

# Reframing Organizational Learning Practices: An Agency-structure Approach

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## Introduction

Organizational learning has long been recognized as a critical component in the adaptive and innovative capacities of institutions. It encapsulates the processes through which organizations develop, enhance, and manage knowledge to improve performance and respond to changing environments. Traditional models of organizational learning often emphasize either the cognitive processes within individuals or the structural systems designed to facilitate learning, such as training programs, knowledge management systems, and institutional frameworks. However, such models can be limiting, as they tend to overlook the nuanced, reciprocal relationship between human agency and social structure. The agency-structure perspective, derived from sociological theories such as Giddens' structuration theory and Archer's morphogenetic approach, provides a more dynamic and integrative framework. This lens emphasizes how organizational actors are not merely shaped by structural constraints but are also active agents capable of transforming those very structures through their actions and interactions. From this perspective, organizational learning is not just about transferring explicit knowledge or developing competencies; it is a complex, socially embedded process where individuals and groups negotiate meaning, challenge norms, and reconfigure practices. This paper explores the domains of organizational learning through the agency-structure lens, identifying how learning practices manifest, evolve, and sustain within this dialectical interplay. It seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of organizational learning as both an outcome and a driver of structural transformation, influenced by the reflexive capacities of organizational members and the enduring, yet malleable, institutional contexts in which they operate [1].

## Description

Organizational learning is a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of individual cognition and formal institutional mechanisms. The agency-structure perspective offers a compelling framework for dissecting its complexity by recognizing the dual influence of human intentionality and structural conditioning. At the core of this perspective is the acknowledgment that individuals within organizations are not passive recipients of knowledge or mere executors of predefined roles. Rather, they are reflexive agents, constantly interpreting their environments, making decisions, and taking actions that can either reproduce or transform existing structures. This dialectical relationship underpins the various domains through which organizational learning unfolds. One such domain is experiential learning, where individuals

acquire knowledge through direct involvement in tasks and reflective engagement with outcomes. In this domain, agency is exercised through trial, error, and adaptation, while structure is represented by existing workflows, hierarchies, and standard operating procedures. As individuals navigate these constraints, they develop new insights that can challenge prevailing norms. Over time, these micro-level adaptations can accumulate into broader changes in organizational routines, especially when they are codified or shared across teams. Another important domain is collective learning, which emerges through social interaction, collaboration, and dialogue. In team-based environments, learning is shaped not only by individual contributions but also by group dynamics, communication patterns, and power relations [2].

Institutional learning represents a higher-order domain in which knowledge is embedded in formal structures such as policies, strategies, technologies, and organizational designs. It is in this domain that the outcomes of individual and collective learning become institutionalized, influencing future behavior and decision-making. The role of agency at this level is often mediated through leadership, strategic planning, and change management efforts. Structural elements such as organizational memory, information systems, and governance mechanisms serve to preserve, disseminate, or constrain knowledge. The interaction between agency and structure in this domain determines whether organizations remain path-dependent or are able to innovate and adapt in response to internal and external stimuli. Moreover, the agency-structure perspective illuminates the politics of learning within organizations. Learning is not a neutral or universally beneficial process; it can be contested, resisted, and unevenly distributed. Power relations influence whose knowledge is valued, which learning initiatives are prioritized, and how success is defined and measured. Individuals and groups may have differing interests, identities, and levels of access to resources, which affect their ability to participate in and benefit from learning processes. Agency, in this context, includes acts of resistance, reinterpretation, and advocacy, while structure encompasses ideologies, disciplinary regimes, and organizational narratives. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing inclusive and equitable learning systems that recognize and leverage diverse perspectives [3].

The agency-structure framework also has implications for organizational change and innovation. Learning is both a precursor to and a product of change, but the nature of this relationship is contingent upon the alignment or misalignment between agents' capacities and structural affordances. Transformative learning occurs when individuals or collectives question and revise their assumptions, leading to a reconfiguration of both cognitive schemas and material arrangements. This type of learning is often precipitated by crises, contradictions, or disruptions that render existing practices untenable. Structural barriers such as rigid hierarchies, bureaucratic inertia, or cultural conservatism can inhibit such learning, while enabling structures such as open communication channels, leadership support, and adaptive technologies can facilitate it. Therefore, the effectiveness of organizational learning hinges on the interplay between agents' readiness to learn and structures' openness to change. Another dimension to consider is temporal dynamics. Learning is not a static or one-off event but an evolving process that unfolds over time.

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The agency-structure perspective accounts for this by examining how past experiences shape present practices and how current actions set the stage for future possibilities. Feedback loops, path dependencies, and institutional legacies all play a role in this temporal dynamic. At the same time, agents can exercise foresight, imagination, and strategic vision to disrupt or redirect these trajectories. Longitudinal studies of organizational learning practices can thus benefit from adopting this perspective to trace the recursive cycles through which knowledge is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed over time [4].

Furthermore, the globalization of business and the rise of digital technologies have added new layers of complexity to organizational learning. Virtual teams, cross-cultural collaborations, and digital knowledge platforms have transformed the spatial and social configurations of learning. The agency-structure perspective remains relevant in these contexts by highlighting how digital infrastructures act as enablers and constraints of learning, and how individuals must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, structural logics. For instance, global teams must reconcile local practices with global standards, while also managing differences in language, time zones, and cultural norms. Digital platforms may facilitate access to knowledge but also impose surveillance, standardization, and algorithmic control. Agents' ability to learn and innovate in such environments depends on their digital literacy, intercultural competence, and strategic adaptability. Overall, the domains of organizational learning experiential, collective, institutional, political, temporal, and digital are all shaped by the continuous interplay between agency and structure. Recognizing this interplay enables a more nuanced understanding of how learning actually occurs within organizations, beyond prescriptive models or simplistic categorizations. It encourages scholars and practitioners to pay attention to the lived realities of organizational members, the contextual factors that shape their actions, and the emergent outcomes of their interactions [5].

## Conclusion

Organizational learning is a rich, dynamic process that cannot be fully understood without considering the interdependence of human agency and structural conditions. The agency-structure perspective provides a powerful analytical lens to capture this complexity, revealing how learning is both constrained by and constitutive of organizational realities. By examining learning across multiple domains ranging from individual experiences to institutional systems this approach uncovers the recursive processes through which knowledge is created, contested, and institutionalized. It acknowledges that learning is not a linear progression or a purely rational endeavor but a socially situated activity marked by negotiation, power, and transformation. Understanding organizational learning in this way has profound implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, it challenges reductionist models and offers a more comprehensive framework that accommodates complexity, diversity,

and change. It bridges micro and macro levels of analysis, connects structure and agency, and situates learning within broader temporal and spatial contexts. Practically, it informs the design of learning initiatives, leadership strategies, and organizational change efforts. It encourages organizations to create environments that not only provide structural support for learning but also empower individuals to act as reflective, adaptive and innovative agents

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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