

ISSS 476S – Organizations That Learn

Please see the [course web site](#)¹ for additional information

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Overview

[Organizations That Learn](#) (OTL) will probably be very different from any other course you've taken. Our topic is organizations that learn. Everything else is up for grabs.

What we explore, how we explore it, the guidelines that inform the exploration, the participants involved, the structure and organization of the investigation, what constitutes success, etc. will all be collaboratively defined. As part of this process we'll try to surface and call into question as many "common sense" assumptions as possible about what organizations in general, and a class in particular, ought to be. If we make a conscious decision to discard an assumption (e.g., if we decide to eliminate the standard instructor-student distinction) we will treat this as another hypothesis to test and examine the consequences. After a preliminary planning phase in which we collectively explore the sort of organization we want the class to be, we'll work together to actually create an organization based upon these ideas. As we do we'll continually evaluate what's working and what's not, making improvements as along the way.

Our Goals

We have two very different sorts of goals for the experiment that is Organizations that Learn:

- First, we hope to collectively investigate what it means for an organization to learn, be it a business, class, family, society, or any other group in which members share a purpose.
- Second, we will collaboratively try to create an environment that fosters learning and that sustains and magnifies our natural desire to learn. In other words, we want to create as well as explore an organization that learns.

Our idea is to use the class itself as a laboratory in which to reflexively explore the topic of learning organizations. In attempting to build "the perfect learning environment" we will inevitably run into roadblocks. By evaluating both the barriers and our responses to

¹ www.orgsthatlearn.org

them, we can generate our own answers to a broad range of interesting and important questions about organization learning such as, e.g., what skills learning, why learning is so important, and whether it possible to create a learning environment that collaboratively sustains and builds on the natural energy and intellectual curiosity of the participants.

Who Should Take This Course?

There are no formal prerequisites for this course. Anyone with an interest in learning, education, organizations (business or otherwise), systems thinking, creativity, the dynamics of a classroom, the degree to which our own thinking defines the world we encounter, etc. is in a position to take the course. In terms of course content each of us has been preparing for this course for our whole life.

The structure of the course raises a different set of issues. OTL will be highly collaborative. Everything is up for grabs. This course will be experimental and unconventional. We plan to investigate the question “how do organizations learn” in a way that will put a heavy burden on each participant to take full responsibility for his/her own learning and for the learning of the entire group. We have many ideas about the topics and issues we think are relevant to the issue at hand, but we are deliberately not going to impose these on the class. The class will be starting with virtually a blank slate and will work together to craft a "syllabus" and a learning plan. Each participant will be invited to contribute to the reading list and to be both learner and teacher throughout the semester. We think it highly likely that you will be asked to give and get a great deal of peer feedback throughout the semester.

OTL offers a container for exploring, proposing and testing hypotheses about organizational learning. Only students willing to take advantage of the challenge and ambiguity that comes with this flexibility should take the course. The bottom line is that if you are looking for a conventional course with standard expectations of you, this is definitely not the course for you. If you are intrigued by the unconventional, if you are prepared to deal with considerable ambiguity, and if you are ready to take full responsibility for your part in an undertaking that promises to be very rewarding and a lot of fun, then we look forward to learning with you.

Preliminary Readings & Reflections

We have pulled together a short list of a few preliminary readings that provide an overview of the general topic and present some of the issues that we might want to explore in more depth during the semester. We suggest you review these for the first class. In early January we will also post some questions to help you reflect on on your past learning and organizational experiences. These reflections will be woven into the discussion in our first session. If you have any questions or would like to add anything to the list feel free to contact us.

About The [Course Web Site](http://www.orgsthatlearn.org)

The course web site – www.orgsthatlearn.org - is a work in progress. Its structure, content and focus will change as the course develops. As with the syllabus, reading list, and course deliverables, site development will be a collaborative learning experience.

Instructor Notes

While the final form of the course will be determined together we've been thinking about approaches and issues for quite a while. To help you better understand our goals for the seminar the information below and on the web site introduces you to our ongoing conversation about the course. They are intended to provide some insight into the development of our thinking about organizations that learn but ...

Two caveats. They are work in progress. They represent our own musings about the course (i.e., they are not written with students specifically in mind).

Preliminary Readings

The following articles provide a good introduction to some of the material that we may choose to explore. We suggest you review them prior to the first class. All of these readings can be found in the Materials section of the OTL Toolkit.

- Dee Hock, *Birth of the Chaordic Age*, "Prologue: On the Nature and Creation of Chaordic Organizations"
- Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, chapters 1 and 2
- Chris Argyris, *Harvard Business Review*, "Teaching Smart People to Learn"

Preliminary Reflections

For the first session we'd like you to reflect on your own past learning experiences both as an individual and as the member of some group or organization of your choice. We'd also like you to consider where you might want to take your own learning in the future. The "Preliminary Reflections" questions will help you focus your thoughts. They will be posted in the Materials & Assignments sections of the OTL Toolkit in early January.

Recommended Texts

We'll solicit suggestions for texts and readings from each participant in the seminar. Your suggestions should be personally meaningful and have some intuitive (although not necessarily identifiable) connection to the general topic of the course. Instructors' suggestions include

- Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organizations*
- Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*
- Robert Quinn, *Beyond Rational Management*

- Peter Senge, *Presence*

... to be continued. The above are available from Amazon (see the [Amazon OTL List](#)) and the UVA Bookstore.

Assumptions

A few of our current guiding principles for the course. This list is a work in progress.

- Less is more (when it comes to instructor input and direction)
- Publish all assumptions - planning and shaping of the course should be transparent
- Chaos is to learning what spices are to cooking
- Feedback is required for learning
- Wholes different from their their parts
- A successful class is itself an organization that learns

Topics

A few possible topics that we may choose to explore in depth:

- Mental models
- Single/double loop learning
- Thinking in systems
- Fields
- Organizational metaphors
- Chas, order & control
- Leading organizations
- Hierarchy and accountability
- Communication
- Communities of practice
- Feedback
- Tension and polarities in organizations
- Resistance and learning
- Organizations as hypotheses

Additional Information

For additional information take a look at the website www.orgsthatlearn.org or feel free to contact the instructors: Glenn Kessler (gkessler@virginia.edu) or John Corlett (jgc2d@virginia.edu)