

Field Manual for a Learning Historian

Version 4.0

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1. Introduction to Learning History theory and practice

What is a Learning History?

In recent years, the idea of building a “learning organization” has gained currency in management circles. Many senior managers, in particular, have come to recognize that, with the right approach to collective learning, their enterprises can continually gain new capabilities even as they weather the vicissitudes of fate. Managers in middle levels, meanwhile, have embraced the “learning organization” idea because it encourages people to follow their own aspirations and, *in the process*, boost organizational performance. This implies that people can reclaim a little bit of the spirit of community and personal involvement that has been leached out of conventional business decision-making.

But even the most fervent “learning organization” enthusiasts have difficulty demonstrating a link between organizational learning efforts and key business results. The leaders of all learning and change efforts in organizations sooner or later run up against the challenge of proving the value of their efforts’ accomplishments. The same is true for other types of “change” and “transformation” efforts. Executives authorize millions of dollars for organizational learning, reengineering, re-invention, or quality improvement — and then grapple unsuccessfully with the problem of assessing their investment.

Assessment is also vital for the participants in learning efforts. They need to judge the value of their past experience, if only to help their organizations move forward, and to develop their judgment and skills further.

Moreover, the rest of the company also needs to understand the experience of its learning efforts to date. They will, after all, need to build upon that experience. How do they replicate the first successes, and avoid repeating the first mistakes? How do they spread the sense of potential achievement through the rest of the organization? How do they overcome the disdain for anything “not invented in our part of the company”? Companies have found it notoriously difficult to institutionalize the learning of its subgroups, to help the rest of the organization develop.

Finally, successful learning efforts generally require people to rise above their conventional blinders to add new ways of thinking and new forms of behavior to their repertoire. But these sorts of changes are misunderstood. They may be seen as evidence of cultishness, as window-dressing that isn't backed up by action, or as well-intentioned but misguided attempts at change. To really make sense of a learning effort, people throughout the organization need to see it through the various perspectives of people who have been involved with it firsthand — so that they can come to terms with it based on actual data (not just on the gossip that reaches them), and make sense of it in a way that is credible to them.

In short, when an organization has been through a learning or change process, people throughout the organization need a feedback process that can provide guidance and support. Yet reacting to the pressure of assessing learning can easily undermine any learning effort. As people become aware of being assessed and measured, the intrinsic motivation which drove them to learn is supplanted by an extrinsically motivated desire to look successful. Any feedback, mediated through an outside observer's eyes, will be tainted by this built-in set of distortions.

Learning histories were invented in response to these concerns and needs.

A “learning history” is a *document*— or a series of documents, possibly in audiovisual form — *that is disseminated* in a deliberately structured manner. The document, and the dissemination, are both designed to help organizations become better aware of their own learning and change efforts.

The learning history *presents the experiences and understandings* of participants — people who initiated, implemented and participated in organizational transformation efforts, or some collaborative learning experience — as well as non-participants who were affected by these efforts.

The learning history tells the story *in participants' own words*, in a way that helps the rest of the organization move forward, without having to “re-invent” what a small group of learners have already discovered.

A learning history thus represents the organization talking to itself, in a safe and carefully structured way, about the things it needs to hear but hasn't yet listened to.

The history includes *reports of actions and results*. It shows readers how learning is an approach to get what they want, and it illustrates how others have achieved the results they wanted.

The history also includes *descriptions of learning methods and techniques* — the intent, tools, and design of an intervention. The history tells the story of how people learned to collectively inquire in new ways, generate insights, and then take actions which weren't thought possible before.

Finally, the history includes descriptions of *the underlying assumptions and reasoning* that led to people's actions. In this way, the unwritten but powerful tacit knowledge and undiscussable myths are brought to the surface, codified, and turned into a knowledge base. People can test their understandings against the perspective of others, without having to be in the same room at the same time. For this reason, we sometimes think of learning histories as dialogue, on a different time/space continuum.

The history includes *the perspectives of a variety of people* (including people who did not support the effort). No individual view, not even that of top managers, can encompass more than a fraction of what actually happens in a real organization—and this reality is reflected in the learning history. When participants discover that their own points of views are treated fairly in the learning history, they become better able to understand the many other perspectives that make up the learning effort.

Learning history work goes beyond writing a history that documents a project. It is a critical element in *developing an organizational infrastructure to support learning*. Its research, distillation and dissemination processes are designed to create new opportunities for organizational learning.

A learning history document *becomes an artifact* which is then used as a piece of directly observable data. This becomes the basis for individuals, a team, and an organization to share a common, collective history of what happened in the past, build on the learning of others, and have a new kind of conversation that *helps them to move forward* in their own learning process. The content of the learning history creates a *context for a conversation* that the organization wouldn't be able to hold otherwise.

Learning history practice provides *a philosophical and methodological basis* for addressing issues related to how we measure and assess organizational learning. The learning history draws upon established theories, techniques, and skills of action science intervention, oral history, anthropology, sociology, literature, and theater. The integration of these theories and techniques, using a philosophy consistent with organizational learning principles, is what makes learning histories unique.

The production of a learning history can require 15-90 person-days over the course of 3-6 months. The end result is a dynamic, interactive report that helps the people of the organization reach a common understanding about their triumphs, their problems, and their efforts to change current reality.

The value of a learning history

Most learning history projects begin with three questions:

1. *“How can we judge the success of our organizational change effort?”*
2. *“How can the rest of the organization benefit from this experience?”*
3. *“What do our efforts to date reveal about our opportunities for success and our potential for failure?”*

We believe that most organizations already know what they need to hear in answer to these questions. But if they have not learned to listen, then history is destined to repeat itself.

These days, people in most organizations have been involved in change efforts, transformations, learning initiatives and innovative breakthroughs. They know the pitfalls that befell them, the value of their experiments – and how the rest of the organization could benefit from their experience.

However, they lack a way to reflect on their story collaboratively, talk about it effectively, consider its implications, and communicate its “learnings” to others. This desire is expressed when managers say, “We need time to reflect,” or “We need what we say communicated to others,” or, “We don’t want to reinvent the wheel.” How, they ask, do we get one part of an organization to learn from another? How do we keep from making the same mistakes over and over and over again.

To instill organizational learning requires a deliberate attempt to institutionalize reflection in organizations as whole entities. Somehow, brilliant components and skeptical overseers must be given a channel for engaging each other thoughtfully and productively. This is particularly important as hierarchies devolve and managers try to institutionalize the organization’s “strategic memory,” so that anyone within a corporate body can draw upon the knowledge of the whole.

Reflection is rarely put into practice in business, because organizations are not equipped for it. For one thing, the time pressures of corporate life mean that there is no slack built in to the typical management process. Managers act collaboratively, but they lack the time to make sense collaboratively of their actions. Instead, they are continually pressed to skip directly into more action.

Moreover, reflection requires the difficult (and often counter-intuitive) task of building self-awareness. Most managers have little experience with inquiring openly into the successes and mistakes of the past. They face overwhelming temptation to cover up such inquiries, because there is generally an organizational norm, or an unspoken agreement: Confrontational issues (like mistakes) are not meant to be discussed. And, as Chris Argyris has noted, this unwillingness to discuss tough issues is, itself, undiscussable as well. A manager who tries to “swim upstream” and reflect collaboratively on past mistakes might be labeled a complainer; and even the attempt to protest the label will be discounted as complaining. The manager is placed in a terrible double bind.

In the absence of reflection, the organization looks elsewhere for its assessments. Outside consultants or “expert” staff members interview some employees and present back the results as a set of “answers.” But this represents a tragically discouraging waste of effort and enthusiasm. People in most large organizations already know what they need to hear *without* a cadre of experts to intermedicate. Each member of the organization knows some aspect of the pitfalls that have befallen them, the ways in which the organization creates its own problems, the impacts of changed policies, and the means by which the enterprise could move forward into the future. They simply lack the opportunity to reflect on their experience together, and make sense out of the total experience of which each member holds a part.

“If there had not been a learning history at our company,” said a participant at one project, “the learning effort would have stopped with the end of the pilot team. People would have dispersed and said ‘It was good.’ Or, ‘It was bad.’ There was data to support both points of view.”

A learning history approach captures stories people tell about learning and change efforts and reflects them back to the organization and others.

Learning histories are labor-intensive, and can be expensive. A small project can be “captured” with two or three days’ worth of interviewing, but a large corporate-wide project may require as many as 150 interviews. It might take 30-60 person-days to conduct those interviews, distill them, and present the results in a document and workshops. Including the time of internal people, the overall costs might stretch as high as \$500,000.

This is significantly more expensive than a survey, but it should be seen in the context of a transformational effort that costs tens of millions of dollars. Without the learning history, there may be no effective way to judge the effectiveness of that much larger investment.

Furthermore, a learning history project provides several benefits that a survey does not:

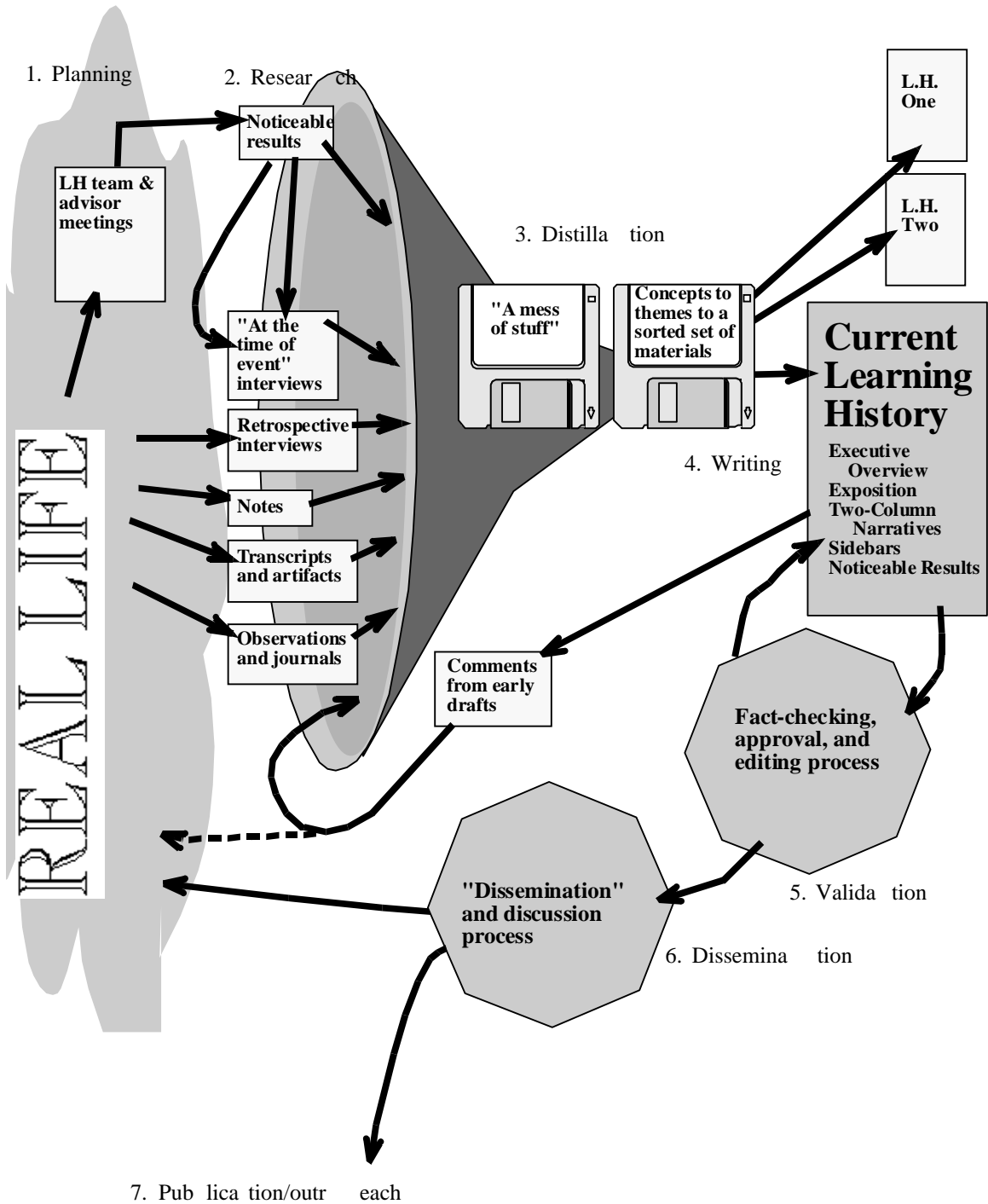
- It is a process, not just a product. The work does not end with the written document; indeed, the final dissemination effort is as carefully planned and implemented as any other part of the work. The learning history process establishes a vehicle for reflection in all of its stages, from the interviews to the final workshops.
- Surveys tend to produce a set of “answers” which are endorsed (or not endorsed) by senior management. The learning history creates a reflective experience that encourages people to make up their own minds; it involves people throughout the company in thinking about the past in a way that helps plan for the future.
- Surveys translate qualitative experiences into quantitative data. In doing so, they distort the experience and inevitably lose credibility and focus. The result: “We’ve measured everything but we haven’t changed attitudes.” The learning history provides a way of packaging and replicating the kinds of non-metric data that otherwise would be lost.
- The learning history work trains a core group of internal people in the methods of reflective interviewing, distillation, and even writing, and brings them up to speed in an overview of the existing transformation process.
- It starts a “buzz” going throughout the company, as people start to make sense of the new “mythic” stories that the learning history generates.
- Learning histories make use of the skepticism that exists in organizations, by reproducing it faithfully *in the context* of both collective aspirations and current reality. “Dilbert’s” voice is heard in the learning history; so is the voice of Dilbert’s boss. This helps build judgment among both of them. “This may be one tool,” said an internal learning historian at one company, “that keeps us from going to the next fad.”
- It creates a history of effective practices that go beyond “best practices.” Learning histories show not just what people *did*, but what they were thinking, what assumptions they made, how they came to their decisions, what others thought about their actions, and how they expect to move forward from here. Instead of merely copying the best practices of others, people who read learning histories are now equipped to develop their own best practices.
- The process builds actionable knowledge *among* organizations.

Learning histories have existed, in the form developed here, for less than three years, but a body of “results” is beginning to emerge. At one corporation (AutoCo, a large automobile company), learning histories are credited with helping preserve the innovations of one key car launch team, so that other teams could build on their experience. In a large oil company, learning histories have become a critical component of the company’s “roll-out” to help instill new business practices into the workday of tens of thousands of people. A learning history of an educational institution has become a key component of the orientation of new people who join the institution’s community; it is credited with providing the most credible understanding of the issues facing that institution. At a manufacturing facility, the opportunity to see their story told in learning history form has been a significant morale and involvement factor — especially since the plant is being spun off from the parent company, and its managers and workers must develop their own organizational identity.

The first comprehensive learning history (AutoCo) was made available to the public, published by the MIT Center for Organizational Learning, in 1997. We expect it, and others, to be produced in book form in 1998. There is reason to believe that others will follow, and that this growing body of data will comprise a rich source of generalizable knowledge which spans organizational boundaries. “Learning histories can be to action science,” Chris Argyris has said, “what a microscope is to the physical sciences.”

Anatomy of a learning history Project

There are essentially seven steps in a learning history project. Each one has its own chapter in this Field Manual. They include: Planning, Research, Distillation, Writing, Validation, Dissemination, and Publication/Outreach.



I. Planning: Determining the boundaries

The planning stage delineates the range and scope of the project. It is conducted, typically, by a learning history advisory team, composed of the external team leaders and a group of “champions” within the company — people who are willing to invest some effort in helping a learning history take root. This planning phase includes identifying “noticeable results:” tangible business outcomes that have already caught the attention of the organization. It also involves recruiting internal learning historians, and establishing the primary audience, secondary audience, the scope of the inquiry, and the specific questions that must be addressed. This planning stage is not just a crucial logistic phase, but a key avenue of reflective participation.

2. Reflective research: Interviews and data gathering

The internal and external historians conduct reflective interview conversations with participants in the original learning effort (along with key outsiders, such as suppliers, contractors, and consultants), taking pains to gather perspectives from every significant point of view. Between 50 and 200 people may be interviewed, depending on the scope of the inquiry. These interviews involve skill development for the internal interviewers, reflective opportunities for the interviewees, and information gathering for the entire project. Thus, the interviews build reflective capacity in the organization — both for the learning historian and for the interviewee, who may never have had an opportunity to ruminate at work, at length, about his or her experience. This stage may also involve other forms of research, including observations, examination of documents, etc.

3. Distillation: Establishing key themes and “plots”

From the mass of data (interviews, observations, field notes, and documents), the internal and external learning historians cull meaningful themes, systemic understandings, and implications. This also builds analytic and synthesizing skills for internal learning historians. We have chosen the word “distill” carefully to convey the essence of this activity — taking volumes of data from interviews, and then rectifying, purifying and refining the “raw data” into a form which the organization can hear. In this distillation effort, we balance our “research” imperative — to keep our conclusions clearly rooted in the data — with the “mythic” imperative — to tell an archetypally moving story — with the “pragmatic” imperative — to tell the story in a way that it can be effectively read, heard and discussed in organizations.

4. Writing: Production of a transitional object

Next, the document must be produced. We base our writing format on the anthropological concept of the “jointly told tale.” In this form of writing, the participants and the learning historians tell the story together, incorporating the participants’ experience and passion, along with the learning historians’ broader perspective and objective training. This approach places an enormous burden on the artistry of the editor. Every narrative tale has to be pared down to its compelling core, to draw an audience in, to be valid and representative, yet succinct and direct. The section on writing in this Field Manual describes the various techniques we use to fulfill our mythic, pragmatic and research imperatives in the written work.

5. Validation: Reflective feedback

In the validation stage, there are several sets of checks designed to reestablish validity. In quote-checking, participants see their quotes, make changes, and approve them, before anyone else sees them. Validation helps guarantee our protection of anonymity, and builds in another level of perspective as interviewees reconsider their statements.

In addition, the learning historians conduct validation workshops with small groups of key participants (who have already been interviewed), along with a few other people from elsewhere in the organization. This allows the original participants to relive their experience in the company of others — and to observe how it will be seen by the rest of the company.

Finally, the learning history champions and team members go over the document in a manner designed to render it most useful to the organization.

6. Dissemination: application and transferring learning

The learning history manuscript is not handed out as a report; it would be simply put on a shelf and ignored. In carefully designed workshops, built around concepts of action research and learning transfer, people from every part of the organization read and discuss the document. How typical was this story? What pitfalls and resources exist for their own learning efforts? How can they use the Learning History’s insights to increase their own capabilities? As comments are added, the report’s story becomes part of the common understanding of the organization.

7. Publication/Outreach

Eventually, learning histories are packaged and presented for a wider external audience, with the organization’s name disguised — so that the organization itself, and the research community, can benefit from the building of knowledge about management and organizational change.

Creating “reflectionable knowledge”

A key goal of learning history work is to create the type of knowledge which inspires reflection, and which leads to meaningful and significant reflection.¹

"Reflectionable knowledge" often exists in the form of stories. It provides a context which makes it easy to assimilate and think about new information. It makes explicit the multiple mental models which operate in a given social setting. The knowledge is expressed at different levels of abstraction - from observable data to interpretations, attributions, and generalizations — in such a way that the communicator’s thought processes are articulated.

Reflectionable knowledge promotes further inquiry into these thought processes and into the differences between various participants’ assumptions. Having reflected, we build a store of knowledge, so that when we return to reflect next time, we are less likely to reinvent the wheel, or spin our wheels.

The emphasis on “reflectionable knowledge” has led us to de-emphasize the document of the learning history. Our fundamental purpose is to create materials which promote a more effective form of conversation. The document itself is just a means to that end.

Indeed, not just the document, but each element in a learning history process—interviewing, observing, analyzing, writing, editing, circulating drafts, following up and conducting dissemination workshops—is intended to broaden and deepen “reflectionable knowledge” throughout the organization. The learning history process provides an ongoing forum for collaborative reflection.

Interviewing: The act of interviewing people and capturing their perspectives about the learning project is, itself, an intervention. Often people in organizations do not take the time to reflect on what they have done, or how they are going about a particular task. After a learning historian asks them to talk about their learning, either by themselves or with a partner, they often come away with a renewed depth of understanding. Later, when they see the report, they have an opportunity to compare other peoples’ interpretations and experiences with their own.

Document creation: In designing and writing the document, a team of learning historians assembles the mass of data it has collected, reads it carefully for patterns and themes, and decides on how to organize the material.

¹ The term “reflectionable knowledge” was coined by Otto Scharmer.

This set of activities is also an intervention. Having interviewed multiple people — those active in the project, those supportive but perhaps only bystanders, and those against the project — the team of “learning historians” is in a position to understand and hold a broader and more diverse perspective than anyone else involved in the effort. That is one reason why insiders are always part of the learning history team: their growing capability benefits the organization.

We advocate the “jointly-told tale” form for learning histories (as described in Chapter 4, “The Jointly-Told Tale”). This form provides an effective model, on paper, of the type of conversation which encourages reflection. It is a slower conversation, in which people can consider the “story” as told from a variety of distinct perspectives — including their own.

Dissemination: The learning history is a “means” to a better conversation. The printed learning history, even if it is incomplete or provisional, provides a foundation of observable data upon which conversations about the learning effort can take place. Discussing a learning history gives non-participants an unprecedented collaborative view of what went on in the learning effort.

In sessions held within the pilot team, team members can look at themselves and ask, “What was effective? What do we need to do differently?” When people jump to conclusions and generalizations, the question can be asked, “Where in the learning history does that come from?” Thus the reasoning process, going from observable data to attributions and generalization, whether derived from data in the learning history or other aspects of a person’s experience, is articulated through this conversation.

In sessions held for other teams, organization members can ask themselves what similarities and differences exist; what they could do similarly or differently; and how they could foster an environment of similar experimentation and learning.

As people throughout the organization read and talk about the document, they become more interested in the project. Their interest leads them to inquire about their own methods, to learn new skills and tools associated with organizational learning, and to create new ways of working, which in turn lead to new results, and eventually, to new learning histories.

In some cases, the learning history process offers the *only* institutionalized opportunity that a team, or an organization, has to reflect. The learning history process can be beneficial not only for the original participants, but also for researchers and consultants who advised them, and ultimately anyone who is interested in organizations’ learning processes.

Basic principles of learning history work

We're coming to think that a number of generic principles apply to learning history work. These principles are presented here as a first take, not as the final word. As the methodology advances, we hope to continue refining these principles into a set of theories of organizational reflection.

Organizations today have a choice - "Slash and burn" or "learn"

Learning history work is inextricably linked with the premise that organizational learning is essential for managers faced with a turbulent environment. Organizations that can survive under an authoritarian regime have no need of learning histories — or, for that matter, of change efforts to evaluate. But the experience of the past 30 years suggests that, in turbulent environments, authoritarian companies will not be able to sustain themselves.

The alternative to command-and-control is collaborative learning — the ability to expand an organization's capabilities in response to its own desired future and the state of current reality.

Learning takes place from experience, but collective learning from experience is inherently problematic

This is the basic dilemma of organizational learning. Individual experiences are inherently limited, by the biases of our own backgrounds and beliefs, and by the fact that we can only experience a narrow slice of time and space. If we confine ourselves to learning from experience, we will always be restricted to a narrow set of "learnings." This is problematic in organizations, where systems are spread over time and space, and may not seem to have much to do with each other on first glance. Learning histories are successful when they bridge individual experience, helping people draw common understanding from the syntheses of individual stories.

Communication that fosters learning must embody research, mythic and pragmatic imperatives

We're trying to deliberately balance three imperatives in our work: The pragmatic (telling the story so that managers can accept it and work with it), the research (telling a story which can be validated by the "data" of interviews and observations), and the mythic (telling a story which is powerful, compelling, and pure because it is true to the story's own needs.) No one can think all three ways at once. A communication creation process, to be effective, must cycle between these three imperatives.

No one voice provides "the answer" - people accept other's viewpoints in the context of their own

Perspective comes from many sources. No one outside expert or internal observer has the whole story. The enthusiasts, skeptics, and senior managers — or, as systems-oriented therapist David Kantor puts it, the “initiators, opposers, followers, and bystanders” — all have valid experiences. They all need to tell it together, in an explicit way so that the reader can see whose perspective is present in which part of the text. This gives the story validity. When people see that their point of view has been treated fairly, they recognize the credibility of the whole document.

"You are not alone" - all particular instances are reflections of universal patterns

“I know who’s speaking,” people often say about a paragraph in a learning history — but they may, in fact, be wrong about the individual, the team, the organization, or even the country! Many of the patterns and systems in organizational life exist archetypally, independent of a particular culture or set of circumstances. By understanding these systemic interrelationships, people can better understand the hidden forces at play in their environment. As challenges and successes are drawn from the details in the learning history, a story that seemed unique and based on idiosyncratic personalities becomes universal — and thus useful as a broadly applicable glimpse into the underlying systems at play.

Organizations "know" what they need to hear but lack the capacity to listen

Individuals throughout the organization, together, understand the “missing” information that the organizations need. Each individual has a piece of the puzzle, but as a whole, they lack systematic ways to combine their understanding into a single story. Learning histories represent an alternative to calling in outside consultants to tell the organization what it already knows.

Organizations need an established infrastructure for reflection.

We believe that ad-hoc interventions will ultimately be limited. Learning histories seem to be most effective when tied in to existing infrastructures for reflection: Management training series, Learning centers, Team workshops, etc.

Learning involves change, and change may be difficult.

Learning Histories bring out difficult, tough stories that have been swept under the rug — and try to do so in a way that the organization can hear. In our interviews, we feel it is crucial to get as many perspectives as possible on painful situations.

Stories convey intangibles

We once wrote a learning history about a team that developed a prototype engineering model. On the surface, the achievement was a “noticeable result:” a technical feat, which had paid off in financial savings, and was probably replicable as a “best practice.”

But to the engineers who put together the prototype, there was a remarkable story involved: A story of continually testing the waters, involving people, and learning to communicate in new ways. Some team members had to work differently with outside contractors (who were architects of the prototype), while others had to muster the courage to request an extra half-million-dollar budget. Still others learned to create an atmosphere of open inquiry, so that engineers could talk across functional boundaries, and make the prototype work.

Until the stories of these half-dozen individuals were brought together, they were not aware of common causes or each others’ contributions, and many others in the company were unaware of the entire process.

Behind every “noticeable result,” there is a story... And the story is more effective at conveying intangibles than any other form of communication.

What is, and is not, a learning history

In our work over the past three years, many different forms of “learning history” have been proposed, and quite a few of these have been tested. In addition, learning historians have been called upon to write a variety of different types of reports, some of which may or may not fit under the definition of “learning histories.” Finally, a large number of intervenors and consultants have begun to include “learning history work” among their practice, and in many cases, their work fails to conform to *our* idea of what a “learning history” should be — and yet, clients are enthusiastically appreciative.

Why bother, then, to define a learning history? Why not let the term “learning history” simply refer to any reflective document that helps capture the “learning” from an organizational experience?

Because we strongly believe, based on our experience and theory, that some types of reflective documents are more valuable *in the long run* than others.

A number of processes and methodologies *resemble* learning histories in some respect: Project clinics, “lessons learned” reports, systems diagram reports, left-hand/right-hand columns from action science, “organizational memory” efforts, action reviews, and “reflective memoranda.”

All of these, however, lack the ability to reach the entire organization in a way that encourages reflection on the most significant aspects of the organization’s experience.

In developing learning histories, we are trying to move beyond the traditional “lessons learned” reports that people think of when they think of “learning histories.” This standard engineering practice, archived in a library, may often lead to valuable technological cross-fertilization, and it may help prevent litigation or the repetition of old mistakes. It may even “capture a moment” in the history of an organization’s learning.

But such reports are all too often filed in desk drawers and forgotten. They rarely, if ever, lead to conversation about the cultural and interpersonal issues that lay underneath the success of a pilot team. They may spread technical and organizational-development ideas, but they don’t allow a sense of “what really happened, underneath the report” to filter through an organization. Or if it does, it will do so by accident.

We have set our sights on developing a methodology that will *systematically* help organizations get past the stumbling blocks that have prevented reflection in the past: The unwillingness to consider “bad news,” the desire to shoot the messenger, the fragmented nature of decision making, and the frequent lack of a common sense of purpose.

As an innovation in learning infrastructure, a learning history should conform to the following nine guidelines. If it does not have these characteristics, then it may be a useful document; but, in our view, it is not a learning history.

Use of “noticeable results”

Noticeable results are events which people in the organization consider significant, whether or not the observers were involved with the learning effort. They are the hard measures that managers use as yardsticks for performance: a gain in value, a decline in errors, the ability to do something that had never been done before, or a clearly observable change in human behavior. They are not always positive; when the leaders of a project are dismissed instead of promoted, that is also a “noticeable result.”

Unless we acknowledge these evident facts, and use them as a springboard for the story, our learning histories lacks credibility. Learning histories without noticeable results may serve the “myth” of pilot team participants, but they will not be taken seriously by the rest of the organization.

At the same time, we do not attribute causes to an organization’s “noticeable results:” we do not say, “Here is the explanation of why this result happened.” Instead, we use the “result” as a springboard into telling the underlying story — both during interviews and during the presentation of the report.

(See Chapter 7: Noticeable Results)

Intended for an audience broader than the participants in the story.

Learning histories are intended to advance an understanding of the pilot team’s experiences — among members of the original pilot team, through the rest of the organization, and in the community of managers and practitioners as a whole. Unless it is designed to be viable for all three of these audiences, we do not consider it to be a learning history.

There are, of course, conflicts between these audiences. For instance, the third audience (the general managerial audience) extends beyond the boundaries of the organization. The learning history must protect confidential information and individual privacy (which may mean disguising the name of the organization). At the same time, it must be set up so that, at some point in time, in some edited form, it can be released to the general public.

(See Chapter 6: Audiences for a learning history)

Data generated through reflective conversations

The learning history depends on information drawn forth in settings where people can think through what they have set out to do, how expectations have been accomplished and/or shifted, and what has been learned.

Without this type of input, the learning history will not develop a rich enough level of content — not just about events, but about the systemic structures underlying those events, and the mental models which exist below the surface of visible actions. In addition, reflective interviews give participants an opportunity to be open and expressive about their experience — one of the major benefits of learning history work.

(See Chapter 9: The data gathering process)

The Jointly-Told Tale

The story told in a learning history should be told in the words of participants. They were present; they alone can describe what they were thinking, and what led them to their actions. Through the carefully-edited multiple voices of people involved in the story, the drama of the underlying structure of events comes through.

But participants are not enough. The reader also wants external information: What is typical? What has been left out? What was the significance?

Thus, we have developed the “jointly-told tale” form, borrowed in part from recent trends in cultural anthropology, in which participants and outside observers tell the story side-by-side.

Without this form, a learning history lacks distinction. It is just another report, rather than a collaboration between insiders’ and outsiders’ voices.

We insist on the "jointly-told" nature of learning histories because it gives us the freedom to make assertions — and yet know that we are protected, somewhat, from the charge of being "overbearing outside observers." The assertions come from the people of the organization.

(See Chapter 4: The jointly-told tale)

The Two-Column Format

Readers want to be told a succinct story. They want to be told what it means, what its implications are, and what they should do differently. As writers of learning histories, researchers need to account for their choices in asking questions, collecting, and selecting data. Readers should be told why particular quotes were chosen, how representative they were, and what interpretations and generalizations can be drawn from the narrative that is presented.

We developed the two-column format as a vehicle for accomplishing all of these goals. Full column text is used for context setting and exposition. The right-hand column is exclusively for primary data — narrative from people involved in the change effort, written comments by participants, sections of memos or meeting transcripts, and speech excerpts, all edited to tell the story as a whole. The left-hand column is used for more objectively interpretive material: notes on the questions which people were asked, conclusions and interpretations drawn by the researchers, attributions and generalizations, comments on how representative the elements of narrative may be, and implications of particular statements.

In a two-column format, complexity can be expressed which is not found in traditionally formatted reports. The two columns distinguish between relatively “objective” comments by non-participants on the left, and relatively “experiential” comments by participants in the story on the right. Reading the two column format feels unfamiliar to some people at first, but it leads (we believe) to deeper comprehension of complex learning and change efforts.

(See, within Chapter 4: The two-column format, and Chapter 10: Writing)

A Team of Insiders and Outsiders

A learning history reflects multiple perspectives including those of outsiders and insiders. Like any research into culture, these two perspectives are necessary for determining meaning. Outsiders will notice the peculiar ways in which an organization operates, ways which go unnoticed and are taken for granted by insiders. Insiders, however, often do not notice how their espoused values or beliefs are different from what is practiced.

While outsiders are likely to notice these discrepancies, only insiders can provide an interpretation for the discrepancies’ significance and their deeper meaning. A learning history effort requires a team with both outsider and insider membership.

There are also pragmatic reasons for insiders to be an integral part of the learning history team. As part of efforts to develop learning capabilities in organizations, companies need to take responsibility for the researcher’s role. The learning history becomes part of the institutional feedback mechanism, an element of an “infrastructure for learning.” If learning efforts expand, there will be a continual need for people to teach others tools and methods for learning and reflecting on progress. As the formal learning initiatives spread, internal people who are trained and capable are needed to carry these efforts forward.

(See Chapter 5: Project design and planning)

Linking attributions to observable data

“The evaluations or judgments people make are not concrete or obvious,” writes Chris Argyris. “They are abstract and highly inferential. Individuals treat them as if they were concrete because they produce them so automatically that they do not even think that their judgments are highly inferential.”² With this concern in mind, we have designed the learning history process so that judgments, inferences, and interpretations can always be linked, by the reader, to the data nearby.

Simply asking people to “tell their story” would be problematic if comments were not linked to specific events and observable information. The story would take on the aura of gossip: Exaggerated myth, without being rooted in genuine detail.

(See, within Chapter 11: Attribution, interpretation, or generalization linked to description)

A means to better conversation

Learning histories should not be judged by the reports themselves. They should be judged by the quality of the conversation that they provoke.

The learning history is conceived not as an end in itself but rather as a means toward better conversation. This justifies the time and expense of the effort. There are three opportunities for reflective conversation: In the interviews, in various phases of distillation, and in the dissemination process. All three must be designed to draw managers into the reflective spirit and make full use of the information in the report.

(See Chapter 13: Dissemination)

Distinguishing assessment, measurement, and evaluation from each other.

Learning and improvement requires the feedback of information that conveys what happened and how people are doing; the extent to which they have been able to achieve expectations; and surfacing reasoning and actions that contributed to final or intermediate outcomes. In modern organizations, feedback comes in the form of assessments, measurements and evaluations. An understanding of the different kinds of uses of information that provide feedback can help organizations which make concerted efforts to improve learn from their experience.

(See next section)

² Chris Argyris, 1990: 89.

Does a learning history qualify as assessment? Measurement? And/or evaluation?

Any manager working toward creating a “learning organization” will sooner or later run up against a challenge of “proving” the value of what has been done. Researchers face the same question, “How do you prove what you hold to be true?” The conventional response is to turn to some form of assessment.

“Assessment,” however, is an emotionally loaded term. The word derives from the Latin root *assessare* — to impose a tax, or to set a rate — and it often seems to invoke a feeling of being persecuted by an auditor. People who contemplate assessment report palpable fear — the word itself draws forth a strong, gut-level memory of being evaluated and measured. This results in defensive behaviors — behavior which seeks foremost to protect oneself against the dangers of assessment. People play it safe: they restrict themselves from speaking frankly, making experiments, taking risks, or paying attention, because they know they may be punished in the assessment. They devote themselves to performing for the test, to make themselves look good. Thus the assessment, in itself, systematically and subtly defeats and limits the learning that it has been brought to measure.

Yet without some form of assessment, it is difficult to learn from experience, transfer learning, or help organizations replicate achievements. Managers request and require tangible, measurable evidence of an impact on their people or organization’s capabilities. How then can assessment be used to provide guidance and support for improving performance, rather than elicit fear, resentment, and resignation?

Experience has shown that the first step, starting with the contacts with potential interviewees, is to distinguish “assessment” from “measurement” and “evaluation.” The sort of assessments we make in learning histories are made of events and team activity, not of individual performance. Moreover, “assessment,” in our context, is the comparison of reality to expectations. “Here is what we sought to do; and here is what we did.” For example, a learning history might include a comment comparing the amount of money made by a new effort to what it was expected to make. By this definition, assessment is a fundamentally human, and necessary activity. It is a way of judging significance.

We judge significance with words, not numbers. A problem occurs when “assessment” is conceived of as “measurement.” Certainly, the benefits of measurement are undeniable: they allow the comparison of performance across a large number of teams, projects, processes, and activities. The concept of measurement is based on being able to ascribe relevant quantitative dimensions to phenomena which can reliably or repeatedly be observed. If we cannot measure a learning effort (or a quality, reengineering, or organizational change effort), then it is far more difficult to judge its improvement. Unless a learning effort is measured somehow, it probably cannot be improved.

And measurement, even of qualitative processes, may be possible. Educator Robert Gahagan noted, “To say, ‘I know good art when I see it’ is not sufficient. If you know it when you see it, you can describe what it looks like. If you can describe it, why can’t we measure it? I work with elementary teachers who often want to measure such things as love, security and self-esteem. When I ask them to tell me what those things look like, they immediately start describing activities. Then why can’t we measure whether those activities are taking place?”³

But the difficulty which measurement poses for learning in organizations can be illustrated by considering how businesses are measured. In business, accountants’ measurements tell managers how the business performs. As Fred Kofman points out,⁴ accounting measurement is a form of language, and language determines what we perceive.⁵ The way in which corporations count “beans” indicates which type of “beans” are valued, and which are not, in a way so subtle that it determines the subconscious focus of peoples’ attention. But then a learning effort begins, and creatively expands participants’ horizons. Suddenly, what they “see” and do may clash with the types of perceptions encouraged by the existing accounting system. A rigid measurement scheme, like that of financial accounting, might not recognize the effort associated with people’s learning, or people may limit their learning in order to comply with the perceptions a measurement system enforces.

If we seek to assign value to the learning effort, instead of measuring performance, then we are well-advised to call our work “evaluation.” Evaluation involves values and valuing, deriving from the Old French *evaluer*, “to value.” Evaluation means to determine the worth of, to find the amount or value of, or to appraise.

³ Bob Gahagan, comment made in the Learning Organization news group, 1995.

⁴ Fred Kofman, “Double-Loop Accounting,” in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, by Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Rick Ross, and Bryan Smith (1994: Doubleday/Currency), page 286.

⁵ (Searle, 1969, 1995)

But evaluation is not necessarily fair or beloved. People react more strongly to being evaluated than to being measured or assessed. Evaluation, they know, tries to judge them as a whole; but often it is not clearly defined who, or on what basis, value or worth is being determined, or what decisions and actions will follow on the basis of an evaluation.

Evaluations are, by nature, subjective; but the evaluators rarely admit the subjectivity. Thus, different people evaluate the same “data” in vastly different ways, and they interpret the same evaluations with even greater disparity. Recently, a university report was released, evaluating one of the university’s programs. One faculty member, reading the report, said, “It raised important issues, and helped define the Program; it will eliminate some controversy.” A Program staff member said, “It was unfair; they picked on the Program in an inaccurate way.” An associate said, “The report didn’t say anything new. We all knew that we were polarized at the Program.” And a fourth person ignored every aspect of the report, except a line that accused the Program of publishing too little work. Since that wasn’t true, the entire evaluation was suspect.

Each of these people had read the same report; each came away with completely different opinions, planning to take completely different actions. That is the danger of evaluation.

A challenge in the learning history process is to develop a method of assessment which frees people from the tyranny of a predetermined measurement and evaluation scheme. The learning history process does not deny the value of measurement, or the existence of measurement schemes in most organizations. Indeed, in learning history projects, all three types of judgment are made explicit:

- We offer *measurement* of significant improvements if we can describe how and why the measurement systems themselves were developed, and what impact the measurement had on the people being measured.
- We provide *assessments*, made by people throughout the organization, with a clear link between the assessment and the direct observable data.
- We present overall *evaluations*, always with enough context that the reader (and interviewee) knows, beyond a doubt, that the evaluation stems directly from the sense and meaning that people make of their own experiences and work.

Influences on learning history work

A learning history combines research philosophies and techniques from ethnography, action research, organizational development and oral history.

From ethnography come the science and art of techniques to investigate culture — systematic approaches for participant observation, interviewing, and archival research — used in understanding the day-to-day routines which make up people’s lives. The ethnographic researcher defines him or herself as an outsider, a stranger on the outside developing an understanding of how those inside the cultural system make sense of their world.

From action research and organizational development we have social scientists working with people in organizations to help improve them as they capture data, reflect data back, and study the changes. Action research offers effective models and methods for exploring situations where the researchers are actively involved in changing the system they are helping. The typical action research intervention⁶ follows a cycle in which managers observe themselves acting and communicating, learn to recognize the assumptions inherent in their actions, build an understanding of the norms and values which drive those assumptions, and then plan new, more effective actions.

A method to engage people in reporting on their experiences comes from the tradition of oral histories. Oral histories are often narratives which come from recorded in-depth interviews. Using the voices of participants to record historical evidence provides a data collection method for rich, natural descriptions of complex events. The oral history approach is used to rapidly capture the details of stories and employs the voice of the narrator to understand the way that people attribute meaning to their experience.

The U.S. Army historian work

The U.S. Army has a long-standing, in-depth “history” practice based upon the need to record the process of decision-making in the field.

Thus, officers and staff are often taken to battlefields such as Gettysburg to see first-hand how the terrain dictated decisions, what the dilemmas were at the time, and how strategy and decision-making considerations played out into action.

From the Army’s experience, we have gleaned a renewed sense of the importance of understanding history for making effective decisions.

⁶ Chris Argyris, Putnam, R. and D. M. Smith (1990), *Action Science*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA. pages 8-9.

The “Listening Project”

Based at a non-profit organization called the Rural Southern Voice for Peace, this project has existed for 15 years. It is a community-based project which uses oral history techniques to organize communities. “The basic idea,” wrote Stephanie Mills in the *Essential Whole Earth Catalog*,⁷ “is to go directly into divided communities and question people about the real content of their opinions, and to listen — attentively and respectfully — to the concerns that emerge.”

The Listening Project’s work shows how learning histories can be a community-building tool, and how the process of interviewing and mutual reflection can help people appreciate each others’ perspectives.

⁷ Review of the Listening Project, by Stephanie Mills, in Howard Rheingold et al, editors, *The Essential Whole Earth Catalog* (1994: Harper-Collins), page 139.

The background of this Field Manual

Our work conceiving and building learning histories began in March 1994, when we invited people in a half-dozen companies to join us for an ongoing practicum at MIT. Everyone was interested in the same question: How do you take the experience and understanding of a pilot team in an organizational learning effort, and make it relevant to the rest of the organization?

Since then, this practicum — the “learning historian pioneer’s group” — has met regularly in two- or three-day sessions to develop a practice for reaching those ends. During these sessions, based on our experiences, we have begun to document and evaluate the evolving body of theory, lore, and practice of learning history work.

When we organized Reflection Learning Associates in mid-1995, as an independent venture for conducting learning history work, we began to incorporate material gleaned from RLA’s workshops and consulting practice into the practicum.

This “field manual” represents our efforts to capture and communicate that body of work to date. It will be continually updated and expanded as the work is further developed and refined.

2. The nature of organizational learning: context for learning histories

An infrastructure for learning

Peter Senge: Why do companies not learn for themselves? Why, again and again, do we have situations like at “Taurus,” where there is dramatic innovation that everyone knows is successful, but it doesn’t spread? Then, by the same token, when we propose coming in to study what people are doing, some people think it’s academic and don’t have time for it. How do we shift the frame from an “academic” to a pragmatic view?

We define *organizational learning* as an increase in the system’s capacity for effective action. By expanding the capacity for effective collective action we expect organizations to achieve outcomes that weren’t previously possible. The learning history is thus conceived as an *infrastructural mechanism*: a device for gathering, and disseminating, reflection by an organization on a large scale.

The learning history provides in-depth documentation and details of the learning project activities, enough so that the learning process could be replicated by other teams. This is not done so other teams will use the learning effort’s experience as a “recipe” for future action. Rather, the level of detail is important contextual information. It gives other teams a sense of the “experience” of being part of the learning effort, a sense which might be otherwise hard to describe. If the learning history is effective, it will inspire other teams — not to copy the details of the pilot project, but to develop a similar approach to their *own* innovation and learning.

The learning historian’s challenge is to find language to bring out the necessary themes and issues, which always involve some discomfort — without pinning the blame on anyone, and in a way that helps the organization move forward.

Learning history work is influenced by the emerging practice of organizational *dialogue* — the creation of sustained collective inquiry into everyday experience and what we take for granted. Dialogue opens new ground by establishing a “container” or “field” for inquiry, a setting where people can become more aware of the context around their experience, and of the processes of thought and feeling that created that experience.⁸

A learning history may be a form of *dialogue* on a different time/space continuum, where the “container” is not created by gathering people into a single room, but by disseminating a document, in various forms and renditions, throughout a community. The document becomes the way in which the community speaks to itself.

At the present time, there is a movement in the learning organization community to develop "corporate memory" systems — data banks accessible via computer networks, groupware, and information technology, to share teams' experiences. Our work with learning histories suggests that these corporate memory systems need to be edited to bring out the *tacit* knowledge of the organization: The unspoken, sometimes unnoticed knowledge which people develop over the course of years. Organizational learning, according to the theory of Ikijuro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, involves making tacit knowledge explicit so that it can move beyond the small circle of people who share it.⁹

This need to codify tacit knowledge is another reason why we set up the learning history so the bulk of it is told in participants' own words. An outsider tends to overlook tacit knowledge; it's available, not in the data so much as the "voice" that people use to give meaning to the data.

Communicating tacit knowledge requires that communicators hold more than an *intellectual* stake in the knowledge. They need an *emotional* stake as well. They need a sense of personal contact, if not with the people who developed the knowledge, then with its potential for helping them. (As one participant in the "learning organization" newsgroup suggests, when designers are puzzled by something, "What did they wish that the prior designer could whisper in their ears to help them out? Based on that insight, what do they think they need to record for the *next* generation?"¹⁰)

To communicate tacit knowledge, the learning experience must be translated into a kind of myth.

⁸ William Isaacs, "Dialogue and Skillful Discussion," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, by Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Rick Ross, and Bryan Smith (1994: Doubleday/Currency), page 353.

⁹ For more about the value of codifying tacit knowledge, see Ikijuro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The Knowledge-Creating Company*, TK.

¹⁰ Michael Ayers; mbayers@mmm.com

An overview of organizational learning theory

Organizational learning is a popular yet elusive subject. More than 20 years ago, management writers explicitly proposed learning as an organizational process to be exploited and studied (Cangelosi and Dill, 1965; Michael, 1973; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Revans, 1966). Today, organizational learning is particularly popular. After all, what manager would claim to have no interest in improving the capability of their organization to learn and become more effective?

Popularity for managers is demonstrated by general interest and the number of business press articles on the subject. Academics have shown interest in the subject as demonstrated by the number of books, special journal editions, conferences and journal articles on the subject. Nearly one hundred books and journal articles on organizational learning, with almost sixty percent of these having been published in the last three years (DiBella, 1994). There is presently no evidence that this trend is declining.

Organizational learning is an elusive subject because there is no consistent definition and some definitions are so broad that they include virtually everything. Consider, on a practical level, how an organization could reliably improve without learning something new? Publications on organizational learning do not share common definitions or assumptions about the nature of organizations. They also do not share theoretical propositions about how learning takes place, or how it can or might be produced. In addition, regardless of definition or approach, the learning organization concepts promoted to date have been largely philosophical or metaphorical. Few, if any, examples of learning organizations have been well documented to date.

One definition of organizational learning, from Senge (1990), proposes that it is a process by which a firm and its people develop their capabilities to create a desired future. This definition was developed through cumulative insights which came from years of applying systems dynamics to improving organization's decision-making processes. This way of defining and promoting organizational learning has particular implications. It implies that goals are developed and shared, that a reliable and replicable process can be created to attain goals, and that a feedback system can be devised that produces valid information to evaluate progress and attainment of goals.

One way to characterize learning is to look at what people become capable of doing that they previously thought impossible. Accomplishing business results, policy changes, improved behaviors and so on are evidence of important changes.

For example, when an American automobile manufacturing firm began production of a new automobile model, and moved the Job One date *forward* by one week without the chaos of last minute production changes typical of vehicle launches, this was evidence of improvement. The managers of the vehicle development program at the automobile company attributed their success in meeting or exceeding all their product development milestones to activities that facilitated learning within and among the engineering teams that designed the car's sub-assemblies (Roth, 1996).

Learning implications for the pilot project under evaluation

The learning history approach was initially developed in the context of studying field intervention projects at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning. The approach is uniquely applicable for assessing organizational learning interventions, because the theoretical foundations upon which learning histories are based — drawing from the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, action science, and literature — are compatible with the underpinnings of learning organization work.

However, any change project can be seen as a learning opportunity, and the learning history approach might be employed to help reflect upon, assess and evaluate any type of organizational change initiative: Starting new ventures, developing new scientific processes and uses for materials, creating new market segments, initiating reorganizations or restructurings, and so on.

Nonetheless, using a learning history approach within an organizational learning project makes assumptions which may not be valid in other change programs.

1. The organization is willing to hear about itself

First, and perhaps most important, is the assumption that there are people in the organization who are interested in listening to “what the organization needs to hear.” The narratives surfaced in learning history work contain messages which are often not spoken or addressed openly, but which are probably significant — albeit painful.

Learning history interviews are confidential, and the narrative is presented in the words of anonymous participants. Critical and sensitive issues are thus brought into the open so that they can be discussed without being attributed to the particular people. Can the organization make use of these perceptions and issues? Or will the learning history be discounted as mere "carping" or an outsider's view?

2. The learning is aimed at increasing capability

The second assumption for learning histories has to do with the type of learning that is associated with organizational learning projects. The MIT Center for Organizational Learning seeks to work with organizations to promote learning which leads to "increasing one's capacity for effective actions." People often fail to recognize gaps between their intentions and the results they produce. Learning is a way to frame the relationship between actions and results of those actions, and adjust them so that people are better able to accomplish what they want. The learning history form is well-suited to revealing this relationship, because the format focuses attention on how people remember their own (and their colleagues' and leaders') capabilities increasing.

3. The aim is "double-loop" learning

Learning is the expansion of one's capability to produce behaviors that lead to desired results.

Implicit in this definition is the idea that thoughts, and ways of thinking, determine what you seek to achieve and how you go about getting it. One model of learning¹¹ proposed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön suggests that knowledge is held by people in their private assumptions. This knowledge determines the strategies they use to govern their actions.

When the outcomes match expectations, the actions are reinforced, and deemed "successful." When actions *don't* achieve expected outcomes, there is a mismatch, and individuals alter their actions. This is the basis of what Chris Argyris and Donald Schön call "single-loop learning."

Single-loop learning involves altering actions through the use of the same knowledge and strategies. For example, when people seek to overcome an obstacle by "trying harder," they are acting under the presumption that their original strategy was correct. They simply need to put more effort behind their actions. In Figure 2-A, this approach is shown as progress around the inner loop, the loop leading to "Strategies."

¹¹ Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1978) Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective. Reading, Ma.: Addison Wesley.

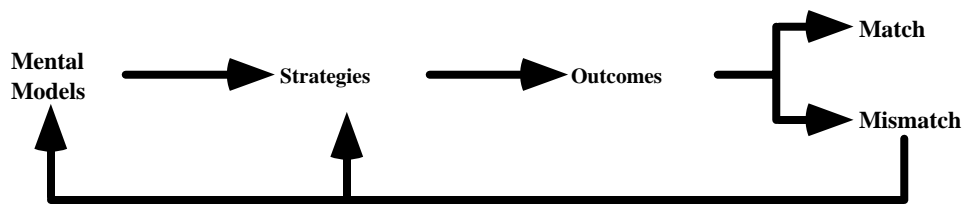


Figure 2-A: The learning process

The alternative would be to look beyond the strategy upon which the “unsuccessful” were based. In Figure 2-A, this alternative is depicted as the path around the outer (or “double”) loop, through “Mental Models.” Mental models are the deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, pictures, images, stories, or myths that influence how we understand the world and how we take action in it. In double-loop learning, people are asked to examine not just their actions, but their mental models: The tacit assumptions and habitual thoughts from which the strategies they employ arise.

The distinction between single and double-loop learning is important in learning history work. Participants in MIT Center for Organizational Learning projects, where facilitators teach skills for inquiring into mental models and testing them, already have a concept of how their ways of thinking influence their actions. They become open to inquiries about mental models.

However, as learning history work moves into helping assess other types of change initiatives, this line of inquiry may be more difficult. These teams may not have been formally taught new skills which help them inquire into their thinking and communicate their thoughts more effectively to others.

Learning historians, working with these teams, face the challenge of raising people’s awareness of the influence of their own thinking process so that it becomes a domain for inquiry. Alternatively, the learning histories might be restricted to “single-loop” concerns: examining the improvements based on existing strategies. Either approach is ultimately acceptable. What is important is recognizing these different conditions, and understanding the expectations people have from the learning history.

4. The organization is concerned about its values

A potential fourth assumption for learning histories is somewhat more complex and esoteric. The purpose of the learning history includes encouraging reflection about the underlying values upon which the collective behaviors in an organization are based.

What are the collective values that the organization is seeking to realize in practice? Many organizations espouse being open, interested in learning, and prepared to deal openly with the inevitable mistakes that employees and managers will make. Few organizations live up to that ideal in practice.

Chris Argyris' and Donald Schön's writing on Model I and Model II values¹² provide excellent examples of the two types of value systems an organization might have, and their implications for learning. In Model I organizations, a set of values are in place which are generally accepted as part of "business culture," but which produce undesired, unexpected consequences. The promotion of "winning" creates conditions for defensive interpersonal relationships. The distaste for expressing negative feelings leads to people protecting themselves, and refusing to explicitly articulate the reasons for their actions. The value of "being rational" leads to behaviors where people follow rules and experience a low level of personal commitment.

In Model II organizations, by contrast, the values that inform actions include the need for valid information, the desire for free and informed choice, and the acceptance of the value of internal commitment. These values lead to learning at double-loop levels, and frequent public testing of individual theories as people talk openly about the reasons for each others' behavior. Argyris and Schön propose that, in practicing these values, learning will be facilitated and the organization will be able to improve.¹³

Learning histories for "non-learning" episodes

¹² Argyris, C. and Schon, D. (1978) Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective. Reading, Ma.: Addison Wesley.

¹³ Other scholars have proposed similar schemes for promoting learning in organizations. Torbert's developmental perspective focuses on the ability of people to be able to reflect on the congruence between their purpose, strategies, behavior, and the outcome of all of these. Reason's ideas of participative inquiry characterizes an effective inquiry group by its abilities in authentic participation and emotional competence. Habermas' nine criteria for degree of democracy in dialogue include such ideas as: All concerned have the possibility of participation; The experience of all participants is considered legitimate; and All arguments as a point of departure are legitimate. While these scholars' descriptions for conditions that facilitate learning are complex and detailed, they raise the important issue that the ongoing support of learning requires particular value orientations.

See Torbert, W. (1991) The Power of Balance: Transforming Self, Society and Scientific Inquiry, Newbury Park: Sage; Reason, P. (ed) (1988) Human Inquiry in Action, London: Sage. Gustavsen, B. (1985); Habermas, "Work place reform and democratic dialogue," Economic and Industrial Democracy 6: 461-479, esp. 474-475)

An appropriate question to ask is the extent to which existing measurement and assessment approaches fit with the concepts, objectives, and outcomes proposed under the ideas of organizational learning. Does the maxim “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it” apply to learning initiatives as it does to other corporate improvement programs?¹⁴ What demands in organizations lead to pressures for assessment and how do those pressures influence the phenomena they intend to measure? If there are limitations in applying traditional evaluation approaches to organizational learning, what are alternative techniques?

Our question: How do we know that an organization is ready to hear what a learning history has to say? We have been asked to work with organizations and create learning histories on their change programs many times. The following email exchange is an example of such a request from someone at a consulting firm, and illustrates the considerations for working in corporate cultures where the dominant norm is not openly discussing mistakes. Mistakes are covered up, and the process of covering them up is undiscussable, and that they are undiscussable is also undiscussable! A learning history is likely to find and report on some of the mistakes people have made, and simply having a document which does so, does not make mistakes discussable.

LETTER

From: Consultant
To: George Roth
Date: 27 Sep 95 16:22:04
Subject: Other Learning History Application

I have a question regarding other applications of the learning history approach. I was having a conversation with one of our partners who became excited about the concept. During this conversation he wondered if the approach would apply to other non-learning related projects.

¹⁴ (1993:89)

The example he gave, and what he was thinking about, is a construction company which is involved in large road building projects. He indicated that the company is aware that some projects are more successful than others (I am not sure what the definition of success is but I assume that some projects end up with matches in expectations regarding cost, quality, etc and some do not). In addition, he noted that there is no mechanism in place to sustain an inquiry as to why some projects are successful and others are not. The teams move quickly from one project to another and learnings are not shared amongst the team or across the organization.

So, the question is: Do you think that the learning history approach would serve as an effective means of reflection and learning in an environment such as this? My initial reaction, my gut, tells me that the process would be effective although I can not articulate why.

Any thoughts or questions regarding the above would be appreciated.

Regards,
Consultant

RESPONSE

From: George Roth
To: Consultant
Subject: Re: Other Learning History Application

I think the LH can help an organization which is ready to examine its values and cultures do just that. The LH will surface issues. The question will be the readiness of the organization to deal with them. There are two areas - one is the value question and readiness, the other is the tools and capabilities to deal with and talk about tough issues.

One way to think about the LH is that it could be used to generate data for an organization which is philosophically ready to move into organizational learning work. The organization will then need tools to process and learn from the data. Thus, the learning history might be an opportunity to pull in organizational learning tools, and in a learning history workshop, provide a practice field for learning new tools using real issues.

Let me also be clear that we are only now testing this idea with people. We welcome hearing about your thoughts and experiences.

Best Regards,

Operating as action researchers

The feedback and reflection which learning historians provide is typical of action research projects. In action research, clients work closely with researchers to address issues which are important to them. Researchers divulge their theories and report their results in ways that clients can test and actively reflect on.

How can the learning history and documentation process create “actionable” knowledge? By documenting the learning projects, we give readers the information they need to see if their *intent* equals the *result* of their actions.

In a learning history, we capture people's causal claims for how their efforts produced results, and we provide data on whether those results were achieved, as well as what unintended consequences might also have been produced. As the learning history tests people's espoused theory (what they say and think they do), it creates an opening for affecting their theories-in-use (what they actually do).

This differs from the traditional assessment model practiced in program evaluations, when an outside expert conducts an investigation and reports the “accepted” findings. The learning history includes the “assessments” made by people who were part of the learning project — reflecting not just on the project’s effectiveness, but on their own attributions and learning. In that sense, the assessment is not separate from, but a part of, the “OADI” learning cycle which is significant in enhancing peoples’ capacities for action.

The “OADI” learning cycle

The basic model underlying individual and organizational learning is a cycle of reflection and action. Building on a long tradition dating from John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, David Kolb¹⁵ and advocates of “continuous improvement” in Total Quality Management (such as W. Edwards Deming),¹⁶ we conceive of the research process as based on a learning cycle. To standardize the terms associated with this cycle, researchers at the MIT Learning Center refer to the experiential learning cycle as the “OADI” (observe-assess-design-implement) cycle.

¹⁵David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (1984, Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall).

¹⁶ W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (1982, 1986; Cambridge, MA: MIT Center for Advanced Engineering Study).

Learning in the OADI cycle (as illustrated in Figure 2-B) starts with the observation of concrete experience. It moves to assessment by reflecting on observations; then to designing or forming abstract concepts based on the assessments; and then to testing the design by implementing it. Finally, the cycle returns to observing the new concrete experience (after implementation), to continue with another round.¹⁷

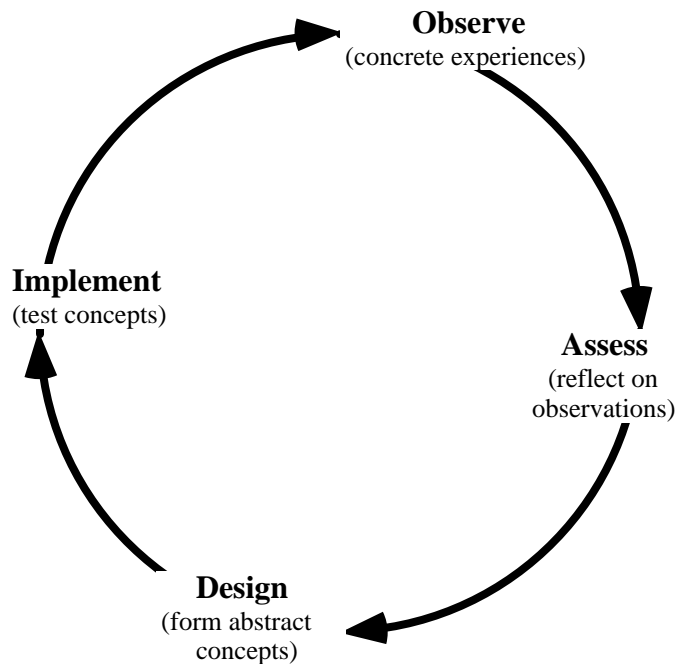


Figure 2-B: OADI Learning Cycle

The same concepts for learning at individual levels apply to learning at an organizational level. Change takes place through a community of people who are knowledgeable about organizational learning concepts, methods and tools, and who choose to apply them in bringing about collective learning and change.

¹⁷ Daniel Kim has extended the OADI cycle from an individual level to include shared mental models and develop it into an integrated model for organizational learning. The OADI learning cycle has also been used for developing grounded, dynamic, behavioral and managerial theory building. See Daniel H. Kim, *A Framework and Methodology for Linking Individual and Organizational Learning: Applications in TQM and Product Development* (1993: PhD Dissertation at MIT Sloan School), pages 341-344.

Figure 2-C illustrates the application of the OADI cycle as part of a large system change process. Large system change can be conceptualized as a continuing learning cycle. Learning begins at the bottom and moves upward:

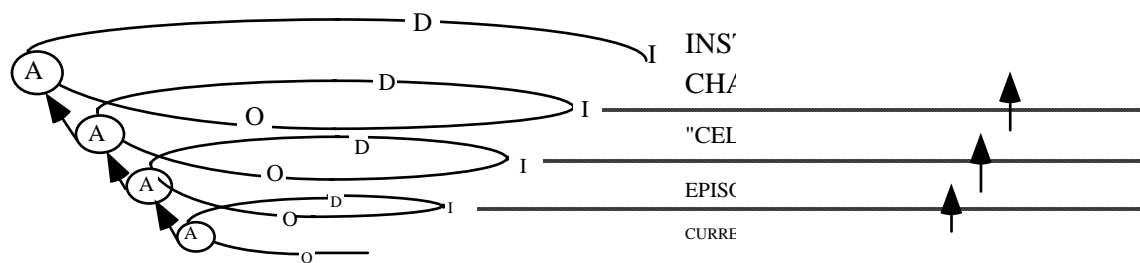


Figure 2-C: OADI Learning Cycle in Large System Change

Starting with observations of *current reality*, people in organizations develop skills to assess, design and implement learning interventions.

As these ideas are brought into action, we observe *episodic change*. Successful learning elements are designed into interventions for the next level within the organization. For example, as you see results in one team, you design a learning intervention which carries those insights to the people who work with that team.

At the next level, beyond the original team, we get “*cell*” *level change*, where a relatively autonomous unit is functioning differently with the kind of results that are desired.

The next level of intervention, at an *institutional level*, is to observe, assess, design and implement interventions which cut across the organization.

One of the key elements of this approach is to involve each subsequent level in the assessment of the change at the levels which led up to it. Those people engaged in the learning and change process are involved in observing and assessing learning from the projects which preceded them. Thus, the change process builds upon itself. At different steps along the way we can look for particular data to help determine whether or not the articulated theory of change holds, and how the progress relates to expectations.

As we report the data we collected from a group back, and focus on their assessments, we invite participants from other groups to share in that process. Thus, there is a transfer of insights from those initially participating to those involved in subsequent activities.

The feedback and reflection which Learning Historians provide is typical of action research projects. In action research, clients work closely with researchers to address issues which are important to them. Researchers divulge their theories in ways that clients can test, actively reflect on and report their results.

We adhere to these principles from intervention theory and method:

- Generate valid data.
- Give people free choice about solving problems.
- Inspire them to want to change.
- The reader should be able to glean both data and experts' observations from the report.
- The reader should be able to draw his or her own conclusions about the significance and meaning of the data.

We adhere to these principles from action research theory and method:

- Integrate scientific inquiry with practical problem solving.
- Use a contextual focus in which the key problems are defined by members of the system.
- Track the consequences of intended changes systematically over time, and interpret and make sense of these data.
- Encourage participation in the research process; give research subjects a say in the process.
- Focus on knowledge diffusion, writing up research results according to accepted social practices.¹⁸

¹⁸ Elden and Chisholm, 1993.

3. Creative imperatives for Learning History work

We have found that there are three imperatives which represent equally important ways to approach a Learning History project — indeed, any creative work. Each of these imperatives is a set of loyalties or priorities. The three imperatives represent “pure” considerations which exist in constant contention. They are all important, yet their contending nature suggests that they can’t be approached simultaneously. They must be attended to sequentially and individually, yet they must always be considered simultaneously, in every phase of the effort.

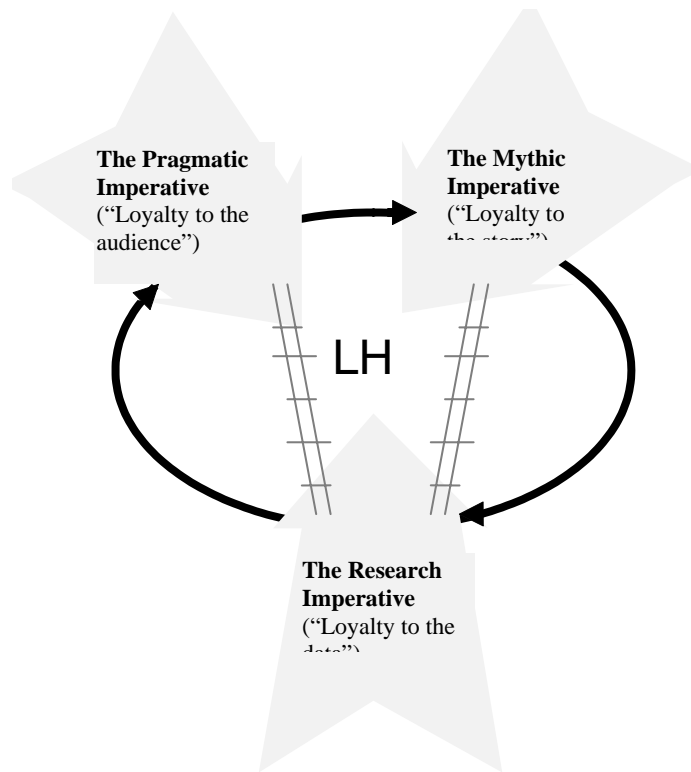


Figure 3-A: The three imperatives

These three imperatives are:

- The systematic, rigorous and analytic study of observable business activity, along with hypotheses about their causes (a research imperative);
- the archetypal and compelling recounting of the organization’s heroism, trials, tribulations, and destiny (a mythic imperative);
- and the supportive, responsive “servant leadership” that respects the existing readiness and capability of the organization and its members to learn and develop (a pragmatic imperative).

The research imperative: Rigor and integrity

The research imperative embodies a commitment to search out and tell the truth. As a learning historian, your primary loyalty is to the data — not to the financial implications (what the truth will cost), the political ramifications (what power structures will be affected), or the personal concerns (how people will feel about the truth). Those concerns may be real, and even valid; but they are not part of your job under this imperative.

Nor can you tolerate your own biases and assumptions. The research imperative requires that the learning history be thoroughly grounded in facts and observations, not in inferences and aspirations. Training in research methods is needed to be sure that systematic and credible processes are followed: collecting data from sufficiently broad sources, using multiple methods for data collection, and searching out multiple types of data.

Why must you operate under the research imperative? Because otherwise, the learning history will not feel true to people. It will not be valid. It will build resentment. People will not trust any of it, because they will recognize that details are incorrect. The “data” has its own integrity, and the learning history must be true to the data. This means that it must be true to the rigors of research consistency. It must provide an opportunity for people to go “down the ladder of inference.” For example, everyone in the organization may believe that “Jane Smith is an authoritative manager.” Even the learning historian may believe this. But the learning history, to be effective, must be grounded in the specific facts and observations that have led people to this conclusion. Chances are, it may help them see how other conclusions are also plausible. If it does not do this, it has not fulfilled the research imperative.

Working in the research orientation gives us a way to deal with an age-old dilemma inherent in qualitative research. (The learning history is a form of qualitative research. It assesses and considers human perceptions and actions, which are “qualitative” — they can’t be reduced to measurements in any meaningful way, without losing much of the content that makes them meaningful.) Qualitative research can’t be expressed in numbers. It requires words, which in turn requires a human being (or several) to write the story and select the words. But all human beings are biased. We can’t detect our biases, because those are grounded in deep mental models of the world of which we are generally unaware.

Nor can we avoid engaging those biases in the work.

The learning historian is going to select some material for inclusion, and exclude the rest. Even the questions asked in the interview will, subtly or broadly, influence the content of the responses. All the “data” depends on the inherently fallible medium of human observation. At the same time, it would be unacceptable to produce a biased piece of work. In the highly charged political atmosphere of large organizations, bias — real or perceived — casts any document immediately into the unenviable role of missionary, preaching only to the converted. Any detection of bias would be a kiss of death for learning histories, which are meant to help people throughout the company to draw their own conclusions.

How, then, can we establish the credibility of our research?

We cannot, completely. But we can establish systematic and rigorous checks to limit the effect of our biases. In addition, we can research and write our results in a manner which makes our biases as explicit as possible. Finally, we can conduct both our research and distillation to mix together a variety of points of view, so that the inherent biases and assumptions are more likely to be exposed.

To achieve all of these aims, we emphasize a variety of methods. In interviews and our own distillation work, we use the “ladder of inference” and other methods to link assumptions and conclusions to the “data” of observable detail. If an interviewee says, “The CEO’s senior committee was scattered and disorganized,” our research imperative drives us to ask: “What did you actually see or hear that leads you to that statement?”

In the distillation stage, we rely on the methods of “grounded theory.” We draw upon a deep tradition of qualitative data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). We base all of our conclusions and themes on a rigorous sorting process, rooted in interview transcripts and observation notes, and we return, as many times as possible, to check our conclusions and themes against the raw field material.

In writing a learning history, we explicitly distinguish between the observable facts (presented as full-column text that sets context, or in sidebars and noticeable results), the descriptions and interpretations that participants made (in the narrative right-hand column), and the explanations, conclusions and assessments which learning historians and early readers have made (in the left-hand column of commentary).

A research imperative also includes an implicit requirement to share the report with the outside world — with the details of the organization disguised. The company which commissioned the learning history gains by testing its own understanding against knowledge from other companies. A key purpose of the learning history is to benefit management practice in general, by providing examples that can help researchers draw forth principles about effective management.

The research orientation is not sufficient in itself because a standard research presentation ignores the affective realities of learning. Research reports present their case as logical arguments, casting each sentence as an analytical step on the path to validity. While this form of writing has helped develop explicit knowledge, it does not help people change their behavior; it does not reach them at a level of deep understanding.

The mythic imperative: Getting the pure “story”

Consider this brief passage from the AutoCo learning history. It is spoken by the Program Manager, the person in charge of the Epsilon team. He is a good-hearted, but fairly hardboiled man, trained as an accountant, who is still learning the skills of being a compassionate, encouraging manager.

What I really wanted to accomplish was to build a team like [the Theta] in 1984. I was on that team. [The Theta car manager] didn't know any of the [alternative management] tools or theories that we used on Epsilon, but he loved us. That was important!

He created an atmosphere such that no matter how he yelled at you and what he did, it didn't matter because he loved you. And I thought if I could ever build a team like that, that would be the crowning touch of my career.

This is one of the mythic moments that are remembered from learning histories: An executive driving himself to buck the system, thinking constantly of the father figure who “loved him.”

But there are many other such moments. For example:

A middle-level manager recalls the moment of trepidation just before she has to address the board of directors of the company — and point out their mistakes.

An engineer finds herself saying, “You know, our supplier is *not* a moron. He was right, and we were wrong.”

A team leader, stung by argument, shocks himself and his subordinates by telling them the truth: “You know, I just don’t trust you!”

A manager is brought to tears by reflecting on all the people whom he has been forced to downsize over the years, how vulnerable those people had been — and how much feeling of loss he had had to suppress.

You may not be able to analyze why these moments are emotionally affecting. All you can say is, that somehow they have resonated; somehow, they have plucked an inner chord of frustration, of cherished beauty, of tragedy or awe. To draw out and retell such episodes effectively, we need to operate from within a mythic orientation — the orientation of an artist. Our ruthless loyalty, in this case, is to the story and its expression.

Why must you operate under the mythic imperative? Because otherwise, the story will not emerge. It will be flat; it will not have power. It will not compel. *It will not be read!* People will have to tease the myth out of the story themselves, and they will not be drawn in. They will not recognize the universal qualities that link this story to the human condition. And there is great value for the audience.

Most descriptions of organizations are “mythically deprived.” To be sure, there are myths at play, but they are not told officially. They are told in carpools and by the water coolers. Their themes are, typically, that “Someone screwed up.” They are the organizational equivalents, perhaps, of cheap novels — easy to digest, but much less substantial than the subtler themes and deeper resonances of a well-crafted piece of literature.

Part of the goal of the learning history is to help the organization develop the capacity to hear the mythic in its own story. Time and again, we hear people wanting more of the mythic themes to come forth, as if they were starved for them — as if they wanted their own story to be expressed with the vigor of a good Hollywood production.

You can reach people with a learning history concocted from this imperative in a way that no other written document will reach them. Writing under a mythic imperative, the “pure” story is written without concern for who will be affected, as if the work were going into a time capsule. The writing must speak boldly. It may, in fact, require caricature. From the mythic orientation, we are willing to let go of the “facts” in order to be loyal to the deeper truth.

Most descriptions of organizations and typical reports are “mythically deprived.” Part of the goal of the learning history is to help an organization develop a capacity to hear the mythic in its own stories. Sometimes, you can work your way into a “mythic” imperative by thinking about age-old stories and themes. In many different organizations, the same myths apply. Cultural forces and basic assumptions influence peoples’ behaviors in ways that reappear year after year, even decade after decade. People like to see those forces appear in stories, and especially in stories set in some other context. “I am better able to hear *my* myth in *your* story.” Systems archetypes have a mythic component. The fact that the “Tragedy of the Commons,” *is* a tragedy draws us to resonate with it. The same is true of “Shifting the Burden” and the other system archetypes.

But there is also a danger in consciously seeking out old myths and archetypal storylines. In any story involving human beings, there are a series of myths at play. Our challenge, as artists, is to find the most powerful of those stories *as they rise out of the material*. We want, with all our intellect and intuition, to get to the heart of the matter. We look for tragedy and grief; for joy and aspiration. We look for soul.

When you operate from the mythic imperative, you are up several rungs on the ladder of inference. Indeed, one of the values of going *up* the ladder is the opportunity to think mythically. For example, there is much mythic resonance in asking questions like these:

“Why did [the deposed President of the company] miss the cues that were all around him? He was a savvy individual — so did he really, secretly, *want* to be ousted?”

“What keeps many managers from enthusiastically looking into the numbers of their businesses? Are they afraid that their own practices will be shown up — and terrified of the shame they’ll feel as a result?”

“Just after that intensive meeting, there was an airplane crash across the highway from the hotel. Did that mean anything — or was it just coincidence? Is it a symbol of what was ultimately going to happen with the current policy?”

“What is it about this particular operation that makes people feel good just as soon as they cross the threshold?”

“[The team manager] has been talking about his group’s ‘noble purpose’ and they’re starting to buy into it. They really seem eager to change the world. Is that an example of hubris... or the way that managers everywhere should behave?”

The pragmatic imperative: Giving the audience what they need to move forward

A pragmatic imperative considers how the learning history can be useful. How can a learning history be designed and formatted so that the people who are written about accept it — but not simply respond complacently? How can the history help an organization grow in a beneficial way? How will it meet an audience’s potential needs? How must it be written for particular audiences?

When you operate under the pragmatic orientation, you think only of the audience’s needs. How can the learning history be most useful? How must the learning history be designed so that they will accept it — but also not respond complacently to it? How can it help the organization grow in a beneficial way?

Why must you operate under the pragmatic imperative at times? Because otherwise, the story will not connect; it will not serve. It will not find a constituency or garner support. It will be self-indulgent. It will undermine the learning which it purports to document. It will be read, considered, debated... and ultimately shoved into a file drawer without any genuine engagement taking place.

The pragmatic imperative reminds us: A learning history is not a journey of self-discovery for the learning historian. It is a way to present to the audience the messages and reflections that *the organization needs*: that will be most useful and valuable for the organization’s own progress and learning. No matter what we may think of a particular theme, if it offends or mystifies its audience, it will do little good. No matter how much we may want the information from a particular interview, if conducting the interview would do harm for political reasons, then we must consider an alternative. You might decide, under this imperative: “There are some things we don’t want to tell them yet.”

This is the imperative of the therapist (“the light bulb has to *want* to change.”) This is the imperative of the project consultant (“The learner will only learn what the learner wants to learn, not what the teacher thinks the learner should learn.”)

Skilled consultants, therapists, and teachers are accustomed to operating under the pragmatic imperative. They know how to present information so that it will be useful and valuable for learning.

Questions of concern under the pragmatic imperative: What is the organization ready to hear, and when? What does the organization need to hear now, to move forward? Where is the organization now? How is the learning history funded? Who will provide access? Who are the sponsors? How will managers receive this? And how many managers wish to consider reflecting over time?

Balancing the “mythic,” “research,” and “pragmatic” imperatives

All three of these orientations have implications for business results; all three of them crop up repeatedly in any organization’s culture. In particular, any company with an effective infrastructure for learning will have found a way to cultivate all three of these qualities. For example, companies like Ford and Motorola both maintain “corporate history” museums which combine technical/historical analysis (research), material on the company’s triumphs and vision (pragmatic), and stories of the company forebears and their struggles (myth).

To be sure, the mythic elements may be too volatile to write into the captions on the museum displays. But visitors will hear the mythic elements first-hand from the guard or manager who shows them around: “Here’s the guy who got us into our satellite topography business. The picture shows him shaking the hand of the CEO. But it doesn’t show how he got turned down four times, and had to sneak his early R&D money in disguise. He had to pretend he was designing a new toaster. Now, he’s a legend around here.”

We have learned, in creating learning histories, that it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to hold more than one of these imperatives foremost at any one time. Each requires a different way of thinking and being. You cannot focus on the heart of a mythic story — as if it were going to be recorded in a time capsule, only for use by future generations — at the same time that you are pragmatically concerned about helping managers deal with their resistance. (Anyone who has had their first-draft creativity blocked by worries of “how my boss, or my peers, will react to this,” knows the difficulty of balancing the mythic and pragmatic orientations.)

It is similarly difficult to focus on the minutiae of “research,” and make sure each branch of ethnographic description (the story) is triangulated by multiple sources and multiple methods, at the same time that you are trying to distill a sense of the whole “mythic” forest.

And when people are told to take a “pragmatic” stance — to produce a one page memo that concisely communicates lessons learned — it’s almost impossible to include the detailed “research” data that would explain, in statistically valid terms, why commonly known remedies are consistently overlooked. These three imperatives are not contradictory; they are complementary. You can’t operate simultaneously in all three imperatives. Therefore, you must consciously budget the process so you handle them in sequence.

In learning history work, we “listen with three ears” — cycling steadily and regularly among all three perspectives. The more you practice them in succession, the stronger you become in each. There is no prescribed order to follow. But in describing the three orientations, and their implications, it’s easiest to begin with research.

Every member of a learning history team must focus on all three imperatives. You don’t divide the teams into a “research person,” a “mythic person,” and a “pragmatic person.” While it may seem that each of us is more oriented to one of these imperatives or another, all of us have the capacity for all three.

Cycling between them adds depth to each of them. The process is like using a kaleidoscope; shifting it and then looking at the same task, the same situation, with a new set of filters and priorities. A pragmatic or mythic remark, for instance, needs to be tested under the research imperative. As learning historians, we may develop a theory about what “the organization needs to hear to move forward.” Before we make that powerful statement, we need data to confirm and substantiate our theory. A mythic remark, or a pragmatic plan, is all the more powerful when its use is backed up by comments and other data.

Thus, a typical learning history project might involve:

(Note: This is only one example of how the process might play out.)

An original conception (“mythic”), leading to...

A proposal for the initial report (“pragmatic”), leading to...

Preliminary thought about research questions (“research”), leading to...

Some hypotheses about themes (“mythic”), leading to...

Scheduling of interviews and gaining of access (“pragmatic”), leading to...

Tabulating and coding of interview data (“research”), leading to...

Serious thought about “what we’re trying to say” (“mythic”), leading to...

Cross-checking to understand the audience’s needs (“pragmatic”), leading to...

Writing a bold, unrestrained first draft (“mythic”), leading to...

Extensive fact-checking and quote-checking (“research”), leading to...

Rewriting to present the material in palatable form (“pragmatic”), leading to...

A conference in which the Learning History is discussed (“pragmatic”), leading to...

4. The jointly-told tale

“From many perspectives, all speaking in turn, here is how we saw the story.”

The role of learning historian differs from that of a person conducting traditional research or assessment in that it supports a learning cycle, rather than separately assessing it. The ethnographic research approach holds an underlying assumption that the researcher remains separate from the culture being studied. The learning historian, by contrast, creates a “jointly-told tale” — a story told to the people in the culture being studied, by similar people, with the learning historian acting as their channel, interpreter, and co-author.

In researching models for writing learning histories, we relied heavily on John Van Maanen’s categorization of ethnographic research.

For background on the ethnographic alternatives to the jointly-told tale, see Appendix A.

In his book *Tales of the Field*,¹⁹ van Maanen describes a type of ethnography so experimental that he devotes less than two pages to it. He calls this the “Jointly Told Tale.” In these tales, the subject and the writer interweave the story -- either through extensive use of quotes, often from the same person at various times in the story (Vincent Crapanzano, *Waiting*²⁰; or through a give-and-take between quote and commentary (Faye D. Ginsburg, *Contested Lives*); or through a carefully edited narrative in which the writer is barely visible (Jean Stein, *Edie*).²¹

We provide four examples of “jointly-told tales” in the accompanying literature.

Implications of the “Jointly-Told Tale”

The learning history must reflect the perspective of both outsiders and insiders. Like any research into culture, both perspectives are necessary.

Insiders...

...live in an environment with an “established prevailing view,” which may or may not agree with their views...

¹⁹ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (1988: University of Chicago Press).

²⁰ Vincent Crapanzano, *Waiting: The whites of South Africa* (1985: Random House).

²¹ Jean Stein with George Plimpton, *Edie: An American Biography* (1982, Alfred A. Knopf).

...feel varying degrees of safety in voicing their views, and will respond to an atmosphere in which they feel they can trust the interviewers or outsiders by talking more freely...

...are intimately attuned to the political (pragmatic) sensitivities of the organization...

...tend to feel mistrustful of outsiders or misunderstood by them, and also intrigued by them...

...tend to overestimate the intransigence of barriers and difficulties...

...are adept at understanding the significance and deeper meaning of seemingly innocent events...

...feel loyalties to various parts of the organization, and may even be caught up in internal rivalries...

...might overlook key peculiarities or take them for granted, simply because they are “part of the water we’re swimming in”...

Outsiders...

...notice inconsistencies between the organizational espoused culture and its behavior...

...tend to make generalizations about each organization, or draw parallels between its culture and that of other organizations...

...feel freer about making “mythic” leaps...

...are continually being judged by insiders, and are prone to make missteps or miss cues....

...may have more access to senior leaders than many insiders do...

The roles in narrative

In the jointly-told tale, most of the story will probably be told by the insider. They will describe events as seen from their point of view.

The outsider will break in to give the reader added perspective, to confirm the validity of particular points, and to set the context.

Three types of statements are incorporated into the narrative:

- “Data” from within: “Here is a statement made by a participant, or a fact.”
- Interpretations from outside: “Here is what the expert believes this data shows.”
- Interpretations from within: “Here is what people in the organization say about the data.”

All three of these statements are clearly distinguished from each other. Care is taken to get the statements in a form which reflects the “voice” and attitude of participants.

Formats for a learning history: The two-column format

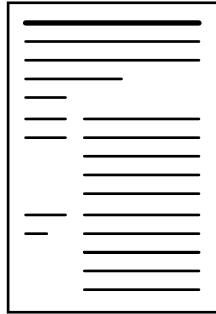


Figure 4-A: The Two-Column Format schematic

This is an “annotated narrative.” It should not be confused with the “Left-hand column” exercise developed by Chris Argyris, where two columns are used to distinguish between unexpressed thoughts and actual conversation.

Readers want to be told a succinct story. They also want to be told what it means, what its implications are, and what they should do differently. As writers of learning histories, researchers need to account for their choices in asking questions, collecting, and selecting data. Readers should be told why particular quotes were chosen, how representative they were, and what interpretations and generalizations can be drawn from the narrative that is presented.

The two-column format accomplishes all of these goals. It distinguishes between relatively “objective” comments by non-participants (on the left), and relatively “experiential” comments by participants in the story (on the right.) It is particularly suited for a jointly-told tale, because it establishes two groups of perspectives, side by side:

- the participants, who bear the brunt of the narrative responsibility on the right,
- and the observers, who bear the brunt of commentary and analysis on the left.

In practice, the same people may have text in both columns. For instance, learning history team members will sometimes interview themselves, to put their experiences in the right-hand column. At the same time, commentary from participants may find its way into the left-hand column, particularly after a validation workshop.

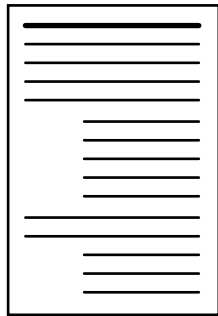
But the two columns represent different stances toward the reader. The right-hand column stance can be expressed as: “Here is what happened, as I saw it.” The left-hand column stance can be expressed as: “Here are some ways to interpret it or think about it.”

Readers are often initially taken back by the two-column format. Their question is, “What should I read first?” Readers have to make choices, and can not simply follow what an author has written. By deciding what to read when, readers exercise choice, pay attention to text in new ways, and become engaged in a different kind of reading process.

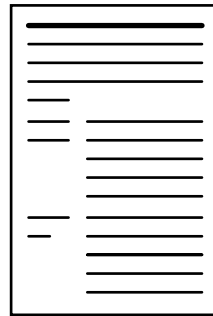
A two-column, jointly-told tale format allows a greater degree of complexity to be expressed than in traditionally formatted reports. The two columns distinguish between relatively “objective” comments by non-participants on the left, and relatively “experiential” comments by participants in the story on the right. The two-column formatting creates a new requirement for reading, which may lead to new comprehension about complex learning and change efforts.

A note for academic researchers:

The two-column format contrasts with the typical way in which field research is written. In a conventional qualitative research format, the full column text is used for all context setting, exposition, description, interpretation and analysis. Quotes, in indented form, are provided as representative data that illustrates researchers' points. The full-column text needs to carry the story and hold readers' interests.



Conventional Format



Two-column Format

Figure 1. Two styles of formatting qualitative text

In the two-column format, various graphic elements take on distinct functions, cueing the reader to expect different types of “voices” on the page.

Full-column text is used for context setting, exposition, and “setting up the telling of a story” that follows in a two-column form. At the end of the a two-column formatted section, full-column text provides analysis, summary or implications of the stories. A left-hand and right-hand column format is used to keep authors' commentary separate from participants' narratives.

The right-hand column is exclusively for primary data — narrative from people involved in the change effort. To condense participants' narrative into a well-rendered form, preserving the spirit of what they say, quotes are often edited. This editing requires an additional quote-checking stage (see Chapter 12, Validation). Other text in the right-hand column includes written comments by people, sections of memos or meeting transcripts, speech excerpts, or other forms of primary data.

The left-hand column is used by the authors to comment on the right-hand column narrative. The left-hand column comments include comments about the questions which people were asked; the assumptions, interpretations, attributions and generalizations researchers make about what is said; comments on how representative comments are; remarks which provide context or summary for quotes; and the possible implications of particular statements.

Anatomy of a two-column format structure.

Basic elements of the two-column thematic segments:

The bulk of the story is told in segments that look something like this:

<p>Thematic sections: “Short stories” that bring out particular dilemmas, questions, or parts of the struggle that bear strong interest and impact.</p>	<p>Openness in practice: Starting at the top After three or four months, people began to notice a change whenever they approached a long-standing disagreement or dispute. In the past, confrontation would have been avoided at all costs. Now, the techniques they had learned in the learning lab seemed to give them a safe way to hold the confrontation. The repercussions rippled out (or “trickled out,” as the engineers put it) to involve other people throughout the team: Suddenly, you could tell someone the brutal truth, as you had held it in your mind for months or years, without worrying about whether they would blow up and never talk to you again. This story is typical of a half-dozen stories we heard with similar effects.</p> <p><i>How rare is the response:</i> “I continued to encourage them to say what they really felt?” In the learning history, people regularly noted being surprised whenever senior managers “drew them out.”</p> <p>Top-level manager: Not long ago, two managers (call them “X” and “Y”) began to attack me at a learning lab. I didn’t understand them. So I continued to encourage them to say what they really felt.</p>
<p>“Narrative by participants:” As if sitting around a campfire, each participant anonymously tells his or her part of the story and how the events appeared from that perspective.</p>	<p>Manager “Y” [telling his version of the same story]: My biggest pet peeve is that we were wasting our time in sometimes four or five meetings per week about making last-minute changes in the specs. This is not unique to our program; this was going on for years at the company. [The top-level manager] would go after little details, rather than letting me manage them.</p> <p>Top-level manager: “Look,” they finally said, “You’re making our lives miserable. I can’t get anything approved without coming to you and getting permission. Why do we need a system that is so cumbersome?”</p> <p>Lo and behold, I said: “Because I don’t trust you.”</p> <p>Internal consultant: When Frank said that (and, actually, he shouted it), there was an uncomfortable silence in the room. What went through our minds was: We always suspected Frank didn’t trust us, and now he’s telling us as much. Then Frank proceeded to say, “And let me tell you why I don’t trust you. If I did nothing to pressure you, you wouldn’t meet your deadlines.”</p> <p>Engineer: I would have had a difficult time saying that to anybody in the past. It would have</p>
<p>Commentary and critique: Questions, reflections, and outside perspectives brought forward by the external learning historians and through some insiders’ commentaries.</p>	<p><i>Having promoted a climate of openness, managers now had to hear directly about the impact they, themselves, had on the people working for them. This, in fact, became the test of whether their “openness” was sincere.</i></p>

Each segment tells a particular subplot or story-line. Each segment has “unity of time and place,” in the sense that the characters are recognizable and continuous (within the segment) and the plot is coherent. Each segment fits with others into a larger “chapter,” which might also be organized on plot lines (chronologically), or which might be organized according to a thematic grouping.

Within each segment, the story is told chronologically.

The right-hand column

The right-hand column presents the basic narrative, told by participants, edited so that retrospective quotes add up to a narrative. Participants are interviewed; we condense their words into a well-rendered form, as close as possible to the spirit of what they meant to say, and then we check the draft of their own words with each speaker before anyone else sees it.

The left-hand column

Comments in the left-hand column, incorporating more “objective” questions, comments, and explication that help the reader make sense of the narrative in the right-hand column. These are not written from the point of view of the participants in the story; they probably will, however, be written from the points of view of the readers.

The full-text material

This material, at the start of each segment (and sometimes in between), provides expository overviews and introductions, to set the context for the story that will follow. A segment typically requires 1-3 paragraphs of overview. These might include a “curtain-raiser,” to involve the audience in the story, and a “nut-graf,” to sum up the basic elements of the plot: Who, what, when, where, why, and what’s going on.

Care must be taken with the full-text material: To provide a sense of the whole and a coherent view, but not to undermine the narrative by making an assessment of the situation. The reader makes his or her own assessment, with the help of the left-hand column.

Sidebars

There may also be sidebars with support material, explaining key points in the text, set off by boxes.	We have begun to develop “generic” sidebars to describe key “learning organization” practices	(such as the “ladder of inference” or “systems archetypes”) that recur in many learning histories.
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Example of the two-column format: “The learning lab attack”

This example describes part of a pilot program at a large manufacturing company. Note the effort to keep each manager’s voice distinct in the right-hand column, and the need to make the left-hand column thought-provoking and carry the concerns of a skeptical audience.

The Learning Lab’s “trickle-out” effect

After three or four months, people began to notice a change in their interactions. Typically, they would have an opportunity to confront someone about a long-standing disagreement or dispute. In the past, that confrontation would have been avoided at all costs. Now, the learning lab seemed to give them a safe place to hold it. And the repercussions, instead of being negative, were almost uniformly positive, and rippled out (or “trickled out,” as the engineers put it) to involve other people throughout the team.

This story is typical of a half-dozen stories we heard with similar effects.

The learning lab created an opportunity for people on the team to begin to address deeper issues, with the team leaders involved.

Frank Jones (a top-level manager of the pilot project): Not long ago, two managers (call them “X” and “Y”) began to attack me at a learning lab. I didn’t understand them. So I continued to encourage them to say what they really felt.

Manager “Y” [telling his version of the same story]: My biggest pet peeve is that we were wasting our time in sometimes four or five meetings per week about making last-minute changes in the specs. This is not unique to our program; this was going on for years at the company. Frank would go after little details, rather than letting me manage them.

And managers, having promoted a

Frank Jones: “Frank,” they finally said, “You’re making our lives miserable. I can’t get anything approved

*climate of openness
heard directly
about the impact
they had on
engineers.*

*Which required
them to answer
honestly...*

*...and that, in turn,
allowed people to
speak much more
truthfully about
underlying issues.*

*How much self-
esteem does it take,
under these
circumstances, to
keep from feeling
threatened or*

without coming to you and getting permission. Why do we need a system that is so cumbersome?"

Lo and behold, I said:
"Because I don't trust you."

Internal consultant: When Frank said that (and, actually, he shouted it), there was an uncomfortable silence in the room. What went through our minds was: We always suspected Frank didn't trust us, and now he's telling us as much. Then Frank proceeded to say, "And let me tell you why I don't trust you. If I did nothing to pressure you, you wouldn't meet your deadlines."

Frank Jones: I would have had a difficult time saying that to anybody in the past. It would have cut the cord of communication and any hope for trust.

But what happened next was amazing. They didn't get mad at me. They simply accepted that it was my position: I couldn't trust them to make changes correctly. And I accepted their position: that they were upset with the way I was acting. All of a sudden the truth came out. We finally got down to the nitty gritty – a meaningful discussion about how to dispel the problem..

attacked?

*But it did appear to
have an effect in
another sense...*

*...which others
noticed some time
later.*

Another manager: I'm one of the people that "X" and "Y" fought with in the past. I've noticed already that they handle the issues differ-ently than they did six months ago.

"X" and I met and brainstormed together yesterday morning, and came up with a couple of ideas. That would have been unheard of in the past; he would have simply said, "I'm not helping you."

I realized that I've got to be retrained too, because I still don't trust them.

Pros and Cons of the Two-Column Format

The two-column format is not universally admired by the learning history pioneers. Many of them find it alien at first. Trained in research, they're not used to telling the story through the voices of other people, and they're not sure, at first, what sorts of things to put into the left-hand column. However, once you get used to it, this form offers an easy way to design an effective learning history.

As part of the work of our group, we have accumulated lists of "pros" and "cons" for the two-column format. For the time being, at least, we are using this format as the core of our own learning history work.

Reasons in favor of the two-column format

It's freeing -- a structure that's accepted. "Don't have to figure out the structure; it's already there."

There's value in a standard format. It allows you to compare different learning histories — to "benchmark" between them.

The reader has to come up with his or her own "flow" — choosing when to move between the two columns.

It brings out the "voice" of respondents effectively.

It works well primarily for retrospective stories because it covers events over time.

It seems to have wide applicability.

It meets all criteria of the three imperatives.

It has been tested and people like to read it. "I read all 60 pages," said one person.

It has imperatives of its own that push the mythic approaches to the forefront.

It reflects the "jointly told tale" explicitly.

It reflects the oral history style and power and narrative.

The two-column format is a model for the sorts of conversations that we would like people to have.

Reasons against

Experience is limited so far. It needs testing.

It seems confusing unless formatted carefully.

There is the potential for confusion vis-à-vis the "left-hand column" (Argyris) exercise, which is an unrelated format.

It needs a careful set-up.

Perhaps it discounts “observational” field notes because there is no obvious place for them.

Care is required with editing the quotes in the right-hand column. Otherwise, the reader might say: “It just seems like a bunch of quotes in the right-hand column and they don’t make sense.”

It requires a tape recorder.

It might not work for “non-retrospective” or “semi-retrospective” approaches.

Imperatives of the two-column format (What it requires you to do.)

Declare “important perspectives” in the field notes, as you are editing. The more that you make notes about important quotes and themes as you’re doing your research, the easier you will find it later to edit the two-column format.

Distinguish “contemporary” quotes from “retrospective” quotes somehow. (A quote made by someone in a meeting in 1993 should be set apart from a quote by the same person, recalling the meeting from the vantage point of 1995.)

Build structure around themes.

This form incorporates the tradition and method of oral history. Thus, you need to give the right-hand column the “right contextual setup.” You should open each theme or segment with a “full-column” introduction, and include perhaps a “full-column” conclusion at the end. These stretch across the width of both columns and permit the voice of the Learning Historian to come in.

Distinguish interpretation from “data” -- explicitly. Critical assessments and interpretations of events go in the left-hand column. (“Team members agreed that the efforts, though they took a long time, were successful in the end. And that claim is legitimate.”)...

“What goes in the left-hand column? All the things that influenced your choice of what to put in the right hand column.”

“I went to the organization and there’s reason to

...unless the interpretations are attributed to individuals in the right-hand column. Then the interpretations themselves are part of the data. (“Jacques: Our efforts took a long time, but they were successful in the end.”)

Put “natives’” stories in the right-hand column. Excerpt and combine them so that it takes on the feeling of sitting around a campfire, having each person tell part of the story in turn.

Spend time in interviews, not meetings. Most of the material in the right-hand column will come from interviews.

think the comments in the right-hand column are made up. Here's why" - an example of a typical left-hand column remark that adds perspective.

The "truth" is in the juxtaposition of perspectives. You will often want to include two or more sources telling their version of the same event.

The left-hand column material, by contrast, is not meant to represent the voice of the Learning Historian, but the voice of the organization, talking to itself.

The left-hand column is a vehicle for the pragmatic imperative.

The right-hand column begins with the data, but you edit it for mythic power.

An alternative to two columns: The staggered format

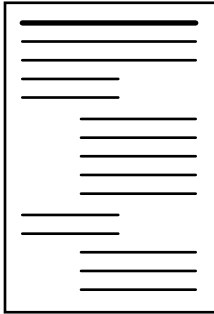


Figure 4-B: The Staggered Format schematic

Similar to the two-column format, this form is more “linear” -- it guides the reader more, while still distinguishing between the various types of material.

Instead of standing side by side, the two columns occupy two-thirds of the page, and alternate as the reader moves down the page.

The reader will read a full-column introduction, and then alternate between left-hand bits of “commentary” and right-hand bits of “story.”

This format is similar to the more traditional format that has been used in academic writing. In academic articles, indented sections are used for direct quotes; and quotes are used as the data supports the statements that the author makes in their full-column width writing. The full-column width writing carries the description, exposition, analysis and conclusions. In that sense, this type of academic writing is not a jointly-told tale as the author guides the reader through the case as they have seen it and choose to present it.

Advantages of the jointly-told tale, staggered format, may include more dramatic effect. The reader has less ability to ignore one side or the other.

Disadvantages include the lessening of reader control. The reader may lose some of the encouragement, implicit in the two-column format, to add new interpretations and questions at the left.

Multiple perspectives

In any large and complex social system, individuals who belong to different parts of that system will hold a wide variety of points of view and opinions about key events. The learning history process not only seeks to elicit, articulate, capture, reflect and document those different perspectives as they influence the ongoing learning and activities, but to report on each of those perspectives in whole and complete ways.

For example, no one can say with certainty what factors caused a particular “noticeable result.” This is because (as management research has repeatedly shown), organizations are complex social systems with multiple cause and effect relationships and time delays which separate those causes from their effects. Thus, different people will tell different versions of the story, with different attributions for what key factors contributed to the noticeable results. People may be reluctant to take a stand about a particular attribution, but as they tell their stories, they often naturally link a particular set of actions with the organization’s results.

It would be a mistake to choose one perspective about what caused a particular result. We *can*, however, capture and describe various causal attributions and describe them in the context of each other.

The attributions which people hold are windows into their theories for how things work in their organization, their mental models, and the basis for their past, present and potential future actions. These attributions are important to examine in terms of their content as well as their degree of variation. A significant amount of variation among perspectives — particularly the degree of certainty which people hold for the “correctness” of their own attributions — is itself an indicator of organizational learning. The way in which people give voice to their perspectives illustrates an uncertainty, perhaps even chaos, which surrounds an ongoing process of inquiry.

In capturing multiple perspectives we raise questions, however, rather than provide definitive answers. These questions are adaptive. The learning history inspires the readers to inquire and reflect on their own assuredness on the numerous attributions of causality upon which other people base their action. Readers will see noticeable results which were achieved in association with the learning project. They are drawn into the thought process of people associated with the project and stimulated to engaged in their own thought process as to how those results were attained.

If the learning history does not report coherently on a perspective, this indicates an incomplete or flawed investigative process, rather than an incomplete or inconsistent view held by the people who were interviewed.

Integrating multiple perspectives

How do we create a sense of reality around complex issues involving multiple perspectives? We suggest that there are three, if not more, basic approaches for how collections of people, in particular organizations, explain reality under these conditions. Consider, to start, two different perspectives. Each of these perspectives is represented by a circle.

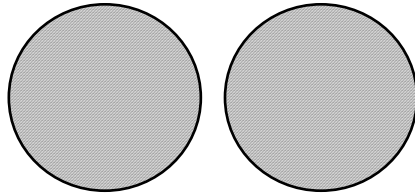


Figure 4-C: Two alternate perspectives represented as circles

One possible approach is to search for common ground, looking for similarities. If each perspective is represented as a circle, then the search for common ground would be where the two circles overlap. This general approach (to accepting only what two perspectives have in common) is based on a process of compromise.

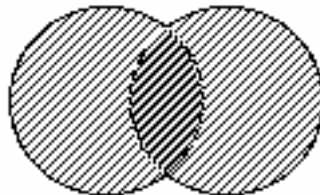


Figure 4-D: Two alternate perspectives where overlap is area of compromise

A second way in which two alternate perspectives are reconciled is by one perspective not being given the same weight as the other perspective. The resolution of the two alternative perspectives is based on the fact that people promoting one of those perspective have more power or influence. Thus, the more “powerful” perspective assimilates the less “powerful” and people are convinced by a process of indoctrination that the more powerful perspective is “correct.” The choice of basis for which perspective to promote as valid can be based on many factors, including scientific rationality, selection of data which supports only that perspective, simply giving voice to only the dominant, or possibly one of many other ways in which one is favored over the other. This process is one of assimilation.

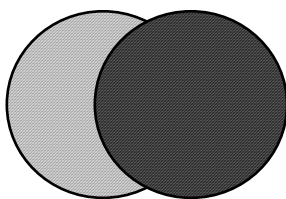


Figure 4-E: Dominant overshadows alternative perspective

Finally, a third approach is to recognize that there are multiple perspectives, and that these alternative views are evidence of an even larger territory of perspective. Rather than look for the compromise, or assimilate one view with another, the fact that there are multiple perspectives is itself accepted as an important fact. The larger territory which encompasses the alternative perspectives is not perceived by any one perspective.

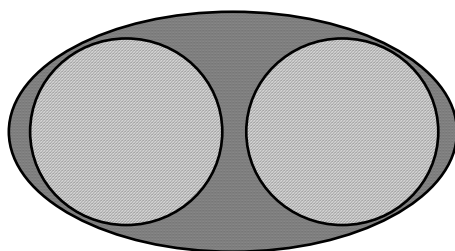


Figure 4-F: Accepting alternative perspectives defines a larger territory

The three alternative approaches to creating a shared reality from alternative conceptions have different underlying logics. The discovery of common ground, looking for preexisting similarities, involves a logic of compromise. Seeking resolution by taking in a different perspective, perhaps accepting what wasn't accepted previously involves a logic of assimilation. Creating a dialectic synthesis, through two different perspectives creating an even larger view, is a logic of community.²²

In seeking alternative perspectives and synthesizing them to define a larger and more complex reality, the learning history approach differs from grounded theory approaches.²³ Grounded theory seeks to develop thick and rich description of concepts by using repetitive observations to dimension and scale the proposed theoretical concepts.

²² Creating Common Ground: A Lesson from the past" by J. King and D. Acklin, Sept 1993, Oregon State University.

²³ Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987.

The learning historian's point of view

Inevitably, the two-column format raises the question: “What is the learning historian’s point of view?”

What agenda does the left-hand column contain? What does it evoke?

This is a significant question. We have seen some projects in which the learning historians felt far more skeptical about the learning effort than many participants did; and other projects in which the learning historians became, in effect, cheerleaders for the effort. In many instances, the learning historian will feel pressure to conform to various agendas — either among the organization members, or among the consultants. It is not always easy to tell where these “agendas” are based, or why they are being promoted.

Should the learning historian begin with a point of view on the learning effort? Or does one emerge from your investigations? What guides the development of that point of view? Or should a learning historian deliberately try to avoid having an opinion about the project?

There can be serious consequences in learning history work. The findings in a report might hurt someone’s career, for instance. In other cases, an internal “heretic” hopes that the learning history will provide him or her with “ammunition:” political support that will justify the expense and trauma of a learning effort.

One way to deal with these pressures is to make as many of them explicit from the beginning. As the existence of hidden agendas becomes apparent, find coherent ways to ask about them.

Beyond that, the learning historian’s judgment is a valuable tool. It should not be dispensed with. It should be continually honed and cultivated, so that it can provide an increasingly sharp edge to the report.

5. Project design and planning

The initial contact: Engaging with the Champion

Typically, a Learning History project is initiated by a senior manager at an organization, or by the intervening consultant. It is typically “sold” as a form of evaluation, as a way of institutionalizing learning from a pilot project, or as a way of “rolling out” cultural change on a large scale. In any case, the first steps will require engaging the key champions within the client organization — and setting up the project so that it meets their needs.

Our experiences have shown that learning history work is large-scale and complex. It requires champions at senior levels who understand the value of systematized reflection. It will require recruiting internal people to join the team. And it will demand an explicit recognition, by the manager of the learning project *and* the external consultants, that the learning historians should remain independent.

Learning historians should not get into situations...

Where they are required to present any foregone conclusions...

Where they feel they cannot raise some questions with their champions...

Where they feel drawn into a role as the pilot team's "father or mother confessor"

Where their work is side-tracked into short-term goals, such as “taking minutes of meetings, since you’re here anyway....”

The role is somewhat similar to that of a long-term auditor. On one level, the Learning Historian should -- must -- be a "person apart." On another level, the Learning Historian must be intimately involved with the team. Somehow both positions must be navigated at once.

Initial meetings with the champion

In these meetings, the scope and budget for the project will be set:

What is the purpose of the learning history? What questions should it answer?

(For example, typical questions might include:

What has been the effect of OurCo's reengineering project?

What is the impact of three years of organizational learning work?

What did the XYZ Team accomplish and how did those accomplishments take place?)

How many people must be interviewed?

(Make sure you include enough people to get a cross-section of probable points of view.)

Who will suggest and confirm interview candidates?

Who will join the learning historian team? How will those people be recruited?

Who will be available to read the ensuing documents?

What are the deadlines and milestones?

What are the costs of the project?

Establishing a Learning History team

Please note that these are guidelines. Every project is different, and every project will require its own adaptations during the planning process. We offer these guidelines as a starting point for considering how to set up the practice in a particular project.

Overview of the team

We believe that a Learning History project must be defined as a team effort from the beginning. It will involve at least one person from outside the organization (generally allied with the outside interventionists). It will also include at least one person from inside (generally allied with the pilot team or the prospective audience for the learning history).

Both people will devote significant amounts of time to this project, and enough resources must be allocated to ensure this capability. The Learning History team may also involve a variety of other participants, playing a variety of key roles, with less of a time commitment.

There are four reasons for constructing the team around a partnership between internal and external people:

1. The complexity and sensitivity of the task

In organizational culture, basic assumptions become tacit and influence behavior, although the form of this influence is rarely brought to the surface. Outsiders are needed to uncover the underlying assumptions and articulate them for the learning history — to “gauge the color of the water in the aquarium where the insiders are swimming.” An “outsider’s” perspective is needed — not just from outside the team, but from outside the organization — to gain the clarity of insight which an insider, caught up in the organization’s demands and culture, cannot see.

An external person would never understand the organization well enough to communicate to everyone. An internal person would be too bound by the organization’s culture to fulfill the mythic imperative of “loyalty to the story.” Insiders are needed to interpret the underlying assumptions in a form that resonates with the organization’s body of shared meaning. Since a learning history is meant to portray “what the organization needs to hear from itself,” the learning historians must thoroughly understand the organization’s culture, and what is acceptable to people who work there.

We have found that when internal and external people work together, they can bridge each others’ limitations. Their perspectives complement each other.

2. The need to build capacity within the organization

Learning organization efforts inevitably lead to a challenge: To develop the capacity within companies so that internal people can carry these projects forward themselves. In order to do so, all learning efforts initiated by outside consultants and researchers need to develop internal people in the roles needed to support and manage the projects. These roles include not only the learning historian, but, in the case of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning projects, the systems modeler, project manager liaison, facilitator, and project leader.

The notion of a "learning historian" was originally developed in response to companies' concerns about how they could learn from the organizational learning projects they were undertaking. Thus, the internal staffing for the project includes people who will develop their capabilities during the process of working on the project. In some organizations, it may be possible to develop enough skills and expertise so that an internal employee can take on the role of an "external" source of perspective. The ability to help a companies we work with to become learning organizations will, in part, depend upon our abilities to develop companies' own capacity to gather data to reflect on their learning.

3. The need for access and time

There are pragmatic considerations. The internal people generally do not have the time for massive amounts of writing, editing, and presentation. They prefer to rely on specialists, often outside people. The outside people are not subject to the vagaries of a corporate hierarchy. They can structure their work situations to have the long, intense and uninterrupted periods of time necessary for analysis and writing. The external people generally do not have access to key people, the trust of people with enough perspectives, or the opportunity to build that trust. Thus, internal and external people have situations which work well together in the service of creating learning histories.

Composition of the team:

At least 1 "Corporate Inside Champion" — the protector/coordinator/sponsor.

Someone needs to sponsor the Learning History effort within the organization. This will not just involve allocating resources. At some point, someone with influence will need to evaluate the final document — to ensure that it is worth disseminating — and to set the wheels in motion for that dissemination. This person will probably not take part in any of the creative or research work, but they will be "an advocate and a touchstone," as one member of the pioneer's group put it.

At least 1 “Corporate Inside Learning Historian” -- the point person.

This is not the champion. One point person from the inside needs to be designated. They are more likely to be involved in the creative work — the research, interviewing, and writing. They may not draft any of the material, but they will need to carefully edit it, making in-depth corrections from both a “pragmatic” and a “mythic” imperative.

The external learning historian’s job may involve offering this person support. “What does the point person need and how can the learning historian offer it to them?”

The point person might be analogous to the “key informant” in ethnography. Key informants are knowledgeable insiders who become helpful in reflecting on research questions.

Point people are often people within the organization who show an interest in or predisposition toward collecting data, documenting, examining and building knowledge on how learning takes place within their particular organizational context.

At least 1 “Outside Learning Historian”

This is the person at the word processor. This person has primary responsibility for designing the interviews, writing the draft, and shepherding the draft through a fact-checking process. This is generally an external individual.

Possibly 1 “Outside Project Manager”

In some cases, the chief project manager may be different from the person writing the report. This person may oversee and implement setting up interviews, conducting interviews, and orchestrating distillation and dissemination.

At least 1 Outside “Mythic Person” with at least a limited experience in the organization.

There is a moment at which themes must be chosen so the learning history can be written. It is difficult for an individual to take this step alone. The “mythic person” consults briefly, to help the internal “point person” and the external “regular learning historian” see the issues more clearly, particularly from a mythic perspective. The “mythic person” has experience in writing learning histories, has a sense of a story line which is important to readers, and has skills to draw that forth from a person immersed in the details.

The presence of a “mythic” person does not alleviate everyone else’s responsibility to operate under the mythic imperative at times. But we include this person because we recognize how hard it is to step back and look at the story mythically, and how much it helps to have an outsider with whom you can talk through the issues. Our experience has been that the help of a “mythic person” has moved the learning history writing process significantly forward.

The Learning Organization Project Manager

This person (who may be internal or external, or there may be one of each) is responsible for the general learning organization (or change) project. This person is part of the team in the sense that he or she champions the learning history, and works with the learning history team to integrate their efforts into the rest of the learning organization work.

Setting up the Learning History process

Single external learning historians

External learning historians are particularly vulnerable when they are part of a two-person team (one internal, one external), with only a few external part-time support people.

In these cases, it is important to explicitly consider the objectives and role definitions of the project and develop an understanding which other people on the project and company partners may share.

If you are an external learning historian, working alone, then we recommend writing a formal role definition and passing it on to your partners and champions within the company. A role definition is a formal, or semi-formal, description of the roles of each participant in the learning history effort, and what will be expected from each of them.

This has two purposes. First, it helps others in the project understand what you are trying to do, and how they can help and support you. It also clarifies the research interests of the project, and your intentions to document the learning project. Second, the definition of the learning historian role, and the example that is created, will help to clarify the roles played by all the various participants, who may come together for this project from several different organizations and groups.

Example of a single-learning historian role definition:²⁴

The following is an adaptation of a letter of agreement for an actual small-scale project. The names and some identifying details have been changed, and dollar amounts have been omitted. The rest of the language is usable in an actual project.

Note that this project combines retrospective learning history work with an ongoing role as “participant observer.” It is important to keep these two roles explicit, because they will otherwise tend to work against each other.

²⁴ We wish to credit JoAnne Wyer and Marty Castleberg with writing the source material from which this example was adapted.

BARBARA JONES

617/686-6611 TELEPHONE/FAX • PO BOX 425465, KENDALL SQUARE,
CAMBRIDGE MA 02142

July 1, 1997

Sam Engel
Organizational Learning Coordinator
Engel & Engel
6 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Sam,

This letter should serve as a letter of agreement, defining the roles of myself and others in the ongoing learning history project for Engel & Engel that begins this month.

The following activities and services characterize the work of a Learning Historian:

- Conducting regular interviews with key stakeholders that create opportunity for reflection and personal assessment.
- Participant observation on the project, including attending and observing key meetings and taking field notes of these meetings for the purposes of tracking important, recurring themes as well as noting the organizational dynamics surrounding those themes in order to provide reflective feedback.
- Conducting other informational/reflective interviews as required.
- Helping the company team and the external research team implement organizational learning strategies through providing reflective feedback on an ongoing basis ("real-time reflection").
- Tracking the "noticeable results" which occur because of new learning.
- Promoting a shared understanding and appreciation for the patterns, cycles, systems, and pervasive mental models that are enablers and barriers to learning, while considering alternatives. (Note: This can happen through various means, including informal conversation as well as memos, reports, and learning histories.)
- Supporting the diffusion of learning throughout the organization through the sharing of learning experiences and documents, as well as participating in planning the diffusion process.

- Developing the capacity of internal people and the team to support learning efforts through learning history work. (This includes coaching in qualitative field research techniques such as participant observation, fieldnote recording, and qualitative interviewing, analysis of qualitative data, writing learning histories on learning and change initiatives, etc.)
- Working with the internal team, project champion and the external consulting team to develop the learning history by encouraging them to provide comments and assessments of how issues and themes identified illustrate larger organizational culture issues.
- Developing the learning historian as a professional role through participation in workshops, writing, and other activities.
- Supporting research activities through investigation and data-gathering. Supporting research planning activities of overall project.

These activities support the production of the following deliverables:

* **Infrastructure for Reflection and Learning.** Through regular interviews and meetings with learning team participants, the Learning Historian creates a regular opportunity for reflection and assessment. This happens in the individual interviews, monthly thematic memos, reflection notes, meetings, and manuscripts which are produced as part of the learning history work. The presence and work of a learning historian on a project team develops new behavior patterns for that team which regularly incorporate time for reflection in the process of assessment and self-evaluation.

* **Monthly thematic memos** that highlight collective issues in learning and change process. (Note: These memos should go to both the external team and to the organization);

* **Reflection Notes from significant meetings.** Reflection Notes are not meeting minutes, but serve to highlight important themes and ideas and prompt insight and reflection so that the team can learn together. Reflection Notes also help the learning team to track their progress. Later, these Reflection Notes can serve as input to a Learning History.

* **Periodic meetings** or workshops based on these documents that aid learning team in collectively reflecting and assessing their own learning and progress.

* **A Learning History manuscript** (see Roth and Kleiner, "Learning about Organizational Learning - Creating a Learning History," *Systems Thinker*, May, 1995). This document is intended to communicate the learning processes and issues of the team. The learning history's power lies in recreating the learning experience for readers by using a "jointly-told tale" format, giving voice to multiple, often divergent, perspectives that accompany complex social change, and separating the assessments, attributions and generalizations of participants from those of the learning history writers. Readers are thus given data and invited to learn and draw their own assessments from another organization's learning experiences. A Learning History is generally written at annual or 6 month intervals.

Other deliverables which may be written include:

* **"Mini Histories" or "Interim Learning Histories"**- These mini-histories are shorter written pieces which capture events over a short time interval or special event. These will be created as needed, and will be ultimately integrated into the Learning History.

* **Outside Publication** is a goal of learning histories, to make the learning process description available to other interested people.

* **"Underground Histories"** may be written. These are reflective pieces on a given project or situation that involves proprietary information. These will never be distributed outside the group that the learning historian is involved with, without the permission of the person contracted with. Even with permission, the circulation will be limited to only the most secure insiders. These pieces will not be used in the general learning history, but pervasive themes may be integrated in such a way that the project and or area is protected.

Professional Standards

The learning historian avoids making rash subjective judgments by being "objective" in the collection of data, using scientific rigor in the analysis of that data-including triangulation (multiple data sources point to the same result), considering multiple interpretations (stories) which could explain the data, and asking for interpretations from members both inside and outside the learning team. Such results should then withstand tests of external and internal validity and reliability. The learning historian cannot refrain from making judgments about the data, but those judgments will be informed by evidence.

The learning historian aims to balance mythic, pragmatic, and research imperatives when writing the learning history, drawing on others both internal and external to the organization to help maintain that balance. The Learning Historian has the responsibility of maintaining the confidentiality of sources and the confidentiality of the organization, unless permission is obtained to do otherwise. The Learning Historian stands outside any political agenda and is an advocate for learning.

External and internal learning historians

It is likely that these two roles will vary somewhat, depending on the organization. However, the roles are complementary and both are necessary. (See discussion below on Learning History team.) In general, the external learning historian is likely to initially take the lead in developing the learning historian role and work. Over time, the lead will transfer to the internal learning historian(s).

Terms, conditions, support required:

Support within the Learning Organization--

An advocate (or advocates) within the learning organization should be in place. The advocate provides the touchstone for learning historian activities, provides ongoing support and helps resolve any difficulties which may arise.

Internal Learning Historians may require an additional level of support from both the advocate and the external learning historian in order to ensure that they do not feel unduly uncomfortable or vulnerable as they begin to take on the role of learning historian.

Confidentiality and anonymity: Learning Historians must be able to guarantee that people interviewed can reflect freely with the learning historian without fear that they will not remain anonymous.

Professional Development: Reflection Learning Associates offers workshops dedicated to supporting and developing the role of the learning historian. In addition to skill development and new tools and methods training, their work and activities are confidentially reviewed by peers working in similar capacities in other organizations. Both external and internal learning historians should plan to attend these workshops with expenses paid by client companies.

A Learning History Team should be formed: A Learning History team which includes individuals who are both internal and external to the organization is recommended. (Internal people have a better understanding of organizational context, can help interpret what common meanings are attributed to the way people think and behave, and are on-site on a continual basis to monitor, observe and capture information on critical events and incidents. External people have a different perspective, do not see as ordinary the common ways in which people think and behave, and are not politically tied to existing constituents.)

At a minimum a learning history team would consist of two people actively involved. Active involvement requires between quarter and half time of a person's work time - 5 to 12 days per month. The actual allocation of time depends upon the current issues and activities in the organization. (Recommendation: Fund learning historians at a level of time appropriate for the reflection and output an organization desires, and then let the people themselves decide on how to best use their time moment to moment to produce the desired outcomes.)

Time and resources made available to support a distillation process, lasting 2-3 days, during which the internal and external learning historians consult with other learning historians on the development of the Learning History.

Time allocated for coaching and teaching in order to develop learning historian capacity within the client company.

Additional research advising, editorial and administrative support for learning historians may also be required. As a group, learning historians seek to publish learning history manuscripts, anonymously if necessary, to further the availability of general knowledge on building learning organizations.

A sample large-scale learning history agreement and budget.

The following is a letter of agreement and budget for an actual large-scale project. The names and some identifying details have been changed, and dollar amounts have been omitted, but all other language has been left intact.

REFLECTION LEARNING ASSOCIATES, INC.

617/686-6611 TELEPHONE/FAX • RLEARNING@AOL.COM
PO BOX 425465, KENDALL SQUARE, CAMBRIDGE MA 02142

July 1, 1997

James McGill
V.P. of Organizational Effectiveness
Parameter Corporation
One Parameter Way
San Francisco, CA 94109

Dear Jim,

Please let this document serve as a letter of agreement between Parameter Corporation (henceforth, "Parameter") and Reflection Learning Associates, Inc. (henceforth, "RLA") confirming the arrangements we have discussed for the Transformation Assessment Project, to be conducted between the present time (August 1997) and February 28, 1998.

1. Purpose of the project:

Since 1995, the Parameter Company has been deeply involved in an organization-wide learning effort. This has directly involved at least 500 people in 7 separate initiatives and projects.

This "learning history" is intended to help the Parameter organization as a whole reflect on its intensive, company-wide learning effort. The report will be used to instigate a series of conversations that can help other people throughout Parameter move forward in their own organizational learning, without having to "reinvent the wheel" discovered by the initial participants and by the company leaders.

2. Scope of the project

The research and assessment conducted by RLA will focus on the conception, planning and implementation of the company-wide learning effort that has taken place at Parameter since 1995. This will include its purpose and goals, how it was organized and designed, and the initial stages of implementation and roll-out.

In addition, two key initiatives, chosen as “microcosms” of the Parameter experience, will be included in the research and assessment. These stories (also called “vignettes” and “playing fields”) represented implementations of the learning initiatives, taking place in Parameter during the 1996-1997 period. These will be chosen for the way that each story illuminates a key theme or set of precepts. RLA’s research and reporting on these initiatives will examine a “vertical slice” of participants in these efforts, ranging through all levels of the organization.

At the time of this agreement, the two vignettes include:

- a. Parameter’s fast-food restaurant division (Cincinnati, OH);
- b. “Parabus,” the toy subsidiary

In place of either of these vignettes, another may be substituted by agreement, as long as RLA and Parameter representatives agree that there is sufficient time to prepare the substituting portion.

3. Deliverables — written documents

A. Noticeable results

Due dates:

Initial draft: August 1, 1998

Final draft: September 15, 1998.

For use in interviews, and elsewhere at Parameter, the “noticeable results” exist in draft form. They will have been continually updated throughout the August/September interview process.

B. Preliminary thematic summary

Due dates:

Initial draft to “champions” (see section 5), Friday, September 27, 1998.

This report will preview the themes that were developed during the August/September interviews and the September distillation process. Since there will not have been time for fact-checking, no quotes or direct attributions will be included. But we will make a commitment to provide an honest, thorough overview of the themes that have emerged — with the caveat that these themes will not be developed or “ready for general dissemination.”

This document will be used as a development tool for the learning history team, and as a planning tool, so that the dissemination process, beginning in February 1999, can take place with more effectiveness.

C. Learning History - fact-checking draft

Due dates:

First draft for fact-checking, October 18, 1998;

With fact-checking edits to “champions” (see section 5), November 15, 1998;

Post-revision (ideally with edits from validation workshop, as described below), December 20, 1998;

Ready for first dissemination efforts, January 15, 1999.

A Learning History of roughly 100 pages, thoroughly fact-checked and organized according to the “learning history” jointly-told-tale format, will be delivered to Parameter in February 1999.

The report will include the following components, not necessarily in the following order in the document’s table of contents:

- A “jointly-told tale” narrative, in “two-column” format, of all the learning efforts listed in item (2) of this agreement;
- An executive summary (derived from, and expanding upon, item 3B of this agreement);
- A description of the “noticeable results” (item 3A of this agreement);
- A section on how this report was developed;
- A section of exposition (the Parameter story’s past history and context, leading up to 1993);
- A full roster-like list of all the roll-out efforts, so that people can see their own work and experience acknowledged;
- A section describing the perceived impact of the learning efforts, and how the organization’s leaders foresee its evolution into the next several years.

This draft will be used in quote-checking and validation workshops. The comments from validation workshops will, in turn, lead to revisions in the version of the draft that is ultimately circulated through the company.

D. Dissemination plan and participation

The report described in (3C) will be disseminated in a series of workshops, in which people across the company talk about its implications for them and how they might move forward. At the discretion of the Parameter champions or other senior executives at Parameter, RLA will offer its planning, advice, design, facilitation and materials for these workshops.

4. Project organization (RLA effort):

Five people will work on this project through RLA. All are closely involved with the RLA “network of associates,” and all are trained in the learning history method and process, as designed to meet the guidelines described in the following two documents from the MIT Center for Organizational Learning:

George Roth and Art Kleiner, *What is, and is not, a learning history?* (MIT Learning History Research Project Guidelines), published 1996;

George Roth, “Learning Histories: Using documentation to assess and facilitate organizational learning,” OLC Working Paper #18.004, 1996: MIT Center for Organizational Learning, 30 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA 02142.

All five RLA associates will be interviewing Parameter employees, respecting our stringent confidentiality and anonymity requirements.

In addition, all five RLA associates will be taking field notes, participating in the “distillation process” that develops the themes, and partnering with the Parameter members of the Learning History Team (see section 5). All five will also be responsible for writing parts of the first draft.

They are:

- Barry Smith, MJ. As project manager, Barry will be responsible for the production, quality, and coherence of all of the drafts, the editing, production and presentation of the final draft of all documents, and the implementation of all of the training.
- Maurice Jones, Ph.D.. Maurice will participate in the design and development of the Parameter learning history.
- Mel Worth, MGA/MSW. In addition to interviewing, Mel will be coordinating and managing the logistics and administration of the learning history.
- Natalie Swan, Ph.D., will be participating in interviews, distillation, and writing.
- Marjorie Masters, Ph.D., will be participating in interviews, distillation, and writing.

5. Project organization (the Parameter side):

We have arranged to involve seven Parameter Company people as key members of the Learning History Team (LHT) that will conduct the Learning History interviews. Members of this team, at their discretion, will also be involved in the distillation process and may (at the discretion of Parameter) be involved in the dissemination process or other related activities.

RLA and the TRT will be responsible to Parameter “Champions,” who will oversee this project. They will represent the company to the learning history, and the learning history’s value to the company. They may also offer consultation on key decision points: The planning of the scope and scale of the effort, the identification of key “noticeable results,” selecting critical people who must be interviewed, and organizing the dissemination process.

6. Audience for the Learning History:

There are four potential audiences for the document described in item 3C of this agreement, the primary deliverable of this project:

- A: Participants in Parameter’s transformation effort, looking for perspective on what they have done so far, and ways of operating more effectively in the future.
- B: New protagonist-participants in the transformation efforts, who need an efficient way to be “brought up to speed” on what their teams has accomplished so far.
- C: The rest of the people of Parameter, who may or may not have been exposed to the transformation concepts and experience, but who need a sense of context and an understanding of how its experience might apply to their own work.
- D: A larger community of university and community college administrators, or learning organization practitioners, as well as other people interested in management research.

This transformation assessment will be oriented toward audience C, though it is validated by Audience A, and could be useful to Audiences A and B.

Audience D represents a critical *long-term* prospect. After the Learning History has already had an effect within Parameter, publication for outside audiences may take place, but only at the discretion of Parameter leadership, and with all identifying details, including the company name, disguised. General publication establishes further research credibility, contributes to the growth of knowledge about improvement efforts and organizational learning, and gives Parameter a conduit for outside perspectives as more people respond to the story. For all of these reasons, RLA is entering into this agreement with the understanding that, at an appropriate time, James McGill or some other designated person will negotiate on behalf of Parameter's leadership to set conditions for anonymity, content and confidentiality that can allow for general publication of the report.

7. RLA consulting rates and billing procedures.

RLA bills Parameter based on a day rate for its consultants, including a specified amount of planning and preparation time for the Parameter Learning History. RLA will also bill for the expenses described in this letter of agreement.

The day rate, for all work leading up to deliverables listed in section 4, is:

Barry Smith:	\$X/day
Maurice Jones:	\$X/day
Mel Worth:	\$X/day
Natalie Swan,	\$X/day
Marjorie Masters:	

The following estimates are based on work leading up to deliverables 1, 2 and 3. Since the scope of RLA's work in deliverable 4 has not yet been determined, that work is not included in these estimates. Estimates of RLA's work for deliverable 4 will be determined by mutual agreement between Parameter and RLA during the planning stage for that part of the project.

For deliverables 1,2, and 3:

The total estimated number of days billed by RLA people is: 130.

The average calculated day rate for all RLA time is: \$X/day or less.

Expenses to be reimbursed by Parameter include:

- Travel and living expenses for interviews and participation in distillation or dissemination work (estimated at \$X);
- Tape transcription costs (estimated at \$X);

- Reasonable postage and telephone expenses incurred by RLA team (estimated at \$X);

These estimates represent a ceiling that cannot be crossed without further agreement by both parties. Travel and living expenses are invoiced at actual cost for reimbursement.

8. Termination of this agreement

Either party may terminate this agreement by tendering a 7-day written notice of termination. Expenses and time incurred by RLA up to the day of receipt of notification of termination will be paid by Parameter.

9. Non-disclosure

RLA will agree to, and abide by, the client's non-disclosure requirements (see the "Confidentiality Agreement," signed by Barry Smith for RLA and dated July 1, 1996). These non-disclosure agreements will continue to be enforced even if the rest of this agreement is terminated.

At the end of the project, RLA will collect all confidential materials held by RLA team members and subcontractors — materials including electronic and paper copies of transcripts, as well as tapes and notes. These will be collected and destroyed. Parameter will be responsible for the similar disposition of these materials within its organization. For the period of two years after the delivery of item (3C) in this agreement, unless otherwise agreed by RLA and Parameter, RLA will retain an electronic copy of transcripts and working documents in a secured location.

10. Legal action

In the event that any legal action is required to enforce this agreement or any portion of it, the prevailing party of such legal action shall be entitled to recover from the other party the reasonable attorney's fees and legal costs thereof.

11. Changes and further considerations

This agreement is intended to reflect the scope and work of the Parameter Transformation Assessment Project as it has been conceived to date, in joint design sessions conducted by Parameter and RLA. Changes to this agreement may be negotiated by mutual consent, and should be documented in writing.

12. Conclusion

We look forward to a rewarding collaboration between RLA and Parameter, leading to a document and “transformation assessment” process that prove to be valuable resources for Parameter as it moves toward its goals during the next few years.

Signed,

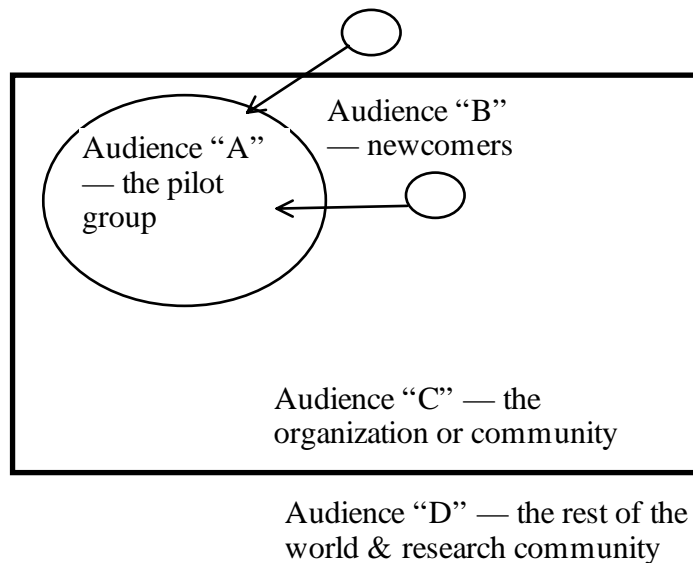
6. Audiences for a learning history

For whom is the learning history written? Who is expected to read it? Who will be allowed to read it?

The consideration of audience raises a number of important issues. For example, is the learning history “internally valid,” or accurate from the learning team’s perspective? This can only be answered by including members of the original team in the audience. Is it useful to others in the organization? This can only be answered by including a variety of people from the organization in the audience.

If (first) the learning team and (then) that team’s organization acknowledge the value of the learning history, can a more general audience — academics or managers — gain value from the document? Can it add to the store of knowledge about organizational learning in general? This can only be answered by some form of general publication, perhaps with all details of the organization disguised.

There are, in fact, four critical audiences for learning history work, each with different needs and purposes. Each of these audiences, from team to organization to general audiences, suggests ever larger groups of people with less knowledge of particular learning situations, less interest in specific project details, and more interest in general managerial issues.



Audience A: Members of the pilot team

These are the participants in the story: Members of the team (or the segment of the organization) which experienced a transformation or innovation. They want to know what happened themselves, and to relive their experience. They're looking for perspective on what they have done so far, and a credible representation of their experience to others in the organization who have heard stories, and are bound to ask: "What *happened* to you all out there?"

The people who were directly involved benefit from the attention which the learning history turns on them. Some of them may get involved in the learning history creation process — interviewing, analyzing, writing, reading and discussing learning. Even a more casual involvement, as they are interviewed and review drafts, helps people reflect on their learning. Seeing descriptions of the learning process and multiple perspectives helps team members gain a better understanding of their individual experiences.

Note that participants in Audience A are not just the supporters of the effort. Following the work of "systems family therapist" David Kantor, we propose that participants will hold one of four stances. They may be *protagonists* in the story (Kantor calls them "movers"), who have initiated the new effort. They may be *opposers*, challenging the innovation. They may be *followers*, cast in the role of implementing the action. Or they may be *bystanders*, called upon as critical witnesses but not directly involved.

In a healthy organization, according to Kantor, people will regularly shift between these stances; in a dysfunctional or failing organization, people will find themselves "locked-in" to particular stances. In learning histories, we often find ourselves torn. From the mythic orientation, we want to present people as characters, locked in to their stances. ("Lee, the consummate opposer, is locked in a tragic drama with Sam, the never-say-die protagonist.") But the pragmatic orientation reminds us that it is counterproductive to pigeonhole people, unless we can frame their stories in a way that makes it easier to escape the long-established patterns of behavior that bind them.

As learning historian Marty Castleberg notes, the more that the external learning historians become immersed in the organizational culture, the more they tend to write for Audience A. Perhaps the reason has to do with retaining credibility among the people we have interviewed; perhaps we are afraid to distance ourselves. Therefore, any learning historian who hopes to move to other audiences needs to find some way of keeping the boundary with Audience A intact.

When learning historians produce “reflective notes” and other documents for Audience A, they are using the learning history methods to fulfill the same goals that “reflective feedback” from organizational development has often produced.

Audience B: Newcomers to the pilot group

These people have just joined the innovative team, and they must be quickly brought up to speed. They are often quickly cast as bystanders or followers, but the organization typically needs them to move up to becoming protagonists. The current leaders of the effort, however, may be too busy, or enmeshed in their perspective, to offer the overview that newcomers need. The learning history provides one.

Audience B wants to know just enough to move forward. They have a great stake in learning what happened in the pilot team; they need to know what to emulate or avoid, as they quickly take on positions of involvement and leadership.

Audience C: The organization (the “entity”) as a whole

This group includes everyone else in the organization. Typically, they hear about the protagonists’ experience only in the vaguest way, through poorly-constructed myths that circulate informally through the organization. They emerge with ill-founded assumptions. This is our critical audience. They may be bystanders today, but before long, they will be cast as protagonists, opposers, and followers in their own dramas. Enlightening a critical mass of these people will produce a reflective infrastructure for learning.

How do you define the boundaries of Audience C? In his book *The Living Company*, Arie de Geus refers to the “persona” of an organization — the entity whose members can say, “We are us.”²⁵ In other words, there is a self-identified organization, in which even the people who did not take part in the events of the learning history have a stake. This group might include some non-employees: Union leaders, suppliers, consultants. But they comprise the “organization,” the entity as a whole: all those who identify themselves as belonging to it.

It’s easy to define the entity with an intact organization, such as a corporation. The “entity” is everyone within “Chrysler,” “Motorola,” “Sam’s Restaurant,” or whatever the corporation may be. It becomes more difficult to make the definition clear when writing a learning history about a non-profit group, a school system, a local community, or a social movement. Who are the constituents of this learning history? Who is really part of the community of people who feel part of this entity?

These questions must be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Audience C wants several things. They want “lessons learned” — examples they can take and use. They want mythic themes that reveal the essential nature of their culture. And they want building blocks upon which they can craft a shared vision of their desired future and a shared understanding of the internal and external forces affecting them.

Marty Castleberg: “From the beginning, there should be thought about who the outside champions might be, and why they might want to learn from the original team's experience. No doubt they will change as jobs shift etc, but the `championship` can possibly be passed on like a legacy from one champion to another.”

Some components of Audience C

Managers (including members of similar pilot teams) elsewhere in the organization

There may be a great deal of resistance to picking up information from another team.

²⁵ Arie de Geus, *The Living Company*, 1997, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

A learning history pioneer: “At my organization, one part does not want to learn from another. Be aware that not everyone in the organization may think the pilot team is the greatest thing since sliced bread...”

Hence our design: To write the Learning History with an awareness of the barriers between teams and functions, rather than writing it as if the barriers between functions were not there.

Barriers between functions exist for a reason. People are skeptical about and resistant to new ideas for a variety of reasons. If the barriers were easy to break, the organization wouldn't need the learning history. Resistance to new ideas is often based not just on failure to see the value of new initiatives, but on a legitimate awareness of the genuine value of the “old ways.” Skeptics are often vocally engaged in considering learning issues. Thus, in learning histories, we try to engage the barriers, inquire into the resistance, and work with the skeptic.

Certainly, some members of the audience will be enthusiastic. They know that they can learn from each other, and look forward to ways of doing so.

The rest of the organization may not be very “invested” in the learning effort. Thus, there is a need for capturing people's interest right up front (the “curtain-raiser”), providing a clear and indisputable statement of outcomes (noticeable results) and explicating the significance and key points of the learning effort (nut-'graf).

Peter Senge: It's almost universal. At almost every organization you go to, hardly anybody learns from anybody else. There are disincentives to sharing. There is not enough time to share.

Even if you deal with those issues, and create a climate or environment where people have a high incentive to share, there is still no guarantee that the quality of that sharing will be high or that it will actually be useful to people. Learning Histories are positioned right at that point.

“Learning” leaders (stakeholders for learning) in the organization

The natural stakeholders are those who are committed to the learning effort, often actively involved in promoting the learning effort, and very eager to read about it in the learning history. They are an active audience; they have a sense of ownership either for the report, or for the events. As promoters of the learning effort, they are often eager to see it represented positively. As proponents of learning, they realize that they can learn from perspectives they hadn't considered or results they weren't aware of.

These natural stakeholders are often the people who enforce the implicit (or explicit) agreements between the learning historian and the organization regarding fairness and discretion. They may be called upon to champion the learning history as it moves through the organization.

Senior managers of the organization

These people will necessarily be key members of the audience. They are among the most difficult members of the audience, because their point of view often encompasses a very different range of concerns than the participants in the learning effort. They may resist the learning history, for instance, on the grounds that no one part of the organization has a monopoly on "the answer" — so why single out *this* group as having done something special?

The learning history draft may want to address this concern, by making it clear that this is only one case of innovation among many, but its example may be valuable in helping others increase their rate of innovation and learning. When the leadership of the organization changes, then that may influence other people in the organization to change — either to become more, or less, receptive to the learning history. In our experience, senior managers tend to appreciate the learning history more over time, as they recognize the value of its lessons playing out across the organization as a whole.

Non-readers and appreciators of visuals

Many key members of the audience do not read; or, at least, we can't depend on them being avid readers. Thus, the learning history must be easy to read, without sacrificing depth or content.

A learning history pioneer: "One study found that managers at most organizations read at a 4th grade level. They couldn't read 8-11th grade material. How do we cope with that?"

Not everyone in an organization needs to *read* the learning history. If there is a critical mass of readers, the history will have a positive impact on the entire organization. The same is true of organizational learning interventions — when a critical mass participates in the learning effort, their initiatives carry over to everyone who is part of that organization.

The form of the learning history needs to fit in some ways with the habits and expectations of the audience within the company, in terms of both *how* information is presented (oral presentation, view graphs, slides, etc., including culturally appropriate visual aids) and *what* information is presented (stories, statistics, graphs, business metrics, policy changes, lessons learned, recommendations, conclusions, etc.). Unless the learning history approaches people in a relatively accessible way, it will not lead to better conversations.

Audience D: The outside world

This group includes the larger community of learning organization practitioners, as well as other people interested in management research. (It includes, for example, readers of the *Harvard Business Review*.)

Audience D, at some point, becomes a critical part of the organizational reflection. If you tell your story and have the outside world reacting and responding to it, it provides feedback to your organization that you would never otherwise receive. In this process of communicating to general audiences, issues which seemed internal and particular to your own organization become universal and are more easily related to general management considerations.

Learning organization efforts often involve research, and there is a responsibility to communicate the results of that research to the rest of the world. Since the learning history is a research endeavor, publication is doubly important. Public distribution of learning efforts contributes to the ongoing research and development about organizational learning. Researchers are keenly aware of the need for public dissemination as a part of research (*see the material on the research imperative in Section 3*).

External publication provides an important missing link for outside consultants. Their position as advocates of new ideas and teachers of skills limits their own perception, and limits what other people are willing to say to them. They may have missed unexpected or unanticipated consequences of their own work, and important reactions to their ideas, both of which are necessary for improving future interventions. The learning history is a vital vehicle for their learning, and they need to be part of its audience — for their own sake and for the sake of their future clients.

But it also provides an important link for the organization. As Danah Zohar has noted, disseminating the learning history more widely provides a vital opportunity for feedback. The organization's leaders can learn a great deal from seeing how others see their experience. What seems significant to other managers? What seems like a genuine triumph to external observers? What danger signals do outsiders see that the internal managers missed?

The degree to which a learning history can be disseminated outside the organization should be explicitly stated before work starts. It is also advisable to disguise both the people being written about and the organization in which they work.

Details in a public learning history should be masked so that the people and company can not be identified. This is not just for the sake of discretion. Identifying people and companies invokes a readers' preconceived notions and stereotypical biases ("That story is only applicable to a big/small/low-tech/high-tech/regulated/entrepreneurial/industrial/service company, not to a company like ours."). This blurs the reader's ability to perceive the prevalent patterns that are based on generic issues (issues which can be found in most companies).

A general audience will be interested in general principles, such as the relationships between particular roles or positions and the overall functioning of the organization. These general principles are adaptable to many management settings. The particular details of one company's situation provides the grounded mise-en-scene from which general lessons can be derived.

What makes for a good organization with which to do a learning history?

“If a tree falls in the forest, and no one hears it, does it make a noise?”

This age-old philosophical question has a direct bearing on learning histories. If a history is written, and no one reads it, does it have an impact? The immediate response might be, “no.” However, the reality of the case is not that simple.

The impact of the history beyond the learning team is undoubtedly limited if the record of its learning is never examined. Nonetheless, the process of writing the history, interviewing people, and reflecting on the results will still have an impact, even if the document is never read. Perhaps the impact will be in the more reflective actions of the people on the learning team.

For an organization to gain a benefit from the learning history beyond the learning team, conditions need to be created so that people read the learning history.

The managers who are committed to the *idea* of disseminating learning should also model the *behavior*. They should be interested in learning from other efforts, and committed to ensuring the quality of the learning history so that it is appealing and interesting, and that it will be read.

The learning history seeks a balance between presenting information in a way which makes people feel comfortable, so that they can assimilate content, and presenting information in a way which challenges preconceived notions to increase people’s awareness of new or alternative perspectives.

Different pieces for different purposes

There are several written items produced by learning historians.

First: the observational and interview field notes, transcripts, and other documentation which form the basic data from project. These documents are generally only for the learning history team.

Second: there are periodic memos which discuss particular theoretical points (as in Strauss' notion of the theoretical memo).²⁶ These memos are generally used for communication among learning history team members and perhaps with teams leading project efforts.

Third: interim learning history-like documents. These memos are written around themes identified in the ongoing learning history process. In the MIT Center for Organizational Learning projects (see paper in Appendix on research process) learning historians are part of project efforts. Providing feedback to the champions and participants of learning efforts is a valued effort on the part of learning historians. The teams often appreciate the opportunity to reflect on their behaviors. The learning historian can test their understanding of events and usefulness of thematic organization of learning history text through interim documents. The interim documents also clarify the learning historians role and value-added in the ongoing project. These thematic, interim documents can be edited and used in the periodic documents which provide snapshots of overall learning and change efforts.

Fourth: the more complete writings which make up the learning history itself. In ongoing projects, documentation needs to occur approximately two times per year. So, for example, a learning history, released in August, might describe what occurred during the January to June time period of that year. Eventually, when particular projects come to a natural end, the previous reports can then be edited into a single learning history.

Balancing the pilot team's view with the larger system view

Multiple perspectives often derive from the different levels of involvement that individuals have with the learning team. For example, most people are, to some degree, either primarily “insiders” or primarily “outsiders.”

²⁶ Strauss, 1987 and 1990.

The insiders are actively involved in the learning effort, promoting the concepts, and facilitating the development of new skills (such as personal mastery, mental model, team learning, shared vision and system thinking skills). Insiders generally have responsibility for the team's efforts — for example, for designing and producing a new product, leading an initiative to provide a new type of service, or developing a new business.

The insiders' view of the world is influenced by both of these factors: by the skills, capabilities and insights they develop as a result of working with the learning tools and methods, *and* by promoting activities which serve to accomplish their business interests.

Almost by definition, the team and its members will find themselves clashing with the existing way in which the organization works. These clashes can be expected because most large organizations don't work in ways which promote and support learning. Often the team needs to isolate itself from the larger organization to establish new ways of thinking and new patterns of behavior. The challenge for the learning team is to not stay isolated and to understand how their actions are interpreted by the rest of the organization.

As Figure 10-B illustrates, team members see the organization from their "insiders'" vantage point. The arrow represents the perspective or view that is held by members of the project team looking out into the division, corporation and then larger industry or social environment in which they operate. This vantage point, which values the new thinking and behaviors, often casts a negative light on the existing ways that the larger organization operates.

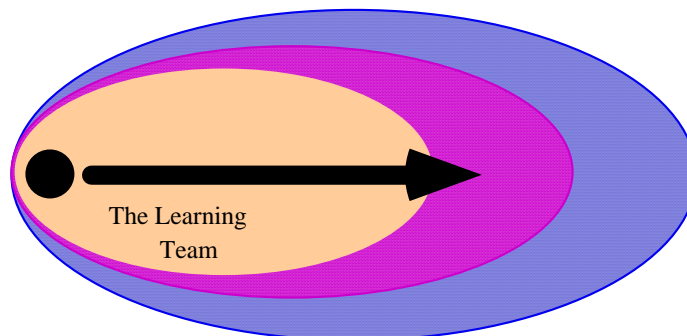


Figure 6-B: Insiders' perspective on the organization.

While the learning team isolates itself to develop new behaviors, the larger organization in which it exists also has a view of the learning team. This view is often based on preconceived notions, which influence what phenomena people in the larger organization pay attention to, and thus what they notice about the learning team. Often, outsiders notice the “soft” aspects of the learning effort (attempts to create safety and support for learning) without seeing how those efforts support the hard requirements of producing business results.

For example, the learning effort may spur people to talk about their problems in more open and direct ways than is customary. When those conversations are heard as “complaints” by others in the organization outside the team, it might appear that the learning team has many more problems than other teams. The actual number or quality of problems may be lower, and there may be a healthy willingness to express problems openly, but outsiders will perceive that the learning team is “in serious trouble” because of the number of complaints that have come to light.

Figure 10-C illustrates the notion of the larger organization having a perspective on the learning team. The arrow represents the view of people from the outside world into the project team. What do people who are outside the project see happening, what are their mental models for interpreting what they see, and what attributions do they make about what this means?

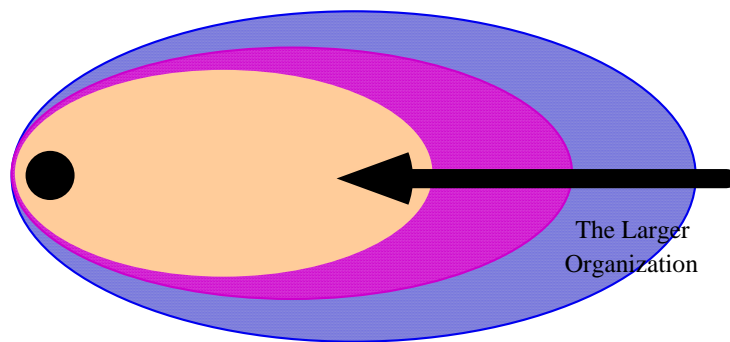


Figure 6-C: Organization’s perspective on learning team

The learning team is often blind to the way it is perceived by the larger organization. Behaviors that make perfect sense to the learning team, and that support its learning orientation and initiatives, may look subversive and out-of-control to others in the organization.

The learning history offers two opportunities to deal with this situation. First, by conducting interviews and collecting data on how the larger organization views the learning team, an information feedback process is established between the learning team and the larger organization. Second, by documenting not only the events and behaviors of the learning, but the reasoning that gives rise to that action, the learning history documents are useful to people in the larger organization. This information offers the people in the larger organization insight into what the learning team is hoping to accomplish and the reasoning of the learning team.

7. Noticeable results

We begin our work by identifying "noticeable results:" key events and criteria that are obviously noteworthy. They can all be described in directly observable, measurable and tangible ways. Anyone would agree they are significant, although they might not agree on the reasons why they took place.

Consider, for example, the AutoCo learning history — a story of a project launch team. The team had begun its work sixteen weeks behind schedule, but caught up enough to launch the “Epsilon” car one week early. They had developed key innovations, including a new type of technical prototype and a new way to exchange ideas with market researchers, that were now becoming widespread throughout the rest of the company. They had come in \$65 million under their budget for late changes. They had superior quality results, but also a very visible record of “not fitting in” with the rest of the company. Managers reported clear, observable changes in their own and each others’ behavior — changes which made it much easier to work together.

All of these were “noticeable results.” These types of “noticeable results” gave the people we talked to a common starting point in their reflection with us. No matter what their attitudes might be, they could find common ground in a single set of data.

The Epsilon “noticeable results” were clearly significant, but without a coherent story it was all too easy for “AutoCo” people to dismiss the results as flukes, caused by luck or the force of the Epsilon leaders’ personalities. Some observers assumed that the numbers had simply been manipulated to make the results look good. These observers focused on the few metrics and observable details that made the “Epsilon” look bad, and discounted the rest. As these various reactions emerged, we realized that we could not just interview people within the “Epsilon” team. We had to broaden our inquiry to interview suppliers, senior managers, consultants, and skeptical observers from elsewhere in the company.

Noticeable results are outcomes, activities, events, behaviors or policies which are out of the ordinary, much different than what would have typically occurred before the learning project. The internal learning historians generally need to define what is a noticeable result, and why it is significant; external people do not have the experience to do this.

How do we know that this is a team worth writing about? Because they broke performance records, cut the times of delivery in half, returned eight million dollars to the budget, or made people feel more fulfilled.

These may not always be “hard” business results. Whatever indicators will be regarded as significant by people in your organization should be included; managers who are skeptical about the project won’t read the report unless the results are included. We find it’s helpful to use noticeable results as a jumping-off point, particularly if you are willing to investigate the underlying assumptions — the reasons why your organization finds these particular results noticeable. Often, a tangible result (the number of engineering changes introduced on a production line) signifies an intangible gain (the willingness of engineers to address problems early, because they feel less fear).

Why noticeable results?

In business, managers are often heard speaking in the language of “results.” As learning historians, we need to talk in this way if we want to be heard. Remarkably enough, managers are often seeking the same kinds of insights that the learning history provides. But they need assurance that they will, in fact, find the insights they seek here. With the pragmatic pressures they feel, they need assurance that the learning history will be relevant.

If hard measures are not directly reported, skeptical business managers are not interested in hearing about organizational processes which illustrates learning, change and personal improvement.

The noticeable results also focus interviews. Learning historians can begin interviews by displaying a list of noticeable results, and inviting interviewees to tell the parts of the story that involved or affected them. In this way, the interviewee helps guide the narrative to the most significant elements, and the interview remains grounded in the “data” of actual experience.

The use of “noticeable results” responds to managers’ and researchers’ expectations for measurement and evaluation. Noticeable results provide a jumping-off point for readers of a learning history. Events which are significant, observable and measurable provide substance and motivation for business readers. The curiosity which readers have to examine what happened and why prepares them to hear the different perspectives and explanations of participants.

Listing “noticeable results” is one way to satisfy the needs of the pragmatic imperative. The organization is already attuned to noticeable results.

The language of noticeable results

The language of business consists of phrases like: “measurable results,” “sustained profit,” “the bottom line,” “competitive advantage,” “business impact,” and “shareholder value.”

Proponents of learning organization work and corporate transformation have their own language about results. They speak of “skills developed,” “new behaviors,” “inquiry over advocacy,” “suspending assumptions,” “tending to process,” “win-win situations” “dignity,” “honoring diversity” and so forth.

We want our noticeable results to incorporate both languages. Our challenge is to connect outcomes and impact with processes and philosophy, and test a theory of how they may be correlated.

Characteristics of “noticeable results”

A “noticeable result” in business settings has three characteristics. First it is an event which people in the organization consider significant. It is significant in that it is something which would not normally be expected, or achieved, in the routine course of business activities. The determination of significance derives from people within the organization. They can tell if what has happened can be explained in the normal course of business activity, or if what happened requires further explanation. Significant, in its typical use, means, “having or expressing meaning, full of meaning.” In this same way, noticeable results are events which have meaning because they are beyond what is anticipated, expected or easily explained.

Secondly, noticeable results are “observable.” Anyone at a particular place at a point in time would be able to witness a noticeable results. For example, in the vehicle development program one of the reporting mechanisms measured vehicle prototypes’ quality. Using the quality reports anyone could look at the report and read the score the vehicle was given. The quality scores were “observable” through the reporting and measurement system. While people may argue whether the measurement or reporting system is valid, they would not dispute the score itself.

The final characteristic of a noticeable result is that it be “measurable” This consideration relates closely to the idea that it be observable. We seek noticeable results that are occurrences or events which be measured and whose measurement is quantifiable and independent of the person performing the measurement. The measurement associated with a noticeable result is secondary to the ability to measure. The emphasis on “hard” characteristics of noticeable results, we have found, is extremely important in developing credibility in business settings. In many cases there is controversy around the achievement of learning and organizational development efforts, and when the descriptions of these efforts is made in abstract and subjective language it requires considerable interpretation on the part of the person making the claims.

Some examples of noticeable results

20% more cases out the door (in a factory)

Higher quality patient care at lower cost

22% increase in orders over last quarter

Intractable quality problems resolved

\$40M company-wide savings

30% reduction in flow time in plant

Raised earned income from 25% to 50% in one year

A large number of senior people are leaving the company.

A highly cynical attitude pervades the company.

A new product development center/learning center/R&D center was established.

Competitors are “knocking off” our new products.

“I don’t know what’s going on — but my attitudes have changed.”

“I’m not the same person I was before.”

The stock price is higher (or lower).

A new partnership exists with the union.

Many stories of personal transformation exist....which result in new managerial behaviors.

“We’re beginning to speak a common language.”

Analysts’ evaluations have changed

A corporate mission statement was written — and heeded (or ignored)

Massive layoffs/spinoffs/outsourcing took place.

New openness or personality shift in a key leader, observed by people from “below,” working in the business unit reporting to that person

Technical people are more attentive to the business side (R.O.I.)

Behavior in meetings has changed: Team meeting structures are different.

Last year, people said: “I don’t feel trusted.” This year, they say: “I worry about my future.” So they are more honest about their anxiety.

Some assessments (these are not noticeable results):

This management's decisions have been very effective.

The senior leaders are not living up to their promises.

The marketing department's policies have backfired.

Competitors are eating our lunch.

The learning labs have produced terrific results.

We had one very effective intervention, and another that was not so effective.

Note that all of these involve a judgment about the reasons why a particular result took place. We believe that it is possible to make such judgments credibly, but not until the learning history has been researched and produced.

Describing noticeable results in your document:

For each noticeable result: Explain exactly what it is, why it is noticeable or significant, and (optional) what achieving it might portend for the future.

Keep the descriptions pithy. Omit needless words.

It is sometimes effective to include a brief description of where the noticeable result was noticed. "Managers report that..." Or, "Stock analysts' reports indicate..." Or, "Quality survey results suggest..."

As the next section will make clear, it is not necessary to mention any causes for the noticeable result. That comes later in the learning history process.

The dilemma of research credibility

Frequently, a pilot team undertakes a learning or change project with the belief that they will produce better results. However, the results do not always emerge on schedule. There may be pressure from authorities to produce “results” before it is time to judge what the results of the effort have been.

Sometimes, managers of the pilot team hope that, if they can demonstrate record results, they’ll get much more latitude in the choices they can make. Our experience suggests that the truth is more complex. Producing better results is one component of engaging the larger system; in itself, results will not justify a pilot team’s “case.”

There are many sad examples of this. One documented story, in *The Age of Heretics*²⁷, describes the Gaines dog food plant in Topeka, which turned existing management practices upside-down, and produced ground-breaking results. But the corporate staff, at General Foods in White Plains, simply did not believe that the results were valid.

One problem is that “results,” themselves, are ambiguous. In the short term, it is possible to make minor interventions and make the number better (or at least look better). Sustained results cannot be proven to be “sustained” for at least several quarters. Another problem is that results depend on a variety of factors. A pilot team may indeed produce good results, and be “tolerated” as long as the results keep coming in. But if the numbers change, the tenuous support for the learning effort will evaporate, and people will pick at the process, with disastrous consequences.

If results are based, in part, on a company’s overall progress — or on the prices of commodities such as oil, chemicals, and computer chips — then it may not be possible to prove a link between the results and the learning effort. After all, the pilot team may have been able to sustain their good results *despite* their learning effort.

²⁷ Art Kleiner, *The Age of Heretics*, Doubleday, 1996

What, then, is the point of delineating noticeable results at all? Because they give us a starting point for our research, and they provide a series of hypotheses. The relationship between the intervention and results, if there is any, is exactly what a learning history process investigates. Instead of proving direct causality (“This program produced that result”), the learning history captures the attributions that people hold for the causal factors. (“Most managers believe that the relocation program led to their improved performance, although there is also credit given to the learning lab.”)

When a company’s performance improves, this is usually related to multiple factors. By describing what people believe to be the factors which contributed to those changes, we open up conversations among the readers, which in turn leads to a deeper understanding of the systems at work. At the same time, as part of our preparation, it is valuable to consider the potential causes of noticeable results. This helps us remain alert for contradictions and nuances in the interviews.

A challenging part of assessment is how to understand how the learning process leads to particular decisions which eventually have an impact on overall profitability in 5 or 10 years. You may not always have the luxury of waiting. Managers frequently want to know how a learning effort is going. That, after all, is why they commissioned the learning history in the first place. They really want to know whether the learning effort has produced any “significant” outcomes that justify their expense and trouble. They know it takes time before their new learning effort influences profitability, but they (quite reasonably) want any clues you can offer now that can help them make better decisions today.

Assessing a business impact is especially complex. cursory investigations can lead to misleading conclusions. It’s all too easy to conclude that a learning process “led to dramatic results,” when others might conclude, simply, “people learned some new skills.”

See the next section of this Field Manual for one approach to resolving this dilemma.

Considering the causes of Noticeable Results

The following diagram, which breaks down the relationship between the learning process and the ultimate impact into component parts, can be helpful when examining the impact of a learning effort on noticeable results.

The left-hand column (“Interest”) represents typical concerns held by the management of the organization. The right-hand column (“Assessment”) represents the “results” that can easily be assessed (because they can be measured or observed).

The overall leap from the “learning process” (at the bottom, #1) to the “noticeable results” (at the top right, #3) cannot be credibly proven.

Each of the component parts, however, represents concepts which can reasonably be investigated. Each of the arrows in the diagram represents some aspect of presumed cause-and-effect influence. Each arrow can be tested, starting at the lower left with the “learning process.”

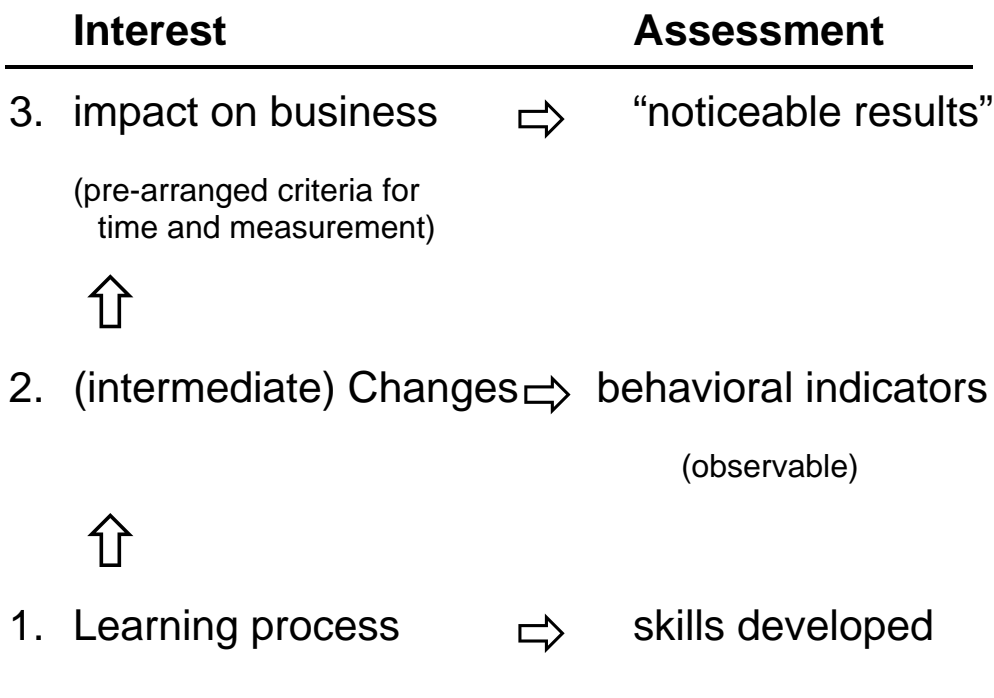


Figure 7-2: The relationship between learning process and skills (for use in preparing “noticeable results.”)

To use this diagram, confine yourself to one arrow at a time. See how many steps “up the ladder of impact” you can confidently travel, without falling into unsubstantiated assessment.

1. Has the learning process led to the development of skills?

Example: “We are now all more skilled at systems thinking, and we know how to draw causal-loop diagrams.”

Every assertion of new skills should be accompanied with evidence of observable, relevant behavior. For example:

Skill	Capabilities	Observable behavior
Use of the ladder of inference	People regularly distinguish “data” (observations) from interpretations, attributions, and higher order inferences (assessments).	When making assertions, people readily offer data to support those assertions. They also explain the reasoning they have used in developing their views.
Balance of advocacy and inquiry	People can inquire into their own thinking and encourage others to do likewise. They are willing to have their views questioned without becoming defensive. They effectively advocate their views, while remaining open to the influence of others.	"Here is what I believe, here is the reasoning that has led me to these views, and the data that supports that reasoning. Help me see where my views might be inadequate?" Or: "I don't see it the way you do at all, but please help me see why it is that you see it this way, or help me understand what you see is wrong with my own reasoning."
Discussing undiscussables	Subjects that would typically be impossible to raise can be discussed productively.	People will report that topics which previously were impossible to discuss are now being brought into the open. They might express either surprise or concern that previously undiscussable subjects are now being discussed. Or, they might express enthusiasm for the increasing openness of conversations.
Skillful discussion	Conflict becomes an opportunity for mutual learning: attitudes toward differing mental models shift to genuine curiosity rather than “right-wrong.”	"I don't understand at all what leads you to see it the way you do, but I would really like to understand." "Please tell me more about the picture as you see it." "It really upsets me when you state the views as you do, and I am trying understand what leads me to be upset."
“Holding dilemmas”	The multiple dilemmas facing the team are publicly acknowledged. People eschew quick fixes or bravado and recognize that these are inherently difficult situations that can be most productively faced with candor, mutual caring, and creativity (and perhaps humor).	Dilemmas are literally situations where people see two opposing goals, forces, or tendencies. Participants, during interviews or observed conversations, describe those dilemmas and note the feelings that they have when confronted by them: "I see a dilemma here between your belief that we need to be open in order to resolve conflicts and my concern in hurting people's feelings. I wonder what we can do in order to honor both of our objectives?"

Skill	Capabilities	Observable behavior
Discerning “systemic forces”	People use tools like the system archetypes to interpret consciously systemic or structural causes of problems.	<p>"I think we have a shifting the burden (or tragedy of the commons) situation here. As I see it, the quick fix that is being advocated will simply keep us from having to address the deeper and more difficult issues. I see the quick fix as _____, and I see the more fundamental problems as being _____."</p> <p>"What are the structural forces that are causing this problem to recur again and again?"</p> <p>"I believe we have been here before -- I see a recurring pattern of behavior that looks like the following: _____. I believe one possible set of structural causes for this pattern lie in _____."</p>
Integration of diverse views in systems work	People use systems tools like the system archetypes and causal diagrams to conceptually integrate diverse views.	When queried, people say that their views have been captured by the systems diagrams and also express genuine interest in the new insights they have gained by understanding how other people see other parts of the system, and how together they now have a new understanding that no one had previously individually.
Personal vision	People are increasingly aware of the distinction between reacting (problem solving) and creating. People are increasingly clear about and comfortable communicating their visions of desired results as a context for taking action.	<p>"My vision for where this project might bring us is _____."</p> <p>"Instead of just fixing this problem, I believe we need to understand the fundamental causes of the problem and ask what is it that we would really like to have as ideal conditions."</p>
Inner commitment	People report an increasing sense of genuine commitment to their own work and the work of the team, while more readily acknowledging their qualms and areas of uncertainty. In other words, commitment comes from genuine caring and is not based on politeness or maintaining a facade of being a “good team player.”	People are genuinely enthused and energetic in doing their work. They report that the work they are doing is very important to them, has real personal meaning, and, even if the organization somehow no longer supported the work, they would find a way to do it on their own.

Skills and behavior are easy to talk about, and easy to gather data about or from. Often, members of the team “come alive” when talking about these, because they have been so personally meaningful. However, it remains very difficult to focus explicitly on the links between skills developed and impact on “noticeable results” such as profit.

It is important to distinguish between measuring skill development and assessing impact. Although a person who is interviewed might speak about developing skills and capabilities, these will be more meaningful as part of the narrative: not as “results” that represent part of the assessment.

We think reports on new skills are very important. It is one of the factors that helps make a Learning History “real” to the people reading it. However, the reports on these new skills should typically be part of the learning history, and not tagged as a “noticeable result.” When they are tagged as “results,” the whole report tends to lose credibility among skeptics. Framing the acquisition of skills as noticeable results has the potential of reinforcing a common misperception that organizational learning efforts focus exclusively on “soft process” considerations, and that the people associated with the learning efforts have become insensitive to the business reality of needing to produce hard results.

2. What intermediate changes emerged as a result of the learning process? What behavioral indicators supply evidence of these changes?

Example: “Soon after the learning labs started, we noticed a change. The participants were much more open to new ideas, and you could hear less yelling going on in the project manager’s office.”

In between learning new skills and business results, there is a need to have some way of observing what changes are transpiring. To guide this observation and data collection you can specify intermediate variables. These intermediate variables are the behavioral changes that indicate new skills and capabilities are being assimilated and used.

We look for evidence of people starting to think differently. Is there evidence that people are starting to act differently towards one another? As we find those changes, we can begin to ask people about their attributions for, and interpretations of, those changes and then what generalizations they draw. As people describe their interpretations they reveal more about their own thinking process, as well as more about the behavior of the group.

Intermediate variables are significant to an assessment of progress. When people's behaviors change, your observations (and their observations) provide evidence confirming that something has started to happen. Directly observable behavioral changes will also be meaningful to the readers of the learning history.

Often, it takes a great deal of time to identify intermediate variables. The team only gradually comes to recognize them. Many are highly tacit, representing ways that "everyone operates around here." Because typical behaviors are so pervasive, they are often seen as impossible to change. When such change starts to occur, people often become increasingly aware of other, related tacit assumptions and accepted behaviors which also thwart learning.

According to the theory that learning involves change, shifts in such variables are *intermediate* between improvements in team effectiveness (as by basic team capabilities like those listed above) and a team's ability to produce improved business results. Thus, intermediate variable, such as observable behaviors that support learning, represent a significant domain for the assessment of learning processes.

For example, in one Learning Center project an important intermediate variable was a particular style of behavior typically exhibited by hierarchical leaders: "the boss has got to be the boss." A significant indicator of learning was evident when both the head of the team and those around him began to report significant changes in his behavior — to becoming more inquiry-oriented and less authoritarian, to responding to stressful situations by asking questions and trying to understand causes of problems rather than to increasing pressure to perform, and to trusting others more to solve problems.

Data to track intermediate changes can be gathered in many ways:

- direct observation of the team in working sessions
- tape recording team meetings and analysis of transcripts
- follow-up interviews with team members after challenging events, which encourage them to reflect on these situations.

3. What impact have these changes had on the business?

How can we measure that impact in terms of “noticeable results”?

The learning historian needs to capture explanations for why results were (or were not) affected by the learning efforts. These explanations may take the form of theories that make links from new skills and capabilities to new behaviors to cogent stories about significant business results. The stories of business results are cogent when they are linked by participants and leaders of the learning effort to those new skills, capabilities and behaviors.

Thus, before the research gets fully underway, the learning historian should have begun to think about criteria that would indicate a link. These criteria should be discussed with leaders of the learning effort, as it will generally reveal their way of thinking about these issues, what they were trying to accomplish, and what actions they took that influenced the course of the intervention.

For example, what is a reasonable time frame in which we would expect a learning process to have an impact on business results? One of the critical issues to wrestle with when we are assessing results is time. Bill O'Brien, a retired CEO, has a wonderful way of putting it. He says that managers are addicted to measures. They want to pull up the radishes to see how they're growing. How many times have we pulled up the radishes to see how they're growing?

When you settle on a reasonable time frame for assessing results, you refrain from judging the learning effort until that time frame has passed. You can still study and learn from the effort, as you go along. But you resist the temptation to conclude: “This has (or has not) affected results.”

Other criteria can help you decide: “How will we know that the results have been affected?”

For example, what percentage of performance improvement represents a significant gain? Ten percent? Twenty? Fifty? This will typically have to be decided by the insiders and outsiders, considering the criteria and the purpose of the project together.

Appropriate measures of improved managerial and business results must be determined by the team — not necessarily by the rest of the organization (although they should be credible to the rest of the organization). Examples of the sorts of indicators that the team might consider meaningful would be:

- specific business goals, such as
 - sales performance and customer satisfaction
 - reduced cycle time
 - lower rates of errors, rework, redesign
 - profitability
- high levels of business results are seen as sustainable in the long run (in other words, they don't depend upon extraordinary levels of "heroic" effort).
- learning processes initiated with one group are extended to other parts of the organization that the team depends upon
- management processes are clear, mutually understood and accepted, and seen as having a healthy balance between flexibility and consistency.

8. Research considerations

A learning history is part of an inquiry process designed to capture “what happened” and how people made sense of a change process and report it to a broader audience. Learning histories are constructed from multiple sources of evidence, including archival materials, field observation, and interviews, either during or after the changes have taken place. The activity of collecting information from people involves capturing both *descriptions* (of events and changes) and *reasoning* for the “how” and the “why” of what happened.

The data predominately used in a learning history comes from an inquiry with change process participants. The learning history as a method depends upon the ability of outsiders (the learning historians) to engage with insiders (change process participants). All learning historian teams require insider/outsider participation. The extent to which insiders and outsiders are involved depends upon specific project conditions and the roles which company people take on as participants in the learning historian team. The combination of people inside the organization and at least one learning historian from outside the company to create new knowledge and theory about an organization and its change process raises important questions of how to judge the validity and quality of a learning history effort.

Balancing Inductive with Deductive Reasoning

The objective of research is to produce generalizable knowledge and theory which describes, explains or predicts what happens under certain conditions. This theory is of interest to managers because it allows what is learned in one situation to be applied in other settings. The theory, when more carefully specified and generalized through comparison with findings from other companies, is also of interest to academic audiences.

The learning history process is an endeavor which supports a theory building and theory testing process. Learning historians working in the field are continually asking others, and themselves, questions to build and test theories about the organization under study. The research influence provides a tradition of theory generation and testing. Part of the learning historian’s task is to develop a process that helps systematically and explicitly generate more insightful (mythic imperative), more useful (pragmatic imperative), and more accurate (research imperative) theories.

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory.”

— Kurt Lewin

What is a theory?

Theory is the articulation of relationships between a set of constructs that relate to phenomena being examined. Constructs are labels for phenomena which have been observed in the research for the learning history. These constructs generally involve observable changes, actions, or characteristics of the individuals, team or situations being studied. For a learning historian, this might include the descriptions which participants provide of their experience, and their observations of what has happened with other people in the setting studied.

Changes in behavior, reported attitude shifts, the prevalence of new innovations, and relationships between key people are all examples of possible constructs. Constructs in a useful theory will be relevant to the audience.

A theory is the description of these constructs and their relationship to each other.

For instance, the theory may suggest that a construct (the use of learning labs) was directly responsible for another construct (changes in the way people interacted around difficult and conflicting decision-making situations).

A theory incorporates hypothesized relationships among these theoretical constructs and new observable variables.

For instance, the theory would suggest finding other similar gains in performance which can be linked to the same use of learning labs. (If the learning labs were truly causing gains, then they would consistently cause gains.)

Developing a valid theory takes into account the following considerations:

Avoid bias by objectively examining your hypotheses.

Find ways in which constructs can be measured.

Science requires replication (explanation and prediction).

Much of research work involves developing convincing mechanisms to demonstrate the validity and relevance of theories. The learning history approach to capturing, studying and diffusing organizational changes has much in common with action research, critical systems thinking and participatory evaluation approaches.

In Learning Histories, testing and demonstrating validity takes the form of:

- Gathering anecdotes and opinions which support the theory;

- Seeking out possible anecdotes and opinions which oppose the theory (so that all reasonable relevant rival hypotheses are ruled out);
- Inquiring among participants about the validity of the theory;
- Testing the theory in other situations and on other teams.

Some examples of theories about an organization:

- “The cyclic nature of this industry caused people on the pilot team to feel an enormous amount of unspoken anxiety about time and deadlines.”
- “Comments or suggestions from Plant A were automatically discounted, and most communications from headquarters were misinterpreted because of a subtle, pervasive rivalry that existed between headquarters and plant A.”
- “New behaviors filter through the rest of the pilot team as people used new conversational tools requiring only 10% of the pilot team to go through learning labs.”
- “The institute’s director had set a pattern of miscommunication with the primary funding source, a pattern which had to do with his personal history, but which then influenced everyone else in the organization.”
- “There was an untapped source of help and support in the relationship between the finance director and the head of human resources.”
- “The new prototype system was far more effective when the prototype manager actively encouraged engineers to make their changes visible.”

Considering “research” in four phases

In general, a new research process (including an organizational learning project and its associated learning history) moves through four major phases. It starts with an open inquiry, and progressively builds upon what is found and links it to what others have found. Various research projects may start at, or span, different phases of a larger research process.

Phase 1: Discovery (Inductive)

This phase of theory-building involves an inductive process: Drawing forth theory from the observable data. In this phase, the researcher develops possible theories, explores these as explanations for what is happening, determines which concepts are most important to consider, and articulates these hypotheses for further testing.

For most learning historians, this phase begins with reflection on the data that you have accumulated so far.

- What is there?
- What are the key issues?
- What are the key variables that can be observed?

For example, variables might include: motivation, anxiety, fear, vision, aspiration, satisfaction, commitment, goal achievement, performance

- What are the relationships among variables?

For example: As the basis for motivating people changed from using fear and anxiety to linking business goals with personal aspirations and shared vision, dramatic and unanticipated performance gains were observed. These observations indicated that there was not a tradeoff, but rather a correlation, between personal satisfaction and commitment and business performance.

Phase 2: Demonstration (Deductive)

Having developed a theory, you must test it. In this phase, your concerns are about validity: the extent to which a theory is reliably consistent with the data, the extent to which its internal logic is consistent, and the extent to which it is reliable in a variety of relevant settings.

Tests for validity: The Nomological Net

Learning histories are written so as to combine themes (major conceptual explanations for what happened) with chronology (compelling stories which take place over time and describe what happened). Each theme is a theory about how the organization works and the forces that made a difference in the learning effort. There are several types of tests for validity of a key theme. They can be grouped in a diagram which researchers call the “Nomological Net.”

The nomological net illustrates the relationship between data, hypotheses and theory (see Figure 8-A). At the top of the net, ($X-Y$) is a depiction of a theory: X is somehow linked to Y. At the bottom of the net ($x-y$) is one of several examples of that theory, taken from the data. In the final learning history, there might be a half-dozen or more individual examples of the theory available from the data. Each of the gray arrows represents a different relationship that can be individually tested. If all of them are seen as valid, that suggests that the theory, as a whole, has validity. If any of the connections are suspect, that suggests that the theory needs further consideration.²⁸

²⁸ Note: This is a simplified version of the Nomological Net. In social science research, there may be intermediate hypotheses that should also be tested. But for our Learning History purposes, this set of tests is sufficient.

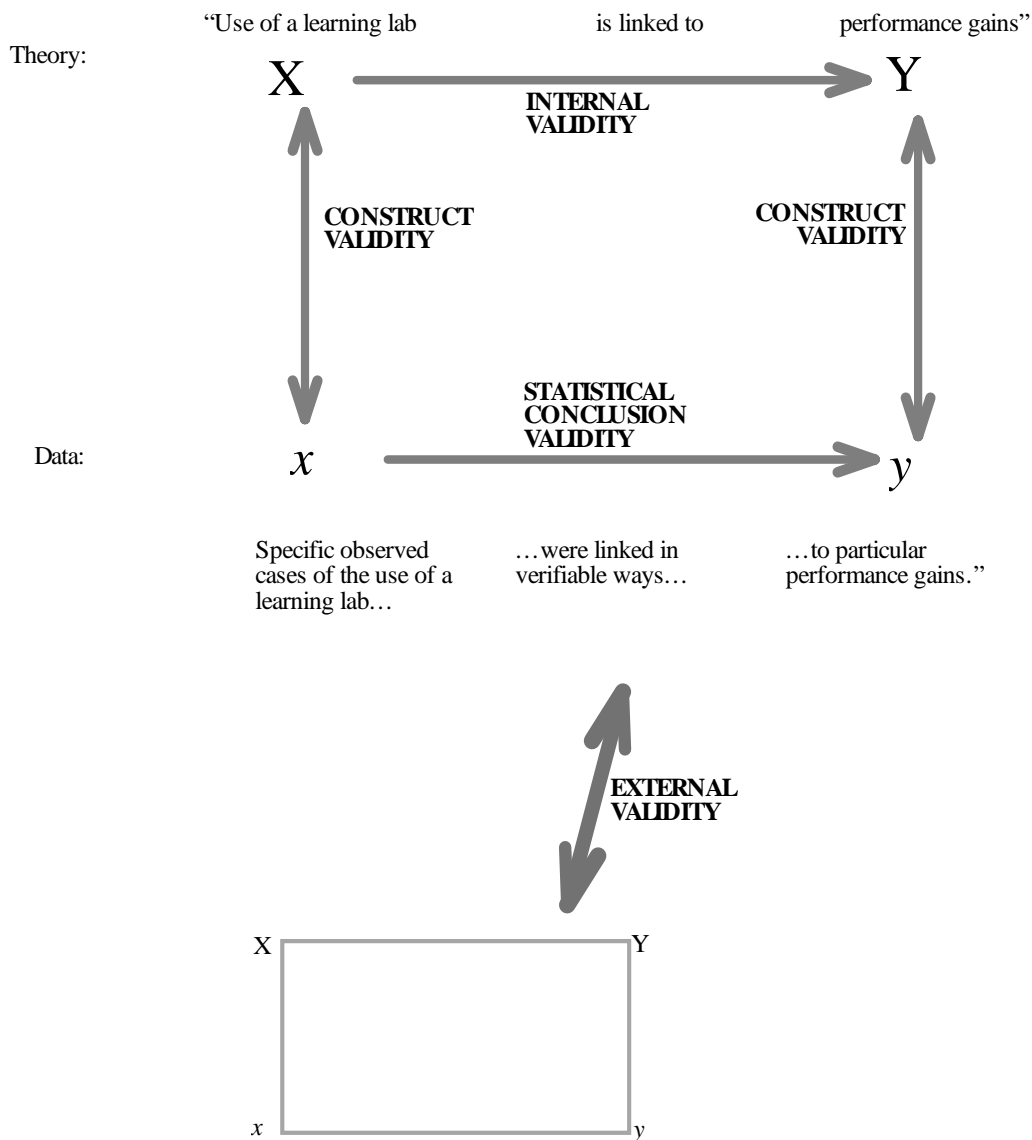


Figure 8-A. The “nomological net:” a framework showing the necessary ways of testing for validity.

For Learning History work, we suggest the following approach for validity testing. Each of these tests should be conducted at various stages during the analysis process, depending on when they seem appropriate:

Statistical Conclusion Validity:

Does the data correctly identify the relationship between **X** and **y**?

In other words, you need to be certain of parallelism between the dependent variables (the “y” factors, or results) and the independent variables (the “x” factors, or causes) in specific cases.

Suppose that someone says, in an interview, “The learning lab made it easier for us to achieve that 35% boost in performance.”

Where does their understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship come from? Do they offer substantiation or evidence to support the claim made in this particular case?

Also, have you tested this relationship? Have you asked skeptical questions, that anyone not familiar with the work might raise? (For example, have you noted the reasons why the new “learning skills” might *not* have had any impact on notable results?) Have you asked the people involved about this?

Have you checked this particular “cause-effect” claim with other participants? Is it supported by your own observations or other data?

Have you interviewed people who might disagree about the validity of the suggested relationship? Does your theory reasonably explain why they might hold their views?

(See Section 7, “Notable Results,” for more about this point.)

Internal Validity:

Does the theory make sense? When you examine it logically, does X indeed cause Y?

This is also sometimes called “face validity.” On the face of it, is the theory inherently plausible? Is it logically consistent?

You should raise questions of internal validity when you look at the story from a mythic orientation. When someone says, “Something about that theory doesn’t quite sit right,” they may be aware of a hint of a problem with internal validity. It’s worth probing into the reasons.

Or you may want to examine the corollaries to the theory. “If this theory is true, then it would logically follow that other theories are true. Do those other theories make sense?”

Suppose, for example, that an assertion is made in a number of interviews that managers throughout the company are anxious, because of the “cyclic nature of the industry.”

As you consider the internal validity, you might ask yourself: Is it reasonable that cyclic industries would make people anxious? Do cyclic industries tend to have more anxious people than non-cyclic industries? (If the theory is true, then they would.) Have other reputable theorists proposed similar theories about cyclic industries, and provided logical reasoning that supports the claim?

Testing for internal validity may seem esoteric at times, but it is important — if only because most organizations tend to hire analytical people. Readers of the learning history will intuitively sense when a theory is not valid, and the entire learning history will lose credibility as a result.

Construct Validity:

Do the theory and the data accurately mesh?

Is **X** a good representation of **X**?

Is **y** a good representation of **y**?

Does the theory actually describe the phenomena?

Construct validity tests the conclusions and interpretations proposed in the theory. Are they substantiated by the phenomena that we are trying to study? Does the learning history faithfully represent the learning experience that it is trying to portray?

More specifically, do the variables at the bottom of the grid provide an accurate representation of the system you are trying to portray? Are they typical variables, or are they “outliers,” chosen (consciously or not) because they support your theory? If you chose your variables at random, would they support your theory?

For example, if your theory states that learning lab work improves results, you may want to test that theory by selecting instances of improved results at random.

How many of the improved results can be reasonably linked to the learning lab work?

One test of the construct validity of a learning history can come from the judgments of the team members who were studied. Do people who were interviewed say the theories and interpretations represent a valid recounting of their experience? Does it resonate as accurate and on-target with them? If they affirm the accuracy and completeness of the written document, and the concepts and themes that you focused on, that suggests you are meeting tests for construct validity.

External Validity: Can this theory be extended to other arenas?

Do the learning history’s themes accurately depict the same phenomena in other situations? To paraphrase Tolstoy, every unhappy organization may be unhappy in its own way.²⁹ Nonetheless, some aspects of that “unhappiness” must be generic. If a theory, applicable to one situation in one organization, has no analogues anywhere else, that theory is suspect.

External validity is the test of whether the story is representative of generic situations. Do individuals and groups reading the learning history respond to it, even if they were not part of the learning team or the organization? Are its lessons universal enough that a range of readers can draw something of value from it?

²⁹ *Anna Karenina*

What do readers with wide experience say about the learning history?
Does it ring true, based on their experience with other organizations?

Phase 3: Refutation

Having developed a reasonable theory, it is necessary to try to refute it. If you cannot reasonably refute it, that adds validity to the theory. Rival hypotheses should be considered at this point.

Phase 4: Replication

Replication has to do with the ability to replicate the conditions described in the report. If they can't be replicated, then the theory is unreliable.

For example, a theory might suggest a cause for the anxiety which people described during a six-month period. But if a reasonable person says, "I felt the same anxiety as well, when I joined the team a year later," and the cause was operating then, that adds data to support the "reliability" to the report's descriptions. (In itself, this is not be conclusive, but a series of such links of logic reinforce the overall validity of the theory.)

Building on the research of previous learning history and case study efforts.

Often a particular research project builds upon, confirms, extends or perhaps refutes findings from previous research efforts. It is therefore crucial to examine written findings of other related investigations and projects to see what has been found and proposed in the past. Some of the hypotheses and theories of earlier projects may end up influencing “themes” of this learning history. Others may be useful to cite in the full column, quote in the right-hand column (if they were voiced by participants in the learning process), or use as grist for the left-hand column.

Once a theory has been demonstrated as having validity and applicability in one learning history, that theory becomes an object for future inquiry in other research projects. “We found in Continental Widgets Corporation that learning laboratories with more than fifteen people were less effective. Was that true here as well?” In the new circumstance, this theory will then stand tests that may either confirm or refute it.

9. The interviewing process

Much of the learning organization research is conducted through on-site interviews and observations. Surveys and questionnaires are also possible ways of gathering information, but retrospective interviews provide most of the narrative perspective needed for the right-hand column of the learning history.

Between 50 and 200 people may be interviewed, depending on the scope of the inquiry. We deliberately seek as wide a range of perspectives as possible, from champions to skeptics. For example, has the learning effort included a “personal growth”-oriented training session? Then we try to interview people whose fundamentalist religious beliefs have been offended, as well as fervent “New Age” supporters, as well as the people who have linked this training to business results.

In situations where we have been asked to gather all this data in a short time-frame, there have been ten to twelve learning historians conducting interviews, operating in teams of two people: one internal interviewer (generally an “organizational effectiveness”-oriented staff member) and one external learning historian.

The inside interviewer knows how to ferret out “insider details,” critical insights and nuances which help ensure that the learning history is credible. The outside interviewer feels freer to raise naive questions, ferreting out organizational blind spots and “undiscussable” issues that an inside interviewer might miss. In addition, as the insiders and outsiders educate each other through the course of the interviewing, a much richer understanding of the company’s issues is built up among the learning historian team.

Interviewing as a “reflective conversation”

The ideas of clinical research interviews (Schein, 1987a) and creating reflective settings have guided the development of the learning history interview process.

Often people who are leading and involved in change efforts do so in addition to other job responsibilities. Thus, they always feel themselves under the gun. They don’t take the time (nor do they easily find the settings) to think through what they have set out to do, how expectations have been accomplished and/or shifted, and what has been learned.

Thus, a learning history interview creates for the participant an opportunity for reflection. The researcher strives to develop a rapport with people that creates a relaxed and safe environment. These interview settings make it easier for people to be open and expressive about their experience, talk about their interpretations and explanations for what happened, and personally benefit from the time of the interview.

As people talk openly about their experience, they often make new reflective connections and develop new insights about their past actions. The interviews build reflective capacity in the organization — both for the learning historian and for the interviewee, who may never have had an opportunity to ruminate at work, at length, about his or her experience.

You might assume that the best way to develop a reflective spirit is to ask people to make assessments — to make sense of their experiences. In other types of organizational interviews (such as therapeutic or consultational interviews), people are expected to talk about their *analyses, evaluations, assessments and judgments* — to explain, for example, what “best practices” they developed, or to expound on what the organization needs to do.

But we have found that this quickly brings them up to a level of abstraction from which it is hard to depart.

Instead, we simply keep returning people to the story of what happened as seen from their perspective. We are continually aware of the need to ground explanations in the concrete (“What happened next? What did you see?”). We encourage participants to look past the unofficial myths of blame and contrariness that have developed in the organization, and talk about their actual perceptions and observations.

This takes a great deal of discipline on the part of the interviewer, who is often eager to move to generalizations. In fact, we are particularly careful, in learning history work, to keep from abruptly moving “up the ladder” into respondents’ personal psychological domains. The process by which questions advance from exploratory to diagnosis to confrontation (Schein, 1987b:161) is carefully managed.

Before the interview

Background:

Know as much about the background of the person/organization as is possible that is relevant. Be as familiar as possible with public information sources such as articles and reports.

Set up a more casual “perspective interview” with a key informant at the beginning, to get an understanding of the “lay of the land.” Remember that this person will have his or her own point of view.

If there are a great many interviews, create an ongoing “cheat sheet” that is continually updated as information is available, containing the person’s name and title, a quick summary of their role in the story, and the best ways to reach them. This becomes invaluable when there are many interviews going on at once, and it later becomes a valuable research tool.

Contact:

Establish initial contact through an intermediary, or directly. Always explain your interest, background, and credentials. Be clear about the purpose of the learning history and the areas of questioning.

Ask for a 1 1/2-2 hour interview, if possible.

You may choose to set up group interviews. When two or more people worked closely together, this can be a good way to get them to amplify each others’ comments. More than four people in a group interview will inhibit conversation. Ask for two hours for a group interview.

You may be asked to send questions in advance, along with a background on the learning history. We prefer, in such cases, to send a list of the questions, but not limit the questions, during the interview, to those on that list.

Some organizations (typically corporate office settings) will want a formal letter of introduction before interviews take place. Others, such as manufacturing sites, will require someone onsite to walk around with you and literally grab people off the floor for an impromptu conversation. Fit your approach to the organizational culture that you are dealing with.

Sample letter of introduction before interviews

April 26, 2004

Dear _____:

As you may know, our office is embarking upon an “oral history” of the experience of the Parameter Company during the past three years — since the corporate learning initiative began in 1995. This "assessment" will be written like an oral history: the story of our efforts to date, told in the words of key participants, assembled by a team of people who include both Parameter insiders and outsiders.

The audience will be the Parameter company as a whole — an opportunity for people to tell their collective story to themselves, in their own words, in a way that can help the organization as a whole build upon our own experience. Rather than handed out as a document, the transformation assessment will be used in workshops, as source material for intensive discussions about fostering and refining the ongoing change work at Parameter.

We believe that by talking with a group of people with varied perspectives, we'll be able to develop a rich story of what we have learned as we have tried, with varying degrees of success, to reorient the Parameter corporate structure and culture. The story, as it's happened thus far, has some significant messages embodied in it, messages that we can learn from and build on — if the organization as a whole can tap into those messages.

We are writing to request an interview with you for this project.
[Optional:] We are interested in talking with you because

...we believe you have been a key observer of the initiatives and events at Parameter's corporate office.

...we are focusing on the "fast foods" story as one example of the way the learning organization work was implemented, and we very much want to include your perspective.

...you were referred to, in our planning meetings, as a person with potentially valuable perspective.

EVERYTHING WRITTEN IN THE REPORT WILL BE ANONYMOUS, and everyone interviewed will have the opportunity to see and change anything used from their interviews, before anyone else sees it.

The transformation assessment team will consist of five outsiders (assembled by the firm Reflection Learning Associates, based in Cambridge Massachusetts) and seven Parameter people who have been trained in this practice. (See an appendix to this message for a list of people involved in the project.

The interview would last about an hour, with the opportunity to continue for longer if you wish. You would talk with two people — one from RLA, and one from Parameter — in a reflective conversation. The conversation would be grounded in key "noticeable results," the events leading to those results (as you saw them), and the attitudes and changes which you saw as underlying those events.

Because we're working on a tight deadline, we would like to schedule this conversation for sometime during August, at any time convenient to you. If that is not possible, we'd like to try for early September.

NOTE: We are also interested in knowing your suggestions for other key people to talk with. We're particularly interested in "natural story-tellers" and key observers: People who have had a chance to see the transformation in action, and whose perspective may be valuable.

Are there any other people you would suggest we should talk with? We will offer them the same guarantees of anonymity and "final cut" that we offer to anyone we talk with.

If you have any questions, please contact...

Beginning the interview

Hold the interview in a private, not a public setting — either the person’s office, or a conference room.

The number of interviewers should always be one or two. More than two people will intimidate an interviewee. When there are two interviewers, they take the roles of lead interviewer and co-interviewer. ***They do not both ask questions at the same time!***

Sharing an interview

Interviews with two interviewers have four stages:

1. Introduction. Lead interviewer presents groundrules, etc. This includes an explanation of the role of the co-interviewer.
2. Primary interview. Lead interviewer presents the noticeable results and asks questions for the first 2/3-3/4 of the time allotted for the interview. Co-interviewer takes notes but is otherwise silent.
3. Secondary interview. Always stop 15-25 minutes before the allotted time for the session. (Generally when 1/4 of the allotted time remains.)

Then check for time: “We have allotted an hour for this interview, and we’ve used all but 15 minutes. We could break at the scheduled time, or if you have time, we could go a few minutes longer. Would that be all right with you?”

At the same moment, the lead interviewer “hands the baton” to the co-interviewer. (“I’m going to take notes now, and Lee will continue the interview, so we can get questions from another perspective.”) Now the co-interviewer asks questions and the lead interviewer takes notes.

4. Conclusion. At the end, both interviewers make sure that the proper follow-up information has been obtained (how to contact the person for quote-checking, and appropriate title etc.)

The lead and co-interviewer can trade roles from one interview to the next. Working in pairs is a good way to develop interviewer capacity.

In either case, the two interviewers switch places. The primary interviewer observes, and the secondary interviewer has the opportunity to ask any questions that have come to light.

Interview ground rules

Develop a "pocket set of ground rules" that you can pull out and repeat each time people ask you why you're there. These might include:

- Necessary guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. Explain (for example) that all quotes will be checked before the learning history is written; that the learning history will be used first inside, then outside the company; that all quotes in either case will be used anonymously; that there will be an opportunity to correct errors and amplify comments; that everything said is potentially usable in the learning history unless the person says otherwise; that nothing will be used outside the learning history efforts.

“Nothing from this interview will be repeated with your name attached, and nothing will be shown to anyone [besides those on the learning history team] before you have a chance to approve it.” If you are working as part of a learning history team, be sure that you let the person know who is on that team. It is very important that you can stand behind whatever promises of confidentiality you make.

- A complete sense of context and purpose. (“Here’s what I’m looking for...”) Remind people why you sought them out. Let them tell you what is important to them as a good starting point for your inquiry process.
- Permission to tape record the interview. You can remind the interviewee that tape recording provides more of a guarantee of accuracy. It also lets them be heard, speaking in their own voice, in the document.
- The role of the co-interviewer. “Maurice, here, will be silent through most of the interview, but will ask questions at the end.”
- If asked, you should be able to explain what a learning history is and how it might benefit the organization.

Emphasize, and believe, that you are a learner. You are there to learn from them.

Ask the respondent if he or she has any questions before proceeding.

Recording strategy

We prefer a tape recorder over notes because the learning history, as a jointly told tale, will incorporate peoples’ phrasing and many details.

We prefer regular-size tapes (which are less expensive, more available, and offer more length.) 90-minute cassettes are durable and only require changing every 45 minutes. An external microphone is essential, it makes the recording quality much higher. The higher quality recording has quick pay-back in terms of reduced transcription time, and more accurate transcriptions. Stereo recording is not necessary because the tape will undoubtedly be transcribed from a monophonic transcribing machine. Always test the machine at the beginning of each interview.

The interviewee may want to turn off the tape at certain moments. Allow him or her to do so. Before turning on the recorder again, you may want to ask the interviewee exactly what about that story was sensitive, and then suggest (if it's worthwhile) a subset of the story to be repeated "on the record." In your notes on the interview, you should record what areas are sensitive, and why they are so.

Plan for contingencies.

You may have an unwilling respondent, unexpected participants, or bad rapport. Some interviews may end earlier than expected; others could go on for an hour extra. Always allow an extra half hour between interviews, if possible, so that you have time for them to run overtime.

Sample interview ground rules

(Spoken and summarized by the lead interviewer.)

In brief, we are conducting a series of interviews in order to develop a collective understanding of Parameter's learning efforts. We are trying to tell the story through the voices of people in the organization. This is why interviews are so important.

We're doing this to help people at Parameter learn through the experiences of others, to help us all reflect on the organizational learning work of the past three years. It is the CEO's intention that the resulting document (and the conversation it inspires) will provide a learning experience for the organization.

Optional: This "learning history" is meant to spark further conversation within the organization, not close it off.

Therefore, it is not meant to be a report written by "experts" that provide their analysis and recommendations.

Instead, we wish to gather together the reflections of thoughtful people within the organization, and present those thoughts back to the organization in a form that is organized, stimulating, and useful.

- This interview is to be used to generate material for one or more reports for distribution within Parameter Company. No quotes or statements from this interview will be published or distributed inside or outside Parameter without the express permission of the interviewee.
- All quotes will be anonymous. We will ask you to identify yourself (your title or position) in a way that protects your anonymity but still reflects your role in this story accurately.
- The only people who will see the transcript before it is fact-checked are the twelve members of the "learning history" team, and a small group of tape transcribers who have worked with RLA principals before. These people have all signed an agreement to keep all quotations or material on the tape confidential, except for comments approved for release in the "learning history" reports. Even the Parameter "champions" and sponsors of the learning history will not see specific quotes until they are approved by the interviewee.
- Some questions may not apply to you. If you wish to skip or pass on a question, please let us know. Or if you don't understand a question, please ask us to rephrase it.

The interview protocol

For interviews, particularly in large-scale projects, a series of comprehensive “interview protocols” should be adapted out of the “noticeable results.”

We accomplish this by printing out the noticeable results in a concise list — the more concise the better — grouped under subheadings that make them easier to read. Some people still find this too much, so we also include a briefer chronology of key events, and invite the individuals to choose one or the other. We bring a copy of each to leave with each interviewee.

“These are occurrences and/or accomplishments which anyone within [this organization] might agree are significant,” we say. “The meaning of that significance might vary, however, among different people.” Ask them to pick the two or three results or events most significant to them:

- Significant because they were personally involved and saw the events unfold directly or the events leading up to these results;
- Significant because these events or results reveal critical aspects and “lessons” from the transformation.
- “If this page brings something to mind that is not here, but is a significant ‘noticeable result’ in your opinion, please bring that to our attention.”

After they take a moment to check off several items, begin with those items.

The interview will flow naturally from the conversation generated by the noticeable results and any prepared questions. (The exact ratio between prepared and spontaneous questions will depend on the person being interviewed, the stage of the project, and the level of comfort of the interviewer; in early stages, questions will be looser and more broad-based.) In later interviews, when there is a need to fill particular “holes” in the narrative or check particular points, then more of the questions will be prepared in advance.

For some individuals, there may also be significant questions that *must* be asked — because they are needed to check or expand upon comments made by other people.

Finally, a few individuals will have such a well-honed overview of the organization's story that they will not need a "noticeable results" protocol. They will already know the realms they want to talk about. Let them do so.

A well-designed protocol, based upon noticeable results, will not just make the interview more useful. It will make the inquiries more comparable, so that they can be replicated across platforms and studied in relation to each other.

Conducting the interview

Some of the interviewers will have interviewed people before; but many will not. There is an established body of interviewing technique. It is vital that prospective learning historians a) get to observe an experienced interviewer in action; b) practice the technique themselves; and c) work in situations where they can get feedback on their interviewing practices.

Remember: quality of information is a function of trust and empathy established in the interview. This person is talking with you on a volunteer basis. He or she has something to say that is important. You are partners in getting that message across.

Build rapport. Establish eye contact, reveal your common background, reveal personal information, make yourself vulnerable. You are there to learn. *Listen more than you talk.*

We'll repeat that. *Listen more than you talk. Trust and empathy are built through the way you listen, and the way you think while you're listening, as much as through the questions you ask.*

Many interviewers like to build rapport by telling a story about themselves. This can help, but do it sparingly. All too many transcripts come back in which the interviewer has spent a third of the allotted time talking about him or herself. If this is a problem for you, then practice asking direct, pithy questions before the interview actually takes place. Try to listen with a childlike attitude of wonder. Don't worry about being wrong. In fact, the more you can suspend your desire to "look knowledgeable," the better an interviewer you will be.

Ask dumb questions. Often, the feeling that "this is a dumb question," or "anyone should know this," is a clue that you have hit an area of worthy of deep exploration. Similarly, if you feel that, "Something is going on here, but I don't know what it is," explore that area tentatively. If you think you know what they are going to say, you may be correct... but often as not, you may be wrong. Ask the question anyway.

Beware of "interviewer overload." There may be times when your subject drowns you in minutiae or dense detail. At those times, it's perfectly acceptable to say, "Wait a minute. I just want to make sure I'm understanding this correctly. The context of all this is...?"

Look for anecdotes and stories. What can the interviewee tell us that really made a difference in his or her life? Some people are natural story-tellers. Others will protest that they “don’t remember much.” Don’t argue with them; just let them look over the critical events and accept as much of a story as they are willing to give.

Some people feel self-conscious because they only have their own point of view to offer. Remind them that their point of view is valuable, and that you will be cross-checking it (“triangulating” it) against the points of view of many other people.

Listen for compelling resonances. If you hear someone say something that contradicts something they said earlier, or something said in an earlier interview, ask gently about it.

For example, in one interview, a senior corporate executive pointed out that 1/4 of the Vice Presidents of that company had been deposed during a major change effort. “Many of those people,” he mused, “would probably have come up to speed if we had given them enough time.”

Later, he opined that a number of second- and third-level managers needed to come on board quickly. If not, they should be forced out of the company.

The interviewer remembered the earlier comment, and asked, “Isn’t that the kind of thing they would have said about the Vice Presidents a year or so back?”

The senior executive did a double-take. “As a matter of fact, you’re right,” he said. And he began talking about the assumptions and attitudes which had led him to that point of view...

Suggested interview questions

The interview questions provide a “recipe” for a successful interview. They are meant to point the interview in a direction, toward a discussion of specific outcomes and learnings.

Eventually, a skilled interviewer will bootstrap him- or herself out of the need for this or any other recipes. But while you are learning to conduct good interviews, a recipe like this is invaluable.

For each of the “noticeable results” checked off:

1. What happened?

Have them describe what happened that they saw, leading up to this result or as part of this event... Continue from the initial story, asking: “What happened next?”

Then: “What happened next?”

Then: “What happened next?”

If you feel them lacking in detail, or you don’t understand what they are talking about, ask: “What kinds of things are you thinking of?” Or, “Can you give me an example?”

2. Why did this happen?

What were the assumptions, reasoning, or conversations which led to particular decisions being made? What forces promoted the event?

Again, ask them to rely on their own observations. When they draw a conclusion about something, ask them, “Is this something you thought at the time? Why?” Or, “What led you to that conclusion or assumption?”

3. What makes this particular result or event significant to you? What does it mean?

Here, you are asking for an evaluation or assessment of the event or result’s significance; to see it as the other person saw it. This provides a leap to their *current* assumptions and observations about the event or situation.

One way to ask this question: “Imagine you are talking to someone else [at this company]. How would you make the case to them that this is an important concern?”

4. In retrospect, what could have been done differently? Why did the alternative *not* happen?

Here is an opportunity to ask for an “action/alternative” focus. For instance, was it possible that things might have turned out differently? “Why didn’t you consider that alternative at the time?”

You may get to this level only rarely. It is a confrontational approach, but sometimes necessary to understand the systemic forces that made events play out the way they did.

In retrospect, do they see their assumptions and conclusions differently than they did at the time?

When and how soon to go from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4 is a judgment call that each person must make...

Move *carefully* from exploration and description (“What happened?”) to diagnostic (“Why did it happen?”) to evaluative (“Why is this important? What did it mean?”) to speculative and confrontational (“What if you had? Why didn’t you?”) Do not skip stages as you make this progression.

In a typical interview, you will have time to cover two or three key events.

Then:

5. Leave the protocol to ask pertinent questions that have emerged.

First, the primary interviewer should use this time to leave the script and follow up “loose ends.” This is also an opportunity to check statements from this interview against statements made by other people.

Remember not to reveal direct statements by name from other people you have interviewed.

How to ask pertinent questions

Clarify important and critical points. When something is unclear, paraphrase it back to the interviewee. “What I hear you saying is that all red automobiles are faster than blue ones. Is that what you meant to say?”

Begin with general questions to give the respondent a chance to explain broad details. “How big a project was this? What was it trying to do?”

Don’t be afraid to ask the same question, in different ways, until it is answered. “No, what I’m really trying to find out is this...”

Ask the respondent to put himself or herself in context. “How did you happen to come into this project? Where had you been before? Where were you coming from?”

Ask questions that set up comparisons between this project and other times or other places. “Is this project typical of the experiences in this company?” “How was it different from your previous work?”

Set up the boundaries of what you are interested in. “We’re not going to talk about the blue project, only the red one.” “We are interested in anything which contributed to the learning organization effort.” Be careful what you ask for; the respondent may spend half an hour answering an extraneous question!

During part of the interview, *throw away the script*. Go with the flow; move with the gestalt. Follow your own interest and curiosity. Keep a balance in mind between what you are interested in and what comes up during the interview.

Be particularly open to different descriptions and explanations than what you have previously heard. These will be useful. Clarify or reconcile conflicting information from this interview or from what others have said. Point out discrepancies to the respondent. “I haven’t heard that interpretation before. How did you come to feel that way? Why do you think nobody else felt that way?”

Be cautious about interrupting the flow. Give the respondent time to answer one question before you move on to the next one. Write down questions that come to mind, but don’t interrupt to ask them.

Be aware of non-verbal cues. Pay attention to the respondent’s fatigue.

Work to get time frames clear. Follow the chronology or narrative, and punctuate it with questions that allow you to compare this story to others. “When exactly did that happen?” “Was that in July or August?” “Was that before or after the Purple Flag Day?”

For difficult questions, paraphrase the point of view of someone else in the organization. “The people at the manufacturing plant said your plan wouldn’t be effective. Had you ever heard that criticism? What did you make of it?”

If the respondent is unclear, slows down, or wanders, shift gears. Bring the conversation to a different jumping-off point. “Actually, I’m more interested in what happened after the learning effort began.”

Ask questions that elicit the respondent's previous attitudes and observations, and note how they changed over time. "When the project started, how successful did you expect it to be? When and how did your attitude change?" "What surprised you?"

Avoid dichotomous ("yes/no") questions, because they produce mundane ("yes/no") answers. "Did you expect the learning effort to be successful?"

Ask follow-up questions for clarification and elaboration. "Why did you expect the learning effort to be successful?"

Staying low on the ladder of abstraction

There is always a temptation to move quickly to the level of assessment. For instance, in one interview, a manager was halfway through a difficult story. He had taken a digression to describe a personnel decision he had made, and then the interviewer asked:

How do you feel now about that decision?

It was clearly the right thing to do, said the manager. It was a tough decision, but we had to make it.

So, asked the interviewer, what would you say is the toughest decision you have to make *now* in terms of personnel?

Suddenly they were off and running. The manager described all of the decisions in front of him, and how he hoped to handle each of them. His voice got sharper and more excited; the reflective spirit was lost.

Instead, the interviewer could have simply asked: "So what happened next?" Then the manager could have reflected on the decision that *was* made, and the consequences it had, in a way that could have led to deeper understanding of the current issues. Unwittingly, the interviewer had prodded the manager to leap up the ladder of abstraction: To make an assessment about his current state. There is nothing wrong with that, but it tends to produce material that is less useful to the learning history document — and to recreate conversations that managers have frequently *without* the learning history.

To avoid such mishaps, continue to use the sorts of questions that move people lower on the ladder of abstraction:

“What leads you to say that?”

“What did you see?” “What did you hear?”

“Can you give me an example?”

“What kinds of things are you thinking of?”

Closing the Interview:

During this last period, review any notes you jotted down. Examine the list of questions. Ask those which weren't covered. Make sure you ask the critical clarifying questions that slipped away earlier. "You know, earlier you said that you expected the team effort to stall in September, but you didn't say why."

Some other valuable questions for the closing include:

"What would you add?"

Stop five minutes before the end of the interview, to give the interviewee the opportunity to close.

"Is there anything you would add to what has been said so far? Anything that came up in your mind that needs to be said?"

Or: "Are there questions I should have asked?"

Or: "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"Who else should we talk to?"

"Is there anyone else that you think I should talk to? How could I reach them?"

"Who are you?"

"We will not use your name, and we will disguise details about your title, but we need to know: What is your title? How would you prefer to be described?"

Then ask how you can reach them for quote-checking. Ask if you can call if there are questions or clarifications that come up later. *Get their email address and/or fax number, as well as their address..* Offer to send copies of the notes or transcript once they are typed (if you are going to do that).

Presence of mind: An example of a real interview

Presence of mind during an interview depends on keeping two things in mind:

- 1) The goals of your interview (what you hope to learn);
- 2) The attitude, at every moment, of the person being interviewed, and where they are going.

Here is an excerpt from a real interview. The details have been changed, but the questions are exactly the same and the answers go in the same direction. We chose it because you can see how different types of questions lead to different results. The interviewer starts without much presence of mind. Then, about halfway through this passage, the presence of mind shifts. Notice how the material shifts then, too....

Manager: We talked about our corporate change effort being a journey. Not an event. I'll speak just for myself: I had the words down well, and I could say things like, "It's not an event, but a journey." But as I look back, it sounded pretty good, but I appreciate how naive I was. We were all naive about the turmoil and uncertainty that corporate change efforts can produce in an organization.

This is clearly significant. Why were they naive? What does he mean? What kinds of things is he thinking of? What sorts of things happened that indicated naivete? All of these questions will occur to you. The challenge, here, is to pick the question that will provoke storytelling...

Interviewer: So, you say that when you started out you didn't realize this?

Here, the interviewer chose to paraphrase and clarify. A good conversation-builder, but it will require follow-up to ground the interview in a story.

Manager: We knew that change was threatening. Everybody understood that. But it wasn't personalized. Now, looking back, I can see the depth of the issues that were raised. It would take a different way of thinking. We hadn't been good at that in the past. We were hopping up a level of magnitude.

A challenging moment. The manager has stepped up a level of abstraction, to talk about how he sees the situation now. He's also contrasting it to a previous time (the past). What do you, as an interviewer, care about most? Do you care about an example of the past? About his frame of mind and conclusions now? Or about the ways in which they were naive then?

Going from a level just above zero, in your communication skills, to maybe 1 or 2?

The interviewer is clarifying, but also showing off. "Look, I understand you." And, also, building rapport by referring back to a previous element of the conversation (the measurement scale). All of these goals are worthy, but they take place at the expense of the detail you want to hear. Because now, as you can see, the manager starts talking about the present situation in the company.

Manager: Going from 1 and a half to maybe 3 or 4. My point is, we're better, but we're still slightly below average. We need to do a lot more. I've been trying, and it takes two way communication. It takes the kind of discussions where you go one on one or in group settings to sit down and talk about where we're at, where we need to go, and what's going on in the company.

So, are those happening? Those kinds of small group conversations or one-on-ones?

This is a tactical error. We are now talking at a high level of abstraction, in a way that will seem boring and repetitive ("motherhood and apple pie") to readers of the document.

Manager: Sure, and we are spending time thinking about the skills it takes to do that. How can we equip our leaders? We have forty thousand people, and thus we have 40,000 potential leaders. So we have a real need to equip each other with better skills, and to learn to be more candid and open.

Now the interviewer has a choice. Give up the old topic (the naivete) and focus instead on how leaders will learn new skills. Or return to the old topic by saying something like, "A few minutes ago, you said something that I wanted to follow up on..."

Does that apply to you personally also then?

The interviewer chooses a new topic.

Manager: Sure. In the past, people might say, "You have to communicate better," but we didn't put a premium on it. We certainly never put a premium on candid, frank conversations. Nobody ever said, "Lie and hide the facts," but we weren't honest. Now I'm talking about getting things on the table that are uncomfortable.

An opening worth pursuing... because it takes us back into a narrative. But be careful: The interviewee's surface thoughts are directing the flow of the interview!

The best way to proceed from here is probably to ask for detail.

For example?

And the interviewer does...

Manager: For example, how people feel about our "shared vision." It was important to go through the process, and of course everyone salutes it. But some of us have wanted to say, "Look, a large group of people in the company *don't* support it." How do we make the link to show them how performance is important?

Or we used to have conflicts between “chimneys” in the company, and those conflicts would be handled in a very polite way. Marketing versus Finance. A lot of times the conflict would just seethe below the surface. Never discussed in a candid way. If anything, we would ratchet up to become even more formal and more polite. More arms length. There wasn’t any constructive challenging: “Why do you say that? Why do you think we ought to make this investment?”

If one group was making a presentation, the others might sit there and think, “This is the dumbest thing I ever heard of.” But they would never say that. Now I’m not talking about things that were illegal or immoral...

We’re in dangerous territory. You might be tempted to say, “What kinds of things?” but is that the direction you need to go? Or do you need to find a way to tie these threads up and get some kind of story out of it?

Business stuff.

The interviewer seeks clarification.

Manager: Yes, business stuff. It wasn’t necessarily right or wrong either way, but we couldn’t talk about our judgements. I was in those sessions in a support role, and I could see it happen all the time. The only person who asked penetrating questions was the Chairman....

The manager is off and running, thinking about the chairman. If the interviewer doesn’t take the bull by the horns, the subject will switch there. The available time for the interview will all be used up...

I’m thinking that this is at the business level. It seems like there are a lot of people issues involved in this, however. You’re making new policy about employees and how they communicate...

Once again we move to another abstract area — this time, following the interviewer’s top-level chain of thought...

Manager: Sure.

When the person being interviewed stops dead and shuts up, that is often a sign that the interviewer has absent-mindedly followed his or her own immediate thoughts.

Is there discussion going on about these people kinds of issues?

The interviewer, still meandering, happens upon a useful thread.

Manager: Without question, and it started several years ago. Let me give you a little bit of background. The Senior Executive Board started with some thoughts we had about the changing employee relationship. We fleshed those out. Spent a lot of time. Those were much more open and candid conversations than we had had in the past.

Which thread will we follow? Notice now how the interviewer focuses in on a particular subject and the tenor of the interview switches.

How were they different?

Manager: Well, they were the first time, other than for a retirement party, that all the officers of the company had ever been together to talk about a subject. In our early discussions, we would push at each other, a bit candidly. Then someone would get their feelings hurt, and you'd back up or be over-polite. But that began to evolve to where we felt free to speak up.

How did you learn to do this?

Manager: We had some good coaching. We brought in James O'Neil, the consultant, and he pushed us. He would get us in sessions.

I remember there was an off-site in 1995, when we decided for the first time to really tackle the employee issues. And there were a lot of simple things we did -- they seem simple now, but they were new to us then.

What kinds of things?

He's off and running now...

Manager: We would ask each other, at the start: What do we want to focus on in this area? What kind of ground rules? What are we going to come back at the end of the day and check ourselves against? Honesty. Open, candid conversations. What other values would we keep track of during the day?

We sort of put our objectives out for the day, and at the end, we religiously had our critique. How did we do? How did this feel? What went well? What didn't?

The first few times, O'Neil led us; then, he couldn't make it one meeting, and we had to do it ourselves.

What happened then? What was that like?

And now you're back in a narrative flow. The readers will be curious to know how this team made the transition; it will help them with their own transitions. As the manager is asked to describe "what happened" the reader can get an understanding of events, and how they were related to whatever explanation or evaluation the managers has for them. Talking at an abstract level can be necessary in an interview setting. It provides the person being interviewed the opportunity to speak their mind, and therefore build a relationship with the person being interviewed. It then becomes important for the interviewer to gently move the conversation to descriptive details to learn what particular events were important, and how they are described by the manager.

After the interview

After the respondent has left the room, dictate impressions of each person, and key points, onto the tape.

Immediately afterward, jot down a few notes of key impressions. These will be very helpful later, when you construct the learning history. Try to leave at least 15 minutes between interviews so you can debrief and jot down these notes.

Immediately label all notes, and the tape, with the name of the respondent, and the date.

Debrief the interview with your co-interviewer. How was the process? How was the style? What did you observe in terms of flow, turning points, candor, interruptions, and new information? What were the surprises? What were the conflicts?

Writing Field Notes

Field notes are essential for keeping track of first impressions and logistics throughout the interviewing process. When a large team is conducting interviews, they help team members build upon each others' experiences, even if they have not spoken between the interviews.

We have found that brief field notes are more useful than extensive documents and have developed a form which we ask interviewers to fill out which includes:

Interviewee:

Organization:

Title/Position:

Date of interview:

Interviewers:

What particularly surprised you?

What themes come to mind from this interview?

Follow-on Activities/To-do's as a result of this interview: (For example, other people to contact.)

Tape recorders and transcriptions

We have found it cost-effective and labor-effective to pay transcribers to transcribe the tapes. Allow three to four hours of transcription for every hour of interview with a single respondent; four to six hours of transcription for every hour of a group interview or meeting. Transcribing costs range dramatically. The quality of transcribers ranges dramatically. There are two ways to ensure higher quality:

1. Conduct higher-quality interviews. Use a tape recorder with an external microphone. Make sure your batteries are fresh.
2. Keep track of the quality of various transcribers whom you hire, and build good working relations with accurate people. Accuracy is worth a premium.

Finally, we recommend that you purchase your own transcribing machine, so that you can listen continually to the tapes even after they have been transcribed -- to pick up nuances and mumbled words that the transcribers have missed.

Telephone interviews

We have found that telephone interviews can be very effective. Some people, in fact, are more open in telephone conversations than they would be in person.

Telephone interviews should only be conducted by one person.

Set up the ground rules in the same way that you would in person.

Permit yourself to be a bit chattier, because you only have your voice to set rapport with.

Telephone recording devices are available in most consumer electronics stores. Do not use a "suction cup" device. Use one that plugs directly into the phone line. Test the device before you use it in an interview.

Over the course of multiple interviews:

Revise the interviewing protocol as needed. What questions should be asked more frequently?

Assume that all of your assumptions will be proven wrong. Don't cling to any of them. Reporting the learning historians' perspective is not important, although it *is* important that one does exist. It is more critical to elicit the assessments of other people. The learning historian's perspective will tend to be a "least-common-denominator" synthesis of different perspectives. (This is the typical perspective from which projects are documented, and it may be one reason why people don't learn from typical project histories.)

You will want to interview several key people two or more times — perhaps at the beginning and the end of your interview period — because you often understand what they have to say more completely the second or third time. Also, they may have reached a more complete understanding themselves.

In later interviews, check unclear or contentious points from earlier interviews. When you check points from other peoples' interviews, don't reveal the name of the other source. Instead of "John Jones said that the project misfired," say, "Some other people have said that the project misfired. What was your impression?" Tell what you have already learned, and ask for confirmation and elaboration.

Move from open inquiry in early interviews to more directive inquiry later as you learn what you want. Become selective with questions. Gather data to fill in and test your "story."

The learning historian is like an anthropologist, aiming to see the natives' culture through their eyes and their way of making sense of the world. Learning historians do add an aspect of analysis in the questions they ask; this includes "undiscussable" questions which may inquire deeply into participants' view of the world.

Interviewing reluctant people

Sometimes you *must* conduct an interview with someone who really does not want to be interviewed — but who holds a critical piece of the story.

It may take a number of phone calls to arrange the time to meet. Persist, gently but relentlessly. Spell out your purpose as completely as possible, and explain why an interview with them is crucial.

The key issue pertains to confidentiality and somehow assuring the interviewee that you can be trusted. This may mean: shutting off the tape recorder, putting away paper/pencil, moving the interview off-site, establishing rapport through more casual contact (e.g. meeting after work over a beer or two), or assuring anonymity.

You need to assure these people that you intend to tell the story, and their view of the story is part of it. You will not make judgments during the interview about what they learned or should have learned.

Your only effective tactic is to get the person to feel better about you and your interest in their story. If that interest is genuine, they will thank you for listening.

Conducting real-time observations

Part of your efforts may include attending meetings or spending a day or two in the project office, to make observations about how people interact and how learning takes place.

Real-time observations can make it more difficult to collect different perspectives. If you form your own assessments about a meeting — especially if you participate in the meeting — this may make it more difficult to inquire later with other participants. You will have formed your own opinion which will influence your abilities to listen to another person describing their interpretation (or, by virtue of the fact that you were there, the way in which they report what happen is less likely to be as rich and reveal their interpretations). Thus, it is helpful to have retrospective interviews conducted with another interviewer who was not at the meetings being described.

Transcriptions of meetings that were tape-recorded can be very useful in offering the flavor of a learning effort. In some cases, you can ask people to tape record important meetings which you can't attend. Meeting transcripts often provide data on how conversation takes place, and transcripts of meetings over time can be used for a conversational analysis that tests whether or not the new behaviors that people describe can be substantiated. By attending some meetings you can build relationships with project team people. Your presence at meetings may create openings for increasing rapport and trust. However, there is a trap in attending meetings. You may feel pressure to show you are “doing something useful,” and thus try to establish yourself in an overtly helpful role, to “justify” your presence.

Some learning historians offer to take meeting notes for the team. They then put in a lot of time writing up the notes, trying to get them to look good so that people perceive their role as having practical value. Before long, the learning historian gets slotted in people's mind as a meeting note taker, perhaps even a glorified passive clerk. That becomes a reputation which must be overcome in getting people to take the time to meet with you for interviews, and to take your observations and reports seriously.

10. Distillation

Distillation may be the single most vital phase of the learning history process. In distillation, we face the challenge of condensing our thousands of pages of material into a coherent, meaningful, well-organized plot line. Distillation is a process for making sense of the changes an organization has gone through, drawing upon our research and our intuitive insights, and establishing an outline for the subsequent writing and editing process.

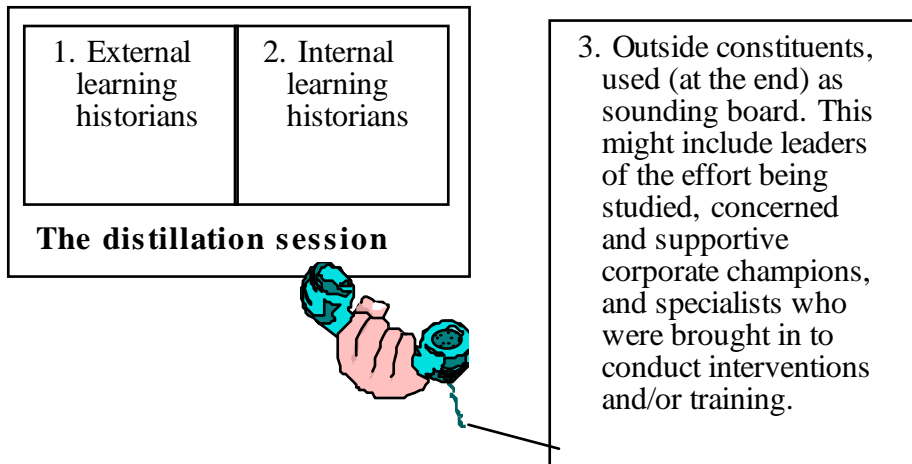
You can think of the distillation process as a way of building scaffolding — material which will shape the construction of the finished learning history manuscript. Even though very little of it will actually remain in the final document, without a coherent scaffolding structure it is not possible to continue building.

The distillation process takes place in several stages. We draw critical events and concepts from the commentary in interviews. We refine those descriptions and definitions by comparing them across all the interviews. Then we discern relationships among events and concepts. Using those relationships, we organize the flow of the learning history for presentation into tightly connected thematic segments.

We prefer to organize the distillation process through collaborative workshops. The insider and outsider members of learning history teams test their conclusions and assumptions against each other. We accomplish our ends by deliberately cycling through the three reflective imperatives.

There may be other ways to accomplish the distillation process, but we have evolved this method as a tightly designed, reliable method for compassionately, accurately making sense of the massive mess of data that exists from interviews. Adhering to it, more or less, will help ensure that all the stages take place, and nothing is skipped.

There are three types of people involved in distillation:



Internal (2) and external (1) learning historians will meet in the actual distillation session; the outside constituents (3) will be available by phone or for short meetings. There will be an occasional need to call one or more of these people, summarize the work, and check the validity of the proposed themes: “How obvious will X seem?” “How would this play back at headquarters and why?” “What will Y make people think of?”

The heart of qualitative analysis:

- To break data down...
- ...conceptualize based on that data....
- ...and put it back together in a new order.

Some considerations:

- Remember that you are always making interpretations, and thus are prone to error;
- Remember to keep asking questions of yourself and others.

The research imperative in distillation:

Social scientists have developed a form of theory building akin to our distillation process, which is known as “grounded theory.” Its rigor is designed to ensure that anyone can organize a mass of material into concepts and theory, *without losing the research validity that emerges from individuals’ biases.*

Much of our distillation process builds upon grounded theory.³⁰ Indeed, we borrow directly from the grounded theory practices of open, axial, and selective coding, which allow us to base our emerging understanding upon the collective experience and knowledge of the people we have interviewed. Our distillation is a modification of those practices, however, with the modifications based on several factors:

- the different predominant forms of data we use,
- the insider/outsider team as a more experientially sensitive instrument for sense-making,
- the checks on our coding which follow from the subsequent sorting process, and
- the end goal and form of a learning history.

The final document will reflect the research imperative in two ways. First, it will be credible (*face validity*). Everyone will be able to see how the change process evolved, that their point of view is reflected fairly. It should be apparent that, while not necessarily bias-free, the biases are explicitly labeled. (The left-hand column reveals the learning historians’ biases, while the right-hand column shows the biases of the people who were interviewed.)

³⁰ Our discussion of grounded theory is based upon several sources:

- Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Chapters 5-8 (pp. 57-142), Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 1990.
- R. Yin, “Analyzing Case Study Evidence,” Chapter 5 in *Case Study Research* by R. Yin, 1994, p. 102-126.
- Toni Gregory, *Transformative Learning: A Study of Thomas’ Theory of Diversity*, dissertation, 1996.
- M. Scanlon-Greene, *White Males and Diversity Work: A Grounded Theory Study*, unpublished manuscript, 1995.

Conversation with Toni Gregory was vital for helping develop and frame this chapter.

Second, at some level, the learning history is a documentary record of “what happened in the project” (*internal validity*). Observable data is included as part of the plot: Who met with whom? What was discussed? What were the issues, the decisions, and the resulting actions? All of these are part of the record, and they comprise much of the introductory material and sidebars.

In distillation, we continually develop validity by keeping our material grounded in the “data” of materials generated through research. This includes interviews and observations of participants, as well as observations by the learning historians. It will probably also include documentation from such sources as meeting notes, records from learning labs, schedules of events, and so on. The documentation, interviews and observations provide data, on what is happening, *and* what people are thinking and how they are acting.

The mythic imperative in distillation:

Learning is a pull process — the learner learns what the learner wants to learn. We need *compelling* stories to capture and hold people’s attention. In every process of change, in order for something new to come about something old is given up — there is improvement and destruction, winners and losers — material from which there is a good story which needs to be told.

Journalists and writers depend on their “mythic” sense of the “heart of the matter,” which they reach by rehearsing the story as if it were a scenario. We use similar techniques to break away from the straightjacket of the pure research orientation. At specified times, we deliberately turn away from the pure data to develop our themes with a mythic eye.

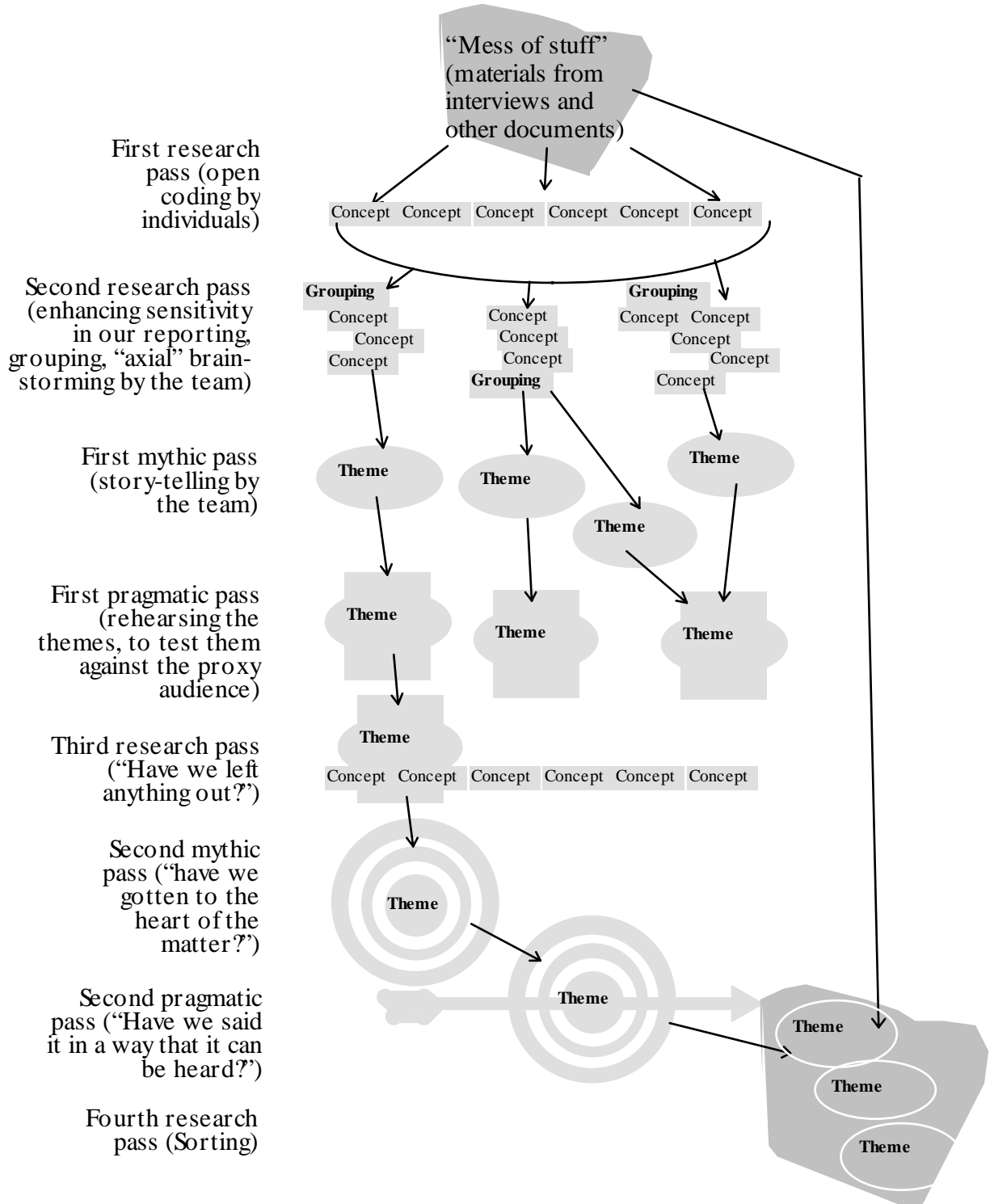
The pragmatic imperative in distillation:

Eventually, we need to see the story through the eyes of the audience. The learning history needs to be read, the story needs to be heard, and the conversations need to be had. We need to take responsibility for not only how we write and present a historical account, but how its audiences will be able to relate, react and use the story in the service of its own learning.

We take responsibility for what we include that was said, and do so by considering, “how can it be heard?” We do this in the last stages of distillation: Retelling our events, once again, while listening through the ears of our primary audience, sometimes through roleplay exercises.

The overall distillation process:

This represents one potential process. Many variations are possible. The key is to allow enough time (three or more days in complex projects) for a full pass through the “research,” “mythic,” and “pragmatic” imperatives, probably in that order.



First research pass: Drawing forth concepts (“open coding” by individuals)

Open coding is the “process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.” The purpose is to develop and describe concepts that can then serve as categories by which we can index the data that is the basis for building descriptive (how) and explanatory (why) theory.

Note that many researchers would not perceive this as “research.” We are not starting with a hypothesis and seeking to prove or disprove it. Instead, we are practicing *inductive* research: Gleaning as much as we can from the data itself.

We cultivate, as much as possible in this initial coding stage, the attitude of an extraterrestrial come to Earth, to whom everything is new and worthy of inquiry.

The “extraterrestrial attitude”

Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, for instance, use the example of walking into a restaurant, and seeing a woman in a red dress standing in the kitchen. What is her job?

As experienced diners, we know the woman is probably a maitre d’ or hostess; but what can we glean simply from observing her behavior? We note the following qualities: The kitchen is a *work site*. She is watching *kitchen work*. Someone comes up and asks her a question, which she answers. (In other words, her job embodies *passing on information*.) She stands in the midst of activity, without disrupting it; yet all her actions betray a sense of *efficiency*. (We infer this because we see her *move rapidly* from the kitchen to the front of the restaurant.) She seems to be keeping track of everything: *monitoring*, and occasionally *providing assistance*. She is *well-dressed*.

As an analyst, noting down all of these concepts, you build up a list of words that are “grounded” in the data of your observation. The concepts are words that provide labels for what is going on, what you observe or hear, how you define and describe it, and perhaps why it is important.

These words, in turn, will be used to build a theory of what the woman is doing, and why she is doing it. The theory you build up may or may not agree with your early inference — that she is a maitre'd. Instead, it will be a “grounded theory” of what the woman’s role, which you can then compare and contrast to more generally held (published, perhaps, by a restaurant association) descriptions of maitre d’s. The process of open coding and systematically examining data will help ensure that your original biases do not blind you to the secrets hidden in the data.

Coding interviews

Of course, we do not usually code from observations: We code from interviews. In an interview, we do not observe actions; we listen to words. We are aware not just of events, but of the interpretations given to events by the person who was interviewed. All of these become grist for our coding process.

Working through the transcript of an interview, we build a list of key “concepts” that have appeared in the text, trying to cultivate that extraterrestrial attitude about both the events and the interpretations of events.

In addition to the direct content of the passage, you might also include material on the interpretations and assumptions apparent in the passage. When developing concepts that describe attributions, interpretations and general beliefs and assumptions, they need to be clearly linked to observable (can be seen or read in transcripts).

At the same time that you are coding materials, you are developing your own ideas for what the concepts mean (definitions and descriptions) as well as how various concepts are related to another. In the coding process it is important to not only label data with concepts, but to keep a running log of your definitions for those concepts, and your thinking of how different concepts are associated with one another.

Phrasing the concepts

Each concept consists of two parts: A label and a description.

Some sample codes:

DIVERSITY DIFFICULTIES WERE UNEXPECTED - Managers said they were surprised by tensions occurring through diversity training; they had assumed they were already aware of diversity issues, but they weren't (McGillicuddy, p. 18).

PAY PLAN'S IDEALISTIC INTENT - Interviewee describes how pay plan was conceived; intent included desire to reward behavior that would abet transformation. This is significant because it can be compared with the results of the plan. ("Jones, p. 3")

The label ("PAY PLAN'S IDEALISTIC INTENT") provides a flag for easy recognition. The description ("Interviewee describes...") helps clarify the label and show why you believed it to be significant.

In your label, try to capture the essence of the concept in 1-5 words.

Look for *in vivo* words — actual words used by the people interviewed that are particularly evocative and descriptive. Or use your own codes — words that occur to you, that arise from the material in the text.

The reference back to the original text ("Jones, p. 3") will be useful later; it's not always essential, only when you want to ensure that a key reference won't be lost.

Make your own sense-making process visible in the description. ("This is significant because...")

Remain close to the data of the quote; go only one step up the ladder of inference. "Diversity difficulties were unexpected," not, "Diversity inexperience is a perennial problem." If it is not in the interview transcript, at least as a concept, it should not be in your label or description.

Some frequently asked questions about coding:

How many labels?

It depends. Often, during a transcript, labels with similar titles will crop up several times. There is no need to write them each time. Once is enough. (You might make a note that a particular concept recurs often, however.)

A transcript of a wide-ranging conversation might yield 25-40 concepts; a transcript of an equally long, but focused conversation, might yield 5 or 10. Developing evocative labels is more useful than amassing a large number of labels.

What unit of transcript do we look at?

Grounded theory practitioners offer several answers to this question. You can either code word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, or section by section. Each yields its own level of detail, and it is often recommended that analysts do several passes, to gain the perspective of each level.

That is enormously time-consuming, however. We recommend one pass, primarily operating at a paragraph level. Occasionally, you may want to take two or three “labels” out of a single paragraph. Multiple labels associated with the same text are acceptable and desirable. A paragraph, as a complete description of an action or thought, might be linked to several different concepts.

Go through the transcripts paragraph by paragraph. Write down a one-to-several word “concept” for each paragraph if it seems relevant, and a short description of the meaning of the concept to you. In reading subsequent paragraphs where that same “concept” applies, check your definition to see if it can be clarified by expanding or altering it on the basis of the data in the new paragraph.

How do I choose the concepts I mark down?

They should be limited to material that is in the text.

They should be interesting and compelling.

They can be important for telling the story, or else evocative of the company's mood and culture.

Include anything that catches your eye, or that you think might catch the eye of one of the other team members.

How do we record the labels?

Either type them onto a computer file, write them on a pad of paper, or write them directly on yellow post-it notes. Use whatever works best for you and your circumstances: you’ll need to find a quiet place to read through transcripts where you won’t be disturbed. We tend to use the computer file as, for us, that makes it is easy to develop and modify concept definitions and descriptions.

Sample open coding: An interview transcript

Consider this passage from an interview with a manager of a large, cross-functional team at a manufacturing company:

I wanted to get around the chimney mentality in the company where each functional unit does its own thing. And my thought to do that was to do everything I could to make the people on the team see each other as people, as personalities and get to know each other and get friendly with each other so they'd begin to react to the people as a counter balance to the forces within their chimney.

And what I wanted to do was an off-site with the whole team for a few days where they stayed at a hotel and they lived and worked together. What they did during the day I could care less about, I was really interested in them doing something during the day together and moving the people around so they got to know each other and providing plenty of wine and beer at night so they'd get friendly.

The members of the team don't work for me. Only a small group of the members of the team actually work for me where I can promote them and I can give them their performance reviews. Most of them work for other functional organizations. The finance organization, the assembly division, the body engineering division, the climate control division, the plastics division, all totally separate entities within the company. Functional entities.

If I just pulled the team together the normal way I would get what we always get, which is those people will protect the objectives of their organization. They'll work on the product, but if it ever becomes a question of whether their organization's objectives are being adequately served, that clearly comes first. Because that's their promotion capability, that's their salary rewards and so on. I have no leverage over that in myself.

My greatest leverage was to make them view the other members of the team as people who they develop a personal relationship with and if I could make them feel that they depended on each other and that they wanted to help each other as people, that would counter balance the material reward and from their functional organization. So that's what I was after.

How would you code this passage? Write some sample labels. Now, compare your labels with the following list. Neither is more or less "correct": They all become useful together as an accumulating data bank of abstract labels (concepts) emerging from the text, and allow us to summarize and work with large amounts of textual data.

1. FUNCTIONAL CHIMNEYS PREVALENT: According to this manager, people are more inclined to support their own organization's objectives instead of the project at hand.
2. SALARY REWARDS FOSTER "CHIMNEYS": People are loyal to functional chimneys, apparently, because salary rewards encourage this. (Is it true?)
3. RELATIONSHIPS COUNTER CHIMNEY ATTITUDE. To get people working together, this manager believed in building personal relationships between staff.

Second research pass: Joining our concepts together.

This part of the process, in itself, has several stages. Somehow we need to weave our individual concepts together so that we are all dealing with the same collaborative *categories* of ideas.

A. Presenting our concepts to the group (enhancing theoretical sensitivity)

We make literal presentations, either in large or small groups, presenting our concepts to each other. One by one, we go through our lists, describing each of our labels and putting them up on the wall — in a way that everyone else can see. As people put the self-sticking notes on the wall, they read the concept label, their definition or description of the concept, describe their thinking about the concept and its importance, and ask for questions and comments. As each person describes their concepts, they should say what is different and similar between their concepts and others already mentioned. If the group is large, we prefer to start as a single group and then — after three or four rounds — break into sub-groups, all working with the same four walls.

Presenting the codes to each other provides opportunities to enhance “theoretical sensitivity” (a grounded theory term). In other words, as we react to each others’ labels and descriptions, we have the opportunity to sharpen and refine them. The process of putting up concepts might provide insights into other concepts which haven’t been captured. It is entirely appropriate for people to add these new concepts to the list on wall. We continue putting new concepts on the wall until we have exhausted the conceptual label notes that were created in coding materials. Some labels will offer clues to new concepts which may not have emerged in the original coding. Others can be broadened and deepened by some skillful discussion and collaborative examination.

While people are putting up concepts it is also helpful to keep lists of issues which arise, or patterns which are hypothesized. These patterns, commonalities across concepts, and relationships between concepts, may help us remember key themes.

What is the duration, frequency, amount, manner, intensity, etc.?

As people talk about their concepts, we might ask the following sorts of questions to clarify them:

- Duration: How long is this going on?
- Frequency: How often does it take place?
- Amount: How many people or things are involved?
- Manner: With what style or approach does it take place? Is it done in writing or verbally, loudly or softly, overtly or covertly, with or without learning, with or without a strong sense of authority?
- Intensity: How strongly is this item felt?

B. Grouping

Gradually, the labels will naturally fit into several clusters. Using a variation of “affinity diagrams,” we will explicitly seek to develop between four and seven overall groupings. This represents the number of themes an organization can digest from a learning history.

Which labels seem to fit together? Which labels seem to “include” or “encompass” other labels? For example, a label on “TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING OUR THINKING” may encompass a label on “TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING MENTAL MODELS.” A label on “TENSION AROUND FINANCE” may encompass a label on “TENSION BETWEEN FINANCE AND MARKETING.”

This grouping exercise will also help identify “isolated” issues that one or two people have brought forward — but that have little relationship to the rest of the concepts. These tend to be “out-liers,” and of less value to the learning history. For instance, in one learning history, one of the learning historians was convinced that gender was a key issue, since one of the significant characters was a woman. However, the gender issue did not emerge in the transcripts of interviews; there was little evidence to support its influence on peoples’ thinking. This lack of evidence showed up in the way that “gender issues” did not group easily with the rest of the material during distillation.

Why organize a learning history thematically?

As we frame the story in terms of individual thematic “short stories,” the question inevitably comes up: How do you keep the lessons that are inherent in the whole story, while breaking the story into parts? There will be an overview at the beginning to tie the themes together. First one plot line is followed; then another. It may not be strictly chronological. Remember, even epics can have thematic chapters. Ideally, the order of themes is chosen so that each theme builds on the one before.

This approach turns out to be much easier on the reader than a strict chronological epic, where the story line keeps switching back and forth between thematic arenas of interest.

Most themes, after all, will involve the same basic characters and the same basic story. Consider the six themes of the AutoCo Learning History:

Theme 1 described the evolution and struggle of the Epsilon project’s leadership team.

Theme 2 concerned the personal awareness of the project leaders, as perceived by the people who worked with them.

Theme 3 had to do with the planning and implementation of the “learning laboratories,” and how those laboratories demonstrated the link between soft skills and hard results;

Theme 4 focused on one technical innovation, and the atmosphere of openness which contributed to that innovation;

Theme 5 looked at two arenas involving working relationships between engineers, and the benefits of strengthening them through particular policies;

Theme 6 told the story of the misunderstandings and miscues that appeared as the Epsilon team faced the larger AutoCo system.

Chronologically, these themes were concurrent; all of them (except Theme 1, which came first) unfolded more-or-less simultaneously. But it is much easier on the reader to consider the “short stories” than the epic drama. In addition, each of the themes had its own principal characters and settings, different from the others. Theme 4 involved a core group of engineers who appeared almost nowhere else; Theme 5 included the marketing people for the Epsilon; and Theme 6 required quotes from the Vice President overseeing the project.

Some themes will be just like sub-plots, involving a separate facility or working group. Others may follow an issue like “diversity” or “growth initiatives” as they play across an entire organization.

C. Axial analysis

Now, having grouped the concepts, we analyze the groupings in more depth. What are the themes that these groupings seem to be describing?

Social scientists call this stage “axial coding.” They typically manage this stage individually. We prefer to manage it collaboratively, in groups of three to twelve people — to take advantage of the varied perspectives of insiders and outsiders. However, we borrow a number of techniques from the “grounded theory” for refining our labels.

Specifically, we ask questions that bring out the heretofore overlooked aspects of each of these groupings:

What are the correlations of the concept?

Here, we look for relationships between the concept and characteristics of our pool of interviewees. For example:

How many times is it mentioned in the text?

What types of interviewees draw attention to this concept? Is it mentioned primarily by men or women? By engineers or marketers? By older or younger people? Or is it mentioned across the board?

Is this concept typical?

What distinguishes it from more typical concepts? For example, there may be a new training program which encourages spiritual growth. Some people hate it; others love it. Which attitude is more typical? And if the “hate it” attitude is less typical, what distinguishes the people who “hate it” from the rest of the organization?

Why did it happen?

Every concept has causes — forces and activities which influenced its occurrence. These provide a significant part of our story line, and we spend a great deal of time looking for them.

At the same time, we have to be careful. It is very easy to assume that something was a cause, when it may only have been a correlation. For example, a diversity policy may go into place in October. In November, five minority managers may be hired. It's tempting to assume that the policy caused the new hiring practice. But in actuality, both the policy *and* the hiring event are probably caused by other factors. A grass-roots movement may be afoot within the company that represents the real cause of both. Attributing causality to the diversity policy may cause the whole Learning History to lose credibility. As soon as members of the grass-roots movement see the report, they'll know that a fundamental cause was overlooked.

How do we overcome the temptation to assign causality to correlation? It's difficult. We lack statistical analytic tools, so we must rely upon qualitative persistence.

The Japanese quality movement has a technique called "The Five Whys," in which you rigorously ask, "Why did this happen?" five times in succession. Suppose, for example, that one of your concepts concerns the fact that people feel a sense of inequity in the organization.

1. Why do they feel it? You look through the text to find out, and you discover that, in several places, they are reacting to a new promotion scheme that rewards people without much equity.
2. Why did that promotion scheme take place? Looking through other interviews, you discover that it was put in place to develop a policy in which promotions would be linked to performance.
3. Why did they want promotions linked to performance? Says the person who implemented the practice, "We wanted several ways of sparking enthusiasm among the managers, and James Jones, our external consultant, said this was a time-honored approach?"
4. Why did James Jones recommend this approach? Jones was interviewed, and said that he recommended it because he was told that the company was looking for performance-related approaches that would not require disturbing the existing pay scales.

5. Why was the company looking for this? We may not have the answer in our interviews, but we will know whom we need to talk to to find the answer. And in that answer may be a significant clue to the causal relationships of the concept we are concerned with.

In many cases, two or more causal factors may be apparent. If there is time, causal relationships may lead to a rudimentary system dynamics diagram of the forces at play. This is a valuable way to approach the question of causality. Events rarely take place in a vacuum; they tend to interact over time, influencing and either reinforcing or undermining each other. See *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* for an introduction to systems thinking.

What happened next? What did this influence or lead to?

Another key part of the system is the effects of a concept. What did it lead to? What came afterward? What did it cause?

What is the appropriate level of aggregation?

Some labels seem to be too general, so that they miss whole categories. For example, a label on “ATTITUDES ABOUT THE CEO” may seem too general. There may be so much material grouped there, that it would be better to divide the material into two labels: One on attitudes about the CEO by senior managers, and another about the attitudes from the rest of the company.

Sometimes the problem with level of aggregation will be obvious: There are 40 or 50 labels attached under one grouping. At other times, it may be more subtle. In the early 1970s, in conducting scenario exercises about the future of the oil industry, Royal Dutch/Shell’s scenario planners discovered that the “OPEC desk” thought about the oil-producing countries as a single entity. But upon reflection and some investigation, they discovered that the various countries were actually motivated by very different forces. Saudi Arabia had too much income, and a strong motive for friendliness with the West; Iran had not enough income; and Libya was driven by a belligerent new leader. This would lead all of them to cut back on oil supplies, but for different reasons. It meant that shortages would persist *until* the OPEC countries’ varied needs took them in different directions.

Similarly, in most companies, it’s tempting to assign a single motive to people in “Human Resources.” But there may be several different sub-groups in that department, each with its own priorities, acting on the organization in a variety of ways.

What else could it mean?

There may be a word in the label or phrase which spawns a new set of thoughts about the concept. As Strauss and Corbin noted, if a disabled man says, “Once I’m in the shower...” the word “once” might mean that getting in the shower would be a difficult process.

Any word can provide a plethora of meanings. If you feel blocked, and you think the quote is significant but its meaning is unclear, you can often break through that block by focusing on a single word. (Robert Pirsig did something similar in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, when he advised his student to write about a single brick.)

You will sometimes hear clichéd complaints: “Management has not been supportive.” Or, “We don’t have enough resources.” These sorts of complaints indicate continuous activity: People are continuing to think and act the same ways, despite the fact that it doesn’t give them what they want. What do people get? What are the benefits that have kept this behavior going? What else could it mean?

Strauss and Corbin talk of making “far-out” comparisons: For instance, what would this concept seem like, when compared to events at a one-person company? What would it seem like, when compared to events in a family? Or a large government? Asking questions like this helps us break through the shackles of the correlations we expect.

Where are the taboos?

Strauss and Corbin talk about “waving the red flag.” They describe one researcher who studied Asian clinics, where men were used as interpreters for gynecologists. This meant that women coming to the clinic with gynecological problems had to break through the taboo of discussing them with men.

“These items are never discussed,” said the interviewees to the researcher. Yet there had to be a way of discussing them; otherwise, women at the clinic could not be treated. And they were being treated.

Words and phrases like “never,” “always,” “it couldn’t possibly be that way,” “everyone knows that,” “there’s no need for discussion,” and “it’s self-evident” are evidence of taboos. They should always be taken as signals to take a closer look.

Don't, caution Strauss and Corbin, take anything for granted:

What is going on here? What do you mean *never*? Or always? Why is this so? Never, under what conditions? How is this state of never maintained? What are its consequences? What happens if never is not maintained? That is, if some poor ignorant person does whatever he or she is supposed to do? Are there certain strategies to get around that never? How are unquestioning or accepting people culturally trained to believe in never? Do people act in that manner but not believe in it? Believe it but not act in it? (p. 92-93)

First mythic pass: Writing the story

At this point in the distillation process, it's often a good idea to take a break to clear our minds. When we come back, we reconvene in small groups and ask each other: "What is the story here? What's really going on?"

Each grouping of concepts, now that it has been thought through, is the raw material for a theme. Our task is now to articulate those themes. A theme should be a statement, not a category. "What people said about the learning effort" is not a theme. Write the theme as a sentence that, even if it were delivered alone, would get across the key idea. Here are some examples of themes:

- Leaders could not instill new behavior unless they modeled it themselves.
- Engaging the larger organization was a surprisingly dangerous activity; but isolation carried its own repercussions.
- Dependence on consultants led people to take the consultants less and less seriously.
- "Soft" techniques were essential to achieve "hard" results.
- Engineers could not innovate until they were made to feel comfortable.

The thematic "nut graf"

We articulate the theme by writing a "nut graf" for each theme: A single paragraph that describes the theme and tells the story, in a nutshell. Follow your nose in this stage. Bring in your own background, your assumptions, your gut feel, and your knowledge of story-telling.

What is the data trying to say to you?

What would you put in the story if you felt free to really "get to the heart of the matter?" What would you put in it if you were going to bury it for a time capsule?

You may spend this time looking for mythic archetypes, or systems archetypes. You may, for example, feel compelled to say, "This reminds me of..." Listen to yourself. What does it remind you of? Where is that reminder coming from? How much do you trust it? How compelling do you find it?

In small groups, talk through the stories as you see them. Let different members of the small groups “rehearse” the stories, playing different roles and characters perhaps. What do you come to? Either write the “nut graf” together, or write it separately and come together to hear each other’s versions of the story. Then have the small groups come back and present the themes to each other. How would you put them into words? What metaphors and analogies seem appropriate?

When scenario planners at the Mont Fleur exercise wanted to describe the potential future of South Africa, they cast about for an indigenous metaphor. Finally they hit upon the flamingo, a bird familiar in South Africa. Flamingos rise into flight together — a startlingly beautiful sight. South Africa’s varied ethnic and political factions, similarly, could conceivably rise together — or fall apart separately. The metaphor was influential in helping some South Africans avoid the kinds of political infighting and excesses that might have sabotaged the country’s transition to post-apartheid democracy.

A systemic understanding in the themes

Within this stage, it is valuable once again to return to the systems view. What archetypal systemic forces are at work here? If they are not considered, then the learning history is in danger, as Peter Senge put it, “of being caught up in and reflecting the very atomistic thinking that [learning organization work] is focused on displacing.”

In other words, a learning history runs the risk of being dominated by events and personalities, with relatively little emphasis on the structures that are driving behavior.

At the same time, we caution against making the systems work too explicit. That will be the task of the audience during a dissemination workshop. To prepare a neat package for them, wrapped up in a label like “Shifting the Burden” or “Accidental Adversaries,” will do them a disservice. It will not allow them to create their own systems understanding, rooted in their own observations and experiences.

Our goal therefore is twofold: We want to shed light on systemic causes and how they might be dealt with differently. To do this, we can’t be satisfied with simply the story of how problems came to the surface and how they were perceived. We want to present enough components of a “whole system” that the reader can see heretofore hidden relationships.

Exactly how do we do this? By making sure all related elements are included — even if those relationships are distant in time and space. And by identifying reinforcing and balancing loops that may be present in the material.

The first pragmatic pass:

We next want to test our stories through varied lenses. How will the organization take them? How will they be heard?

Retell the stories, as we have refined them, with different people acting as several different types of listeners. One will represent the CEO; another, key members of the executive council; another, significant staff people; another, significant union people. As you listen from these roles, what do you hear? What seems missing? What points of view are not included (or are in danger of being not included?)

A final three passes.

You will now find it valuable to quickly cycle through three more passes:
In all three cases, the “nut graf” will be continually revised.

Research:

“Are we still true to the data?”

Does the theme, as described, in fact feel “grounded” in the material?

For each assertion made in the description of the theme, can you find examples in the narrative?

If not, is there reason to believe that there is substantiation elsewhere -- in documents, observations, or correlations of details?

If not, you will need to either go back and conduct more interviews, or revise the narrative.

Mythic:

“Have we really gotten to the heart of the matter?”

Do you find yourself fascinated by the story?

Or do you have the sense that “the really best stuff has been hidden?”

Could you imagine showing this report to someone outside the organization and have them be fascinated?

Do you feel like the story has a universal element?

Pragmatic:

“Have we presented this in a way that people will hear and learn from?”

Could you show the draft to the champion?

Would you feel comfortable presenting it to the board of the corporation?

Can you imagine it genuinely attracting the sort of interest that leads to learning?

Sorting

Once there is an agreed-upon set of themes, it is possible to sort the text. We are now at the stage where we are ready to prepare the text for writing. This also provides another check: That the material actually does reinforce the themes we have developed. Going through the text, we assign each paragraph to one or more themes. This is easiest to do in a word processor which permits multiple files and “drag-and-drop.”

Step 1: Getting the source ready.

Do one interview source file at a time.

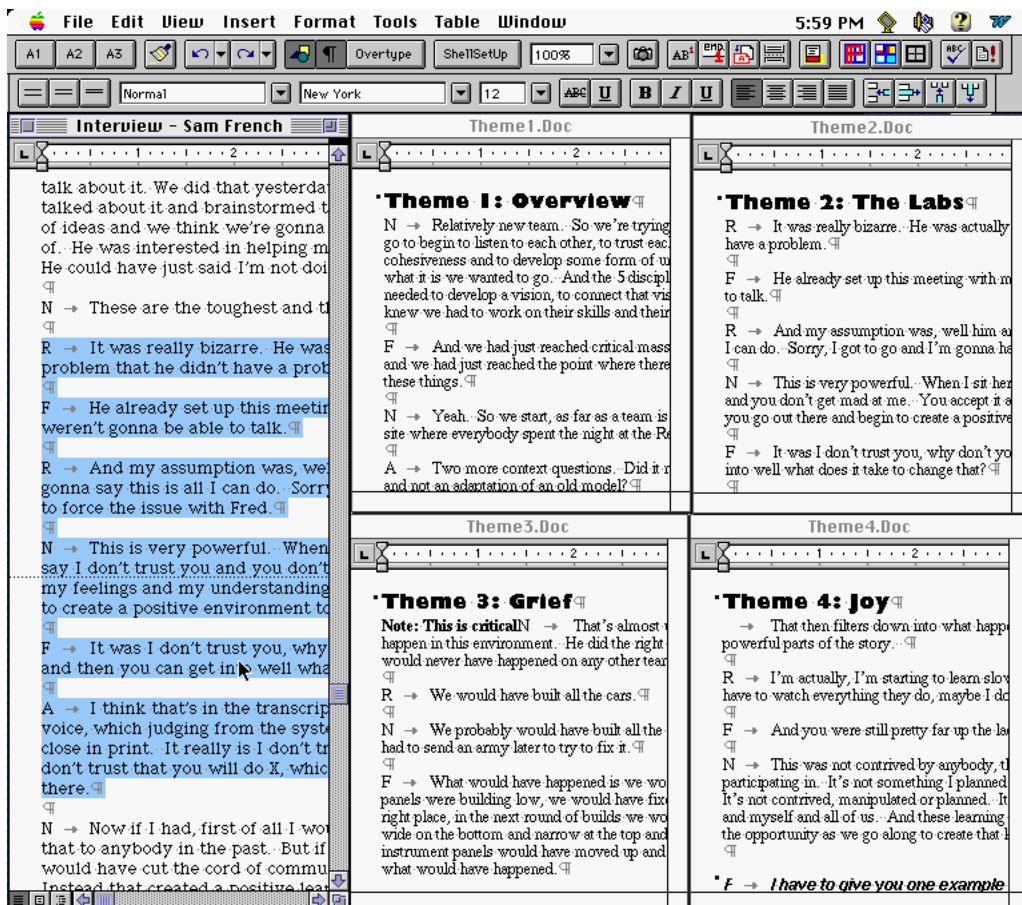
Make a backup copy of the interview file before you start working with it. (This allows you to change your mind if you delete a great deal of material and then want to go back.)

Mark each paragraph beginning with the name of its interviewee and date of interview. (This can be done with search-and-replace.)

Step 2: Get all the target files in place.

Now create several “target” files, one for each theme.

If you set it up so that the source file occupies one vertical column on the screen, and the target files are arranged in small boxes next to it, it will look something like this:



Picture of Screen for sorting interviews

Step 3: Sort

Then literally drag each paragraph to the appropriate target file(s). Discard any paragraphs that don't need to be saved. There are two ways to do it: The cut-and-paste method and the drag-and-drop method. The drag-and-drop method is a lot easier, and more fun, but it requires you to set "drag and drop" to work on your computer.

If one paragraph might apply to more than one theme, use your judgment. It is fine to "assign" a paragraph to two or three themes, but do this sparingly. Otherwise, you run the risk of having two themes duplicate each other.

Notes that occur to you: As you're going through, if you want to add to notes to individual paragraphs -- things to watch out for, or ideas that occur to you -- that can be very valuable. Add them either in **boldface** or in underline, whichever is easier. (These might include, for instance, potential topic headers or notes that a paragraph could go into several themes, or an implication that occurs to you, or a link with some other interview you recall.)

Step 4: Exchange files

Finally, the files are exchanged so that each member of the team has all the necessary files to begin writing. Clearly, a big screen helps! But it can be done on a laptop computer as well. You will find that the target windows do not need to be very large.

11. Writing the learning history

The craft of writing takes a lifetime to learn. The best guide is still the best-known: William Strunk and E.B. White's *Elements of Style* (originally published in 1935).

The audience of a learning history may not be accustomed to substantive reading. They need concise, clear prose. Every paragraph should have a point; every sentence should be included for a reason. This is easy to say; tough to accomplish. Your most effective aid is a literary ear. Read writers who are noted for their prose and syntax. Take their sentences apart; see how they do it. Do they use long sentences or short? Do they vary the pace and rhythm of their prose? Do they elucidate with mellifluous Roman/Latin phrasing; or do they speak in blunt Viking tones?

The English language evolved from many roots. It is Germanic in origin, flavored by Norse and Celtic languages from the British Isles, overrun by French words from the Norman invasion of 1066, and suffused with Greek and Latin from the Renaissance. Influences did not stop there. Borne by the British empire, English picked up words from Spanish, Hindi, and the languages of southern Africa. In the melting pots of the United States and Canada, it took on phrasing from Native American languages, Dutch, Italian, Yiddish, West African languages, Chinese, and more Spanish.

The result: There is an enormous variety of tones and styles, even in “good” English. As learning historians, we write with many of those tones and styles. We tell the story in other peoples’ words. We improve the clarity and meaning of their diction, while keeping the tone, flavor, and impact of their voice intact.

Components of the writing process

The writing task for a learning history involves a variety of tasks:

Sorting: Even though much of the sorting has already taken place within distillation, there are many quotes to interweave so that they add up to a coherent narrative.

Winnowing: In a typical document, there will be far, far too much raw material to include. You will recognize the need to cut and distill, continuously, through every draft of the document.

Listening: You are trying to tell the story in the words of the people who have talked with you. Therefore you need to cultivate the art of listening, with reflection, to their transcribed words (and sometimes to their tapes), to develop a coherent “voice” for every segment of text.

Translating: What did the person mean to say? Did they say it? Or did they express it in vague terms that could be interpreted in several ways? Your task includes rewriting for clarity; translating from the casual thoughts that emerge in an interview, to a narrative that brings meaning to the reader.

Analyzing: Frequently, you will need to step back and speak from the voice of the learning historian — either in the left-hand column, or in the exposition (full-column) text. What can you say about the data? Is it typical? Is it an outlier? Is it credible? Many of the concerns described in previous chapters on research emerge again during the writing period.

Rewriting: You will continue sharpening and honing the prose throughout the rest of the validation process.

The writer’s sort: From “stuff” to a preliminary outline

At the beginning of the writing phase, you still have a “mess of stuff” to deal with. In complex learning histories, you may have hundreds of pages worth of material. Somehow, that has to be arranged in a way that makes sense to the reader.

During this stage, each of the themes will turn into an extended short story. Each of them may be 30 or 40 pages long. (You will edit them down further, later.) A coherent theme may or may not have “unity of time and place.” All of the events may take place with a small group of people, acting together over time. Or they may include a group of wide-ranging activities, with only the common theme to bind them together.

In either case, the story will emerge by listing the key events and arranging them chronologically. What is the relationship between these events? Do they have a common thread of activity? What would the appropriate transitions be between them? Your task will probably take several days, or more, for each theme. Plot out the order of activity in a disk file, and then sort all the narrative paragraphs to fit within that flow of activity.

In many cases, the best plot line is simply chronological. Start with the “nut-graf” that you have already written for this theme.” From there, think through a chronological outline: What happened first? Then what? Then what? Each stage in the chronological plot becomes a header in your outline. Then sort the material in your file into the various chronological headings. Continue, as you go, to revise the chronology to fit the understandings you develop as you sort the material.

At this stage, you will probably want to begin writing brief “nut grafs” for each of the headers in your chronology. Continue to revise these paragraphs as insights emerge during the writing process. Let the quotations from interviews drive the story. Arrange them in sequence, and then edit within the quotations, discarding and rearranging sentences to make the story — as told by the narrators — more effective. To create a transition from one segment to another, add a paragraph of exposition.

The components of a learning history

These are the various pieces that you will write as part of the learning history effort. They are listed here, not in the order in which they will appear, but in the order in which you will develop them.

Scaffolding

Some pieces, while they are extremely important, will not make it into the final document. They are “scaffolding” — constructions whose purpose is to help you with further constructions. Do not skimp on scaffolding.

Though it may seem like a waste of time, it makes the writing process go faster by permitting you to organize your thoughts. At the same time, don’t get carried away with polishing the scaffolding. You use this material as the basis for more polished material.

The purpose and audience statement

It is important to consider who will be reading the finished work, and what their concerns and needs may be. At the beginning of the project, you may want to write out a short description of the purpose of the learning history and the people who will read it. This is “scaffolding” -- it will not be published, but it will help you produce the finished work.

As you write, you can get bogged down in considering all the people who will read the document: The team members. The CEO. Your employer. Your colleagues. Your peers. Et cetera. To avoid getting bogged down, pick one “person in your head” — someone whom you know personally, who would make an ideal reader for the work. Then, as a meditative technique, think of the first draft as being written exclusively for that person. Whenever you find yourself worrying about what someone else might think, return your thoughts to “Barbara” (or whoever it might be.) Ideally, Barbara might be the “champion” for the project.

When your mind wanders and you find yourself asking, “What will people think of this?,” you can reduce the anxiety by focusing on this one person. “What will Barbara think of this.” Or, “Barbara will get a kick out of this...”

Some qualities of a good “person in your head:” They are caring, down to earth, oriented to your purpose, willing to push back, and you have a gestalt of them. Later, during the second draft, you’ll expand the circle in your mind to a group of people. Consider what each of them would think of the text. Then actually run the text past some of these people in real life, to calibrate your own mental perceptions of them.

Opening “Curtain-raisers” — to the piece as a whole, and to the theme.

A curtain-raiser is a lead segment or paragraph that introduces your work without overwhelming the audience. “What do you want them to see when the curtain goes up?”

We consider very carefully how the Learning History opens. The curtain-raiser must engage people, and give them a flavor for the full story, without overwhelming them with plot details. The curtain-raiser may be a vignette or a thematic point; often, it’s a striking and self-contained facet of the whole.

Curtain-raisers do not include very much material. Consider the openings of most plays and movies — how little they tell you about the overall plot, as they concentrate on giving you the flavor of the piece and introducing the characters. (The movie *Speed*, for example, doesn't even introduce the bus until well after the movie begins.)

The curtain raiser to a learning history could be an overview of two or three thematic points; or it could be a story. Generally, curtain raisers that tell “how we created this learning history” are boring; that material is better left as an appendix at the back.

“Nut Graf” — to the piece as a whole, and to the theme.

The word “nut graf” is journalism jargon for the “kernel paragraph,” the thematic center of a news story. If you only had one or two paragraphs to tell the entire learning history, what would you put in those paragraphs?

Throughout the work of learning-history writing, we try to force ourselves into the discipline of nailing down the thematic point explicitly. Even if it doesn't appear in the final draft, it will serve to focus our attention all the way through the drafting. Often, however, the nut graf *does* appear in the final draft, as the key paragraph within each theme. It serves as a courtesy to the audience: introducing them to what you consider to be the key issues. It must direct their attention without overwhelming their point of view.

To write a nut graf, begin not with a paragraph but a single sentence. Write the main theme of your writing project, in a sentence: What are you trying to say? (Do not just name the category, as in: "To explain the use of models in systems thinking." State your point in a declarative sentence: "Anyone who tries to learn about systems without practicing modeling will soon find themselves jumping to the wrong conclusions.")

Once you have a sentence that pleases you, ask yourself: What else is needed, at the moment, to make sense of this sentence? Why is it significant? What's the scope of what happened — where, with what company, and when?

Put the answers to those questions, briefly but cogently, into the same paragraph as your initial sentence. That paragraph becomes your “nut graf.” For examples of nut grafs, check any newspaper. Newspaper stories will always have a paragraph that captures the story in a nutshell; typically the first, second, or third paragraph.

The exposition

The exposition is what happened with whom, with more detail about when, why, how, and where. Here’s where you say there were 512 people on the team, meeting in two separate buildings, who worked together from 1993 to 1995. The exposition must be told, but it often has no thematic value. It should be placed somewhere near the beginning, but after the nut graf.

Within projects, there will be critical and defining events which indicate progress or lack of progress in building a learning organization. These events could be based on particularly noticeable results, actions of important company people, or behaviors which are dramatically different than what people are accustomed to. Often these events are given different interpretation by the different people that were part of them, but over time a perspective tends to dominate — the official story.

The exposition is the segment where you include that official story. It may include a literal chronology of events. It will certainly explain how the project began, and it may list key people. Make the exposition concise but complete. Set it off from other material so that people can skip past it quickly or use it to give themselves an orientation in the context of the learning effort.

The plot

How do you get people from the curtain-raiser to the closing? By deliberately devising a plot to lead them there. Will it be strictly chronological? Will you break the narrative up into thematic components? Or will you follow specific characters through the story? Every learning history demands a different sort of plot, and we try to think carefully about the effects before choosing one. So far, we have found that many plots revolve around key themes, such as “Innovation in the Project” and “Engaging the Larger System.” Each theme then has its own curtain-raiser, “nut graf,” plot, and closing.

The right-hand column (narrative)

The bulk of the narrative will be told here.

You start by finding the great quotes; and letting them carry the narrative. You edit the quotes to remove redundancy and ambiguity, and to gain clarity. Follow your nose. If you are fascinated by the quotes you are working with, that's a sign that you are working with good material. If you find it difficult to keep your attention on the material, so will the reader; cut more ruthlessly.

Some peoples' transcribed segments are clear and fascinating, and can be used without editing. Other people meander, and you may need to group sentences from several paragraphs together into one paragraph (always with the knowledge that you will show them the final product, and with the discipline to avoid changing the meaning).

The left-hand column (commentary)

The left-hand column is composed of questions, comments, and analyses.

We have found that people tend to over-write the left-hand column. They put in too much; they want to write the kinds of analytical paragraphs that would appear in academic papers. But those overwhelm readers.

Left-hand column text should be telegraphic, pungent, direct. It should refer to material in the right-hand column. In many cases, readers will use the left-hand column as a skimming aid: They will look for questions that intrigue them, and then dive into the story line at right.

The closing

What tune will the audience be singing when they leave the theater? How do you want them to be thinking and feeling when they close the report, and walk away from the presentation? You may not keep the closing in its first draft form, but it is essential to consider the closing early in your process, because it shapes the direction that the rest of your narrative will take.

Linking attribution, interpretation and generalization to real life

“The biggest lesson I learned from a critique,” wrote one learning historian, “was that I had felt a strong push toward deriving lessons and convincing readers, by pointing at results. But my own effort to push my ‘findings’ into such a direction were challenged, thankfully. So now I can tone it down.”

The people who have been interviewed will often tell stories. They may describe their feelings and observations. And they will render many judgments, generalizations, and interpretations. You may be tempted to discard the stories, and keep the judgments and generalizations intact. Resist this temptation. Every generalization and attribution should, if possible, be linked to an observation or story, so that we can see why the person reached this particular conclusion.

Chris Argyris writes: “The evaluations or judgments people make are not concrete or obvious. They are abstract and highly inferential. Individuals treat them as if they were concrete because they produce them so automatically that they do not even think that their judgments are highly inferential.” (Argyris, 1990: 89).

Staying focused on stories and observations helps the reader remain aware of the narrators’ reasoning process, and the reasoning of the learning historian. It also keeps the learning history vibrant; it prevents dullness.

Writing and editing

“What do I have to do to make my material engaging?”

A written work is a linear form. It cannot be “holistic” or “circular” unless people are expected to skip around in it. Note how people read: They start at the beginning, looking to be engaged. After they hit a threshold of boredom, they skip to the middle, looking once again for a place that will engage them. The learning history must contain “hooks” at the beginning, and in various places throughout the document, that draw people in to the material that interests them.

Writing is theater

Reading takes place over time. The reader fatigues; therefore, there need to be obvious stopping places. The reader forgets what came four pages before; therefore, the structure needs to be clear and obvious, and there need to be reminders of where the narrative is going. The reader should never ask himself or herself: “Why am I reading this segment?” It should be obvious. But the guideposts that we provide to the reader should not draw attention to themselves. Simple headings, transitions, and “nut grafts” are best.

Conveying voice

In a jointly-told tale, the story is told through the language of participants. Each participant has a unique way of talking that can be translated into print. Some people use metaphors; others don't. Some people use short sentences; others use long sentences. Some people speak about “their perceptions.” “I felt this, I said that.” Others speak from a vantage point far from their own feelings. “The project was interesting to everyone.”

To convey voice, begin with the raw transcript. When you first work with the transcript, you may find it easier if you read it while listening to the person's voice on tape. Your goal is to make that person's written voice come across with the clarity, purpose, and message that they would ideally prefer to have.

Cut the material to essentials. Express the thoughts in the manner that the speaker used, but make it clearer and more coherent. Be true to the spirit, tone, and content of what they said, without necessarily being true to their words (you will fact-check this with them, anyway.) Drop “throat-clearing” phrases and words — “in order to,” “so that,” “really,” “you see,” “I want to make it clear that,” “obviously,” “and so on,” and so on....

At the same time, you may need to insert words that clarify ambiguities. For instance, in place of the word “it,” you may need to refer to the “it” by name. Whenever possible, use their language instead of a paraphrase. Look for colorful words, unique words, that convey their distinctive way of talking. Build the sentences around those words. Aim to be concise while reproducing their voice. This skill becomes easier with practice. You learn to do this by “listening” for their voice, in your own mind, as you read the transcript of their words. What were they really trying to say here? Why did they feel this way? What was important to them?

An example of editing to convey voice

The following paragraph is taken from a speech given by a manufacturing executive, during a conference held by the Center for Organizational Learning. It is reproduced here exactly as it was turned in by a transcriber (who was not familiar with the Center's work or with the speaker's work). Many of the errors in the text can be traced to the transcriber's unfamiliarity with the material.

How would you edit a raw transcript for use in a learning history? Mark up the following passagee:

Another powerful tool is what we call the ladder of interest. It raises our awareness of how we think. We tend to think frequently at the level of interests and beliefs and assumptions. I'll give you an example. The meeting starts at 8 o'clock. An engineer arrives at 8:15. What is the observable? Almost everybody said the engineer was late. That's not true. The observable is the engineer came at 8:15. Some people said, well the engineer was not only late, but he was late because he didn't care to be there. All the way up to the ??? assumptions. Well that engineer is a ??? engineer. They don't care to be part of the team. That's why he was late. But the only observable is that the engineer came at 8:15. I've worked in Brazil for a while. And the engineers all came at 8:30. And what do you think I thought of their abilities? Well, I learned to adjust to the cultural values of that environment and I scheduled my 8:30 meetings at 9:00 or 8:00 meetings at 7:30.

And everything worked out okay. This is what I mean. A tool and we use this tool and we practice this among the bosses and among our team members. Whenever somebody said something he says what is the observable? The whole object here is to establish common ground something we can agree on to establish a common language. Now, I'm not going to go into this because this gets into some theoretical constructs but what we're talking about here is mental models. A mental model is like a picture. A picture of how we interpret life or how we create it sometimes ??? And if we have different mental models of life of what's going on, what's going to happen we're going to have conflict. We're going to have miscommunication, mistrust, etc. etc.

Here is one way (not the only way) that this quote could be edited to convey voice. How did your edits differ from these edits? Which were more effective? (Yours may be more effective than these.) What other possible editing choices occur to you now?

Another powerful tool, which we call “the ladder of inference,” raises our own awareness of how we think. Most of us tend to think at the level of assumptions, instead of at the level of “observable” data. For example, suppose you have a meeting that started at 8 o’clock, but one engineer arrived at 8:15. What was the “observable?”

If you ask people that question, almost everybody will say the engineer was late. But that’s not true. The only “observable” is: The engineer came at 8:15.

Some people say, “Not only was the engineer late, but he was late *because* he didn’t care to be there.” Or they go further, “Those types of engineers don’t care to be part of the team.” That’s why they say he was late. But the only “observable,” still, is the fact that the engineer came at 8:15.

I’ve worked in Brazil. There, the engineers all came in at 8:30 for an 8 o’clock meeting. I learned to adjust to the cultural values of that environment; I scheduled my 8:00 meetings for 7:30. And everything worked out okay.

We practice using the ladder of inference among the bosses and among our 200 team members. Whenever somebody makes an attribution about something, another person feels free to say: “What is the ‘observable’ on which you base that comment?” The whole object here is to establish a common ground — some concrete data that we can agree upon. If we can’t bring ourselves back to look at what has actually happened, then we’re going to have miscommunication and mistrust.

Here are some choices that we made in editing this text:

We changed “our awareness” to “our own awareness” to make it absolutely unambiguous that the speaker was using a generic form of “our”.

We deliberately set the anecdote as a “supposed” generic occurrence, instead of something that had actually taken place. (The original transcript was ambiguous, and would have let us go either way. As an exercise, you might try phrasing the text as if the speaker were telling a story that had actually taken place.)

We let the jargon “observable” stand, but put it in quotes to show that it was jargon.

We added the sentence beginning, “He might not have known...”, without which the story doesn’t make sense. (This is acceptable because we will fact-check the paragraph with the original speaker.)

We cut the use of the term “mental models,” because it would have required too much new verbiage to explain, and it isn’t necessary to the story that the speaker is telling. (If it were necessary to this story, we might have to phone the speaker and ask exactly what he meant by “mental models,” rather than try to invent so much new language.)

The learning historian’s voice

A learning historian wrote: “To what extent should the learning historian (LH) acknowledge his/her own activity and perspective? The more explicit the LH makes her/his perspective, the better the LH will be. Because of course, the LH always has a perspective, and even more so when s/he is an insider. Thus, the data would include more than interviews with others; it would include the learning historian’s own questions and experiences in meetings, and other group settings.”

That’s all true, and no single approach seems completely satisfactory. There are several considerations. For one thing, the learning history is generally produced by a team. The team has worked in distillation, and the “learning historian’s perspective” is flavored by the distillation process. At the same time, as the “head writer” who is putting together a chapter or the full story, you are intensely aware of your own biases and opinions. You may be tempted to tell the exposition in the first person, or to interject your own opinions.

From the mythic and research orientation, you are quite right. But pragmatically, the learning historian’s “voice” seems to be confusing to readers. They aren’t directly interested in that voice. They seem to look on the revelation of that voice the way you would look on a stage manager, in a play, coming out and explaining the action.

Each of the three main segments in a learning history seems to carry a different imperative:

1. In the full-text “exposition,” readers want guideposts and contexts. This feels more natural in the third-person, unless it has been very carefully set up.
2. In the right-hand column, readers want the voices of interviewees. All narrative voices of interviewees should go in the right-hand column.
3. In the left-hand column, readers seem to want a surrogate for their own perspective, but with opportunities for judgment and ideas that they would not have thought of themselves. This is the place for the learning historian’s “voice” — but the constraints of the left-hand column mean that the learning historian can’t go on at length. Also, it tends to be awkward to write in the first person here.

We have found it more effective to add a preface or afterword in which the learning historian can explain their own approach and attitudes about the material.

Word-smithing

Every paragraph is about one thing. If the paragraph serves two or more purposes, it may deserve to be two or more paragraphs.

Like goes with like. In other words, move sentences (and phrases) so that they follow a logical thread and are next to the other sentences on a similar subject.

Omit needless words. This includes needless words in quotes.

Avoid jargon. Rephrase into real English, even if you think most of the audience will understand the jargon. Strive for vividness and phrasing that is true-to-life and concrete.

Use the active voice (“Charlie spoke but no one attended”) whenever someone or something is responsible. Use the passive voice (“the speech was made in the empty hall”) when you want to emphasize slow change, or lack of responsibility.

A story is always told from someone's point of view. Know whose point of view is driving yours. Don't switch orientations in the middle of a paragraph, or without some transitions. Let the reader know, in some way, whose perspective is driving each statement. Use phrases like: "People on the team saw that..." or, "It became clear to the senior managers that..." or "Now, in retrospect, it is clear that..."

Edit to bring out the direct human voice, and the voice of speakers. This does not necessarily mean using the literal transcript of what they say. It often means making their written voice read like their spoken voice sounds.

Avoid clichés. If someone notices the phrase instead of noticing your point, it's a cliché.

Avoid transitions that are just there for transition's sake. Don't tell the audience what you are about to tell them; just tell them once. Make every sentence carry a different piece of the message.

Be able to defend why every part of the work is included.

Some alternatives for handling quotes in a document

In our learning history work, we follow the model of a theatrical script for the material of the right-hand column:

1. Theatrical script: Electrical system engineer Bob McGill: "When there's no common document available to all, you don't know what other people are doing. I would be working to solve something, and the people in the sheet metal function wouldn't know about it." (*This is the form we use for the "two-column format" we prefer.*)

Some people have questioned whether this is the best possible form for quotes. In the spirit of inquiry, we offer some other forms to consider — other ways of using quotes. None of them seem as effective to us.

2. Testimonial: "When there's no common document available to all, you don't know what other people are doing. I would be working to solve something, and the people in the sheet metal function wouldn't know about it." -- Electrical system engineer Bob McGill

3. News story: "When there's no common document available to all, you don't know what other people are doing," said electrical system engineer Bob McGill. "I would be working to solve something, and the people in the sheet metal function wouldn't know about it."

- 4. Interpretive report:** Electrical system engineer Bob McGill proposed one reason why the system needed changing: “When there’s no common document available to all, you don’t know what other people are doing. I would be working to solve something, and the people in the sheet metal function wouldn’t know about it.”
- 5. TV documentary:** Let’s hear the reason from electrical system engineer Bob McGill: “When there’s no common document available to all, you don’t know what other people are doing. I would be working to solve something, and the people in the sheet metal function wouldn’t know about it.” --
- 6. Author’s interpretation:** Electrical system engineer Bob McGill was one of seven who pointed out the dangers of having no common document, available to all. For example, he pointed to a change involving sheet metal. The sheet metal engineers on the team would have no inkling of the change, because McGill would have no way to inform them.

12. Validation

Learning histories are documents about the experiences people have been through in their organizational improvement efforts. Although they are intended for audiences beyond the original participants, they are validated by the original participants. As such, they provide a mechanism for feedback to participants. Because the manuscript integrates a wide range of perspectives, the learning history often provides the original participants with an opportunity for significant insight.

The reflective interview/conversation is the first opportunity for organizational members to be exposed to the learning history process. In participating in that interview they are promised confidentiality and anonymity, and the opportunity to review the materials the learning historians would like to use from the interview before it is used. That review takes place in two stages - 1) individual fact or quote checking and 2) validating a whole document, with quotes in context. Each of these steps provide additional opportunity for individuals and groups to consider their own statements about their perceptions, actions and relationships to the organization's successes and challenges.

We have called the process whereby participants' quotes are checked individually and in the context of other's quotes "validation." As action researchers, we see this as an essential step. If the learning history does not prove itself to be accurate and useful to the original participants, how can it be represented as such to other people, teams and organizations who want to learn from the original participants' endeavors?

The learning history may not be entirely flattering to the original participants. Yet, to have validity in the organization, it has to "see" with the same critical eye as that of a skeptical insider. That skeptical insider would know many of the alternative evaluations which people in the organization hold — not only the good news of the improvement effort, but also the problems or unanticipated consequences of that effort. If the document did not include the perspectives of opposers and bystanders, it would appear to be a "white-wash." It would not contain the observable data and evaluations of events that allow others to cultivate their own judgment in undertaking or building upon initial programs. Nor would it include the material needed to transfer and diffuse collective learning.

It is important to check quotes with each individual before they are seen by anyone outside the learning history team. Quotes are edited for clarity, during the writing process, and the person needs to check whether potential edits accurately represent them. The intimate setting of a reflective interview/conversation may also lead people to say more than they want to "own," even if they are not identified, once they see their quotes in the black and white of written text.

Quote-checking

This is a vital job, which requires a great deal of clerical coordination. Until the draft's quotes have been checked with the original interviewees, it is not completed and should not be made available to any general audience, even an audience of participants on the original learning project.

As you compose the work, it is essential to keep track of who has spoken each quote. When the draft is near completion, all the quotes are pulled out and matched with the names. Then each person receives the quotes and is invited to make comments or changes. Some people will refuse to allow their quotes to be used, but most will be pleased to have them included. For those who do not want their quotes used, try to find out exactly what their concern about the quote is. Is it a matter of accuracy, or emphasis?

The mechanics of this process may vary. Some organizations are well-suited for fact-checking by email; others, by fax. It depends on which is more private and less subject to tampering. A quote, before it is fact-checked, particularly as it is sent to the person, can have the destructive force of dynamite. Therefore, every effort needs to be taken to keep fact-checking private.

Include a cover letter reminding the respondent of the interview, and telling them how much time they have to review your quotes and get back to you. Don't forget to include your own phone, fax, and email information.

Let people know that you *expect* them to find errors, and you are interested in correcting all factual errors. You are also interested in other comments they may have, *and their reasoning for making suggested changes*.

Later, when the comments come back, you will go through the suggested changes. Use your judgment about non-factual changes. Occasionally, someone will try to use fact-checking as an opportunity to "rewrite history." Sometimes this is legitimate; sometimes not. Consider their change in light of the three imperatives: Does it get you closer to the "real story"? Does it seem more valid in terms of the data? Does it help you tell the organization what is good for it to hear?

The following is an example of a letter used with quotes for fact checking:

LETTER

February 22, 1995

Dear Mr. Welsch,

Thank you for the time you spent meeting with me on January 10, 1995. I truly appreciated everyone's hospitality, generosity with their time, and candor and openness in speaking about the changes that have taken place at Parameter Corporation. I again ask for your help in this next step of our effort.

I have sent you the particular quotes from our confidential interview that I would like to use. I ask that you review them for accuracy and make sure that you feel comfortable with their use in the learning history.

The quotes will appear without your name – and, in fact, I have included a possible "generic" title that we would use to identify you. Even so, I offer the opportunity to make edits or changes. You may want to clarify errors or oversights, or to mask items that seem indiscreet. You have "final cut" over these words and I will abide with any changes you suggest (though I may ask you to explain the reasoning behind the changes, if it's not clear to me.)

I do ask that you consider that the comments you have made are important to the overall process of change and learning at Parameter Corporation. Your quotes will be set in the context of multiple perspectives. If you wish to withdraw a quote entirely, I would be grateful to find out why, because that will help me gain a better understanding of the material.

Also, you will have an additional opportunity to review your quotes in context before it is more widely available within Parameter Corporation. The process for moving forward is as follows.

We will do this by sending you the pages which include your quotes. In this process you and others see your own quotes in relation to one another, using only the quotes which everyone approved in the first round of fact checking. Finally, pending approval of the quotes in context, we will have a learning history document which in its entirety will then be available for further validation to those that participated in creating it.

What I ask is that you read the attached set of confidential quotes and mark them up with corrections, additions, or omissions, if required. On pages where you have made corrections, please fax them back to me at [fax number]. This fax machine is confidential. If it is easier for you, we could talk through your changes by telephone, or by you leaving me a voice mail message. If you have other questions, please feel free to call me. Again, I truly appreciate your time and support in this learning effort.

Sincerely,

Confidentiality: Balancing protection of sources against generic understanding.

Quotes are checked before any document containing them is distributed.

We have found that it is less awkward to write the piece without names (even “obvious” names that every reader will recognize.) Using broad titles preserves the tone of confidentiality and makes it easier for the piece to *be* discreet, without losing the value of the material.

Our approach to confidentiality and anonymity is not without controversy. Some people in organizations we have worked with have questioned how anonymity contributes to the development of a learning organization. They argue that people should be willing to stand behind their quotes, so that issues which come out in interviews can be directly addressed by people who are involved or implicated. Their point is that a learning organization is one where people have the skills and safety to talk about difficult subjects openly, without fear of retribution. When issues are surfaced anonymously, there is no way of addressing them.

This issue has much to do with the audience and purpose of a learning history. While the document is validated by original participants, it is also intended for other audiences. The issues that are raised go back to the purpose of a learning history, and its use by different audiences. It also goes back to considerations in social science research, where the ethics are to protect and ensure no harm comes to people who participate in research projects.

The idea of a learning organization is an ideal. Organizations that have survived over time have all demonstrated an ability to adapt, cope and learn. Yet, there are factors in the practice of management that make learning in business organizations difficult. Our goal in conducting a learning history is to create a picture of the experience an organization has been through as it attempts to improve. That picture includes multiple perspectives, often surfacing elements of the informal system that determines how an organization works which are not generally publicly discussed. Helping a group of people in an organization deal with these multiple, and perhaps conflicting and unpopular perspectives, is the purpose of learning workshops. The learning history surfaces data about what has happened, how people explain it, what they generalize from that experience, and what influences critical events have on future actions.

When the quotes used in a learning history differ from one another, they are presented back to readers so that each perspective can be seen as a whole. A “whole” perspective, even on seemingly controversial views, provides enough context for readers to be able to understand what a person is saying and their basis for saying so. It provides enough context to learn from where a person speaks. Judging those comments is the role of the reading audience — it is the learning historian teams responsibility to be sure that enough information exists around comments so that others reading the document can develop their own judgment.

Often providing the context for a whole understanding is not possible in the busy pace of business organizations. There are also norms of not openly speaking about difficult and controversial issues. The reflective interview/conversation has a tendency to bring out these issues in relationship to critical events, and raise issues which have been lurking beneath situations and are not openly discussed. Whatever is said in these interviews is said by someone, and the issue for organizations is to accept these perspectives as being held by people in the organization, and allow them to be discussed so that they can be dealt with.

If quotes are not anonymous, people will likely limit what they say in interviews, as well as what they approve, to be included in the learning history manuscript. The learning historian, working across different management levels within an organization, will learn about how power and authority are exercised in the organization, perhaps in ways that not everyone is directly familiar with (and these considerations are part of what is presented in the manuscript). Identification of people in quotes may place a learning historian in a difficult position, if that were to be the norm for these document. If a person in the organization were willing to be identified in making a controversial quote, and the learning historian had evidence which led them to expect that person would suffer retribution for it, the learning historian’s responsibility to protect the personal lives and careers of the people they are working with would override the desire to include the controversial quote.

As the original participants in an organization consider information revealed in a learning history that is not presently openly discussed, they can start an inquiry into creating conditions that would be more supportive of people surfacing issues directly, without the protection of anonymity.

We have found that identifying quotes in terms of roles actually helps people in organizations consider the larger system implications. Identifying even key individuals by role, helps reader inquire into what it is like to be in that role, and what kinds of forces act on the person in that role. The effect of associating quotes with roles has been very helpful in for audiences of original participants (where people would be subject to the bias produced by their own stereotypical views of the particular individuals). Considering organizational change and learning processes from the perspective of people in different roles has been critical for audiences beyond the original participants at they identify with those roles and how they are carried out in their own settings.

Validation Workshop

Perhaps the most tricky and difficult issue in the learning history process is the validation workshop. As it is the first time the document is revealed in its entirety, it is also the point in time where significant learning can take place for both the learning historian team and the participants of the learning process. Previously fragmented and perhaps misunderstood views of events and their implications are drawn together, given equal consideration, and presented side-by-side.

We approach the validation workshop much in the same way as dissemination workshops. This approach asks people to take on the mindset of a foreigner or beginner, and to try to understand the comments people make from that person's perspective. When people find themselves reacting, we ask them to make note of that. People are asked to actually write what they felt in the manuscript (for themselves) and to note what in the text provoked or evoked their feelings. These reactions are data — information for readers about their own thinking processes, and how they evaluate and judge what others say. Their reactions are very legitimate responses to what happens all the time in organizations and other collective settings. Linking and attributing reactions to specific text gives the group an opportunity for deeper inquiry together.

The reactions which people have had to the learning history become the data for a facilitated conversation. That conversation is most productive when it is done by members of a team or organization who work together and are dependent upon one another. The experiences of the teams in the learning history provide a common context for other teams and organizations to consider their own issues. The learning history provides an indirect, and perhaps somewhat safer, environment to talk about issues which affect all teams and organizations. Participants all have the same text, and therefore the same data. Having common materials allows them to identify and distinguish idiosyncrasies of individual reasoning processes from what is actually reported in the text. In a way, the learning history becomes a transitional object in the learning processes of other teams.

The validation workshop is also similar to the dissemination workshop in that it follows the same process. It is more difficult for participants in the validation workshop to “learn from the text” or use the learning history as a “transitional” object, because it is their experience which is being reported on. They all have additional data — the aspects of their own and other’s experience which were not expressed in interviews, and are not included in the document — about what happened. The challenge for the validation workshop is that this may be the first time that different perspectives, presented side-by-side with integrity and wholeness, have been seen together.

The validation workshop usually generates many reactions and insights. Some of these will result in the development of a greater sense of shared understanding of the experiences people have gone through in learning and change. Those reactions are likely to result in insights about how to approach things differently, and how to move forward as a group. Like a dissemination workshop, part of the validation process involves the group planning and making decisions for how to deal with the insights they have gained.

The validation workshop will also raise questions about the learning history. Some people will not be satisfied with the way things are reported, and how various groups are represented. The learning historian will often get these reactions earlier, when people are reading the document in preparation for the workshop. People have called and described their dissatisfaction with the learning history as a representation of what has happened. This is particularly true for people in positions of power and authority.

These reactions need to be met with a sense of understanding and compassion. What is being presented is different from what people have held to be “true,” and been able to see from their own position and perspective. Particularly when the reaction comes from people who are instrumental in sponsoring and funding the learning history project, these reactions need to be carefully, genuinely and honestly responded to.

What the learning history does represent is what people in the organization are thinking and doing. The opportunity for these issues to surface may not exist in the current organizational culture and structure. The learning history does capture how the informal system of the organization works, and provides data which lets many people see how the organization copes and actually functions. The reactions of people to what is surfaced need to be heard, and the following questions need to be asked:

- What was it that caused you to react this way?
- Do you believe that this is not an accurate representation of what people are saying, thinking or doing?
- Are there perspectives or points of view that are missing?

Allowing people to react is part of the learning process. If those reactions can be captured, and brought into group discussions, they become data for the collective learning process. Given the importance people place on their work, the personal and political implications for an open reporting of what has transpired, the need to allow people their own space and time to react can not be underestimated.

Our experience has been that these initial reactions are part of a catharsis that precedes more open inquiry. It does require, particularly in controversial situations, a skilled facilitator or coach to help people and groups with their reactions. The facilitator helps people go back to the data that triggered their reactions, and examine the individual or collective assumptions that were the genesis of their response. In surfacing those assumptions, people become more aware of them, and can begin to make them part of an open discussion. People experience the power that their assumptions have on them, and can recognize the hold that their assumptions have, rather than being simply held by them.

In the validation workshop, after responding to the reactions of participants, and helping them with their ability to make use of the learning history, the context, comprehensiveness and accuracy of the document needs to be questioned. Although the original participants of the experiences that the learning history reports on may not be as flattered by what is reported as they had expected, the question is to what extent can it be agreed to as accurate? Are there significant issues or events which have not been included? Are there important perspectives which have been missed? And, beyond these big-picture questions, are there details which aren't clear or accurate?

It is important that the original participants, upon seeing the whole document, have the opportunity to comment on it, and influence it, in its entirety. Many of the tradeoffs that the learning history team made in using what they did may end up being discussed, particularly in terms of how the manuscript was organized and what material was included where. As the group that participates in the validation workshop begins to gain an understanding for the complexity of the choices that went into organizing and writing the learning history, they will become engaged in the question of what is the best way to present the material. Generally very insightful comments are about how to present materials so that they can be better understood and more influential with others in the organization. These suggestions generally influence a subsequent edit of the document. Validation can take place in a single workshop, or over the course of a number of workshops where the document is adjusted and tweaked so that it accurately represents the different constituents of the learning and change process, and is presented in ways that reach broader audiences.

13. Dissemination

A learning history is not an end in itself. Although the tasks of planning, interviewing, distillation, sorting, writing and validation place great emphasis on producing a manuscript, the manuscript production is only part of the learning history process. In fact, although the learning history manuscript is a tangible product, and a necessary component in achieving the overall objective, it is not *the* objective.

The objective of a learning history process is to produce better conversations in an organization, so that the organization can move forward effectively. This objective might seem entirely unreasonable for managers, consultants, and researchers. How can a manager rely on a “research” document to be the basis of conversation? How can consultants work with a document that may not present initiatives with the “spin” they would prefer? How can a researcher be responsible for writing something which people actually read, never mind discuss? These questions reflect the interdependence among researchers, consultants and managers in the learning history process. They all need to work together, and have a stake in the document if it is to engage the organization in a learning process.

We suggest that the evaluation of an learning history project be in the “ability of the organization to hear what it says.” This goal places the burden on the authors to produce a written document which clearly and forcefully conveys people’s experiences with full consideration for the intended audience. Since the learning history process aims to transfer and diffuse learning, there is a responsibility on the part of the organization, and the champion, supporters, proponents and internal members of the learning history team to create conditions in which the learning history can be heard. These conditions include developing an interest and demand for a learning history.

Large organizations are hierarchical entities. That hierarchy is part of a legal structure: some small set of people have a fiduciary responsibility for the financial health of the firm and the interests of its stockholders. Hierarchies are also part of the cultural fabric, reinforced by the patterns of behavior which emerge from decades of bureaucratic managerial methods. As leaders attempt to improve their organizations' effectiveness by making them less hierarchical, they continue to be responsible for processes that distribute power and result in new forms of governance. Organizational leaders have some responsibility to read learning histories, and recognize and approve their content as part of a conversation that takes place at different levels in the organization. If leaders are engaged in important issues and conversations within the organization, it sends a signal to people everywhere in the firm about the importance creating and supporting conditions which support learning.

The theory behind dissemination workshops

A learning history is meant to be read and discussed so that people learn from it. It is important to understand how readers make sense of text when thinking about how people learn from a learning history.

Reader-response theory is based on the understanding that the meaning of text resides neither in text alone nor in the author's intentions (Iser, 1989). Readers interpret and do not automatically accept "authored" meanings. They bring their own background, experience and knowledge to what they read. While writers intend one meaning for their words, there are likely to be as many interpreted meanings of a text as there are readers. Meaning is created by the interaction of reader, text, and author's intentions (Yanow, 1994: 3).

Workshops are an essential part of disseminating the information in learning histories. Giving a learning history to a group of people without an opportunity to discuss its contents or implications does not allow for collective meaning-making processes. Learning history manuscripts are preceded by an attestation about their use in learning. Readers are told that they will not get the full value from the document if they simply read it like any other report. Instead, people are asked to read the manuscript in preparation for a meeting with other team members. They are asked to consider how what is in the document could be a vehicle for conversation by their team. In their own reading, people are requested to "take on the mind set of a beginner" and suspend their judgments, not to automatically condemn people who made mistakes, or to assume they know why mistakes occurred.

Distribution

Presenting and transferring information to others

When a learning history is ready to show, it will probably need to be shown to people in stages. Given the aim of facilitating better conversations, learning history manuscripts are not simply mailed out to people. After, or as, a learning history is validated, consideration needs to be given as to how the learning history will be used and its content considered. Both the sequence in which different people see and use the learning history, and the process by which it is offered to and used by people, is important.

Sequences for distributing learning histories

As the draft manuscript is produced, it is validated by participants: those that have been involved in the initiative about which the learning history is written. They are often people who are committed to the learning history's success: the corporate inside sponsor, sponsors from within the team, the learning organization project manager, etc. Meetings to get people's feedback and thoughts are always scheduled in giving people the learning history. These individual or small group "previews" are part of the process for leading up to the more public validation workshop.

Even when a learning history is being used in a different organization than the one in which it was created, it is still important to involve key managers. A learning history may change people's awareness of their own situations, influence conversations and unfold into possibilities for new actions. The process of using a learning history to raise issues needs to be worked through an organization's existing power structure. People in positions of authority need to have the opportunity to consider the questions the document raises. If senior managers are not interested in learning and change, it will be difficult to have a significant effect on the way that organization functions while they continue to occupy their positions. Reluctant senior managers have the power to restrict the attention that issues are formally given and can influence the extent to which other people can openly talk about those issues. Developing a strategy which allows senior managers to consider the issues and become engaged in the questions that are raised is much more effective in promoting collective learning than trying to convince these managers that the learning history has the right answers for them. One strategy which has been effective has been to ask top managers to write cover letters indicating support for the learning process, for the use of the learning history by interested teams, and for open consideration of issues applicable to the organization.

Once there is managerial support for the learning history process and for considering the issues it raises, the learning history can be made more widely available. This second stage of the dissemination process involves using it in conjunction with facilitated workshops where it is discussed. A learning history will provide limited benefit if it is read like a report. Individuals reading reports form their own judgments, and may even change their actions, based on what they read. However, the ability to develop shared understanding, and possibilities for new, more effective coordinated action, are only realized when a learning history is collectively considered.

Dissemination Workshop Process

The learner learns what the learner wants to learn. Learning is a voluntary process. It is like leading a horse to water — you can get it there, but you can't make it drink. You can make people go to workshops, but you can't get them to learn something they don't want to learn.

People are drawn to learning new things because of intrinsic desires to achieve security, safety, success, affiliation and recognition. What will draw people into a learning process? Our experience is that the desire to learn and improve is intrinsically driven and realized through conditions which an organization creates for its employees. These conditions include encouraging new ideas and actions, giving people the latitude to experiment, recognizing their accomplishments, and rewarding new behaviors. One way to do this is for senior leaders to model this process in the way they themselves behave, engage in their own learning process, and are willing to discuss and share their challenges and successes.

Compelling stories of learning and change have a significant ability to influence people in trying something new. These stories are not the formal ones given in speeches, but the ones which are heard in corridors about how things really work “around here.” They are also the stories upon which learning histories report. The learning history dissemination workshops are the opportunity for people in the organization to bring those mythical stories into collective setting for open discussion. The power of a good learning history lies in its ability to draw people into that discussion.

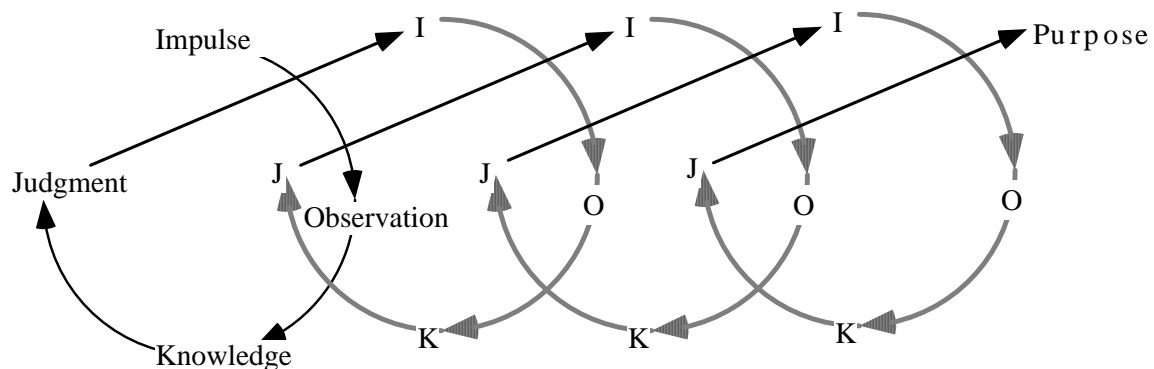
Our recommendation has been to distribute learning histories as part of voluntary workshops or meetings. Invite people to read it and then, a week or two later, meet in a gathering of a half-dozen to a dozen people to talk through the learning history and the implications of it for themselves and other teams. The workshop is an opportunity for people to come together and discuss what they have read, how they interpret it, and what lessons it holds for them. How people respond and the kind of conversation that emerges in this workshop is new data about the learning process.

Adults tend to learn experientially. The dissemination workshop *itself* is an experience from which people can collectively learn. When the conversation in a dissemination workshop is based on a good learning history, it can help create the experience from which people learn. As the poet David Whyte has commented, “Good poetry helps you remember an experience. Great poetry IS an experience.” In this same way, a well-designed and facilitated learning history workshop *is* the experience. In order to live up to this possibility, the learning history workshop must be understood in terms of the dilemmas of experiential learning and what can be done to create the conditions for collective experiential learning.

Dilemmas in Learning from Experience

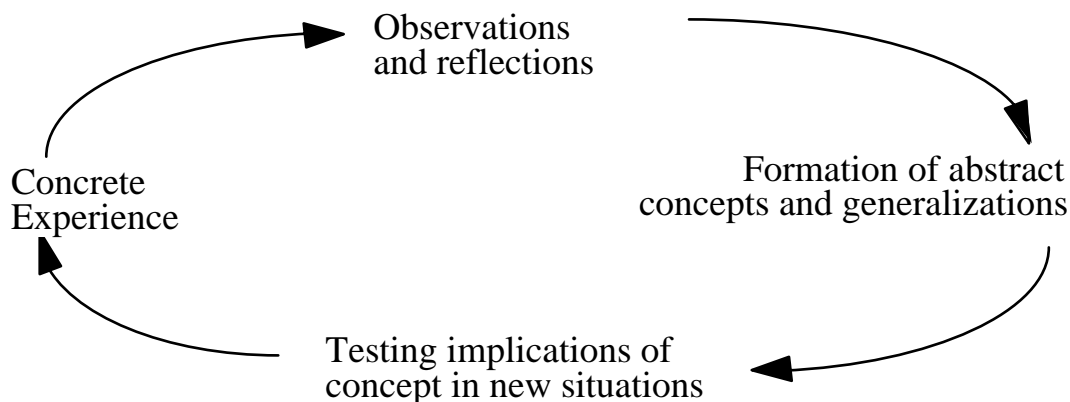
The research of psychologists (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1971; Bruner, 1964) and organizational theorists (Lewin; 1951, Lippitt, 1949; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Kolb, 1984) proposes that learning is a cyclical process involving action, here-and-now concrete experience, feedback on experience, and formation of abstract concepts that guide future action. Yet, learning in organizations is inherently problematic. People who take action and make decisions in organizations often do not get feedback on their actions and decisions, or what feedback they do get is limited and biased (Argyris, 1990). Examining theories of experiential learning reveals what is needed to support continual development and learning in organizations.

The foundation of experiential learning is expressed in Dewey’s (1938) model of learning. Learning transforms the impulses, feelings and desires of concrete experience into purposeful action. Learning takes observation of existing conditions, and uses judgment to compare those impulses with knowledge of what has happened in similar conditions in the past. Learning is a developmental process from which impulses are transformed into mature, higher-order purposeful action.



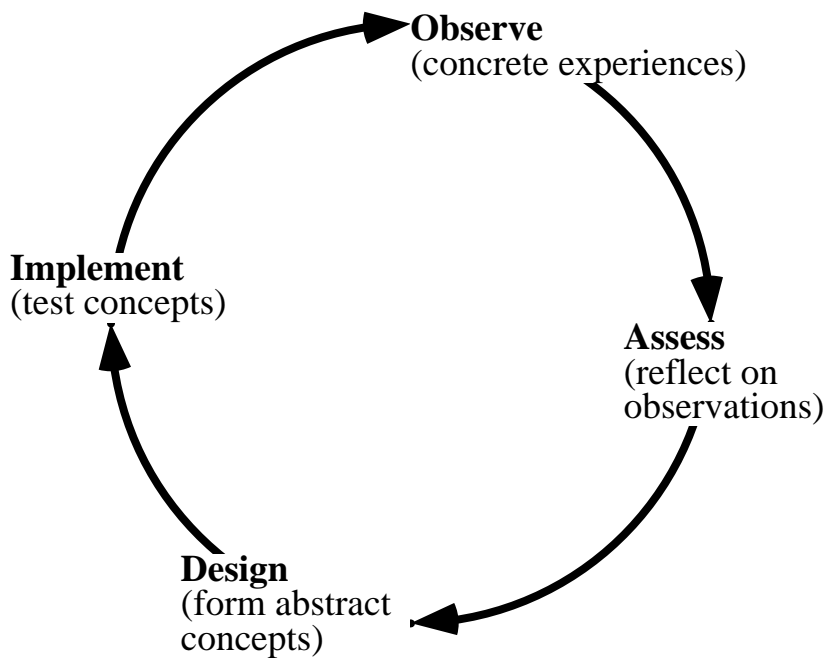
Dewey's Model of Experiential Learning

Dewey's model for experiential learning is closely related to the Lewinian model used in laboratory training groups, and as a basis for action research. Lewin (1951) developed the notions of feedback processes borrowing from electrical engineering to describe social learning and problem-solving processes that generate information by which to assess deviations from desired goals (see Kolb, 1984: 21-22). He conceived of learning as a four-stage process. Immediate, concrete experience provides the basis for observations and reflection. The observations are generalized into a "theory" involving abstract concepts. The concepts used in new situations, as their implications inform actions. As those implications guide action they create new, concrete experiences.



The Lewinian Experiential Learning Model

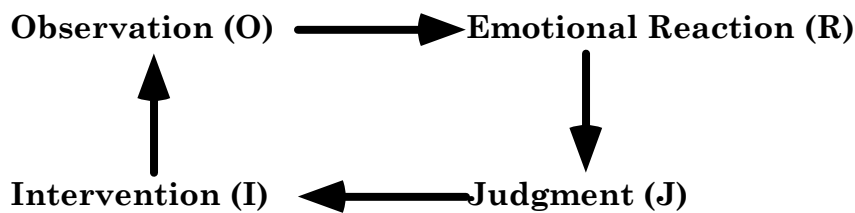
The models of experiential learning (Dewey, 1896; Lewin, 1951; Kolb, 1984), and more recent advocates of quality and "continuous improvement" like Edward Deming (1982), all view learning as a process that connects thinking and acting. Learning is a process that involves and integrates observations, concepts, action and experience. In developing a description for use within managerial settings, researchers at the MIT OLC have simplified the terminology in the experiential learning cycle by referring to it as the "OADI" (observe-assess-design-implement) cycle (Kofman referenced in Kim, 1993a: 38-9).



OADI experiential learning Cycle

The OADI cycle involves observation of concrete experience; assessment reflecting on observations to interpret and their meaning; design of possible actions based on the assessments; and testing the design by implementing it, leading to further observations. Kim (1993a) extends the OADI cycle to include shared mental models in developing an integrated framework for conceptualizing “organizational” learning.

Postponement of immediate action so that essential observations and judgments can intervene, and influence the actions that are essential for achieving desired goals, is an important aspect of applying experiential learning cycles. Unfortunately, real life situations and individual cognition are not as simple as the models that are developed to describe complex processes like “learning.” Schein (1987) applies the experiential learning process when he describes the intrapsychic processes that influence consulting relationships. His basic ORJI cycle illustrates the complexity involved when our nervous systems simultaneously gather, process, and act on external stimulus. People observe (O), react emotionally to what is observed (R), analyze, process, and make judgments based on what is observed (J) and behave overtly to make something happen, or intervene (I).



The Basic ORJI Cycle (from Schein, 1987: 64)

The simple form of the ORJI model implies a sequence to help people recognize the traps that make actions ineffective in achieving their intended purpose. Observations may be distorted by preconceptions and defense mechanisms, requiring people to learn to suspend their “prejudgments.” Emotional reactions often go unnoticed, particularly if people have learned to deny feelings. Yet, while a person may not be aware of feeling, feelings do influence the reasoning process that informs judgment and action. The complexity of the connections and inability to separate emotion and reason are well documented by scientists and educators (Damasio, 1994; Goldman, 1995).

People are constantly processing data, both observations and emotions, evaluating information and making judgments. The logic of the judgment process, which is itself subject to systematic error (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981), depends upon the facts upon which it is based. Judgments influence action. Actions are interventions, whether they are knee-jerk reactions or carefully planned inquiries. Interventions are the visible signs of judgment, yet whether the logical process or the facts upon which they were based were appropriate, can not generally be discerned. Schein suggests the ORJI cycle as a model for individuals to distinguish their internal processes from those in the external environment and learn to identify biases. The ORJI model has been helpful for individuals to improve their observational abilities and avoid premature judgments and inappropriate behaviors.

The problems of individual learning in the ORJI cycle is similar for collective learning in organizations. A basic problem with the OADI cycle in business settings is that it doesn’t work very well -- while it characterizes how learning might occur, it also shows why often little learning does occur. Central to the OADI cycle, and to all experiential views of learning, is that learning occurs as human beings observe and reflect on the consequences of their actions, leading to new understandings and actions. Learning processes often involve “mistake making” and then learning from those mistakes.

Managers have limited opportunity for such learning. The consequences of bad managerial decisions can be catastrophic, both in financial and human terms, so every effort must be made to avoid making mistakes. When mistakes are made, there are psychological and social pressures to cover up the mistakes rather than to learn from them, what Argyris (1990) calls “organizational defensive routines.” Moreover, it is extremely difficult to learn from decisions whose consequences may unfold over years, and where those consequences may be distant from the original decision-makers. Consequences may also be ambiguous and/or influenced by forces outside of managers’ control.

Secondly, there are dilemmas in organizations related to the nature of experience. Participants in the same event rarely characterize their experience in the same way. For example, when observing a workshop, how many interpretations could people make as they watch the instructor writing notes on a flip chart? He could be writing words as reminders, seeking to gain control and attention of the audience, performing while people listen, providing new information, and so on. At any moment in time, there could be an infinite number of possible answers for what is going on. Thus, the question of a group having a collective experience has its dilemmas.

What you experience depends in part on who you are, and who you are depends upon how various experiences have shaped and influenced you. The language which people use is based on selecting the action they choose to express. For example, consider the following vignette:

I am in my office, working at the computer on the draft of a paper. There is a knock on the door, and I respond, asking the person to come in. It is a colleague, who says, “Sorry, I can see that you are busy.” I respond that its okay, I was just rewriting a section of a paper on the role of language in creating experience. We discuss this for a moment and my colleague leaves. I go back to work, and the phone rings. It is a student who wants to meet with me to discuss the comments I made on his thesis. I respond that I am in the middle of some work which has to be completed that afternoon, and won’t be available until the next morning. After scheduling the appointment, I go back to work on the paper. A little later there is another knock on the door. My wife and two daughters have come to meet me for lunch. My five-year-old asks “What are you doing?” “Playing on the computer,” I respond.

How we describe our actions shapes the experience from which we learn. Our actions are guided by the stories that we tell. Our actions are thus the manifestation of what we can produce in our language. What we experience has as much to do with us as it does with the outside stimulus which we characterize as experience.

Preparing for the dissemination workshop

Understanding breakdowns in the experiential learning cycles has been important in helping people involved in organizational learning projects conducted by the MIT OLC. Explicitly considering how to create conditions for learning has led to the design, implementation and study of “managerial practice fields.” Managerial practice fields are designed learning spaces, such as role-plays and simulations, where decision-makers can experiment, try new techniques, describe what happened, make mistakes and test new behaviors. The ability to experiment in the practice field is intended to accelerate people’s learning so that they can become more effective in their business “performance fields.”

One of the “managerial practice fields” that addresses dilemmas in the experiential learning process is the learning history dissemination workshop. The dissemination workshop uses the learning history manuscript as the basis for a common, observable, context from which description can be built into explanation and a basis for more effective action.

An essential characteristic of the learning history process and manuscript is letting people tell their story (selection of language which represents their actions in the way they think about them). In a reciprocal way, it is then important to provide instructions for people reading a learning history (and later discussing it) to let themselves hear those stories. It is through reading, listening to, empathizing with, and seeking understanding that people are able to accept perspectives and points of view other than their own. And, it is by approaching the learning history as a story to learn from that people can collectively improve through the conversations they have about it.

We have developed the custom of placing a cover letter, or disclaimer, on learning histories as they are distributed. We can not enforce their use in workshops, but we are obligated to inform people of the document’s intended use, and how to gain the most value from the manuscript. We offer the following text as a boilerplate; others have taken this material and incorporated it their personalized cover letters that invite people to a scheduled workshop.

ATTENTION: The Learning History Disclaimer

You can read the following learning history the way you would read an ordinary report. However, if you read it that way, we do not believe that it will provide the intended value.

A learning history describes what happens in a learning and change process, in the voice of participants. It documents "hard" facts and events, and focuses on what people thought about events, how they perceived their own actions, and differences in people's perceptions. By recreating the experience of "being there," the learning history helps readers understand what happened in a way that helps them make more effective judgments.

Learning is not always an easy process. It involves taking on the mindset of a beginner, letting go of what you have worked hard to "know," and a willingness to examine situations which aren't turning out as intended. When people try new behaviors and do things differently they often make mistakes – in fact, mistakes are inevitable. In typical business settings, however, mistakes are covered up and undiscussable.

The people who tell their story in this learning history have made mistakes, and they have also had successes. Those experiences are communicated here. Thus, the learning history workshop seeks to create an opportunity to talk openly about what has been learned, and to extend this discussion into its implications for current and future issues.

When you read this document as a learning history, in preparation for a meeting in which you can discuss its contents, we ask you to do two things.

First, consider it as a vehicle to better conversations.

Read the document in parallel with other members of your team. Plan a couple of hours dedicated to coming together to talk about what you read and how it applies to your current efforts (see "Facilitation Guidelines: Learning History Dissemination Workshop"). As you read the learning history, notice what triggers your emotions – surprise, joy, anger, sadness, fear and so on – and mark those areas in the text so that you can go back to them later. Prepare yourself for how you might talk to your colleagues about your reactions and thoughts in reading this document.

Second, as you read, take on the mindset of a beginner.

Listen to what people say, and wonder why they said what they did. Try to suspend your judgment; don't automatically condemn those who made mistakes, or assume you know why mistakes occurred. Think about how a particular story is similar to and different from issues you have encountered. Come to the workshop prepared to learn with one another about the events which took place, and their implications. Come with questions that might help you understand and empathize with points of view that are very different than your own.

You may find yourself wanting to talk about the material in this learning history with others before the Dissemination Workshop. However, in doing so we ask you to consider that you are dissipating the personal energy you bring to the workshop, energy which will combine with others' in collectively making sense. You also may want to ask other people questions who have not read the document and who will not attend the workshop with you. We ask that you wait until after the workshop to talk with others about the document. If you have found the learning history document and the conversation it generated helpful, you might want to suggest that others read it and form groups for conversation too.

The cover letter invites people to attend the workshop and legitimizes their reactions to the material by asking them to be aware of - and share - those reactions. We recommend that the workshop be facilitated, and that this facilitation be done by someone other than the learning historian. The goals of the facilitator are to help develop a shared understanding of what happened with another team. It is most helpful when the participants of the workshop are an intact team, as the understanding of what happened in the learning history would allow them to develop some collective insights on how issues might affect and apply to them.

In helping groups learn from the learning history, we provide them with our suggestions for facilitation guidelines prior to their coming to the meeting. The following is an example of a document we have used. This document is generally included with the learning history as it is distributed. Other people have taken this material and included it in the cover letter inviting people to the dissemination workshop. If people are aware of the facilitation guidelines for a learning history workshop, they can help bring about the conditions that will aid everyone in their learning process.

Facilitation Guidelines: Learning History Dissemination Workshop

These are the general guidelines we suggest for discussing a learning history.

To make use of the experience captured in a learning history, readers of a learning history need to come together to openly and honestly discuss their reactions to the stories, and the lessons those stories hold for them.

Individuals all have different prior experiences and attitudes. Even when they share a long mutual history, they often perceive events differently. In the complexity of typical business settings, most people don't have the time, tools and common experience to effectively compare their understanding of what happened. The learning history dissemination workshop is a "managerial practice field" where people can come to a shared understanding of learning and change processes.

To reach a shared understanding of a complex process, it is necessary to "slow down" the conversation which people typically have in reacting to the written document. Slowing down the conversation allows people to talk about their perceptions of what happened, their interpretations and attributions, and the suggestions they have for moving forward. Everyone attending the workshop has a responsibility to create conditions that promote learning for themselves and others.

We suggest the following process to facilitate the Learning History workshop. This process is meant to provide general guidelines for the flow of conversation, not a rigid segmentation of what we talk about.

Phase One: "What happened?" and "Why?" The conversation is best initiated when people link their comments to what is written in the learning history. We generally ask people to describe what surprised them. Stick to key events and descriptions, noting issues that involved learning. In particular, where do you find yourself quickly moving to judgments, blaming people for mistakes, wanting to "fix" things, provide expertise, or otherwise intervene in the described situation?

As people talk, they add their own interpretation and attribution to what is written. Often they may be different that what is written in the learning history's left-hand column. How is what was described similar or different from what you experienced? Where do you have very alternate interpretations from what participants (in the right-hand column) or learning historians (in the left-hand column) say? How do notes that people made in left-hand columns compare?

The facilitator will ask where in the text people found themselves reacting in different ways. He will ask exactly what words led to their interpretations. By going back to that text, we can separate the perceptions and judgments people bring to their reactions from those that are found in the learning history.

Phase Two: "So what?" and "What next?" Can generalizations and implications be drawn from this learning history? What are the implications of the experiences portrayed in the learning history for present initiatives? How typical and significant are the alternative interpretations that came up in this workshop? In this phase we link the past with the present and future. What are the important questions for people to think about as they leave the workshop? What responsibility can people in the workshop take for the conditions described? Can we identify in ourselves, or help others see, behavior patterns that limit our options? What will help us all move forward?

The facilitator will be helping individuals and the group consider how their comments link to their responsibilities. What might be the causes of the behavior patterns the group wishes would change, and what responsibility do people have, or could they take, in bringing about desired improvements? The facilitator will also remind the group of time boundaries so that next steps can be planned.

Learning History Dissemination Workshop

In the workshop itself, people come together to talk about what they read, what lessons they draw from it, and how it applies to them. The workshop is conducted in a way which seeks to make visible these multiple reasoning processes. Discussing reasoning processes, or how you think, is not a trivial matter. It requires safety, as well as considerable skill and understanding, on the part of all participants. A facilitator may help with this process, and it is best if participants are familiar with the concepts of working with mental models. We have generally recommended that people have some introduction to organizational learning concepts for participating in dissemination workshops (this can be done as part of a longer workshop, or developmental series of workshops that organizations conduct).

The workshop begins by asking participants what would be necessary for them to openly and honestly discuss their reactions to the stories, and what possible lessons the history holds for them. The cover memo that precedes the learning history manuscript, and invites people to the workshop, emphasizes that as individuals they have a variety of prior experiences and different attitudes. It is important to remind people that the learning history workshop is a form of “managerial practice field,” where people come to develop shared understanding for learning and change processes.

In order to develop a shared understanding of a complex change process, the conversation in which team members react to the written document needs to be carefully “slowed down.” Slowing down the conversation allows people to talk about their perceptions and interpretations of what happened, and how this relates to their thoughts about how to move forward. Everyone attending the workshop, not just the facilitator, is asked to take responsibility for creating the conditions that promote learning for themselves and others.

Slowing down the conversation involves distinguishing between two phases of discussion. The first phase focuses on “what happened” and “why.” People are asked to link their descriptive and interpretative comments to specific text in the learning history. The question, “What surprised you in reading this document?” is often used to start this conversation. Another way to have people talk about what seemed out of the ordinary to them is to ask, “Where did you find yourself quickly making judgments, blaming people for mistakes, wanting to “fix” things, wishing you could have provided expertise, or otherwise wanting to intervene in the situation?” The facilitator asks people exactly where in the text they found themselves reacting. The facilitator grounds people’s comments in the words in the text which led to their reactions. By going directly to text, people’s own reasoning process is separated from the reasoning that is a written part of the history.

As this conversation evolves, people develop a shared description for what happened and a set of plausible alternative interpretations for why events unfolded as they did. The second phase of conversation shifts to diagnosis and implications; it involves asking people to add their own interpretations to what is written. “So what?” and “what’s next?” questions frame and stimulate this discussion. Often people’s interpretations are different from what participants said or what authors wrote. We ask people how what was described compares to their experiences. Where did they have alternative interpretations from what participants (in the right-hand column) or learning historians (in the left-hand column) said? What are the implications of the experiences portrayed in the learning history for present initiatives?

In this second phase of conversation, the past is linked to the present and the future. What questions can people think about as they leave the workshop? Can people identify in themselves, or help others see, behavioral patterns described in the learning history that apply to their own team? The facilitator asks the team and its members to consider how critical comments about the teams described in the learning history speak to their own conditions. What might be the causes of the behavior patterns the team wishes could change, and what responsibility could they take in bringing about those desired improvements?

The particular evolution and use of learning history dissemination workshops depends upon how it fits into an organization's overall developmental process. For example, what is the organization's objectives in initiating learning processes, and how can they evolve given the particular cultural peculiarities of the organization? The workshop itself and the depth of inquiry it is able to obtain depends upon facilitator skills as well as participants' familiarity, skill and comfort with mental model and learning concepts.

Current efforts are underway to bring the process of creating and using learning histories into the realm of the boarder territory of organizational reflection. These initiatives include using experiential workshop techniques to facilitate people's awareness of their own automatic thinking processes, and helping them use that awareness to slow down their normal reactions.

Reflection on Field Experiences

In thinking about the dissemination workshop, in some sense a culminating moment in learning history work, it is worthwhile to reflect on the process as a whole, its objectives, and its implications for organizations.

A learning history is a process for capturing, assessing and diffusing improvement experiences in organizations. It is also a document that helps an organization listen to “what it is trying to tell itself” about its own learning and change efforts. They are in-depth oral histories, with commentaries, that help an organization's people learn more effectively from changes that some parts of a company have been through. In the organizations we work with, we help people cultivate and codify their collective judgment of their progress, and as they develop their judgment, apply that learning to new initiatives. What we have learned about organizational reflection in the process of doing learning histories means that anyone doing anything in an organization can be more effective by learning how to make use of the judgment they already have in their organization.

Organization can only be as effective as the people who make them up. They are comprised of individuals, yet an organization's effectiveness depends upon how much its capabilities exceed the sum of its people's capabilities. We view a business organization as an assembly of people working to achieve collective goals while attaining individual benefits. What holds an organization together is the common understanding of its people. As people collectively learn, they develop shared understanding for each other and their tasks. How well the organization as an entity functions depends upon the relationships among individuals, and how those relationships affect the abilities of individuals to work collectively. The structure of those relationships holds the judgment for how an organization operates and what is and is not effective. By engaging the people in the organization in reflecting upon their own and other's improvement efforts, we help individuals refine their judgment, and in so doing build understanding that strengthens relationships and cultivates the judgment of the organization as a whole.

Currently, there are almost a dozen learning history projects underway. In working with companies we no longer talk about “assessing” learning efforts. Instead, we talk about capturing the history of the learning process. This approach has been highly successful in gaining support for project documentation efforts. This new language has changed the tenor of assessing projects. People at all levels want to share what they have learned. They want others to know what they have done—not in a self-serving fashion, but so others know what worked and what didn’t work. They want to tell their story.

Only a handful of dissemination workshops have been conducted to date. Many of them have been within the organizations about which the learning history is written. The learning histories have raised significant issues, and as the organizations struggle with the implications of those issues, they have been reluctant to make the document available to other companies. At some level this phenomena can be seen as an indicator of success. The opportunities for learning that arise from collectively considering mistakes are a powerful motivation for changing future behaviors. However, not all people who have been part of the learning effort - especially proponents of learning histories - have remained in the employ of the companies where those efforts took place.

In the projects where learning histories have been written and used, people’s response was not as unanimously positive to the document as was their reception to the reflective interviews. Some people in the organization are enthusiastic about the portrayal of the learning process, others, particularly managers promoting learning efforts and their consultants, have been “disturbed” by what the learning history says. Two major causes for this reaction have been identified. First is the consideration that learning efforts have been based on ideas of individual and shared vision as the motivating force for changes. The documentation of historical conditions reveals why the organization needs to change, something that proponents of learning are already intimately familiar with. Learning efforts are focused on possible futures, not on an undesirable past. The learning history puts the problems of the past and present in stark contrast with the ideals for a future. The second cause for dissatisfaction relates to managers’ desire for prescriptive histories. They don’t just want to be told what happened and how people think about it, they want to know what to do. More theoretical lenses, such as causal loop diagrams, which map the forces at play have been requested from the researchers. People want researchers to move from documenting events to include more synthesis, analysis and recommendations.

These reactions have caused concern and questioning of the learning history process. We are in the process of testing the different reactions to learn more about the perceived difficulties. Although individuals say what they say in reflective interviews, approve their quotes once in isolation and later again in context, the messages for the organization are difficult to hear. It is not clear what the implications of these reactions are for learning histories. What does the reaction say about the learning history itself and what does the reaction say about the people and the organization? In a number of cases there is evidence that managers expected the learning history to provide only the learning process highlights, in essence, what people in the organization were telling proponents of the effort. Was the learning history expected to be a recording of great achievements — creating a legacy for the managers and consultants that led the change efforts? What is the tolerance of organizations to read about their own mis-steps and false starts along the road of learning and development? Does the age-old adage, “history is written by the victor,” have an implication in these situations?

Although the learning project process may be a new method for stimulating organizational change, the organizations studied to date are not unique. Their experiences are generalizable to all organizations. Kurt Lewin, the father of action research, is known for the theory that only by attempting to change a system does one demonstrate any real level of understanding of that system (Schein, 1985: 22). A learning history reflects back to the organization its own character, based on what the learning intervention revealed. The metaphor of a bell (visualize a large bell, like the Philadelphia Liberty Bell) helps explain this. A bell may be struck by a variety of objects. The force from those objects reveals the character of the bell in that it rings only at a frequency inherent to its own internal, physical characteristics. Different objects and the force by which they strike the bell affect the sound volume produced, but not the character or frequency of the sound. In a similar way, a learning intervention reveals the character of an organization. Perhaps the learning intervention has been particularly effective in producing a loud tone which more clearly reveals an organization’s important characteristics. Once those characteristics are revealed, they can be understood. The organization will have gained a new awareness, and an opportunity to change more effectively.

Is the resistance to the message of the learning history like the phenomena of holding up a mirror to one's face? Whenever we look in a brightly lit mirror our initial impression may not be one of approval. We may be critical of our appearance, and in the bright light of a mirror, notice blemishes and imperfections we don't normally see. Not only don't we care to see them, often we forget we have them, and that damn mirror is a sharp reminder of reality. Does this metaphor of the mirror apply to organizations? Is a learning history that damn mirror? Do most managers want to believe that their organizations are functioning better than they truly are? Is what people say to learning historians really what the organization needs to hear?

14. Publication and outreach

“The particular details of a company’s learning efforts are part of universal managerial behavioral patterns.”

This statement is the compelling reason for a boarder outreach of learning history work. As we learn more about the process by which organizations improve, and the challenges they face, we continue to find patterns which are common across many organizations. To some extent, this should not come as a surprise, yet it always seems to be shock to everyone working within organizational settings. The issues which they have faced in dealing with their specific issues always seem to be both so unique and palpable that they are reluctant to see how they would have value to others. And since openly discussing both challenges and successes, and developing insights from those discussions, are rarely encouraged, peopel fail to see any value in sharing their efforts.

Yet, as the experience in publishing the AutoCo learning history has shown, spelling out the details of particular situations reveals that they have much in common with what is happening elsewhere. These detailed descriptions of changes, when told from multiple perspectives in the voice of participants, provide a significant opportunity for broader learning and industrial improvement. The AutoCo learning history is a disguised case of a learning initiative at an automobile, and people from each of the big three American automobile manufacturers who have read this case have claimed that it is about their company.

It is not surprising that the same behavior patterns are common across large American corporations. Not only are the firms themselves part of the larger industrial infrastructure, but the people that are working in them are from similar communities, have been brought up with common traditions, and received their educations at the schools, colleges and universities whose teachers or faculty all practice a standard pedagogy. We are all part of a common social fabric, one from which we take our identifies, and which provides the context for behaviors which are sanctioned and acceptable.

Many people in business settings have had the experience of going to training programs which teach new skills and offer insights that seem like they will be valuable. However, when you get back to your normal workplace, the insights you have had, new skills you have learned, and changes you have experienced are difficult to carry out and hold onto. You want to act and behave in ways that are more effective, yet as only one person entangled in many different webs of relationships with others, you soon find that while you think you are different and have changed, no one else does. The pressures for conformity you experience soon overwhelm the enthusiasm and capacity you may have felt you had to be different.

People whose efforts at developing new skills have led to personal growth have a tendency to want share their experience with others. This is particularly true for individuals who have spent great portions of their lives in technical domains, like engineering, finance, operations and research. Their experience with education and learning has been in the realm of learning new theories, facts and methods that are technical in nature, based on the physical sciences, and manifestations of a mechanistic view of how the world operates. As they are exposed to principles and “soft” ideas from the social sciences they may find that world view challenged. Their new awareness may be so powerful that they find themselves proselytizing to others.

The impact on people around them is not always good. It is not easy to take. In fact, one often wonders if these people are doing this to convince themselves. Their skills and awareness are still those of a novice, and so what they describe often seems to more or less be common sense. The explicit message is that they had a problem, and have dealt with it. The implicit message is that by virtue of association, you have that problem too and could really benefit by learning something new. Yet, their revelations and new understandings may not be valued by others in their work settings. This makes offering unwanted implicit advice all that much more difficult.

In business settings, people do not talk about their inabilities to improve before they start. They want to talk about what they accomplished once they are successful. Even when awareness of problems or the realization of mistakes were the genesis for significant improvement initiatives, it is not the problem or mistake, but the awareness and realization that is openly discussed.

Businesses are much like individuals in their experience of change. Beyond being made up of people and relationship among them, as organizational entities they too struggle with changing effectively. As collectives they have difficulty admitting mistakes, changing the pattern of their behaviors within their network of investor, customer and supplier relationships and being able to talk about the process elements of improvements.

A foundational principle of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning has been the need for a consortium of companies to work together to be able to effect fundamental changes in managerial practices. These large companies have common core processes and systems that are so accepted as the sanctioned methods of conducting work that they are taken for granted. The efforts to create transformative organizational change and improvement requires a fundamental alteration in the thinking and management processes of these organizations. Any one company has great difficulties in making changes without some reference to other firms that are held up as legitimate and are also using similar approaches. Each company also needs a point of reference outside itself from which to learn. Like individuals, when a collection of companies undertake a common process to change, they provide a level of support and a capability for learning from one another.

The need for a public sharing of company improvement initiatives is what led us to seek publication outlets for learning histories. There has naturally been a great demand among companies directly participating in the MIT OLC research efforts to learn from one another. This learning has been greatly dependent upon the network of relationships that individuals from various companies have created. The knowledge that has been gained this way has started as, and mostly remained as, tacit. People have gained insights for their own efforts from in-depth (often late night) conversations, company visits, and reciprocated presentations. These mechanisms, while highly personally satisfying, have been time and resource intensive. In a way they can perhaps seen as largely ineffective as a broader process for creating new knowledge on learning and change in organizations. And, without the operation of a larger knowledge creation process, the abilities of individual corporations to sustain their improvement efforts will be limited. The network of investor, customer and supplier relationship will inevitably push for an isomorphism that drives innovations into a more broadly understood and routine form.

An organization which allows its learning histories to be published (although in disguised form) also gains value. As the learning history is received in a public managerial audience, the particular dimensions of an organization's issues are projected into the general management realm. This allows people in the organization to recognize that their issues have generic significance. Feedback on how others approach similar situations will provide creative insights that would not have been recognized from an exclusively internal perspective. Also, as many people have learned who employ outside consultants and experts, large organizations and their management can often be more effectively influenced by seemingly "fresh" outsider views than by the suggestions of insiders. The format of the learning history is to engage people in the complexity of the issues in learning and change. By virtue of its publication outside the firm, learning efforts and the issues they raise will be perceived with greater credibility by those "inside."

A learning history captures a learning process as it is perceived by its participants. Learning is not an outcome, it is a process. The journey of that process, and details about the salient context in which it takes place, is what people require as they consider undertaking these efforts. The learning history, when read by others, is a presentation of the experience of that journey. And, much like traveling to foreign lands, the traveler has a better appreciation for their own situation when they return, insights about what might be possible, and an awareness of what is taken for granted.

We offer the proposal we are presently using to initiate a publication venue for learning histories as a way of illustrating how we articulate the value of learning histories for general audiences. We expect that we will soon be able to talk more concretely about publication, both in having the first volume in the series completed, and the basic guidelines for the series available.

Proposal: The Learning History Library

Managers and students of management have produced a plethora of theories about the critical factors that allow organizations to learn or change. Managers are also inundated with case studies of real-life businesses facing the stress of transformation or reinvention. But we still do not understand what happens when part of an organization transforms itself.

That's because there has been no effective way to tell the stories in a way that truly allows the reader to learn from what has gone on in the past. Conventional management treatises and case studies, produced by business schools, keep most of the human element of a business story at a distance. They capture the “numbers” and even some of the personal dynamics, but focus on only one or two perspectives, and filter everything through the viewpoint of the “expert” storyteller. Journalistic reports, by contrast, are immersed in gossip and personality, often with very little information about the financial, political, and business forces which affected the people in a corporate transformation.

Until now, there has been no place to go to relive the experience of an innovative team, or to experience what it's like to work in organization struggling for its life, *as seen from the point of view of the participants themselves*.

That is why we want to propose a new publication series — of a new kind of oral history, describing real-life events with universal ramifications, edited for tight and compelling drama, with ongoing commentary. This publication is written to allow individuals to reflect on the story of another company and move forward in their own organizations.

For the past two years, we have been producing exactly this sort of document, and call them “Learning Histories.” They have been invaluable tools in a variety of business corporations and non-profit institutions (automotive, electronics, manufacturing, petro-chemical, telecommunications and educational organizations). Now we would like to make the same documents available to a wider audience, by augmenting, producing, and publishing one or two learning histories per year. We think that the thousands of people interested in organizational change and organizational behavior will find them to be compelling and unique resources for learning.

Learning histories are compelling because the story of change is captured in the voices of the people, as they describe the intellectual and emotional challenges involved in letting go of old ways to embrace new opportunities. They provide the description of what happened, who was involved, what they were thinking, and how their efforts did or did not achieve their expectations. People enmeshed in organizational transformations, reading learning histories, will see that they are not alone.

What is a “Learning History?”

A learning history is a document used to help organizations evaluate their own efforts to learn and change, and to keep from reinventing the wheel. This document tells its story in the words of participants — people who initiated an organizational change effort, implemented it, or were skeptical but involved with it.

A learning history is full of specific details. It describes how members of an innovative team achieved their aims (or didn't): how people learned to collectively inquire in new ways, how new insights were generated, what went wrong, and how a team produced results. Each learning history is a microcosm of organizational experience.

Consider, for example, the “AutoCo” learning history included in this proposal. It recounts the story of 300 engineers at a Detroit “Big Three” auto firm, who were charged with meeting the typical “impossible” deadlines to get a vehicle out the door. The “Epsilon” team resolved to finish the car launch without the costly and destructive last-minute “heroic” efforts that had dominated most automobile introductions in the past. Along the way they discovered that this meant not only developing new management techniques and a “systemic” understanding of their work, but recreating their interrelationships with each other and with the rest of the company. For instance, top leaders of the team had to learn to say explicitly, “I don't trust you,” to troubled subordinates instead of keeping those feelings hidden in the name of group harmony. Perennial rivals from different groups, working on different systems of the car, had to learn to work together to figure out how to share the power from the car's battery. Everyone on the team had to learn, in one way or another, to change the way they thought about deadlines, mistakes, and each other.

Teams throughout “AutoCo,” throughout the American auto industry, and throughout all of the manufacturing industries, face the same challenge today. How can they accomplish impossible goals without sacrificing themselves to the company? How can they marry their aspirations to their work? The Epsilon story shows how a process of product development cannot be reshaped by one or two people alone. Reflection and constructive conversation must be modeled by senior leaders, and a critical mass of people must “buy in” to a less combative, more collaborative process.

To date, most learning histories have been commissioned by the organizations themselves, in order that the rest of the organization can learn more broadly from its own efforts. But these learning histories tackle universal subjects that conventional reports ignore: The clashes between different groups within the organization, the misunderstandings and miscommunications that hobble performance, and the varying points of view about the future direction of the enterprise. A learning history thus represents the organization talking to itself, in a safe and carefully structured way, about the things it needs to hear but hasn’t yet listened to.

Now, with this series, we will offer this dialogue for the benefit of the rest of the world.

Learning Histories at the Present Moment

Organizations already know what they need to hear, but if they have not learned to listen, their history is destined to repeat itself.

These days, people in most organizations are involved in many different change efforts — transformational leadership, re-engineering projects, and learning initiatives. The participants know the pitfalls that befall them, the value of their experiments, and how the rest of the organization could benefit from their experience. However, people in organizations lack a way to reflect on their story collaboratively, to talk about it effectively, to consider its implications and to communicate its “learnings” to others. Managers express this desire when they say, “We need time to reflect,” or “We need what we say communicated to others,” or, “We don’t want to reinvent the wheel.” How, they ask, do we get one part of an organization to learn from another? How do we keep from making the same mistakes over and over?

“If there had not been a learning history at our company,” said a participant at one project, “the learning effort would have stopped with the end of the pilot team. People would have dispersed and said it was good. Or that it was bad. There was data to support both points of view.” Instead, he continued, the learning effort was put in perspective. Rather than hearing about it in scattered conversations, people in the rest of the company could see a comprehensive report, making sense of the project and its legacy.

With the publication of a learning history in a book series, people in other companies can have the same opportunity. Each learning history will become a critical addition to our common knowledge about what happens to organizations that attempt deliberate change.

The Structure and Format of a Learning History

“From many perspectives, all speaking in turn, here is how we saw the story.”

Like veterans of a battle sitting around a campfire after the event, each person has his or her piece of the story to tell. The learning history lets them speak directly to the reader — in the same manner as Jean Stein's best-selling biographies of Edie Sedgwick and Robert F. Kennedy, which told their stories through interwoven, tightly edited clips from interviews. A similar approach was successfully employed for telling business stories in the best-selling *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Peter Senge, et al, Doubleday/Currency).

But the learning history does not stop with the story. With the "campfire story," there is also independent commentary and perspective. This "interpretive material" includes comments about how the quotes were gathered and chosen, whether they are typical or distinctive, why they may be significant, and what has been left out of the final draft. It also includes questions that help managers apply the lessons of the transformation effort to their own situation.

There are also contextual introductions, which set the stage for different parts of the learning history, and sidebars to provide details about particular digressions referred to in the story. For instance, in the "AutoCo" learning history, a senior management team sorts out its preliminary ideas with a technique borrowed from the Total Quality movement. A sidebar on the learning history explains the technique and shows the particular conclusions developed by the senior management team.

All of these components are written succinctly and directly. We want each learning history to have a Studs Turkel-esque flavor; all the interviews in the context of the drama of organizational change will have a gritty, direct approach.

The beginning of each Learning History book will offer a thematic overview, summarizing the key themes of the story and why managers will find them significant. This “executive report” will be written by Art Kleiner and George Roth, the editors of the series. At the back of each Learning History will be a series of “reflective commentaries” by prominent management authorities; these will set the story in historical context.

For the “AutoCo,” learning history, we have arranged commentaries by George Roth (MIT), Rosabeth Moss Kanter (Harvard Business School) and Peter Senge (MIT, author of *The Fifth Discipline*.) Their brief essays will comment on the events and ramifications of the story, and also bring in their perspectives (respectively) of Action Research, Change Strategy, and Systems Thinking. Written for managers, these commentaries will be readable and direct. Each Learning History, including introductory overview and “reflective commentaries,” will be 100 to 150 pages long. Each will be a small hard-covered book, designed to sit next to each other on a shelf as volumes of an elite series.

Intellectual roots of the Learning History

The Learning History evolved as a synthesis of several previously unrelated disciplines. From management journalism (particularly the sort of journalism in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*) and from oral history/ethnography came an understanding of how to present complex business stories for a variety of audiences. From "action research" and "process consultation" (two key forms of organizational intervention) came techniques for increasing the reflective capability of everyone who comes in contact with the learning history: Interviewees, champions, readers and the learning historians themselves. From social science research came a rigorous approach to guaranteeing the validity of the learning history's "data," even after heavy editing. From theater and myth came an appreciation for bringing forth archetypal stories, to make the team's journey real. Finally, from anthropology came a basic attitude about the role of the learning historian.

We have adopted ethnographer John van Maanen's categorization of the "jointly-told tale" to help us cope effectively with the fact that our audience is also our subject.³¹ Because conventional anthropologists (and business researchers) "assess" the organizations they study; there is an underlying assumption that the researcher remains separate from the culture being studied. By contrast, in a "jointly told tale," the subject and the writer interweave the story as mutual narrators.

A jointly-told tale *belongs* to the subject as much as it belongs to the writer. The "natives" use the anthropologist as a medium through which they speak directly to the reader. At the same time, the anthropologist includes his or her own reactions, so that the reader can detect and distinguish any biases that have entered into the narrative.

We think this is an essential approach to business literature, where the readers are very similar to the people under study. It is important to include a wide variety of viewpoints — enough to give the learning history the breadth of perspective of, say, *Roshamon*, *Citizen Kane*, or *The Alexandria Quartet*. No individual view, not even that of top managers, can encompass more than a fraction of what actually happens in a real organization. People in different parts of organizations develop local explanations for events. These descriptions, interpretations and explanations often become rigid and closed to outside inquiry; as often as not, they take the form of: "It's someone's fault." This point of view, in turn, influences what these people notice in the future. Thus, as Chris Argyris has noted, the mental map (with which participants made sense of the territory) becomes confused with the territory itself.³²

If each perspective is reported in a coherent and respectful way, readers of the learning history see thinking similar to their own captured and compared alongside reports from others who think differently. The learning history thus makes visible a story that has been collectively hidden. When participants discover that their own points of views are treated fairly in the learning history, it becomes easier for them to understand the many other perspectives that make up the learning effort.

³¹ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (1988: University of Chicago Press).

³² Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* (1990: Boston, Allyn & Bacon).

The learning history includes descriptions of *the underlying assumptions and reasoning* that led to people's actions. In this way, the unwritten but powerful tacit knowledge and undiscussable myths are brought to the surface where they are exposed to the reaction of other readers. For this reason, we sometimes describe learning histories as an equivalent to face-to-face dialogue.

All this allows the learning historian a far greater thematic range, while the story remains steeped in the "data" of real conversation and reflection. After observing the way that learning histories provide a record of a working group's varied assumptions and attitudes, action research pioneer Chris Argyris noted that the learning history "may become to action science what the microscope was to bacteriology."

THE MIT LEARNING HISTORY EFFORT

To our knowledge, the first full-scale learning history effort began in October, 1993 at the MIT Sloan School Center for Organizational Learning (MIT-COL). About a dozen companies were involved in one or another form of "learning effort" — attempts to galvanize a team's performance by sparking an awareness of systems and mental models. Now these companies wanted to know: "How can we evaluate our success thus far?"

But evaluating a learning effort is not easy. Imagine, for example, that you have been involved with a breakthrough effort to talk freely and openly about the assumptions and misunderstandings underlying your work. Perhaps for the first time in years, you have been able to bring up touchy and dangerous criticisms of your colleagues, in a way that leads people to understand them constructively. Now you are asked to fill out a survey: What has been achieved here? Someone is going to take this information and evaluate, and make decisions about, your group. You feel that your promotions, bonuses, and potential rewards depend upon your answers to this survey.

There will be a strong temptation for you to try hard to make yourself, your team, and your effort look good. Any "unfinished business" that might lead to further learning will be swept under the rug. Any attempt to judge your "level of learning" against the efforts of other teams will lead to competition between them. Experimentation and colloquy will decline; instead, people will inevitably try to perform for the evaluation. Any learning that you gained in the effort may well be forgotten. Not only will other teams be unable to build on your experience, but your own team will tend to backslide.

Knowing this, George Roth, the MIT-COL Research Director, initiated a new mechanism to tell the stories of the learning efforts to date. He was determined to find a way to report on ongoing organizational learning work without killing its positive effects in the process. Shortly after beginning the project, he recruited Art Kleiner to help. Kleiner had worked closely with MIT-COL director Peter Senge as consulting editor on *The Fifth Discipline* and editorial director of *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. In these projects, Kleiner had wrestled with the same question: How could he report on learning efforts for these books and avoid killing the learning they involved?

Roth and Kleiner (the authors of this proposal) resolved to tell the stories in the participants' own words — a form that worked successfully in the “cameos” sprinkled throughout the *Fieldbook*. But they also knew that this form would require more commentary than the *Fieldbook* allowed. So they set out to design a format that would show readers how the narrative was selected, and that would reveal their biases as learning historians. The idea was that, this way, no one would feel manipulated by the selection process.

Together they developed the “jointly-told tale,” and a series of graphic formats for representing multiple perspectives (including their own observations) on the printed page. Then they gathered an ongoing group of “learning historian pioneers,” and initiated about ten projects. These early learning histories were read, studied, critiqued and reworked by the learning historian pioneers group.

After about two years, they began to feel that learning histories were of a high quality, enough to be of interest to the general business audience. They began to assemble the necessary permission from the companies who had commissioned the learning histories to release them.

At the same time, they began to develop learning histories for clients outside the bounds of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning. As their scope and interest expanded, they created Reflection Learning Associates as a vehicle for producing learning histories for clients. At the same time, the MIT work evolved into the “Learning History Research Project.” Under that aegis, they have published a set of guidelines for learning history for whoever might undertake it.

Audience

Any manager engaged in transformation work would be an audience for the learning history series. As an example, look at the attached *AutoCo* learning history: its story is of universal interest to any manager trying to improve development and manufacturing operations.

The Learning Histories provide an accessible source of data for business school faculty, researchers, and students. They will tap into the difficult issues and situations that form the core of contemporary management research.

Our experience with corporate managers shows that they find it far easier to read a learning history than a formal report, or even a management book. The narrative, told by participants, draws them into the story; the interpretive remarks give the readers immediate ways to apply the story to their own experience.

We expect a ready-made audience to be aware of the learning history form. *Fifth Discipline* author Peter Senge has been talking about learning histories in many of his speeches in the last few years. (He extolled the “AutoCo” learning history in a national teleconference appearance with Tom Peters and Steven Covey in September, 1996.) We are also developing a series of lecture/workshops on the subject. For example, there was a well-attended learning history “track” at the 1996 and 1997 Systems Thinking in Action Conferences, the preeminent conference in the learning organization field. Finally, there will be material on the learning history concept in the new Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, and on the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook and MIT-COL web sites.

Anyone interested in organizational learning will want to read about how others have progressed in their efforts. We estimate that each learning history will sell at least 20,000 copies during its first few years.

How a Learning history is created

Each learning history in the series will emerge from a funded project, either supported by a client company or a foundation grant. In each case, the learning history will have been designed to answer questions about a particular corporate change or learning effort.

Between 50 and 150 people are interviewed for each learning history. Their quotes are “distilled” into a variety of concepts, which then become the basis for thematic “short stories” within the framework of the overall story. In AutoCo, for example, we ended up with six key themes, from the need for managers to “model” the learning behavior they espoused (theme no. 2), to the difficulties they faced in confronting the entrenched culture of the larger organization (theme no. 6), to the evolution of a technical innovation (theme no. 4).

The learning history is distilled by a small team of “insiders” and “outsiders” — people who work for the organization being studied, and people who come in as consultants. This mix gives the learning history more relevance than either group could provide on its own.

After the learning history is written, it is extensively fact-checked. Although all quotes are anonymous, people are given permission to rewrite their quotes. The “learning historian” retains a presence in the left-hand column, as the author of commentary and perspective that complements the narrative. Finally, the document as a whole is validated by having original participants read it and comment on its accuracy and pertinence.

After it is approved for use within the company, closely knit “dissemination workshops” are held. Selected managers read the learning history in small groups, and talk about its implications for their part of the business. Their insights and concerns are noted, and become adapted into the “left-hand column” of the final draft.

An extensive approval process is generally required before the learning history is released for public distribution. During this time, senior managers from the organization have an opportunity to consider the learning history’s final draft; so do key participants in the original episodes that it describes. We have found that a careful review process does not constrict the learning history; instead, it makes the final report deeper and richer.

The Publication Series

We will produce one or two learning histories in this series per year. We are willing to make a commitment to produce a certain number, if that is required. But we would like to contract for each separately.

Appendix A: Three anthropological models

The ethnographer collects the data to understand the way natives make sense of their culture, and makes assessments and reports on what he or she finds. Coming from its origins in anthropology, ethnographers report to their peers, providing assessments of culture, often in ways which are so sophisticated that they are only understood by other ethnographers.

In researching ethnographic models for writing learning histories, we relied heavily on John van Maanen's categories. In his book *Tales of the Field*,³³ van Maanen labels four types of anthropological stories:

The "realistic" ethnography.

"Here is the objective truth as we found it."

The writer ventures into a remote locale and present the "truth" found there, as if there is only one truth. The writer has no presence in the story; anyone coming to that site, it is implied, would have seen the same thing. In business writing, one of the primary realists is Rosabeth Moss Kanter. Consider this passage from *When Giants Learn to Dance*:

³³ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (1988: University of Chicago Press).

In 1987, more than forty coalitions between Ford Motor Company and outside commercial entities were identified by Harvard professor Malcolm Salter. There were more than eight thousand person-visits by U.S.-based Ford employees to Japan — and so much traffic between Detroit and Tokyo in general that many U.S.-Tokyo flights now originate in Detroit rather than Chicago.... These relationships with “blurred boundaries,” to use Joseph Badaracco’s term, overlay or even replace market relationships with organizational ones, often creating close, even intimate connections between separate organizations.... At Eastman Kodak, one of its suppliers staffs and runs a Kodak office supply room...

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Note the objective tone, the moving back and forth between concrete detail (flights originating in Detroit) and abstract conclusion (replacing market relationships), with little substantiation for some of the main points. What we want to take from the Realist style is the willingness to draw conclusions, make them explicit, and buttress them with detail -- while making sure the reader sees that there are many ways to look at the story.

The “confessional” tale

“I went to the remote locale, here is what happened to me, and here is how I changed.”

The entire story is deliberately given from the subjective point of view of the writer. “I went to the remote locale, here is what happened to me, and here is how I changed.” As van Maanen remarks, the confessional tale evolved as a response to aspersions cast on the realist tale — a way to “explicitly demystify fieldwork or participant-observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field.” Few pieces are entirely confessional, but many ethnographies have confessional elements, in which the anthropologist comes out from behind the curtain, and in first-person language explains how he or she conducted the research, built up confidence in the “natives,” and developed an understanding. Perhaps the most widely read business “confessional” writer is Tom Peters (although he is primarily a “realistic” writer, people tend to remember the “confessional” parts). Here’s a segment from his *Liberation Management*:

³⁴ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *When Giants Learn to Dance* (1989: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone), page 120.

Let's just consider the origins of the Mrs. Fields' enterprise, which was launched just four blocks from my Palo Alto office. I've visited that premier location more than once — many, many times more. Mrs. F. makes great, yummy, gooey, sinful, chocolately chocolate-chip cookies. And I think I can picture young Debbi Fields at the stove in the early days, smeared with chocolate, smacking her lips, revising the recipe over and over again, trying to figure out how to jam even MORE chocolate into her little calorie bombs.... What I CANNOT imagine is Debbi F. turning to her husband and future business partner, Randy, at the end of another day of struggle, and saying, "I made great progress, hon, toward my six-sigma cookie goal." Can you?.... Reduce to zero the odds of something going wrong and you'll also reduce to zero the odds of anything interesting happening. My Sunday was a fine, six-sigma day -- error-free, that is. Another 1,500 Sundays like that and, actuarially speaking, I'll be perfectly dead.³⁵

Note that Tom Peters' personality and temperament is as much a subject of the story as the things he writes about. The reader identifies with his perspective, his new understanding, his skepticism and his love of chocolate. His presence overwhelms the fact that his book is essentially a "clip job," in which he largely gets his facts from published sources.

The "impressionist" ethnography

"If you were there, you would have felt this way."

A third form, which van Maanen calls "impressionist," tells the reader how it feels to be a member of the group under study -- how it feels to be a Maori or Trobriand Islander or member of the Los Angeles police force. Using literary techniques, the ethnographer spins a tale which reads like fiction, and which transports the reader to the locale under study. Like a good novel, a good impressionist ethnography quickens the heartbeat and twangs an empathetic chord. The best business example we know is a book by Earl Shorris called *Scenes From Corporate Life (The Politics of Middle Management)*. A magazine writer and manager at an ad agency, Shorris fictionalized his stories, changing key identifying features so that he would not harm peoples' careers. He attests that the main themes and stories are intact.

³⁵ Tom Peters, *Liberation Management: Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties* (1992: Alfred A. Knopf), pages 689-690.

The national rollout began in September. Sales were as expected at wholesale and the product moved off the shelves even faster than predicted. He had been purposely conservative. He understood company politics, he had ambitions. Suddenly, sales of the wax stopped....

He sat in his office, day after day, staring at the walls, examining the brightly colored, optimistic picture he had requested. The nice memos no longer arrived in the mail. People he met in the halls and in the dining room had little to say to him. Something was wrong with the product, he was certain, but he did not know what. He took bottle after bottle off the shelf in his office, trying them on various kinds of wood and wood finishes. In every case, the magic wax worked....

He took the family to his in-laws' house in Vermont for the Christmas holiday. It had promised to be a week of skiing and good times in the big A-frame house, but he had no spirit. The whole family felt his distress. The children fought and cried, his wife caught cold. To cheer him, his mother-in-law bought a bottle of the magic wax at the supermarket near the ski lodge. Immediately upon coming home with the groceries she went to the living room of the house and sprayed all of the wood floor that was not covered with rugs.

When he came into the room to accept congratulations for the magic wax that saved his mother-in-law from polishing the wood floors, he saw it. Near the fireplace the floor shone and near the front door it was covered with a gray film, as if someone had laid a very thin sheet of waxed paper over the wood. He knelt down near the door and touched the gray film. It felt as smooth as the rest of the floor. He tried to wipe it away with his fingers, then he tried to polish it away with his handkerchief. After a long time he was able to rub the wax away, leaving the floor dull and unpolished.

Something had gone wrong in the plant. The product needed heat to work. The exothermic reaction he had felt in the lab had been lost in the reformulation that had brought down the cost. He was standing on a disaster. All around the country there were floors turning gray as winter touched them. He stood there for a very long time, looking down at the floor. He did not know what to do. He was glad the floor did not shine in the place where he looked, because he did not want to see his own face.³⁶

This story takes on pungency when read aloud. It can be very powerful. It gets its power from its deliberately dramatic language and sweep of perspective: “All around the country there were floors turning gray as winter touched them.” Impressionist stories like this give us a beginning of a model for dramatic rendition: a way to make the learning experiences (and frustrations) of our learning teams vibrant enough that other people can appreciate the change that is involved in this work.

All three of these main forms of ethnographic writing, however, are unsatisfactory at heart. All three of them keep the *writer* distant from the *subject*, and both writer and subject distant from the *reader*. In our learning histories, the populations of writer, subject, and reader will overlap. That is why we turned to John van Maanen’s fourth suggested form, mentioned briefly at the back of his book: The “Jointly Told Tale.”

³⁶ Earl Shorris, *Scenes from Corporate Life: The Politics of Middle Management*, (1981: Anchor Press/Doubleday), pages 296-297.

Appendix B: Learning History Articles

The following articles are publically available, or available as working papers from the MIT OLC (tel 617/253-9815). They can also be viewed, down-loaded or ordered through the MIT OLC web site (<http://learning.mit.edu>).

“Learning about Organizational Learning - Creating a Learning History” by George Roth and Art Kleiner (working paper).

“Learning Histories: “Assessing” the Learning Organization” by George Roth and Art Kleiner in The Systems Thinker Vol. 6, No. 4, May 1995.

"Learning Histories: Using a new form of document to assess and facilitate organizational learning" by George Roth (working paper) January 26, revised May 3, 1996.

“The Learning Initiatives at the AutoCo Epsilon Program, 1991-1994,” by George Roth and Art Kleiner (working paper) May 9, 1996

Examples of learning history like materials:

Documents:

- “Folk Theories of Home Heat Control” by Willett Kempton - valve and feedback theory to explain operation of thermostat and behavioral records, and interviews.
- History of Merchant Ivory - making of films, historian narrative with commentary of the producer on what the historian said in the margin.
- **Jointly-told tales:**
 - Stein, Jean, with George Plimpton, Edie (An American Biography) - biography of Edie Sedwick (Other biographies - Robert Kennedy, Chuck Yeager as written that way)
 - "The Pro-Life Narratives" in Ginsburg, Faye D., Contested Lives (The Abortion Debate in an American Community), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 172-180.
 - "The Past" in Crapanzano, Vincent, Waiting (The Whites of South Africa), New York: Random House, 1985, pp. 48-71.
- "Consequential Heresies: How `Thinking the Unthinkable' Changed Royal Dutch/Shell," by Kleiner, Art, Emeryville, CA: Global Business Network, 1990.

Additional References:

- Argyris, C. (1990), **Overcoming Organizational Defenses**, Prentice-Hall, New York, NY.
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Appendix C: Organizational Learning Research Papers

“From Theory to Practice: Research Territory, Process and Structure at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning” by George Roth and Peter Senge, Journal of Change Management, Vol. 9, Iss. 1., 1996.

“Building a Learning Organization,” by David Garvin, Harvard Business Review, July-August, pp. 78-91, 1993.

Appendix D: Supplemental Readings

In teaching people to do learning history work, we use and recommend the following readings:

Designing Research Process -- Beginning to “Breath In”

“Introduction” Chapters 1 in Case Study Research, by R. Yin, 1994, pp. 1-17.

Qualitative Data Analysis by Miles and Huberman (1994) pg. 9 - 15. (Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis, The Nature of Qualitative Data, Our View of Qualitative Data Analysis)

“Getting In, Getting On, Getting Out, and Getting Back” by David Buchanan, David Boddy, and James McCalman in Doing Research in Organizations ed. by A. Bryman, London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 53-67.

Getting the Data!

“Conducting Case Studies: Collecting the Evidence” Chapter 4 in Case Study Research, by R. Yin, 1994, pp. 78 - 101.

"Interviewing an Informant" by James Spradley from The Ethnographic Interview, Harcourt, Brace, Janovich College Publishers, 1979, 55-68.

“Preparation for the Interviewing Project” Chapter 2 from Recording Oral History (A practical guide for social scientists) by Valerie R. Yow, Sage Publications, 1994.

“Interviewing Techniques” Chapter 3 from Recording Oral History (A practical guide for social scientists) by Valerie R. Yow, Sage Publications, 1994.

“Notes on Interviewing” by George Roth, working paper, dated April 5, 1995

"Participant Observation: Varieties and Strategies of the Field Method" by Norman Denzin, The Research Act, A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods, Aldine Publishing, 1978, 185-218.

Roles in the Field

"The Martian and the Convert" by Fred Davis in Urban Life and Culture, 1973, 2, 3, 333-343.

The Clinical Perspective in Fieldwork by Ed Schein, Sage Publications, 1987, 11-39.

“Analyzing the Culture of Two Organizations: The clinical Research Model” & Figure 3.1 Categories of Research on Organizations, from Schein, Organizational Culture and Leadership, 1992, pp. 28-30.

"Insider/Outsider Research Teams: Collaboration Across Diverse Perspectives" by Meryl Reis Louis and Jean M. Bartunek, Journal of Management Inquiry, 1992, Vol. 1, No. 2, 110-110.

Insider/Outsider Team Research, Jean Bartunek and Meryl Reis Louis, John Van Maanen (editor) Qualitative Research Methods Series, Sage Publications: Newbury Park, Ca., Vol. 40, 1996.

Organizational Culture

"Ethnography and Culture" by James Spradley from The Ethnographic Interview, Harcourt, Brace, Janovich College Publishers, 1979, 3-16.

"Uncovering the Levels of Culture" by Ed Schein in Organizational Culture and Leadership Jossey-Bass, 1992, pp. 16 -27.

"Deciphering Culture for Insiders" by Ed Schein in Organizational Culture and Leadership Jossey-Bass, 1992, pp. 147-156.

Intervention

"Intervention Tactics and Style," Chapter 9 in Process Consultation, Volume II by Ed Schein, 1987, pg. 145 - 160.

"Toward a Typology of Interventions," Chapter 10 in Process Consultation, Volume II by Ed Schein, 1987, pg. 161 - 179.

Analysis of Text Data -- starting the Distillation Process...

Basics of Qualitative Research, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, Sage Publications: Newbury Park, Ca., 1990.

"Analyzing Case Study Evidence" Chapter 5 in Case Study Research, by R. Yin, 1994, pp. 102-126.

"Early Steps in the Analysis," Chapter 4 in Qualitative Data Analysis by Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 50-89.

Writing -- "Breathing Out"

If you want to write, Brenda Uland,

"Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" by Horace Miner from The American Anthropologist, 1956, 58, 503-507.

"Field Notes" by David Fetterman in Ethnography (Step by Step), Sage, 1989, 107-109.

"Deja Entendu" by Jean Jackson from *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 19, 1, 8-43.

Writing up Qualitative Research by Harry Wolcott, Sage Publications, 9-47.

Finding your Writer's Voice Chapters 1 - 5, 7, 51, 53 by T. Frank and D. Wall, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1994.

"Jointly Told Tales" section in Tales of the Field by John Van Maanen, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988, pp. 136-141.

Learning History-like Texts:

"The Pro-Life Narratives" in Ginsburg, Faye D., *Contested Lives (The Abortion Debate in an American Community)*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 172-180.

"The Past" in Crapanzano, Vincent, Waiting (The Whites of South Africa), New York: Random House, 1985, pp. 48-71.

Chapter 5 in Stein, Jean, with George Plimpton, Edie (An American Biography) New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.

"Consequential Heresies: How 'Thinking the Unthinkable' Changed Royal Dutch/Shell," by Kleiner, Art, Emeryville, CA: Global Business Network, 1990.

Appendix E: The Learning History Critique Sessions

Preparing for critique:

As you read the piece ahead of time,

Mark significant sentences or phrases that strike you as worthy of comment:

Either because they are particularly effective,
or because they are jarring.

Notice how the left- and right-hand column text play off each other.

Ask yourself: What questions do I still have, that the Learning History did not answer?

How would I regard this if I were a manager in this company, the audience for the report?

How would I regard this if I were a participant in this pilot project?

Critique format:

1. The presenter explains:
 - Purpose of this piece
 - Audience for this piece
 - Particular help that the presenter would like.
 - In long pieces, specific sections needing attention.
2. The colleagues glance over the piece, or read it silently for the first, time, once again marking anything which has provoked a reaction in them.
3. The presenter is asked to be silent (during Step 4), to focus the critique on learning (by listening and avoiding defensive reaction).
4. The critique continues, with colleagues commenting on what struck them and how the piece accomplished (or didn't accomplish) the presenter's objectives.
As you comment, please be sure to ground your comments in the text: i.e., exactly what passage(s) lead you to your reaction?
5. The facilitator has an opportunity to provide a "wrap-up" or "summation" comment, or to ask for a volunteer to do so.
6. The presenter gets the last word.

Appendix F: How we got there...

- My own efforts at bringing more of a research and documentation orientation to the OLC. I'm not the most visible person in this role, because like many learning projects, too much visibility too soon is likely to hamper efforts to be left alone to experiment and create something new. I feel with the efforts of everyone that has been involved, we have created something new and powerful that complements our organizational learning efforts. It is craft that we practice today, and what we seek to do is learn how to codify it so that others can learn and practice it effectively.
- Early efforts, illusive impact and support. - Qualitative research seminar. Variable based measures and approaches. **Show slide from then (August 1993)**
Inconsistency between approach and philosophy of learning (outsider knew more and was in a position to judge, limitations of researcher's perspective and abilities to make sense, learning for researchers separate from that of those studies -- Nanette Black from Ford pointed this out, and I was too defensive, both personally and of the "academic" traditions, to get this, and she didn't have any better proposals for what to do). **My stymied period**
- Having so much negative experience associated with "assessment," "evaluation," "measurement," "research" and other such terms which were the exclusive domain of the anointed few. **Search for a better way**
- Ford desire to learn from past experience - success of the Ford FN74 led to others wanting to know how and know why. Reception for a research effort -- **but couldn't call it "research" if I wanted to sit at the same table.**
- Only way that I could do this was because of my own deeply held belief in what I was doing was beneficial -- **Study experience of re-engineering project - things are just not what they seem, and I wasn't in a position to do anything but write to academics about it.**
- **Trial by fire - called upon my experience in strategy, operations, account management, sales, project management, and leadership.**
- Developing a new term so as not to have to "unlearn" the old
- "learning histories" - itself an oxymoron.
- inviting a group to figure this out - "conceiving and building learning histories began around March 1994, when we invited people in a half-dozen companies to join us for an ongoing practicum at MIT. Everyone was interested in the same question; How do you take the experience and understanding which a pilot team has learned, and make it relevant to the rest of the organization?
issues:
 - how do we build understanding without the direct experience of what the team went through (change to giving people material to create local experience which mirror other's experience).
 - document projects so that others could read about, inquire and build upon.
- Pioneer' group: met quarterly since March of 1994 - field researchers that would take the responsibility for leading the efforts to document learning.

- definitions which came out of group, and the need to articulate the territory we were venturing into (our vision statement):

“The two concepts underlying the learning history are to 1) provide markers for what the learning journey has been and 2) light the path for others to follow. A learning history is a practical approach for a team of researchers and company people to capture replicate, and reflecting on their learning and change processes.”

- Bretton Woods, June 1994 - convened the first group to talk about issues of assessing organizational learning and our developing ideas for learning histories. **Incredible reception, listening, and support!!!**
- Pioneer’s group meetings in July and August (four days as people wanted more than July) 1994, February 1995, April and May, July, and October, 1995.
- Work with the Ford Learning History - proposal requests came in November of 1993, started with first meeting in February, 1994, took until July to get contract organized and the group together, interviews in August and September, writing in October and November, draft reviews in December, workshop in December, and a “final” version in January. Then, into the executive ranks - to engage them in the question of what to do, rather than react to what has been done - with approval expected the end of September, 1995.
- Systems Thinking in Action conference presentation - November 1995 - how to package what we were doing at Ford and with the pioneer’s group into a coherent 1.5 hours of presentation. So popular, and such an important topic, we had to do it twice!
- Request for Systems Thinker lead article for May of 1995 - “Creating a Learning History”

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

- need to let people know what our evolving questions are; where have our questions evolved from?
 - how do we document our projects, get research questions articulated, get companies to accept and fund researchers? The ends that we sought was how to get documents out of projects.
to
 - how do we distinguish LH from other forms of assessment, learning, and transfer of knowledge.
 - Accepting the tension between the LH (who asks people about the story they want to tell) and the project manager (who wants to bring particular things into being - learning processes and wants particular research questions and hypotheses answered).
 - LH as a means, the ends we seek is the organization being able to have a better conversation. Evaluate LH by the ability to hear.
- We have built upon, integrated and synthesized a number of different fields of study:
 - ethnography - learn about culture from the natives point of view
 - action science - studying a system by being part of changing it
 - oral history - narrative to describe history
 - the arts - literature, journalism and theater - engaging and holding our audience
- Based on our experiences, we have begun to document and evaluate the evolving body of theory, lore, and practice of learning history work. **We have built a community of practice**
- Project manager - learning historian issues:
 - July meeting - conflict in LH desire for freedom and free reign with project managers process for running projects, balancing resources, and creating situations for learning historians to investigate.
 - Impressionistic writing of my experience on this meeting and the comments I heard with intention of circulating more broadly
 - Jointly-told, two column format for describing learning historians comments and my thinking
 - Distribution of memorandum of agreement and FM for a LH; project manager meetings
- Field Manual for a Learning Historian. This “field manual” represents our efforts to capture and communicate that body of work to date. It will be continually updated and expanded as the work is further developed and refined.
- Memorandum of Agreement for a Learning Historian - text which can be used to articulate what a learning historian does, process for setting expectations, defining deliverables and value provided, and requesting resources and support required.
- Development of training curriculum which brings new learning historians up to speed to join our existing pioneers group. In process of teaching those seminars and having others ready to work with those materials.

WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE DOING NEXT?

- Integration of new learning historians with pioneers group - January 10-12, 1996.
- Learning History Workshops - disclaimer on use of learning history as a report.
- Testing the dissemination workshop:

Environmental issues: setting, seating, cross section of organizational members, time expectations, someone from process being studied, groundrules, appreciation for skillful discussion, preparation in dialogue/organizational learning disciplines?

Purpose of LH: To improve the level and type of conversation that the organization has about learning. People talk about “Where was it in the text,” separate out their own reasoning process from the data.

Disclaimer: This document is really for group learning. Pass it to a group of people to read and discuss. And here are some questions to start you off. The purpose of the dissemination group is Hearing: To soak up people’s reactions to the LH, and to have them experience and hear the LH. Consider multiple perspectives alongside your own and see how different roles interact. Recognize the effect of your own lens and what’s going on. The LH is a Rorschach -- connects the range of varied reactions back to the data. Puts the ladder of inference in the foreground.

Questions to ask during the session:

[The facilitator only knows the story of the pilot through the LH, not through other experience. The facilitator is new to the story.]

- What did you get out of the LH?
- What in the text led you to say that?
- Requirement that they collectively make sense of the document.
- What else would you have wanted to know?
- What information do you need to move forward?
- What themes did you see that weren’t explicit?
- What is this like? What does it remind you of?
- What is it like from your experience?
- What does it remind you of generally? “The team described here reminds me of a nursing home.”
- How do we move forward? Where does the organization go from here?
- So what? Now what? Then what?

- To the participant: Do our perceptions ring true? Are they valid to you?

General stages of the session:

1. Reporting the experience of reading the LH
2. Interpreting the experience of reading the LH
3. Connoting how to take the LH's themes back to the rest of the organization.

Facilitating the dissemination group.

- Focus group facilitation is similar, except that the purpose is not extracting information but reflection.
- Make them aware of their own thinking and reasoning process.

The LH session could be part of a learning lab.

- Additional articulation of practices:
 - Distillation day - how to analyze the mess of stuff, weave together story (chronology) and themes (pragmatic messages)
 - Standards for evaluating a learning history
 - Dissemination workshop processes
 -
- Completion and distribution of learning histories
 - AutoCo
 - Harley Davidsen
 - Philips Display
 - Pacific Bell
 - AT&T
- Learning History Champions workshop - with LH theory and experience
- Learning History track at annual meeting (hopefully)
- Selection and targeting of high-leverage "learning history project opportunities"
- Seeking additional funding to test concept in addition to contracts to deliver value to companies (**grant**)

Appendix G: Responsibility and Ethics

This special section is a contribution from an active learning historian. JoAnne Wyer has been an award-winning designer/producer of interactive educational materials. She holds a Ph.D. from an interdisciplinary program at the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Southern California. Having both academic training and corporate experience, she has a deep commitment to bridging the gap between theory and practice. She now does consulting and learning history -related work. She can be reached at 105 Mission Drive, Palo Alto, CA 94303, tel 415/323-1842; e-mail - jwyer@aol.com.

Responsibility and Ethics: The Collective Wisdom of Learning Historians

by JoAnne Wyer

Learning histories require of the authors a profound sense of responsibility. The resulting document may be used to determine the success or failure of an organization's entire learning effort, an assessment which will impact people's careers and lives. To fully acknowledge this responsibility, the authors—whether a single individual or a team—need to engage in a process of continuous reflection and clarification.

Thus, it is important to discover what we, as learning historians, have collectively learned about responsibility and ethics from our practice in the field. After all, the essence of *praxis* is that theory and practice are one: interdependent aspects of the same idea. There cannot be one without the other.³⁷

To that end, I interviewed a group of six learning historians in order to explore their thinking about some issues which had challenged me in my own learning history work. I asked questions about five aspects of LH work: Purpose, Audience, Point of View, Integrity, and Measures of Success.

³⁷The originator of the concept of *praxis* was Karl Marx. With Engels, Marx developed a philosophy of science founded on the principle of the unity of opposites. According to Marx, theory and practice could not be separated; they were different aspects of the same thing: the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge cannot be gained, in any meaningful sense, without engaging in the dialectical process of theory-to-practice-to-theory. Thus, the philosophy of *praxis* mandates the connection between knowing and doing; it holds that the purpose of knowing (science) is action and the only validation of knowledge is action.

Praxis carries with it a sense of responsibility: one seeks to understand the world so that one can change it.

This was not a scientific study; my sample size is small and I was not interested in the commonality of responses. Rather, I was looking for insights. This was an attempt to gather our learning together and to begin to develop a sense of our *collective wisdom* which we can use to guide our practice.

1. Purpose

What is the purpose of learning history work? Is there one purpose or are there many?

Originally, we positioned learning histories as an assessment tool--a means for evaluating the efficacy of organizational learning efforts. Subsequently, George Roth and Art Kleiner have elaborated upon the purpose of learning histories, articulating a purpose statement which describes the *mission* of learning history work: “to help organizations learn from the experience and implications of their own learning and change initiatives.” Their vision of the purpose of learning history work is broad in scope and inspirational in its intent. However, my growing perception was that, *in practice*, there were many possible, specific purposes which a learning history could serve, depending upon the situation. If this were the case, then it was important to be clear up front about which purpose any particular LH was serving. Was this view shared by others?

In my interviews, I found that everyone shared the same general sense of purpose. Some learning historians shared my view that there were multiple possible purposes; others were more certain that there was a single main purpose. Yet when each considered their own work, their expression of purpose varied considerably, based on their personal experiences. While everyone shared the same *general* sense of purpose, nonetheless, many possible purposes emerged. They included the following:

- **Disseminating learning in a *meaningful* way**

One learning historian focused on the dissemination of learning as a key aspect of LH work. Trained in traditional research methodology and thus aware of its limitations, this learning historian saw unique value in the learning history approach to authorship. Traditional methodology calls for the researcher to be the expert, but when the *learners* are the authorities, learning can be much more meaningful:

“(The purpose of a learning history is) to disseminate learning that is meaningful to the people who are learning. The question: How do we learn from other people?, is still open. The learning history intuitively feels right as a means for accomplishing this...because the LH allows the people whose story it is to tell their story. Instead of placing the authority in an author who is outside of the learning process. the authorship—and the “authority”—is handed back to the storytellers.

“The LH approach makes the work more meaningful because it’s the people in the field who say what’s important, rather than academics who may not know. This speaks to irrelevancy of much of the information about organizational change which we in the academic community have now.”

- **Catalyzing change**

Another focused on the end-document as a potentially powerful agent of change for teams and organizations *outside* of the learning team whose story is told in the learning history:

“It seems to be that a learning history would encapsulate in a powerful, effecting way the learning that had occurred during the course of some project and that it would be able to excite others to learn the same things.

“The LH, then, is a catalyst for change—and the first thing it would change is people’s mental models. For example, someone in (the organization) would pick up the LH and read a success story, in language familiar to this person, said by individuals within the organization, in positions they’re familiar with. And after reading it, they’d would go ‘Wow. These guys did this and this is what they got out of it.’ And as he/she read it, they would see how things could be done differently and they would then go out and act differently as a result of thinking differently.”

- **A process tool for reflection**

Originally, learning histories were positioned as an assessment tool. Retrospective learning histories enabled the team and organization to assess what had been learned. In this scenario, the learning history was distinct from the change effort. This view seems contrary to the following learning historian’s belief that learning histories are, in fact, an integral aspect of the intervention strategy:

“Learning histories are another form of learning intervention. One way I’ve framed learning histories when I’ve talked to people about them is to use Deming’s (quality cycle): ‘Plan, Do, Check, Act.’ Learning history is the ‘Check.’ In everyday business life, we seldom ‘check.’ My hope is that this (checking) will allow the organization to move deeper into the change effort (particularly) if they’re stuck.

“What’s particularly powerful is the reflective part of it. There is power in the interviews themselves. Organizations generally don’t allow people to have that (kind of) time. The interviews allow people to reflect on their own learning, to give it some thought. If people think there’s a product coming out of it, then this will then to give people time to reflect. It’s funny. It’s a backwards process.”

- **Improve effectiveness of learning team**

Another pointed out how the reflective aspect of the process can benefit the learning team:

“The purpose is to help a team be more effective, and the individuals on that team to become more effective...One of key values for me is that it just slows people down...It’s a reflective moment...a breath in the marathon and that’s extremely valuable.”

- **An organizational “mirror”**

If the learning history prompts reflection, it is because the jointly told tale can be an organization’s mirror:

“I bought into the three imperatives--the mythic, pragmatic, and data--using the jointly told tale as a mirror that the organization holds up to itself so that it can learn about what’s going on in terms of its own learning and processes. That to me is the fundamental purpose of the Learning History. Perhaps that can take a lot of different flavors and forms...”

- **A boundary-spanning communication tool**

Yet another learning historian noted that a learning history could fulfill a much-needed political purpose. Learning histories can play a significant part in the organizational change process, serving as a communication tool that could help bridge the gap between the learning team, and the rest of the organization:

“The ability to be successful depends upon communication outside the group--it is necessary to ‘engage the larger system’—not only to communicate what’s going on within the group responsible for the change, but also for the group itself to learn about their impact and how their impact is being perceived.”

- **Fulfilling the pragmatic imperative: political leveraging**

This pragmatic, politically-informed purpose is put forth by a learning historian who reminded us that organizations generally don’t fund learning histories unless there is some benefit anticipated from the cost:

“The main objective is for the person who paid for it to have something they can leverage.”

- **Assessment of a learning effort**

We have generally accepted the value of learning histories as an assessment tool. Yet, one learning historian argued that a learning history would be most effective as an assessment tool if we followed an approach akin to that of experimental design. In other words, we could apply a theoretical approach to an organizational problem and then measure the results, using the learning history’s data, to see if the theoretical approach made a difference. Under this scenario, a learning history should be conceptualized as an integral part of the design of a learning intervention up front.

- **Sense-making and Documentation of a learning effort**

Finally, this learning historian summarized my overall question about purpose:

“There are multiple purposes--assessment, a sense-making tool, or simply documentation or communication. Different people in different projects will weight different things as more or less important.”

We have heard learning historians speak of many possible purposes for learning histories. If all of these purposes can be served by a learning history, then we have a very robust tool, indeed. Yet, having such protean tool requires greater clarity of purpose up front. Following the guidelines of good project management, we must be as clear as possible before we start. We must begin by asking: What does this team/organization need from a learning history? What purpose do we *think* we are serving? What purpose will most serve the needs of the organization? What are the political issues surrounding this effort? How can I get agreement on the purpose?

This discussion also raises some questions: Does the use of learning histories as a form of assessment run at cross purposes with its role as a learning tool in its own right? Is the learning history part of the intervention? Can these multiple purposes all really be served well? We probably still have some learning to do around these questions.

2. Audience

How important is the issue of audience (or client) to this work? Are there multiple audiences? Can all audiences be served by one version?

There seem to be five parameters at work here:

- **The audience dilemma: What are the prospective audiences?**

Our guiding assumption has been that there are four target audiences:

- A - Primary participants, the learning team
- B - New members of the team - a way to come up to speed for common understanding of what happened so far
- C - Larger organization in which team is embedded
- D - General public

Our second guiding assumption has been that the target audience should be the general public which includes academics and practitioners.

Yet, there are differing views about this definition of audience. For example, one thought that academics and practitioners were separate audiences requiring different approaches. Another found that it was necessary to write a version of the learning history specifically targeted to the management of the learning team—because this manager was the client and he had needs and expectations for the learning history which were very different from those of the learning team.

Perhaps there are actually six different audiences:

- the team
- those new to the team
- the management of the learning team (who is likely to be the client)
- the organization at large
 - and the “general public” which includes
- other practitioners outside the company, and
- academics

• **Targeting the primary audience**

This brings up the issue of targeting. There was general agreement that the determination of primary audience determines how you write. But who is primary target audience?

In my own learning history work, I was very involved with the learning team and very much wanted to target the learning history to them. This feeling was particularly acute because I was aware of organizational changes which would eventually result in the loss of jobs for many on the learning team. I found that I wanted to give them something in the learning history—a kind of testimony to their personal courage. Yet, I was also being encouraged to think in terms of a much broader audience. In so doing, however, I felt that the emphasis of the learning history would shift quite dramatically and there would be less impact on the team, in whose success I had become quite vested.

There seemed to be no “right” answer to this question. There seemed to be only a reinforcement of my concern that different audience needs could not easily be met by a single version. I sensed that a more detailed version would satisfy the mythic longings of the team to see their accomplishments documented and their multiple voices expressed. Conversely, the audience outside the organization would benefit from being able to see the mythic *patterns*. In turn, those patterns could be most easily seen without the detail which would be important to the team. Unfortunately, we were not able to test these assumptions, and I was left with a hunger for closure. My overall sense is that we have a responsibility to make the choice about target audience very consciously and deliberately and that we must bear the responsibility for the decision we make.

What did other LH’s think? Had they encountered similar situations?

One learning historian was firm in the view that the writing should be focused toward the general public:

“This is my bias. Keeping this audience in mind helps me think more mythically. What’s the ‘real story’ going on here? My sense is that these stories are so common to humanity that that’s the level I want to get to. This approach also defuses some of the issues that might be incendiary. (You evolve toward this audience version as you go through the dissemination process.)”

But another learning historian argued that:

“The primary audience should be the team. That’s the best. And my framework for that is obvious. The purpose is to increase the team’s effectiveness.”

Yet another argued that:

“The major audience is the people in the company. It’s both the team and the organization surrounding the team. The team can certainly be helped, but one of the things we’ve learned is that if you don’t involve the organization higher up—if the people above the team don’t know (what the team is learning) or are scared by it—what’s the point?”

The audience ‘D’ approach is a way of writing that can speak to the largest audience without losing the impact. It’s still a strong story. Not ‘jargon-ny’ or boring. You bring it up a level to see what the point is. If you focus just on Audience A you stay too embedded in the system so you’re not even helping them think about it.

“You evolve toward Audience D as you go through the dissemination process.”

Another learning historian questioned the focus on the broader audience:

“(You get) diminishing returns as you broaden the scope of the audience.”

• **Client expectations & Project Management**

Because the audience question is so complex, it is important to clarify the boundaries and characteristics of the intended audience:

“If I had it to do it over again, I’d be very clear up-front about audience. I’d spend a lot of time defining audience.”

In particular, it is important to clarify who your audience is with your client and to set expectations up front. This issue has been given little attention.

“The conclusion I reached is that it is of vital importance to define your target audience and work through that determination with your client—and your team—before you begin.”

And because it has been given so little attention, the relationship of audience and client has led to problems down the road:

“The question of audience gave me a lot of trouble. And it’s so important! We ran into the trouble of having Audience 1— management, who was also the client—ask two questions: What’s the value of this training program? How do we measure its effectiveness...Then there was the team, the second audience, and we were taking those people’s time...so they wanted something back. Those two goals were a little in conflict.

What tips do we have for working through the issues of client and audience?

“This is important. For any particular LH, there is a client who has a particular purpose in mind in the beginning. Then it should be part of the negotiation: Who are the other audiences that might benefit? The client should be party to that. Audience is different from client. (This distinction) must be clear in the beginning: (you must establish) who’s who and make sure everyone’s “happy” with that if there is a difference.”

Working as a team can also be helpful in working through those issues with your client:

“Client is different from audience. Your client is one of your partners. This is why it’s important to have an LH team with an inside person and champion who would represent the client. That person has to be “cultivated” to accept the “general audience” audience approach.”

Again we are reminded that learning historians must also practice good project management skills:

“There may be multiple stakeholders. I learned that you need to get very clear up front who this is for and who owns the document because it’s a major project. You need to bring to bear all of the elements of good project management.”

- **Multiple versions?**

But what about the question of multiple versions?

“You should be able to have one version serve many audiences—after all, the theory is the story is the story...but it’s very hard.”

Among the people I interviewed, there was some emergent agreement that there should be at least two versions of each learning history, but there is not yet a well-thought out approach to the question of multiple versions. For example, one learning historian put forth that there should be two versions: One for the team, which is rich in detail. Another for a broader, perhaps academic or practitioner, audience who would be interested in more general findings. These versions would take different forms:

“The two different audiences affects who you write to and how you write. You might then have to produce two documents. The first looks like a learning history, worked on many months until the validation and dissemination meetings, when you receive a kind of ‘imprimatur’ from those involved in the learning. The second, more ‘public’ document may look more like a traditional paper (or an HBR article). The format required is very different because it has to be more traditional, but the methodology behind it is still non-traditional. Yet we (can) no longer acknowledge that it’s a participant groups’ story. (Instead, we give that authority back to the author.) That’s an important (distinction).”

But can academics and practitioners be served by the same version? If so, what would that version look like?

“I do think the same version of the document can probably serve the needs of all internal audiences. If it’s written as a jointly told tale, identifying people in a very generic way, that will resonate with many different levels of the organization. The strength of the learning history for internal consumption is the detail. You need to tell them everything that they learned.

“But that won’t work for the other audience—the scientific or academic community. Ultimately, I think (this version of the LH) should address points that would be of interest to the general organizational theory community and that clearly would not be the same version...This version would probably focus more on the research/data imperative. We might need to write it much more like an academic article, (using the story as a means for) theory-building or theory-confirming. The article would have to be shorter (than a learning history) and the point arrived at much more quickly.

“A third audience could be the people in-between. Other practitioners. Maybe there needs to be a version of an LH for them.”

Another talked about including a version fine-tuned to the team and another retooled to meet client/management expectations. Is this the best way to handle the dilemma of audience and client?

“The primary audience should be the team...But if management is sitting there saying, ‘I want to assess the impact of Organizational Learning teachings within the client environment,’ it does a lot of different things to Learning Historians...The fact that I knew what that manager was thinking and wanting... you can’t put it aside even if you try!

“So, how do you meet those two audience needs? Can you provide the same “meat” with a different ‘coat’ around it? With a three-page introductory letter? That’s what we did. There was no budget to do anything else. It’s hard to do two different versions—one for the learning team and another for the client/management. It’s kind of schizophrenic.”

Budget considerations will, of necessity, limit our ability to meet the needs of multiple audiences.

- **Transfer of learning**

Finally, there is another aspect of the audience issue: What is it that’s transferable and how is the learning transferred?

“I think LH’s are specific enough that they aren’t there for public consumption. There can’t be just one LH to fit all purposes. I don’t know that we’ve proven how transferable a particular LH is to another organization. I am beginning to question that. This was an assumption which we had in the beginning: that an LH was a generic thing. (I don’t think it is.) Or maybe we have to learn how to do it differently.”

The issue of transfer raises many questions: How transferable is the learning from the AutoCo LH? Is learning most easily transferred through story, or through the development of theory which can then be applied in a new context? How will learning histories contribute to the building of theory?

Up to this point in the history of learning histories, it seems that we have tended to short-change their use in theory-building. That’s probably because we can’t really get to theory-building until we have begun to accumulate several individual case histories and looked for common patterns. However, an example of the potential for theory-building can be seen in Peter Senge’s recent systems diagrams on the leverage points and challenges to sustaining transformational change efforts. The data found in learning histories informed these diagrams.

What can we conclude from this discussion of audience?

First, we can see the importance of applying the basic concepts of project management to learning history work, including the necessity of defining audience, purpose, budget and scope up front. Then we must proceed to both educate and partner with our client, recognizing that the purpose of the LH is deeply connected to audience.

Second, we may consider another way to think through the questions of audience targeting and multiple versions. Is there another way to conceptualize audience needs? Is there, perhaps, a “mythic” audience, a “pragmatic audience, and a “research” audience?

The three imperatives (the mythic, pragmatic, and research) possibly correlate with the three different types of audiences. For example, there may be an audience which is most receptive to hearing their story from a mythic perspective. Perhaps this is the learning team or the organization. Such a mythic approach might energize an organization, helping them to see their day-to-day efforts in more soulful or allegorical terms. There may be an audience which is most interested in the pragmatic advice and notable results of the learning effort. In all likelihood, this is the client and/or management of the learning team. Finally, there may be an audience which is most interested in what this learning history can contribute to theory—and, ultimately, practice. This audience would include the academic audience and others, such as learning organization practitioners, who are concerned with developing theory into knowledge they can use. Perhaps these two sub-audiences can be served by one document if the concept of praxis is used.

There appears to be no simple or easy solution to the audience dilemma. We can only continue to work the issue, striving to be more explicit in our approach and giving careful consideration to how we might shape the document for the specific needs of our targeted audiences.

3. Point of View - The “Left-Hand Column”

Should learning historians even have a point of view? If so, what is it? What guides the development of our point of view—particularly what is it that guides the writing of the left-hand column?

What affects point of view?

- **Human nature**

As a human being, you can’t avoid having point of view:

“A learning historian will have opinions! You’re a human being; you’ll have your own feelings about what’s going on.”

And, as a human being, your point of view will, in the very least, be affected by your experience:

“Do we begin with a POV or does one emerge? It’s both. Everyone has a POV. Even when you set up your contracting arrangement, you’re forming an opinion about the system that you’re now apart of.”

In general the learning historians that I interviewed were keenly aware of the changes that took place in their own points of view. As each project unfolded, their opinions and attitudes changed, were influenced, emerged, or evolved. The ways in which that happened seemed to be different for different learning historians. For example,

- **Relationships**

The relationships with the team that are built in the course of the work had a tendency to influence the point of view of several learning historians.

“As to point of view, I found that I didn’t hold one POV, but many. And even those multiple POV’s changed over time. I started out with a commitment to being honest, faithful to the subject’s story and also being honest to my own needs as a researcher.

“That shifted more toward a burden of keeping the relationship with the organization I was studying open. (And that was made more difficult because of the culture of this particular organization. They had a very consensual culture.) And I was drawn into it. That made it more difficult for me to be critical of some things, such as leadership, for example.”

There was an investment in the success of the learning team and a sense of loyalty to members of that team. Yet, there was an awareness that something else must guide their point of view—perhaps, for instance, a sense of deeper loyalty to the reader and the organization as a whole.

- **Client expectations**

Another admitted that client expectations can also affect your point of view:

“Knowing you have two sets of expectations--those of your client and those of your audience--does effect your point of view.”

- **The LH process - “the story begins to emerge”**

The very process of investigation affects point of view--as one LH put it, “the story begins to emerge.”

What guides POINT OF VIEW?

What then, are the guiding principles that Learning Historians have used to guide the evolution of their own thinking? This is particularly important because it influences and shapes the reflections, observations, and questions that make up the left-hand column.

- **Understanding “objectivity”**

One learning historian reminded us to dispense with the idea of being “objective” per se.

“I don’t care if you’ve gathered numbers through a survey or gathered data through participative observation, data are data and interpretations are interpretations. No data is any more ‘objective’ than any other. What’s not objective is the interpretation I put on either the numbers or the words. The root of the difference is in their point-of-view. So the notion that we need to keep our point-of-view out is a red herring. The data needs to be objective; the interpretations are always subjective.

“So then the question is: How do you go about owning up to your point of view and conveying it to reader?”

Recognize the distinction between data—which can be objective—and interpretations of the data, which cannot. If objectivity cannot be the basis of point of view, then something else must be. What is it?

- **Find Grounding in the Purpose of the Work**

One suggested that the mission of the work could serve as a touchstone:

“Keep in mind the purpose and goal of the LH you’re working on and the purpose and goal of the change effort. Ultimately the purpose is to help the group make sense of the change effort, to understand the multiple perspectives (that can be brought to bear on it), and to feed that back in to the organization so that they can develop a higher level (of capability.) Ground yourself by coming back to that touchstone. And to the mythic, pragmatic and research imperatives.

Another echoed that commitment to purpose:

“In terms of the point of view which I think should be taken, I try really hard to say the LH is about learning. So if there is a perspective, that’s what this is all about. Whose learning is this for? It goes back to audience and client. Who is the learner? So my point of view is: I am an enabler of learning. That’s what I’d like it to be.”

- **LO Theory**

One learning historian suggested that the interpretations we make are based on our assumptions. Those assumptions must be guided by some overarching beliefs and theories concerning organizational learning and organizational development:

“The (use of) theory is implicit. If you just read the left-hand column of the AutoCo learning history, there must be a thread that holds all of the comments and questions together. Otherwise, what do you have? A lot of random observations. Or a bunch of clusters of common threads. The left-hand column should be guided by organizational learning theory.”

• **Systems Perspective**

Another historian suggested that thinking of the team and the organization as parts of a dynamic system helps us to keep perspective and bring clarity to the story:

“Another dimension to POV has to do with moving away from the ‘nitty gritty’ and taking on a systems perspective. We need to define what the system is that we are going to work on and ask: What other systems do we need to sweep in? What’s going on in terms of learning here at multiple levels?

“Taking the systems perspective gets us away from looking at individuals and getting too distracted by personality issues. But not all clients have this ability.”

• **Commitment to unpack assumptions**

How attentive are learning historians to the need to testing their own assumptions? One learning historian advocated greater veracity in owning up to assumptions that underlie the learning history and making them explicit to our readers.

“Bias is not a bad thing, it’s a very natural thing. Our job as credible investigators is not to make a superhuman effort to be devoid of any bias, but to make those biases you do have explicit. That’s something that’s missing (from the way we approach LH’s now).

“As presently constructed, LH’s do not make assumptions explicit. So there were Mental Models that went unchecked. I would have liked an opportunity to pursue a way of making the Mental Models explicit. I need to make known to my audience what the assumptions/worldviews are that I bring into this work. For example, if I’m analyzing an organization, do I have an explicit assumption that democracy should be shared by all? I think this is an incredible way to set the stage. It helps me understand things I don’t agree with, and vice versa.

And these mental models will vary with each LH. Therefore, if a team is writing the LH, this might present some difficulty, so you have to spend a lot of time dealing with assumptions. But now we spend NO time questioning our own assumptions, just questioning our subject’s assumptions.”

In that same vein, another learning history affirms the need to own the voice of the left-hand column. While it often seems as if we try hard to make learning histories seem “author-less,” to some learning historians, the left-hand column is about the authors’ owning their own beliefs:

“In the LH column, the LH ‘authors’ have the opportunity to own their interpretation of events...You have to be very explicit about owning that interpretation and how you made sense of it. This gives the audience a way to get to know you. The ‘author’ of the learning history is all over the document. In the left-hand column you’re saying what it all meant. The reader can see how you made sense of it. They may disagree, but at least you’re owning it!”

• A “learningful spirit”

Point of view must be guided by a willingness to be vulnerable, a willingness to desist from advocacy, a willingness to learn from others:

“What guides that process? The LH has to be directed by a learningful spirit. What does that mean? It means that, for a moment, I have to give up everything I believe to be true and look at this anew. I have to be willing to do that...”

“This is probably why learning histories are best done in teams....In our project, for example, we went down this whole path of thinking....Then someone new came in, looked at what were thinking and said: Well, did you think about this? It was a simple question but it re-framed everything we did. That’s an example of what I mean by a “learningful spirit”—going back and rethinking versus defending.”

• The Importance of the Team

All agreed on the importance of a team effort. In a sense the learning that takes place on the learning history team should be a model for the learning that can take place in the larger organization. (It is like a fractal.) The LH should think of themselves as “enablers of learning” both for their organization and for each other.

4. Integrity

The root of the word “integrity” means “wholeness.” But integrity has also come to mean being “virtuous” and “honest” as well as “sound” and “uninjured.” From my experience, it seems that learning history work can test our integrity in all of these ways. For example, I found myself developing a strong sense of empathy with the learning team. I was no longer a separate “whole,” but part of something larger than myself. For the most part, I saw this as an advantage; I felt that I could then “walk in their moccasins,” seeing the world as they saw it. But others wondered if I had “gone native.” Had my emotional involvement with the team clouded my judgment, making me less critical than I ought to be? Had I lost my so-called “objectivity?”

Unanticipated political demands also caused me to wonder if I could be as forthright and honest as I wanted to be. Thirdly, when my role called for me to act as a sounding board for people in the organization, I found myself the target of a lot of heretofore unreleased emotion. I realized that if we are not careful, there is the possibility that we can become “injured” in the course of the work. If I had experienced some of all of these integrity issues in the course of my learning history work, I wondered if others had as well.

Integrity Issues:

• **Boundaries**

One way to think about maintaining integrity is to be watchful for how one’s “boundaries” might be being dissolved by the work:

“While I acknowledge that people can learn from criticism, the methodology of the LH is very rooted in relationship-building. (Relationships are very) important in this work. So your POV is necessarily not objective and that is an issue.

“I felt I needed to be syntonic with the culture I was studying, to really be a part of it. This worked in one way, but...being part of the culture both enables and limits. It enabled the story to be told in the way it was told. But I felt it didn’t work in terms of enabling me to truly offer critiques on the role of leadership, for example. So, while I felt I needed to be syntonic with the culture, this was both enabling and limiting.”

With regard to boundaries, several (external) learning historians thought that a certain amount of “going native” was not necessarily to be avoided. Yet, there were no easy answers to the dilemmas it presents. “I (have an) immersionist (style),” one historian admitted. “I run that risk. (So) it’s a daily balance. I have to keep asking myself, Am I too involved? It’s important to be explicit (about what I’m doing and) to understand: what are the trappings of the culture? And also to understand that you’re going to get sucked into it. You realize that you have to do things their way’ in order to be effective.”

Another disagreed with this immersionist approach:

“To serve other people well, even yourself ---you can’t become inducted into the system, part of the group you’re writing about!”

For another, this was a non-issue--although we can see that perhaps the integrity of the people in the organization with which he was involved may have had a significant impact on his experience. We can also see that relationships were very meaningful:

“I never felt that I’d ‘gone native.’ (Rather,) I always felt that I saw things differently, that I had a different spin on things than those within the company. At the same time, I certainly came to admire and have a fondness for these people and I really wanted them to succeed. They were feeling oppressed by headquarters, which was geographically distant, and they were trying to take more in control of their own destiny. So I saw all the difficulties and the obstacles they had to overcome and the travails, etc., associated with that (ultimately) failed attempt. I really wanted them to succeed, and that feeling must have informed by work, but I never let that feeling adulterate in any way what I was writing or thinking. And the people on the team were really interested in my being an honest broker. They wanted me to say what I felt needed to be said in that context.”

The degree to which one immerses themselves in a culture may be a function of personality and inclination. There seems to be no rule about how much or how little is best—only a caution that immersion both enables and limits.

• **Pressures**

In some instances, we may feel pressure to conform to various agendas. One learning historian voiced concern about another threat to integrity: the pressures that become especially acute when client expectations diverge from what is most learningful for the team:

“We were feeling the pressures especially regarding the audience thing. We thought (our sponsor’s) not going to get anything out of this--it’s not going to speak to his needs. How are we going to deal with that? Somehow we always defaulted to the story. It’s hard to do, though. The thought of the person whose writing the check not getting anything meaningful (to them) out of it was personally threatening.”

One of the unanticipated aspects of learning history work might be the degree to which people will try to influence the end result.

• **Staying “centered” emotionally**

Boundary issues will be particularly acute if the organization is in pain. This learning historian felt the boundary issue quiet acutely:

“My LH involved quite a bit of criticism of the organization. I had hoped that I wouldn’t hurt people, but I think I did a little bit---It is difficult to be the holder of so much negativity. That was hard. It didn’t feel very good. To sit with it and sort it and then put it back to people was unpleasant. Not everyone is prepared for that. You have to build up a filtering system. Next time I’d be more prepared (to deal with it). I’d also be prepared to reflect back to the interviewer, rather than just taking it in, asking questions that turned back on people’s sense-making.”

In sum, this work seems to require a good deal of personal integrity. How do we develop the sense of integrity required for this work? What are the safeguards for holding integrity and remaining centered?

Safeguarding Integrity

• Due diligence

The responsibility and ethical considerations of LH work requires that learning historians exercise “due diligence” in continuously reflecting upon and clarifying their own motives:

“The question is: Who owns the document? Whose benefit or agenda is it serving? Ask: Will what I’m doing benefit me, the client, or the system? The integrity issue has to do with making sure it’s not my agenda that’s being served. I find that looking at things from the level of the whole system (helps me to get) above taking sides.”

• The Learning History Team

One of the safeguards to integrity is the team itself. There will always be a tension between becoming immersed or syntonized with the culture you’re studying and standing far enough away to see the picture clearly. This is one of the reasons why getting both inside and outside perspectives is recommended. But this can only work if there is some internal grounding within each learning historian. Below, three historians offer their testimony to the effectiveness of the LH team:

“In my case, the team forced me to take other’s perspectives — not always comfortably. That’s the learning part of this whole thing. I tried to do a small learning history by myself and I would never do it again. I was trying to do all the things I talked about, but it’s too hard to have a sense of objectivity. You need people to bounce things off of.”

“This work does require a high degree of personal integrity. It’s critical to be part of team of people who can check each other, to have a group of people who have a particular way of working together who can then serve as checks and balances to each other. The team has to have a way of communicating with each other so that questions about the team itself can come up. Including such questions as: does the champion themselves have an agenda? Is the outside LH being too critical?”

“It was too difficult to try to be both an insider and an outsider, so I needed outsiders, colleagues, who could look at the document. I also needed an outside facilitator during the dissemination meeting. Fortunately, I was aware of my own limitations and of the storytellers’ limitations.”

• **Affiliation with other Learning Historians**

There seems to be a shared perception that affiliation with other learning historians can facilitate both the growth of learning history work and individual professional development. Despite such obstacles as distance and the infrequency of direct contact, we have developed an informal network that has begun to become a learning community. This affiliation is especially helpful for learning historians who do not have the privilege of working on teams; they can call upon other learning historians whom they know and trust to review their work, to discuss issues, and exchange advice and experience. The continuation and further development of this learning community seems essential to the practice. The question is: What is the best means for sustaining this affiliation?

• **Skills, Knowledge, Ethics—and Project Management**

What is the professional background required of a learning historian? At present, we have not specified any particular background requirements. One learning historian suggested that there are some essential background requirements: a grounding in ethics/practices of good qualitative research, project management, and organizational development.

“For me to do the best product, I have to do much more up front work than prescribed and I need to be grounded and I have to have a certain set of skills.

“There must be good project management-- We have to work though who pays, what are the deliverables. Then I think learning historians have to have certain skills: research skills, data gathering techniques, assessment; a baseline understanding of ethics in research. And I think they need to have a good nuts and bolts grounding in organizational development. How are you doing to put an LH together in a way that is helpful if you don’t know what kinds of things are helpful in change efforts?”

The question of a base level set of requirements has been raised. Perhaps a grounding in the principles and practices of organizational learning is a minimum recommended requirement. What do we think?

- **Experience**

Experience can certainly help a learning historian to anticipate the integrity issues which he or she may encounter. Experience can help the learning historian to recognize the paradox of lost boundaries and with holding negativity.

- **Self-awareness**

Besides skills, ethics, and knowledge, experience and mutual support, there is something even more fundamental:

“I think of it as self-awareness—not as integrity so much, but being aware...knowing that I’m influencing this learning and the question is: How am I influencing it? And also (you need to be) willing to let others on the team help influence both yourself and that learning process.

“And I don’t know how to develop that self-awareness. Maybe it’s not “develop-able,” maybe it’s something that’s just inherent in certain people.”

5. Measures of Success

When completed, I found that I craved some way of determining how successful—or unsuccessful—my learning history had been. But what is the measure of an LH’s success?

In my interviews, I confirmed that there is general consensus that we don’t as yet have agreement on a measure of success for learning histories in general—but each learning historian offered their own views as to what success would be for them. These views included the following:

- **A “product” result:** The document has impact on mental models which can change behavior.

Learning history work has been described as both a product and a process. One learning historian offered that one indicator of success would be if the “product” of learning history work—the document—had an impact on mental models which resulted in a change of behavior. The product can have an impressive result:

“I can articulate how one would know that a LH was successful, but I’m not sure it can be easily measured. An LH would encapsulate in a powerful, effecting way the learning that had occurred during the course of some project and it would then be able to excite others to learn the same things.

“The first change would be people thinking differently...People operate on theory. And if a learning history alters a person’s theory about how the world of that company should operate, then they would begin to act differently in their organizations. This is the ideal: that an LH would be that inspirational. If a dull and dry report can get people can get to change, then (certainly an LH should be able to have an impact!

Another learning historian offered a specific description of how the learning history did appear to affect mental models—and, subsequently, behavior change:

“In my case, the LH provides an environment for talking about things not talked about before—even though that was difficult. In the dissemination meeting, the facilitator was able to surface themes, clashes of mental models, things we wanted to talk more about. And even though there seemed to be a lot of resistance to (the insights in the LH), I have noticed that these ideas got incorporated into people’s thinking. People increasingly quote something from the learning history, which indicates it’s gotten into the general consciousness.

“Before there was a high level of ‘undiscussables,’ things that were only said in the hallway. Now it’s clear that there’s a better process of communication and this is what’s needed across the boundaries (of the organization). There have been concrete results. There is more representation in staff meetings and more information makes its way out much more readily from those staff meetings. So it was successful in some ways.”

- A **“process” result**: The value is in the reflective process itself.

Besides being called a “product,” learning histories have also been called a “process.” It stands to reason, then, that some learning historians would find the most significant results to be those catalyzed by the process. Unfortunately, this is where our traditional notion of measurable results is most challenged.

“I believe the process is more important than the deliverable. When we build systems dynamic models, we clearly believe that it’s the exploration which is most important, not the model. The LH process is the same—with the same dilemmas. You spend all this time building the model. That’s where all the learnings occur...and people outside the process don’t get it. It’s just like that with the LH. The arguments over audience, point of view, quote selection, themes, etc., are what’s important. So one of the interesting questions is: How do you get more of whoever the audience is more involved in this process?”

- A **“mythic” result**: Does it surface the “shadow” aspect of the organization?

Perhaps one of the most significant effects a learning history can have is to raise the consciousness of the organization, making people more aware of the disparity between the story they want to tell and the story their actions are telling:

“I think the measure of success of any learning history links back to purpose. In this case, the purpose was to reflect back to people a clear picture of the organization, to feed back the multiple perspectives on the organization, etc.

“In this case, there was an ‘espoused reality’ which everyone liked. But that was only part of the picture. The LH showed a bit of the shadow of that. It gave a more true reflection of what current reality was. If one accepts that one has to understand the current reality in order to take advantage of the creative tension, then if people are not sharing a collective sense of current reality, you won’t be able to get to your shared vision. So, the LH helps with a shared understanding of what current reality is. This might be a standard for a successful LH.”

As this learning history points out, the measure of success must be linked back to the original, clearly defined purpose of the learning history effort.

- **A “pragmatic” result:** Do people read it?

Is it being referred to, used to leverage more leaning, more behavior change? A pragmatic voice offered the following:

“You judge the value of an LH by its use. If people don’t pick it up and use it, then it’s not valuable. And I don’t know how to make people do that. You can’t. So, I wonder, is there a more useful form which this could take so that people would more readily pick it up and use it? Or is it a question of educating the client? (I think we should) ask the people who read it: Is this really useful in this format? How could it be given to you in a more usable way? But there are incredible implications to doing that. It assumes that the clients know what’s best for them.”

- **A “research” result:** Does it contribute to theory?

While no other learning historian specifically mentioned this as a primary indicator of success, my sense is that this is a function of a) the newness of the genre and b) the focus on the practical application of learning histories within organizations. While learning history work should not lose its practical focus, I believe that the learning history’s contribution to theory will become a more important criterion over time.

What can we say conclusively about measures of success? The learning historians I interviewed varied in their perceptions of the measure of a learning history's success. Some focused on the potential of the end-product to change mental models and, hence, behavior. Others saw the primary value in the reflective process itself. Some believe that we can find measures to judge the value of a learning history. Another thought that the most important effects were likely to be virtually undetectable:

“Perhaps the most profound effects (of learning efforts) are also very subtle...That could be because there might be a delay in the effects of the learning...Six months later people may go ‘Wow,’ but perhaps not at the time when the LH is being done.

So the organization may not necessarily find such efforts effective in the way that we have traditionally measured effectiveness.”

Others held that the success of a learning history is irrelevant:

“What’s the measure of success of a learning history? People bothering to read it. Which brings me to: It’s not really important if the LH finds success. What *is* important is that it starts a process in which people begin to think and ask their own questions. Ideally, it should help people find their own questions--as opposed to give them an answer. The architecture of engagement includes the LH document, but is larger than the document.”

Another held that measures themselves are irrelevant; all that counts is learning:

“The value of an LH is measured by asking: Have people learned as a result of doing this? This relates back to the purpose of learning history work, which I see as NOT being assessment, but rather learning.

“It’s easier to ‘sell’ an assessment document. Some people really do need that kind of assessment. But, really, learning is all that counts. It’s all we can talk about. When we try to measure we tend to end up measuring the wrong things.”

The measure of an LH’s success probes the larger questions of what is the value of learning itself? And why must we focus on measurement?

Yet, without a clearly defined measure of success, learning histories will find a hard time succeeding in the “pragmatic” environment of the business world:

“It’s a hard sell. Particularly in our culture, where we’re very deliverable, short-term focused. There’s some continued interest. but...it’s hard for people to put their fingers on its value. We need help with how to position LH work effectively.”

Ultimately, then, the learning history runs into the same difficulties of evaluation as the learning organization work itself does:

“A learning history is a catalyst. We don’t know what the measures of success are yet. And until we articulate these measures of success....(we’ll experience some discomfort.) Businesses generally are struggling with how to measure success regarding learning. And we know that things get worse before they get better, etc. The LH suffers from the same problems. The only thing we know now is we have to give up our traditional measures of success.”

My synthesis of these responses is that the effectiveness of any learning history can be evaluated by a range of indicators, all of which have inherent validity. On a practical level, this feedback suggests that is important to clearly define the purpose of any particular learning history, and to link that purpose to some criterion of success that will work for your LH team and your client situation—and set that expectation up front. On a more theoretical level, it is likely that all of these views are “true” and that learning histories will thrive as a medium only if we admit to, and wrestle with, the apparent paradoxes.

Conclusion

In drawing to a close, I am reminded of a hexagram from the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese oracle. It is *Kuan*- which means “Viewing.” The hexagram shows a tower, from the top of which many perspectives can be seen. And in that the viewer is raised, he/she is also easily seen.

“Let everything come into view,” the hexagram reads. Then, “Divine the meaning. *Viewing* describes your situation in terms of the need to look without acting in order to find the right perspective. The way to deal with it is to let everything emerge and divine the central meaning. Particularly look at what you usually don’t want to see and think about. Have confidence. Examining things will bring you the insight you need.”

This hexagram seems to be a metaphor for learning history work. The work requires “looking without acting,” attention to that which emerges, and a certain vigilance in seeking the “right perspective,” the “central meaning.”

The hexagram continues: “Take a high view of the matter at hand. Yield to things and give them space on the inner ground.”

And then it describes a stance that, for me, sums up the attitude at the core of the learning history work: “Stay correctly centered and you can let the whole world come into view.”