

Organisational learning:

a borrowed toolbox?

David Kelleher and the Gender at Work Collaborative

Background

In a field such as gender and development, which has suffered from an excess of stated intentions over actual change, ideas like that of the learning organisation are more than welcome. Organisational learning was originally intended to help organisations respond better to the demands of their environment. It also envisaged changes to how the organisation itself functioned. This ‘double-loop learning’ was seen as a way in which the organisation could change fundamental beliefs (Argyris and Schön 1978). The promise of change in fundamental beliefs makes learning organisations attractive to advocates for gender equality.

This paper grows out of an e-conference hosted by the Gender at Work Collaborative. The Collaborative is a recently established knowledge-building network dedicated to institutional change for gender equality. It was founded by four organisations: the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Women’s Learning Partnership (WLP), the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS), and the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). The paper itself is a collaborative project led by David Kelleher arising from an ongoing international discussion about gender equality and institutional change and focused in an e-conference among the following participants: Hala Ghosheh, Evangelino Holvino, David Kelleher, Kate McLaren, Sarah Murison, Penny Plowman, and Ingrid Richter. Many of the key ideas have been developed over a long collaboration with Aruna Rao.

What is a learning organisation?

The concept of the learning organisation as defined in the call for papers for the special issue of *Development in Practice* on which this Reader is based, arises from the following tenets:

- Organisations are mission-driven and their organisational form evolves to best meet that mission within their own particular dynamic context.
- Staff should be empowered to maximise their potential and contribute at both the operational and strategic levels.
- Teamwork and the need to break down functional barriers within an organisation are central tenets.
- The organisational culture is one that values experimentation, risk-taking, and learning in order to breed innovation (i.e. knowledge for action).
- Organisations are sensitive to, and have strategic linkages with, the external context, combined with in-built flexibility, which allow them to thrive in a changing environment.

My understanding is similar in many respects but it is worth commenting on some differences. In earlier writing about organisational learning, Abbey-Livingston and Kelleher (1988) and Kelleher and McLaren (1996) have also highlighted the importance of power, the nature of knowledge, and paradoxical action.

Many have written about the importance of empowerment, participation, and team relationships as key factors in organisational change. These are crucial, but I think that experience has shown that participation within existing power relations confines the dialogue to the box of permissible conversation. For learning to happen, this set of power-related understandings must be challenged – generally from outside the organisation. In the e-conference, McLaren reminded us of the importance of well-organised and well-connected women’s organisations in pushing key government departments to launch equity efforts. Therefore, permeability to influence and to ideas from outside becomes an important part of the equation. Of course, ‘bad’ ideas from outside are also part of permeability. This highlights the importance of political analysis and action within the organisation in order to amplify ideas that further equality and translate them into policies, programmes, and practices.

The last two factors, the nature of knowledge and paradox, require some explication. Traditionally, organisations behaved as if knowledge was objective and true absolutely. Knowledge was held by experts and the senior people in the organisation. But Paulo Freire’s work (1981) challenged that, and showed that knowledge is created (and accompanied by a series of explicit and implicit political messages).

Recent thinking (Von Krogh *et al.* 2000) sees knowledge as an individual construction of reality that involves feelings, beliefs, and experience (some of which are not even conscious). This is a much more fluid and democratic understanding of knowledge which, as Murison pointed out in the e-conference, permits the sharing of information and its translation into knowledge through practice – a crucial aspect of learning organisations.

The other aspect of organisational learning is non-rational or paradoxical decision making and action. Huberman and Miles (1984) first wrote about this in their analysis of innovative schools. They found that innovation depended on both freedom and control. In other words, schools which were most innovative existed in a situation where there was some magical mixture of freedom and control. This was not news to experienced managers but the literature had always emphasised the importance of support and freedom and lessening control. Later work (Quinn 1988) extended this idea to a theory of non-rational leadership.

In summary, we understand a learning organisation as:

- permeable to outside ideas and pressures;
- sufficiently democratic that those ideas with merit can flourish from all levels of the organisation and evolve into practice;
- possessing teams capable of functioning democratically and effectively;
- capable of resolving apparent contradictions between such issues as stability and change, and support and pressure;
- capable of using processes and tools for organisational learning.

Before leaving this section it is important to temper any apparent clarity as to the nature of learning organisations. In our conference, Holvino first pointed out that much of the writing about organisational learning reifies ‘organisation’ and ‘learning’. I agree; a learning organisation is not a ‘thing’ that can be described in any complete way that would allow us to say, ‘this is a learning organisation, this isn’t, this one scores 7’, or the like. As McLaren highlighted, many of the organisations we work in would not meet the definition of learning organisations and yet much learning is happening. Richter said: ‘I no longer use the phrase “learning organisation” because it has become ... whatever you imagine it to be. Saying that there is such a thing or animal as a learning organisation is like saying there is a “doing” organisation.’

Increasingly, we are coming to believe that the idea of learning organisations is like a myth: a collection of ideas, woven into a story that

helps us make sense of experience and forms one of many ideals to which to aspire. The story is compelling and useful in many situations, so it is a story that is often told (although with many variations).

The last point is that it is important to ask what it is that a learning organisation is learning. Is the learning happening within a set of cultural and organisational norms, or is it challenging those norms both internally and in its work in the society?

This leads us to the question of the usefulness of these ideas for institutional change for gender equality. Is this toolbox, developed largely within the private sector, helpful to those working for gender equality? Our first clue that we might be using a borrowed toolbox comes when we look for the word 'gender' in the index of leading (and even lesser) texts on organisational learning. It is, of course, conspicuously absent for (at least) three reasons. First, organisational learning, while concerning itself with change (even at a deep level) has never claimed to be about transforming power or gender relations. Learning organisations have been advanced as a more effective response to the problem of change. The measure of success is whether the firm does better within existing understandings of the idea of 'better'. Its purpose is not social transformation or change in gender-biased institutional norms that shape families, markets, or the State. Second, although organisational learning believes in participation and a certain democracy, it doesn't admit to politics: constituencies, pressure, or accountability. In other words, it represents a strong advocate for wide participation and involvement of staff at all levels, but it leaves the authority structure intact. For those of us who have been managers in NGOs, this is not necessarily a bad thing on a day-to-day basis, but changing gender relations demands that we think differently about organisations and hierarchies and consider organisational forms with more accountability to clients, staff, and beneficiaries. (Some NGOs have made considerable progress with this – but not by reading organisational learning texts.) Third, organisational learning doesn't focus on key elements of importance to gender equality. There is a growing body of work that describes organisations as gendered in very fundamental but invisible ways and requiring a kind of anthropological dig to understand their gendered aspects (see Acker 1990; Goetz 1997; Rao *et al.* 1999).

In order to understand this gender bias in the very fabric of organisations and the effect this has on development and human rights work, we turn to the question of institutional change.

Gender equality and institutional change

The founding meeting of the Gender at Work Collaborative agreed that significant progress towards gender equality could be made only by changing institutions and gender-biased institutional norms. The meeting also clarified the difference between institutions and organisations. We understood institutions as the frameworks of rules for achieving social or economic ends (Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1996). These rules specify how resources are allocated, and how tasks, responsibilities, and value are assigned – in other words, who gets what, who does what, and who gets to decide. Institutions, then, are *societal* rules of the game, and are different from organisations, although they affect organisations (and can be affected in turn).

Although institutions vary within and across cultures and are constantly evolving and changing:

... each major institutional arena is gendered in its male bias – its failure to value or recognise reproductive work, defining it as ‘unproductive’ or basing effective participation on a capacity to attain freedom from the reproductive sphere ... [this bias] is then deeply reinforced – institutionalised through the formation of social networks, or shared understandings and conventions of inclusion or exclusion, justified ideologically, which privilege the participation of a particular social group.

(Goetz 1997:13)

There are various ongoing efforts to change gender-biased institutions. Examples include legislative reform, women’s budgets, and judicial reform. These macro-level changes, however, are dependent upon the organisations that plan and implement them. One would not expect a patriarchal, misogynist organisation to lead an effort to change gender-biased institutions (although many organisations are far from monolithic and not all behaviour conforms to a particular orientation).

The task of changing organisations so that their work can be more effective in changing institutions is a primary interest of the Collaborative. Briefly, how do we understand this?

If institutions are the frameworks of rules, organisations are the social structures that operate within these frameworks and act either to reinforce the rules or to challenge them. These institutional norms often operate below the level of awareness but are knitted into the hierarchies, work practices, and beliefs of organisational life, and thereby constrain organisational efforts to challenge gender-biased norms. This includes not only how the organisation functions

internally (the number of women managers, for example) but how it conceives of its mission and whether it delivers services and programmes in a way that challenges gender norms.

Acker (1990) outlines at least five 'gendering processes' in organisations. Formal practices may be apparently neutral but in fact discriminate against women. Informal practices, such as expectations that committed staff work nights and weekends even though women are more likely to have family responsibilities, also discriminate against women. Symbols and images in the organisation, such as the unspoken idea in one case that supervisors need to be men who can make the hard decisions, exclude women from even considering their own possible promotion. Everyday social interactions such as the 'teasing' practised in one development organisation reinforces women's 'place' within it. All of this is internalised by both women and men, making it all seem reasonable and 'normal'. This results in a set of assumptions not only about internal organisational dynamics but also about the work itself. Gendered organisations condition what is seen as possible, reasonable, or appropriate. For example, one peace-building organisation had a very difficult time seeing any role for women in the peace-building process. The men in the organisation genuinely felt that including women in any significant role would not be an effective way to work. Other aspects of this organisation that were not necessarily or obviously gender biased, such as hierarchical power and control over information, simply blocked efforts to see the work differently. Describing a meta-difficulty facing organisational change for gender equity, Acker (2000:630) writes:

Another dilemma ... arises from the pervasive cultural representation of organisations as instrumental, goal-oriented, no-nonsense arrangements for getting things done ... this belief in gender-neutral organising is comfortable for those with privilege. Indeed one of the privileges of those with power is the privilege to not see the systemic sources of privilege.

This writing would lead us to say that work must focus (at least) on changing what Rao *et al.* (1999) call the deep structure: power relations, work-family relations, and the valuing of individual effort and heroism.

Application of organisational learning to gender equality in development and human rights organisations: an example

Gender equality advocates have been involved with ideas associated with organisational learning in a number of organisational settings

and have found them to be helpful. Over the past ten years there have been a growing number of efforts to change institutions for gender equality based on an organisational approach.¹

Perhaps my most intensive use of organisational learning technology was with BRAC, a large NGO in Bangladesh. The Gender Team was charged with leading a long-term effort to improve gender equality both within BRAC and in the provision of services to poor rural women in Bangladesh. From the beginning, we identified the need to change organisational norms, systems, and relationships as critical to our efforts to promote gender equality. Briefly, the process can be seen as having the following stages:

- 1 *Start-up*: clarifying management interest, finding resources, negotiating the essential elements of the process and establishing the Gender Team.
- 2 *Needs assessment and knowledge building*: a participatory process that involved over 400 staff at all levels in two-day workshops to assess gender issues in BRAC and in BRAC's programme.
- 3 *Strategic planning*: working with the results of the needs assessment, the Gender Team met for two days with the senior management team and then followed up in a series of one-to-one meetings. This discussion led to a proposed design for the process, which evolved through more management discussions. Ultimately the management group met again to approve the programme design and the idea of an action-learning approach that would involve local area staff in a collaborative analysis of the gender dimensions of their work and then plan action to strengthen gender equality.
- 4 *Training of trainers and micro-design of the programme*: the training built a core group of 25 facilitators (which has since grown to nearly 50) who would work with area office staff to facilitate the action-learning process. We first used the training of trainers to test and refine the programme design and then launched a pilot in which new facilitators worked with Gender Team members to begin to deliver the programme in area offices.
- 5 *Implementation*: the trainers worked in area offices to lead staff through a cycle of learning, analysis, and action planning. Area office teams developed analyses of gender issues in their setting and in the programmes they worked in, and developed local solutions. Meetings of area managers considered issues that seemed beyond the capacity of local staff. After two years, the most

important outcomes were a democratisation of BRAC and a changing of relationships between women and men and between levels of the hierarchy. The programme continues some six years later. Approximately 20,000 staff have been involved in the programme. (For a more complete description, see Rao *et al.* 1999.)

In the BRAC case, a number of the ideas related to organisational learning were central to the work:

Permeability to outside ideas and pressures: in the early 1990s BRAC was a restless, constantly growing, constantly changing organisation. Its Executive Director was a visionary who would often bring a discussion of potential action to a close by saying 'why not?' Some of BRAC's senior managers were more open to the idea of women's empowerment and gender equality than others, but they were all in touch with currents in development thinking and had received some suggestions that they consider gender more carefully. As they considered these ideas, they brought in a number of people from outside BRAC and outside Bangladesh to help them think through different approaches. BRAC's permeability was critical to getting started on the project.

Internal democracy: it is fair to say that BRAC was ambivalent about organisational democracy. It was a value espoused in the organisation but many middle managers adopted an authoritative, even harsh, management style. However, the Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL) programme took the organisation at its word and structured a democratic analysis of gender issues (and more) in area offices and in programmes. These analyses often challenged the manager's right to have the final (or only) word on a number of issues and resulted in a real democratisation of relations within BRAC. Much one-to-one 'political knitting' was needed on the part of the Gender Team leader and members to help managers see how this democratisation was also in their interests. Ultimately, this democratisation was only possible through the intercession of senior managers who rode out the concern of a number of managers as the project began to result in critiques of ways of working at BRAC.

Effective teamwork: for many theorists in the subject, teamwork is at the heart of organisational learning. This was also true at BRAC. Many successes could be traced to good teamwork, which made it possible to analyse problems and develop good solutions that avoided the pitfalls of blame, conflict, and organisational politics. Similarly, some of our greatest difficulties could be blamed on poor teamwork.

Tools and processes for organisational learning: central to the success of the project was the use of tools such as needs assessment, strategic planning meetings, residential retreats, training of trainers, and the action-learning process used in the area offices. All of these tools were designed to allow people at all levels of the organisation to bring issues to the surface and develop solutions. At the same time we were trying to build up skills in these methods and acceptance of their use. We started from a strong position. For years BRAC had had a very strong training ethic and had invested heavily in staff training. The transition was from learning as individuals (training and adult education) to learning as systems (organisational learning).

Resolving contradictions: this is more difficult to analyse. There were some obvious contradictions that BRAC resolved well. One was the democratisation and opening up of the organisation, coupled with the need to manage a disciplined workforce of 15,000 people spread over 30 regions in 750 area offices. Another was in the management of the GQAL programme itself – the use of management power to democratise relations between staff and managers. A more difficult contradiction was the need to marry ideas of increased women’s empowerment with the need for ‘repayment discipline’ in a microcredit programme. Although the tension between these two ends was discussed, BRAC hadn’t made significant movement on the issue while we were involved.

In retrospect, then, the ideas associated with organisational learning were of considerable help in the project aimed at gender equality. In particular, there were three important ways in which the project was shaped by the use of organisational learning tools and understandings:

- 1 The change process was seen by both the Gender Team and the management of BRAC as being ‘managed’. This meant that the ultimate judges of the effectiveness and viability of the project were the managers of BRAC. These people were remarkably open to a wide range of changes but it meant that, to stay on the agenda, change had to be seen as responding to the issues and priorities of BRAC managers. There was no broader group of clients or staff to which the programme reported. This not only may have constrained the agenda, it also reinforced the power relations in the organisation. While the project opened up opportunities for democratic decision making, there was no thought of changing the right of managers to make whatever final decision made sense to

them. At the same time, were it not for the interest and power of some senior managers, the programme would not have happened.

- 2 We didn't think in terms of constituencies that could exert pressure on BRAC for particular kinds of changes. The process was seen as organisational, not political. This also reinforced management power and limited the agenda.
- 3 We did not focus on societal change and then state what needed to change at BRAC to further that agenda. Instead, we focused on organisational change and capacity building. Our assumption was that efforts at societal change for gender equality would follow. By starting with the organisation we risked getting mired in organisational dynamics and losing sight of the ultimate aim of societal change for gender equality.

Of course, it is impossible to say whether the project at BRAC would have been more effective had we used any of these alternative paths. BRAC has since pursued a variety of gender-related interventions that have taken the organisation much further than was evident when I was last involved. However, these alternative paths imply a process that would go beyond the practice of much organisational learning to focus on power relations and the capacity of the organisation to challenge gender-biased institutional norms.

Conclusion: an expanded toolbox – and ‘isn't it a little more complex?’

This section is necessarily speculative because, to our knowledge, these practices have not been used in an integrated way, though a number of ideas stand as hopeful experiments. Tentatively, then, organisational learning for transformation would:

- *Deal with deep structure*: particularly the question of work–family balance and the deep-down aversion to allowing the reproductive sphere to intrude on organisational life. This is difficult for NGOs – which of us wants to risk being ‘less productive’ in order to accommodate dimly understood ideas about institutional change? (Although Rapoport and Bailyn's (1996) work at Xerox demonstrated that movement can be made on work–family issues while also increasing productivity.)
- *Deepen democracy*: particularly the question of accountability to women and men served by the organisation, but also coming to

grips with the question of internal constituencies and their use of power to press for change towards equality.

- *Develop tools for consensus and learning*: particularly those which can bridge the real differences in interest between organisational stakeholders. The development of dialogue and interest-based bargaining hold some promise in this regard.
- *Lead to recognition of the spiritual*: although most organisational thinking is silent on the place of the spiritual, personal conversations with people who are working in this area testify to the importance of this deeper level. The physicist David Bohm, in his book on wholism (1995), reminds us of the importance of being open to the fundamental shift of mind from seeing the world as being made up of things that are separate, fixed, and resistant to change, to a world that's open, full of possibilities, and primarily made up of relationships.

The above critique of organisational learning is not intended to mean that those ideas are of little use in furthering a gender-equality agenda. On the contrary, as Ghosheh pointed out in the e-conference, these tools and ideas have been important in getting started in a variety of organisations. Further, the idea that nothing will happen by using existing understandings of organisational learning and that something big will happen if we enhance our toolbox is just too simple. As McLaren wrote:

Such profound change is far more complex, politicised, chaotic, and much less instrumental ... there is lots of important learning going on as a result of sustained efforts using these traditional tools. Some of it is a direct result of planned activities. There will inevitably be individuals whose understanding and practice will change as a result, and this will have an organisational or collective impact in some way, over time. But just as important, there is also learning and change that is piggy-backing on the formal activities. There are lots of other organisational processes at work at the same time. Some of these are deliberate, but others are not. I am thinking here of the incredible importance of human interaction, the interpersonal connections and relationship building that go on around 'learning' and 'change' initiatives: trust building, influence peddling, gentle persuasion, exchange of favours, getting on the band-wagon, power plays etc. – the full range of human behaviour in all its bounty.

Such comments should also remind us that we are far from the only game in town when we are working with an organisation. Even with

the best tools and skills, we are only a part of a complex soup of organisational evolution.

The last point is that there are always differences between our goals as change agents, what is possible in a given situation, and what organisations want when they ask us to help them become more gender equitable. As change agents we may recognise that gender equality requires a very different set of power relations in the organisation, but we are seldom, if ever, asked by organisations to lead a cultural revolution. Our work is generally an effort to move the organisation towards being somewhat more equitable, perhaps more democratic, and more accountable. We may also be working to get the organisation to pay more attention to work–family and other equity issues, knowing that the overwhelming bulk of organisational change work is incremental. This doesn't mean that we are content with these incremental changes. We do this believing that our work is contributing to a larger change that is taking place over time.

As we work in these complex places, settling for a series of incremental changes, the questions are: are we on the right path, do we have the right tools, is our work adding up to significant change, and are we working in a way that will live up to our ideals and justify our effort and the trust of those we are working with?

Note

- 1 See Rao *et al.* (1999), Goetz (1997), Porter *et al.* (1999), Van Dam *et al.* (2000), and Plowman (2000). See also the work of KIT Gender (www.kit.nl/gender), The Novib Gender Route Programme, and the Center for Gender in Organizations (www.simmons.edu/gsm/)

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