Learning Societies: A Picture of What's Possible
Peggy Holman

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

– Eleanor Roosevelt

I am on a quest to unlock the mystery of a learning society that nourishes its members and yields extraordinary, sustainable results. For me, this is key to creating a better world.

An early part of this quest was an introduction to the work of the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL). Their provocative principles radically altered my practice as a consultant supporting change in organizations. Their groundbreaking research started with the notion that all people have a tremendous capacity to learn. Through years of anthropological observation in schools and businesses, they concluded, "learning is inseparable from engagement in the world." They also made the following observations:

* *Learning is fundamentally social.*
   An important part of what makes [people] successful and productive is their ability to integrate their work with their social lives. They forge their identities and connections around their work, and forge their knowledge and their contributions to the community in which they work.

* *Learning is an act of membership.*
   Learning is not just the activity of a sole individual, but the primary vehicle for engagement with others. Every act of learning brings a change in one's relation to the community and a change in one's identity.[1]

Whether applied to schools, places of business or communities, the IRL's insights taught me that learning is integral to the way we interact. I began to embrace their message as a powerful but invisible truth: we already are a learning society. This idea may seem at odds with our current experiences. In truth, it is an acknowledgement that people are always learning *something*; just not necessarily what the teacher thinks they should be learning. For me, this understanding is key, because it implies a radically different approach to enabling change. I no longer see my work as overcoming resistance to learning. Rather, it is about inviting people to look within themselves and discover what is most important to them and how it connects with others. This journey inward seems to consistently focus on the innate capacity to learn in ways that encompass the good of the individual and the collective.

How Do We Uncover the Capacity to Learn, to Enable Successful Change?
Answering this follow-on question eventually led me to the work of Solomon Asch, a social psychologist whose research during the 1940's and 1950's provided great insight into the relationship between individuals and groups. Based on his work, three conditions for effective communities[2] (i.e., communities that sustainably support the needs of individuals and the collective) have evolved:

Perception of a Shared World
Asch's term was 'mutually shared field': "a field that includes both the surrounding and one another's psychological properties as the objective sphere of action."[3] He found that by seeing the interconnection among themselves, individuals are equipped to share actions, feelings, ideas and to mutually acknowledge one another. For me, the implication of this condition is that we begin to understand we are not alone, that we are part of something larger than ourselves. More powerfully, we recognize that there is no outside, that the other and ourselves are all part of the same system. Any solutions rest in the relationship between us. Talk about a radical re-thinking of our responsibility to ourselves and others!

Perception that All Are Equally Human
When we perceive others to be more alike than different from ourselves, then we "stand on common ground, [and] turn toward one another." [4] In my work, I always seek ways to invite people to look inward, to discover what they love and to share that passion. When people discover that what is most cherished, what is most personal, what they care about most deeply, is also cherished by others, then in Asch's words, they "turn toward one another."

Perception of an Open Dialogue

"Social life makes a double demand upon us: to rely upon others with trust and to become individuals who can assert our own reality. The primary striving of humans in society is toward both trust and independence."[5]   Asch found that differing perspectives converge through the interaction between the social and the personal. When there is no chance for dialogue, there is no possibility of mutual understanding and action. The impact on my practice has been to ensure all voices are invited into the room and that the groundwork for respectful interaction is laid.

Dialogue

What Is It?
A profound means for groups to converse that builds capacity to think together creating shared meaning and deeper understanding of interconnections.

Probable Outcomes
Moves participants toward collaborative partnership and shared leadership.   Makes visible and holds up for inquiry assumptions about leadership, decision making, and other challenges, making these more coherent with desired culture and outcomes.

Group Size
5 – 100+ people. Using concentric circles allows increased numbers without sacrificing depth.

Typical Duration
2 hours. Most effective when used in 2-hour sessions interwoven with daily activities.

The Steps In Brief
Setup: Chairs in a circle, no table
1. Pose an interesting focusing question.
2. Introduce 2 ground rules:
   · One person speaks at a time - focus on listening;
   · Focus on inquiry, hearing many perspectives by not saying "I disagree". Rather, ask to understand others' perspectives.
3. Go around the circle asking each person to speak without interruption on their thoughts/feelings on the topic.
4. Move to an open the discussion.
5. Closing: go around the circle asking each person to speak without interruption on what they are taking away from the discussion.

For More Information
The Dialogue Group 001-714-837-8771.

Bohm, D. On Dialogue. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Ellinor, L. and Gerard, G. Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998.

Isaacs, W. Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Like the IRL's insights, Asch's conditions profoundly influenced my consulting work. I found that when Asch's conditions were present, the capacity to learn is whole-heartedly embraced. By inviting groups to discover their shared world, by encouraging them to look within themselves for what is important to them as individuals, and by creating forums for them to talk together in respectful dialogue about what they've learned, I've noticed the quality of the interactions change radically. From adversarial, narrowly focused, personal agendas people begin to open

themselves to each other in heart-felt, powerful ways. They cease to act solely from selfishness but actually rise to the best within themselves. Over and over, I have found that at the end of gatherings and in the months that follow, people's relationships change. While they rarely call it love, those who act in caring, responsible ways grow in esteem and power, in the best sense of the word.

Another implication of this approach is that lecture has been replaced by experiential learning. I learned that people reveled in this newfound freedom, moving from passive consumers of presentations to active learners pursuing their own paths to understanding. I discovered that even the crustiest, most cynical of people develop new understanding and appreciation for their colleagues. Many also found a deeper understanding of themselves. And I observed that when people changed, when their relationships changed, the likelihood of sustainable organizational change to a learning organization dramatically increased.

What I have come to believe is based on a single, profound notion: *each one of us has all the power we need to create the world we want to live in.* By acting as if we were powerful, we can bring about a learning society. This way of being brings out the very best within our ourselves and our communities, because it compels us to act from passion and responsibility. It increases our awareness of our gifts compelling us towards our aspirations. It inspires us to act from a sense of personal calling bound by deep collective understanding. And when this happens, what we do reflects the best of who we are, what we dream as individuals *and* as a community. This dramatic shift seems to involve a very different relationship to power, leading to a very different way of living.

The Partnership Society: A Power Shift
In The Chalice and the Blade, social historian Riane Eisler proposes two models of society. The *dominator* model is present in the hierarchical structures of most organizations – with *ranking* as the primary organizing principle. In the *partnership* model, social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking*.[6] In organizations that use ranking, power is based in *domination* over another. In contrast, linking is based in relationships and power is based in *love* and *responsibility* for the benefit of all. Power, by this definition, seems to emerge as people begin to function as a learning organization.

Ranking and linking can be illustrated through two classroom models. In a ranking model, the teacher dominates. Students sit, hands folded, listening to what the teacher deems important for them to learn. The teacher is the center of power, with all students expected to obey. This classroom is orderly and quiet. In a linking model, learning is everyone's responsibility. Students take an active role in defining their learning needs, working in relationship to each other and the teacher. The teacher's role is to support students in their learning endeavors. This classroom may have multiple activities happening at once. To the outsider, it appears messy, chaotic, noisy, even out of control. No doubt, there are conflicts and challenges in this classroom, as students negotiate how time should be allocated among individual and group activities. But in the partnership classroom, power belongs to everyone.

An extrapolation of this classroom can be envisioned through Eisler's characteristics of a partnership society:
- "…Instead of requiring individuals that fit into pyramidal hierarchies, these institutions…allow for both diversity and flexibility in decision making and action…"
- "…the question is *not* how to eliminate conflict, which is impossible…The question directly bearing on whether we can transform our world from strife to peaceful coexistence is how to make conflict productive rather than destructive…"
- And perhaps, the most profound implication of the partnership society: "…power … [is] more equated with *responsibility* and *love* than with oppression, privilege, and fear."[7]

Appreciative Inquiry

What Is It?
A powerful approach that invites people to learn through their personal stories of accomplishment and aspirations. Used by individuals, organizations and communities, it begins with an affirmative interview to identify the best of 'what is' in order to pursue dreams and possibilities of 'what could be'.

Probable Outcomes
Fundamental shift toward cooperation, equality of voice, high participation, inquiry and improvisational learning as daily practices.

Group Size
20 – 2,000 involved in interviews, large scale meetings and collaborative actions.

Typical Duration
3 hours to 4 days. The longer it runs, the more embedded into daily practice it becomes.

The Steps In Brief
1. Select a focus area or topic(s) of interest.

2. Design an interview to discover strengths, passions, unique attributes. Example questions:

   a. Describe a peak experience or "high point" in your work. What was happening? Who was involved? What made it a powerful experience?

   b. What do you most value about... yourself? your work? your organization?

   c. What core factors give life to your organization?

   d. What three wishes do you have to enhance the health and vitality of your organization?

3. Identify patterns, themes and/or intriguing possibilities in the interviews.

4. Create bold statements of ideal possibilities ('Provocative Propositions').

5. Co-determine 'what should be' (consensus regarding principles & priorities).

6. Take action.

For More Information
Taos Institute <www.taosinstitute.org>

Cooperrider, D. & D. Whitney. "Collaborating for Change: Appreciative Inquiry," in P. Holman and T. Devane, eds., The Change Handbook. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

Hammond, S. & C. Royal (eds.). Lessons From the Field: Applying Appreciative Inquiry. Texas: Practical Press, Inc., Thin Book Publ. Co., 1998.

Allowing for diversity… flexible decision making… productive conflict… peaceful coexistence… power as responsibility and love. Is not what Eisler calls a partnership society the essence of a learning society? As the IRL uncovered, learning happens through social interaction. Since relationship is fundamental to a partnership society, and learning is at its heart a social activity, a partnership society by definition values learning. When relationship is encouraged, so is learning.

I believe a partnership-based classroom provides a wonderful example of how such an organization might function. Students own their power: they take responsibility for what they want to learn and act based on what they love. They aren't paralyzed by fear of repercussions from teachers or parents. They don't wait for permission from the teacher to learn something new. Power does not operate as *ranking* or domination over another. Instead, students

forge *links* with others who feel passionate about the same things they do and learn together. Power manifests as love and responsibility. And in this nurturing environment that they create for themselves, their innate capacity as a learning organization emerges.

Can a highly traditional organization truly learn to operate differently? Whether a school or a business, by introducing ideas and tools, such as dialogue, Open Space Technology, and Appreciative Inquiry,[8] that invite our inherent learning capacity to emerge, it is possible to bring about change. The wonderful tools available today support learners in discovering and pursuing their individual and collective passions.

Balancing Chaos and Order: A Different Way to Operate
You may be thinking "if everyone runs off to follow their passions, we'll be out of control, it will be chaos!" While I don't believe we'll be out of control, I do believe a learning society has a different relationship to order and chaos.

On the surface, our traditional organizations understand order quite well. It is about discipline and control; people knowing their role and staying in their place. And yet, "…we have created trouble for ourselves in our organizations by confusing control with order."[9]   Control comes from outside. It is Eisler's dominator exercising power over others. It relies on the privileged few to have all the answers, expecting everyone else to simply obey. In contrast, order comes from within, forged by the linkages created among members as they define the boundaries of their world. Because power is rooted in love and responsibility, those who want power learn to balance their individual needs with the needs of the whole.

A learning organization's relationship to power invites everyone to recognize the truth: that each of us has all the power we wish to claim. Since the implication is that everyone can do whatever they want, it invites chaos into the mix. This is a significant challenge for most of us because it requires "unlearning" many messages we've been taught through the years about the evils of chaos: not knowing the answer to the question is bad; messiness is inefficient; letting go of control means there will be lots of meaningless uncoordinated activity; someone has to be in charge or nothing of value will happen. And yet, ironically, when chaos and order are both embraced, not knowing the answer often leads to breakthroughs; messiness is understood to be many complementary and parallel activities; letting go of control causes innovative means of coordination to be developed; and no one in charge allows many natural leaders to emerge, thus increasing the overall capacity for meaningful action to take place. All it takes is a leap of faith! The good news is that tools have emerged to help people make the leap.

Open Space Technology

What Is It?
A powerful methodology that enables a group of any size to address important, complex issues in a constructive and powerful way.

Probable Outcomes
Discovery of the capacity to operate as a learning organization with high levels of personal responsibility and leadership.

Group Size
5 – 1000 people. With computer connected, multi-site, simultaneous events, theoretically, there is no limit.

Typical Duration
3 hours to 3 or more days. The longer it runs, the more learning and depth happens. Ultimately, it can be a daily practice for individuals and organizations.

The Steps In Brief
1. Create a focusing statement or theme that frames your topic in a positive way.

2. Invite people who care about the theme.

3. Create the space: Set chairs in a circle or in concentric circles, leaving space in the center with blank sheets of news print and colored pens. Label a wall "Agenda Wall".

4. To begin the gathering, explain the theme, the process the group will follow to organize, the Law of Two Feet, and the four principles.

5. Invite anyone who cares about an issue to step into the circle and write the topic, their name, a time and place for meeting, announce it and post the offering on the Agenda Wall. They are responsible for facilitating their session(s).

6. When ALL offerings are concluded, invite people to sign up for what they're interested in.

7. People participate in discussions and take responsibility by using the Law of Two Feet.

8. Closing: reconvene in the circle to share highlights and key learnings, simply listening to whatever people have to offer.

For More Information
Open Space Institute <www.openspaceworld.org>

Owen, H. Expanding Our Now: the Story of Open Space Technology. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 1997.

____. Open Space Technology: A User's Guide (2nd edition). Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco 1997.

Embracing Chaos
Consider this example of a Canadian social services agency (an organization providing a 'safety net' for the underprivileged in society). For four years, Birgitt Bolton led a Canadian social services agency as an 'Open Space organization.' An Open Space organization uses the four principles and the law of Open Space Technology as its framework for operating. These are:

- Whoever comes is the right people;
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have;
- When it starts is the right time;
- When it's over, it's over.

The Law of Two feet states that if you are neither contributing, nor getting value where you are, use your two feet (or other means of mobility) and go somewhere else.

Bolton describes the experiment:

We had a bulletin board where anyone could post an issue or opportunity... The person who put the topic up offered leadership to see it through... People used [the Law of Two Feet] to keep themselves only in situations in which they were contributing or receiving, so that no time was wasted by anyone in meetings. Conflict was minimized as people learned to let go of their agendas by living their organizational life using the four principles.

During that time, we funded two new organizations, a large housing project and an inner city health center. Our client load doubled and so did our productivity. We learned that leadership was in all; that all had a right to work at vision; that all had a role in the community; that all had responsibility for good management. We received a number of awards recognizing our leadership and excellence.[10]

There are numerous examples of how differently the organization operated:
Departments that had been antagonistic towards each other started working together. The most striking demonstration of this was the relationship of our fundraising department with all of the other departments...I was surprised that people who had been antagonistic towards fundraising had come to the realization that they need to give some of their energy towards fundraising or else the service delivery just wouldn't happen. The staff, Board members, and volunteers in fundraising and the ones in service delivery didn't become friends overnight and in some cases animosity continued. However, they worked together in a way that generated 40% increased revenues in the first year of working together... Most other social service organizations in our province were reporting declines in funding during this time.

We realized that much of what we spent our energy on as an organization, especially energy in dealing with conflicts, involved attention to behaviors and actions. As a staff we started talking about a theory that was known as the "iceberg theory", attesting that most of what was really going on in the organization was below the level of the visible (behaviors and actions) and at the levels of emotion, meaning, perception and interpretation. We started putting more energy to discussing the unseen. Some of this was done by our discussions about purpose, values and vision. Equally as valuable to shifting our attention to what we started calling the deeper essence of the organization was to spend time regularly to discuss our assumptions about the organization, and about specific areas of work.

Somehow, at some point in time, in 1993, there was a shift throughout the organization towards thinking in terms of social justice rather than charity...The motto of the organization, "together we can make a difference" shifted from words to action. I do know that for years, as the CEO, I had attempted to hold people accountable to a social justice model and it just didn't happen, except at the senior staff level and amongst a rare few Board members, front line staff and volunteers. At some point in 1993, I became aware that I was holding no one actively accountable. I discovered that they held each other accountable and I had very little involvement in the shift.

We had discussions within the organization about chaos, about chaos and change being constant and how to work with it. We started using words like navigating with change and started to talk about and laugh about the impossibility of managing change. This affected how we did our planning, shifting us away from linear goal setting and strategic planning, and leaving room for new opportunities as they emerged.

We altered the role of management to one in which we identified management tasks as those that removed barriers for the job to get done, and one that ensured that we provided resources for the job to get done. A significant way of doing this was managing the organization in a way that paralleled the Open Space Technology meeting, complete with an ongoing bulletin board and opportunities to attend discussion sessions that could be set by anyone, based on passion and responsibility.[11]

In western society, we've been raised to believe chaos is a bad thing – it's being 'out of control.' Chaos can be frightening because the outcomes are unpredictable. Yet chaos is home to creativity and innovation. Letting go of

what's known frees us to create something new. Bolton and her organization successfully harnessed chaos and order to serve themselves and their community.

A learning organization requires one foot firmly and consciously, albeit not always comfortably, planted in chaos. One person, acting at the margin of expectations, can pursue an idea seen by everyone else as a waste of time. What a profound reinforcement of personal power to act responsibly for the good of the whole! And what a frightening prospect for traditional schools facing turbulent times. What if students were free to pursue their own learning objectives? How could teachers possibly balance this with the expectations from parents that students improve the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, much less the demands of an increasingly technical and complex society?

Additionally, what ensures that people *will* act responsibly for the good of the whole? Or that what one person thinks is good for the whole is really worth the time and energy invested? Or that it is possible to balance the desires of students with the demands of their parents and society? While a learning organization embraces chaos, it does not abandon order. Rather, order shows itself in a less familiar form. Our traditional view of order exists in the rulebooks and laws that govern our behaviors to create a civil society, a well-run business or an exemplary classroom. In this form, order leaves very little room to welcome the unexpected inherent in chaos. To allow room for both chaos and order, order-as-rules is replaced by order as the principles and purpose that guide us.

I propose this new relationship to order and chaos underpins a learning society. Groups that have learned to balance chaos and order seem to do so through three practices that embody Asch's conditions:

· **A deeply felt purpose provides *direction* and *connects* the community.**
What I hold to be true is that *purpose* manifested through explicit operating principles provides a highly resilient structure that sustains order. Rather than control from an outside dominator, order emerges through the linkages forged in defining common purpose. For example, the purpose defined by the people of Bolton's organization was clear: to be the safety net for those in society least able to care for themselves. The operating principles consisted of some givens – for example, an acceptable responsibility to the province that funded it and agreements among the members of the organization about how they would work together. The operating principles also relied on the 4 principles and the law of Open Space. Using these principles, a variety of operating practices emerged, such as collectively maintaining a white board that provided a cross-organization communication of all the organization's activities. As needs changed, the practices shifted quickly because the purpose and principles provided a framework understood and embraced by all. Open Space Technology itself provided the principle tool the organization used to organize its activities.

· **People act from *love* and *responsibility*.**
Power in learning societies is rooted in *love* and *responsibility*. Think about the people that have made a powerful difference in your life. Whether a teacher, a parent, or a friend, it is the people who have loved us in responsible ways that shape the best in us. And the people who hold the collective respect of a community are those whose love and responsible actions support us all. While this is contrary to the many messages we learn in schools and other organizations about how power operates, I believe it is the natural evolution from the IRL's insights. What happens when we start with the IRL's belief that all people have a tremendous capacity to learn? As the IRL noted, we uncover that learning is a social phenomenon. As I've worked with organizations and observed this principle at work, I have seen that learning fulfills a core human need to contribute. People learn so they can give back to others. That fundamental desire is love and responsibility in action. And as Eisler's partnership society shows, when power is based in love and responsibility, the relationships created through contribution are the basis of great power.

· ***Reflection* and *inquiry* flow into action.**
Organizations that embrace learning engage extensively in *reflection* and *inquiry*. Operating as a learning organization requires a high tolerance for ambiguity, or remaining comfortable with questions, over an extended period of time. Reflection and inquiry skills become a vital aspect of daily practice. A dialogue may continue for several months ultimately leading to action. And that action is not necessarily based on consensus but is informed by the common understanding that has grown through collaborative exploration. While consensus may keep us tied to group action – often valuable, it is equally important to tolerate action at the margins. This tolerance enhances long-term survival.[12]

Conclusion: Towards Learning Organizations

A handful of organizations are learning to operate as learning organizations. They are clear about their purpose, they invite people to act from love and responsibility and they create the room required for continued reflection and inquiry. As they experiment, they teach us about societies based on linking, leading the way to a learning society. As Bolton's service organization illustrates, real people in real organizations and communities are already experiencing a learning community. Yet their success is so counter-intuitive for most of us: can letting go of control, embracing chaos, using the power of love really work? I submit that no other form has a better chance of creating peaceful, sustainable, personally satisfying life on this planet.

Endnotes

[1] IRL Perspective. <u>7 Principles of Learning: Challenging Fundamental Assumptions</u>. [pamphlet], Institute for Research on Learning, Menlo Park, CA.

[2] Marvin R. Weisbord, et al. <u>Discovering Common Ground</u>. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992, p.21-23.

[3] Solomon Asch. <u>Social Psychology</u>. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952, p.163.

[4] Ibid., p.161.

[5] Ibid., p.499.

[6] Riane Eisler. <u>The Chalice and the Blade</u>. New York: HarperCollins, 1988, p.xvii.

[7] Ibid., p.200, 192, 28.

[8] All of these methods have been used in schools. See sidebars for short descriptions. For a fuller description of these and other approaches to change, see Peggy Holman and Tom Devane. <u>The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future</u>. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

[9] Margaret Wheatley. <u>Leadership and the New Science</u>. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992, p.22.

[10] Bolton, Birgitt, "From One Leader to Many Leaders," <u>At Work</u>, March/April, 1997, Vol. 6, No. 2, p.26-27.

[11] Bolton, Birgitt, "My Story of the Open Space Organization," Part 2 of 4, E-mail on Open Space listserv, January 18, 2001. Birgitt (Bolton) Williams can be reached at birgitt@mindspring.com.

[12] Arie de Gues. <u>The Living Company</u>. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997, p.146.

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