

Book Review

Schools that learn

Author : Peter Senge, Nelda Cambron – Mecabe,
Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith,
Janis Dutton & Art kleiner(2000)

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Peter Senge is the author of the *The Fifth Discipline*, “one of the seminal management books of the past 75years” (Harvard Business review). Along with Arthur D. Little executive Bryan Smith and editorial director Art Kleiner, he is the coauthor of *The Fifth Discipline field book* and *The Dance of Change*. Both the books set out the strategies and tools for building a learning organization and the challenges of sustaining momentum in such an organization. Nelda Cambron – Mecabe, professor at the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University (Ohio), is a well – known expert on school reform and leadership; Timothy Lucas , a public school superintendent in New Jeresey, is a recognized innovator of systems thinking approaches for schools, and Janis Dutton is an education writer, consultant, and community activist.

The authors emphasize the importance of fostering a societal culture devoted to learning, that would dedicate its resources to institutions that would shape our development as learners. Schools would be places, where every one, young and old, could learn how to learn. In order to improve the world, we need schools that learn. The school, as the authors see it, is a fulcrum point for educational and societal change. The authors identify five key disciplines of organizational learning, which are ongoing bodies of study

and practice that people adopt as individuals and groups . These learning disciplines, offer genuine help for dealing with the dilemmas and pressures of education today. They are:

- **Personal Mastery**, which is the practice of articulating a coherent image of one’s personal vision
- **Shared Vision**, which is a collective discipline, establishing a focus on mutual purpose.
- **Mental Models**, which is the discipline of reflection and inquiry skills, focused around developing awareness of attitudes and perceptions.
- **Team Learning**, which is a discipline of group interaction
- **Systems Thinking**, through which people learn to better understand inter dependency and change and thereby able to deal more effectively with the forces that shape the consequences of their actions.

The authors question the following industrial age assumptions about learning.

1. Children are deficient and schools fix them.
2. Learning takes place in the head, not in the body as a whole

3. Everyone learns or should learn, in the same way.
4. Learning takes place in the classroom, not in the world.
5. There are smart kids and dumb kids.
6. Schools are run by specialists, who maintain control
7. Knowledge is inherently fragmented
8. Schools communicate “ The Truth”,
9. Learning is primarily individualistic and competition accelerates learning

It is put forth that there is something significantly different about studying subjects as if they were alive. Such an educational process rests on:

- Learner – centred learning rather than teacher- centric learning.
- Encouraging variety, not homogeneity – embracing multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles; and
- understanding a world of inter-dependency and change rather than memorizing facts and striving for right answers.

It is asserted that there is also something different about treating schools like living systems, instead of as machines. In particular, it means:

- constantly exploring the theories in – use of all involved in the education process,
- reintegrating education within webs of social relationships that link friends, families and communities.

When we inhabit a school as a living system, we discover that it is always evolving. The authors trace cognitive development, personal and social development and self awareness

processes for ages upto 17 and delineate the role of teachers and parents. They also set out the ways in which the five learning disciplines are nurtured over the various stages.

The practice of personal mastery focuses on some of the most significant questions an adult can reflect upon: What are you really trying to create in your life? What is the nature of reality right now for you? And what do you choose? Let us now look at some of the learning practices. In case the teacher and the students find that the conventional classroom structure is a barrier to their educational goals, they have to recreate the classroom design from scratch. From a parent’s perspective regarding homework, one would like to raise the question whether commitment versus compliance is an issue for everyone. On the sensitive issue of assessment in the classroom, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with it, and if designed well, it can be a vehicle for learning and awareness. Indeed learning and awareness are difficult without it. Assessment has to be done in a way that fosters, rather than kills learning.

Intellectual behaviours encompass multiple intelligences, the value of systems understanding and importance of a learning community within a framework of hands – on practice for teachers and parents. There are fourteen behaviours, which offer a straightforward, effective, and profound alternative to conventional assessment. They are: 1) persistence 2) decreasing impulsivity 3) listening to others 4) flexibility in thinking 5) metacognition 6) striving for accuracy and precision 7) questions and problem posing. 8) drawing on past knowledge and experience. 9) ingenuity, originality, insightfulness, creativity. 10) precision of language and thought 11) gathering data through all the senses 12) displaying a sense of humour. 13) wonderment, inquisitiveness

and curiosity and finally 14) cooperative thinking and social intelligence.

The authors are emphatic that the emerging language of the five disciplines can provide strategies for those attempting to practice critical pedagogy. When practiced in combination, the five disciplines can support transformational pedagogy, by giving people strategies for thinking critically about their situations, and vehicles for coming together to change them. Creative tension is the power behind the disciplines of personal mastery and shared vision. And an understanding of current reality can be supported by the disciplines of mental models, team learning and systems thinking. Many real life examples and case studies are given, which illustrate application of the core concepts and tools spelt out by the authors.

Schools that learn has been developed over a number of years, through conversations and conferences in a variety of settings around the world. The impetus for the book came originally from the authors of the original Fifth Discipline Fieldbook. The book benefitted from the support and encouragement of quite a few organizations such as the Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Systems Thinking in the Classroom Project at the Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, and quite a few others which can be reached through: <http://www.fieldbook.com/organizations.html>

Peter Senge, the principal architect of this monumental work is a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Sloan School of Business and Chairperson of the Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), a global community of organizations, researchers, and consultants dedicated to building knowledge about fundamental institutional change. He has dedicated his

professional life to translating the abstract ideas of systems theory into tools for better understanding of economic and organizational change. His work espouses a unique position for human values in the workplace; indeed vision, purpose, reflectiveness, and systems thinking are essential, if organizations are to realize their potential.

Any reader seriously interested in the business of teaching and learning would benefit immensely from a thorough reading of this book. It is a browser's delight, providing many cross-references throughout the text, pointing out meaningful links to follow. The authors' suggestion to the serious reader is to make the book one's own, by marking up the pages, trying out the solo exercises, and scribbling, using the many exercises and techniques suggested in the book, engaging others in thinking about change through conversations in classrooms, schools and communities, the organizations to which this book is dedicated.

On the whole, this monumental work requires careful perusal, understanding and digestion of the many ideas put forth, for anyone seriously interested in learning processes and education for tomorrow.

Reviewed by

Veena Venugopal

She is Senior Lecturer at

RNS Institute of Technology, Bangalore

She can be reached at vn_vg@yahoo.co.in