

## Book Review: Essential Readings on Management Learning Authors: Grey, C. & Antonacopoulou, E.

Grey, C. & Antonacopoulou, E., (2004). *Essential Readings on Management Learning*, London: Sage.

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In the last decade or so, organisational learning, knowledge management and learning organisation have been becoming some of the critical areas of focus in the disciplines of organizational behaviour and strategic human resource management (SHRM). The explosion of interest in these areas is linked with wider shifts in economy, society and polity. These terms are becoming popular both at micro and macro levels. Governments across the globalising world have been focusing on human capital development as one of their key responsibilities so as to develop competitive advantage in enhancing exports, and also using these as methods of enhancing the economic growth rate. Management scholars and social scientists have been arguing that organisational learning has an intimate connection with the development of the learning organisation; and the latter is one of the important emerging themes in the contemporary discourse on SHRM. But it is also seen that many of the corporate decisions to invest in human resource development (HRD) and promoting individual and organisational learning are often ad hoc and not rooted in learning contexts and organisational realities.

In the above context, the book under review is a fine contribution towards comprehending various concepts and theories in management learning. It is a collection of twenty articles on different aspects of management learning. These articles are from amongst those published in the peer reviewed journal *Management Learning* since 1994. This journal, which was a relaunch of its predecessor, *Management Education and Development*, continues to be treated as one of the most reputed journals in the management field. The editors of the book, who were also the editors of *Management Learning* for five years, have attempted to put together, what they claim to be, " some of the best and most innovative writings within this field since the journal's inception in 1994" .

The twenty chapters of the book have been structured around six broad themes: organisational learning and learning organisation; individual learning; critical approaches to management education and learning; pedagogical practice; globalisation and management learning; and beyond management learning. Though it is difficult to select the best articles for the purpose of this review, in my opinion, some of the most interesting ones are in part two. The articles in this section on individual learning have argued that understanding individual learning necessitates appreciating the dynamics of social nature of learning. The section also focuses on different modes of learning as well as styles of learning. In a very sophisticated analysis, while attempting to comprehend the complexities of social nature of learning and knowing in organisations, Spencer has argued that theoretical or scientific knowledge should be supplemented by social knowledge, local knowledge and self knowledge. Another interesting paper in this section is by Richter which has analysed the role of learning projects as important vehicles for understanding executive learning.

While deliberating on management learning, It is also pertinent to ask whether the concept of learning organisation (LO) has been developed as per the hype created by the LO concept in the HRM thinking. In an interesting paper, Elkjaer handles this issue in part one of the book. This article is quite sceptical of much progress in its actual operationalisation; the gap between the

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rhetoric and reality being too wide. Based on an empirical study of the Danish public enterprise, Administrative Case Consideration (ACC), which launched a project on developing a learning organisation, he has tried to figure out the causal roots of this state of affairs. He has argued that the principal reason of this not having taken place is the reliance of training as the main method of implementing the LO project, with sole focus on changing the organisation by changing the individuals and otherwise leaving the organisation alone. In the last chapter on aesthetics of management storytelling, Taylor et al. have attempted to show how an understanding of aesthetics can contribute to the ability of a manager in facilitating organisational learning. In doing so, they have used Henry Mintzberg's well-known taxonomy of the 10 roles of the manager. They have argued that i) stories and storytelling play an important part in the full spectrum of management practice; ii) the aesthetics perspective adds to the existing understanding of management storytelling; and iii) artful storytelling is an effective vehicle for managers to contribute to organisational learning.

The canvas of the contributors to this volume is no doubt very wide and varied in focus and orientation. But what runs through it as a common factor is a deep concern for critically examining and questioning that which appears to be 'taken for granted'. The book is a rich source of seminal knowledge on organisational learning and learning organisation; and should not be seen as consisting as an abstract contribution to an academic discourse. Most contributions have succeeded in comprehending, critiquing and problematising issues in learning in general and those involved in organisational learning in particular. Grey and Mitev (pp. 151-166) are rightly outraged at the narrowness of business schools in handling learning issues. In a similar vein, is the concern of Kostra's paper (pp. 343-362) showing discontent with Western management thinking in the context of Eastern Europe.

Overall, the book has succeeded quite well in raising critical issues in the subject and in articulating many of them. Even though it is becoming a fashionable practice to criticise critical management scholarly writings as being abstract, especially due to the increasing influence of trainer-academics in business education, this collection exposes a number of problems and contradictions in existing learning approaches and reflects a good image of purely academic perspectives in this area. In my opinion, a major shortcoming of most 'how to' books on management learning is that they propose to offer bullet-point magical solutions that are supposedly expected to transform the organisation concerned. But learning is often complicated by different wants, needs and motivations of people. The contents of, *Essential Readings in Management Learning*, grounded in many years of expounding the learning dynamics, recognises this complexity and the mistaken belief of "one size fits all" solutions. It is a valuable source book and a fine piece of scholarship containing useful ideas for current and future HRD experts. It should indeed be an essential reading for management scholars and academics. It contains perhaps the most thoughtful and provocative papers not just focusing on management learning but also reflecting on wider issues in leadership and human resource development.

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