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Individual and Organizational Learning: A Developmental Perspective on Gilsdorf, Rymer and ABC

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For the past two years, the opening plenary session at the Association of Business Communication's (ABC's) annual convention has included presentations from both the Outstanding Teacher Awardee and the Outstanding Researcher Awardee. The purpose for including both presentations in the opening session is to draw attention to the synergies between teaching and research—a synergy that I believe is critical for ABC's growth and development.

In their presentations (this issue), the outstanding teacher awardee, Jenny Gilsdorf, and the outstanding researcher awardee, Jone Rymer, offer us poignant stories about their personal and professional growth. I believe, however, that these narratives not only tell us about two scholars' developmental journeys, but also mirror a developmental journey of our own Association. Their journeys exemplify a process of generative learning that is core to both individual and organizational transformation.

The purpose of my presentation there and present paper is to provide an integrating framework for exploring the linkages between the ideas put forth by Gilsdorf and Rymer. To develop this framework, I will use a psychodynamics perspective to examine the connections among individual development, an organization's developmental process, learning, teaching and research.

Individual Journeys

Combined, Jenny Gilsdorf and Jone Rymer have taught and conducted research for more than 45 years. Both of their narratives provide illustrations of the developmental tasks they have faced as teachers and researchers, their coping strategies and their subsequent generative learnings (Senge, 1990a).

Jenny Gilsdorf tells a personal story not only about her students and the changes in her students' use of the English language, but also tells us

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about the changes that have happened to her. Jenny's move from "English" to EnglishES" was not just about the addition of the two letters "e" and "s"; it was a transformational experience for Jenny. Jenny's move to a rich intercultural environment at California State University-Los Angeles, combined with the globalization of business, catapulted her into a new teaching situation where her assumptions about the English language and about the teaching of business communication have been challenged. Through a continual learning process, Jenny's worldview has evolved and changed which, in turn, has altered her approach to teaching in the classroom.

Likewise, Jone tells us of a co-mentoring journey in which she, too, has developed both personally and professionally. During her 25-year journey, Jone has learned to collaborate with others and has developed a keen sense of give and take. Her epiphany of "only connect" is one that is deeply personal and has allowed her to successfully traverse the developmental tasks of teaching, publication, and tenure.

Personal Growth and Career Development

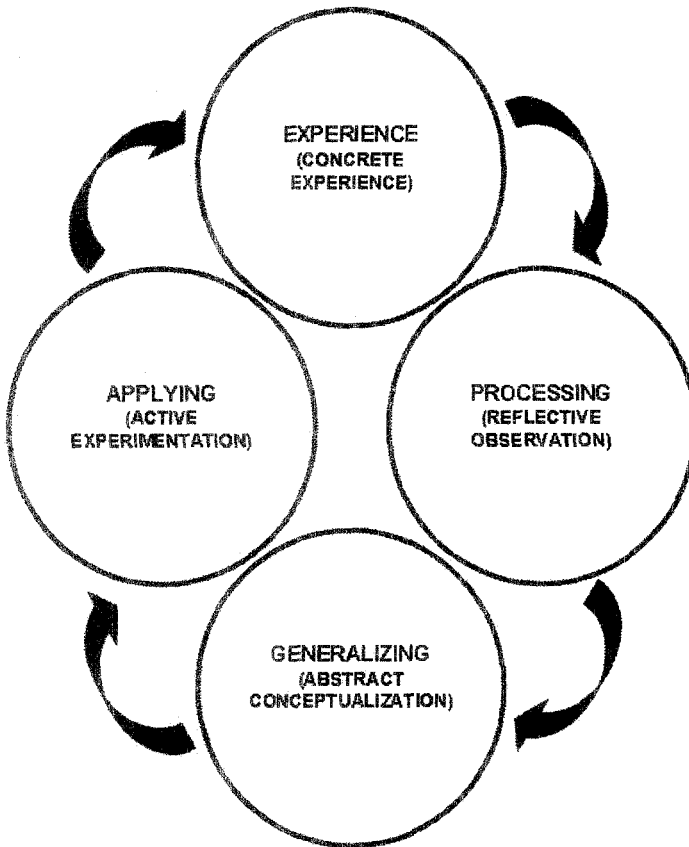
Extant research has shown that development is not just a childhood phenomenon (Freud, 1917; Piaget, 1972) but continues throughout adult life in relatively predictable phases (Gould, 1972; Levinson, 1978; Nuegarten, 1968). Sheehy (1976) and others claim that these phases involve developmental tasks that are set before us at different stages of our lives. These tasks include both personal and professional dilemmas such as marriage, rearing children, divorce, aging, job hunting, or promotion within a chosen career. Ideally, an individual works through these tasks developmentally leading to self-insight, wisdom, competence, ego strength, adaptation and/or personal integrity.

According to scholars who study adult development (Bee, 1996; Havighurst, 1979; Neugarten, 1968), we are confronted with a succession of internal and external changes, which converge and require adaptation. In an adult's life, internal changes might include an illness, aging, or various psychological needs. External changes might be a new work assignment, going up for tenure, or a personal event such as becoming a parent or taking on the responsibility of an aging parent. These changes can result in periods of disruption of a quasi-state of equilibrium, which, in turn, requires crucial coping skills (Lewin, 1951). If we are successful at adapting to these changes, we are able to develop new capacities for learning and are able to establish a new equilibrium. If we are not able to cope with the changes, then the outcome may be neutral or regressive (Wolfe & Kolb, 1991).

A Four-Stage Experiential Learning Model

According to Wolfe and Kolb (1991), the difference between simple readjustment and progressive development involves the quality of learning that occurs from a personal experience. Wolfe and Kolb's four-stage exper-

Figure 1.
The Adult Learning Cycle



Source: Wolfe, D. M., & Kolb, D. A. Career development, personal growth, and experiential learning, 1991.

riential learning model, which is explained briefly here, provides a useful way of thinking about the relationship between learning and adaptation through one's career.

In this model, immediate concrete experience provides the stimulus for observation and reflection. These observations evolve into a more generalized "theory" from which new action implications can be deduced. In effect, a learner requires four types of adaptive abilities to engage in experiential learning. The first, concrete experience, requires the individual to be open to new experiences or to take a fresh look at familiar situations. The second requirement is an ability to reflect on these experiences from

different perspectives. The third imperative is an ability to create concepts that integrate the experiences into logically sound personal theories. Finally, the individual must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems.

A close look at the model reveals two primary dimensions or dialectics of the learning process. Along the vertical axis, the top and bottom stages serve to identify a concrete/abstract dimension of cognitive development as identified by several cognitive psychologists (Bruner, 1960, 1966; Harvey, Hunt, & Shroeder, 1961; Piaget, 1972). This dimension requires individuals, throughout their lives, to not only immerse themselves in individual experiences but also be able to step back and view their experience from an abstract or more detached view of the world.

Along the horizontal axis, the left and right stages serve to identify a second dimension of cognitive growth and learning which requires the individual to engage in active experimentation as well as step back to interpret and reflect on that experience (Kagan & Kogan, 1970). The challenge for the individual is to continually engage as an active learner, adapting one's work and personal identity to the changing environment.

Let me use Jenny's "Englishes" as an example of experiential learning and adaptation. First, Jenny has a concrete experience in her classroom where she is faced with increasing numbers of students who speak English as their second language. This experience causes her to reflect, discuss the experience and share her reactions and observations with others. As a result of her experience and observations, she notices general trends and begins to formulate new theories about her experiences with these students. She may formulate personal theories that lead her to study the phenomenon in a more systematic way or she may begin investigating other theories from the extant literature that might help her better understand her interactions with her students. Then she applies her new-found theories in an attempt to modify her old behaviors or to test new behaviors, which can be practiced in everyday situations. Through this continual learning process she adapts and develops both personally and professionally.

Jone's learning is similar. She tells us a story about Debbie Andrews and herself talking the night away only to discover the "magic" of connecting. From this experience, she observes and reflects on her success. Her experience and reflection leads her to believe that these collegial relationships might be beneficial in a number of arenas including teaching, research, career, and university politics. Then she tests these relationships and learns through trial and error what seems to work and what doesn't. Over the years she has come to conclude that these collaborative relationships or "co-mentors" are essential to her maturation as a teacher, a scholar, a member of her profession and as a person.

As a result of these experiences, both Jenny and Jone have engaged in transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000), or what Argyris (1999) might

refer to as "double loop" learning, where individuals go beyond superficial problem solving and question or alter underlying assumptions to solve problems.

Our Organization's Journey

Parallel to Jenny and Jone's individual development, is the development of ABC and our discipline. Like Jenny and Jone's transformation, our organization, too, has adapted and developed over its lifetime.

Locker's (1998) historical analysis of ABC and business communication shows how ABC's identity has shifted somewhat dramatically from the late 30's when the organization had a more narrow concentration on the practical aspects of business writing to the current day where the organization has a broader, more inclusive focus on teaching and research about communication in the workplace. These shifts, according to Locker, have been a result of numerous external pressures on the discipline and its associated organization. An early example of these pressures occurred in 1959 when Gordon and Howell's Ford Foundation report sharply criticized business communication and other business-related academic professions. According to the report, business writing courses were viewed as remedial and atheoretical. In response to these and other criticisms, the organization changed its name from the American Business Writing Association (ABWA, 1936-68) to the American Business Communication Association (ABCA, 1969-1984). This new name mirrored the organization's new strategy, which was to migrate from a singular focus on pedagogy to a more research-focused discipline and, to move from a sole focus on writing external letters to a more broadened field that included such subjects and courses in organizational communication, information management, and communication theory.

These changes represented central identity and image shifts (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), which the organization believed were crucial for its survival. As the organization continued to evolve through the 80's and early 90's, business communication scholars reflected and debated who we were as an organization and an academic profession. This time the discussions focused on how business communication was distinct from the burgeoning fields of organizational communication, technical communication, and managerial communication. (Couture, 1992; Fann and Smeltzer, 1989; Dulek, 1993; Reinsch, 1991, 1996; Rentz, 1993; Rogers, 1996; Shaw, 1993; and Shelby, 1993, 1996). Among the most recent external pressures on ABC is the globalization of business, which has led to an internationalization of our Association. In 1985, "American" was removed from the Association's name, and in 1995 the Board passed a motion creating international regions for Asia and the Pacific, the Caribbean/Central and South America, and Europe. Now members can attend conferences on a regular basis outside the United States. Other indicators of the growing

international focus are an increase in the international membership of ABC and the organization's *Journal of Business Communication* that frequently publishes articles with an international focus.

For ABC to survive and thrive, it must continue to keep attuned to environmental threats and opportunities. To do more than simple readjusting, the organization will need to develop an organizational learning strategy that will allow it to transform itself for the future.

Relationship Between Individual Learning and Organizational Learning

Extant literature on organizational learning points to the critical link between individual and organizational learning (Argyris, 1999; Friedman, 2002; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990b). Friedman (2002) states that while it makes good sense to analyze individual learning within the context of the organization, oftentimes the critical role of the individual as an agent of organizational learning is obscured. His writing draws on Argyris and Schon (1996) as well as Dewey's (1938) concept of inquiry which links individual and organizational learning:

Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organization's behalf. They experience a surprising mismatch between expected and actual results of action and respond to that mismatch through a process of thoughts and further action that leads them to modify their images of the organization and their understandings of organizational phenomena and to restructure their activities so as to bring outcomes and expectations into line, thereby changing organizational theory-in-use. In order to become organizational, the learning that results from organizational inquiry must become embedded in the images of organization held in its members' minds and/or in the epistemological artifacts (maps, memories, and programs) embedded in the organization's environment (Argyris & Schon, 1996, p. 16).

Friedman (2002) proposes five steps in the organizational learning process that map closely to Kolb and Wolfe's individual experiential learning cycle, described earlier. First, an individual recognizes a gap, contradiction or mismatch between the status quo and the standard by which they judge performance. Here, Friedman adds some additional specificity about the type of concrete experience that generates learning. The experience has an element of surprise, which results from a mismatch between what was expected, and the results of the action. Second, the individuals engage in a process of inquiry and data collection to make sense of the mismatch. Third, some idea, proposal or theory is devised to create a change and fourth, the individual must act on his or her ideas. The fifth critical step is when the organization recognizes the learning and embeds it in its organizational processes. As described earlier about individual

learning, if an organization is successful in embedding new learnings into its organizational patterns, it is able to develop new capacities for learning and establish a new equilibrium. If an organization cannot cope with the changes or becomes prone to ego defenses such as denial, rationalization, and idealization, it may stagnate or regress (Brown & Starkey, 2000).

Returning to Jenny Gilsdorf's experience with English as Second Language students in her business communication classes, it is clear that she has transformed the way that she thinks about the use of English and has begun a discourse about her ideas with the members in the organization. Whether the learning becomes part of the larger organization will depend on the continuation of the discourse within the community and the subsequent organizational actions that may embed these learnings in its organizational processes.

Jone Rymer's experience provides another example where her learning about co-mentoring can be embedded in ABC's organizational processes. During the annual convention, the Association offers opportunities for co-mentoring through such venues as Interest Groups or the Research Roundtable. These events are spaces that encourage peers to engage in dialog with one another about their common interest.

Integrating Teaching, Research and Practice for a Robust Learning Organization

I believe that these learning cycles point to the importance of integrating teaching, research and practice for our organization to sustain a robust learning environment. The first stage of the cycle, experiencing a disconnect between the status quo and a standard of performance, is achieved through all three functions. Teaching is the means by which we engage with student learners. Through this experience we test status quo knowledge on a daily basis. When current knowledge is inadequate, it is incumbent on those of us in the classroom to begin to engage in the second stage of the process, which is reflection and inquiry. Likewise consultants, practitioners and researchers test current theories in the course of their everyday work. As they bump up against situations in which current theory is insufficient, they, too, must reflect, inquire and test their basic assumptions.

This process of inquiry should lead teachers, researchers and practitioners to adapt old theories or develop new theories about the phenomenon in question. The new theory or idea is tested and the results are noted. And the process begins anew.

In today's world of knowledge intensive industries, it is imperative that we continuously create and disseminate knowledge about business communication. This process will require a synergistic partnership among teachers, researchers and practitioners so that we are able to learn from each other and embed critical learnings in the organization. ABC can be instrumental in supporting this learning by providing a safe place for

scholars to challenge and share ideas, by encouraging the co-mentoring and support of new members, and by finding creative ways to ease the inherent tensions between the social systems of practice (teaching) and the social systems of science (research) (Van de Ven, 2002). In addition to these supportive functions, ABC must be able to "amplify" and "synthesize" the knowledge of its members (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and guard against self-defensive routines that might impede inquiry, growth and development (Argyris, 1999). The leadership and members must be willing to continue to look inward as well as outward, reflecting on our identity and continually challenging ourselves to rethink our underlying values. In this way, ABC can forge a path of generative learning that sustains our development over the coming decades.

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