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Learning as Work:
Teaching and Learning Processes in Contemporary Work Organisations

**Connecting Culture and Learning in Organisations:
A Review of Current Themes**

**Daniel Bishop, Alan Felstead, Alison Fuller,
Nick Jewson, Tracey Lee & Lorna Unwin**

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ABSTRACT

While the respective literatures on organisational cultures and workplace learning are fairly well developed, the potential insights to be gained from combining the two have been largely ignored. The primary aim of this paper is to connect some of the main themes in the two literatures. In particular, the paper highlights some of the ways in which organisational cultures and subcultures can support – or inhibit – workplace learning. It is hoped that the paper provides a starting point for understanding more precisely the types of assumptions, beliefs and practices that might support workplace learning, thus providing a possible foundation for the construction of a model of a learning-supportive culture.

CONNECTING CULTURE AND LEARNING IN ORGANISATIONS:
A REVIEW OF CURRENT THEMES

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a notoriously elusive concept, despite being almost ubiquitous in the language of the social sciences and indeed of everyday life. It first became popular with the social anthropologists of the early twentieth century. Since then it has become firmly entrenched in a variety of disciplines including sociology, social psychology, organisational behaviour and management studies.

During the 1980s, a particular fixation with cultures in an *organisational* context emerged in the business and management literature, and this was embodied in works such as Peters' and Waterman's 'In Search of Excellence' (1982). Their book, and others like it, sought to promote the idea that due to increasingly severe and complex competitive pressures, businesses could no longer achieve advantage in the marketplace simply through the manipulation of organisational structures and material resources. Rather, it was argued, success now depended on the effective management of the social and subjective life of the organisation; the values, beliefs and attitudes of those who worked within it. Such claims grew in strength when supported by a small but steadily mounting body of evidence suggesting a connection between culture and organisational performance (see Brown, 1998: 231-233). Thus organisational culture became a substantial field of enquiry[1].

A simultaneous and perhaps related development over the last 20 years or so has been a growing interest in the role of *learning* as a source of competitive advantage. In turn, this interest has given rise to popular concepts such as 'organisational learning' (e.g. Argyris and Schön, 1978) and, in particular, the 'learning organisation' (Senge, 1990; Pedler *et al.*, 1991). Under the umbrella of such constructs, many writers and researchers have explored the ways in which the informal and subjective aspects of organisations could be strategically managed to promote learning. However, relatively

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[1] As will be seen, the designation 'organisational culture' is viewed as problematic as it tends to reify the organisation as the only valid unit of cultural analysis, thus ignoring for example the importance of *subcultures* within organisations.

few have explicitly and systematically related the issue of learning to the issue of culture within organisations. This, in broad terms, is the primary aim of this paper; to connect the literatures on organisational cultures and workplace learning, with a view to suggesting an emergent model of a 'learning-supportive culture'[2]. Aspects of culture that may actually hinder learning will also be identified.

The paper consists of four parts. The first examines the various ways in which the concept of culture has been defined and applied to the study of organisations. The second part briefly explores the techniques used by researchers and practitioners to operationalise, measure and research culture within organisations. The third part of the paper reviews current thinking on the question of whether (and how) culture can be managed and / or changed. Finally, the paper considers the relationship between learning and culture in organisations, assesses the evidence relating to 'learning-supportive cultures' and applies this discussion to some of the early case study data emerging from the research.

1. Defining and Understanding Culture

While there is no universally agreed definition of 'culture', there is some consensus in the literature over its meaning. In very broad terms, culture is often understood as "each group's or community's way of life and outlook on the world." (Alasuutari, 1995: 26). In an attempt to delineate the meaning of the term more specifically, Brown (1998) reviews a number of different definitions. In essence most of them view culture as being fundamentally constituted by a (mostly tacit) set of values, assumptions or taken-for-granted understandings that are shared by the members of a social group. These assumptions heavily influence the thoughts and actions of group members and have various visible manifestations (also called 'practices' or 'artefacts', e.g. rituals, structures, stories, symbols *etc*.).

Hofstede (1996, 2001) – one of the most influential writers on the subject of culture – offers a definition that has become paradigmatic across much of the social sciences,

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[2] For reasons explained later in the paper, the term 'learning-supportive culture' is preferred by the authors to the more commonly-used 'learning culture'.

particularly in studies of organisational culture. In essence, he claims (Hofstede, 1984) that culture consists of two levels. At the first level, there are values, the 'deep' level of culture. A value, he observes is a broad, fundamental and generally implicit principle that leads members of a social group to "prefer a certain state of affairs over others" (1984: 18). It is shared, and leads to a common definition, for example, of what is 'good', and what is 'bad', what is 'logical' and what is 'illogical', what is 'rational' and what is 'irrational'. These values are generally invisible to outsiders because of their tacit nature. Even insiders are normally unaware of them.

Other writers have preferred the term 'assumptions' to 'values'; Brown (1998: 27), for example describes an assumption as "a taken-for-granted solution to an identifiable problem… assumptions are so fundamental and taken for granted that people never think to question them." In a similar vein, Schein (2004: 31) observes that basic cultural assumptions are tacit "thought worlds" or "mental maps" that shape our actions and reactions, and how we interpret the actions of others. He goes on to claim that there are five types of assumption:

a) Assumptions about humanity's relationship to its environment, e.g. can we influence or dominate aspects of our environment, such as our product market?

b) Assumptions about the nature of reality and truth, e.g. is there an absolute truth / solution to a problem or simply our own interpretation?

c) Assumptions about human nature, e.g. are people basically good? Will they act responsibly if granted autonomy?

d) Assumptions about the nature of human activity, e.g. is it better to think before acting, rationally considering all possible alternatives, or to act quickly and decisively?

e) Assumptions about the nature of human relationships, e.g. is individualism preferable to and more effective than collaboration?

All cultures, claims Schein, work on these types of assumption. They generate more specific and explicit beliefs about how people should act, or how organisations should operate. For example, if it is assumed within the culture of an organisation that human nature tends toward laziness, then it will most probably be believed that autonomy

should not be granted to employees as they will not use it to the benefit of the company.

The second level of culture, according to Hofstede, is that of 'practices'; the 'shallow' level of culture. Practices are the visible manifestations of culture that reflect the more implicit values and assumptions. According to Hofstede, they include: a) symbols (e.g. corporate branding, logos, physical and geographical arrangements); b) heroes / heroines (on whom organisational members can model themselves and their values); and c) rituals (e.g. weekly meetings or ways of greeting people that are "carried out for their own sake" in order to maintain social relations rather than to achieve specified objectives). Other writers have added that manifestations of culture can include such things as organisational structures, control systems and stories (Kemp and Dwyer, 2001).
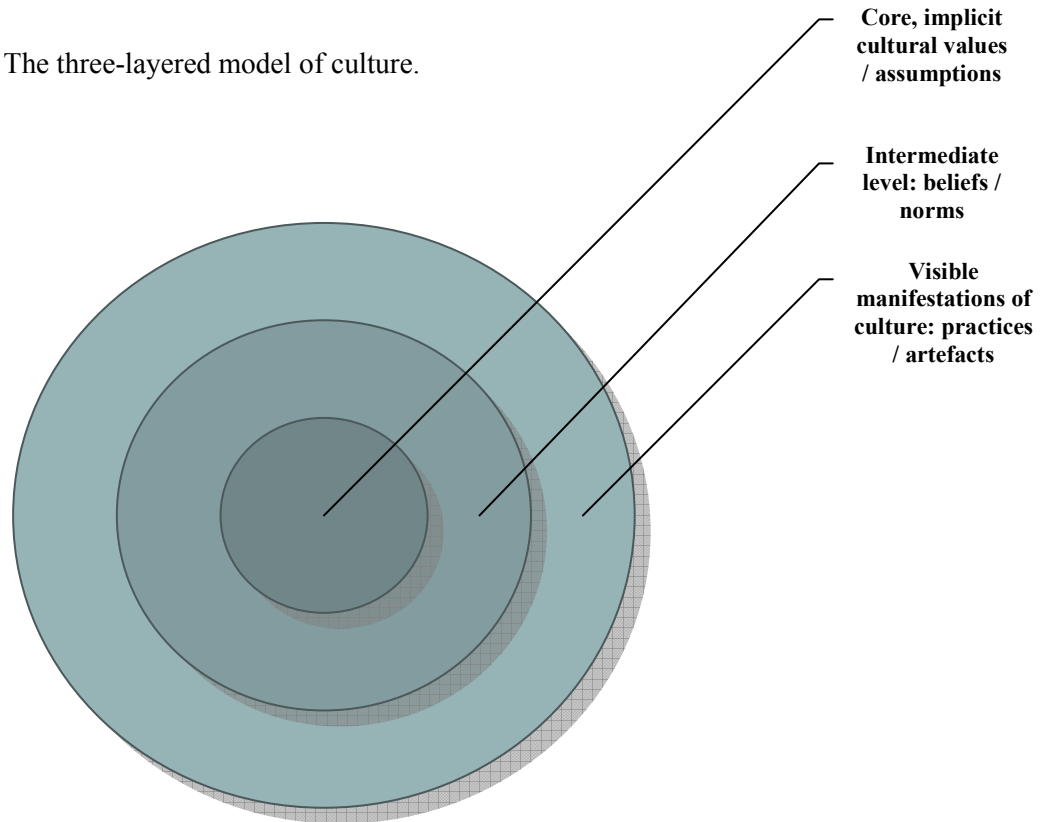
The majority of organisational researchers use Hofstede's model or some variant of it, though the validity of his work is not universally accepted (see Section 2). Nevertheless, the terminology used often differs between one model and another. For example, De Long and Fahey (2000) refer to 'beliefs' instead of 'values', and claim that there is an intermediate level of more explicit 'norms' in between beliefs and practices. Schein (2004) also believes that there is a middle level, but refers to it as 'beliefs'. However, such differences are mainly cosmetic in nature; the basic model of culture being fundamentally constituted by unquestioned and assumed values, and manifested in more visible practices or artefacts, perhaps with an intermediate level of explicit beliefs, is fairly commonplace. This model is presented in figure 1 below.

It should also be noted that, according to most writers, cultural manifestations do not simply reflect core values, they *perpetuate* them. Drennan (1992), for example, outlines the processes by which adherence to accepted practices can lead to the replication of values and assumptions within organisations. In particular, he claims:

> "[w]hen new members of staff join they soon get absorbed into the existing way
> of doing things. Right from their first days, supervisors show them 'how we do
> things here' and their colleagues quickly teach them the ropes… they are anxious
> to please and fit in. As a result, they readily conform to the behaviour that is

expected, and expectations… have a powerful influence in getting both new and existing employees to conform, i.e. to perpetuate the existing culture." (1992: 2. Emphasis in original).

Figure 1: The three-layered model of culture.

Core, implicit cultural values / assumptions

Intermediate level: beliefs / norms

Visible manifestations of culture: practices / artefacts

Source: Adapted from Hofstede (2001) and Schein (2004)

In Giddens' (1984) terms therefore, cultures within organisations (and other types of social group) are seen as 'structurated' systems that generate self-maintaining social practices. In a similar vein, Bowditch and Buono (1994) employ the concept of 'custom' to illustrate how, when an individual is socialised into an organisational culture, s/he reproduces that culture through adherence to the expected habits and routine behaviours. That adherence (implicitly) supports the values that engendered those behaviours, and so the culture becomes self-perpetuating.

It would, however, be misleading to give the impression that there is universal agreement over the way in which organisational culture should be defined and

understood. For example, Smircich (1983) and Legge (1995) point out that, in the main, there are basically two competing, ideal-typical ways of understanding organisational culture. The first, using Burrell and Morgan's (1979) typology of sociological paradigms in organisational analysis, is an essentially functionalist approach. This approach, characteristic of much of the management and business studies literature, sees culture as something that an organisation 'has' – a single variable that can be manipulated by managers to achieve competitive advantage. The second, an essentially interpretive approach dominating in some of the sociological literature, sees it as something that an organisation 'is' – a largely uncontrollable phenomenon that emerges contingently out of social interactions within the organisation, and between the organisation and other agents in its environment. It is of course possible, as many writers and practitioners have done, to adopt an approach somewhere between these two extremes. In these circumstances, culture is viewed as a complex social construct that can perhaps be managed to some extent, but which can never be completely controlled. Additionally, there is also a third view that positions culture as something that an organisation *imposes* as a means of establishing ideological control over the workforce. This theme, which places culture within the context of power relations in the workplace, is developed in the Annexe to this paper.

Another area of contention among organisational researchers surrounds the *level* at which the term 'culture' should be applied. There is perhaps a growing consensus that the organisation is not the only unit of analysis in relation to which culture can be employed. For example, Hofstede (1998: 1) points out that:

> "[o]ne could study culture at the level of an entire corporation… a national subsidiary, a product / market division (national or international), a functional department… a geographic location… a hierarchical level… or even a work group. One could also choose cross-organizational units such as a profession."

He is at pains to remind us that culture 'belongs' to the social group, and that the organisation is just one type of social group; there are many others around which cultures can coalesce. Hofstede's argument is supported by Martin (1992) who claims that *sub*cultures within organisations can be as strong, if not stronger, than organisation-wide cultures. Consequently we should use the broad term 'cultures in

organisations' rather than 'organisational cultures' as the latter is too restrictive in its focus. His claim is endorsed by Maull *et al.* (2001: 316) in an empirical study of cultures in four financial services companies. The study concludes that "perceptions of culture… differed widely by [branch]… and incidentally by job grade… which removed the myth of a single organisational culture." The emerging picture suggests that we should be wary of accounts that refer simply to 'organisational culture', or 'organisational *learning* culture' without recognising that cultures of different types, with different values, can (and perhaps normally do) exist at various places and levels in the same organisation. As a consequence of this, we should also perhaps acknowledge that the culture practised and / or espoused by senior managers within an organisation does not necessarily represent *the* organisational culture; there may well be other, very different (sub-) cultures within the same organisation.

Some writers have claimed that the issues surrounding cultures in organisations have another layer of complexity. For example, Meyerson and Martin (1985) argue that the social and subjective states of organisations are so complex, fragmentary and fluid that the cultures that emerge are generally extremely unstable, localised and ephemeral in nature. They go on to observe that such environments, being so changeable, intricate and 'chaotic', are "relatively uncontrollable" from a manager's perspective (1985: 640). This, of course, has clear implications for the manager's ability to promote learning cultures. Meyerson and Martin might claim that such a task would be basically impossible as managers have very little control over the multiplicity of cultures that exist at any one time in their organisation. However, the majority of writers have been slightly less pessimistic and there is generally a feeling that it is possible for managers to exert some degree of influence, however tenuous, over cultures within their organisations (see section 3 of this paper).

2. Researching and Measuring Culture in Organisations

Organisational researchers have used an extensive array of techniques to research and measure culture. For those influenced by Weber's (1968) concept of 'verstehen' (understanding), Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (1984), and hermeneutics (e.g. Dilthey, 1996), cultural analysis is a process of obtaining a profound and detailed

appreciation of the subjective *meanings* of cultural values and tacit assumptions as they are employed – often unwittingly – by members of that culture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such an approach tends to favour *qualitative* methodologies when researching culture. For example, Smith (2000: 26) claims that in order to understand the hidden "'structure of feeling' that underlies a particular culture and its shared values", the researcher must employ methods, such as detailed conversation analysis, that enable him or her to excavate those 'invisible' and taken-for-granted assumptions that members of a culture may be unable to articulate explicitly.

Similarly, Kemp and Dwyer (2001) in an empirical study of organisational culture in the hospitality industry, employ qualitative methods to acquire an understanding of cultural values and assumptions. They:

> "used multiple sources of data, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, document analysis of in-house publications, staff bulletin board notices and flyers, and advertising material, and a series of observations of interactions between both hotel staff and hotel staff and guests… The richest source of data was the interviews." (Kemp and Dwyer: 2001: 81-82).

The combination of different methods to provide a more accurate and valid picture of cultures within organisations, also called 'triangulation', has become increasingly popular over the last 20 years or so. Hofstede, for example, advocates the combination of qualitative methods ("for depth and empathy") with quantitative methods ("for confirmation") (2001: 393)[3]. His preferred approach to researching and measuring culture begins with the semi-structured interviewing of organisational members "to create a qualitative, empathic description of the culture" (2001: 395). The findings from these interviews are used to inform "a paper-and-pencil survey containing 135 precoded questions" (2001: 395) that collect information about various cultural values and practices from employees and managers at a variety of levels and in a range of functional areas. The survey data are analysed, and numerical 'scores' are attributed to the different aspects of values and practices. These scores are

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[3] Hofstede's combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is in part a deliberate attempt to quell the "unholy war" (2001: 393) between researchers on different sides of the qualitative / quantitative 'divide'.

correlated with each other and turned into a statistical measurement of the cultures and subcultures that exist within the organisation.

In perhaps the most extensive and authoritative empirical study of cultures within organisations, Hofstede (2001) applied this approach to a cultural analysis of 10 different business enterprises. On the basis of this study he determined which values and practices were commonly found together, and discovered that there were three main 'clusters' (or, essentially, cultural types): a 'bureaucratic' cluster (where stability was valued and hierarchical, authority-based organisational structures were the norm); a cluster of 'professionalism' (which valued high levels of qualification and placed work at the centre of one's life); and a 'conservation' cluster (where practices were dominated by a lack of internal communication and knowledge-sharing and where security was highly valued).

It should be noted that Hofstede's work on culture is not universally accepted as methodologically and conceptually valid. For example, McSweeney (2002) and Smith (2002) provide compelling critiques of his research, pointing out, among other things, that he bases much of his discussion of culture on data collected using questionnaire items not originally designed for the purposes of cultural analysis. They claim that this leads him to make unwarranted claims about the dimensions of culture. Smith (2002) also argues that Hofstede fails to specify with sufficient clarity how we distinguish between the causes and consequences of culture (why, for example, does he view increasing affluence a determinant rather than an outcome of culture?).

Such criticisms notwithstanding, there is no denying that Hofstede's work on culture has been extremely influential. Perhaps his primary influence has been to raise the popularity of triangulated approaches involving quantitative methods to the measurement of organisational cultures. For example, Maull *et al*. (2001: 308-310) outline the 'PCOC' ('Personal, Customer Orientation, Organisational and Cultural Issues') model, the purpose of which is to provide practitioners with a means of assessing the compatibility of their organisational culture (or subcultures) with proposed major changes to organisational structures and / or practices. They argue that, whenever such a major change is planned – such as the introduction of a Total Quality Management (TQM) initiative – managers should use the PCOC technique to

enable them to introduce the changes in a way that resonates with the dominant culture. The centrepiece of this approach, as with Hofstede's, is a questionnaire, distributed widely or universally within the organisation (or a specific group / function), that aims to measure various aspects of the culture or subculture. The content of the questionnaire is based on preliminary, qualitative focus group discussions with employees. Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they agree with various statements representing possible cultural values (e.g. "There is no time to examine problems that effect us", or "people who are successful in this organisation have a real concern for customers"; Maull *et al*, 2001: 310). The responses are aggregated at organisational level to produce an overall 'score' for the organisation's culture. That score is then matched to a pre-determined model of what the culture should be, which values it should be based on and promote, given the change that is proposed.

Some researchers have applied similar methodologies – combining qualitative and quantitative methods – to more specific investigations of the extent to which organisational cultures and subcultures facilitate and / or promote learning. For example, Thompson and Kahnweiler (2002) formulate an 'Organisational Learning Culture Scale', drawing on Schein's (2004) model of a learning-supportive culture to rate the cultural dimensions of an organisation in terms of their support for, or inhibition of, learning. (e.g. attitudes to communication, or assumptions about human nature).

Such triangulated approaches to cultural analysis involving quantitative measures are clearly at odds with ethnomethodological and hermeneutic approaches. The – essentially positivist – belief that 'culture' can be isolated within a discrete group or organisational setting, broken down into distinct sets of values, and thereby rendered amenable to direct and quantitative measurement by 'scientific' researchers through a survey of employee attitudes is founded on epistemological and ontological assumptions that are unrecognisable to ethnomethodologists. Their view is that obtaining a valid understanding of the culture of a social group cannot really be achieved from the standpoint of an outsider (or survey researcher), as the words used and attitudes expressed by individuals are believed to draw their meaning from their

(cultural) context; that meaning cannot be accurately captured if it is abstracted from its context (see, for example, Smelser, 1992).

Consequently, ethnomethodologists and those following hermeneutic traditions advocate the use of more qualitative methods that do not perform this abstraction, such as participant observation, life story accounts and other ethnographic approaches. The researcher aims to develop a deep understanding of the culture, perhaps through becoming an accepted member of the social group. In doing so, they achieve an appreciation, rooted in the original social context, of the meaning of cultural symbols and manifestations and their connection to tacit cultural assumptions. Importantly, researchers following such an approach do not believe that the culture of one social group can be directly compared with that of another (or with some pre-defined cultural template); cultures are viewed as basically incommensurable as their essential assumptions are *qualitatively* different.

Clearly therefore, there are some deep-rooted epistemological and methodological differences between researchers of organisational culture. This is Hofstede's "unholy war" (2001: 393); on one side there are those who believe that culture is in essence a unitary, discrete and quantifiable variable that can be isolated and measured through surveys and manipulated by managers to improve outcomes. Martin (1992) refers to this as the 'Integration' perspective. On the other side are those who believe that culture is a complex and fragmentary phenomenon that emerges 'bottom-up' from unpredictable social interactions within a group, which can only be understood through adopting an insider's perspective, and which is difficult if not impossible to control[4]. Yet the 'war' analogy is perhaps an oversimplification of the debate; many researchers and practitioners have, of course, taken a middle path and accepted that cultures in organisations are indeed intricate, self-referential, socially constructed and difficult to manage. However, they also believe that cultures can be at least partially understood and influenced through triangulated research methods and strategic management initiatives. It is to such debates over the management of culture that we now turn.

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[4] Indeed, the attempt to control culture is itself often seen as an attempt to establish ideological domination on the part of managers (Martin, 1992); see Annexe for a further discussion of this issue.

3. Managing Cultures in Organisations

Brown (1998) observes that cultures / subcultures which are not compatible with organisational structures or strategies can present a serious problem for managers. Maull *et al*. (2001: 319) provide empirical evidence to support this claim, positing that managers planning to introduce TQM initiatives need to ensure that the dominant cultures within the organisation are supportive of the key values of such strategies. If such supportive cultures – or "performance-enhancing cultures" – are not in place, then the initiative is at high risk of failure; if employees, for example, continue to work on the tacit assumption that volume of production output is more important than precision and quality, then systems and procedures designed to facilitate TQM will struggle to have the desired effect. Maull *et al*. (2001) conclude that managing culture, or at least managing *around* it, is an essential part of improving business performance.

But how easy is it to manage culture? Can it, indeed, be managed at all? Holloway (1991) highlights the tendency of more managerialist accounts to assume that this process is largely unproblematic. Under such accounts, she claims:

> "[t]he leader is invoked as the mechanism which ensures that the group and organization don't just evolve their own culture, but that their culture is under the control of someone at the top who has responsibility for the successful performance of the organization… [However,] sociological analysis of managerial effectiveness has constantly tried to emphasize the conditions within which a manager must exercise both formal and informal authority" (Holloway, 1991: 140-141).

Similarly, Legge (1995) points out that initiatives designed not only to manage cultures in organisations but to *change* them seldom meet with genuine success. For example, Storey's (1992) research into culture change programmes found that such programmes do not, for the most part, result in an authentic and fundamental cultural transformation. All too often a cosmetic alteration to symbols and other visible manifestations of culture (e.g. job titles, office layouts) is assumed to represent genuine change, while in reality the basic assumptions and values actually remain the same. As Legge points out:,

"[i]f the [espoused] corporate culture makes no sense of the organisational realities experienced by the employees other than senior management, it will not become internalised outside that small sub-group." (1995: 187).

Various writers have attempted to explain this apparent difficulty in managing and changing culture within organisations. Hofstede (2001), for example, claims that cultures, being based on collective histories developed over time, are inherently stable and therefore resistant to manipulation. Furthermore, Smith (2000) is keen to remind us that individual employees are thinking, sentient agents who do not simply receive and accept information transmitted from senior managers without questioning it; they interpret that information based on their own values and act accordingly (often in ways that resist the transmitted culture). Additionally, there are those (e.g. Meyerson and Martin, 1985) who claim that cultures within organisations are seldom stable or coherent enough to be managed at all (see section 1).

However, perhaps the majority of practitioners and writers in this area are slightly warmer to the suggestion that culture is, to some degree, manageable within organisations, and that it is possible for managers to wield some influence over it. Very few, though, have claimed that this influence is exerted with ease. For example, while Schein (2004) sees one of the central functions of leadership within organisations as the management of culture, he concedes that:

"culture refers to those elements of a group or organization that are most stable and least malleable. Culture is the result of a complex group learning process that is only partially influenced by leader behaviour." (2004: 11).

Similarly, Hofstede (2001) believes that culture has many determinants, existing as it does in a complex, mutual relationship with structure and strategy within the organisation; "[g]iven top management's commitment" he observes, "organizational cultures are *somewhat* manageable." (Hofstede, 2001: 409. Emphasis in original).

So how can managers attempt to influence culture? In outlining the ways in which learning-supportive cultures can be developed, De Long and Fahey (2000) observe

that this process can begin by manipulating cultural *practices* (the 'shallow' level of culture). "For example" they claim:

> "the ways in which departmental meetings are conducted strongly influence the likelihood of a group's generating new knowledge or leveraging its existing knowledge. Are differences of opinion encouraged and respected, or routinely discounted by group leaders? Is conflict managed constructively or is it suppressed or smoothed over?" (2000: 115-116)

Thus, the argument goes, attending to cultural practices and manifestations can be an important (and relatively straightforward) part of attempts to manage culture, as well as playing an important role in perpetuating deeper values and assumptions.

However, as outlined previously in this section, altering cultural practices can only ever be *a* part of the culture change process; such superficial adjustments are simply likely to provoke cynicism among employees if they feel that fundamentally very little has altered. It is, nevertheless, one way of initiating change, and De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that any cultural transformation programme must take a holistic approach that addresses culture at all of its various levels – values (or assumptions), beliefs, and practices.

Their point is supported by Bowditch and Buono (1994), who argue that fundamental cultural transformation cannot be achieved simply through behavioural manipulation (e.g. introducing new procedures or financial reward structures). If such a transformation is to occur, then employees need to feel a *normative* commitment to the 'new' cultural values; "[i]f attitude change is to take place" they claim, "… managers should support relevant behavioural changes with intrinsic motivators as much as possible." (1994: 121). Thus, attempts to influence culture are more likely to meet with success if managers address the values and beliefs of employees, as well as their behaviours. Drennan (1992) adds that training can play an important part when inducing such a change; it may be used to communicate the new values and behaviours to employees and also to develop the skills to enable them to perform the required behaviours in the workplace.

However, before attempting to manage or change the culture/s within their organisations in order to promote desired outcomes, managers must decide what sort of culture they need. In taking this decision, they might consider Brown's warning that:

> "the relationship between organisational culture and performance is so complex, so dependent on large numbers of dynamic variables that no simple 'cultural formula for success' can be relied upon." (1998: 235).

Perhaps, as Brown suggests, there is no single template for a desirable culture; perhaps a 'good' culture is simply one that supports the idiosyncratic aims and strengths of each individual organisation. However, this has not stopped a growing interest among researchers and practitioners in the role that culture can play in supporting *learning* in organisations. What, it is increasingly asked, might a 'learning culture' look like? What values and behaviours might it promote? It is to such questions that the next section turns.

4. Learning-Supportive Cultures in Organisations

It is only recently that researchers have begun to make genuinely systematic connections between learning and culture within organisations. However, it is a connection that has been made less explicitly for some time. As the 'learning organisation' concept began to grow in popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increasing recognition that organisational cultures had some part to play in promoting learning. As Bates and Khasawneh (2005) observe, the learning organisation literature has tended to refer to:

> "a consensus… among organization members about the value of learning and use of new learning for creative purposes in the pursuit of organizational goals and objectives… a culture that supports the acquisition of information, the distribution and sharing of learning, and provides rewards and recognition for learning and its application as critical for successful learning organizations." (2005: 98)

Bates and Khasawneh (2005) believe that such insights are indeed useful in emphasising the importance of culture in general terms, but also that a more precise conceptualisation of a 'learning culture' is needed. To this end, they offer a definition of 'organisational learning culture' (OLC), which they claim is:

> "reflected by an organization-wide pattern of values and beliefs about the importance of learning, its implementation and dissemination. These values and beliefs are based on observable, salient work context factors such as norms associated with creativity and innovation, human resource practices that support ongoing employee development, and managerial practices that facilitate efforts directed at change and innovation." (2005: 99)

Thus, Bates and Khasawneh suggest the possibility of a three-level model of an OLC, with assumptions, beliefs and practices that support learning. Other writers have begun to follow a similar path. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in Australia, for example has provided the basis for understanding the possible forms of learning culture through a series of case studies of organisations professing to have implemented such a culture (see, for example, Johnston and Hawke, 2002). Similarly, Eraut's (2001) account of 'learning climates' (or 'microclimates') makes explicit the role of culture in encouraging and supporting learning (although his use of the term 'climate' encompasses aspects of the organisational environment beyond the cultural).

The purpose of this section is to review some of the more salient and recursive themes in this literature with a view to developing a more detailed and comprehensive account of this model. The section is then concluded with a brief illustration of the culture – learning connection drawing on some initial findings from the research.

Cultural Assumptions and Learning

De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that the first level of culture, that of tacit values and assumptions, has some profound effects on learning within social groups. For example, they claim, in any organisation there are (largely unspoken) assumptions about:

a) What is 'worthy' and useful knowledge, e.g. abstract or practical knowledge;

b) The form and function of social interactions, e.g. expansive or restrictive;

c) Who should possess and retain 'useful' knowledge, and;

d) How 'new' knowledge is adopted or created.

Such deep-rooted assumptions generate more explicit beliefs and norms (the intermediate level of culture). For example, if there is a pervasive assumption that interactions between employees are routinely restricted to task-related matters, then this is likely to create behavioural norms, and subsequent practices, that inhibit information-sharing and collective learning. Similarly, Fuller and Unwin (2004), in their account of 'expansive learning environments', highlight the importance of assumptions regarding where, within the organisation, knowledge should reside. In an empirical study, they observe how in two of their case study organisations "a shift towards the expansive end of the continuum occurred when knowledge was seen to be a central component of all jobs" (2004: 137). Thus, if it is assumed that knowledge is endemic throughout the organisation rather than the possession of a few senior members, then information is likely to be shared more freely.

López *et al.* (2004) also attempt to identify the assumptions characteristic of a learning-supportive culture – which they call a 'collaborative culture' – and conclude that those which promote learning include: an assumption that change needs to be managed proactively; a trust and respect placed in individuals; a value placed on teamwork; an assumption that employees will use empowerment responsibly and that empowering employees will benefit the organisation; and an implicit acceptance of risk and ambiguity (López *et al.*, 2004). Empowerment, participation and collaboration are perhaps the main themes in this culture, and in this regard Thompson and Kahnweiler (2002) observe that there is often an assumption in the literature that high levels of employee participation facilitate greater learning, and therefore higher levels of performance. However, they also conclude on the basis of an empirical, quantitative study that there appears to be no strong correlation between participatory practices and an 'organisational learning culture' (measured using a 'Dimensions of Learning Organisation' questionnaire, based on a model provided by Schein, 2004).

Dalley and Hamilton (2000) demonstrate that assumptions about what constitutes 'useful' knowledge can also impact on the quantity, and particularly the type of learning that occurs within an organisation. In their study of small firms, they find that:

> "learning by doing is the preferred and predominant method of knowledge creation in the small business. This is the only method that is trusted and respected by the owners." (Dalley and Hamilton, 2000: 55).

Dalley and Hamilton claim that this pervasive outlook among senior managers in small firms makes it less likely that they will see the utility in engaging in formal, off-the-job training. Their claim is supported by Reeve and Gallacher (2005), who observe that differing cultural assumptions about 'valuable' knowledge often present a barrier to employer – university partnerships. Among employers, they observe:

> "[a]bstract concepts, and material which was not seen to be directly relevant to the immediate work process, were questioned… In a culture that insists that 'if it won't go on one side of A4 forget it…' it is difficult to get managers to appreciate an academic approach that recognizes and explores ambiguity, balances arguments and values critical thinking." (2005: 228).

This finding echoes De Long and Fahey's claim that "[c]ulture shapes what a group defines as relevant knowledge, and this will directly affect which knowledge a unit focuses on." (2000: 116)[5]. De Long and Fahey also remind us not to treat the organisation as the only unit of analysis; different groups or functions within the same organisation may have entirely different ideas about what useful or relevant knowledge is. In one of their case study organisations (an 'electronics firm'), for example, they report that the subculture evident in the management information systems section valued "knowledge embedded in software, documents, systems etc."

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[5] It is perhaps ironic that the literature on workplace learning itself sometimes reveals a tendency to privilege one form of knowledge over another. As Eraut *et al.* (2000) and Felstead *et al.* (2005) point out, there is often a propensity among certain writers and politicians to focus on *formal* learning leading to qualifications rather than *informal* modes of workplace learning which are as important, if not more so. Drennan (1992) for example, refers to the importance of creating 'learning cultures', yet his subsequent focus on formal, off-the job learning indicates that perhaps he is actually referring to '*training* cultures'.

(2000: 118) in contrast to the subculture of the engineering section, where knowledge deriving from experimentation and teamwork was valued more highly.

Ashton (2004) alludes to another way in which cultural assumptions can impact upon learning; "opportunities [for learning]" he observes, "are provided through the operation of *interpersonal relationships* in the workplace." (2004: 49. Emphasis added). In support of this, De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that cultural assumptions seem to shape the form and function of social interactions and relationships within organisations, by representing:

> "the rules (e.g. 'Don't interrupt a superior'…) and practices (e.g. meeting formats and frequencies…) that determine the environment within which people communicate." (2000: 120).

So, for example, if there is no common assumption that cross-functional interaction, communication or knowledge-sharing is routinely to occur, then such things are unlikely to happen, despite the institution of artefacts (e.g. company intranets) to facilitate them. Cultural assumptions also, they claim, influence learning by shaping beliefs about who should be in control of what knowledge, and where certain types of knowledge should reside and / or be shared. For example, cultures that value technical skills acquired and used in isolation by individuals are less likely to support knowledge-sharing networks; similarly, cultures characterised by a lack of trust will probably not promote the transfer of knowledge from the individual to the group or organisation.

Addtionally, De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that cultural assumptions can influence how, and how often, learning occurs within social groups by shaping attitudes towards the creation and adoption of new knowledge. For example, an ingrained predisposition towards proactive innovation, creative thinking and continuous improvement is likely to provide a fertile ground for learning. Bishop (2004) provides support for this claim in a study of learning in SMEs, where it is seen that some small firms develop a largely unspoken 'innovative' orientation, while others remain more 'inert' in their attitude toward new knowledge, thus closing off many learning opportunities.

Finally, Schein (2004) puts forward a 10-point hypothetical model of a learning culture, in which he identifies the basic assumptions that promote learning. These assumptions include *inter alia* the following: that the external environment (e.g. product markets) can be influenced and even changed; that human nature is basically good; that information should be an open resource rather than a hoarded possession; and that "diverse but connected units are desirable." (Schein, 2004: 405).

At the level of tacit assumptions therefore, there are strong indications that cultures exert a powerful influence on the quantity and type of learning that occurs. In particular, assumptions about what constitutes 'valuable' knowledge, about how to deal with new knowledge, about the appropriate 'location' of knowledge in an organisation or group, and about the form and function of social interactions all seem to have a profound impact on learning. Yet that impact can only be felt through the more explicit beliefs and tangible artefacts / practices that assumptions give rise to, and it is to these more 'superficial' levels of culture that the remainder of this section turns.

Cultural Beliefs, Cultural Practices and Learning

To some extent it is relatively simple to predict the sorts of beliefs and practices that particular cultural assumptions are likely to generate, and the effects that they have on learning have already been hinted at in this paper. For example, the assumption that 'soft' skills and knowledge (e.g. people management skills) are useful and of value will probably lead to the explicit belief that the development of such skills should be facilitated and rewarded. In turn this is likely to promote practices and artefacts that advance and support those beliefs (e.g. bonuses for participation in soft skills training, or stories of organisational 'heroes' who are / were unusually good people managers).

Some writers have offered more specific and detailed accounts of the beliefs and practices that could form part of a learning culture. For example, Marsick and Watkins (2003) specify nine 'dimensions' of culture within learning organisations. These dimensions are used to construct a 'Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire' (DLOQ). Among other things, they highlight the importance of

instituting mechanisms to promote employee involvement and feedback, of building learning opportunities into job design and teamwork, and of implementing widely-accessible knowledge management systems to capture and share knowledge at group and organisation levels. A belief in the value of 'systems thinking' is also seen as important. [6]

It quickly becomes apparent that such accounts resonate strongly with existing models of the 'learning organisation'. For example, Senge's (1990) 'five disciplines' include systems thinking, team learning and a commitment to continuous learning in pursuit of shared goals ('personal mastery'). Senge also advocates the promotion of 'localness', which:

> "means moving decisions down the organizational hierarchy; designing business units where, to the greatest degree possible, local decision makers confront the full range of issues and dilemmas." (1990: 287).

In a similar vein, Pedler *et al*. (1991) identify 11 practices that characterise learning organisations (or 'learning companies' in their terms). These include participative policy making, flexible reward systems, 'enabling structures', readily available support and resources for learning, and systems to facilitate inter-company learning.

These accounts of the learning organisation are not without their limitations. For example, they tend to make the problematic assumption that managers are generally willing and able in reality to prioritise learning ahead of short-term exigencies (for a full account of such criticisms see Hughes, 2000 and Keep, 2000). However, they do allow us to begin to form an impression of what the visible and tangible aspects of a learning culture might look like. Furthermore, they appear in some ways to resemble what have more recently been called 'High Performance Work Practices' (HPWPs) (see Butler *et al*., 2004 for a general overview). For example, Ashton and Sung (2002) provide a detailed description of the learning-supportive practices associated with High Performance Work. In doing so, they refer to measures such as job rotation,

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[6] These dimensions, and their impact on 'job satisfaction and motivation to transfer learning', are verified in a quantitative empirical study by Egan *et al*. (2004).

organised cross-functional interaction, the devolution of responsibility for decision-making and the broadening of work tasks (2002)[7].

Towards a Vision of a Learning-Supportive Culture

This section of the paper has begun to describe a few of the possible features of a learning-supportive culture based on a distillation of themes from the current literature. It has attempted to achieve this in a relatively systematic way, identifying in turn some of the assumptions, beliefs and practices that might constitute such a culture. These features are summarised in the table below.
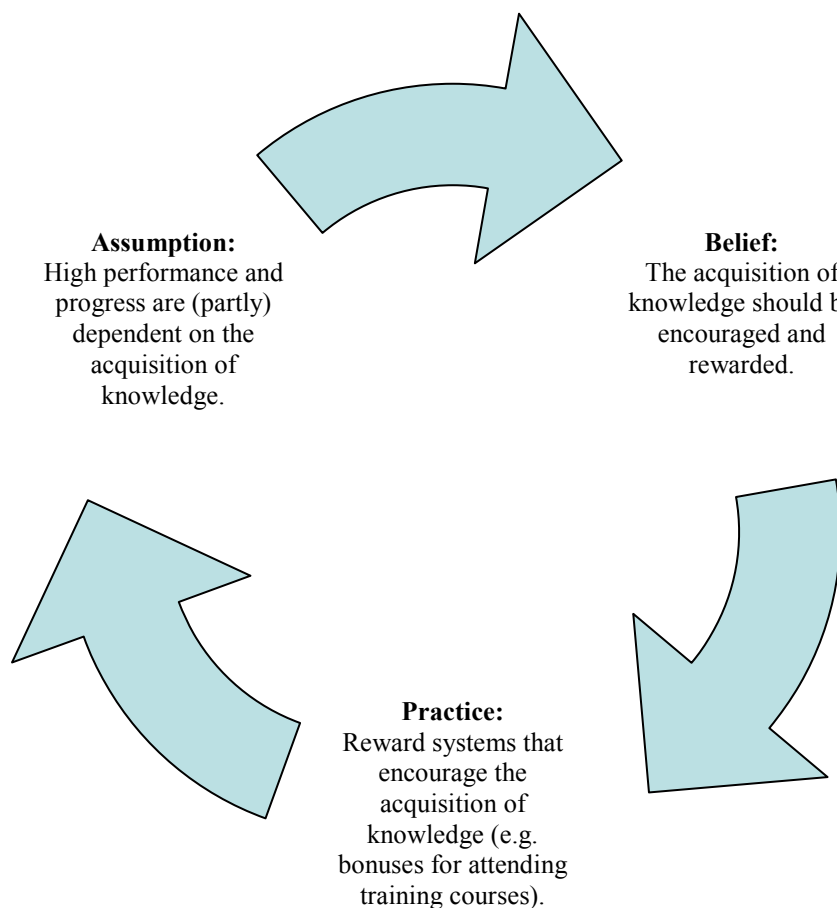
Table 1: Some possible features of a learning-supportive culture

Tacit assumptions / values	• High performance and progress are (partly) dependent on the acquisition and exploitation of knowledge. • Interactions between members of the organisation or group are normally expansive rather than restrictive in nature; expansive collaboration is more productive than individualism. • The benefits of knowledge are only fully realised when it is treated as an endemic resource rather than a restricted possession. • Human nature is essentially good; people are normally trustworthy and responsible. • A proactive attitude towards innovation and the management of change is a prerequisite for high performance.
Explicit beliefs / norms	• The acquisition and sharing of 'useful' knowledge should be encouraged and rewarded. • All members / employees should have easy access to knowledge resources. • Members / employees need to be empowered to use and exploit acquired knowledge. • Collaborative working is an effective method of promoting knowledge-sharing (which is assumed to improve performance).
Practices / artefacts	• Reward systems that encourage the acquisition and exploitation of knowledge, e.g. bonuses for attending training courses or making suggestions for efficiency gains. • Flexible and expansive job design to empower employees to exploit new knowledge. • Organised and accessible knowledge management systems, e.g. organisational intranets, to enable employees to contribute their knowledge to a centrally-stored resource, and to access the knowledge acquired by others. • Rituals and routine behaviours that promote / facilitate the acquisition, sharing and exploitation of knowledge, e.g. participative decision-making within work groups, or inclusive social interactions.

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[7] Importantly, Ashton and Sung (2002) also argue that such practices, if implemented, will have little effect if they are not supported by underlying assumptions. For example, systems designed to facilitate devolved responsibility for decision-making will have little impact on performance if there is still a general assumption of low trust within the organisation.

This is not supposed to be an exhaustive list or comprehensive model of a learning-supportive culture, simply an indication of what such a culture might, in part, comprise of. It may, of course, be a little artificial to isolate and delineate cultural features in this way, as the relationships between the different levels are complex, overlapping and mutually reinforcing (see Figure 2 below). This can make it difficult to determine in practice, for example, where 'tacit assumptions' end and 'explicit beliefs' begin. We should also perhaps take note of Johnston and Hawke's (2002) observations that learning cultures may take a variety of forms from one organisation to the next. There may be no one 'true' model of a learning culture, only variations on a theme. However, it is hoped that the points raised in the foregoing discussion clarify current thinking on the relationship between cultures and learning within organisations, and at least provide a starting point for the construction of a more comprehensive model of a learning-supportive culture than has been available hitherto.

Figure 2: An example of the mutually-reinforcing relationship between cultural assumptions, beliefs and practices

Assumption:
High performance and progress are (partly) dependent on the acquisition of knowledge.

Belief:
The acquisition of knowledge should be encouraged and rewarded.

Practice:
Reward systems that encourage the acquisition of knowledge (e.g. bonuses for attending training courses).

Learning and Culture in Practice: Initial Findings from the Research

The evidence emerging from the research is providing firmer empirical ground on which to make the association between culture and learning. This can be seen in the illustrative data presented below, which are taken from one of the organisations in which case study research is currently ongoing. The organisation manufactures components for supply to the automotive industry, employs in the region of 900 people and is currently facing unprecedented levels of competition (on grounds of both cost and quality of product) from companies in Eastern Europe and China. As a primary result of these growing competitive pressures, the company recently introduced a training programme whereby all production operatives are required to obtain an NVQ level 2 qualification in engineering operations. More experienced operatives and supervisors are recruited and trained as internal NVQ 'tutors' to guide other employees through this process.

The NVQ programme is clearly an example of how a learning-supportive culture might be manifested in organisational systems. However, unless it is founded on supportive values and assumptions, it is likely to have only a limited impact on learning and performance outcomes. In this instance, there are reasons to believe that such values and assumptions are indeed in place[8]. For example, in the following interview extract, the HR manager of the company clearly expresses the explicit value placed on employee skills and development as a fundamental prerequisite of the competitive strategy:

> "So [we are] an organisation with a very strong culture of employee development and looking forward we see our sustainable competitive advantage being built on employee development and employee capability. Such as we find ourselves now in a global market. Everyone can buy the same machines. We all have the same processes. We can all use the same level and the same types of technology. The one deciding factor within all that is that the people are the one thing that are probably not transferable and the one thing that you can't really replicate."

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[8] It should be acknowledged that the focus of data collection so far in this particular case study has been on interviews with managerial staff. It is therefore possible that the emerging picture is one of a managerial rather than organisation-wide culture. This theme is one that shall be further interrogated as the data collection shifts focus on to more junior staff.

Such sentiments suggest that learning is not simply viewed as a bolt-on activity, or a chore that distracts from 'more important' production-related matters. It is very much valued – explicitly – as a central part of the performance management process. This attitude can also be seen in the following extract, where the company's director of finance and IT talks about the way in which production operatives are encouraged to be proactive in investigating the cause of product defects:

> "It's constant training. It's process engineers looking at things, working with operators to try and improve. Looking back and saying "right, that fault has been caused by something that's happened ten stages earlier so let's get that out of the picture". You then go back and see why that happens way back at the start of the process and then you find it is the toolmaker, it's the way he makes the tool…
> It's a learning process and the training comes from us enabling, empowering the operator to make suggestions and encouraging them."

The belief being espoused in a fairly explicit way by this respondent is that employees need to be empowered and given a significant degree of freedom if they are to exploit their knowledge. At a deeper, more tacit level, the unspoken *assumption* behind this must be that employees, once empowered, will use that increased autonomy in a responsible way. That is, it is assumed that human nature – or at least the nature of the company's employees – is basically good.

A final example of the way in which culture(s) within this organisation seems to support learning became evident during a daily production meeting in one of the company's divisions. The meeting involved various middle managers, junior managers and supervisors along with some engineering / R&D technicians. The purpose of these meetings, which take place at the beginning of every day, is essentially to discuss any production-related problems experienced over the previous 24 hours, and to reach a solution, if possible, to each problem. The following extract is from field notes taken during the observation of one of these meetings:

> A full and frank discussion ensues about the causes of a machine failure yesterday. After 5 different people volunteer their take on the problem, the business unit manager [who chaired the meeting] offers a solution for

discussion… It is basically accepted though with one minor amendment suggested by a process engineer… The discussion is moved swiftly on to the problems relating to quality issues and downtime. The meeting is very open and efficient. It seems that everyone is allowed / expected to contribute readily on issues within their area of concern… Some issues arouse intense debate but a solution is always agreed.

One of the more noticeable aspects of the meeting was its *openness*; it was a very loosely-structured meeting with little or no ceremony. Individuals entered and left the discussion as they felt necessary, and contributed in frank and honest ways, apparently without fear of upsetting other people in the room. Yet the discussion progressed rapidly and efficiently, and solution-focussed debate never slipped into argumentative confrontation. At no point did the chairperson make the 'rules' of the meeting explicit; the expected norms of behaviour had simply become assumed.

As De Long and Fahey (2000) observe, the way in which meetings are conducted can tell us a great deal about cultural support for learning in organisations / groups. For example, where conflict is managed constructively in meetings, and where differences of opinion are respected (even encouraged), there are generally underlying tacit assumptions that promote learning, e.g. through experimentation, trial and error or the benefits of collaborative working. To insiders, such assumptions may not even be recognised at a conscious level; to the researcher, as an outsider, their manifestation in the conduct of routines and rituals such as daily meetings can be one of the clearest indications of a learning-supportive culture.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper has been to bring the literatures on culture and learning within organisations closer together, with a view to clarifying the notion of a 'learning-supportive culture'. It is proposed that this term, rather than the more commonly-used 'learning culture', is employed in the future, as it promotes a more fruitful vision of culture as being a collective subjective condition that can be supportive (or not) of a number of outcomes *including* learning, rather than simply being concerned with learning to the exclusion of all else.

Firstly, various definitions of 'culture' were reviewed and some common themes extracted. It was seen that there is a degree of consensus that cultures – which can form at a variety of levels within and between organisations, as well as outside of them – are normally founded on tacit, implicit assumptions (or values) and manifested in more explicit and 'visible' beliefs, practices and artefacts. The paper subsequently sought to identify the various assumptions, beliefs and practices that appear to impact on the quantity and type of learning that occurs within organisations.

As the outcome of this task (see table 1), various learning-supportive assumptions are identified (e.g. 'human nature is essentially good', or 'collaboration is more productive than individualism'), as are the beliefs (e.g. 'collaborative working promotes knowledge-sharing') and practices (e.g. routines that promote collective knowledge-sharing) to which such assumptions might give rise[9]. However, this is not presented as a complete theoretical model of a learning-supportive culture, rather as a possible starting point for such a model.

Recent empirical work (e.g. Bates and Khasawneh, 2005) has begun to test similar models of learning cultures in practice, but this is still an extremely under-researched field. We are as yet some distance from fully understanding the potential of culture in supporting learning, but this paper has hopefully clarified some of the issues. More work is undoubtedly required to illuminate the complex interplay between cultural

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[9] Again, it should be recognised that the *type* of learning that occurs also seems to be influenced by, for example, cultural assumptions about what constitutes useful knowledge. Thus, a culture may support learning, but may also emphasise some types of learning over others. So, as Reeve and Gallacher (2005) observe, organisations can become blinkered to forms of knowledge that could potentially hold benefit for them.

assumptions, values and practices, to delineate with greater clarity and certainty the particular aspects of learning-supportive cultures, and to determine whether or not such cultures can be created or promoted, and if so, how. While it seems increasingly likely that such empirical work will involve survey instruments designed to measure and test different cultural features, it should perhaps be recognised that the task of uncovering complex systems of meaning and sense-making within specific organisational settings cannot, as Smith (2000) argues, be achieved through quantitative approaches alone. In acknowledgement of this, Hofstede (2001) provides a working template for the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in triangulated cultural research.

One final note of caution is due; as Johnston and Hawke (2002) observe, the propensity of employers to pursue the creation of learning cultures is closely associated with the extent to which they perceive a connection between learning and performance. As such, discussions of learning cultures could fall on deaf ears if, as may be the case, there is little demand for learning among employers. Keep (2000), for example, argues that the dominant competitive strategies currently employed – and in many cases found profitable – by organisations in the UK tend to do little to promote a requirement for learning, based as they are on relatively low-skill paradigms of work organisation. This, claims Keep, explains why there are actually so few genuine 'learning organisations' in Britain, despite the empirical evidence suggesting that learning actually has a positive impact on organisational performance (see, for example, Bontis *et al.*, 2002).

However, we should guard against being overly pessimistic; a growing body of research promotes a cautious optimism regarding employers' attitudes towards workplace learning. Forth and Millward (2004), for example, highlight the increasing use of learning-supportive high performance work practices within UK organisations, while Appelbaum *et al.* (2000) indicate that a similar process is occurring in the US. It seems that the seeding ground for the development of learning-supportive cultures may be becoming gradually more fertile.

Annexe: Further Discussion of Culture, Power and Ideology

As observed in Section 1 of this paper, two ways of viewing culture are a) as something an organisation *has*, or b) something an organisation *is*. There is also a third perspective with a long history in the sociological literature; that culture is something that an organisation *imposes*. This annexe presents a closer analysis of this position.

In Burrell and Morgan's (1979) terms, seeing culture as something an organisation either has or is relies heavily on the 'sociology of regulation'. That is, both perspectives focus, albeit in different ways, on examining and explaining culture in relation to the maintenance of social order and existing social practices. They tend to emphasise the ways in which culture promotes integration, cohesion, stability and common identity within organisations. In adopting such an outlook, there lies the danger of neglecting what Burrell and Morgan refer to as the 'sociology of radical change', i.e. the view that organisations are places of contestation, resistance and conflict. Many writers have adopted such an approach, and in doing so have sited culture within the relations of power and control that pervade the workplace. Culture, it is often said, is simply a form of *ideology* imposed by managers upon the workforce as a means of furthering their control over the labour process.

The notion of culture as ideology has been adopted by many writers across the social sciences. In anthropology for example, Geertz (1993) argues that ideology is itself a cultural system; a set of assumptions, beliefs and attendant artefacts that represents and promotes the interests of a particular social group. Similarly, Fallers (1961) describes ideology as "that part of culture which is actively concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of belief and value." (1961: 677-678).

Yet the 'culture as ideology' perspective has perhaps been presented most forcefully by writers in the traditions of Marxist and critical theories. For example, the work of Gramsci (1995) promoted the idea of 'hegemony' (ideological domination) as a means by which the capitalist classes maintained social control. Louis Althusser (1971) echoed this view, claiming that various 'ideological apparatuses' in the employ of the state (e.g. the education system, the media) direct attention away from the inequalities of capitalist society, thus generating an acceptance of the inherently

exploitative relations of production. Althusser argued that the working classes are so eager to distance themselves from the material alienation caused by their working conditions that they gratefully accept the manufactured cultural values handed down to them[10].

With more specific reference to the organisational context, culture has been equated with ideology in a number of ways. Clegg and Dunkerley (1980), for example, present the cultural values of patriarchal ideology as a means by which men's advantaged position within organisations is maintained. Other writers have invoked concepts such as the 'colonisation of the self' (Casey, 1995) to describe the way in which corporate cultures are forced upon employees in an attempt to achieve normative control over the workforce. As Grugulis and Wilkinson (2002) argue:

> "[C]ultural change targets employee attitudes directly and aims to secure 'commitment' rather than 'resigned cultural compliance' with all employees sharing a 'common vision' and working together for the good of the organisation. As a result, the managerial task becomes one that involves establishing control over the meaning of work, rather than its execution, of 'converting' employees to the corporate 'faith'." (2002: 181)

As employees internalise the 'official' culture, it is argued, senior managers achieve greater control over their output; culture is thus seen simply as a means of achieving control in the workplace. Furthermore, it is seen as a more effective means than traditional approaches based on authoritarianism, as it reduces or even eliminates the need for direct supervision; employees, having been 'colonised', willingly adhere to the desired values.

Ezzy (2001) supports this argument, claiming that the cultural values associated with and promoted under 'new' management practices such as TQM:

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[10] This view of the passive recipient or 'cultural dope' simply receiving and accepting the cultural values presented to them has been strongly criticised by many writers. See, for example Smith (2000), who points out that individuals are thinking, sentient agents who very often consciously resist attempts to enforce a particular culture upon them.

"ensure worker compliance through resuscitating the Protestant bourgeois ethic that encourages employee self-discipline, devotion and service, and restrains dissent and self-indulgence." (2001: 633)

Thus, argues Ezzy, through the promotion of a particular set of cultural values (i.e. through promoting an ideology), employers seek to manipulate the subjective conditions of employees, to 'colonise them', thereby extending their control over the labour process.

Despite this extensive literature on culture, ideology and power relations within organisations, relatively few writers have attempted to integrate such themes into the study of workplace learning. There is certainly a growing body of evidence suggesting that opportunities to participate in or experience learning are not distributed equally within organisations (see, for example, Rainbird *et al*., 1999). However, notions of culture and ideology are largely absent from such discussions, and there is definitely room for improvement in our understanding of the connection between power, ideology and workplace learning.

This understanding has undoubtedly been furthered recently by writers such as Fuller *et al*. (2005) and Gee *et al.* (1996), who criticise Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of learning through 'peripheral participation' in communities of practice. Their claim is that the term 'community of practice' is often simply a means used by managers to persuade newcomers to accept the rules of their own exploitation. In other words, they argue, it is essentially an ideological tool[11]. Other writers (e.g. Kunda, 1993; Strangleman, 2004) have observed that the training programmes often associated with culture change initiatives are little more than exercises in ideological transmission. However, the nature of the relationship between power, culture, ideology and learning is still an area that is only partially understood; it is certainly one that would benefit from greater conceptual and empirical development.

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[11] As Gee *et al*. (1996) point out, Lave and Wenger acknowledged that their work was "largely silent" on the political structuring of learning and learning opportunities.

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