The Importance of Collaborative Groups for the Learning Process

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Abstract: This essay intended to discuss the importance of collaborative groups in the learning process for the preparation of an individual, groups and organization to face the complexity of the new world created by globalization. The methodological approach qualifies as descriptive bibliographical for trying to present features of the phenomena studied linking the different variables and, being a systematic study developed based on published material, from a review of books and articles related to the subject in question, promoting a intersubjective discussion. Based on Senge’s (2006) “learning enterprises” and Morin’s (2006) complexity theories, there were four conclusions: (1) Collaborative groups, unlike work teams, value the individuals that get closer and manipulate their real role in the system, no matter their function, seeing themselves as cause and consequence of processes; (2) The very system must be composed as a “learning” organization in order to motivate collaborative groups to exist; (3) Collaborative groups provides the organization continuous expansion of its capacity to create skills; (4) By creating collaborative groups the system gets intelligent and is able to learn and teach.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning; Team Work; Learning System; Administration.

1. Introduction

One of the strong current paradigms concerns the “power that comes from direct experience”. We value very highly knowledge obtained through experimentation,
through trial and error. In this learning path we test alternatives, identify errors, redefine strategies and realign the way to the trail that brings us the best results in the least possible time.

This path to building knowledge is not wrong, but this learning’s illusion begins when one can no longer notice errors of their actions because they are taking place right beyond their eyes. In a system an error made in the beginning of the process could only be identified by its consequences shown in the final phase and we might not have access to such information.

Senge (2006) questions “what happens when we no longer can observe our action’s results” and “when the main consequences of our actions happen in a distant future or in a “learning horizon”, amplitude in time and space in which we can assess our effectiveness”?

The growth of complexity in current organizational systems has intensified demands on the quality of individual learning and motivation for the search results for everyone. However, in this globalized world the consequences of individual actions or even the result of contributions from an independent work group are each time less easy to identify.

So, the way to try to overcome difficulties between different members of a complex organizational system provoked by globalization has been sought over the mechanical parts of the system. They are mechanic for obeying with no resistance explicit orders from imposing schedules. At first it has been noticed that the complexity stems from the existence of people who interfere directly in the desired result and that they do not accept the collective programming, resisting paths imposed by the strategy.

Any new system must be able to identify, respect and add to the process of building knowledge for coping with new challenges, and for the participation of individuals and groups, which are responsible for the definitions of the live concepts of words and actions taken in organizational relations.

In order to positively consolidate these participations, the suggested path by different contemporaneous authors has been to create working groups (committees) to look for solutions to the problems affecting the interested parties.

But is it any team work that can be considered a collaborative group and both achieve the same goal, which would be pro activity of every individual in the process to build knowledge – learning – necessary to face the challenges imposed by globalization?

2. The Learning Path

The social-historic theory of thinker and social interactionist Russian researcher Vigotski (2005) considers one to builds knowledge through their interaction with the environment, that being the base for their development. In Vigotski’s (2005) theories, the concept of mediation defines that the object only makes sense to the individual when intermediated through the surrounding environment, allowing
him to interpret the symbols that these objects represent. In other words, the environment, with its cultural strength and other individuals who are part of it, is the universe of meanings that allows one to create their interpretation of the real world. Based on this author’s studies, one is not only active but interactive, he is not only a producer but also a receptacle, because he builds knowledge and makes oneself through intra and interpersonal relations. And this process is built through the search of the subject, within the culture, information, concepts and meanings that will build their knowledge. It is a non-linear process to build human knowledge.

However, this cultural reference is currently scattered in a complex (and mutating) system based on the challenges of globalization and, the search for meanings and translations ends up overcoming one’s limitation of competence.

According to Senge (2006) in order to achieve success in building knowledge under the rules of globalization complexity, it is necessary to have a proactive participation from every participant of the system making it integral and integrated so that the values of individual and group learning are included. The author developed techniques grouped in five disciplines: Personal Domain, Domain of mental models, Shared vision, Group learning and systemic thinking. Aiming to promote a significant and measurable impact on the system’s results, the five disciplines make up a set of learning practices that allows one and the group to which they belong to change paths, acquire new skills, gain knowledge and experience and, discover levels of self-conscience.

To tackle different problem situations that emerge in these hyper competitive times, organizations realized that they cannot face them with only the task force of a single part of the system but with the creation of multi-departmental thought, able to see the crisis from several different angles and find solutions where ever they are. However, not even these managerial teams have been reaching their goals.

Senge (2006:58) upon commenting about the negative feature of managerial teams, brought us the concept of "skilled incompetence" created by Argyres, "teams full of incredibly skilled people to prevent their learning." Individual postures in defense of their own positions undermining the purpose for which individuals are grouped.

The teams tend to waste their time fighting for their space, preventing that anything makes them look personally incompetent, and pretending every one supports the team’s collective strategy – keeping up the appearances of a cohesive group (SENGE, 2006:58).

Thus, to simply group people in discussion committees has not been the solution. There needs to be a clear but complex way of looking at the different parties to be integrated in the system, no more for their positions, functions and independent operations, but for their systemic relations, diagnosing the processes’ causes and visualizing their paths and results, even and especially when they exceed individual and group limits.
2.1 Understanding the Complex System

Morin (2006) highlights the search for the balance between the subject and the environment, where each subject depends on the breathable culture surrounding him and is somehow taken by it, since it is what lays down the rules for its self-organization, giving out limits and providing, or not, ways to develop its potential. The author also confirms that, reciprocally, one strengthens the system of which they belong, actively participating in its construction and fortifying its beliefs, because when they are not accepted as a rule, the subject gets defensive, keeping away or provoking their displacement. Individuals who are participants in the system are those that accept it and confirm it.

To be complex means what is sown together (MORIN, 2006), and that after they realize the extent of their complexity, they are capable of dealing with what’s real and with it, talk and negotiate. By looking at the complexity of the construction of knowledge in this globalized world, we perceive the endless game of inter-retroactions. That is how it’s done when selecting elements of order and certainty that help clarify distinguish and prioritize problem situations to be faced as a challenge, making understandable the complexity of the experiences of each individual and the various intrinsic groups to the social process.

Senge (2006) emphasizes that when inserted in the same system, different individuals tend to behave similarly. The author comments that for systems to improve their performances it is necessary to reach the "core of the fundamental differences between common ways of thinking about the game" - which would be each mental model - “and the reality of how it works...” - identified as the paradigms that format the group’s actions, its culture. Individuals need to redefine their influence scope (because they influence and are influenced by the whole chain).

We need to identify how the individual position interacts with the system as a whole. Individuals need to see themselves as a part of the whole so they can start linking the cause and consequence of their actions. Going down that path alone is very hard, because according to Senge (2006) blocking features to organizational learning need to be deactivated so that other qualities that provide new learning opportunities can be developed.

2.2 Group Learning Limitations

In their globalization processes, organizational systems have been unable to meet their various functions and talents to create a productive whole, developing awareness of the whole and trust in all parties. Rather, the parties wind up being a barrier to others’ learning.

To break this deadlock, Senge (2006) highlights that it is necessary to see the system from another perspective and be able to see it as a whole, like a painting. It is important to understand that individual actions trigger their own individual
problems. And the way the organization creates its reality and how to change it is grounded in the process of how each of these individuals see their surroundings and how they participate in its construction, individually and as part of a group.

Besides the already mentioned negative characteristics – Experience Illusion and Managerial Teams –, Senge (2006) presents six other characteristics of organizational systems, as in Figure 1, which hinder the construction of knowledge needed to face the challenges of globalization.

The individuals’ experience shows their potential, or not, of their ability to build new knowledge to the challenges imposed to the system by globalization. As Senge (2006) highlights – I am the position – this negative feature is shown when individuals limit the understanding of their responsibilities to the duties of their functions, positions or roles, failing to realize their share of value and guilt before the process of achieving the larger goals of their group. If every person does very well what they consider to be their job, they are a correct functional part, however they don’t make any commitments to the changing process, not noticing when their decisions and actions are the cause of problems and even when it can be solution to others.

When the individual has a “non systemic way of looking at the world”, because they focus only on the role they take on and its corresponding functions, they fail to notice when they are the provocateur of difficulties for the system and how their actions and decisions affect other parts and dimensions. Senge (2006) names such limitation as The Enemy is Out There, for being the distance between cause and consequence of individual and collective actions.

Another blocking characteristic of learning would be the individual’s illusion that they are in full control of the system. It is when the individual has the illusion of being able to solve every problem situation simply they have solved all the local problems encountered to that moment. However, nowadays the causes and consequences are beyond their sight, and thus end up taking a limiting posture to the system as a whole, causing it to be reactive to changes, “wait until the situation is out of control to take action” (SENGE, 2006:54).
The Scalded Frog analogy is widely used in the corporate world and Senge uses it to highlight the problems faced by “enterprises that do not learn” when they do not realize the internal or external threats, which indicate gradually through slow processes, promoting a negative adaptation instead of activating reactions of defense and attack.

The “short term” outlook that the Fixation on Events feature builds is an effective alternative to foresee sectorial events, however only “generative learning” offers the conditions to create knowledge from problem situations, identifying patterns, their causes and seeking solutions within and outside the organization.

Systemic thinking teaches that there are two types of complexity – the details complexity of many variables and the dynamic complexity, when cause and effect are not close in space and time and obvious interventions do not produce the expected results. (SENGE, 2006:393).

There would not be enough space in this article to probe the solutions that have been tested by the organizations, such as the double-loop systems which enhance the perception of the external environment for the better adaptability of the system as a whole. Regardless, when talking globalization, the environment variables are so many and arise so fast that require an increasing complexity of the very system’s solution seeking process. And when included individual reactions (resistance) to problem situations, we reach the conclusion that a complex system needs much more than a correct and comprehensive programming for the search for solutions.

2.3 Group Learning Enhancers

What is the way to overcome problems encountered in managerial teams that end up sabotaging the expected result when forming a group? More than the formal communication made by human resources, Senge (2006) indicates the dialogue – to hear and be heard – as the main pillar of essential knowledge to the common life.

The dialogue is a way of helping people see the representative and participative nature of thinking and [...] become more sensitive to our thoughts’ inconsistencies, and also making it safer to recognize such inconsistencies (SENGE, 2006:269).

Group learning begins with dialogue, which is a true process of healing and thinking together. Dialogue is the "inevitable element" to teamwork. Without it the group is merely a gathering of people. For Senge (2006), open and frank dialogue, allows deep understanding of the forces that need to be mastered (in each individual and in the group as a whole), and creates a meaning for the intelligent systems, transmitting values, vision, integrity -- composing systemic thinking.

The dialogue is in fact a transverse element to every motivational characteristics of learning in the system, which according to Senge (2006:40) are
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2.4 A New Reality

The way in which an individual creates their reality and takes a stance in the face of changes is crucial to the learning process because as Einstein says, learning involves a modification to the original state so that the mind will never be again what it once was. To diagnose the shortcomings that hinder the learning is the first step to disable them and start a consistent work of construction of individual and collective knowledge deploying a new mindset to see the world and achieve the desired objectives for all.

To disable barriers means to fertilize the ground for the learning process germination, encouraging the development as shown in Figure 1, systemic thinking, thinking of others and all, perception of each individual’s contribution to the solution of problem situations; generative learning; attention to gradual changes; indentifying cycles, learn from them and develop a vision shared by all.

Figure 1: Collaborative Group. Source: Made by the Authors, based on Senge (2006)

To meet the challenges of the complex organizational system, these new features are required at any time and place. When working in teams these features are tested as if they were they were innate to the individual. What Senge (2006)
brings us is the certainty that it is possible to work productively as a team, but that it depends on certain motivational features in the system itself.

3. Collaborative Group

Individuals “with a high level of personal awareness are able to achieve the most relevant results to them,” because they undertake to "their own learning throughout life." They also learn to understand and master the environment (Senge, 2006:169). But for this to happen, they should know how to deal with creative tension and master their mental models, looking to enhance the internal images they make of the world.

Mental models “are presumably deeply rooted, generalizations or even images that influence our way of seeing the world and acting” (SENGE, 2006:42). Some models make it easier to live, others such as prejudice, root the individual to stubbornness and arrogance and therefore should be eliminated so that the person can enjoy new experiences, exchange ideas with different systems, learn and grow. And this stage, the identification and reconstruction of mental models that distort the understanding of the environment, the author assumes should contain “conversations rich in learning, which balance inquiry and reasoning, in which people effectively expose their own thoughts and are open to influences of others.”

These conversations are rich in learning by enabling those involved to present their ideas, discuss and seek a consensus to construct together a vision of the world. A world that they will have to share to achieve the goals proposed by all and for all. By sharing a vision, individuals feel connected by a common aspiration, and when there is a genuine vision as opposed to the famous mission statement, they “give their all and learn, not because they are required to, but because they want to” (SENGE, 2006:43).

So Senge (2006:43) suggests that a collaborative group should be seen as "the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations," for exploring collective skills knowing that the "intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of its members, so the group develops exceptional coordinated action abilities.”

4. Methodological Procedures

This essay qualifies, according to Demo (1998) and Lakatos (2003), as descriptive for trying to describe the characteristics of the studied phenomena, linking the different addressed concepts, and bibliographical for being a study developed based on published material, from a review of books, scientific articles, and professional literature related to the subject in question, looking to probe knowledge about the different perspectives built to present a complex outlook of the addressed situations, promoting a intersubjective discussion.
5. Conclusion

The first conclusion that can be taken from this essay is that working in teams can no longer be seen as just a gathering of people to work together. Unlike “teamwork,” by creating a collaborative group an “institutional space” is opened so that the system can see individuals no more as independent parties of a disconnected whole, but as people aware of systemic relations. The development of systemic thinking itself processes when one sees oneself proactively acting as part of a group, because by truly interacting with others, one gets closer to their real place in the system, seeing oneself as cause and consequence of different relations within a bigger system.

The second conclusion we can point out is that the system should be constituted as a “learning” organization in order to encourage collaborative groups to exist. The system must have characteristics that motivate a free and dynamic exchange between the individuals involved, respecting the complexity of the challenges posed by globalization, allowing the construction and reconstruction of knowledge - learning – that will end up rebuilding the system itself.

Thus, recurring to Senge (2006) for the theoretical framework necessary, there were presented seven limiting features that should be diagnosed in organizational systems and eliminated in order to promote an environment conducive to the assembly of collaborative groups.

The third conclusion is that to compose a collaborative group is to provide the organization a continuous expansion of its ability to create individual and collective skills for dialogues that create the understanding of distinct realities, their interpretations and translations, developing awareness of the whole and trust between parties.

In the end, to summarize, the main conclusion of this essay is that, by creating a collaborative group, the organizational systems will recreate themselves continuously, going from being a survivor to a intelligent system, able to learn and teach, transcending quickly, prepared to face the challenges of globalization’s accelerated dynamic.

References