2 Memory and Learning Theory

2.1 Introduction

Learning and adaptation is fundamental to life and the success of an organization. Without it, an individual will not only fail to prosper but will have to rely entirely on others for survival. Organizations that fail to learn will eventually be engulfed by others keen to remove the competition or strip their dwindling assets.

Learning must be a continuous process. Many people see colleges and universities as places of learning but too frequently assume that, once people have graduated from these institutions, learning or at least institutional learning is complete. But the acquisition of knowledge and skills is a lifelong business.

Lifelong learning occurs in diverse settings: at work, at play and in the home; but primarily in the workplace, where it is of necessity a requirement to keep the job. The question therefore remains how best to ensure that people effectively, efficiently and happily learn in the workplace.

It is not surprising that learning has for centuries been the subject of fascination of first philosophers, then educationalists, psychologists and even politicians. The academic literature is rich with eminent people defining and plotting the process and progress of learners and learning. But a short journey into the literature and a number of surprises emerge:

- There is little agreement on how even to define learning
- Of the large number of theories on learning, most have some relevance to those who make their living out of helping others to learn
- Literature on the practical aspects of helping others to learn, coaching training, e-learning and mentoring makes few if any inroads into learning theory (and vice versa)
- Paradoxically, theory rarely informs practice or vice versa
- Perhaps faced with this complexity and uncertainty, the business world of training and learning contains both the unscrupulous and the charlatan, who peddle evidence-free, quick-fix “solutions” to learning and training problems.

This chapter attempts to bring some order and highlight what is useful
for the learner and those helping the learner in the workplace to understand. It will discuss and describe the fundamental facets associated with learning.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD) defines “learn” as: “acquire knowledge of, or skill in, (something) through study or experience or by being taught; commit to memory; become aware of by information or from observation.” This is a useful starting point, but does not cover everything required in the modern workplace.

Acquiring knowledge and skills is uncontroversial, but the demand for high performance in organizations has added a third element to the definition – values and beliefs. Other words may occasionally be used, but by this, they mean someone’s way of thinking, their approach to a problem, their attitudes; often it is about accepting and following the culture of an organization.

Knowledge is usually thought of as know-how and skills as the successful, behavioral application of know-how. However, attitudes towards learning and training are crucially important in determining whether, how and why knowledge and skills are (or are not) acquired.

The term “learning” emphasizes the person in whom the change occurs or is expected to occur. Learning is the act or process by which behavioral change, knowledge, skills, and attitudes are acquired (Knowles 1998, p. 10).

Boud and Garrick (1999, p. 52) put learning in the context of the organization as follows: “A large proportion, although not all, of an organization’s knowledge resides in three human reservoirs, namely (1) the cognitive understandings, (2) the learned skills and (3) the deeply held beliefs of individuals. They go on to quote Quinn: “Bringing the three together has been the success formula for most outstanding teachers, entrepreneurs and coaches whether in education, sports, the professions or general business” (Quinn 1992, p. 254).

Breaking down the learning process into these elements – knowledge, skills, beliefs and values – is important for those in the business of helping people to learn; each demands a different approach by the learner and their trainer, coach or mentor. There may be some overlaps and dangers of oversimplification, but none that take away from the usefulness of this separation of concepts within the definition of learning.

2.1.1 Knowledge

London taxi drivers have to spend months often years learning about their capital city and then take a rigorous test. This is known by them as “doing the knowledge”. They are acquiring vast amounts of information about the names of roads and the best routes from one place to another. Once qualified, the driver uses his knowledge to take passengers to their destination by the shortest or quickest route, invariably without reference to a map.

Classically, schools but also universities, put great emphasis on learning facts. In history, pupils learn the names of kings, presidents and prime ministers and the dates of their tenure. In arithmetic, tables are memorized. Law