concept of the learning organization came to pass, and the significance of systems thinking in the process. Throughout the course, LDRS 802: Organizational Systems, Change, and Leadership, the importance of organizational change and organizational development is discussed extensively.

A portion of Yeo’s (2005) article is dedicated to finding common themes within the definitions of organizational learning and the learning organization. He presents nine definitions between the two concepts, and consolidates them into a common theme—”viewing organizational learning as a driver of organizational performance and competitive advantage” (p. 372). By doing this, the readers are given a shared understanding of the concept in a singular definition for
the remainder of the article, which is helpful in understanding the different perspectives highlighted.

The idea of organizational learning, which is a component of organizational development, came to the forefront of organizations with the technological advancements in the 1960s (Yeo, 2005). Since the 1960s, organizational change has become more rapid than ever, and the need for organizational learning has grown exponentially. From experience, I can testify that employees are expected to learn new processes, programs, or technology in shorter amounts of time to keep up with consumer needs. The models that Yeo presents aim to offer perspective on how Peter Senge’s (1990) five disciplines have influenced various organizational learning concepts. While Yeo focuses on the models developed by five scholars, using Senge’s work as a type of foundation, he also acknowledges the work of other researchers and their consistency with Senge’s concept of systems thinking.

It is clear throughout the article that Yeo (2005) is in agreement with Senge’s fifth discipline of systems thinking, and how it is the unifying element of all organizational learning dynamics. He supports the ideas that many researchers have posed about the significance of systems thinking, and does well to connect those thoughts to the organizational learning models and concepts he discusses throughout the article. At this point, the reader is likely to do further research on these models and concepts in order to fully comprehend their connection to Senge. One such model he features is Steiner’s (1998) organizational learning model. Yeo pinpoints how Steiner’s belief in holistic approaches to organizational development, such as looking at the big picture, is related to systems thinking. Additionally, when highlighting Buckler’s learning process model, Yeo points out that both Senge and Buckler emphasize the importance of a shared vision in organizations. The emphasis that Yeo places on this characteristic is important
because it shows that Buckler expanded upon Senge’s discipline of a shared vision to articulate who, specifically, is to communicate the shared vision of an organization. Because Yeo only chooses to expose particular points of each model, however, the reader must ask themselves if what has been presented is enough to make adequate connections to Senge’s five disciplines.

Doing additional research on the featured models and concepts would help the reader better understand the context in which they were developed, as well as their connection to Senge. For example, Steiner’s (1998) study, “Organizational dilemmas as barriers to learning,” is a case study that examines and attempts to develop a learning organization within a Swedish tool manufacturing company. Buckler’s (1996) study, on the other hand, is the presentation of a new model, which was developed utilizing his own professional experience and previous study by scholars such as Senge (1990), Kolb (1984), and even Maslow (1943), among others. While examining the studies that Yeo features, in-full, the reader will better understand their connection to Senge’s five disciplines.

There is one thing Yeo (2005) fails to do in his synthesis; Throughout the article, Yeo fails to define Senge’s five disciplines. While he discusses the relevance of the concept extensively, he does not establish a shared knowledge between him and the reader. This may be attributed to the idea that those reading this article would already have a thorough knowledge of the five disciplines. For those that are not as familiar, however, will ask, “What are the five disciplines?” This is, perhaps, the most critical piece of information that is required for the reader to understand, and agree or disagree with, Yeo’s conclusion.

There are several examples of the connections Yeo creates between Senge and the other scholars’ works; however, there are still questions to be answered at the end of the article. One question that Yeo (2005) posits at the end of his work is “Is systems thinking really crucial to
organizational learning?” (p. 368). While he does an excellent job of highlighting the fact that systems thinking is a common component of the organizational learning process, he asks a question that is not answered from this synthesis; therefore, further research should be done. In addition, the reader may ask the question of how an organization can become a learning organization; this is not answered in Yeo’s synthesis, even though he offers information about models that are allegedly useful to the application of organizational learning methods. Once again, the reader would need to do further research in order to devise an applicable set of learning methods for his/her organization.

Although Yeo (2005) does not go into extensive detail about the featured models in his synthesis, he does offer a compilation of information from 57 scholarly works. These works, all published between 1990 and 2004, offer theoretical foundations for new models of organizational learning and the learning organization, as well as the practical application of those applications. For example, Buckler’s article focuses on presenting a new model, and Steiner’s case study is focused on applying Senge’s five disciplines in an attempt to create a learning organization. It appears that Yeo has offered a thorough examination of the literature, even though he admits that his references do not exhaust the topic of the learning organization in the literature.

**Reflection**

Yeo’s (2005) work provides the reader with an adequate understanding of the use of systems thinking in organizational learning. While reading this article, I found it difficult to understand the connections between Senge’s (1990) five disciplines and other scholars’ works. This is primarily due to the fact that Yeo does not define the five disciplines at any point in his article; however, a quick scan of a three-page book review garnered a deeper understanding of
Yeo’s work. While this work does require some extra research in order to agree or disagree with the author’s conclusion, I think the models and concepts he features are ones that can be practically applied to a variety of organizations.

A point of interest, for me, is that Yeo discusses Steiner’s (1998) study more than Buckler’s or Reynolds and Ablett’s. I think this is, in part, due to the applicable nature of Steiner’s work. The study done by Steiner is a case study, which required Yeo to provide, in my opinion, a more comprehensive interpretation of how Senge’s work influenced Steiner’s conclusions. Upon closer examination of Steiner’s study, however, I discovered that her study was done using Senge’s five disciplines has a foundation for comparison. Steiner’s study was actually applying the five disciplines within an organization in an attempt to create a learning organization. Yeo does not discuss this aspect in his synthesis. In my opinion, this would have been helpful information for the reader as it would have offered a real-world example of how systems thinking can be applied to organizational learning, and how it impacts the creation of a learning organization.

As Yeo stated in his article, this piece is intended to be a summary of what a learning organization is, what organizational learning is, and how Senge’s fifth discipline (systems thinking) is expressed in various organizational learning models. In a professional sense, I believe the most practical part of this article is in regard to the stages of learning. Yeo used Senge’s (1990) systematic approach to define these stages. This part of the article is the most practical and least theoretical, which offers a foundation to potentially create a good organizational learning program. This information may also prove useful when designing a leader and leadership development program, which is required for another course’s assignment in my MPS program.
In conclusion, the comparison between Senge’s five disciplines and the various models and concepts that Yeo presents, have offered me knowledge on how all components of organizational learning and organizational development must be “glued” together using a form of systems thinking, or a holistic, big picture, point of view. I have come to agree with Yeo’s synthesis and assessment of the literature on organizational learning. At this point, I’m sure much development has been made on the topic throughout the past decade; however, this is a good place to begin should one consider researching the concept of the learning organization.
References


