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A Diaggrammatical Representation of Organisational Learning Using Socio Cultural Theory

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Current Organisational Learning Theories

The current organisational learning literature focuses on the contributions of Argyris and Schön (1978) with their conceptualisation of learning being based on the assumption that people learn in one of two ways:

- **Single Loop Learning**
  
  "In these examples, members of the organization respond to changes in the internal and external environments of the organization by detecting errors which they then correct so as to maintain the central features of organizational theory-in-use" (Argyris and Schön 1978, p. 19).

  The model explains that people learn when they are completing their usual jobs and then make a mistake which results in an error. It is through working out what the error was and how to correct it that people do not create the same error again. This, according to Argyris and Schön is how people learn.

- **Double Loop Learning**
  
  Whilst slightly more involved that single loop learning, double loop learning is still an inherently simplistic process. The only addition to single loop learning that it offers is the acceptance that context and working practices can and do impact interaction and learning at work. The double loop learning model relies on the same action, error, correction structure but rather than the individual just accepting their fault and not doing it again, they learn from it and use the experience to amend the practices of the organisation to prevent the error from being made by others.

  Similarly to single loop learning, this more complex model does not allow or offer any explanation of how people learn. It is merely assumed that through the action of amending practices to prevent an error repeating itself then learning occurs. This assumption implies that learning happens almost by accident.

Distributed Models of Learning

In response to these systematically oversimplified theories of how people learn, more distributed models of learning have emerged that have led to the consideration of the context in which knowledge is both obtained and as important factors in the learning process (see Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998, Billet 2001). In line with this notion of distributed learning and contrasting traditional and restrictive theories of learning within organisations, Billet (2001) explains that "learning is an activity requiring effort" (p. 30) therefore it is expected that in order for an individual to put the effort in they are motivated and engaged with the subject matter that they are learning about, rather than relying on them finding or causing an error.

**Situated Learning**

Further to Lave and Wenger (1991), I would argue that learning is constructed by activity, context and culture and so individuals cannot learn in an abstract and context-free manner as the model of learning outlined above would imply.

The assumptions of this model are that knowledge is embedded within the practices of a community. When somebody new joins the community with no knowledge of the existing practices they are a peripheral participant. To become a full participant of the community they must be able to understand the practices of the community and be able to influence and change these to suit. It is when the individual has learned the existing practices that they are able to do this.

This model focuses on the learning of knowledge in its context and for this reason, situated learning tends to be an unintentional method of “learning by doing” rather than a deliberate transmission-style learning and teaching method. As the knowledge does not come from structured “teachers”, it instead comes from the “old-timers” in the community who have contributed to the shared knowledge.

**Contextual Learning at Work**

Similarly to Lave and Wenger’s model of Situated Learning, Billet (2004) proposes that learning within a workplace is driven by context and “mediated by both the contributions of workplaces and individuals’ agency” (p. 109).

Once again, in contrast to the models of single and double loop learning, Billet explains that learning is not necessarily something that can be structured into formal teacher-learner events and is constructed as individuals engage in social practices. Workplace social practices lead individuals to think and act and it is through engaging in thinking and acting that knowledge is added to, adapted and changed. As such, thinking and acting become “indistinguishable from learning” (Billet 2004, p. 111). In a workplace environment, it is likely that most thinking and acting will be reiterative of daily tasks; in this case, the learner would be becoming more specialised in their task completion.

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References


![Diagram of Organisational Learning Using Socio Cultural Theory](image-url)