

Learning in complex organisations: uncovering the secrets of successful practice

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If you thought complexity was just a 1990s fad, or that it's all theory and no practice, think again. In fact, it offers important insights into how learning *really* happens in complex organisations.

Roffey Park's brand new research on learning in complex organisations challenges the dominant views on learning. It talks with developers and managers who have been exploring what complexity means for them to uncover the secrets of successful practice in a complex world.

The report offers insights into what enables and inhibits learning, grounded in the experience of practitioners across many different contexts including oil and gas; power generation; international law; software development; manufacturing; not-for-profits; and healthcare.

Key findings include:

Dominant views on learning only take us so far

The prevailing views on learning favour the notion that it is something that can, and should be, carefully designed, managed and controlled. This only takes us so far in understanding how learning really happens in complex organisations. It doesn't explain how truly novel learning arises, why learning is sometimes unexpected or surprising and how it can be deep, sudden and transforming for individuals and collections of people in our work-places.

Complexity theories help explain how learning really happens

Complexity theories offer some understanding of these points. They talk about local interaction instead of experts, emergence rather than planning and spontaneous self-organisation as being the source of new patterns and deep changes. Trouble is – complexity theories are still seen by many as being too theoretical.

'Complexity thinking' impacts practice

An initial enquiry with practitioners showed that an understanding of complexity had influenced their thinking and practice quite profoundly. It highlighted the importance of paying close attention to local context, making connections and flexible planning and control. It also recommended appreciating *both* the value *and* the limitations of complexity theories and warned practitioners against using too much of the complexity language.

There are multiple influences at play

An extended enquiry discovered that effecting learning in a complex world means engaging with multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives. It found that many tensions and dilemmas arise for practitioners and raised questions close to developers' hearts such as; can we really make a difference? What if the difference we make isn't a positive one? Could it happen equally well without us? Should we tell people why we do things in the way we do? How different can we be and still be accepted?

Creating the conditions for learning in complex organisations

Encouraging the kind of learning which has the potential to transform people and organisations is less about controlling content and more about creating the conditions for learning. Developers and managers *can* foster new learning in complex organisations by considering 3 critical areas (space, stimulus and self) but should take care not to intervene too far.

Learning in Complex Organisations by Sharon Varney is available from Roffey Park, priced £20. It can be purchased online and downloaded from www.roffeypark.com/reports or by calling Gemma Robertson-Smith on 01293 851644 or email research@roffeypark.com.