

THE HUNTING OF THE LEARNING ORGANISATION: A PARADOXICAL JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the epistemology of learning, as reflected in some discourses of the learning organization. The article is inspired by, and draws substantially from Lewis Carroll's 'Hunting of the Snark'. It employs a broadly systemic theoretical perspective.

The article highlights relevant characteristics of Carroll's fiction and argues for the importance of differentiation between orders of learning, following Bateson's (1973) model of levels of learning. Building on this differentiation of orders of learning, and on the notion of the inevitable paradoxical nature of organizations, the article explores a possible conceptual integration of 'learning' and 'politics', which Easterby-Smith et al (1999) consider desirable.

A question raised is of whether experiences cited as paradigmatic of 'the learning organization' are most likely to be transient and emergent. The analysis questions the extent to which such states can be produced through intention and design, and therefore to what extent the wish for these to become permanent states may parallel the hunt for the Snark.

Keywords: learning; learning organization; organizational learning; paradox; systems theory; learning to learn.

INTRODUCTION

The value of narrative and storytelling in practice contexts, and as subjects for research and theorising, is acknowledged (for example, Abma 2003; Gabriel 2000). What appears less common is the use of story, metaphor, imagination and the like in academic writing (which might seem odd, given the emergence of postmodern views of knowledge). I refer to 'The Hunting of the Snark' in this article in a spirit somewhat similar to that of the Sufi teaching story (Shah 1973, for example; and see Reason and Hawkins 1988), and that of use of stories in this field by authors such as Watzlawick (1986) and Weick (1994). The intention, in essence, is to offer a perspective, a way of seeing that asks 'what if?', in order to stimulate thought and dialogue.

My intent is to provide a potentially illuminative critique of some epistemological dimensions of the 'learning organization' idea. Epistemology refers to the science of 'knowing' (Bateson and Bateson 1988 p.20; see also Bateson 1991 pp. 215 – 224). In other words, I seek to question conceptions of, and presuppositions about, the nature of learning that may be embedded within discourses of 'the learning organization'.

This is not intended to deride either the idea of the learning organization itself, or the endeavour of 'hunting' – the idea has, among other things, stimulated much experimentation in organizational settings (e.g. Garvin 1993, Burgoyne et al 1994, among others). My aim is to express an *aesthetic* insight into some of the epistemological issues, and to attempt some conceptual sense-making of this through systemic concepts, without trying to convert the aesthetic side wholly into cognitive theory.

ON 'THE HUNTING OF THE SNARK'

Why Lewis Carroll's 'Hunting of the Snark'? The poem is the story of ten characters who set off on a voyage, organised and led by a character called the Bellman, in search of a fabulous creature, the Snark. Carroll wrote 'The Hunting of the Snark' in 1876 (Gardner in Carroll 1974 p.16). Apparently he conceived of it whilst walking in Guildford (where the University of Surrey is located). It is described by the Encyclopedia Britannica as 'nonsense literature of the highest order', yet it seems

much more than a piece of whimsy. Martin Gardner mentions the view that the poem, subtitled 'An Agony in Eight Fits', is 'a poem about being and non-being...a poem of existential agony' (Gardner, in Carroll 1974 p.28).

Initially, when reflecting on personal experience of organizational events in 2000, I was struck by the potential of the dream-like voyage of fancy on which Carroll's characters embarked as an allegory of the quest for the learning organization. Pure allegory has limitations. Through writing and developing the article I came to view the poem more as a paradigm of the consequences of human desire for, and efforts at, progress through the striving for ideals. In other words the poem expresses something about our 'hunting'. In this respect it may represent a mythological themeⁱ, a profound metaphor more than a mere cautionary moral tale.

Various lines of inquiry could open up from this point. Here I confine myself to three main imaginative insights:

1. The *idea* of 'the Learning Organisation' can be regarded as a Snark. The Snark is a fabulous creature; the probable existence and location of the Snark are asserted by the Bellman ('what I tell you three times is true'ⁱⁱ) although there is no hard evidence. In similar fashion we have been exhorted to search for 'the learning organization'. There is value in the 'hunting'; nevertheless the Snark itself is illusory.
2. The revelation that the Snark is a Boojumⁱⁱⁱ resonates with the idea that, while learning appears to be regarded as universally good and beneficial, there is a 'shadow' side to 'the learning organization'. For example, it seems essential to regard learning as being regulated in organizations. This opens the possibility that we can see learning as interwoven with power and politics, such that politics is considered as neither separate from, nor a barrier to, learning.
3. The paradoxical nature of organizational life is central; there appears to operate, for example, an equivalent of the Bellman's 'Rule 42'^{iv}. Through pursuit of *learning* and *learning to learn*, we may miss the necessity of (as it were) learning not to learn.

I address each of the above themes in turn, relating these to relevant literature in the field. For a conceptual framework I draw on systems thinking, particularly the work of Bateson (1973, 1979, 1991), Keeney (1983), and Watzlawick et al (1974). These share a view that human systems are essentially *recursive*. They operate in an

`arational' manner, neither with a linear, logical rationality, nor with irrationality. This is reflected in aphorisms such as `plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose' (Watzlawick et al 1974 p.1). From this perspective the logic of the operation of human systems resembles that found in Lewis Carroll's work. Bateson, for example, emphasises paradoxical thinking and circular causality (for example, Bateson and Bateson 1988 p. 143). The paradoxical nature of organisational life is also addressed in other literature in this field (for example, Weick 1994, Antonacopolou 1999, 2001, Lewis 2000).

WHAT I TELL YOU THREE TIMES IS TRUE

Since the late 1980's, businesses and all others kinds of organisation have been exhorted to become learning organizations. Pedler et al (1989 p.1) report seeing the term learning organization in a Foundation for Management Education document in 1987, and say, presciently, `this theme is the one most likely to preoccupy managers in the next few years'. Since then, the desirability of becoming a learning organization seems to have won widespread acceptance.

Incidentally, Carroll chose names beginning with `B' for all the characters (Bellman, Baker, Banker, Barrister, Beaver, Billiard-Maker, Bonnet-Maker, Boots, Broker and Butcher), plus two monsters (the Bandersnatch and the Boojum). It may be a trivial point, but it does seem a pity that those prominent UK authors in this field, Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, so narrowly miss perfecting this theme.

Might we see texts such as Pedler et al (1991), Senge (1990) and Watkins and Marsick (1993) as equivalent to the Bellman's rallying cry? We have been told three times (and more) that the learning organization is the answer, we have accepted that this must be true, and we have hunted high and low.

Looking through the literature, I am struck by how common it is for authors to take care to *deny* that they are pursuing the `learning organization' as a goal, to assert that it is unattainable, and to describe it as a vision (Senge et al 1994 pp. 5 - 6) or an aspiration (`The Learning Organization is more of a continuing aspiration than a product', Garratt 2000 p.x). Nevertheless, the language of voyages is noticeable. For example, in a special retrospective issue of The Learning Organization journal (`The learning organization: ten years on'), three of the four articles include explicitly the

term 'journey' (Garratt 1999; Marsick & Watkins 1999; Smith 1999). There seems little doubt that these authors at least seek to enthuse their readers to join the voyage.

The quest for the learning organization, perhaps especially as its existence is typically denied, appears mythic, a voyage in search of some symbolic or fabled goal. Grey (1998) notes that the learning organization has actually been described as 'the holy grail', a magical solution to the problems facing businesses, resonant perhaps of the existential angst that Gardner perceives in the poem. Marsick and Watkins recall that in their early workshops 'we would talk about the fact that, in some ways, the learning organization represented all of our collective best wishes for Utopia in the workplace' (1999 p.207). Elkjaer (2001) describes a case in an article, using the subtitle '*an undelivered promise*'. In Senge's writing, it is a journey in search of the experience of being a member of 'a "great team"... we probably remember the trust, the relationships, the acceptance, the synergy...' (Senge et al 1994 p. 17). Garvin (1993) remarks on the 'near mystical terminology' of authors such as Senge^v.

A question raised in this article is whether experiences such as that invoked by Senge are more likely to be transient and emergent than routine or permanent. While the desire to create such experiences is understandable, the implication that these could become a permanent state of organization may be the more illusory aspect. The analysis offered here also questions the extent to which such states can be produced through intention and design.

Some literature attempts to define characteristics or measures by which the learning organization may be identified, as in the briefing the Bellman gave his crew^{vi}. These included, notably, Pedler et al's (1991) eleven characteristics of the learning company. There are frequent attempts to measure the ephemeral quality of 'learning' through the extent of overt activity such as training, a relationship which Antonacopoulou (2001) argues is vastly oversimplified.

In the poem, the Bellman's chart is, delightfully, entirely blank. This was much appreciated by the crew, who found it 'a map they could all understand'. It is tempting to appreciate the Bellman's stance here, particularly when contemplating the plethora of programmes and models purporting to guide us to the learning organization. At the very least, the small print accompanying sale of these artefacts might cite Korzybski's dictum ('the map is not the territory' – Korzybski 1933, cited in

Bandler and Grinder 1975 p.7), and refer to Weick (1994) (the point of a map is less accurate representation than mobilisation of action).

In their pursuit of the Snark, the voyagers 'sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care; they pursued it with forks and hope' (Carroll 1974 p. 73). There is a view that some literature in the field employs hope rather than the critical probing of forks. However I want to resist, for the specific purposes of this article, suggesting that the former genre (often described as prescriptive and unproblematic, e.g. see Örténblad 2002 p. 214) is necessarily inferior to critical, academic literature (e.g. Coopey 1995, Dovey 1997)^{vii}. It seems it is not only the 'unproblematic' literature that subscribes to the 'journey' metaphor, whether explicitly or through construing the learning organization as a developmental project.

FOR THE SNARK WAS A BOOJUM...

A theme that I see represented very little in literatures of the learning organization is the possibility that 'learning' has a shadow side^{viii}.

Grey (1998) argues that portraying learning as necessarily 'a good thing' for an organization is patent nonsense. It is like saying that water is good for health, so the more water we drink the better. Even though essential for life, water is only good for health up to a point and it is possible to die through drinking too much water^{ix}. Keeney (1983 p.14), among others, comments on the epistemological flaws of the principle that 'more is better'. He, like authors such as Bateson (1973, 1979, 1991) and Watzlawick et al (1974) prefer a more systemic 'logic' that works with optimisation and self-regulatory limits rather than maximisation, and considers the unintended consequences of 'good ideas'.

So, what if 'learning' is in principle as likely to be harmful or unpalatable to organisations as it is likely to be beneficial or attractive? Just as Gabriel (2000 p. 5) comments that 'not all stories are good stories', do we also need to consider that not all learning is 'good' learning?

Certainly, much literature suggests that too little learning will be disastrous for competitive success, often invoking or citing Reg Revans 'formula', $L \geq C$, such that 'an organization's rate of learning should be equal to, or greater than, the rate of

change in their environment' (Garratt 2000 p.2). What the literature appears to neglect is the question of whether one can have 'too much of a good thing'. Similarly, it seems that very few authors surface the idea that learning itself may have unintended as well as intended, and undesirable as well as a desirable faces.

This is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's aphorism that 'In this world there are two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst.'^x To jump ahead to the ending of Carroll's story for a moment, a member of the crew, the baker, does find a creature on the island. It is not, however, the longed-for, benign Snark; 'For the Snark was a Boojum, you see' (Carroll, L. in Gardner 1974 p.96). The baker is never seen again. I wonder sometimes whether in practice we also hold a tacit awareness that 'the Snark is a Boojum'; that if we are successful we will not like what we find, and so voyage towards the learning organization as well as conspiring to avoid encountering it?

Taking a reported incident from practice^{xi}, a multinational company intending to develop itself as a learning organization ran programmes to encourage managers to challenge received wisdom and to take an inquiring approach. Later, one participant attended an awayday, where the managing director of his division circulated among staff over dinner. The participant raised a question about the approach the MD had taken on a particular project; with hindsight, had that been the best strategy? 'That was the way I did it', said the MD. 'But do you think there was a better way?', asked the participant. 'I don't think you heard me', replied the MD. 'That was the way I did it'. 'That I heard', continued the participant, 'but might there have been a better way?'. The MD fixed his gaze on the participants' lapel badge, then looked him in the eye, saying coldly, 'I will remember your name', before walking away.

At first glance this example appears to be in direct contradiction to the espoused aim of becoming a learning organization. As we know from Argyris (1999) espoused theory and theory in use do not usually coincide; and questioning managerial hegemony is often outside the boundary of what managers may consider 'useful' inquiry. Elkjaer (2001 p.445) notes the way 'learning organization' programmes can appear to be about socialization. So I doubt that anyone reading about this incident would be surprised by it^{xii}.

In Argyris' terms, the MD seems to have demonstrated 'Model I' behaviour through a defensive routine (Argyris 1999 p.58), apparently making the issue 'undiscussable'

(e.g. Argyris 1999 p.141). His response seems likely to militate against the second-order change (Watzlawick et al 1974) the company appears to be seeking. The participant presumably feels he has received mixed messages (Argyris 1999 p93), perhaps being placed in a form of double bind (Bateson 1973 p.242) in which he is simultaneously exhorted to put 'learning organization' principles into practice, and punished for doing so. If he concludes that he is not to challenge senior managers he may develop what Argyris calls skilled incompetence (1999 pp. 139 – 148).

However, surely some learning has taken place? For our hapless participant, like the baker in pursuit of the Snark of an inquiring, learning organization, I can think of no better term than 'Boojum' for the MD's response. Nor do I suggest that the MD's response was helping to create a 'learning organization'. But I do suggest that the MD's response triggered *learning about learning* in that organization.

Typically, according to Easterby-Smith et al (1999) the literature in this field typically splits learning from politics, noting that Coopey is unusual in that he regards politics as a natural feature of organizational process; 'The idea of organizational learning as a political process is touched upon by many... but from the perspective that this is a persistent problem which needs to be overcome and nullified if learning is to take place' (Easterby-Smith et al 1999 p.5). Thus Senge (1990) regards politics as an impediment to learning, and suggests that individual and interpersonal skills are the means to overcome limitations in the context. Similarly, Argyris, as Easterby-Smith et al (1999) point out, implicitly treats politics as a barrier to learning. These positions appear to commit the epistemological error (Bateson 1973 pp. 280 - 308^{xiii}) of pitting one part of the system against another.

Another tendency in the literature is that of regarding 'learning to learn' as highly desirable (e.g. Garratt 1999 p. 203). It may be equally important to 'learn not to learn'. The participant, perhaps naively in retrospect, took literally the encouragement to pursue inquiry. He learnt, as it were, at a contextual level. This may be seen as a kind of meta-learning, about when to display the behaviour the organization appears to want, and when not to do so.

Therefore one can argue about whether, in this particular instance, the MD's response was likely to serve the organization's declared interests; but the *type* of behaviour the MD was displaying, ostensibly interfering with learning, is unavoidably part of learning in organizations.

What if we were to see this 'shadow side' of learning within a wider picture, as an integral component of learning in organizations? The implication is that we might connote apparent 'non-learning' positively^{xiv} and, in common with many systemic models (e.g. the presuppositions of Neuro-Linguistic Programming – Dilts 1998), to regard apparently troublesome patterns of behaviour as skilled accomplishments. So instead of concluding that people's skills at learning are somehow deficient (ie if we were only better at it, or could remove the barriers, we could create learning organizations), it opens the possibility that their skills are already exquisite, if seen through an alternative frame.

In other words, we might regard the tacit, informal strategies for regulating learning in this way, which many refer to as 'politics' and thus connote negatively, as skilled and sophisticated – as a form of 'learning to learn'. It appears that individuals need this type of skill in order to participate. Indeed, it seems that it is only by adopting a completely decontextualised concept of 'learning' that learning can be regarded as necessarily 'good', and separate from politics. To further that exploration, I will discuss paradoxicality through an intriguing and, at first glance, incidental feature of 'The Hunting of the Snark', that of Rule 42.

RULE 42: THE UTILITY OF SAILING BACKWARDS

One of our doctoral students, an experienced counsellor and facilitator who works in organisations as a professional supervisor, perceives a significant degree of 'parallel process'^{xv} between issues he encounters in supervision sessions, and organizational problems or dynamics. In other words, in his experience the content, process and relationships in supervision appear to be an unconscious re-enactment or reflection of aspects of organizational functioning.

This phenomenon might appear to represent a wonderful opportunity for organizational learning, for 'joining up' individual experience and organisational issues. A supervision session presents live, relevant organisational material. Would this not create the possibility of collective learning? What is curious is that this opportunity seems carefully avoided. Specifically, it does not appear to be considered a legitimate activity to explore the individual's symptoms as the effects of the context of the organizational culture or structure. This may reflect a prominent dynamic in

organizations, the individualising and psychologising (Salaman 1979 p.202) of organizational, systemic or structural problems.

It is as if the organizational equivalent of the Bellman's Rule 42 is operating, perhaps formulated as; *the organization shall not speak to the supervision, and the supervision shall not speak to the organization*. This acts as if to interrupt the feedback loop from individual experience to organizational issues^{xvi}.

Is there, though, a logic to this paradoxical rule? For example, in relation to Alex's questions, the apparently irrational disconnection between individual supervision and organizational learning enables managers to be seen to have taken action, and gives a rationale for defining these problems as belonging elsewhere therefore needing no further action. It also enables employees to keep issues raised in supervision 'private', as to disclose them outside supervision could result in embarrassment and ridicule

In addition, it may well be useful in organizations for the ship to sail backwards from time to time. We live an age of 'hero managers' (Collins 1998) who are assumed to be in control. With reference to Bateson's concept of conscious purpose (Bateson 1973 p.410), the more people try to engineer the future or the state of the 'ecology' of any system, the more they are likely to interfere with it and generate unintended, potentially harmful consequences. Sailing backwards gives a different perspective, and perhaps allows more for serendipity. If we rely on intentional action by managers we might make little progress. We need the accidental, the spontaneous, and the arational, for the emergence of novelty^{xvii}.

There is also another layer of paradox, which is that *naming* Rule 42 is itself likely to be treated as a violation of Rule 42. In Argyris' terms (1999 p.141), the existence of Rule 42 is itself undiscussable, and its undiscussability is undiscussable. In Alex's supervision example, it would be interesting to observe what would happen if managers and employees began to discuss the advantages they gain from this apparent Rule 42. For the participant in the earlier incident to have accused the MD of not allowing inquiry could have invited still more sanctions.

CONCEPTUALISING PARADOX: ORDERS OF LEARNING

At first glance we might regard Rule 42 as an absurdity, as dysfunctional and as something to overcome. I want to entertain the possibility, however, that Rule 42 represents another significant part of the picture. That is, that Rule 42 is a kind of 'meta-principle', an epistemological position about how we regard paradoxes and dilemmas.

Conceptualising this introduces further difficulties as it invokes the very self-referential nature of language and thought that it is attempting to describe. This is one possible reason for taking an aesthetic rather than a cognitive approach. Here I will at least sketch a way in which Bateson's model of 'levels of learning' may assist, without abandoning an aesthetic apprehension of this territory (as Bateson advocates), or the experiential, emotional dimension of paradox.

Paradox and contradiction inevitably arise in communication. For example, communication has both 'content' and 'relationship' dimensions. As Bateson showed, words often carry the 'content' message whilst paralinguistic or non-verbal aspects often carry the 'relationship' message^{xviii}. Bateson's work on schizophrenia (1973 pp. 215 - 241) argues that double binds can be created where content and relationship messages are contradictory. Again, this is what appears to have happened to the participant in the earlier example. There was some explicit content saying 'question what happens here'. The MD's behaviour contradicted this, in effect saying 'don't you dare question my actions'. The participant was in a double bind in the sense that obeying either of these instructions would mean disobeying the other.

Bateson's theory of levels of learning (1973 pp 250 - 279) developed from Russell and Whitehead's theory of logical types, which aimed to account for logical paradoxes^{xix}. As Flemons explains it:

'Russell's Theory of Logical Types distinguishes between levels of abstraction. Originally invented as a way of eschewing paradox in the world of logic, the notion of logical types is used by Bateson as a way of charting the classification inherent in all perceiving, thinking, learning, and communicating. A class is a different logical type, a higher level of abstraction, than the members it classifies: The class of "all books" is not itself a book; the name of a thing is itself not a thing, but a classification of it... This hierarchy of types - classes, classes of classes, classes of classes of classes, and so on - provides a convenient bridge to the critical notion of context and the interdependence of wholes and parts. The notion of levels makes clear that learning,

for example, is a contextual affair; one not only learns, but simultaneously learns how to learn.' (Flemons 1991 p.5-6)

It is this latter point that may help here. Specifically, it is the idea that any act of learning in organizations necessarily entails simultaneous layers of 'learning'^{xx} (equating to Bateson's 'Learning I', or LI) and 'learning to learn' (LII); and that 'learning to learn', as Flemons indicates, is a contextual affair.

What did Bateson mean by 'context'? His definitions of LII emphasise *changes in sensitivity to the context* ('changes in the manner in which the stream of action and experience is segmented or punctuated into contexts together with changes in the use of context markers', 1973 p.264). So LII refers to learning *about* the context: 'I assume that in any learning experiment... there occurs not only that learning in which the experimenter is usually interested... but also a more abstract or higher order of learning, in which the experimental subject improves his ability to deal with contexts of a given type. The subject comes to act more and more as if contexts of this type were expectable in his universe' (Bateson 1991 pp. 53 - 54). In summary, '*what is learned in Learning II is a way of punctuating events.*' (Bateson 1973 p.271: italics in original).

I take Bateson's definition of 'learning to learn' to embrace both higher-order characteristics of the 'problem' being solved, and the social or relational context and its 'rules'. Bateson (1973 p.271) gives transference as an example of LII, in that it concerns patterns of behaviour learnt (introjected) at an early age which a person reproduces when in similar contexts later in life.

Snyder's (1971) notion of the 'hidden curriculum' may be another example of LII, in that this concept expresses the idea that every educational experience has an overt curriculum (stated learning aims, activities and so on), and a hidden curriculum, or what is taught tacitly. Students simultaneously learn from the overt curriculum, and 'learn to learn', so becoming socialised into the practices and expectations of the particular educational setting. French and Bazalgette (1996), drawing explicitly on Bateson's work, have drawn attention nicely to this more tacit, contextual, learning to learn through their notion of the 'teaching-learning' organization. It seems that this conception of LII may also be compatible with Lave and Wenger's (1991) emphasis on learning being a facet of participation in communities of practice (see also Gherardi et al 1998). As Lave concludes from a study of West African tailors'

apprenticeship (1996 p.155), 'it was not just the informal side of life that was intricately context-embedded and situated activity: there is nothing else'. If, therefore, a decontextualised concept of learning is unrealistic, it is LII that may be regarded as concerned with continuous learning about participation.

Bateson called LII 'deutero-learning', and also referred to it as 'learning to learn' (1973 p. 263)^{xxi}. It is worth noting that 'learning to learn' is used typically in different senses. Often it refers to improvements in *skills of learning*; equating perhaps to improving study skills, or learning about one's learning style, or learning to use learning contracts. At other times this term refers to double loop learning (which is different from deutero-learning – see Argyris and Schön 1978), denoting a more strategic kind of thinking that questions and seeks to correct the norms or goals of action.

The suggestions here are that:

- a) LI and LII necessarily co-exist in organizational settings.
- b) LII can be thought of as concerning 'politics', at least in so far as it concerns learning about rules and norms of the context.
- c) There is a hierarchical and recursive relationship between these putative levels, such that changes at LII will organize and influence (not determine) what is possible at LI. The contextual level serves to legitimise, limit, encourage or discourage learning at LI.
- d) The recursive aspect means that influence flows not only from LII to LI, but also back in the other direction. (It seems crucial to regard the contextual 'rules of participation' as emergent, not as set by some superordinate authority).
- e) These 'rules of participation' are communicated through relationship more than content; there is often conflict between overt, stated, formal rules and those enacted.
- f) A fundamental facet of organizational life involves experiencing and managing the dilemmas and paradoxes arising from contradictions between content and relationship messages.

This kind of differentiation between levels of learning may shed some further light on Antonacopoulou's (2001) empirical finding of a paradoxical relationship between 'training' and 'learning'. Antonacopoulou explains that, whilst 'the association between training and learning is still presented as a very potent one' (2001 p. 327),

this does not necessarily match individuals' perceptions based on their experience. She cites interview data that show how managers both affirm the purported relationship between training and learning, and deny that it exists in their experience.

As Antonacopoulou acknowledges, these manager appear to face dilemmas ('the dilemma facing the individual is that of truthfulness and honesty with the self and others', 2001 p.331; 'In the light of the continuously changing priorities of the organization, managers feel more disorientated about what the organization expects and what they need to do in order to be successful', 2001 p.336). In practice, she suggests, 'the organizational priorities supersede those of the individual manager' (2001 p.336).

The data appear on the surface to demonstrate inconsistent or irrational thinking by individuals (nb Antonacopoulou does not suggest that this is so) . Yet it may reflect instead a tacit awareness of, and ability to manage, different levels of discourse in organizational life.

If we adopt Bateson's model, these responses (see also p.337) can be thought of as reflecting two different levels of discourse, which Antonacopoulou characterises as theoretical and operational. In short, managers have learnt (LII) the contextual rule that **training** is regarded as a **learning** opportunity; yet also acknowledge that in their personal experience (LI), *training* does not necessarily lead to *learning*. These statements only create a paradox if we take **training/learning** (LII) as identical to *training/learning* (LI).

Insert Table 1 here

What is of especial interest here is Antonacopoulou's comment that these managers apparently find this paradox 'not unusual and accept it as part of life' (2001 p.339). To say that managers find it normal opens a variety of possible interpretations. It could mean that these managers collude not to notice it, or it could signify that managers are aware of the paradoxical nature of organizational existence, so they do not attempt to rationalise something that cannot be rationalised. Antonacopoulou's article suggest that managers see this kind of dilemma as 'politics': 'For example, managers perceive training as a key to their career progression and try to play by the rules of the political game (maintain their self-image against admitting ignorance)'

(2001 p.336). Conceptually, we might consider managers' ability to handle such dilemmas as an example of deuterio-learning.

This line of inquiry may indicate a case for conceiving of a further, reflexive layer that concerns how to regard and manage paradoxes. In the Snark, this layer is made explicit within Rule 42 ("No one shall speak to the Man at the Helm," had been completed by the Bellman himself with the words "and the Man at the Helm shall speak to no one." So remonstrance was impossible...). In organizational life, this kind of 'meta-principle' seems likely to remain tacit. As a concept, it seems related to Argyris' idea of 'Model I and II', perhaps also Wijnhoven's learning prototypes (Wijnhoven 2001) and the differences between Torbert's developmental stages (Fisher et al 2001). Changing such 'meta-principles' would (in Bateson's framework) involve LIII (1973 p. 264), which might be expressed as 'learning about {learning to learn}'. It is questionable to what extent such 'meta-principles' are susceptible to intentional change.

In summary, utilising Bateson's theory, perhaps three qualitatively different orders can be mapped out. These operate *as-if* synchronous and interrelated, corresponding to the levels Bateson labelled Learning I, II and III. I refer to these three levels here as 'product/process', 'contextual rules' and 'meta-principle'^{xxxii}.

Insert table 2 here

The application of Bateson's levels of learning to the fields of the learning organization and organizational learning (primarily the latter, and I acknowledge that I am migrating between these literatures here) forms the basis of Argyris' work on single and double loop learning (e.g. Argyris 1999). However it appears that much literature steers us towards a cognitive treatment of these issues. Argyris' own work has a strongly cognitive emphasis. Some authors, such as Garratt (2000), whose 'three learning cycles' model is based explicitly on the thinking of Watzalwick and Argyris, do this by emphasising strategic thinking. Others, such as Jankowicz (2002), offer a strongly cognitive application of Bateson's levels.

Other authors reject the cognitive approach to paradoxes and dilemmas and seek to retain the experiential, participatory dimension. One of these is Bill Torbert, whose 'action inquiry' was influenced by his studies with Argyris, but who developed a much more subject-centred perspective (e.g. Torbert 1991; Fisher and Torbert 1995).

It seems that a cognitive-rational trajectory loses touch with the 'existential agony' of the hunting. Both Bateson and Stacey (Stacey et al 2000 pp. 205 - 206) argue for a participatory view of the world. Actors (such as managers) are participants, and can neither stand outside the system, nor control it. Among other things, this means that we cannot treat paradoxes in organizational life as abstract, cognitive puzzles. They are embedded in interaction. We inhabit them, we feel the emotional tension of dilemmas, we cannot take 'time out' to go away and consider a solution, and our responses carry real consequences and risks. It may be that such dilemmas hold especially rich possibilities for learning if they can be made subject to inquiry.

In summary, a model such as Bateson's levels of learning may help us to conceptualise paradox and to regard it as a normal condition of organizational life. Yet the cognitive emphasis of some authors who have built upon Bateson's model seems to neglect the experiential and existential dimension of an aesthetic apprehension of these issues, as represented by Carroll's poem.

THE BEAVER'S LESSON

As a final main section, I return briefly to questions of transience and intentionality.

Argyris is convinced that changing individuals is the key to changing the organization ('The moment one focuses on double-loop learning the individual becomes the basic social structure, and supra-structures cannot be changed without beginning at the individual'. Argyris 1999 p.89). Thus he proposes uncompromisingly that it is necessary to change individual behaviour in order to change the system. At the same time, Argyris acknowledges the extreme difficulty of escaping Model I ('because people have been socialized to produce Model I and because the world continues to operate largely according to Model I even when some people try to act according to Model II', Argyris 1999 p.245).

In *Fit the Fifth of the Hunting of the Snark* ('The Beaver's Lesson') the Butcher and the Beaver share an ordeal, an encounter with the Jubjub bird. This cements a friendship all the more remarkable for the fact that at the outset, the Butcher had declared that he could 'only kill beavers'.

I observed earlier that sources using the 'journey' metaphor appear to be searching for paradigmatic, partially idealised states (Snarks). A stimulus for this article was my department's experience of a national Higher Education Subject Review (in 2000). The process of preparing for the event itself, with staff working increasingly long hours towards the same goal, generated considerable 'team spirit', and seemed set aside many previously existing barriers to collective endeavour. More people were able to question more, and in each others' presence, than usual. The purposes, values and methods we took for granted in day-to-day working now became more open to inquiry. There was outer success (in our case, scoring 23 out of 24 in the Subject Review).

It was as if, during preparation for Subject Review, Rule 42 had become suspended or modified temporarily^{xxiii}. In other words, the 'meta-principle' for how we dealt with dilemmas and paradoxes appeared to loosen, at least enough to enable what I and others experienced as greater scope for inquiring.

One of the responses in our department was to ask 'why can't we work like that all the time?'. Recalling Senge, the episode seemed to become idealised as what things could or should be like *routinely*. Some identified the barriers to this as (for example) the way that people normally 'looking after their own narrow interests', or 'fail to collaborate enough'.

The question this might raise is to what extent such collaboration is emergent from, rather than the source of, such experiences. The apparent changes in behaviour from our Subject Review process appeared (to me) to subside when that the particular context no longer pertained. This led me to wonder to what extent the reasons were contextual, not intra- or interpersonal. What if such episodes are *typically* transient and emergent? What if they are created less through programmes or enhancements in 'learning disciplines' (Senge 1990) than through changes in the context, changes that may often be quite serendipitous, as for the Butcher and the Beaver?

Therefore, as a final question to the epistemology of the 'learning organization', I wonder to what Senge and others bring their own 'meta-principles' to bear. Whilst an analysis of such 'meta-principles' is beyond the scope of the present paper, one might expect them to be culturally sourced and not consciously selected. In this case, for example, it might be represented by bringing a typically Western, rational

perspective to the concept, seeking laws, formulae and methods through which such states can be recreated intentionally^{xxiv}. Alternative cultural perspectives may embody quite distinct epistemological assumptions.

CONCLUSION

This piece has suggested that the idea of the 'learning organization' is, metaphorically, a Snark; the Snark is a Boojum, in that learning is not a universal good; and that organizational life has a paradoxical nature, illustrated by Rule 42.

The hunt for the 'learning organization' has mobilised much action and experimentation. Interesting issues lie in the epistemology of such an approach, and embedded within the apparent nonsense of Lewis Carroll's 'Hunting of the Snark', may be a deeply wise metaphor of human efforts to attain ideals through 'engineering' social improvements.

Using Bateson's levels of learning, enhancing learning (LI) necessarily engages us in learning how to learn in that context (LII), and also in learning how to manage paradox (LIII). Such a perspective may provide one way to reconcile 'politics' and 'learning'. The value of an aesthetic apprehension of these issues to complement cognitive analyses has been emphasised.

No doubt you have anticipated the ending. I am not optimistic for the future of the learning organization as an idea, as I perceive that it is softly and silently vanishing away. There will be other Snarks to hunt, of course; however, every Snark will turn out to be a Boojum.

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Table 1: Apparently contradictory discourses of the relationship between training and learning

Learning II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training does lead to learning
Learning I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>training</i> does not lead to <i>learning</i>

Table 2: Levels of learning in organizations (after Bateson 1973)

Level III	Meta-principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning to {learn to learn}; ie how to treat 'rules' for managing the dilemmas, paradoxes, double binds, tensions. • Akin to Argyris' 'Model I and Model II'
Level II	Contextual 'rules of participation'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning to learn in this context; ie learning about 'rules' that determine what is legitimated as learning. • Akin to Snyder's (1971) concept of the 'hidden curriculum'.
Level I	Product/Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The result or outcome of the process; e.g. whatever learners claim as product or as evidence of meeting the objectives; processes and behaviours that constitute and 'learning' as an activity.

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ⁱ Clearly it is only one of many works of fiction that could provide such a metaphor.

ⁱⁱ

*'Just the place for a Snark!' the Bellman cried,
As he landed his crew with care;
Supporting each man on the top of the tide
By a finger entwined in his hair.*

*'Just the place for a Snark! I have said it twice:
That alone should encourage the crew.
Just the place for a Snark! I have said it thrice:
What I tell you three times is true.'* (Carroll, L. 1974 p.45)

ⁱⁱⁱ

*Erect and sublime, for one moment of time.
In the next, that wild figure they saw
(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,
While they waited and listened in awe.
"It's a Snark!" was the sound that first came to their ears,
And seemed almost too good to be true.
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers:
Then the ominous words "It's a Boo-"*(Carroll, L. 1974 p.94)

^{iv} 'The Bellman, who was almost morbidly sensitive about appearances, used to have the bowsprit unshipped once or twice a week to be revarnished; and it more than once happened, when the time came for replacing it, that no one on board could remember which end of the ship it belonged to. They knew it was not of the slightest use to appeal to the Bellman about it - he would only refer to his Naval Code, and read out in pathetic tones Admiralty Instructions which none of them had ever been able to understand - so it generally ended in its being fastened on, anyhow, across the rudder. The helmsman used to stand by with tears in his eyes: he knew it was all wrong, but alas! Rule 42 of the Code, "No one shall speak to the Man at the Helm," had been completed by the Bellman himself with the words "and the Man at the Helm shall speak to no one." So remonstrance was impossible, and no steering could be done till the next varnishing day. During these bewildering intervals the ship usually sailed backwards.' (Carroll, L. 1974 p. 41).

^v This unfortunately, seems to connote mysticism as something inadequate or negative.

^{vi} As to the nature of the Snark, the Bellman said:

*'Come, listen my men while I tell you again
The five unmistakable marks
By which you may know, wheresoever you go,
The warranted genuine Snarks.
"Let us take them in order. The first is the taste,
Which is meagre and hollow, but crisp:
Like a coat that is rather too tight in the waist,
With a flavour of Will-o'-the-Wisp.'* (Carroll, L. 1974 p.59)

^{vii} Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999) differentiate the primarily action-orientated literature of the learning organization from the more analytical literature on organizational learning. I note,

however, that some authors grapple in intellectually rigorous ways with issues of organizational learning (e.g. Wijnhoven 2001) without necessarily questioning the underlying desirability of the idea of the learning organization. Reviews of types of literature can be found in Prange (1999), Huysman (1999), and Örténblad (2002).

^{viii} This is different from the point that the 'learning organization' concept is open to ideological or instrumental use.

^{ix} See for example <http://www.hhp.ufl.edu/keepingfit/ARTICLE/toomuchwater.htm>, accessed 14.7.2003

^x Dumbly, in Lady Windermere's Fan, act 3; source, The Columbia World of Quotations.

^{xi} Related to me by another manager who witnessed the incident.

^{xii} Admittedly we do not know how the MD perceived the incident.

^{xiii} 'The Cybernetics of Self: a theory of alcoholism'

^{xiv} Positive connotation was a therapeutic technique of the Milan school of family therapy, who were influenced particularly by the work of Gregory Bateson.

^{xv} An established concept in psychodynamic therapy and consulting, 'the somewhat puzzling and often overlooked processes whereby two or more human systems in relationship to one another seem to 'infect' or become 'infected' by one another.' (Alderfer 1987 p.210).

^{xvi} That the earlier example can also be framed through Rule 42 is probably apparent, the participant having effectively questioned whether the MD had fixed the bowsprit to the correct end of the ship.

^{xvii} As Stacey et al (2000) argue from the perspective of Complexity Theory. Stacey et al argue for sharp differentiation between Complexity Theory and all forms of systems thinking on teleological grounds. However, there seems to me to be explicit congruence between Bateson's systemic epistemology and the formal principles of Complexity Theory in important respects.

^{xviii} Meaning is assumed to be constructed.

^{xix} Notably, that attributed to Epimenides, a Cretan, who declared 'all Cretans are liars'.

^{xx} The term 'learning' already has epistemological confusion embedded within it as it represent different part so speech. For example it has a noun form, a nominalisation (Bandler and Grinder 1975 p.32), implying that learning is an object or has concrete form, such that it could be perceived and measured. This is complicated because learning (as output or product) has no objective existence, and is often *constructed*, either with reference to a practice context (eg I have created a learning contract so what ever I do in pursuit of it is 'learning') or retrospectively (I reflect on my experience and identify changes in meaning and understanding, which I then label 'learning'). The word 'learning' is also a participle referring to activity or behaviour. However this is further complicated by the fact that there is no simple behaviour called 'learning'; it becomes reified, but the term refers it seems to a *class* of behaviours - see Flemons' quote above - inferred from of specific behaviours, or defined by intention.

^{xxi} Bateson commented in 1959 (1973 p.220), 'I have in the past unfortunately called these phenomena "deutero-learning", and have translated this as "learning to learn". It would have been more correct to coin the word trito-learning and to translate it as "learning to learn to receive signals".' He did not persist with this alternative term.

^{xxii} The framework proposed by Lave (1996 p.156), consisting of telos, subject-world relations, and learning mechanisms may appear similar. Lave's schema is not directly comparable as it identifies requisite dimensions of any theory of learning. In other words it is an analytical tool for interrogating theories. As such it provides a potential framework for evaluating this article's perspective - I have not attempted to do so here.

^{xxiii} It may be that analyses such as Engeström's activity theory perspective (Engeström 2000) provide fruitful, grounded understandings of processes of learning in organizations.

^{xxiv} It is curious that a recursive, systemic logic is acknowledged within the learning organization literature (e.g. Senge's 'laws of the fifth discipline', 1990 pp. 57 - 67) but is rarely used reflexively. In other words, to what extent do authors such as Senge apply systemic principles such as 'twice as much is not necessarily twice as good' (Watzlawick 1986 p.25) to their own advocacy for increasing 'learning'?