

Probing the Future: The Learning Organization In An Age of Rapid-Prototyping

This paper seeks to bring three different formulations of future-learning in or by organizations together into a combined framework that provides a workable model for organization and innovation based on a new, integrated formulation of organizational anticipatory learning practices for navigating the future.

It is axiomatic and well-understood that to be viable in a world characterized by change and uncertainty, organizations need to change too. Future success requires ability to create new solutions or success models, often based on new capabilities, and this rests on an ability to learn. Considerable and justifiably well-regarded work was done in developing the concept of a learning organization in the 1990s (De Geus, 1988; Stata, 1989; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994) and, while there was at the time a considerable energy around it, much of this has dissipated in the intervening years—due to some inherent tension (Kerka, 1995), including distinctly idealistic and revisionist notions of organizational purpose, and, inter alia, a slow evolution away from a focus on future-learning to more general organizational learning (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998; Huber, 1991).

However, apparently paradoxically, as the notion of a learning organization has stalled, learning has in dramatic respect moved to the very heart of organizational innovation thinking, particularly with the emergence and quick spread of design thinking methodology, and now well-understood concepts of prototyping “build-to-learn” and “fail-fast” (to learn) (Brown, 2008, 2009). This has been given further impetus with the expansion of design thinking well beyond the remit of product and or service innovation (Brown & Martin, 2015) towards involvement with organization strategy renewal, and many examples of companies which “exploit design thinking to support change, envision the future, and enhance portfolio planning.” (Sato et al., 2010).

Into this literature, from the foresight side, Rohrbeck & Kum (2018), have put forward a “3Ps” foresight process model— Perceiving, Prospecting, Probing—which covers familiar terrain in strategic foresight methodology but extends it with particular attention to the idea of probing, this being where a foresight-generated new idea does not proceed directly to strategy but is developed into a learning-probe project to investigate with feedback how it might concretely take shape and be brought to user and market readiness. Probing takes decision-makers past merely identifying and understanding future solutions and conceptualizing a future path, and into real-world micro-scale exploration of these solutions. Like prototypes, probes stimulate and gauge user feedback, and create a learning cycle of iterative refinement of the product or service with users—that is, via probing, firms move from “cognitive search” to “experimental search” (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). Practically, probing may include R&D projects or acquisitions, internal venturing, experimenting in trial markets, creating intrapreneurship units or internal venture funds, “accelerator” units running consumer tests, etc. (McGrath, 2001; Michl et al., 2012; Rohrbeck et al., 2009). Other analysts from the foresight field have worked the common terrain between design prototyping and probing, for example, Day & Schoemaker (2016) advise “probe-and-learn” experimentation in the foresight process, this being rapid prototyping or quasi-experimental

designs that explore new strategic initiatives and pave the way for sequential investments, which (drawing on design thinking) requires: “a willingness to be immersed in the lives of current, prospective, and past customers [and] exploring and identifying latent needs or learning from lead customers.”

The paper brings these notions together, building on (and restituting) the *future-learning* component of the learning organization literature, and combining it with the relevant updated notions that have entered the field from design thinking and strategic foresight. Via this it aims to provide a practical (re)understanding the learning organization as a collection of systems and capabilities for iterating towards new ideas, solutions, business models, etc., rather than as a general call to organizational evolution or wellness, and it provides an updated working model for to achieve this.

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