CLOSING THE LOOP: ASSURANCE OF LEARNING AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education have been accused of not engaging in organizational learning (Brown, 1997). One way schools have to learn about themselves is through assessing student outcomes. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB International) recently implemented assurance of learning standards across all accredited business programs. The AACSB International standards on assurance of learning and the assurance of learning plans from two business schools were evaluated for their emphasis on organizational learning. Interviews were conducted with two business school deans and the key leaders of three school's assurance of learning efforts. A content analysis of this data revealed the standards, the assurance of learning plans and the implementation of the plans contributed to organizational learning.

Introduction

Hill (1999) proposed that institutions of higher education find organizational learning difficult yet, to maintain long term success, they must engage in organizational learning. Lopez, Peon and Ordas (2006) define organizational learning as a dynamic process of creation, acquisition and integration of knowledge aimed at developing the resources and capabilities that allow the organization to achieve better performance. Organizational performance in institutions of higher education may be measured by addressing input vs. output from a quantitative, resource focused, model (Fernando and Cabanda, 2007). Another performance measure may be assessed from the educational outcomes of the students (Hill, 1999). It is the organizational learning centered around the institutional assurance of learning plans that is the focus of this article.

Planning for, developing and implementing assurance of learning plans is a fairly recent initiative in business programs accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, International (AACSB International). In 2003, the AACSB International adopted assurance of learning standards requiring their accredited institutions to establish curriculum assessment plans that included learning goals, expected student outcomes, assessment and evaluation of those outcomes and a system to "close the loop" by applying what was learned by the outcomes assessment to the curriculum (White, 2007). The cycle of establishing learning goals, collecting data on student outcomes related to these learning goals, assessing the outcomes data and developing and implementing change initiatives to improve student outcomes would seem to follow the organizational learning loops described by Agyris and Schoen (1978).

The purpose of this initial study is to understand how a group of similar business schools have addressed assurance of learning through their assessment plans and determine the extent to which the implementation of these plans has facilitated organizational learning. From understanding how these schools implement their assessment plans and how they use the data gathered in the assessment process, methods may then be developed to provide a more comprehensive look at how closing the loop with assurance of learning plans may provide a catalyst for organizational learning within a business education setting. This study may be of value to those seeking to understand and enhance organizational learning in higher education settings.

Organizational Learning

Organizations as a collective of individual learners learn when they have in place systems that enable

them to process information similar to individual learning (Lipschitz, Proper, and Oz, 1996). Barlett & Ghoshal (1998) maintain that only when an organization has developed the capacity to transfer, share, and develop the dispersed individual-level knowledge will the organization benefit from organizational learning. This process implies that there is some level of interaction between the individuals in the organization as part of the learning process stepping away from individual silos of information and sharing knowledge across organizational domains.

"It is a paradox not lost on many in higher education that while the corporate world has embraced organizational learning, higher education lags significantly behind." (Brown, 1997, p. 5). Freed (2001) contends that many institutions of higher education, while organizations filled with learners, are not engaged in organizational learning. Roadblocks to organizational learning may come in the faculty perception of organizational learning as a fad (Kezar, 2005), the reluctance of tenured faculty to change, the entrenched nature of institutional traditions (Freed, 2001), the loosely coupled nature of the university as an organization (Clark, 1983), and dysfunctional processes where one fails to take scientific inquiry from the classroom and apply it to the organization to which they belong (Brown, 1997). Dill (1999) indicates the public and the federal government are putting pressure on higher education institutions for academic accountability and it is this pressure that is encouraging these institutions to engage in organizational learning in an effort to improve their core processes of teaching and learning.

In response to public pressure for educational accountability, the AACSB International increased the emphasis on assurance of learning by reforming its standards on program assessment from less than 10% to fully one-third of its accreditation standards in 2003 (Michel, 2007). Business schools are required to establish curriculum assessment plans based on their stated mission and vision (AACSB Intl., 2008). These curriculum assessment plans are to include overarching learning goals that support the mission and vision of the school, learning objectives that support the learning goals, indicate where and how to measure these goals, include the assessment of these outcomes and use the results as a component in the school's continuous improvement efforts (Martell and Calderon, 2005) (see figure1, Program Assessment in the Appendix). The AACSB International espouses faculty participation in this process as critically important to the success of the program (AACSB International, 2008). In addition to faculty participation, assessment planning, implementation, and success depend on supportive leadership and dedicated budget allocations (AACSB International, 2008).

As of 2007, business schools were expected to have a mature assurance of learning plan in place where outcome assessment data was being used to "close the loop" and feed back into informing the school's continuous improvement efforts (Hollister and Koppel, 2008). This model of assessing organizational outcomes and using the information derived from these assessments for organizational improvement seems to indicate organizational learning should be taking place within these AACSB International accredited institutions.

In evaluating organizational learning in higher education, Schechter (2008) addressed elements of organizational learning as mechanisms. Schechter further asserted that these mechanisms may be employed to advance organizational learning in the educational setting. Schechter's (2008) organizational learning mechanisms are: 1) Analyzing information; 2) storing-retrieving- putting to use information; 3) receiving-disseminating information; 4) seeking information. Schechter (2008) proposed through building these mechanisms into the educational institution, the organization takes a strong step toward becoming a learning organization.

The Learning Organization

The construct of organizational learning has received the attention of many researchers (Cangelosi and Dill, 1965; Argyris and Schoen, 1978, 1996; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991; and Garvin, 1993). Common to all of these treatments is information

received and its influence on change within the organization (Prange, 1999). When information is received and it is processed through a narrowly focused paradigm resulting in incremental change it is described as single loop learning (Argyris and Schoen, 1978). When information is received and it is evaluated in a much broader organizational/programmatic sense where basic organizational assumptions and paradigms are challenged it is considered to be indicative of double loop learning (Argyris and Schoen, 1978).

Argyris and Schoen (1978) looked at the differences in organizational learning when compared to the organization's official stance on learning within the organization. Organizations with an emphasis on organizational learning described in official publications yet most frequently engaged in incremental change are termed Model 1 theories in use organizations. Organizations with an emphasis on organizational learning as described in official publications and frequently engaged in deeper, more fundamental change as a result of knowledge development are considered to be Model 2 theories in use organizations. Argyris and Schoen (1978) evaluated these differences as the difference between theories espoused and theories in use. For Argyris and Schoen (1978) the connection between the organization's position on learning and its practices was the tipping point between organizational learning and the learning organization.

In combining the Model 1 and Model 2 organizations (Argyris and Schoen, 1978) with the presence of organizational learning mechanisms (Schechter, 2008) educational institutions may be evaluated for their capacity as a learning organization. Organizations that demonstrate a commitment of leadership and fiscal support to program assessment (AACSB International, 2008), display mechanisms that parallel those proposed by Schechter (2008), yet only support the organizational learning process as it relates to incremental changes in curriculum or other assessed constructs would be considered Model 1 organizations or organizations that demonstrate single loop learning. Those institutions that demonstrated a commitment of leadership and fiscal support to program assessment, displayed organizational learning mechanisms and weighed the assessment results as part of a holistic organizational review would be seen as Model 2 organizations or organizations that demonstrate double loop learning. It is the tie in with how the results of outcomes assessment have been used to implement change within the organization where the differentiation between the different models may be exposed.

The Research Questions

With the difficulties of implementing organizational learning in higher education settings, and in light of Argyris and Schoen's (1978) presentation of Model 1 and Model 2 theories in use organizations the following research questions (RQ) are proposed:

RQ1a: Do the AACSB International standards for assurance of learning as amplified through the assurance of learning seminar support the use of seeking, receiving, analyzing, disseminating, using, storing and retrieving data as part of assurance of learning planning and implementation by business schools?

RQ1b: Do the assurance of learning plans as implemented by business schools describe the mechanisms of seeking, receiving, analyzing, disseminating, using, storing and retrieving data?

RQ2: Has the outcomes assessment process at these institutions resulted in single or double loop learning?

Method

Within the context of the higher education setting, an understanding of organizational learning may occur through the analysis of documentation and through interviews with the people involved. Lopez, Peron, and Ordas (2006) indicate that training is a fundamental element in learning organizations. Hill (1999) cites a case study at Ball State University where the involvement of faculty is a critical element in higher education learning organizations. Dever (1997) asserts the critical role of the educational institutions leadership as fostering an environment for the transformation to a learning organization.

AACSB International standards, AACSB International assurance of learning training materials, and individual assurance of learning plans are official documents where this emphasis on organizational learning may be identified. Interviews with key leaders of the business program and the assurance of learning program may also provide the insights into the involvement and commitment of the schools to advance organizational learning and adopt processes leading to becoming learning organizations.

The schools used for this research were selected for their structural and functional similarities. These schools are similar in program size, faculty complement, institutional structures, mission, student complement, and budgets. The three schools selected were a convenience sample of small rural state supported institutions of higher education, accredited by the AACSB International, with similar student populations (1000-1500 under graduates), faculty complement (FTE 30-40), and institutional structures (Universities, with union faculty and non-union administrators). Each school addressed the implementation of assurance of learning in slightly different ways with a faculty assurance of learning committee, a curriculum committee taking charge of the effort or an associate dean leading an assessment or curriculum committee. Each institution recognized individual faculty leaders in the assurance of learning efforts and accredited them with much of the efforts success.

AACSB International standards were retrieved from the organization's website. The researcher attended an official AACSB International assurance of learning seminar where lecture notes and official assurance of learning training materials were collected. Assurance of learning plans were obtained from two of the three participating schools. Interviews with the individual deans and with one to two of those involved with the implementation of the assurance of learning plans were recorded and transcribed. The interviews lasted between 35-55 min and were conducted during the summer of 2008. Due to the timing, an opportunity to interview a larger collection of participants in the assurance of learning effort or faculty members at large was not feasible.

Interview Protocol

The interview questions were developed using elements from the organizational learning scales by Lopez, Peron, and Ordas (2006), the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) by Watkins and Marsick, 1993) and the organizational learning mechanisms proposed by Schechter (2008). In addition, questions were developed to assess the level of impact the implementation of the assurance of learning process and the assurance of learning outcomes.

2) Demographic Data
    a. Position.
    b. How long in this position.
    c. Size of college or university
    d. Size of business unit within the college or university
        i) Size of faculty complement full time/part time
        ii) Size of student body, grad/undergraduate.
    e. Semester, trimester or quarter system?
3) The AACSB International standards for assurance of learning were established in 2003, would you please describe for me the impact these new standards had in the early stages of implementation at your institution?
4) What were the significant tasks that needed to be addressed in order to respond to the assurance of learning standards?
5) Is there an individual or a group that has primary responsibility for outcomes assessment?
6) Once the process was designed, when did you begin to implement outcomes assessments into the program at your school?
7) What is the process for collecting and analyzing the outcomes assessment data?
8) Who is involved in the analysis of the outcomes assessment data?
9) How are the results of the outcomes assessment analysis distributed?
10) What types of efforts have been made to address the results of the outcomes assessment analysis?

11) Has there been any organizational training associated with the results of the outcomes assessment results?

12) What type of interest have the faculty shown toward the information derived from outcomes assessment analysis?

13) Have there been any budgetary, facility, or other investments as a result of the data derived from the outcomes assessment analysis?

14) When you look back at the process so far, what is your favorite story about how outcomes assessment has impacted your school?

14) Is there anyone else in your school that is available over the summer who was involved in this process that may prove helpful with this study?

Results

RQ1a: Do the standards for assurance of learning as amplified through the assurance of learning seminar support the use of seeking, receiving, analyzing, disseminating, using, storing and retrieving data as part of assurance of learning planning and implementation?

In reviewing the assurance of learning standards and the assurance of learning seminar materials, the content of these materials clearly address all of the learning mechanisms indicative of organizational learning.

Seeking. The standards require business programs to operationalize their learning goals and determine where and how they will find the data that pertains to each learning objective.

"After setting the learning goals, the faculty must decide where the goals will be addressed within the degree curricula." (AACSB International Standards, p. 63). In addition to seeking information on the operationalization of the learning goals, business programs are also encouraged to seek "external guidance from the business community, the university and from recent graduates and current students for input on the learning goals and objectives." This process helps provide information to the organization about its key processes and how the stakeholders view the program.

Receiving and analyzing. While the standards do not dictate the methods used to collect assessment data, they clearly imply this data is collected and analyzed. Schools must demonstrate that learning occurs for each of its learning goals.

Disseminating. Disseminating information about the results of the assurance of learning outcomes is highly encouraged. This dissemination should not only come in formal annual reports required by the accrediting body, but also through reviews of the results with key stakeholders, department chairs, and the faculty at large. "Make sure outcomes assessment results are available to everyone involved in the educative process of the students." (Seminar notes).

Using. "Schools should describe the processes they use to see that the information from the course-embedded measurements inform the school's management processes and lead to improvement efforts. (AACSB International Standards, p. 66). "... and demonstrated use of assessment information to improve curricula." (AACSB International Standards, p. 69).

Storing and Retrieving. Several slides during the assurance of learning seminar addressed multiple methods for storing and retrieving outcomes assessment information. Faculty are encouraged to use this data in the process of conducting pedagogical and discipline based research.

While there is no clear indicators of creating more than single loop learning, learning that is focused on assessing and improving student learning, there is information from the conference slides that addresses changing the organization's culture to embrace assessment. Other improvement recommendations from the seminar materials included altering the course structure, hiring new faculty, modernizing technology, or conducting seminars to address weaker areas.

RQ1b: Do the assurance of learning plans as implemented by these schools describe the organizational learning mechanisms of seeking, receiving, analyzing, disseminating, using, storing and retrieving data?

The two plans reviewed addressed the organizational learning mechanisms in similar ways to those of the accrediting body. These plans addressed specific learning objectives, expected learning outcomes and the specifics of where in the curriculum these outcomes would be measured. The schools addressed the analysis portion from different directions based on their own unique approach. Three of the four purpose statements for assurance of learning from one school addressed dissemination of the information and "creating an ongoing school-wide dialog on effective practices" Both schools address improvement loops based on assessment outcomes, analysis, feedback on possible improvement efforts and implementation of improvements.

When addressing storing and retrieving data, one program specifically limited access to the raw data to only the under graduate curriculum committee; the committee charged with the responsibility of conducting the analysis of the collected data. This school addressed the disseminating of the results through the annual report via the department chairs and in general faculty meetings. For both programs, the storage of the data was the responsibility of the committee conducting the analysis.

One program presented a diagram in their assurance of learning plan that appeared to present double loop learning as an outcome of this process. There was a loop showing the outcomes assessment process as improving student learning and a second loop off of the first that demonstrated how the school was also engaged in improving their assurance of learning processes. The other school presented an outcomes chart that graphically showed how the outcomes were used to feed back into the learning objectives citing specific outcomes results and implemented improvement efforts.

RQ2: Has the outcomes assessment process at these institutions resulted in single or double loop learning?

Single loop learning. In the review of single loop learning the organizational learning mechanisms were used to evaluate the information from the interviews.

Seeking. During the interviews, representatives from each school addressed the major tasks necessary to develop and implement their assessment plans. A variety of methods are currently employed to assess learning from national standardized testing to a faculty developed comprehensive examination, simulations and imbedded measurements within specific courses. In addition to seeking information about their students, this process also brought about discussions with the other non-business programs across the campuses. One program seized the opportunity presented by the faculty in the English department to replace the second semester English composition course with a specific business writing course that serves as the second semester English composition requirement for all business majors.

Receiving and analyzing. The receiving and analysis process addressed during the interviews indicated a close adherence to the process as outlined in the school's plan. One school indicated that the department representatives on the curriculum committee were responsible for collecting and providing initial analysis of the assessment data gathered from any measures imbedded within their department's courses. The analysis of the data for one program is presented to the department chairs first and only after the chair's recommendations are addressed is the formal analysis process completed. Another program provides the completed report to the dean of the business school after the committee's analysis is completed..

Disseminating. Lunch appears to be a common thread in the dissemination of the outcomes assessment reports or in engaging faculty members on assurance of learning topics and gaining feedback on possible assessment measures. Once approved, either a copy of the report is provided to the faculty at large, or the report is briefed by the assessment committee to a general faculty meeting. In all cases, attempts were made to engage the faculty in both the process and in providing feedback on the analysis of that time period's outcomes assessment report.

Using. As each program is slightly different, with slightly different learning objectives, the

implementation of the assessment results also took on a unique program-specific response. One program, after recognizing there was an undesirable gap between their goal for quantitative and accounting skills and the outcomes, implemented a series of faculty workshops on integrating more quantitative and accounting work throughout the course. Another school, facing a similar dilemma, with the collaboration from the mathematics department, altered the curriculum to require all graduates to complete three quantitative courses during their program. As mentioned earlier, one school responded to the assessment results by exchanging the second semester English composition course for a focused business writing course for all business majors.

Storing and retrieving. The interviews revealed that each school followed their protocols for storage of the assessment information as outlined in their assessment plan documents. The schools took different approaches to providing access to the data. One school held the assessment data in the confidence of the assessment committee; only providing copies of the assessment reports.

Double loop learning. One of the markers identified during the assurance of learning seminar that served as an indicator of a cultural attitude change toward assessment was when faculty members, not directly associated with the assessment process initiate their own inquiry into the assurance of learning data. Currently, in all three schools, there appears to be little voluntary interest among the faculty in evaluating the assessment data for either self improvement or for possible pedagogical research. Information from the outcomes assessment process has been used to remodel course curricula, shore up weak areas in the curriculum, pick up new faculty lines, and foster cross campus collaboration. This reluctance may stem from those attributes identified by Kezar (2005) and Freed (2001) of the perception that assurance of learning is a fad or the entrenched nature of faculty toward change.

There have been efforts to involve the faculty as a whole. One program, in developing their writing rubric, broke the student writing samples up into 5 packets of 10, then had all the faculty grade a packet. This is attributed as a significant event that established the importance of the process and its requirement for full participation.

Implementing the assurance of learning process did provide opportunities for organizational learning above the analysis and feedback loop associated with the learning outcomes. Faculty members were involved in seminars, briefings, and in the assessment planning process. Members were involved in developing learning goals and objectives.

Conclusion

It appears that the implementation of the AACSB International assurance of learning standards has improved organizational learning at member institutions. Schools now have in place a program that provides feedback on the school's performance on key student learning outcomes. These intuitions are actively implementing curricular changes based on the outcomes assessment data. The results of the analysis of the outcomes assessment are being disseminated throughout the faculty and opportunities for faculty education to address outcomes shortfalls have been developed. In some cases, the results of the outcomes assessment have contributed to collaborative efforts with other programs on campus. The mechanisms of seeking, receiving, analyzing, disseminating, using, storing and retrieving data are well represented in the official documentation from the accrediting body, the school's assurance of learning plans, and in the assurance of learning practices s in which the schools engage.

The organizations studied do not indicate in their assessment plans a position on becoming a learning organization. The assessment plans are structured in a single-loop learning form where the assessment outcomes inform curricular changes, but do not reach much further than that. These plans identify the four areas of Schechter's (2008) organizational learning mechanisms in one way or another but do not address double loop learning. The AACSB-International assessment standards, viewed as a whole, require business schools to engage in strategic planning and self-assessment. In this process, outcomes from the

assurance of learning efforts may play a role in this self-assessment process. Whether this self-assessment process leads to developing business schools into learning organizations remains to be seen.

Limitations. Confining the study to assurance of learning plans and the relative newness of the implementation of these plans may have impacted the depth of understanding from this study. Assurance of learning is only one quality initiative contained in the AACSB International standards. Continuous improvement and closing the loop are integral parts of the current AACSB International lexicon. The standards address continuous improvement throughout the program and thus, by addressing only assurance of learning, areas where the organizations are engaged in double loop learning may be missed. The relative youth of the assurance of learning plans also impacts the reliability of the data and thus the utility of the analysis in making wholesale curricular changes.

Another limitation to this study was the time-frame for data collection. The summer presents difficulties with accessing the faculty at large. Their assessment of the assurance of learning process and what the have learned would provide much greater understanding to this study.

The implementation of assurance of learning programs appears to have resulted in improving organizational learning, not only from the outcomes, but also as a by product of developing the assurance of learning plans themselves. There is still room for growth in building an assessment culture within the organization. Should this assessment culture become a reality, these schools may be on their way to becoming learning organizations.

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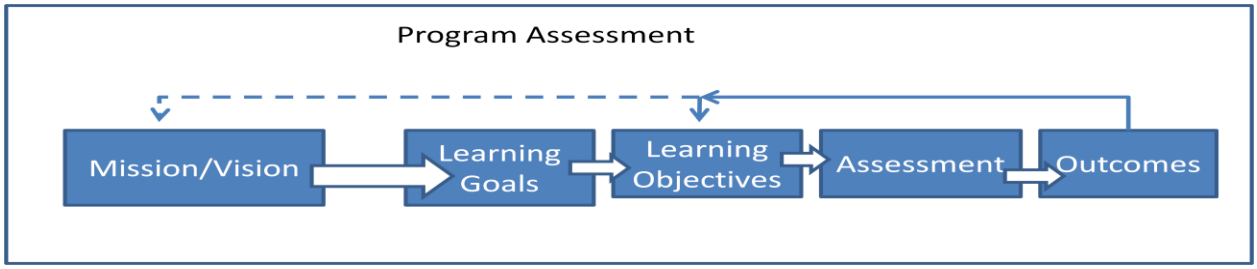
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Appendix

Figure1. Program Assessment



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