

Guest Editorial

Introducing this special issue on team learning

This special issue is focused on team learning, the fourth discipline proposed by Senge (1990) in his seminal book on learning organizations, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Our motivation to propose a call for papers on team learning to *The Learning Organization Journal* (TLO) arose out of two interrelated reasons: on the one hand, the recognition that team learning has been growing as a research topic over the years; on the other hand, this growth has driven this stream of literature away from the literature on learning organizations (Rebelo et al., 2020). Hence, one of the objectives of publishing this special issue in TLO is to once again place team learning as a key feature of a learning organization, thus contributing to drawing the attention of organizational learning and learning organizations researchers, as well of practitioners, to the importance of learning at the team level.

In fact, since the publication of Senge's book, team learning has been growing as an autonomous and interdisciplinary research topic with numerous articles centered on learning at this level of analysis. The growth of this research domain is boosted by the fact that teams have increasingly become the building blocks of organizations. Because teams are created with the aim of generating value for the organization, research on the conditions and processes that foster team effectiveness has received increasing attention (Mathieu et al., 2017). Team learning has been one of the elected processes in terms of research on team effectiveness, justified by continuous empirical support of its positive relationship with several criteria of team effectiveness (e.g., Chan et al., 2003; Edmondson, 1999; Kostopoulos and Bozionelos, 2011; Wong, 2004; Zellmer-Bruhn and Gibson, 2006). Nevertheless, learning at the team level is relevant for other processes and outcomes other than team effectiveness. Of no less importance, it is relevant for learning at the organizational level because skills, insights, and achievements accomplished by a team that learns could be propagated to other teams and to the whole organization, setting the tone and establishing a learning standard for the organization (Senge, 1990).

Team learning is "the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire" (Senge, 1990, p. 236) and involves knowledge acquisition (sharing, storage, and retrieval), participation (boundary crossing, team activity and team reflexivity) and creation (co-construction and constructive conflict) processes (Decuyper et al., 2010).

It can be conceptualized as both process and outcome partly because learning involves the activities through which individuals acquire, share, and combine knowledge through interactions. On the other hand, learning occurs in a team when there is a change in its knowledge as a result of such collaborative interactions (Argote et al., 2001; Levine and Argote, 2020). In fact, team learning has been studied as a team process and as a team outcome and research has been carried out in the three leading conceptualizations identified by Edmondson et al. (2007): a) team learning as performance improvement (i.e., as an increase in teams' knowledge); b) team learning as task mastery (i.e., the ability to coordinate team members' knowledge to accomplish tasks); c) and team learning as a process of collectively sharing, discussing, and reflecting on experience.

The team learning literature has led to advancements in the way team learning is conceptualized and in the understanding of its antecedents and consequences (Nellen et al., 2020; Rebelo et al., 2020). However, more research is needed to move towards a more thorough understanding of learning at the team level of analysis. Teams are complex adaptive systems that change according to varying conditions over time (McGrath et al., 2000). Thus, the importance of framing team learning in a dynamical perspective (Rebelo et al., 2020) leads to the call for including change and time in research designs (e.g., Navarro et al., 2015), and this call remains a relevant avenue for research. Whereas team and organizational learning literatures flourished at similar times, with few exceptions they developed independently (Levine and Argote, 2020). This led to a lack of cross-fertilization of these two literature streams, so research on the interplay between individual, team, and organizational learning, and of the role that team learning plays in learning organizations is also needed (Rebelo et al., 2020).

Taken together, the papers that are included in this special issue answer these two calls and shed light on new research questions, enriching the understanding of team learning phenomena. We are pleased to introduce each one in the next section.

This Special Issue

The five studies compounding this special issue offer different conceptual lenses to approach the construct of team learning, apply different methods and research designs, and are centered on different contexts, from sports to organizational teams.

The first paper "Learning across teams in project-oriented organisations: the role of programme management," authored by Bert de Groot, Wim Leendertse, and Jos Arts, focuses on program management in project-oriented organizations and analyses the influence of program configurations on learning across project teams and between project

teams and their respective organization. Based on the definition of a program “as a framework for grouping projects to achieve benefits that would not be realized if they were managed independently”, the authors carried out a case study comprising five programs of a project-oriented organization. This paper brings new and interesting insights into how learning at the group level and at organizational level evolves and can be stimulated in project teams and in project-based organizations, an increasingly common organizational structure in various business fields.

The second paper, entitled “The role of team processes in innovation development to sustain learning organizations”, by Alison Witherspoon, presents a study that “explores the role of employee team learning related to innovation” grounded in mixed methods action research and conducted in the higher education context. Beyond “expanding on the role of team behaviors in effective team learning by considering team processes over time”, this study presents a model (named PROPEL) to enable learning at the group level that sustains a learning organization. In doing so, in addition to its theoretical and methodological value, this paper constitutes an added value to team learning initiatives and training in order to increase learning and innovation in organizations.

The third paper, “Organization multilevel boundary crossing and dialogical learning mechanisms in interdisciplinary research teams”, by Essi Ryymin and Laura Lamberg, presents a case study also carried out in the higher education context. Focusing on a research project that combines expertise and perspectives from various disciplines, the aim of this study was to analyze the dialogical learning mechanisms, how they evolve over time during the research process, as well as at what levels - organizational, interpersonal or intrapersonal - boundary crossing, i.e., “a person’s transitions and interactions across different sites,” occurs. In a world where interdisciplinarity is so required, this study not only contributes to expanding on the relevance of the dialogue to team learning, already emphasized by Senge (1990), but also offers interesting clues for intervening in and facilitating interdisciplinary teamwork.

The fourth paper “Team learning process: a longitudinal study in dynamic situation”, by Thibault Kérivel, Cyril Bossard, and Gilles Kermarrec, was carried out in the context of sport, and focuses “on-field” learning processes. By means of a longitudinal approach and qualitative data, this study aimed to identify learning processes when teams are in action, and how they are mobilized over time. In this way, it aims to provide “additional knowledge to understand how teams learn in action”. In shedding light on how team learning processes are used in action by teams facing uncertain and dynamic situations, such as a soccer team playing “on-field,” this study offers an unexplored perspective of team learning and give clues on how to “manage teams in high temporal pressure situations, as operation teams (e.g., military, flight crew, firefighter)”.

The fifth paper “Learning through time: the role of team reflexivity and virtuality in decision-making teams,” by Pedro Marques-Quinteiro, Sjir Uitdewilligen, Patricia Costa, and Ana Margarida Passos, comprises two longitudinal studies: one is a simulation study and the other has an experimental design. This paper especially targets one relevant team learning practice, team reflexivity, i.e., the collective behavior of reflecting upon the team’s objectives, strategies, and processes. Together, the two studies aim “to test if team reflexivity is a countermeasure to the detrimental effect of team virtuality on team performance improvement”. The findings gave interesting insights into the role of this team learning behavior on decision-making tasks when teams use virtual communication, a feature that is increasingly common in the daily life of teamwork.

Contributions of this special issue to the team learning literature

Each paper in this special issue brings unique and valuable contributions to theory and practice, as well as inspiring clues for further research. Only the reading of each one can capture all those features. This section does not pretend to be a summary of the contributions of each study in this special issue. Instead, it aims at highlighting some of the contributions that the ensemble of these papers, as a whole, offers to literature.

As can be observed in the brief description of each paper provided in the previous section, they are linked by addressing learning at the team level. However, they all have different theoretical framework departures, different foci, and different aims. This diversity, *per se*, is part of the richness of the special issue, as it broadens horizons in terms of multiple forms of looking at and studying the topic.

This diversity is also present in the types of teams and organizational contexts considered in the five studies: project-teams and project-oriented organizations (de Groot et al., 2022); employee teams and interdisciplinary research teams from higher education organizations (Witherspoon, 2022; Ryymin and Lamberg, 2022, respectively); soccer teams (Kérivel et al., 2022); and decision-making teams (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2022). The diversity of this sample shows the relevance of learning across different teams and contexts, and inspires us to further explore the role of team learning in contexts that have been less investigated.

This special issue encompasses case studies (de Groot et al., 2022; Ryymin and Lamberg, 2022); action research (Witherspoon, 2022) and various longitudinal approaches (e.g., qualitative, by Kérivel et al., 2022; simulation and experimental, by Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2022). The variety of methods, designs, data analysis, and collection techniques the

reader can find in this set of research papers is another aspect of the richness of this special issue. They provide rigorous and interesting insights for further studies on learning.

Finally, as previously mentioned, the research papers in this special issue answer two important calls in the literature on team learning, by putting time into the equation on their research designs, and/or by exploring the interplay of learning levels, as well as the relevance of team learning for learning organizations.

Concluding remarks

The journey as guest-editors of this special issue was an enriching challenge with a very gratifying end. Our thanks to the journal's editor-in-chief, Professor Anders Örtenblad, and to the Emerald team for this opportunity and all the support provided. We also want to thank The Learning Organization Journal editorial team for their support, especially the associate editors, Hong Bui and Kyoungshin Kim. Likewise, we want to express our gratitude to the reviewers who collaborated on this special issue, whose voluntary, timely, and remarkable work was crucial. Lastly, but not least, our final words go to the authors. Your valuable studies and contributions, your collaboration and willingness to improve throughout a demanding reviewing process were the cornerstone that made this issue special to team learning research and practice.

We hope that readers will find this issue as interesting and fruitful as we do.

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