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We will teach you the steps but you will never learn to dance

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Abstract

Purpose – To critique individual learning experiences in organization, explore the role people play in inhibiting learning in organization and explore theories of individual learning as "theories in use", drawing on a metaphor of steps and dance.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a subjective qualitative approach engaging in semi-structured interviews with individual participants and narrative data analysis. A metaphor of "steps" and "dance" is used to analyse narrative data and theories "in use"; the "steps" imply a fixed form which constrains the individual within the confines of the job role, while the "dance" relates to a fluidity and flexibility which enables individuals to express movement and therefore learning.

Findings – Empirical data reveal a level of "not learning" in practice and raise the significance of both upward and downward feedback and questioning in learning levels. Results highlight the management-employee relationship and the crucial role of managers in unlocking or inhibiting individual learning. In "Scriptorg" individuals are trapped in a cycle of "not learning" or at best single loop learning; new steps are inhibited by the management approach and there is no evidence of "dancing" in learning terms.

Originality/value – The paper examines theoretical insights in practice through case study exploration to highlight the significance of managers in inhibiting individual learning in organization and reinforces that practitioners should focus on interventions that unlock managerial learning, addressing the psychological and behavioural characteristics of managers, consequently enabling individuals to dance.

Keywords Self managed learning, Learning, Managers

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Individual learning has been a popular concept for debate for over a decade, however the "contradiction between the espoused theory and theory in use of learning" (Bokeno, 2003, p. 604) is now under discussion. While much of the extant literature is immersed in learning at the organizational level, there is an acknowledgement of individual interactions, behaviours and learning processes as prerequisites (Senge, 1990; Marquadt and Reynolds, 1994) for organizational learning. In terms of individual learning, it is argued here that there is a lack of empirical evidence to underpin many of the theoretical insights (Burnes *et al.*, 2003) and a scarcity of empirically based literature that highlights the significance of people and the role they can play in inhibiting individual and organizational learning. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to critique individual learning experiences in the chosen organization from employee and managerial subjective perspectives and to explore existing learning theories as "theories in use" through a UK case study organization, Scriptorg.

As part of a wider study, Scriptorg has been explored in relation to the impact of its social architecture on individual learning and performance but for the purposes of this

paper, the focus is on individual experiences of learning. The paper explores both the "steps" and the "dance" of individual learning through qualitative research and narrative data from individual participants in the organization. The "steps" of individual learning imply a fixed form which constrains the individual within the confines of the job role, i.e. the choreography (single loop learning). While the "dance" relates to a fluidity and flexibility which enables the individual to express movement and learning (double loop learning). Both the "steps"(choreography) and the "dance" (movement) of individual learning are highlighted by analysing those individual learning levels evident in the narratives of participants engaged in the research. Theories of individual learning are critiqued, the case study organization is described and the research strategy outlined. Narratives of individuals outlining their experiences within Scriptorg are re-presented and analysed to enable useful insights for academics and practitioners concerning the impact of people in inhibiting individual and organizational learning.

The individual in organizational learning

Easterby Smith (1999) suggests that organizational learning is a process of organizational transformation and argues that individual and collective learning, fostered by learning activities, play a key role to furthering this process. Gronn (1997) argues that organizational learning represents the procedures to which organizations adhere for sustaining, supplementing and improving the knowledge practices related to their core functions. Dixon (1998) and Snell and Chak (1998) suggest that organizational learning entails meaningful change in the processes, structures or concerns connecting individual members. Encompassing individual learning, the cognitive perspective of organizational learning takes on two approaches. The first views individual learning as a model for organizational action, where organizations are able to learn, presuming that they have identical or at least similar capacities to those of humans. However, these theories tend to identify learning processes without reference to organizational context (Chiva and Alegre, 2005). Critics of this approach argue that the organization is not human and therefore human attributes such as "learning" and "thought" cannot be assigned to organizations (Easterby Smith *et al.*, 2000, p. 785). The second approach proposes that organizational learning is individual learning in an organizational context (Bhatt, 2000, 2002). Within this approach, theories present organizational learning as more than the sum of the learning of individual members of an organization and the role of organizational culture is to raise the desire to learn in the individual.

Argyris and Schon (1978) note there can be no organizational learning without individual learning. Argyris (1999, p. 7) argues that individuals are the only proper subjects of learning and that if organizational learning means anything, it means learning on the part of individuals who happen to function in an organizational setting. Senge (1990) argues that organizations learn only if individuals learn and that while individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning, without it no organizational learning occurs. Dodgson (1993) claims that the individual is the primary learning entity and that they create organizational forms that enable learning in ways that facilitate organizational transformation. Czegledy (1996) claims that organizations do not learn, people do and therefore it is better to talk of learning in organizations than the learning organization.

As authors we take the position of Argyris (1999) in that a theory of organizational learning must take account of the interplay between the actions and interactions of individuals and the actions and interactions of higher-level entities such as departments, divisions or groups of managers. However, in practice, Argyris (1999) argued that individual learning is rarely encouraged by organizational members and if learning is encouraged it is normally within the parameters of the individual's job.

There have been a number of critiques of approaches to individual learning, including Yeo (2002) and Gherardi (2003) who have provided typologies, methodologies and problematized accounts to contribute to the evolution of the field in the last decade. However this paper draws directly on the foundations of individual learning through earlier works in the area with a view to exploring these "theories in use" in an empirical setting. Theories by Bateson (1972), Argyris and Schon (1978), Senge (1990) and Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) are considered in relation to learning levels evident in, and contributing to, individual learning in a case study organization.

Individual learning and levels of learning: the steps and dance

In terms of individual learning, Bateson (1972) theorised different learning levels which can be achieved at an individual level. In particular Bateson (1972) argued that there was evidence of a "not learning" level in organizations. "Not learning" in organization is evident when individuals are isolated, fail to receive feedback on their actions and fail to receive and/or process new information. The level of "not learning" can create a failure to link individual mental models and shared mental models in organization and becomes a barrier to individual and organizational learning.

Progressing levels of learning, single loop learning described by Argyris and Schon (1978) describes a process where errors are detected and corrected in a continuous improvement process but here the individual does not challenge taken for granted assumptions which underpin the way things are done in organization. This level of learning questions how things are done in organizations but does not challenge why (Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992). Senge (1990) parallels this approach through his definition of "adaptive" learning where individuals develop capabilities to manage situations through making improvements and amendments.

Bateson (1972) explains this level as individual's realising that their actions are not achieving their goals but not adjusting their actions to enhance achievement. This level of learning can add superficial knowledge to the organization's knowledge base because current mental maps and basic activities remain unchanged.

Jones and Hendry (1992) suggest that individual learning is usually considered in the context of production processes. While Garavan (1997) identifies that when individuals are controlled and confined within their roles they appear to exhibit the characteristics of single loop learning, in failing to question or challenge basic assumptions. This apparent lack of challenge enables management to maintain control by rigid rules and prescribed ways of doing things (Edmonstone, 1990). As Ryan (cited in Dixon, 1998) suggests, in a bureaucracy the brains and insights of workers are seen as impediments to the smooth operation of the organization and this reinforces the "thinker" and "doer" relationship (Dixon, 1998). Here the "thinkers" are the managers in the organization with the "doers" as employees. This type of learning (the "steps") tends to be limited to training needs arising out of an organization's requirement to have individuals do a job properly, within the systems that govern how the organization is controlled.

These levels of individual learning are viewed here as the "steps" of learning to be explored with individuals in the case study organization. These "steps" of individual learning imply a fixed form which constrains the individual within the confines of the job role, where the choreography (single loop learning) is planned, prescribed, learned and performed, without question, challenge or generative learning.

Double loop learning as presented by Argyris and Schon (1978) entails individuals questioning and challenging the success recipes of the organization, leading to a deeper level of understanding and reassessment of values and assumptions. The role of managers is assumed to be fundamental at this level, to encourage such questioning and challenging and facilitating contexts which enable individuals to engage in risk taking activities and resulting learning. Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) claim this level of learning questions why things are done in the organization. Senge (1990) refers to this level of learning as "generative" learning, which focuses on developing new perspectives, options and possibilities. Bateson (1972) argues that double loop learning creates development for the individual and transformation for the organization.

Double loop processes become the "dance" of individual learning. This being a fluid process allowing movement within the role and the ability to question and challenge fundamental assumptions, which enables the individual to express movement and learning.

The role of managers in learning

Lyons (1985) argues that a basic requirement if learning is to take place, is a climate, which encourages, facilitates and rewards learning, with particular emphasis on the manager's role. Dixon (1998) and Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) identify that the capacity of management to learn and to promote learning is an important element of an organization's learning capacity. However, one of the biggest learning dilemmas facing most organizations currently is how to get middle and senior managers to learn how to change and think differently (Argyris and Schon, 1996) as radically different managerial approaches are needed if the stockpiling of increasingly ineffective unilateral controls are to be halted (Senge, 1990). What is required to facilitate individual and organizational learning is the commitment to learning and related management capability throughout an organization's hierarchy.

Argyris and Schon (1978) assumes that managers are experienced at single loop learning; at performing well within their sphere of competence, which in itself contributes to their fundamental constraint in moving to a level of double loop learning. The assumption is that managers who engage in single loop learning seldom experience failure as they stick to the tried and tested, resulting in a lack of learning opportunities; this in itself creates defensive mechanisms to compensate for any failure that may occur (Argyris and Schon, 1978). In general the extant theory from this traditional paradigm argues that managers tend to avoid criticism, blame others or ignore problems, precisely when the ability to learn is most vital. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it most (Argyris and Schon, 1996). This approach to learning is identified by Antoncopoulou (1995) as Mathophobic, understood as managers who tend to be risk averse in their learning approach. They wait passively for the organization to provide them with the necessary resources to learn, on the whole they are perceived as lacking initiative and are apathetic regarding their personal development. This single loop, Mathophobic

approach to learning is also apparent in individuals who are managed in a way which emulates the learning levels embedded and practised by their managers.

Given these perspectives, those managers who endeavour to commit to the learning of individuals, providing them with opportunities to learn and enhance their capability, face issues of loss of control, status and power. As a result, managers may often behave in ways that maximise their security and status in role, usually at the expense of the learning of opportunities of their staff. Field (1997) argues that as individuals move into the role of the empowered learner, managers feel insecure and feel the workplace to be unstable and unpredictable. Managers therefore tighten control by undermining activities likely to facilitate learning and when controls become too tight, individuals hold back, therefore manager's controls are loosened. Exploring these types of interactions by managers, particularly in hierarchical and bureaucratic organization and their impact on individual's experiences of levels of learning is an aim of researching the case study organization.

Scriptorg: the case study organization
The researched case study is a public sector service organization in the UK which provides regulatory, information and managed services to a significant number of professionals. The organization is dispersed over nine locations in the UK, North East, North West and Yorkshire, employing 2,800 staff to carry out a variety of functions. The organization is structured into five directorates, is hierarchical, traditional and culturally bureaucratic.

Within the organization, there has been significant investment in training and development to "kick start" learning in order to enhance service delivery and improve ways of working, as well as a recent attitude survey in the North East Directorate, indicating a commitment to change. As a result there were organizational assumptions manifested through the training and development function that learning would move up the organizational agenda. This context provided a unique opportunity to explore the organizational case study in terms of levels of individual learning. The rationale and opportunity for conducting exploratory research in the North East Directorate, named here as Scriptorg, originated from one of the authors of this paper, who at the time was a training manager in the organization. Within this context of change, the training manager observed individuals portraying an aversion to learning, predominantly during training situations. A recurrent theme interpreted through the author's interactions with delegates was that as individuals they appeared constrained, restricted and fearful in relation to their learning in the organization. As a result a strategy was developed which supported exploratory case study research.

The research approach
The research strategy was informed by a subjective epistemology and a social construction approach. This enabled us to acknowledge multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) within the case study and to focus on the meaning-making activity of individual participants in co-constructing with us as researchers, their experiences of learning within the case study organization. The aim of the research strategy was to gather rich qualitative data by exploring experiences of individuals, focusing on their perceptions of learning within their organization in order to address the overall aims of the research detailed here. These were to critique individual learning experiences in organization by drawing on employee and managerial subjective perspectives and to

explore existing learning models and theories concerning levels of learning as "theories in use" through a UK case study organization, Scriptorg.

The data in this paper is drawn from 12 participants in the North East UK location, who engaged in an individual semi structured interview. Non-probability sampling was used in which the subjective judgements of the training manager author were used to select the sample. Staff were approached when attending formal training sessions, informed of the research and asked if they would participate. As a result the participants were drawn from operational and managerial grades within Scriptorg but with some clear direct reporting lines between those interviewed; three senior managers, four middle managers and five first line managers and junior staff, with length of service ranging from 1-43 years. Significantly, the directors in the North East region declined to part of the research process.

The emphasis within the interviews was on individual experiences of the participants and the quality of the resulting data relied on the relationship between the researcher and the researched, where participants shared their stories and we listened with openness to thoughts, feelings and experiences (Charmaz, 2000). The interviews lasted between one and three hours and in order to explore experiences of different levels of learning, the interview questions (examples shown in the appendix) were grouped into five themes: levels of learning, organizational structure, management style, culture and managerial perspectives to learning.

These themes were the starting point for the iterative process of analysing the qualitative data. Each interview was first examined individually with text identified and sorted into the broad themes. We then engaged in a process of textual analysis, comparing across themes and interview transcripts, identifying narratives from the participants which particularly highlighted the emerging findings. As such this paper draws on extracts of subjective narrative data from individuals as they re-tell their experiences of learning within Scriptorg. Narrative is an appropriate subjective and interpretative lens for understanding processes of micro-political activity, one means by which ideas and practices are legitimated (Currie and Brown, 2003, p. 564). This is particularly valuable for shedding light on aspects of individual and group sense making; sense making being understood to refer to those processes of interpretation and meaning production whereby people reflect on and interpret phenomena and produce intersubjective accounts (Leiter, 1980 in Currie and Brown, 2003). As a final step, we drew on conceptual cohesion with reference to the constructs in the literature (Kitchener et al., 2000, p. 219) to provide frameworks for discussion on levels of individual learning. We acknowledge that the narratives included here are part of a broader authorial strategy and have been chosen to have a particular effect on readership (Denzin, 1994, Currie and Brown, 2003).

Findings
The steps and dance of individual learning in Scriptorg
Not learning. To begin to unfold individual learning processes and identify levels of learning, participants at Scriptorg were asked how often they received feedback on their performance. This was identified as a part of the "not learning" level categorised by Bateson (1972); not learning results when individuals fail to receive feedback, on their actions and performance. Unprompted by the researchers, all participants immediately made the distinction between positive and negative feedback.

Responses from those below the senior management level indicated that they received only negative feedback, particularly if they made mistakes in their job, demonstrating therefore that they were not conforming to the planned, taught and learned choreography or "steps". Narratives from participants included:

I asked for feedback once on my performance. I felt like I was complaining. You can move mountains and not get feedback in here.

I get feedback if I've done something wrong.

I get criticized all the time.

The whole environment is a blame culture. People are always on witch hunts.;

Bateson (1972) suggests that lack of feedback creates isolation for the individual and fragmentation for the organization, resulting in a lack of linkage between individual mental models and shared mental models and implying a "them and us" relationship between management and "others". Significantly Bateson (1972) fails to differentiate between negative and positive feedback in his categorisation of "not learning". If individuals below the senior management level receive only negative feedback, bearing in mind the destructive impact this can have on an individual, does this imply they are operating at a level below "not learning"? This theoretical categorization requires further clarification in order to identify the exact level of learning depicted by the receipt of negative feedback.

In contrast, the three senior managers claimed that they received positive not negative feedback from Directors. If Bateson's (1972) argument is followed, this implies that double loop learning is likely to take place so that individual's understand why their prior meaning-making systems had to change. Although Bateson does not refer to feedback in his own definition of double loop learning, we argue that constructive feedback must be inherent in this level of learning. This finding implies that when interacting within a positive feedback environment, then senior managers are more likely to have the freedom to move beyond the steps and create their own moves within a dance of learning and to begin to manage their learning process accordingly (Coopey, 1996). An issue which emerges from the interviews with the senior managers and discussed later, is why, when they receive positive feedback, they fail to engage in positive feedback with their direct reports.

Single and double loop learning. As a way of exploring single and double loop learning levels, participants were asked if they challenged upwardly in relation to how things are done in Scriptorg. Single loop learning describes situations where individuals are comfortable performing within their sphere of competence and stick to the tried and tested, (Argyris and Schon, 1978), while double loop learning requires individuals questioning and challenging the success recipes of the organization, leading to a deeper level of understanding and reassessment of values and assumptions. All participants interviewed suggested that questions were not asked nor challenges made. Indeed, the narratives revealed that participants felt that they were "weak" as a result of this. Participants in junior roles discussed how they were frightened of "management" and were regarded as trouble makers if they questioned established processes. As noted earlier, Garavan (1997) argues that when individuals are controlled and confined within their roles, they appear to exhibit the characteristics of single loop learning, in failing to question. This apparent lack of questioning enables

management to maintain control by rigid rules and prescribed ways of doing thing (Edmondson, 1996). Narratives from individuals which highlight this include:

No we don't question, we are so weak here. We don't challenge but we should.

It is difficult to stand up to someone in a management position, as they may make li difficult.

I've been here a long time, I wouldn't dare back answer management. I suppose I'm frightene of them.

I feel guilty if I question, so I tend not to bother. I feel it is not my position to question.

You are regarded as a trouble maker if you challenge.

I have lots of ideas for improvements but my hands are tied.

I questioned and challenged. I was very naïve regarding organizational politics. Senio managers threw me in, stood back and watched. I didn't hit the targets. I receive unbelievable flak. On reflection I guess I was a scapegoat.

Manager participants reflected on whether their staff were able to question an provided a number of honest insights:

Deep down, I feel rather vulnerable when they do question, so I don't encourage it. I suppos that's wrong really isn't it?

They can question but it won't change anything.

As long as there is a good reason for it, I don't mind I suppose.

Some of my employees question me but the agenda is already set, so I feel they are usuall wasting their time.

The findings indicate that if individuals do attempt single loop learning and operate within the taken for granted assumptions or attempt double loop learning and challenge fundamental assumptions in the organization, then managers may apply significant constraints, i.e. "it won't change anything," "the agenda is set". These constraints may be enacted in ways which limit individuals to the choreographed steps of learning; the reinforcement of conformity and of the "thinker" (manager) and "doer' (employee) relationship. By constraining their teams and direct reports to the "not learning" level, the managers reinforce the "fixed steps." The steps are learned and repeated, whilst any creative movements are unlikely due to apparent "handcuffs on learning" Schein (1999) and managers appear to inhibit any opportunities to engage in learning "dance".

From the perspective of senior managers when asked about their opportunities to question and challenge, they claimed that it was difficult to question upwardly as directors often became defensive and therefore they tended not to. One senior manager offered an explanation for this defensive behaviour, suggesting directors and in turn whole directorates were unfamiliar with releasing information, communicating freely and working in a cross functional way. This view, as well as those of managers, tends to reflect the traditional management paradigm, in which there are few transfers across divisional lines and reinforces the views of Argyris and Schon (1978) who suggest that there is a defensive tendency among organizational members to protect themselves

from open confrontation and critique hence they do not engage in questioning or challenging. Argyris and Schon (1996) explain this behaviour as managers attempting to avoid vulnerability, risk, embarrassment and the appearance of incompetence.

The managers appear to create environments in which questioning is not the norm and limit opportunity for challenge. The narratives of senior managers reveal that they too are restricted to repetitive choreographed steps and at best single loop learning. As the Directors were inaccessible in terms of this research, a question left unanswered is whether they were the ones in the organization who were free to engage in double loop learning and to "dance" from an individual learning perspective and is identified as an area for future research.

When referring to double loop learning, identified by Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) as more fundamentally questioning and challenging why things are done, the theory does not differentiate between this process as being upward or downward questioning and challenging in an organizational hierarchy. We therefore asked all manager participants in the interviews if they questioned and/or challenged their direct reports in the organizational hierarchy. The overwhelming response was that individuals were instructed by managers, implying at most a level of single loop learning in the sense of correcting errors.

The role of managers in learning

Participants were asked to describe their relationship with their manager to explore the role and impact of managers on levels of individual learning. The participants noted that the immediate management – employee relationship did not facilitate individual learning. Themes emerging from the narratives suggest that relationships in the hierarchy were distant and blame apparent, within a context of a perceived lack of management capability and a lack of exposure to other styles of management:

I get blamed a lot, nothing is ever right. I'm spoken to like shit. I find myself constantly sucking up to the manager concerned.

I'm contacted when the manager needs to know something.

It's fine apart from the times I want to punch the individual concerned. My manager is very status conscious and will not be questioned, therefore nothing ever changes.

Primarily, management skills are not inherent in managers here. Senior managers have technical backgrounds and lack base line management techniques. Secondly, the length of service here is extensive, they have no exposure to external management.

One non management participant highlighted a definite "them and us" culture and relationships which reinforces the master – servant relationship characteristic of the bureaucracy and the role of "doers" and "thinkers". The participant noted that there were a lot of managers in Scriptorg with "ulterior motives" indicating a lack of trust in the management relationship. Another participant at the same grade indicated that generally managers were extremely grade conscious and very inflexible. Within this bureaucratic and hierarchical public sector organization it was observed by one of the authors (training manager) that all levels of managers are status conscious.

Some days my manager gives me some freedom within my role. I never get feedback from them. If I get positive feedback from others, my manager clamps down on my freedom and re-asserts their authority by making me undertake mundane tasks. However the manager

always realises that my knowledge and skills are required and gives me freedom in my role again. This process happens on a cyclical basis.

They [the senior managers] rarely ask for feedback and when they do, people are suspicious and consequently not honest.

My staff have said they would like to bypass the manager concerned and come straight to me but I've told them the senior manager deserves a chance to learn and we must support them in that learning.

This observation is also reinforced through the manager's reasoning processes within the interviews and resulting narratives. These narratives highlight evidence of the divide between organizational "thinkers" and "doers" in learning (Dixon, 1998) and reinforces our metaphor of the steps and dance of individual learning. The individual begins to get a feel for the space on the dance floor (some freedom to learn) but the manager shuts them down, forcing them back to their steps unquestioningly (the tightly defined job role). These findings can be aligned with Field's (1997) argument that when individuals learn, the manager may feel insecure, threatened and can tighten control by undermining the activities that facilitate learning. Field (1997) identifies with this "management jealousy" when describing manager's reactions to individuals when they are empowered to learn. One of our participants described being involved in a strategic process of organizational importance and their manager's reaction to that:

When I got involved in Investors in People (IiP), my manager complained that I was never at my desk. I know my manager was jealous of my input into the steering group.

It has been argued that for learning to take place in an organization, encouragement must be explicitly forthcoming and embedded in the context: the manager's role is fundamental in achieving this.

Participants were asked if there were ways in which managers encouraged and or inhibited their learning. Overall the participant's narratives demonstrated that there was no evidence of support for single or double loop learning from managers. However, emphasizing the importance of the manager's role in unlocking or inhibiting learning in organizations we asked manager participants to describe what they perceived their role to be in supporting and encouraging learning and how they felt if their employees were learning:

I know what I should be doing but I've fallen down on that. I should be giving my employees some autonomy to challenge, experiment, but it's pointless it gets knocked back. I'm not allowed to empower.

I know what I should do, I've tried but senior management knock everything back, unless it is a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). They don't see them as a threat.

My role is to encourage but I don't know what good it will do them in the future.

I don't like this individual making decisions, I'm frightened they will try to take over. I quite often feel defensive towards this person and therefore keep a close eye on them.

There was one manager who was positive about their role and impact on individual levels of learning:

> I think it is excellent. I get a great deal of satisfaction, from seeing people learn and develop, even if it means losing a member of employees. What this organization forgets is that if people learn, productivity and quality are enhanced. But I never get the chance to develop.

Three senior managers were questioned with regard to their working relationships with their directors and in contrast to their earlier responses, they noted positive working relationships, even though they also discussed finding it extremely difficult to question and challenge them. One senior manager explained how they had a great deal of autonomy, implying access to the dance-floor but then went on to say that this was as long as they kept their manager informed.

To further explore levels of learning and experiences that would indicate some movement from the "steps" of learning to a "dance" in Scriptorg and therefore reflecting some impact of the significant investment in training and development, all participants were asked how often they were encouraged to take risks.

Argyris and Schon (1978) associate double loop learning with radical change, suggesting that the role of managers is fundamental at this level, to encourage risk taking. Not surprisingly in light of the previous findings, all participants (senior managers and below) claimed they were not encouraged to take risks and a middle manager described an example which they felt constituted a risk and the consequences of engaging in these behaviours.

> I made a decision which carried with it an element of risk. My manager disagreed with the decision and I got the blame. For many months later, the manager would remind me that they didn't want any trouble like the last time. I felt totally undermined and undervalued. I still think to this day that I made the right decision, but I have not made any risky decisions since that time.

In fact some participants highlighted the reverse and described the blame culture in which they were working:

> I hate making mistakes, I'm made to feel bad about it by management, they constantly remind me.

> ...Terrified, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder.

However, two senior managers said that they felt comfortable with regard to making mistakes and that the organization realized that mistakes happened, but another commented that they were concerned with regard to making mistakes as people were "waiting to shoot you down." Argyris and Schon (1996) may explain this experience when they comment that managers often blame others at the precise time when learning can occur in organization. However, a narrative from an employee participant highlights the central issues in relation risk taking and the level of "not learning":

> We are not allowed to take risks, we have very tightly defined jobs; risk taking is not a consideration.

These narratives describe experiences which are the antithesis of learning. Gerber (1998) argues that individuals should not be fearful to make decisions while Stonehouse and Pemberton (1999, p. 6) argue that "individual learning centres on inquisitiveness, problem solving, risk taking, challenging existing behaviour and understanding". In their study of 195 Spanish firms, Lopez et al. (2005) argue that learning positively contributes to innovation and is therefore critical for moving from the constrained levels of "not learning" and "steps" of learning evident in Scriptorg, to a learning dance which enhances individual and organizational performance.

We will teach you the steps but you will never learn to dance

The aims of this paper were to critique individual learning experiences in organization, explore the role people play in inhibiting learning in organization and explore theories of individual learning as "theories in use", drawing on our metaphor of steps and dance learning. By analyzing the narrative data in relation to individual levels of learning in Scriptorg the following themes have emerged.

Within Scriptorg, individuals are operating at the level of "not learning", as identified by the lack of questioning, lack of challenge, the reluctance to take risks, the lack of feedback and managerial control mechanisms, both implicit and explicit, which prevents the development of learning levels and which reinforces the "steps" of learning. In theory, if the positive feedback they say they receive from directors is considered, senior managers could be operating at a level of double loop learning, however within an overall context of not learning, this would be highly unlikely.

We identified a gap in the theory base in relation to receiving feedback as a facilitator to learning, as Bateson (1972) fails to differentiate between negative and positive feedback in his categorisation of "not learning". Given we have identified individuals in Scriptorg below the senior management level receiving only negative feedback, we raise the question of whether this implies they are operating at a level below "not learning"? Further research is necessary to explore the impact of negative feedback on levels of learning.

Participants discussed their management-employee relationships as "them and us" interactions in which individuals felt constrained. The control and constraints placed on those below senior management have been clearly highlighted, with all participants claiming that they are not encouraged or supported in terms of their learning. We have found that Antoncopolou's (1995) Mathaphobic theory of passive, risk averse managers who lack initiative and motivation in learning, is evident as another "theory in use" in Scriptorg. Significantly, the narratives revealed the crucial role that managers can play in inhibiting learning in an organization. Managers are currently instrumental in creating the environment or otherwise to enable questioning, challenge, giving and receiving positive feedback and reactions to mistakes and facilitating suggestions of new ideas.

The senior managers who received positive feedback from their directors did not replicate this with their direct reports, creating "blockages" to individuals' learning. By constraining their teams and direct reports to the "not learning" level, managers are interpreted as reinforcing the fixed and choreographed "steps" and inhibiting opportunities to "dance". Therefore Scriptorg managers place "handcuffs on learning" (Schein, 1999).

Initially our dance metaphor constructed the "steps" as a fixed form of learning which constrained individuals within the confines of role. The "dance" related to fluidity and flexibility enabling individuals to express movement and to double loop learn. However, the empirical research changes our understanding; the "steps" become the level of "not learning" and the "dance" is straining to reach even the level of single loop learning. Our research highlights that individuals within Scriptorg are trapped within a cycle of "not learning" or at best single loop learning. Individuals are therefore taught the "steps" (single loop learning) in order to perform their job role and once productive, this actually degenerates into "not learning". Any new steps or movement, as sources of creativity, improvisation or motivation and prerequisites of double loop learning are inhibited by the management approach. There is no evidence of learning

as "dance" in Scriptorg. Significantly the strategic assumption that learning would be climbing the organizational agenda has not advanced in practice.

At the outset of this research the "we" in the title of the paper could not be determined. On critical reflection, the research findings suggest that the "we" is determined by "management". Individuals within Scriptorg are taught the steps but the management approach suggests that individuals will never learn to dance. However, rather than looking to "blame" individual or groups of managers for inhibiting learning, we acknowledge that Scriptorg's UK public sector environment and culture and its individual organizational climate and social architecture underpins, constructs and perpetuates such behaviours (this has been explored in our broader research project elsewhere). In order to place learning on the organizational agenda, given the entrenched managerial behaviours and approaches within Scriptorg, there needs to be director level commitment to placing learning on the organizational agenda and an appropriate social architecture needs to be identified and implemented. Once embedded the aim would be to develop individuals and therefore the organization within an appropriate strategic learning context.

Our understanding of "management" here includes the level of director and as noted earlier the directors of Scriptorg declined to be involved in the research. This has obviously had an impact on the research data and emerging themes. We have not been able to explore the director's interpretation of learning, their strategic commitment to learning in the organization or their role in facilitating learning. Nor have we been able to explore their individual experiences of learning and their impact on others' learning, other than through the senior manager narratives. Given that the highest level of learning we identified was single loop learning which we now understand as "dance" in Scriptorg and that dance was initially understood as double loop learning, this leads to the question of who, if anyone, is dancing? Future research with directors is required in order to explore these issues further.

In terms of further implications of this research for practice, we have highlighted the crucial role that managers play in inhibiting individual learning in organization. In order to enhance individual learning and therefore organizational learning, practitioners should primarily focus on interventions that unlock managerial learning, addressing the psychological and behavioural characteristics of managers, consequently unlocking the learning of individuals and enabling individuals to dance.

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Further reading

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Appendix. Examples of semi-structured interview questions

- How often do you receive feedback on your performance?
- Do you question your manager in relation to how things are currently done?
- How often are you encouraged to take risks when improving efficiency?
- How effective is information flow?
- Describe your relationship with your manager
- How do you perceive the management – staff relationship in general?
- In what ways do your managers encourage/inhibit your learning?
- Describe the culture of the organization.
- How do you feel about making mistakes in your role?
- Do your staff question the way things are done around here and how?
- Have you ever experienced failure in the organization and what happened?
- How do you demonstrate commitment to your own development?
- What is your role in facilitating people's learning?
- How do you know if your staff are learning/developing?