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# Innovative organizational learning technologies: organizational learning's Rosetta Stone

Ulrik Brandi and Rosa Lisa Iannone



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### Innovative organizational learning technologies (iOLTs)

In a persistent rhythm of growth, competitive organizations keep on the lookout for innovation and new methods that strengthen their capacity to react coherently to change. Organizational learning research follows these pursuits closely to try and untangle the elusive “learning” dimension of this rhythm. More recently, the practices in deploying organizational learning have transformed through mobile, online and offline technologies that optimise learning processes and results; what we name “Innovative Organizational Learning Technologies” (iOLTs). Although we are still in the early stages of adoption, the use of new learning technologies is well in progress: “We have only just begun to understand the power”, McKinsey reported (Chui *et al.*, 2013, p. 13). Our view is that the promise of faster, cheaper, more comprehensive and inclusive learning technologies has in fact created opportunities for insights into the “language” of organizational learning. But, how can iOLTs be our *Rosetta Stone*?

### Opportunities for new insight into organizational learning

The context of organizational learning – in which iOLT providers and users position themselves explicitly – consists of three approaches to learning (Brandi and Elkjær, 2011) (Table I).

These theoretical perspectives on how learning can be conceptualised and harnessed for growth parallel organizational practices. Where practitioners once viewed the organization as a patriarchal provider and controller, today, learning is something that is much less “deployed” and much more part of an evolution of knowledge and experiences in a social context. In the first two perspectives, explicit learning, triggers and enablers are what can be counted as organizational learning. In contrast, for long, observing and harnessing ubiquitous, spontaneous and social learning from informal participation was something that had to be inferred, at best. But now, with the advent of iOLTs, and more specifically, practice-based iOLTs, we find that there is much more opportunity to facilitate learning interactions; for instance, through social learning network activities.

We perceive a marked shift between traditional learning technologies that deliver formalised learning (i.e. learning management systems that deploy top-down training) to what is becoming more and more in use: user-generated learning through new

**Table 1** Organizational learning perspectives

1. Behavioural perspective	2. Action perspective	3. Practice perspective
Organizations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour Learning through structure and incentives The organization is a bureaucracy	Organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting errors Learning through inquiry and reflection The organization is a system	Organizational learning is a constant evolution through social and cultural interactions Learning through participation in communities of practice The organization is a culture
Formal	→ Informal	

user-need-driven and customisable technologies. This shift is what has opened a new paradigm of practice and research into organizational learning; addressing the third perspective presented above. Like the *Rosetta Stone*, these practice-based iOLTs can help us concretely record the very “language” of organizational learning, as it emerges over time and space.

### Leveraging iOLTs for practice-based organizational learning

Practitioner-led iOLT offerings are abundant. For instance, the Learning Technologies Exhibition, hosted more than 6,000 visitors, 230 exhibitors and 60 conference speakers ([www.learningtechnologies.co.uk](http://www.learningtechnologies.co.uk)) in its January 2014 event; the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD, [www.astd.org](http://www.astd.org)) offers a variety of publications dedicated to professional learning, including research reports, books, newsletters, blogs and podcasts on the potentials of learning technologies; and Social Media Week, advancing the “communications paradigm” ([www.socialmediaweek.org](http://www.socialmediaweek.org)), is shifting the impact and reach of social media, globally. The significance of such large-scale endeavours is that iOLTs are underscored as the single-most influencer of the future of organizational learning. More exciting is the range of iOLTs that embrace organizational learning’s practice-based perspective, also hugely varied. Examples include social learning network software that is replacing obsolete learning management systems, 3D immersive simulation technology unfolding in non-tech organizations and cloud-based project management tools that enable global, uninterrupted creativity and knowledge sharing.

Nevertheless, the link between research and practice is still burgeoning, signalling there is still much to leverage with practice-based iOLTs. Some examples that shed new light on the social dimensions of organizational learning support the thesis that the practice perspective of iOLT-use holds powerful advantages. For instance, we can now evidence that blogs help nurture knowledge creation and sharing in project-based organizations (Baxter *et al.*, 2009). Social tools such as social networks and wikis can transcend “traditional” intranet capacities while improving knowledge acquisition, organizational patterns and “minimiz[ing] the reinvention of solutions and the repetition of errors” (Menolli *et al.*, 2013, p. 273). The use of gaming features (e.g. avatars) and virtual spaces (e.g. virtual boardrooms) enriches communication, new ways of exploring and the creation of shared understandings amongst geographically scattered teams (Dodgson *et al.*, 2013). The iOLTs can also be highly adaptable for “generation Y new hires” (Leidner *et al.*, 2010) through “enterprise 2.0 system-setup”, which can result in heightened employee engagement, the facilitation of new employee training and orientation processes and the building of cooperative learning spaces. These examples showcase the power of practice-based iOLTs, which can be leveraged to augment learning patterns and culture.

### New research-practice paradigm

The research gap that practice-based iOLTs can address is complex because it specifically deals with the elusiveness of “learning”. In examining organizational learning journeys through a more social lens, by way of iOLT interactions, we can begin to understand beyond the “how to use iOLTs” and reach towards the “why, when and how

best to use” them. Practice-based iOLTs offer us a first chance at seizing learning that is spontaneous, learner-driven, ubiquitous, longitudinal and recorded. The iOLTs that actualise the less formal channels of learning, capture the elusive and bring it to light. Hence, iOLTs could very well be the *Rosetta Stone* of social, embedded, organizational learning. However, as Menolli *et al.* (2013) pointed out, iOLT use that lacks an explicit learning framework can overwhelm users, and can even become meaningless. People and technology drive organizations and thus, we would like to accent, as Collis and Moonen (2005) have, that:

Technology is not [just] for ‘delivering’ learning [i.e. the first two organizational learning perspectives] or for taking the humans out of learning, but it rather is a *set of tools, a locally tailorable workbench, which offers affordances to empower people to share, build, support and manage their learning together, in their common context* (quoted in Margaryan and Littlejohn, 2014, p. 175).

The iOLT arena thus offers both practitioners and researchers new opportunities for insights into learning processes that are not necessarily formulated along “traditional” learning management lines. In this sense, knowledge and experiences are acknowledged as being entangled with learning technologies. An increasing number of mediating technologies actualise a shift towards the practice-based perspective of organizational learning: from formal, having been the most valued, to now, the informal; from top-down learning management to bottom-up learning creation; from cognitive and behavioural approaches to social, spontaneous and contextual learning. Practice-based iOLTs can indeed help us trace and decipher the “language” of learning in concrete ways, which is a key aspect in our being able to understand and leverage our organizational learning capacities, in creating new ecosystems of growth.

**Keywords:**

Organization development,  
Organizational change and learning,  
Organizational learning,  
Work-based learning,  
Learning technology

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