Universities as Inclusive Learning Organizations for Women
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Abstract: This paper will examine universities as learning organizations to assess how inclusive their policies and practices are for women. The paper begins with an overview of the concept of the learning organization, particularly as applies to universities. Issues of inclusion for women are then taken up by examining the literature on women in adult and higher education and by drawing upon research from a SSHRC funded study that examines women’s lifelong learning trajectories. Using a critical feminist theoretical framework, an analysis is developed to assess the underlying value and power issues that need to be addressed for universities to truly become inclusive learning organizations.

Learning Organizations

The concept of the learning organization has gained widespread appeal as a strategy for organizations to adapt to a fast-paced and flexible marketplace. The terms organizational learning and learning organization seem inherently good, as they couch learning as a way for employees to better themselves at the same time as they are benefiting their organizations. Kezar explains that organizational learning originally “emerged from organizational psychology as researchers began to observe what they thought was a new phenomenon, whereby collectives could be seen to learn as a whole rather than just individually” (2005, p. 10). From this then emerged the concept of the learning organization, which “is an environment that promotes a culture of learning, a community of learners, and it ensures that individual learning enriches and enhances the organization as a whole” (2005, p. 10).

In his popular book, The Fifth Discipline, Senge (1990) argues convincingly that both individuals and the organizations that they belong to can grow and benefit from developing a learning organization. He addresses five “disciplines” to be taken up that include a) systems thinking, that requires recognizing how organizations can be misdirected in their efforts if they only concentrate upon local, causal relationships; b) attaining personal mastery, when individuals within organizations engage openly in continuous learning opportunities; c) assessing mental models, whereby taken-for-granted knowledge is challenged if it creates barriers for learning; d) building a shared vision, through strong leadership and consensual agreement on objectives; and, e) developing team learning, as members of an organization work collectively towards change (Senge, 1990; see also Kezar, 2005). Alexiou summarizes the idealistic notion of the learning organization as “an organizational model based on certain emancipatory promises, such as empowerment of employees, a transformation in the role of managers from controlling to facilitating, and the creation of a broader and more collaborative vision for the organization” (2005, p. 17).
Universities as Learning Organizations

Increasingly, the concept of the learning organization is being taken up in the literature on higher education as a positive strategy for implementing growth and change (Brown, 1997; Kezar, 2005; Tinto, 1997). Tinto (1997) argues that envisioning universities as learning organizations would create a greater emphasis on learning communities and shared learning experiences. Another reason why universities may move towards the model of the learning organization is that there is less public funding and a greater expectation that universities will obtain resources from the private sector. Like corporations, the pressures of international competition, dealing with diversity, attending to flexible needs, and maintaining a competitive advantage create ongoing pressures for universities to attend to the performance demands of the global marketplace. Forest argues that “colleges and universities can and must grow smarter” (2002, p. 31). Similarly, Froman believes that “organizations today are faced with a complex and ever-changing array of forces that requires them to ‘reinvent’ themselves” (1999, p. 185).

By implementing the strategies to promote the development of the university as a learning organization, universities could be more successful and better able to compete. Brown (1997) believes ongoing learning by all members of the university is a prerequisite if the organization is to grow and be competitive, and that learning would occur in all aspects of one’s work life.

All of our work would be seen as theory building and theory testing, as experimentation in the finest sense, an experiment in which the quality of our lives depends upon our dedication to learning and listening and building a community of truth (Brown, 1997, p. 8).

Most of the literature on universities as learning organizations raises concerns around practices that seem to inhibit rather than promote active learning within the organization. Yet while the literature on universities as learning organizations is often critical of existing university practices, teaching approaches, and administrative procedures (Brown, 1997; Forest, 2002; Froman, 1999; Tinto, 1997), the underlying theory of what constitutes a learning organization (informed by Senge’s (1990) work) is generally accepted without critique. However, what the literature frequently overlooks or skims over are underlying power practices and differential values that impact on universities as learning organizations.

Although the notion of creating a shared community of learning seems to fit an idealized perception of how a university should operate, there are concerns that need to be taken up around the concept of a “learning organization.” Within a university there may be competing visions of what constitutes important learning, as can be seen in ongoing debates around valuing the “scholarship of teaching,” and the emphasis in rewarding academic research. The encroaching influence of the marketplace has created rising concerns around the autonomy of academic research, fear that higher education is becoming more elitist, and worry that academic freedom is gradually being eroded. To understand these concerns, we need to develop a critical feminist analysis of universities as learning organizations.

A Critical Feminist Analysis of Universities as Learning Organizations

A critical feminist analysis of universities as learning organizations takes us in two directions. First, it challenges the assumption that the needs of employees and organizations are always aligned and questions the increasing influence of the marketplace on the academy. Secondly, it raises concerns around how gender (amongst other variables) needs to be taken up to
assess issues of inclusion within learning organizations. In our analysis, we begin the conversation of how to move past the current rhetoric of the learning organization to create collaborative learning opportunities that truly benefit students and employees in universities, and take into consideration the various challenges that women often face in academe.

Much of the literature on universities as learning organizations addresses concerns about how faculty, administration, and staff must work together to increase recruitment, decrease costs, and stay competitive in the global marketplace (Forest, 2002; Froman, 1999). Within universities, however, there may be competing interests over resources, decision making capacities, and conceptions of what constitutes good administrative structures and sound teaching practices. As Owenby (2002) points out, within learning organizations conflict arises frequently from different learning agendas, corporate influences, and resistance from employees who are compelled by management to participate in learning activities.

In response to faculty, administration, and staff problems, universities are bureaucratic hierarchies, and increasingly are perceived as and run like businesses that are expected to compete, generate profits, and be “accountable” – a term that usually alludes to cost/benefits payback rather than high quality intellectual work. In this context, there is frequently a widening gulf between teaching concerns in the classroom and revenue generation by the administration. Ironically, much of the literature skims over concerns with regards to students’ participation in universities as learning organizations.

Initial feedback from mature women learners engaged in a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded study examining women’s lifelong learning trajectories in Canada reveals that women continuing their education often require additional supports because of the gendered nature of their lives. Women are still primary caregivers for children and the elderly, and efforts on the part of the university to facilitate their learning are not only helpful, but necessary if they are to be able to fully participate as learners. In addition to the commitments that many women have to their family and household, many women work outside the home as well, leaving only a small window of time for educational endeavours. Gatens argues that “a desire to make our institutions more democratic should result in a desire to reshape institutions in such a way that men’s historically embedded advantage as well as women’s disadvantages are eradicated” (1998, p. 8). However, as Alexiou notes, the literature on “learning organizations which claim emancipatory promises in principle ignore issues of gender which, in practice, are a distinctive and defining feature of our workplace contexts” (2005, p. 19).

Women’s varying commitments to paid work, education, and responsibilities in the homeplace result in learning trajectories that are frequently complicated and non-linear. Fenwick (1998) argues that learning organizations tend to define valid learning within narrowly-defined contexts, overlooking a plethora of valuable learning that may occur outside of organizational parameters. Experiential learning from the homeplace and community is often devalued in formal educational contexts.

Learning organizations, as they are currently understood, tend to privilege the perspective of employers over employees, and do little to address the continued marginalization of women in organizations and in society. Universities are often seen as gender-neutral. However, when looked at through Kimmel’s (2000) lens of the gendered society, we see that gender-neutral usually equals men, although we often fail to realize it. The bland reassurances of much of the literature on universities as learning organizations do not take up the way gender (and other variables such as race, class, ability, and sexual orientation) impact on how individuals participate within learning organizations. Instead, these differences are glossed over, within a
rhetoric that suggests universities as learning organizations can provide a valuable service in preparing students to compete within “the emerging realities of the new workplace” (Froman, 1999, p. 190).

The “reality” of the workplace and the academy for many women is that they will be at a disadvantage because of gendered differences in responsibilities and life experiences. Mirroring women’s experiences in the broader paid workforce, women in the universities are more likely to be found in part-time, contract positions that are characterized by lower pay, lower status, and less job security. In examining the learning organization from a Marxist-feminist perspective, Mojab and Gorman note that “only certain segments of the workforce benefit from learning opportunities” (2003, p. 232). One of the consequences of this continued marginalization of women in the academy is that they have fewer opportunities and lesser support to develop their research programs and engage in ongoing professional development. Academics on the periphery of the academy have either limited or no access to research support, funding to attend conferences, or even basic workplace amenities such as office space, computers, and phone lines.

While women in the academy often recognize the inequalities of their workspaces, there is often a reluctance to take up these issues in a public forum as there is still considerable ambivalence, discomfort, and resistance around feminist concerns. In talking about the concept of “hallways of learning,” Dixon notes that there is often discussion that occurs within corridors instead of in official meetings for various reasons, such as to keep a confidence or protect a competitive advantage. However, two other reasons that conversations may only take place in the hallways include: “the meaning may be about personal issues that are of little value to the organization,” and “there may be no easily accessible channel through which the meaning can be conveyed” (1999, p. 45).

While Dixon does not expand on these ideas, by applying a critical feminist analysis, we can raise questions about the types of issues that are seen as personal that do not seem to have a channel for introduction into collective meaning. An example of this can be seen in Gouthro’s (2002) narrative about attending a faculty meeting during which there was a decision made around tenure for a female professor who had had a baby in the last year. No mention was made of this in the meeting, but afterwards in the hallway, the other women in the department discussed how difficult it had been for this woman to attain the criteria for tenure while taking care of a new baby. However, the conversation never progressed beyond the corridor. It was not introduced into collective meaning because those involved felt that it would be seen as a merely personal issue, and there was no avenue through which to raise it.

Nonetheless, hallway conversations may eventually be brought into collective meaning, and they can also provide an impetus for specific research projects. For example, Young and Wright (2001) discuss how their research “developed out of the authors’ mutual interest in and hallway discussions about the difficulties involved in combining the two roles” of mother and tenure track professor in the field of social work (p. 555). The authors do not refer to Dixon, and this is their only mention of hallways in their article, but it is interesting how they too felt that their concerns would be seen by the university as private, and not linked to larger societal and organizational issues. They argue that universities should address the fact that parents with primary child-care responsibilities (who are most often mothers) are at a severe disadvantage in the current tenure-track system. Although universities are attempting to address this, “the profession supports policies that adversely impact women more frequently than men” (p. 566).
Challenges and Possibilities for Universities as Inclusive Learning Organizations

To address issues of gender inequality, we need to consider how to move past the current rhetoric of the learning organization to create collaborative learning that truly benefits employees, and takes into consideration the various challenges that women often face. There are a number of factors that need to be taken up within higher education to create a more positive orientation that would support an inclusive learning organization.

While the university does offer some potential as a learning organization, it is not something that can be assumed. A radical reassessment of the concept of the learning organization has to be developed for universities to be considered inclusive learning organizations, particularly for women. This reassessment would need to recognize the competing power issues that exist within institutions, acknowledging that the interests of administrators, faculty, staff, and students, will not always be the same. External pressures from the increasingly competitive global marketplace that drive concerns around accountability and productivity need to be critically assessed. For universities to become learning organizations that are supportive of women’s lives, many considerations must be addressed. We need to understand how gender impacts on lifelong learning and career trajectories, develop policies that value more broadly defined learning contributions, and create opportunities that allow more flexible support for research and learning.

References
