

Continuing and Distance Education Services as a Learning Organization:  
A Case Study Examining Organizational Learning

Continuing and Distance Education Services  
School District 57, British Columbia

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## **Continuing and Distance Education Services as a Learning Organization: A Case Study Examining Organizational Learning**

### **Introduction**

In today's fast pace of change and competitiveness, organizations must adapt quickly to meet new challenges. Organizations must "gain insight and understanding from experience through experimentation, observation, analysis, and a willingness to examine both success and failures" (Malhotra, 1996). Organizations that do this exhibit organizational learning. Just as people learn, so do organizations. As organizations increase their capacity to take effective action, they are learning. One such organization facing major environmental changes and the chaos and associated upheaval, is Continuing and Distance Education Services (CDES), in School District 57, located in Prince George, British Columbia. The purpose of this paper is to examine the organizational learning of CDES, provide an overview of the organization as a Learning Organization, and explore organizational learning strategies suggested by the analysis.

### **Learning Organizations and Organizational Learning**

Malhotra (1996) defines a Learning Organization as an "Organization with an ingrained philosophy for anticipating, reacting and responding to change, complexity and uncertainty". Nevis, DiBella, & Gould (1998) state, "All organizations are learning systems...all have formal and informal processes and structures for the acquisition, sharing, and utilization of knowledge and skills". The later viewpoint reflects the process of learning as opposed to a point of attainment suggested by the former. Certainly all organizations learn to some degree or another. As an organization increases its capacity for learning, it reaches a point at which one can confidently say, this organization is a Learning Organization. It has developed a large number of effective, inherent learning orientations and critical facilitating factors for learning. Nevis et al. in their study of organizational learning have identified seven key Learning Orientations (LO's). They state, "Learning Orientations are the values and practices that reflect where learning takes place and the nature of what is learned". They have also identified ten key Facilitating Factors (FF's). They further state, "facilitating factors are the structures and processes that affect how easy or hard it is for learning to occur and the amount of effective learning that takes place". Taken together they form a matrix used to describe an organization's capacity for learning. The patterns in the matrix will give a profile of the organizational learning that exists in the organization, and further examination will reveal whether the organization can confidently

be declared a Learning Organization. Table 1 lists the Learning Outcomes and Table 2 lists the Facilitating Factors .

### Organizational Learning at CDES

Table 1 and 2 provide a matrix for analyzing the organizational learning at CDES. Table 1 and 2 record the observations and comments respecting each of the key attributes, the LO’s and the FF’s.

Table 1: Observations regarding values and practices reflecting where organizational learning takes place and the nature of what is learned.

Learning Orientation (LO)	Variability		Observations and Comments
<p><b>1. Knowledge Source</b> To what extent does CDES develop new knowledge internally or seek inspiration in external ideas?</p>	Imitative	Innovative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES relies on individual scanning of its environment. No mechanisms beyond personal “in the hall chat” or occasional small ad hoc group discussion, is formally in place to ensure the dissemination of the collective scanning that is being done by people at CDES. There is no central repository for the gathering of the information on the environment gathered in this way.</li> <li>- CDES does work with partnered organization to provide educational services but does not innovate in the delivery of those services.</li> <li>- Administration is receptive to innovations brought forward by people in internal-processes and course development and delivery, but has not fostered a culture of innovation.</li> <li>- Due to the chaos arising out of its creation<sup>1</sup>, CDES focuses on internal knowledge; developing day-to-day operations and how to shift to an online delivery system.</li> <li>- CDES is more adroit at adapting others’ processes for delivery of its educational programs.</li> <li>- It is more imitative than innovative.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Product-Process</b> Does CDES prefer to accumulate knowledge about product and service outcomes or about the basic processes underlying various products?</p>	What	How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES focuses on processes in admissions and program delivery as it works through the chaos imposed by its changed environment.</li> <li>- CDES focuses on accumulating knowledge on products (courses) and their delivery but not enough on the necessary processes to create them. Production issues for online course development abound but not adequately addressed.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> CDES was created by the amalgamation of three educational organizations; CDES is one of the largest schools in School District 57, Prince George, British Columbia with a broad mandate for delivery of educational services to diverse student populations.

<p><b>3. Documentation Mode</b> Do attitudes vary as to what constitutes knowledge and where knowledge resides?</p>	<p>Personal</p>	<p>Public</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most knowledge passes from person to person and if deemed necessary posted publicly. There is no public repository of an enduring nature for accessing organizational knowledge gained. Email communication is used to share knowledge, but lacks easy search and recall over the long term.</li> <li>- There is a lack of awareness of what constitutes knowledge and what should be shared and available to all in the organization. There is a great deal of experiential knowledge.</li> <li>- A great deal of knowledge transfer is occurring on a personal level.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Dissemination Mode</b> Has CDES established an atmosphere in which learning evolves or in which a more structured, controlled approach induces learning?</p>	<p>Formal</p>	<p>Informal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES uses an informal model of dissemination, relying on role models, experienced staff, “gate keepers”, and word of mouth. Information is shared closely in departments. Often individuals who need to know, do not know, when changes are made. Clear paths for knowledge dissemination are not determined. Scattered work sites compound sharing of information.</li> <li>- An email conference is available for getting the word out.</li> <li>- On occasion groups of staff share their experiences departmentally or in a broader team.</li> <li>- Documented procedures are few.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Learning Focus</b> Is learning concentrated on methods and tools to improve what is already being done or on testing the assumptions underlying what is being done?</p>	<p>Incremental</p>	<p>Transformative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Even in an emerging environment demanding significant change, focus is on small improvements rather than organizational renewal. The organization is renewing step by painful step.</li> <li>- Many People are holding onto traditional basic assumptions of the nature of “the business”. At this time, examination with transformation in mind might be fruitful.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Value-Chain Focus</b> Which core competencies and learning investments does CDES value and support?</p>	<p>Design</p>	<p>Deliver</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES traditionally focuses on design competencies, as opposed to a sales nature. Resources, both staff and funding are directed to creation of programs as opposed to marketing of those programs.</li> <li>- Focus is on design not delivery</li> </ul>
<p><b>7. Skill Development</b> Does the organization develop both individual and group skills?</p>	<p>Individual</p>	<p>Group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES encourages skill development individually and as a group. Divisions and departments provide for knowledge gained by individuals to be passed on person to person.</li> <li>- Group training sessions have occurred for critical implementations.</li> <li>- Separation of divisions, departments, and sites make continued daily sharing of knowledge</li> </ul>

			<p>difficult.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skill Development is more individual than group</li> </ul>
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Table 2: Observations regarding facilitating factors related to organizational learning

Facilitating Factor (FF)	Observations and Comments
<p><b>1. Scanning Imperative</b> Does CDES understand or comprehend the environment in which it functions?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES does not have a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which it is operating, partly because the environment is still shifting. Shifts taking place in the environment will affect CDES.</li> <li>- Word of mouth between individuals and a small core people is the only means of sharing awareness of issues, environmental developments, etc.</li> <li>- There has been insufficient knowledge acquirement to keep abreast of environmental changes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Performance Gap</b> How does administration analyze variance between targeted outcomes and actual performance? Is there a potential new vision?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES does not have a clear vision for the future. The major changes it has undergone cry out to fill that vacuum.</li> <li>- Sufficient feedback mechanisms are not in place to provide immediate analysis of variance with regard to where CDES is headed.</li> <li>- .</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Concern for Measurement</b> Does CDES, develop and use metrics that support learning? Are measures internally or externally focused, and custom-built or standard measures?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES uses objectives in the “School Plan for Student Success” to create metrics to determine effectiveness of the plan. They are reviewed yearly, but need revisiting in light of changes to the school. Focus of the plan has been exclusively on student success rates and needs to be broadened.</li> <li>- The nature of the metrics – student success rates – leads to examination on a yearly basis.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Experimental Mind-set</b> Does CDES emphasize experimentation on an ongoing basis?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES uses experimentation continuously, not planned experimentation, but reactive experimentation – “a try this” approach – without engaging employees in the experimental design.</li> <li>- People need a ‘heads up’ if the approach is purely experimental, and encouragement to provide needed feedback in a timely manner, so that Leadership can stay abreast of developments.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Climate of Openness</b> Are the boundaries around information flow, permeable so people can make their own observations?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is insufficient means for people to express their views, feelings, and thoughts. Group and collective mechanisms do not exist for necessary feedback and open discussion and debate.</li> <li>- Leadership has an open door policy, but issues are complex and beyond individuals, and need team or group approaches to analyze and deal effectively with them.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Continuous Education</b> Is there a commitment to lifelong education at all levels of the organization?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CDES provides necessary training on an ‘as needed’ basis. Individual knowledge acquirement and learning is encouraged.</li> <li>- Attention focuses on “what do we need to know now to survive” as opposed to “everyone is encouraged to learn and acquire knowledge”.</li> </ul>
<p><b>7. Operational Variety</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People have flexibility in approaches to work goals. There is no</li> </ul>

Is there more than one way to accomplish work goals?	one fixed way of doing business. CDES respects teacher autonomy. The work just needs to be done.
<b>8. Multiple Advocates</b> Along with involved leadership, is there more than one “champion” who sets the stage for learning?	- Leadership encourages champions that step forward to take up the cause, yet are not strong champions in their own sphere. Lack of a clear vision may be the cause.
<b>9. Involved Leadership</b> Is leadership at every organizational level engaged in hands-on implementation of the vision?	- There is no vision. Or if there is one, leadership has not articulated it for the people. Leadership is engaged in directing CDES to meet what is deemed necessary at the time, on that day.
<b>10. Systems Perspective</b> Do the key actors think broadly about the independence of organizational variables?	- There is no systems perspective, an official systems analysis has never been undertaken to examine the internal systems. - There is awareness of the independence of organizational variables, but no attempt made yet to use the tools of system analysis, or to engage people in viewing CDES as a system with interdependent components, processes, and variables.

**Analysis**

Nevis et al. (1998) provide a framework for organizing the aforementioned learning orientations and facilitating factors, into three suggested stages for enhancing learning, “knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and utilization”. Using their framework and applying a rating system of improvement needed (I), fair (F), and good (G) to the above data reveals a better picture of how CDES stands in each of the three stages for enhancing organizational learning. After reviewing the observations and comments, reflecting on their importance and significance to the success of CDES initiatives, and applying the ratings to each LO and FF, an interesting overview of CDES as a learning organization emerges (see figure 1). Ironically, CDES, an educational institution whose mandate is delivery of educational programs for life long learning, is an organization that has organizational learning disabilities. Figure 1 also provides a map for establishing CDES as an effective learning organization. Further considerations will provide the compass.

Major environmental changes have resulted in CDES striving to meet all its mandates under chaotic conditions. Therefore, at this time, it is best for CDES to embrace a strategy to improve organizational learning that is easiest to implement, yet is cognizant of the immediate needs of the organization. Nevis et al. (1998) state that the three stages, “knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and utilization”, as so ordered, are “increasingly more difficult to implement”. The process of becoming an effective learning organization takes time. In light of this and given the current context for CDES it is suggested that CDES focus on only a few FF’s and LO’s that will improve knowledge acquisition. Additionally, dissemination of knowledge is vitally important to the day-to-day workings of CDES and its future success. Therefore, a focus on key FF’s and LO’s that will

Elements of an Organizational Learning System

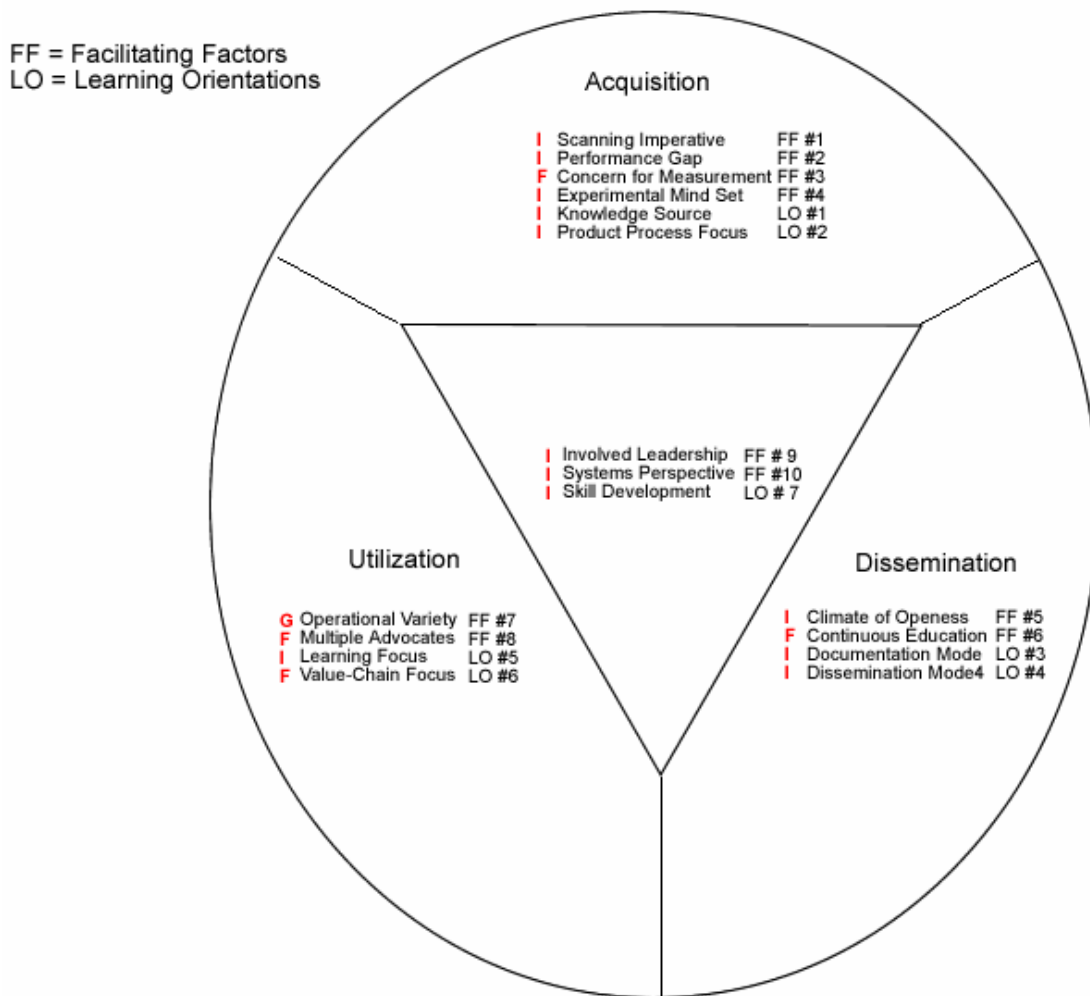


Figure 1: CDES standings in each of the three stages for enhancing organizational learning

improve knowledge dissemination is immediately important for CDES. As a start, CDES should address the following three areas immediately. First, strategies for knowledge gathering and sharing with regard to scanning the shifting environments need development, to address the weakness in ‘Scanning Imperative’. Second, leadership along with the CDES stakeholders must identify the vision for CDES to address the weakness in ‘Performance Gap’. Leadership must recognize the importance of feedback mechanisms now in time. Developing an open communication system providing people input to decision-making and feedback on the results of decisions and actions taken will empower CDES through changes and developments and create the needed “Climate of Openness”. Information, knowledge, and understanding must flow between leadership and the people working at CDES.

Since changes in these areas may be “...seen as an attack on the organization’s basic values...” (Nevis et al., 1998), resistance to change can be anticipated. Leadership must keep foremost in the minds of the people the advice of Willard (1994, p.166) that “In a fast-paced continually shifting environment, resilience to change is often the single most important factor that distinguishes those who succeed from those who fail”. CDES needs developments in these areas of organizational learning. They provide a starting point and they will help CDES succeed in delivery of its mandates. One caveat – the ratings suggested in the analysis are the author’s perspective. The development of a solid overview requires further analysis by stakeholders. However, the conclusions drawn from that one perspective do provide interim direction to Continuing and Distance Education Services to develop its capacity for organization learning, improve its chances for success, and become an effective ‘Learning Organization’.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

All organizations acquire, share, and utilize knowledge and skills. CDES is no exception. It shows a stronger aptitude for utilizing the knowledge it gains but over all weaknesses in acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. Taking small steps to improve its organizational learning, specifically with regard to, scanning the changing and increasingly competitive environment, developing a sound vision for the organization, and improving and nurturing an increased climate of openness, will move CDES forward towards becoming a Learning Organization. Chaos and change has created a knowledge dissemination crisis at CDES. For some it is too much too quick and for others it is inability to share. As CDES strengthens its organizational learning it will be better able to anticipate, react and respond to its changing and uncertain environment.

### **References**

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