

LEARNING TO CHANGE

A RESOURCE FOR TRAINERS, MANAGERS AND
LEARNERS BASED ON SELF-ORGANISED LEARNING

**SHEILA
HARRI-AUGSTEIN
AND IAN M. WEBB**

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This book is dedicated to:

*Ray, Geoff, Pete, John, Sid, Maurie, Eddie, John Paul, Willie, and all those
'SOL Coaches' with whom we have worked on the job.*

Series preface

Training and development are now firmly centre stage in most organisations, if not all. Nothing unusual in that-for some organisations. They have always seen training and development as part of the heart of their businesses-but more and more must see it that same way.

The demographic trends through the 1990s will inject into the marketplace severe competition for good people who will need good training. Young people without conventional qualifications, skilled workers in redundant crafts, people out of work, women wishing to return to work-all will require excellent training to fit them to meet the job demands of the 1990s and beyond.

But excellent training does not spring from what we have done well in the past. T&D specialists are in a new ball game. 'Maintenance' training-training to keep up skill levels to do what we have always done will be less in demand. Rather, organisation, work and market change training are now much more important and will remain so for some time. Changing organisations and people is no easy task, requiring special skills and expertise which, sadly, many T&D specialists do not possess.

To work as a 'change' specialist requires us to get to centre stage-to the heart of the company's business. This means we have to ask about future goals and strategies, and even be involved in their development, at least as far as T&D policies are concerned.

This demands excellent communication skills, political expertise, negotiating ability, diagnostic skills-indeed, all the skills a good internal consultant requires.

The implications for T&D specialists are considerable. It is not enough merely to be skilled in the basics of training, we must also begin to act like business people and to think in business terms and talk the language of business. We must be able to resource training not just from within but by using the vast array of external resources. We must be able to manage our activities as well as any other manager. We must share in the creation and communication of the company's vision. We must never let the goals of the company out of our sight.

In short, we may have to grow and change with the business. It will be

Series preface

hard. We shall not only have to demonstrate relevance but also value for money and achievement of results. We shall be our own boss, as accountable for results as any other line manager, and we shall have to deal with fewer internal resources.

The challenge is on, as many T&D specialists have demonstrated to me over the past few years. We need to be capable of meeting that challenge. This is why McGraw-Hill Book Company Europe have planned and launched this major new training series-to help us meet that challenge.

The series covers all aspects of T&D and provides the knowledge base from which we can develop plans to meet the challenge. They are practical books for the professional person. They are a starting point for planning our journey into the twenty-first century.

Use them well. Don't just read them. Highlight key ideas, thoughts, action pointers or whatever, and have a go at doing something with them. Through experimentation we evolve; through stagnation we die.

I know that all the authors in the McGraw-Hill Training Series would want me to wish you good luck. Have a great journey into the twenty-first century.

ROGER BENNETT
Series Editor

About the series editor

Roger Bennett has over 20 years' experience in training, management education, research and consulting. He has long been involved with trainer training and trainer effectiveness. He has carried out research into trainer effectiveness, and conducted workshops, seminars, and conferences on the subject around the world. He has written extensively on the subject including the book *Improving Trainer Effectiveness*, Gower. His work has taken him all over the world and has involved directors of companies as well as managers and trainers.

Dr Bennett has worked in engineering, several business schools (including the International Management Centre, where he launched the UK's first masters degree in T&D), and has been a board director of two companies. He is the editor of the *Journal of European Industrial Training* and was series editor of the ITD's *Get In There* workbook and video package for the managers of training departments. He now runs his own business called The Management Development Consultancy.

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We also appreciate the support given by the series editor, Roger Bennett, who as external examiner for Ian's PhD, saw the value of the 'Personal Learning Contract' as a tool for reflective learning on the job. He also recognised the contribution that SOL, backed by the methodology of the 'Learning Conversation, can make within the world of training and development.

We are especially grateful to the editorial and production teams at McGraw-Hill-Julia Riddlesdell, Anthea Coombs, Kate Allen, Vicky Baker, Ros Comer and Elaine Gaymer-for the professional support and personal attention they gave us. Working with them was a salutary experience.

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Foreword

This book explains simply and clearly how people may increase their capacity to learn. The authors, Sheila and Ian, show how trainers, managers and learners can achieve this. They focus on the diverse habitats of work, at all levels of the social hierarchy within commercial, industrial and government enterprises. However, their message has significant implications for all types of enterprise engaged in change. To be enabled to develop personal learning potential, and hence one's capacity to learn, is a rare achievement. When it happens, a quantum leap in learning competence takes place. It results in each subsequent skill, task or topic being learnt significantly better and in more cost-effective ways. This is no wild claim. It is the most repeatedly validated outcome from many years of action research carried out at the Centre for the Study of Human Learning (CSHL) in Brunel University, UK.

This academic learning community was founded by Sheila and me as a postgraduate school and as a research and consulting institute. The term 'academic' is used here to indicate an informed and systematic search for valid knowledge and innovative techniques. Members of the CSHL also belong to other institutions including banks, marriage guidance clinics, industrial companies, the Metropolitan Police, commercial organisations, drug addiction centres, large management consultancy companies, the London Fire Service, the Cabinet Office of the Civil Service, the Social Services, The Zen Foundation, hospitals, The Royal Mail Businesses, teacher training colleges, psychotherapy units, Olympic sports squads, a strategic planning unit, a teaching therapy organisation offering the Alexander Technique and a commercial language teaching college (to name but a few). The CSHL functions as a global learning community using Internet and other hi-tech communication channels to coordinate members living and working in Europe and other parts of the world, including Australia, Iran, Canada, Mexico, the USA and India.

Ian was one of our recruits. He was awarded his PhD in Human Learning in 1990 and after a stint of management teaching formed his own independent training consultancy. As an associate of the CSHL and as an honorary senior lecturer he retains close working links. For his PhD, supervised by Sheila, Ian carried out a series of sensitive and innovative studies on a one-to-one and small-group basis with learners in a variety

of educational and training contexts. He applied various CSHL techniques and methods, especially the Personal Learning Contract (PLC), to produce some very interesting and, indeed, rather outstanding results.

Early in her career, Sheila was a prime mover in introducing learning-to-learn to advanced 'A' and 'S' level and undergraduate science teaching. She extended this work within higher education during her PhD studies with me at CSHL in the early 1970s. During this time she conceived the notion of a 'Learning Conversation', which evolved into a unique approach for addressing processes of learning. Together, we developed this into an explicit methodology and invented a whole series of new techniques for recording learning activities and helping individuals reflect upon their experiences. Later, during her years as senior lecturer in the psychology of education at Loughborough University, she introduced the theory and practice of Learning Conversations into the teacher training curriculum. She also introduced self-assessment and peer-evaluation into trainee teachers' assignments and examinations. At this time she also worked as tutor, monitor, examiner and member of a course design team for the Open University. At the next stage in her career Sheila re-joined the CSHL as my deputy to launch a series of action research projects in government, commercial and industrial contexts.

We have installed Self-Organised Learning (SOL) in the Ministry of Defence, in a number of industrial and commercial companies and in the Royal Mail letters and parcels businesses. Working with Sheila, conducting Learning Conversations on the job has always been inspiring. I experienced new insights as I observed her:

- explaining SOL to a captain in the Gurkha Rifles by encouraging him to make a series of origami paper penguins, and then use this experience to reflect on how he organised his learning;
- standing on Reading railway station at midnight helping a firstline Post Office supervisor to reflect upon why the over-run of mail to Paddington was 55 per cent (and her delight three weeks later when Paddington confirmed that he had reduced it to 3 per cent in the previous week);
- using the repertory grid conversationally to help the senior managers in Kelloggs UK reflect upon, and then systematically re-define, the quality of one of their brands of breakfast cereal;
- helping two Royal Naval officers-one of whom was on Air Intercept Control duty in HMS *Sheffield* when it was sunk by a missile in the Falklands-relive the experience on a computer-driven simulator; they were having one deep 'ah-ha' learning experience after another;
- conversing with a Zen Master about SOL and Zen as alternative paths to self-fulfilment;
- explaining to a well-known captain of industry that psychologists from the CSHL do not shrink people's heads, they expand them; and then going on to use the opportunity to get him to reflect rather

rigorously, in a head-expanding way, on how he did his job.

- eliciting Personal Learning Contracts as she conducted tutorials with post-graduate students, so enabling them to appreciate the power of the PLC and reflective tool.

In formulating the theory of Self-Organised Learning and by inventing and developing the methods of the Learning Conversation, the CSHL has made a major contribution to the theory and practice of education and training over the past 25 years. The current vogue for 'independent learning', 'open learning', 'empowerment', 'learning organisations', 'distance learning', 'learning companies' and even 'innovative learning' reflects many of the ideas that we pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time such progressive ideas were often greeted with alarm and hostility. The current preoccupation with such conceptions of learning carries the seeds of its own destruction. As with many other 'flavours of the month' in education, training and management, what starts out as a powerful set of ideas is easily misunderstood. It is then misrepresented, and exploited by the politically and professionally ambitious. Thus the original ideas become so distorted that they lose their quality, their utility and finally their credibility. This cannot happen to SOL and Learning Conversations because the approach is robustly embedded in practice and in the real experience of people.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the concept, 'learning' is often misunderstood because it is all too easily equated with training or it is treated as a 'product'. As the reader will discover, SOL is always concerned with the quality and the specific content of what is being learned; but it is the process of learning that is, here, always centrally addressed. For the Self-Organised Learner, 'learning' is not just successfully submitting to being taught, trained or instructed. Nor is it what happens incidentally to the lucky learner as he or she acquires more experience. It is personal to each learner, and needs to be consciously understood and organised by each learner, in his or her own terms.

For Self-Organised Learners, each and every event becomes an opportunity for experimenting and developing personal skills, competences and creativity. Once initiated, this process cannot be stopped by the insightful or even the politically bigoted; what happens is that when self-organisation is thwarted in one area, it blossoms in another. Self-organised learners seek new challenges; they question and expect valid feedback and discriminating appraisal. This spark should be cherished and nourished by an organised system of support.

The theory of SOL and its enabling methodology of the Learning Conversation are rooted in Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), cybernetics, knowledge engineering and transformational management theory. SOL is contributing to the evolving new psychology which is emerging in various forms in different parts of the world.

Enabling SOL is fundamental to modern-day management. Any

enterprise will remain viable if its members are regularly encouraged to review what they should know, the skills they should have and what they should expect to achieve. It will become successful if its members are enabled to acquire the knowledge and skills they have identified, use them well and continue to revise their understanding and their performance in the light of their experience.

The enterprise will really begin to take off when its trainers and its managers:

- enable each member of staff to investigate exactly what it is they need to know and be able to do, to get the job done with quality, cost-effectively and reasonably fast;
- encourage them to acquire these skills and knowledge, continually testing them out, refining them and updating them from experience on the job;
- enable all staff and all teams to take responsibility for their own learning; then develop their capacity to learn so that they become capable of life-long learning.

This book invites every manager to become a Learning Manager. Each manager will continually be learning on the job; and managers will be supporting the learning of each of those for whom they are responsible. Part of the trainer's role becomes that of supporting the manager to develop the skills for carrying out these activities with competence and flair. Sheila and Ian directly address trainers and suggest how they might transform their views of their job, becoming more skilled and competent in enabling effective learning to take place on the job.

The organisational application of Learning Conversations to enable individuals and teams to become more self-organised in their learning entails a personal paradigm shift by all concerned. This requires a significant change in one's whole pattern of understanding of what learning is all about. Sheila and Ian have done a magnificent job in offering the readers an opportunity to make this shift by experimenting with their own learning as they converse with this book.

LAURIE F. THOMAS

*Professor of Human Learning, Brunel University, UK
Carl Rogers Memorial Professor, Clayton University, USA*

Notes for readers from a SOL Coach

For most of my lifelong career in the Post Office I had to learn the hard way. By the time I was a senior planning manager with special responsibility for training, I was given the opportunity to develop more skills and I became a SOL Coach. In many ways this transformed my life and how I did my job. I experienced many 'Learning Conversations' and over a period of two years I kept a diary of my thoughts and feelings as I practised SOL on the job. Extracts from this diary are reproduced below for the benefit of trainers and managers who read this book.

I have initiated several 'Learning Projects' as a SOL Coach. These have included:

- Learning Conversations to create an awareness of the effects of 'orderliness and tidiness' on office performance.
- Developing, running and evaluating SOL workshops for newly appointed supervisors to help them research their jobs by hands-on experience.
- Developing and testing my 'personal problem solving algorithm' as a planner
- Working with the Christmas team to develop 'personal work plans' to ensure the smooth despatch of mail during this busy period.
- Working with my full-time SOL Coach to support the smooth transition from the old mail letter sorting office to the new system.

Part of my Personal Learning Biography which records some of these activities is presented in Figure 7.4. Each project was judged to be successful when evaluated against SOL criteria and the 'objective measures' within my office.

My introduction to Self- Organised Learning (SOL)

In 1985 representatives from CSHL at Brunel University visited our post office to study the work performed by postal supervisors. Their objective was to consider new methods to be used either as an alternative or as additions to the current methods being used to improve the standards of supervision.

I was one of the supervisors interviewed and I remember that I was

more than a little sceptical and I questioned the purpose of the interviews. It had been one of my duties to organise training sessions and I thought that the existing sessions were quite adequate and did not involve expensive outside training. However, during the interviews with the CSHL people I began to realise that there was more to it and I became more inquisitive and interested. In 1986 I attended a SOL course and became a part-time SOL Coach.

Self-Organised Learning has helped me quite considerably. In the course of my work in planning, I have to think about the work or problem and analyse it critically. It was always normal practice to perform this work by traditional methods that had been used for years and never questioned. Since attending the SOL course I now ask myself 'Is there a better way or perhaps a quicker one?' Of course, it does not necessarily follow that there is, but at least I think about it and do not just accept matters.

I have found SOL to be a very personal thing and if accepted it can help in many different ways, both at home and at work. It is a personality builder as it makes you more confident, you see things differently and more clearly. SOL should not be considered 'an overnight success story', but once the seeds are sown they will grow, although they grow more quickly in some people and more slowly in others because we are all individuals with our own individual pace.

I have become more aware of how I do my job, I certainly give matters more thought and I examine myself for my strengths, faults or weaknesses. I think the most noticeable change is that I find myself looking at problems on a much broader horizon. For example, I realised that our post office, along with others countrywide, was going through various inspections and fault-finding missions, all of which should improve our business. I felt, however, that insufficient thought was being given to staff motivation. My thoughts evolved into proposals which have been given to management for consideration. I credit Self-Organised Learning for my interest and insight in this matter.

Reflections: the humorous side of SOL

After returning home from the SOL course, I began to review the course and wondered if something was missing from the curriculum of 'Learning to Learn', namely 'Learning to Think'. I was not sure exactly what I had learned and this seemed to be the general feeling among the other course participants. All of us were saying, albeit in different ways, that we were unsure of exactly how to put SOL into practice. We had learned a great deal on the course but because the method was completely new to us and perhaps a little strange, it was difficult to grasp.

Preparation of a Learning Programme

I began thinking about a possible Learning Programme and tried to work out a pattern we could follow. First, I thought that a meeting

between SOL Coaches and their assistants should be set up to discuss how all the Coaches could work on the same wavelength, not necessarily in the same way, but as a team. I felt that this could make for better informed and more efficient and confident supervisors who are able to go on learning and support the learning of others on the job.

It was while I was thinking about preparing a Learning Programme and working on a flowchart that the word 'FEAR' came into my head. I recalled that this word had been mentioned on the SOL course – the fear of failure, of not being as good as the next person, not really knowing the answers, when a nod of the head suggests confirmation but is really the disguise for not wanting to speak out.

I then realised that I was talking to myself—a sign of madness it is said! I found that almost for the first time in my life I was digging deep into myself, questioning, reflecting, exploring and playing with my mind. For days and weeks I experienced a mixture of apprehension, fear and excitement. Was I going mad? Or was this the seed of the inner Learning Conversation that we had been introduced to on the course?

I have come to realise that it is possible to become a more balanced person if you can learn to think inwardly as part of the Learning to Learn techniques. There is close similarity between learning and thinking, and with the Learning Conversation method I have been made to think, by means of discussion and by asking myself questions and answering them myself.

The enemy of SOL

It is hard to believe that Self-Organised Learning, which can only benefit people, can have an enemy, but it does. How many times, I wonder, does the SOL Coach hear the words 'It's just a gimmick' or 'It's just one big con-somebody trying to tell us how to do our job', and so on.

It is common knowledge that many people are adverse to change, particularly when it affects them personally. In the Post Office we are all aware of the drastic changes taking place and how things are going to differ in the future, particularly in the supervisory grades. I have found that new staff are more responsive to SOL simply because they are keen to receive as much help as they can to be successful in their jobs.

I have noticed that established supervisors with many years of experience seem to shy away from anything different from the norm, they prefer to carry on as they always have 'robotishly'. If the set pattern looks like altering, you will hear a barrage of reasons as to why the new methods will not work even before anything new has been introduced! The established supervisors, set in their ways, find it hard to change. SOL becomes something they do not understand, they resent anyone who tells them it will help them improve, that it will encourage them to question themselves about how they do their job. The supervisors will always reply that 'There is only one way to learn this job, and that is with long experience – the hard way!' They are really afraid that they

might reveal certain weaknesses by taking part in SOL. 'It is a brain-washing technique,' I have heard someone say, and 'We do not need SOL, with our experience we know it all,' was another comment. It is not an easy task to convince established supervisors that SOL can only be of benefit to them. Sometimes a supervisor may already be practising SOL to some extent and not be aware of it. The enemy of Self-Organised Learning is fear in the individual.

Speaking personally, I shall continue to endeavour to transform 'training' and to become an enabler of change on the job.

R.W.

SAMPLE

General introduction

Agenda board

- Training and learning
- Self-Organised Learning as a radical approach
- How the book is organised
- How the book may be used
- Suggested activity: action plan: designing an SOL workshop

This book is intended for the training practitioner. The term 'training practitioner' tends to suggest someone with training in their job title; however, the book will be of practical value to *all enablers of learning* and this will include trainers, managers and supervisors as well as consultants, counsellors, tutors and human resource providers generally.

There is a growing movement away from 'content-based' training towards 'process' management. Self-Organised Learning (SOL) is firmly based in processes of learning and learning to learn and is 'content' free. This means that any topic, task or skill can be approached through the SOL methodology; topics from law, accountancy, economics, management theory, statistics, science and engineering to more practical tasks such as operating a lathe, a computer or a check-out machine, to people-oriented activities such as dealing with customers, getting the best out of employees and encouraging team leadership. These represent a small selection of topics, tasks and skills which may be learnt effectively through the practice of processes related to SOL.

With the aid of this book, *training practitioners will be in a position to enable their clients to become better learners.* This will be achieved through greater awareness and self-management of personal learning processes, which will contribute greatly towards improved and lasting results in organisational effectiveness.

Some of the examples and procedures used in the book are based on the doctoral research of Ian Webb, one of the co-authors. The original techniques and the methodology of 'Learning Conversations' and SOL have been developed over 20 years of action research in industry, education and government by Dr Sheila Harri-Augstein and Professor Laurie Thomas, founder directors of the Centre for the Study of Human Learning and the Postgraduate Division of Human Learning based at Brunel University.

Training and learning

Technology, organisations, communities and life in general is changing at an ever-increasing pace, and individuals as well as all forms of working and social groups have to be able to develop *strategies for change*. In order to cope with the pressures that often arise, we have to learn new ways of mentally tackling situations, which frequently involve changes in procedures, the manner in which we relate to others and the ways in which we physically perform tasks. Escalating change is not confined to Europe but is a worldwide phenomenon that is gaining momentum. Sudden change as opposed to gradual change, referred to by Charles Handy as discontinuous change, can bring about high levels of stress in many people. Often they find themselves deeply threatened by a future in which they have no strategy to cope let alone to survive and grow.

The answer that frequently emerges is to encourage all those involved in change to undergo 'training' or 'retraining'. There are many problems

associated with this approach, not least of which are the *personal myths* held by the majority of individuals and by trainers themselves. One such myth commonly held by learners relates to the belief that the older we become the less we are able to learn! Here are some sayings reflecting personally held myths about 'age and learning' that we have probably all heard:

- *'If I lose my job, I shall be on the shelf for life-it's too late for me to change now.'* (A 40-year-old executive.)
- *'You can't teach an old dog new tricks.'* (A 50-year-old post office supervisor.)
- *'My memory is going; I am definitely getting older.'* (A 30-year-old schoolteacher.)
- *'I have heard that brain cells die off and are not replaced after the age of 21; goodness knows how much of a brain I have got left now that I am reaching 40.'* (A researcher in the pharmaceutical industry.)
- *'Older people have used up most of the brain's capacity, so they have a problem when learning anything new. If my learning is to be successful some part of my memory has to be destroyed to make way for new knowledge.'* (A 35-year-old mature student.)

One classic *trainer held myth* relates to the 'control of learning'. All too often trainers assume that if training is carried out effectively, with a well-organised programme using carefully controlled training materials, and assessed rigorously using objective criteria, then learning will automatically take place! Trainers caught up in this myth fail to appreciate that *trainers' purposes and learners' purposes are seldom identical* and that real learning can only take place when each individual's learning needs and personal background is seriously taken into account. Figure 11.1 shows how the trainer's 'purposes' and 'expected outcomes' are often not the same as the learners' 'purposes' and 'expected outcomes'. These represent two *different perspectives* on learning. The Learning Conversation allows the trainer and learners to *negotiate shared purposes*, and to *agree standards for evaluating the quality of the outcomes*.

With inappropriate myths like these, and many more predominating in the training/learning culture, it is not surprising that when we have to adapt to change through a process of learning—often forced upon us by outside influences—stress arises which, in turn, can lead to poor performance, an inability to cope and all too often illness and absenteeism.

It is a sad fact that in the UK, for a variety of reasons, many organisations large and small pay scant regard to training. Those few proactive and insightful organisations that provide training for their staff often find that, when changes in work practice and technologies are introduced, and people are 'trained' to meet these new demands, the staff fail to adapt to further unforeseen changes. This involves trainers in more work, carrying out further training in the form of courses, workshops or traditional coaching. In the long run this is neither cost-effective for the

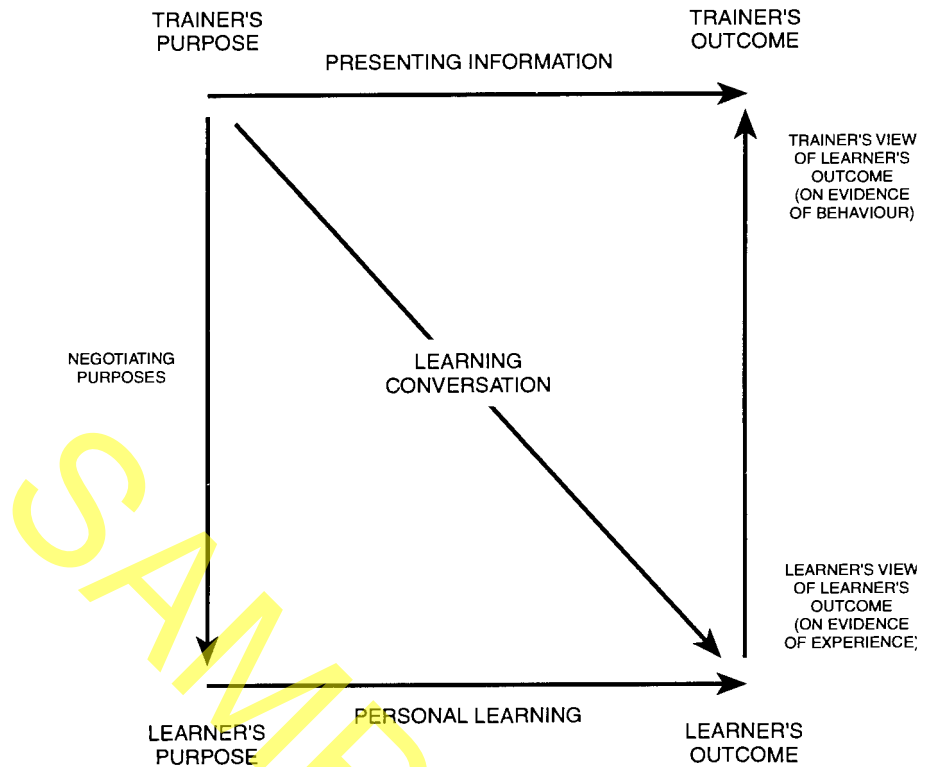


Figure 11.1 Perspectives on training and learning

company nor significantly productive of trainer time and effort. Training is essentially designed to be *expert-organised*, leaving the learner little room for manoeuvre and may well be concerned with reducing the number of 'short cuts' taken by staff who feel they have found 'better' but not approved ways of carrying out their work. Again, individual learners are often designated to attend training sessions without prior consultation and with little or no involvement in the design of their course.

When asking people to express what they wish to get from a course, the following comments are commonplace:

- *'To be frank I don't know why I'm here, I was just told to come along.'*
- *'My boss sent me.'*
- *'I received this memo about joining only last Friday, and when I tried to get out of this course because it isn't really relevant for me, I was told I had no option but to attend. I am hopping mad!'*
- *'What a waste of time! I have got loads of real work to do at the office, I really resent this.'*
- *'I thought this course dealt with learning about total quality but it's largely about the skills of accountancy.'*

This is hardly an ideal situation to help develop real and on-going learning!

Any serious book that aims to address learning directly must concern itself with the accelerating pace of change, the ever-spiralling demands for new skills and competences, and the relevance of learning in a persons job and in life. This book aims to do just that, and much more. It aims to familiarise individuals and groups who may need to learn together, with a compendium of techniques and procedures by which they can develop and conduct 'Learning Conversations' for enhancing their *capacity to learn*. Self-Organised Learners have the capacity to continue to develop their *learning* on the job and in life. For them the learning curve is characterised by an infinite growth potential.

The book aims to open up the mind to the exciting possibilities offered by SOL in enabling individuals and teams to develop their own abilities to manage change constructively by making the most of all learning opportunities and experiences and by loosening their dependence on other organised behaviours and standards. The book is designed to introduce the natural yet radical concept of SOL. It offers a very practical approach, encouraging the reader to use the techniques and procedures to *learn by experimentation* and by *reflection in action* on the job.

Many books have been written on the subject of self-development and learning to learn with a wide variety of stand-alone tools to help the learner to progress. Such books are, in the main, highly prescriptive despite the claim to be process-based. They do not invite 'freedom to learn'; nor do they promote self-responsibility and continuous learning. They perpetuate what we would call *other-organised learning*. We aim to do something very different.

The content-independent *reflective learning tools* to be introduced are systematically designed to open up the process of SOL. Each is selected for use according to the needs of the individual at any given situation, time or place. Our experience shows that as learners increase their competence in learning they are gradually able to discard these tools instead of using them as a crutch to be relied upon for ever. The tools will have served their purpose to *enhance awareness of personal perception* as well as *personal performance*, promoting an enduring change within the person. Such learners will be able to conduct effective on-going 'Learning Conversations' with themselves, which can endure through life.

The SOL journey should not be viewed as a solitary activity: on the contrary it takes place within a *social environment* which encompasses the world of work, study and life as a whole. We invite readers to consider ways in which *learning partners* may be recruited to help in the quest towards SOL. Suggestions are given on how to develop *conversational networks of learners* operating in project teams or in small groups, or as a 'learning section' and a 'learning department'. Towards

the end of the book, we indicate how an entire organisation can also recruit SOL for promoting learning throughout the company.

Trainers and managers are encouraged to reflect on their role of enabling others to develop competence in learning and how to make the best use of the opportunities that present themselves inside and outside the workplace for promoting personal development and team learning. Once this has been achieved various tools and strategies are offered for the management of SOL within the organisation.

The book is written in such a way as to encourage readers to *experiment* and *converse with themselves* about the ways in which they are learning as they progress through each chapter.

Self-Organised Learning as a radical approach

Learning is increasingly becoming the focus of attention in the workplace, with many approaches to helping people become better learners. Action learning, active learning, accelerated learning, learning sets, autonomous learning, independent learning, experiential learning, self-directed learning, neurolinguistic programming (NLP), open learning and learning style inventories have each, at some point, been 'flavour of the month' and there are no shortages of source material from which to examine the subject of learning. The key issue with these approaches, in our view, is that despite the apparent focus on learning, they are often primarily aimed at helping the trainer to use a preplanned and pre-organised 'learning package' as distinct from providing tools and techniques for enabling the learner to develop a continuous capacity to learn. A deep-rooted myth prevails: as a 'professional', the trainer should be in a position to know exactly what learning is necessary in others and how to structure and organise the learning activities to meet predictable needs.

Self-Organised Learning is totally different in that it genuinely focuses on the learner, who is enabled to develop responsibility for diagnosing personal needs and for developing personal standards of quality as well as for managing his or her own learning. The approach involves identifying appropriate resources, which will include people who may be in a position to offer their experiences and expertise. Learners are guided to explore the work situation and the often unexpected yet rich resources within themselves as well as in their whole environment. Part of the resources that may legitimately be offered include formal courses and workshops, but learners will have identified their needs and enrolled themselves. Such learners find it uncomfortable to submit themselves passively to being directed and instructed in what, for them, may be a purposeless manner. They would rather actively engage in the learning process in ways that meets their unique needs.

Many trainers who are accustomed to running courses and workshops in a predefined and highly structured manner are likely to find self-

organised learners initially difficult to cope with, but once a shift in attitude is made they readily learn to accept new challenges, to move towards identifying individual needs and to meet the developing purposes of each of their clients. Trainers can then begin to see themselves as enabling learners to go forward to learn on the job, by systematically engaging them in Learning Conversations, thus supporting the process all the way.

How the book is organised

Each chapter begins with an *Agenda board* outlining the framework of the contents, and ends with a section featuring *Suggested activities* for developing the skills involved. Towards the end of each chapter we develop the *definition of Self-Organised Learning* and in the last chapter invite you to define the term for yourself.

In this general introduction we have explored how Self-Organised Learning relates to training and have introduced the concept as a radical approach.

In Chapter 1 we offer a basic definition of Self-Organised Learning, which is elaborated on as the reader progresses through the book. This chapter explains Self-Organised Learning and covers some of the benefits to individuals, teams and organisations.

Chapter 2 is concerned with getting started by challenging personal and professional myths about learning. There are suggested activities that will help to increase understanding of how personal myths can affect learning. We introduce and guide the reader through the process of setting up learning experiments, and making sense of learning.

In Chapter 3 we show the reader how to model the experience of learning using the repertory grid as a tool. Procedures are offered for analysing the results of the grid and the reader is shown how to support the learner to stand back and reflect on these results. Some mini exercises are offered throughout the chapter so that a step-by-step mastering of the method is achieved. The Self-Organised Learner is here seen as a 'personal scientist' researching learning.

Chapter 4 addresses itself to the need for developing a language with which to converse about learning and how this can help to develop skills and competences and the learner's capacity to learn. It describes exactly what we mean by a 'Learning Conversation' and introduces the role of the 'Learning Coach'. The different dialogues and the three levels of the Learning Conversation are explained.

In Chapter 5 we introduce the reader to the Personal Learning Contract as a major learning tool. We explain what we mean by the 'personal' learning contract and differentiate out meaning from the commonly held view of what a learning contract is. We take the reader through

the procedure step by step and build up the process from a simple tool towards a more complex 'real life' instrument.

In Chapter 6 we illustrate Personal Learning Contracts by presenting examples of 'real life' applications from a wide variety of backgrounds to show the reader how the process works in action. This chapter is also intended to give the reader some ideas for using this tool as a training practitioner.

Chapter 7 is devoted to methods for measuring progress in learning. There is a suggested framework for measuring progress in SOL called the Personal Learning Biography. As well as measuring the effects of improved learning on task-based activities, this biography can be used as an evaluation tool.

Chapter 8 focuses on the practical organisational application of the SOL approach and elaborates on the development of a learning system involving a Learning Manager and Learning Coaches, and the setting up of learning networks among staff. We indicate how SOL may be introduced into an organisation, and how it may be encouraged to develop and become part of the learning culture.

How the book may be used

We suggest that while readers work their way through the book they perform the recommended activities and so experience SOL for themselves. We do not advocate that the entire text should be read before experimenting with learning. An overview of the approach can usefully be gained from the flow chart of the book, the table of contents and the agenda board at the beginning of each chapter. The previous section presented a brief summary of the ideas, techniques and processes relating to each chapter.

Some of the *learning tools* referred to can be used in isolation to the overall methodology and the benefits can be experienced almost immediately. However, the real science of SOL and the full pay-offs that the whole methodology brings can only develop when individuals accept responsibility for their own learning, thus creating a *personal project*. Such a project involves experimenting with all the tools and procedures in a variety of learning tasks and situations. This requires competence in carrying out all three *levels* of the 'Learning Conversation as well as practice in the three *dialogues* of learning.

So! We suggest that you experiment with your learning *right away*, and then you can begin to consider how to support others to develop their SOL skills. Some readers may wish to use the methodology for helping others to develop competence in learning without experimenting too much themselves. This is, to some, extent possible but it would be difficult to envisage helping others develop the skills of learning conversations when one has no personal experience of the process! An

advanced driving instructor needs not only to be an experienced driver before tutoring pupils for the advanced test, but must also be experienced in the tutoring process. Simply reading a book on advanced driving techniques and tutoring techniques, without personal experimentation, is unlikely to be helpful to either the trainer or the learner!

Quite simply, the SOL methodology is not just a package that can be passed on. It demands insight, understanding and specific skills which need to be mastered. On the other hand, given some support for learning, we have been very impressed by the speed with which some learners can become self-organised. In the book we describe how the training practitioner can offer this kind of work-based support for developing Self-Organised Learners.

Suggested activity

Action plan: designing an SOL workshop

Imagine that you have been given an opportunity to design a '3-day event' focusing directly on individual *processes of learning*. This may involve up to 30 participants, and should empower individuals, teams and an organisation as a whole to effectively change.

We invite you to produce specifications and a design brief for this event, giving emphasis to SOL.

Part of each day should be organised to enable individuals to *research the nature of their own jobs* and to *exchange experiences* on what they did (or intend to do) to learn the skills involved. Part of the day should be structured to *generate opportunities for feedback-for-learning*.

Consider carefully the resources to be offered, the nature of the exercises to be introduced, and your own responsibilities while running the course. Try to *identify your own various roles*.

- 1 Construct a comprehensive yet flexible *process-based* plan for each activity.
- 2 Develop at least two *alternative plans* for the whole event.
- 3 Design a scheme for using *feedback generated by the learner* to *evaluate the effectiveness* of each plan.

We invite you to use this book to build on this activity, making revisions to your plans, and trying these out in different situations for clients of varying backgrounds and needs. Try to develop a fresh approach-as an *enabler of learning*.

1 What is Self-Organised Learning?

Agenda board

- The basic principles and background of Self-Organised Learning
- Tools for change
- The characteristics of a Self-Organised Learner
- Some benefits of Self-Organised Learning
- Suggested activity: designing a SOL workshop: revisions and elaborations

Basic principles and background of Self- Organised Learning

Self-Organised Learning (SOL) is a process which has to be personally experienced in order to be properly understood. Here we shall start with a basic definition which will become more personally meaningful as readers work through the book. By using the book as a resource for their practice, readers can develop an appreciation of how SOL can empower the person, on the job and in life.

SOL is defined as:

The personal construction *of* meaning-a system *of* personal knowing'
and

Meaning is the basis for all our actions.

Let us elaborate a little on this basic definition.

Each and every experience allows us to construct personal meanings, made up of thoughts and feelings, which underlie all our anticipations and our actions. This process is basic to human life; indeed, we would go as far as to say that it is basic to all organisms with brains. Our actions include everyday tasks such as cleaning one's teeth, deciding what to wear on a particular day, ordering work priorities for the day, working through the first meeting of the day, organising a report, or attending to a problem with the car. Actions may be more complex or of a less frequent occurrence-for example, working on a programme of self-development, chairing a critical meeting, handling a tricky disciplinary offence, sorting out a 'sticky' personal relationship, completing a water-skiing slalom course at great speed, or even building one's own home. Actions may involve major life events-for example, constructing a new life after redundancy, or divorce, or even living positively through the stages of a terminal illness.

Towards the end of each chapter we shall return to this definition and elaborate on it further. At the end of the book we invite you to define Self-Organised Learning in your own terms!

The methodology intrinsic to the SOL approach involves Learning Conversations for challenging robotic patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions, and for exploring new degrees of personal freedom. It is based on the fundamental notion that no one can 'cause' learning in someone else. Attempting to control learning from the outside can only result in producing dependent, inflexible, non-adaptive individuals who perform like robots. We call such learners other organised, not self-organised. They are neither creative nor able to engage constructively with change.

By getting to grips with the ideas and experimenting with the Learning Conversation techniques, readers will gain practical experience and will be in a position to give a critical appreciation of what SOL is and what it can achieve. Here, we aim to explain its background and to introduce some of the basic principles.

Self-Organised Learning has emerged from the humanistic, cognitive and behaviourist movements within psychology, and forms part of the rapidly growing 'New Psychology'. This focuses on a science of the 'whole person in which both experience and behaviour are integrated into a 'psychological whole'. SOL explores how people's thoughts and feelings, perceptions and cognitions influence their actions, the ways in which people interact with their environment—their *personal worlds*. SOL offers a 'total quality' approach and focuses on developing an individual's *capacity to learn*, through experience on the job and in life. Readers may be familiar with the ideas of Carl Rogers and George Kelly, two leading figures within humanistic psychology. For Rogers, 'freedom to learn' was a key concept and Kelly saw 'behaviour as an experiment initiated by the whole person. Rogers drew attention to the importance of the 'psychological conditions' necessary for personal growth, i. e. for becoming, in his words, a 'fully-functioning person'. He saw the role of a facilitator as removing the obstacles to growth thus allowing the person to 'flower'. He developed '*congruence*', i. e. becoming at one with the learner while remaining true to oneself; '*empathy*', i. e. entering into the world of a learner; and '*unconditional positive regard*', i. e. truly accepting this world, as psychological procedures for promoting personal growth. The facilitator can thus converse with the learners in ways that *mirror their processes*, heightening awareness and facilitating growth.

The 'support' functions of the Learning Conversation within SOL recruits a Rogerian approach to facilitate personal reflection. Given such support, individuals are able to live more fully in and with each and all of their feelings and thoughts; make increasing use of their senses, and to use this information in awareness. The 'personal science' unique to Rogers allows the individual to gain deep recognition that 'the whole self is more than just conscious awareness'. Participants learn to *trust their own processes* and remain open to the consequences of their actions and of change. While Rogers focuses on the *conditions* for personal growth, Kelly was more concerned with *systematically representing personal experience* in the form of 'personal constructs'. No two people see their world in the same way and *their construct systems act as unique sets of spectacles* through which they perceive and make sense of their world. It is important, therefore, to elicit individuals' construct systems and help them to reflect on their own functioning. Kelly helps us to appreciate why a group of managers attending the same meeting will interpret the agenda differently and prepare different solutions to apparently the same problem. Likewise, each reader of this book will comprehend it differently and will react differently to it.

A person's construct system develops through the course of his or her particular life history and may change through the passage of time. SOL *makes a science of this change process*. It builds on Kelly's metaphor of 'the person as scientist', i. e. making sense of the world by building a personal

theory of it. Such personal theories form the basis of subsequent anticipations and actions. 'Good scientists' go on to revise and occasionally transform their theories in the light of their on-going experiments. But people, i. e. learners, are often not very skilled as scientists and their models of their world are often implicitly held in almost total non-awareness. Such models become impossible to revise and individuals become very impoverished as a result. This inhibits their growth.

SOL builds on the 'biographical account' and repertory grid technique originally developed by Kelly and transforms these as reflective tools for learners. The 'Learning Conversation methodology and the three stages of SOL awareness (to be described later) are rooted in the psychology of Rogers and Kelly, and evolve this further towards a conversational science.

SOL, feedback and purposiveness

A growing awareness of personal functioning depends on an ability to *model* each and every aspect of the human process. How does a person's meaning system influence his or her anticipations and actions? How do the results of actions feed back to revise understanding?

To answer these questions SOL leans heavily on ideas within *Cybernetics—the science of communication and control*. This is based on the *study of the flow of information through a system* and the way this is used by the system to control itself, i. e. to *self-organise*.

Imagine the system to be a person. Self-control involves generating personal criteria of competence, and this depends on the aims and intentions of the system. This is central to SOL. To appreciate how purposes help to control the functioning of a system, one needs to understand the principle of feedback. *Negative feedback*, as, for example, in the control of a central-heating system, is based on an *error-correcting mechanism*, which is important for reinforcing a stable system, i. e. for maintaining an equilibrium. Take, for example, a room in which the temperature has been set at, say, 65 °C. The thermostat switches the boiler on and off as the room temperature exceeds or goes below this preset value. Trial-and-error type learning can be explained with this principle, but there is more to learning than this. Negative feedback operates within a *closed system* and does not allow for change and growth. *Positive feedback* allows for greater diversity and change to be introduced. It allows for an elaboration of a person's meanings by introducing variety and a wider range of purposes. A simple mechanical example would be when sound is fed back in an oscillator, so that it becomes amplified, theoretically to an infinite degree of loudness. So a *new response is reinforced*. New *patterns* of sound can be similarly reinforced.

Feedback is thus a fundamental concept in learning. Negative feedback based on an error-correcting mechanism, as, for example, in expert debriefing, top-down job appraisal, and exam assessments, does not

support SOL. Positive feedback, internally generated by Self-Organised Learners as they engage in on-the-job activities and life experiences, allows them to construct and reconstruct their personal meanings. These are the building blocks from which they model their world and act on it.

Such personal meanings become the *emergent structures* which enable self-organisation and lead to deep and relevant change. Meanings are constantly being revised through a dense web of open, positive feedback and self-regulation according to the degree of fitness and viability in the environment.

Through SOL a person is enabled to explore an increasing variety of purposes for learning, and to try out and develop an increasing range of successful strategies for achieving these purposes by making use of positive feedback. This more open type of feedback leads to a richer system of personal knowledge and greater personal competence.

Learning on the job offers a rich environment for generating diversity and change, but only when SOL *awareness with open feedback is practised*. Without such awareness and self-control an individual rapidly stabilises into 'robotic patterns' of thoughts, feelings and actions. SOL is therefore important for greater *adaptiveness* within a rapidly changing environment enabling survival and growth.

SOL, relativity, chaos theory and complexity

Learning is a messy and rather untidy business, and necessarily so! You cannot fully know what you are going to learn until you have learnt it! As you progress, you might even change your mind about what you are going to learn and how you intend to learn it. In a sense, learning is open-ended and unpredictable. Now we must dip into the realms of recent trends in modern science to begin to understand this fascinating phenomenon. Bear with our digression into science a little longer, since this is important for a fuller appreciation of SOL.

Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' has shown us that even scientific 'truths' are relative. Put very simply, 'light' exists as particles of matter and as waves of energy. It has two basic properties, related to its mass and its energy. In order to measure the speed of light accurately scientific observation has shown that its mass becomes less predictable and vice versa. The two perspectives from which light is measured have to be taken into account so that the 'truth' about light is essentially *relative*.

To understand the 'truth' about a fully functioning person it is also essential to enter the realms of relativity. One must study the whole person from at least *two psychological perspectives, personal experience and behaviour*. When observing personal experience it is impossible to predict exactly how this influences behaviour. When observing behaviour, i. e. action, it is impossible to predict how this relates to personal experience. But what individuals can do is *converse with themselves in awareness* and explore the possible relationships between experience

and action. This depends on developing a frame of reference: how personal meanings, needs and purposes lead to anticipations and actions and how the results of actions feed back and lead to revised (new) meanings. Individuals can learn to develop these conversational skills for themselves. The 'uncertainty principle' and 'relativity' are thus central to SOL.

In our experience, the process of change nearly always involves *dis-integration*. We have all experienced getting worse at something before getting better! Think of trying to improve your tennis service, golf stroke, computer programming skills, or even your skills in chairing a meeting! Now, *very small changes* in thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions can bring about rapid disintegration, creating personal *disorder*, until new patterns of skill begin to emerge. This is chaos theory in action! SOL not only allows individuals to explore this process of dis-integration, and to learn from it, but also to go on testing out and rebuilding new patterns until greater skill and competence are achieved. The whole process becomes a joyful, exciting voyage of discovery rather than a pain to be endured until some semblance of competence is somehow arrived at. We invite readers to experience the SOL process and discover for themselves!

Learning operates on the *edge of chaos*, somewhere between a stable system of order and an unstable system of disorder! It is here that personal meaning, a person's system of personal knowing (see definition of SOL on page 2) gets constructed. At the two extremes of the behaviour of all systems, ORDER and CHAOS pervades. Between these two extremes, at the edge of chaos one finds COMPLEXITY! This is a class of behaviours in which the components of the system are neither stable nor in a state of randomness. Complexity is now recognised as the state that allows information to organise and reorganise itself to increasing degrees of sophistication. This is the state *that allows the person to construct new and more complex meanings*. The LIFE process itself in all its diversity and complexity thrives on the edge of chaos, only rarely stabilising into fixed patterns. Such extremes rapidly result in the extinction of a species, as Charles Darwin has shown in his theory of natural selection.

SOL encourages learners to thrive on the edge of chaos, a state easily recognised in today's competitive, fast-changing world. Frozen meanings and fixed attitudes need to be opened up and revised and a whole new repertoire of constructs need to be explored. Each of us has constantly to forge new metaphors for working and for living.

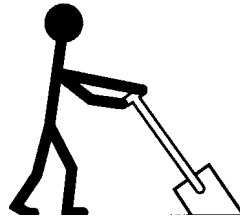
Crises, uncertainties, changes imposed from the outside shadow of everyday life and personal stress becomes symptomatic of ever-increasing chaos. Personal experimentation, on the other hand, introduces diversity, flexibility, innovation and growth. The edge of chaos is vast with possibilities beyond the boundaries of our current imagination.

It allows for *perpetual novelty* and, as some eastern philosophies suggest, for a state of being 'continuously reborn'.

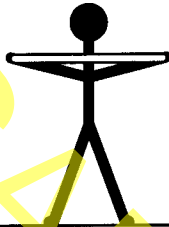
A case has been made for SOL as a *progressive state of 'being'* in which personal growth and change generated from within are constantly negotiated. Immense possibilities open up for communities and for organisations which consciously set out to support this process. Learning becomes transformed as a process of total quality and this is an in-depth approach steeped in the new science, and involving the whole person. In one sense learning can be likened to surfing on the crest of a powerful wave, depending on mental skill, agility and immense awareness from moment to moment. The thrill of ultimate success gives it meaning and learning becomes the joyful experience it should be. In Chapter 3 we shall remind you of learning as a process on the edge of chaos, as we explain about the 'drop in the learning curve' during change and about the need to challenge our robots.

SOL and awareness Research has revealed that there are three essential stages in becoming aware of the personal process of learning, and these stages are illustrated in Figure 1. 1.

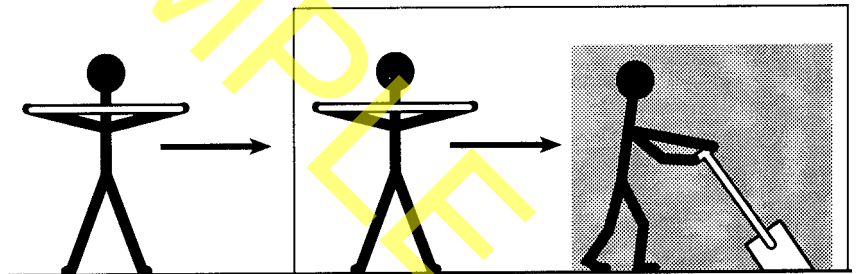
First is the robotic non-reflective stage where the learner tackles a task and is almost completely unaware of how the task was actually done. Second is the stage when the learner concentrates in detail on the *doing aspects* of the task itself, observes this process and develops a greater awareness of the thoughts and feelings related to it, so enabling the learner to *experiment with change* in the ways in which the task is performed. The third stage involves observation of the processes of *how learning takes place so* that the person develops an awareness of his or her own learning skills. The evidences accruing from stage 2 become the source for reflecting on *how we learn* and how we *think* and *feel* about it. Learners then learn to build on this new experience, and learn to describe this process for themselves. Increasing awareness can lead to a quantum leap increase in levels of personal skills and competence. It often leads to higher levels of personal motivation and a desire to look constructively at change. Self-organised learners look curiously at the way things work rather than robotically and non-consciously carrying out tasks in the same way each time without questioning whether or not they can be improved. The methodology for developing stage 2 and stage 3 awareness depends initially on some outside support. The SOL coach provides this by engaging learners in a series of Learning Conversations. Learners will also need to seek others, including specialists and experts, as a resource for their learning and this may involve attending courses at appropriate times as they identify their specific needs, but these will form part of a *strategy they will have developed for themselves*, in conjunction initially with their SOL coach. Instead of being passive receivers of training they will actively engage in a Learning Conversation with their chosen resources, people, media and



Stage 1: Little AWARENESS of doing the task- no awareness of learning



Stage 2: AWARENESS of doing the task



Stage 3: AWARENESS of doing the task and of learning to learn

Figure 1.1 The three stages of SOL

technology, in order to make sense of them, i. e. to construct their personal meanings and so achieve their unique learning needs.

Readers should not conclude that the transition from one stage to another is simple and straightforward. In reality the process can take some time and will involve much personal experimentation. In fact, many learners have commented that SOL is highly enjoyable and rewarding, but that it is a lifetime commitment and indeed becomes a *way of life*. Awareness of our own unique processes of learning is an ever-evolving phenomenon. Despite this, much can be achieved in the short term. As soon as a start is made, SOL leads to significant effects. Readers, therefore, should not conclude that the path towards SOL is

necessarily long and that, in the tough arena of work, it simply may not be a feasible option. Our action research has shown that this is definitely not the case.

Once the learner starts to engage in SOL, improvements in skills and competence, in attitude, and in motivation develop very rapidly. The individuals drive the process with support from the SOL coach and the Learning Manager. The SOL coach may be either an operational junior or a middle manager experienced in SOL, or a training practitioner temporarily seconded to support learning on the job. The learning manager may be a volunteer senior manager who agrees to devote a small proportion of work time to coordinating and monitoring the SOL process in his or her work domain.

We find that Self-Organised Learners become driven by the constant need to question the way in which they do things on the job, and this is underpinned by the knowledge and ability to structure and manage their own strategies for coping with and initiating change.

Tools for change

The book takes the reader chapter by chapter through some of the core *learning tools* for enabling self-organised change. Let us briefly put these tools into some psychological context.

Greater awareness of personal behaviour depends on some *record of action*. A human observer or a machine can record the learner's performance and use this record for 'talkback'. During talkback special techniques are used so that the learner is encouraged to *reflect on how these details of behaviour relate to personal experience*. Videos, computer logs and learning partners (shadowing) can be used to enable talkback. Part of the task of the Learning Coach is to help the learners engage in their own talkback. This is a very different process to the use of videos for micro teaching where an expert observes the learner's actions, debriefs the learner and issues instructions for improvements. Many training situations follow the same pattern. The tools are specifically designed to help learners make better sense of their actions and to improve the quality of their performance.

While some form of external observation can record behaviour, *only the learner has direct access to his or her own experience*. The repertory grid and other 'meaning-eliciting' tools, to be introduced in Chapters 2 and 3, are used to elicit and heighten awareness of 'personal meanings' systematically and to show how these are constructed and recruited to influence actions.

The Personal Learning Contract (PLC) procedure described in Chapters 5 and 6 is another core-learning tool and develops this further. It allows the learners to explore the *relationship* between personal experience and action systematically so that they can model this for themselves. Initial

'plans for change' derived from personal histories become transformed through experimentation, action, reflection and review. The learners' *capabilities for learning* are thus enhanced.

These awareness-raising learning tools allow the learners, often for the first time, to *become observers of their own processes*. This is a very powerful experience which can lead to significant change. The tools allow the learners to *stand outside themselves and so to see themselves from a new perspective*.

We are at a moment of profound change in our personal, work-related and social lives. These tools, used within a Learning Conversation and initially supported by the SOL coach, enable individuals to get deeper insights into processes of change, and to become proactively involved in shaping their immediate and longer term futures.

SOL is a supreme expression of individual freedom. It can lead to a self-transformation of personal skills and competences. When Self-Organised Learners live and work together, very powerful forces of growth are put into action. These tools for SOL allow individuals and teams to go beyond the apparent limits of their intellectual and practical selves towards greater skill, competence and creativity.

To better appreciate the radical nature of SOL, we have elaborated on its background, its basic principles and some of the tools and techniques involved. Readers are asked to tolerate the oversimplifications and digressions into psychology and modern science, but our aim has been to show how SOL *is a powerful new approach for the training practitioner*. It can never be degraded to the 'flavour of the month' since its effects are long term and can endure for life. SOL is becoming increasingly recognised as part of a new and rapidly growing science. Its methodology has psychological structure and is process based. This distinguishes it from other apparently learner-centred approaches which can be manipulative and prescriptive, lack deep structure and are more concerned with superficial short-term change. SOL delivers an enduring transformation of personal learning skills, competences and capabilities. It enhances our capacity to learn. It empowers the individual.

The characteristics of a Self-Organised Learner

There are a number of essential characteristics for a self-organised learner, and some of these are summarised below:

- 1 Individuals must *accept responsibility* for their own learning rather than being dependent on the initiatives and directives of others.
- 2 There must be an achievement of an *awareness of how one learns*, and this involves:
 - (a) recognising individual needs, and developing these into clearly expressed purposes;
 - (b) initiating flexible learning strategies and recruiting appropriate

- resources for achieving the expressed purposes;
 - (c) self-evaluation of the quality of the achieved outcomes;
 - (d) critically reviewing this cycle of activity;
 - (e) planning and implementing more effective cycles of learning activity to meet future needs.
- 3 There must be an appreciation of the *dynamic nature* of the learning process and a continuous striving for greater self-organisation.
 - 4 The Self-Organised Learners need to recognise and *challenge* existing partially developed skills, including learning to learn so that such skills are transformed to achieve greater competence.
 - 5 The Self-Organised Learners need to digest, challenge and redefine SOL in *their own terms*. This creative aspect of SOL expertise generates new dimensions of personal innovation and experimentation.
 - 6 There must be a continuous effort towards achieving a 'quantum leap' improvement in the individual's *capacity for learning*.
 - 7 The individual learner must believe in the value of SOL and *practise it as a way of life* in his or her job and in all social contexts. Such individuals who act as Self-Organised Learners are in many ways acting as Kelly's 'personal scientist'. They are actively involved in developing their own theories or hypotheses about given events, testing these out in practice, generating feedback of the consequences of their actions, and revising their 'theory' on the basis of such on-going experiments involving themselves. The quality of their actions depends on the richness of this whole activity. The three levels of awareness, the Learning Conversations and the tools, driven by the MA(R)4S reflective process (explained fully in Chapters 4 and 5), are designed to empower individuals with ways for achieving a better management of this proactive process called Self-Organised Learning.

Thus, Self-Organised Learners act as *complex adaptive systems* in a constant state of revision. They are constantly anticipating events, based on their experience and how they model the world. These models are revised in the light of feedback from actions on the world. Thus, for example, in situation xyz, bearing in mind experience abc, action lmn is likely to be best. But if situation xyz changes to xrs or ejh then action pyu may be more appropriate. The Self-Organised Learners will test this, generate feedback from the results of actions, and revise the model. They will also remain watchful of processes of change and adapt accordingly.

The Self-Organised Learner is continually exploring new niches to be exploited as *new opportunities for learning* and for living. A Self-Organised Learner's appetite for diversity is continually growing. He or she is never in a state of equilibrium, but is constantly juggling between stability and chaos. If a person operates mainly in equilibrium, seeking a status quo in most situations, he or she is psychologically dead.

A Self-Organised Learner is *part of a rich web of interactions* with the social, technological and physical world. Awareness, reflectivity and a growing sense of consciousness enables the learner to emerge from a genetically and culturally encoded past to become more of a free agent, with a capacity to develop and grow. It is our human capacity for adaptiveness, for SOL, that allows us to evolve our consciousness and our models of the world. We are thus empowered to change our world constructively: our world of work, home and leisure. By healthy competition, cooperation and purpose we can creatively evolve alternative futures. Thus, we can escape from the incessant process of decay and chaos dictated by the second law of the universe. Learning as a process of *self-organisation is the vehicle for living and working on the edge of chaos.*

Some benefits of Self- Organised Learning Individuals

There are many advantages to adopting SOL, and some of the more generally reported are listed below.

- Improved personal job satisfaction.
- Improved contributions to the job.
- Improved relationships with other members of a team.
- Effective adaptation to changes in work practice and demands for new skills.
- Better use of training and personal development opportunities.
- Rapid advancement on the ladder of promotion, where appropriate.
- Learning on the job is viewed as an on-going way of life which is challenging, exciting and personally constructive.

Teams

- More cohesive teams, working with improved understanding.
- Team work is seen as personally relevant to individual members.
- The team is seen by individuals as a positive learning environment.
- Reduces problems frequently encountered by individuals who see themselves as 'outside' the team.
- The team is supportive of individuals, and individuals are supportive of the team.

Organisations

- Realistic policies, strategies and tactics may be readily related into positive courses of action once the commitment of learners has been gained.
- Efficiency and total quality develop as learners and teams proactively seek to improve their performance.
- Change is managed more effectively instead of expending undue energy on crisis management. Instead crises if and when they occur will be used as 'opportunities for learning'.
- Realistically achievable personal improvement plans are developed as a part of the performance review and planning process.

- Improved morale throughout the workforce as SOL expands its horizons.
- Improved team building and problem-solving activities.

Summary

In this chapter we have explained how SOL draws on humanistic psychology, cognitive science and cybernetics and integrates these sciences into a conversational science of learning. We have indicated how feedback, relativity and uncertainty, as well as chaos and complexity, are part of the process of learning. We have outlined the characteristic features of an SOL system and described some of the benefits of the approach. We have emphasised that SOL is based on learning from experience and is essentially a natural and practical process.

In Chapter 2 we shall explore how personal and professional myths about learning can be both constructive and destructive. We aim to encourage the reader to identify these myths and we show how they may be challenged when appropriate and reshaped into more viable beliefs and values which empower processes of Self-Organised Learning.

Suggested activity

Designing a SOL workshop: revisions and elaborations

At the end of the General Introduction we introduced a basic activity—designing an SOL workshop—and we suggested that readers should return to this at any time. This may be an appropriate opportunity for further reflection and analysis.

- 1 Consider the ideas put forward in this chapter.
- 2 Summarise these as you understand them and then try to organise them into some meaningful pattern.
- 3 Can this pattern of personal meaning created by you be used as a resource for the design brief of the 3-day workshop?
- 4 How might you create a supportive learning environment for the workshop?
- 5 Try to evaluate how some of these ideas might be useful for the modern-day training practitioner.