An organization's ability to learn may make the difference between its thriving or perishing in the years ahead, says author Peter Senge.

The Fifth Discipline explains the characteristics of “learning organizations.” Schools are considered to be institutions of learning, but are most of them learning organizations?

Definitely not. A learning organization is an organization in which people at all levels are, collectively, continually enhancing their capacity to create things they really want to create. And most of the educators I talk with don't feel like they're doing this. Most teachers feel oppressed trying to conform to all kinds of rules, goals and objectives, many of which they don't believe in. Teachers don't work together; there's very little sense of collective learning going on in most schools.

By the way, I also disagree with your assumption that schools are institutions of learning for students. Why is that?

We say school is about learning, but by and large schooling has traditionally been about people memorizing a lot of stuff that they don't really care too much about, and the whole approach is quite fragmented. Really deep learning is a process that inevitably is driven by the learner, not by someone else. And it always involves moving back and forth between a domain of thinking and a domain of action. So having a student sit passively taking in information is hardly a very good model for learning; it's just what we're used to.

Let's look at adult learning first. We do have staff development programs to help educators improve their skills, to become more knowledgeable. Are these kinds of efforts misguided?

No, but they're far from supporting the kind of learning organization I'm talking about. The traditional approach to helping educators learn has been to develop the skills of individuals to do their work better. I'm talking about enhancing the collective capacity of people to create and pursue overall visions.

Obviously, the educational enterprise is ultimately about kids learning. But we must also give systematic attention to how teachers learn. And by learning, I don't mean sending them away to off-site conferences. I'm not saying they shouldn't ever do that, but learning is always an on-the-job phenomenon. Learning always occurs in a context where you are taking action. So we need to find ways to get teachers really working together; we need to create an environment where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more what it takes to work as teams.

Can you say more about the difference between the individual learning that a teacher might do and this notion of a team or an entire organization learning?

Well, it's like the difference between a bunch of individuals who are good basketball players and an outstanding basketball team. Or a musical ensemble that has a lot of great musicians but sounds pretty mediocre. There is always a huge difference between individual capability and collective capability and individual learning and collective learning. But this is rarely reflected in how schools are organized, because education is so highly individualistic. Many people are advocating cooperative learning for kids, but the idea that teachers and administrators ought to learn together really hasn't gone too far.

The fragmentation that exists in the education process is extraordinary. Part of it is embedded in our theory of knowledge. Our theory of knowledge puts knowledge in cubbyholes; in our society we consider an expert to be someone who knows a great deal about very little. So part of the problem here has to do with very deep issues regarding the fragmentation of knowledge and our incapacity to really integrate.
A second dimension of the problem is that educational institutions are designed and structured in a way that reinforces the idea that my job as a teacher is as an individual teaching my kids. I have literally heard teachers say, “When I close that classroom door, I'm God in my universe.” This focus on the individual is so deeply embedded in our culture that it's very hard for people to even see it.

**Teachers might feel that, because it would take so much collaboration to bring about any kind of systemic change in education, they're better off trying to improve what goes on in their individual classrooms.**

Our unit of innovation has usually been the individual teacher, the individual classroom, or a new curriculum to be implemented individually by teachers. But the larger environment in which innovation is supposed to occur is neglected. So few innovations stick. Either a teacher moves away, or a teacher who successfully innovates becomes threatening to those around him or her.

Significant changes in the content and process of education require coordinated efforts throughout a school: you cannot implement “learner-directed learning,” for example, in one classroom and not others. It would drive kids nuts, not to mention the stress on the individual teacher.

So there's absolutely no choice but trying to create change on multiple levels. Yes, there needs to be fundamental innovation in the classroom. Yes, you've got to find and support these teachers who are really committed to that. And no, it's completely inadequate by itself, because you have to be working simultaneously to create a totally different environment in the classroom, in the school, in the school system, and eventually in the community. And that's why it's not easy.

Our fundamental challenges in education are no different than in business. They involve fundamental cultural changes, and that will require collective learning. They involve people at multiple levels thinking together about significant and enduring solutions we might create, and then helping those solutions come about.

**What is it about education, compared to businesses or other organizations, that makes it so hard to support the kind of collective learning you're talking about?**

The education enterprise is especially complicated because not only does the organization have different levels, it's very stratified. You've got teachers, principals, off-site administrators, school board members. I'm not convinced many of them see themselves as having a lot of power. One characteristic of an organization that has very low ability to learn is that people at all levels see themselves as disempowered; they don't think that they have leverage to make any difference.

Last but not least, this whole enterprise is embedded within the community. So it's an extraordinarily complex organization and very stratified, very fragmented. And so it really should come as very little surprise that it's almost incapable of innovation.

**You're familiar with some schools that really do exemplify certain traits of learning organizations. What's going on in them?**

In schools where I've seen really significant innovations that have endured, they've usually grown out of people from these multiple constituencies working together. It's been a few committed teachers with some bright ideas, in concert with a principal who has a particular view of her or his job, in concert with a superintendent who is in line with that principal, and in concert with people in the community who are very much part of the innovation process.

**How do principals and other administrators in schools we could call “learning organizations” view their roles?**

The principals I know who have had the greatest impact tend to see their job as creating an environment where teachers can continually learn. Then, in turn, I believe the job of the superintendent is to find principals and support principals who have that attitude.

**Suppose you were chosen to be the principal of a school. What would you do first to make that school more of a learning organization?**

I'd find the teachers who really had some commitment to doing something different. I don't think a principal can “establish an environment” in a vacuum. But a principal can pull together a group of people who really could start to establish an environment. And they have to have some idea of what they are trying to do, and some real commitment
and passion to do it. Now you wouldn't expect to find a lot of people at the start. In any system, you find most people basically trying to cover their asses and preserve the status quo. That's true in all organizations.

So the very first thing I'd do would be to find ways to start to get those who are committed to doing things differently talking to one another. Then the next step is to start to design a process that would be inclusive. You have to start with the people who are ready to start, but your goal is always to create the most inclusive process possible, to involve people at all levels, including the kids, in envisioning where they really want the school to go. That's the cornerstone. But it's also very challenging to start an ongoing visioning process, which is very different from some group of people going off and writing a "vision statement."

You see, the education field has a huge asset. A large percentage of people enter this profession with a high sense of personal purpose. It is converted into a liability, because within a few years they become extraordinarily cynical. They feel thwarted.

That's absolutely right. You know the old saying: scratch the surface of a cynic, and you'll find a frustrated idealist. Nonetheless, this sense of personal purpose is still a huge potential asset, because if you dig down deep enough, you'll find that sense of purpose and deep caring in the most hardened cynic. Education is standing in a gold mine in this respect.

How do you mine it? The process always involves two dimensions. One is creating a reflective environment and a degree of safety where individuals can rediscover what they really care about. And the second dimension is to bring those people together in such a way that their individual visions can start to interact. We communicate our individual visions to one another and eventually start to create a field of shared meaning—where there really is a deep level of trust and mutual understanding—and we gradually begin to build a shared vision. Actually having shared visions exist is so profoundly different from writing a vision statement that it's really night and day. It takes a long time, and it's a process that involves a lot of reflection and a great deal of listening and mutual understanding. It always involves those two dimensions.

**Some people are skeptical of this whole “vision” idea. Those who have been through “visioning” sometimes feel that it's a contrived exercise, a diversion from their real work, and not an especially potent process.**

The problem is that usually it's not a process; it's an event. We all go off and write a vision statement and then go back to work. It's absolutely pointless; it can even be counterproductive because people think, "we've done the vision stuff, and it didn't make any difference." For anybody really serious in this work, you'll spend 20 to 40 percent of your time—forever—continually working on getting people to reflect on and articulate what it is they're really trying to create. It's never ending.

**Many educators are interested in your ideas. Do you work with schools very much?**

Actually, I don't. I spend all my time with the MIT Center for Organizational Learning, which works with corporations. That's just a practical matter of where we feel we must concentrate our efforts at this time.

There are some exciting changes being led by educators, though. There's a growing network of educators around the country interested in systems thinking in education. There is a networking organization called the Creative Learning Exchange in Acton, Massachusetts, which does nothing but keep track of who is doing what in schools all around the country, and they make that information available. There's also an annual conference on systems thinking in education.

**From what you have heard about how schools have tried to work on your theories, are some common themes arising?**

One of the commonalities in our work is a recognition of the deep fragmentation of the educational process, and the belief that too often we fail to capture the imagination and commitment of the learner in the way any real learning process must.

We see an enormous need to integrate systems thinking as a foundation for education for kids. So, many of the changes in curriculum and pedagogy involve bringing the systems perspective into the mainstream of education, because people today must be able to make sense of systems, to learn how to use knowledge in ways that cross disciplinary boundaries. You know, they used to say that school could teach somebody 80 percent of what they need to learn in their lifetime. Today that figure would probably be more like 2 percent. Schools need to focus on thinking
skills and learning skills, because those are what will prepare kids for a world of increasing interdependency and increasing change.

One of the interesting things about our work on systems thinking, mental models, dialogue, and personal mastery is that it has almost as much relevance from a curricular and pedagogical standpoint as it does from a managerial standpoint. So it's a bit different from other efforts to change management practices in schools.

**Education is famous for fads and quick fixes. What do you say to people who want to know how to apply your ideas right away?**

I say forget it. Nothing will change, no matter how fascinated you are by a new idea, unless you create some kind of a learning process. A learning process is a process that occurs over time whereby people's beliefs, ways of seeing the world, and ultimately their skills and capabilities change. It always occurs over time, and it's always connected to your domain of taking action, whether it's about relationships or about your professional work. Learning occurs "at home," so to speak, in the sense that it must be integrated into our lives, and it always takes time and effort.

That's the whole reason for emphasizing this notion of "disciplines." And discipline means commitment, focus, and practice. Most things that really matter in life take discipline and years of practice. But the concept of discipline has really drifted out of our culture. We've come to believe that anything we need that's important, we can go out and buy. This is not true in other cultures. There's a very deep appreciation for discipline and the idea that learning occurs over time. In fact, the very term *learning* in Chinese is made up of two symbols. One translates as "study," to take in new information or new ideas. The second is "practice constantly." You cannot think or say the word "learning" in Chinese without, in effect, thinking and saying "study and practice constantly."

**Still, a lot of people must have wondered what to do with The Fifth Discipline, successful as it was.**

*The Fifth Discipline* was never meant to be a practical book; it was never meant for a large audience. It was actually written for people who were already involved in this work and wanted something serious to deepen their understanding of the underpinnings of what they were doing. It's been a big surprise to see how many have bought *The Fifth Discipline*. I'm sure many of them read it for 20 minutes and say, "Well there's nothing I can do with this," and set it aside.

**The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook seems more accessible for those who want some ideas about how to get started.**

The Fieldbook is a much more appropriate starting point for most people. It is full of short sections that provoke the reader to think about how to manage a visioning process or develop the capacity of a group of people to function as a team. It has more than 50 contributors, most of whom are practicing managers, and it's like a catalog. It's people writing about their stories, sharing their tips, what they learned from practical experiences. I would like to see a version eventually that draws primarily from examples in education. But right now, I don't think there is a big enough community of practitioners to do that.

**That would be helpful. Educators are sometimes skeptical about examples from business. They feel such examples don't necessarily apply to an organization whose “products” are people.**

Well, I think there's some validity in that viewpoint. In some ways, innovation in education really is much more challenging than it is in business, because educators have these multiple constituencies I spoke of earlier. And, yes, the "product" of education *is* human beings who can be happy, continue to learn throughout their lives, and contribute to society.

On the other hand, we feel that our work does apply to education. Many educators are picking up these two books and seeing that this work is not about business. It's about how human beings learn, and about the new ways we will need to think and interact in the 21st century, in a world characterized by increasing interdependence. There is really nothing intrinsic in any of the basic disciplines, for example, that distinguishes business from education. You can make pretty compelling arguments that systems thinking, building a shared vision, dialogue, and learning how to reflect on our mental models are, at some level, educational undertakings more than business undertakings. That's the reason that in fact there has been so much of a crossover, even though *The Fifth Discipline* was not written for an education audience. People seem to have little difficulty translating the principles, tools, and methods, for use in education.
We tend to blame outside circumstances for our problems. "Someone else™ the competitors, the press, the changing mood of the marketplace, the government™ did it to us. Systems thinking shows us that there is no outside; that you and the cause of your problems are part of a single system. The Fifth Discipline, Fieldbook (1994) Dance of Change (1999) Schools that Learn (2000) Presence (2005) Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) Intl Organization for academics, consultants and leaders Innovation Associates. Learning Organizations. Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

1. Alyssa Gracia Peter Senges Learning Organization. 2. The Learning Organization Learning organizations are places where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. 4. Personal Mastery. Connecting personal and organizational learning. 5. Merging personal vision with current reality. 6. Commitments between the individual and the. Senge frames your understanding of the learning organization with an ensemble of disciplines which he believes must converge to form a learning organization. We will briefly describe each of these dimensions so that we share a basic understanding of the components that create a learning organization. Dimensions of a Learning Organization. Our main focus, however, is to suggest some ways in which you can promote a learning organization environment in your organization. These ideas will help you get started; true transformation takes time, commitment, and resources. Systems Thinking.