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Chapter Five

Learning and Health: Discourses of Reinvention

In this chapter, we explore some of the ways in which issues of health and well-being have become entwined with both individual and organizational learning. Specifically, we:

- Interrogate the assumption that learning is automatically or necessarily good for us.
- Introduce the metaphor of organization-as-brain, highlighting how many of the most desirable characteristics of organization (intelligence, inventiveness, connectivity, flexibility, etc) take the brain and its capacity to learn as their implicit blueprint.
- Suggest that a prioritisation of organizational learning constructs the 'perfect employee' as someone committed to ongoing self-development and self-reinvention.
- Explore interrelations between learning and well-being, suggesting both that learning enhances well-being (learning enough to be well) and that well-being enhances learning (being well enough to learn).
- Reflect on how an emphasis on learning casts the individual as agent of his or her own employability, and hence responsible for the health benefits that continuous employment produces.
- Consider the emotional costs of discourses of learning and reinvention, such as feelings of guilt, shame and a sense that one is never quite good enough.
- Reflect on how individualised responsibility for both learning and well-being casts popular organizational tools, such as personal development plans (PDPs), in a different light.

The organization-as-brain and the significance of organizational learning

Organizations can be likened to brains in terms of their capacity to receive, process, retain and generate knowledge and information. The human brain is capable of responding incredibly quickly and creatively to an ever-changing set of stimuli and demands, and of generating entirely new repertoires of thought and behaviour as it adapts (Garud and Kotha, 1994). It is not hard to see why the qualities of the well-functioning brain should have been so enthusiastically transposed onto the well-functioning organization; both are marked by intelligence, flexibility, speed, connectivity, resilience, self-organization and the capacity for

invention and reinvention. Popular management expressions such as 'corporate consciousness' (Campion and Palmer, 1996), the 'corporate mind' (Hampden-Turner, 1990), 'corporate imagination' (Hamel and Prahalad, 1991), and 'organizational intelligence' (Liebowitz, 1999) suggest the power of this metaphor to shape and reflect our understanding of the well-functioning organization.

The brain provides a powerful blueprint for capabilities which both include and exceed the logical and computational, such as judgment and intuition (Claxton et al., 2015; Sadler-Smith, 2016). For instance, it inspires work on the integration of creative 'right brain' capabilities with more rational, analytical 'left brain' proficiencies (Ford and Gioia, 2000; Leonard and Straus, 1997; Mintzberg, 1976). The notion that both organizations and individuals have two different qualities of brainpower, based on the biology of two brain hemispheres, has a strong intuitive resonance. We frequently find arguments in popular management literature that the key to success lies in 'putting the whole organization's brain to work', that is, in finding ways to take advantage of both analytical and intuitive capabilities. For instance, Herrmann and Herrmann-Nehdi (2015, p.9) suggest that "certain modes of thinking will increasingly dominate an organization as it matures unless the leadership applies Whole Brain Thinking to consciously cultivate and encourage the breadth of thinking that is necessary for ongoing success."

The most significant aspect of the brain metaphor is that it emphasises the importance of *learning*. The brain's plasticity, that is, its ability to reorganize itself by forming new pathways between neurons, provides an ideal template for the notion that both organizations and employees can form new connections between ideas, opportunities and practices - in short, that functioning well involves and requires reinvention. Indeed, the language of plasticity is now being applied explicitly to organizational types that are able to adjust, change and innovate rapidly and seemingly spontaneously (Alqithami and Hexmoor, 2014; Levinthal and Marino, 2015).

In a sense, this emphasis on plasticity and reinvention is a development of the organization-as-organism discourse (chapter two), in that it focuses on the need to change and adapt rather than sticking to the rigid blueprint of the organization-as-industrial machine (chapter one). The key distinction between the organism and the brain metaphors is that, whereas the organismic approach emphasises the need to adjust in response to changes in the environment, the brain metaphor depicts a more internally-generated, spontaneous, self-organizing dynamic. The organism 'learns' reactively, that is, in the face of specific requirements and stimuli; whereas the brain 'learns' proactively, in that learning is what it is designed to do and keep doing. As Senge (2006) explains, the contemporary learning organization must do more than just adapt

and survive; it must also generate new ideas, new connections, and new ways of working. In other words, innovation and continuous self-renewal are the very hallmarks of the organization-as-brain.

Much of the work in this area has focused on the constructs of 'organizational learning' (Argyris, 1992; Argyris and Schön, 1978) and 'the learning organization' (Burgoyne et al., 1994; Senge, 2006). Although there has been much debate about the relationship between these two terms, the most common way to differentiate between them is by saying that the former refers to certain types of activity that take place within an organization, whereas the latter is a particular entity or type of organization in and of itself (Tsang, 1997). The former is more likely to be the focus of academic work in this space, and hence more exploratory and/or critical, whereas the latter is more likely to be appealing to practitioners, and hence possibly more performative (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011). Both organizational learning and the learning organization have considerable currency in organizational conversations, and their popularity has resulted in the emergence of a 'learning perspective' as one of the dominant paradigms in contemporary organizational research and practice (Bapuji and Crossan, 2004). As the vignette below (box 5.1) suggests, such dominance is reflected in the ease with which learning and continuous self-renewal have come to be seen as priorities for both organizations and the people within them.

Box 5.1

Case Study:

Excerpt from an Interview with a Senior Partner at *AnOther Consulting*

So, you asked me what I think is the key to business success. In the past, I might have said something different. But right now, I am going to say 'learning'. But not learning in the sense of collecting impressive-sounding qualifications. More learning in terms of being passionate about rising to the challenge of working in this globalised, tech-enabled world, where overnight, things change and demand us to change with them. I think many people in business feel they're going to be left behind if they don't invest in serious self-renewal to make sure their skills are fresh. You know, that awful feeling of embarrassment when the new crop of graduates come in, and they talk about things and you have no idea what they are talking about?! Well, avoiding that feeling is high up my own list of priorities! And you know, it's interesting, isn't it, that Zuckerberg – well, perhaps not him, because he is having quite a hard time of it right now, but let's say a range of the

major tech entrepreneurs – they don't have degrees, they don't have MBAs from swanky business schools. What they have is a different kind of learning. Learning is in their DNA... kind of. You know, they seem hard wired to kind of mould themselves into who their businesses need them to be. They are serious learners!

Through the prism of the brain metaphor, therefore, the individual employee is constructed and evaluated in terms of his or her willingness and ability to learn. The qualities we associate with the human brain at its best, namely, intelligence, flexibility, inventiveness, self-organization and proactive networking, are core attributes of the 'perfect employee', and these are marshalled and put to work through programmes, cultures and attitudes of learning. This commitment to learning is more than just the specific response to a particular 'training need' at a single point in time. Instead, employees - indeed, all members of society - are increasingly expected to engage in 'life-long learning', where both personal and professional development are a continuous focus over one's entire adult life, including past the point of formal retirement (Berglund, 2008; Mantie, 2012; Nicoll and Fejes, 2008), occupying a powerful presence in discourses of 'healthy ageing' (Stephens and Breheny, 2018). As the *AnOther Consulting* partner in the previous vignette illustrates, the 'learning perspective' implies that what organizations and institutions value most is people invested in serious self-renewal and self-reinvention.

Connections between learning and well-being

In much of the rhetoric on contemporary organizations, anything containing 'learning' as suffix or prefix is now automatically assumed to be a positive thing. In many of the organizations we have encountered, corporate materials promote a 'learning culture' as a space of opportunity, experimentation and discovery; corporate conversations encourage the development and demonstration of a 'learning mindset' as the route to personal success and collective innovation; and line managers and human resources professionals use artefacts such as 'learning contracts' and 'personal development plans' to structure (and soften) performance management conversations - a topic to which we return later in the chapter.

In the literature, too, learning is almost inevitably cast in positive, uplifting terms. For Senge (2006), the learning organization inspires people to find meaning, self-fulfilment and happiness in one's work. Indeed, Kofman and Senge (1993) crystallise the differences between bureaucratic and learning organizations by suggesting that the latter are a place of wonder and joy. From a more critical perspective, Contu et al. (2003, p.933) suggest that "learning discourse seems to have become constituted as truth: it is unproblematically assumed that

learning, like vitamins and stopping smoking, is a *good thing*". As this quote suggests, learning has been put into the basket of things assumed to be inherently and unequivocally good for one's health.

Learning enhances well-being

Because learning is generally held to be 'a good thing', it is hardly surprising that arguments have been made for a positive connection between learning and well-being. This is especially prevalent in the literature on 'life-long learning' where an ongoing commitment to learning, especially amongst older citizens, has been associated with enhanced well-being (Jenkins and Mostafa, 2015; Merriam and Kee, 2014). This is a topic of increasing interest to social policy makers, since an ageing population means that people are living much longer post retirement than in previous generations - a matter which is considered in some depth in chapter four on the connections between health and age, and elsewhere in this series in the context of discourses of 'healthy ageing' (Stephens and Breheny, 2018).

In the literature on adult learning, positive correlations have been traced between learning and well-being both in a direct sense (e.g., learning increases people's positive feelings about themselves and their lives, and their uptake of positive health behaviours, such as better diets and regular exercise) and in a more indirect sense (e.g., learning increases the likelihood of good earnings, and hence facilitates a more comfortable and healthy lifestyle) (Field, 2009). Jenkins and Mostafa (2015) report that good health amongst older citizens is strongly related to participation in social learning activities, such as art classes and book clubs, suggesting that there is something significant about the health benefits of the relational and interpersonal aspects of the learning experience, as much as the content of the learning *per se*.

Within the domain of organization, the effects of learning on well-being are of considerable interest in the context of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) - a particular manifestation of life-long learning in organizational contexts. CPD is something of an umbrella concept, which connects a range of ideas and practices, including professional education, personal development and career advancement (Kennedy, 2014). Increasingly, CPD has become part of the regulatory fabric of organizational life, having "turned from acts engaged in by professionals for their own satisfaction to a systematized and codified set of activities that has consequences for their continued registration, and in many cases, their right to practice their profession" (Boud and Hager, 2012, p.17). The commitment to ongoing CPD has profound implications for the politics of identity construction (Mackay, 2017; Mulvey, 2013) for, whilst participating in CPD may be a regulatory requirement, individual enthusiasm for the

ethos of CPD as an opportunity for growth, self-improvement and self-reconstruction is also a personal choice. The successful employee sees dedication to learning and regular skills-refresh as one of the keys to that success; and by implication, one of the keys to well-being.

The connections between CPD and well-being are of interest to researchers working across a range of sectors. In the health sector, for instance, Hugill et al. (2018) trace positive health benefits of CPD, defined as enjoyment of improved supervisor-supervisee relationships, enhanced levels of motivation, and more effective provision and use of constructive feedback. In the education sector, Lofthouse and Thomas (2017) emphasise the significance of participation in the design of CPD, suggesting that well-being unfolds in collaborative partnerships designed to support individual learning plans and highlighting the health benefits of learning relationships. Mulvey (2013) suggests that CPD amongst professionals might have a positive impact on well-being in a more existential sense, namely, as a way of helping professionals move past periods of mid-career crisis and self-doubt. In short, there is strong support for the notion that learning has a beneficial effect on how people feel about themselves, their careers, the value of their contribution, and the quality of their relationships with others.

Well-being enhances learning

There is another way in which the relationship between learning and well-being might be seen as a positive thing for organizational functioning, which involves a reversal of the direction of influence. As well as arguments that learning enhances well-being, it is possible that well-being might enhance learning, that is, that both individual and organizational learning can only take place if people are well - in the sense of feeling confident, safe and secure at work. This argument emerges in the literature on barriers to organizational learning, and the question of why both organizations and employees often fail to learn. With organizations investing increasingly heavily in programmes and technologies of knowledge management, the question of why so many of these initiatives fail to deliver - and of why the same organizational mistakes seem to be made over and over again - is of growing concern, especially since failure seems to be the most likely outcome even when such initiatives are reasonably well resourced and sponsored by organizational leaders (Storey and Barnett, 2000; Syed, 2015).

The complexities of the relationships between learning and well-being are of great interest to scholars of emotion in organizations, especially those writing from a psychoanalytic perspective. Writers in this space emphasise that the psychology of learning is one of emotional upheaval, disturbance and disruption, in which anxiety both promotes and

discourages learning (Vince and Martin, 1993). Anxiety can promote learning when people are motivated to work through and resolve the discomfort that feelings of uncertainty and not-knowing evoke. It can discourage learning, on the other hand, when such feelings of uncertainty and not-knowing threaten to become overwhelming. When this happens, people instinctively resort to defensiveness, because it is easier to deny than to confront the feelings of discomfort of not knowing or not understanding something. If employees are unable to contain their feelings of uncertainty or unsafety, they are more likely to resist learning, whether actively in 'fight' or more passively in 'flight'. The excessively or persistently insecure employee is thus not emotionally 'well enough to learn', for when we buttress ourselves against anxiety through defences, denials and avoidances, we engage in what Vince and Martin (1993, p.210) call "willing ignorance".

In many organizational experiences, there is an important connection between barriers to learning and the threat and avoidance of blame. The notion of the 'blame culture' is something one hears frequently in people's descriptions of their working lives, and in particular, their fear of the consequences of making and admitting to mistakes (Edmondson, 2011; Resodihardjo et al., 2016; Weaver, 1986). The fear of being blamed for things going wrong can mean that employees behave with greater caution and conservatism in the interests of self-protection. This is likely to have an adverse effect on learning, because both the fear and the reality of blame undermine the ability and willingness of leaders and employees to engage in processes of critical reflection and dialogue, through which constructive, open and hence 'healthy' communication about the *systemic* causes of mistakes and failures might lead to genuine organizational improvement (Vince and Saleem, 2004). With a 'blame culture', therefore, it is the organization, not just the individual, which is not 'well enough to learn'.

Towards a 'healthier' kind of learning

In the psychoanalytical literature on organization, a picture emerges of a potentially more productive relationship between well-being and learning, with both concepts co-constructed in terms of emotional resilience. Here, well-being is not associated with the 'management' i.e., suppression or avoidance, of difficult emotions in order to try to be happy or calm all the time. Instead, well-being unfolds in the experience of learning how to acknowledge and contain such difficult emotions. It means accepting that it is unrealistic to want to be happy or calm all the time, just as it is unrealistic to think that one will always know what to do in organizational practice, or that a lesson, once learned, will never need to be learned again. This kind of emotional learning involves adjusting to the pressures, imperfections and inevitable failures of organizational life, rather than learning as the acquisition of knowledge via planned

development programmes, which focus on explicit content designed overtly to support organizational objectives.

The distinction between different kinds, or qualities, of learning is interesting for an analysis of both organization and health through the lens of metaphor. The 'common sense' idea that learning involves the acquisition and transfer of knowledge gives learning a concrete tangibility, as if it is a thing that can be possessed. This is entirely consistent with the overall metaphor of organization-as-brain, whereby knowledge and learning are construed as being located and contained in the head (Boud and Hager, 2012; Hager and Hodkinson, 2009). Challenging the tangibility of learning allows us to shift its dynamics, taking it out of the metaphorical head, and into a broader range of experiences and practices, where it can emerge in dialogue, feelings and bodily sensations, often theorised in terms of 'experiential learning' (Kolb, 2014; Strati, 2007; Tomkins and Ulus, 2016).

Learning to live with the experiences of failure and disappointment is no mean feat, however. Much of the rhetoric of organizational life hinges on what Vince (2002a, p.1192) calls the "politics of imagined stability", which promotes a vision of control and coherence in which rationality, rather than emotion, is assumed to be the key organizing principle. Believing in such a vision protects employees from the potential destructiveness that acknowledging things like failure, weakness, mediocrity, and disappointment might unleash; but, from a psychoanalytic perspective, this vision is fantasy, not reality (Gabriel, 1999; Vince and Saleem, 2004). A healthy attitude to organization requires resilience, therefore, to acknowledge both fantasy and reality and try to distinguish between them.

This kind of emotional resilience is not the same as 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman et al., 2013), a concept which has both supporters and critics in roughly equal measure (and which we sometimes use in our consultancy conversations, notwithstanding some conceptual discomfort, simply because it resonates with practitioners and can be used to establish a degree of common ground). Writing from a critical perspective, Fineman (2004), for instance, suggests that the construct of 'emotional intelligence' represents an attempt to *tame* emotion in the interests of the corporate bottom-line, distinguishing between 'high' emotions which are desirable and worthy and 'low' emotions which are inimical to healthy organizational functioning. As Gabriel and Griffiths (2002) suggest, 'high' emotions which might help the organization include hope, excitement and pride, whereas 'low' emotions which are considered unhelpful include anger, disgust and envy. Thus, "emotional intelligence enthusiasts, while claiming to liberate emotion, seek to subordinate it to reason and in particular the instrumental reason of business and organizations" (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002,

p.216). Encouraging employees and leaders, in particular, to work on improving their 'emotional intelligence' invokes the metaphor of the brain through the concept of intelligence, but it might be argued to be an instrument of organizational compliance rather than emotional resilience or genuine well-being.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, learning to engage with the more difficult, and perhaps less attractive, emotions is an important aspect of both individual and organizational well-being. Clancy et al. (2012) argue that the experience of disappointment, in particular, is a vital source of learning. Rather than the traditional view of disappointment as a negative, i.e., 'unhealthy', emotion that needs to be repressed and controlled to prevent it harming both individual and collective morale, they argue that disappointment reflects a mature, more balanced, and hence healthier, view of organizational realities. Disappointment is thus a crucial component in the experience of moving past primal, over-simplified splitting between good and bad - a core feature of the narcissistic organization with its heroes and villains (Schwartz, 1992). As Clancy et al. (2012, p.528) suggest:

“One reason why the expression 'blame culture' is such a widespread description of organizational experience is not only to do with an impulse to protect oneself (or the members of a group) by projecting failure onto others. It is also about the inability to integrate failure within the organization”.

Engaging with disappointment - both individually and collectively - might help organizations to soften the dynamics of blame and anxiety and their often negative, defensive effects on both learning and well-being. Learning to tolerate and survive disappointment may, therefore, be part of what is needed to create healthier, more productive and more resilient organizational cultures.

Of course, the notion of resilience conjures up the politics as well as the emotions of organizational life. To navigate the politics of organization, successful employees assess which aspects of learning will serve their interests best, including deciding when to make their learning overt, e.g., by sharing their 'lessons learned' and examples of 'best practice' with others, and when to maintain a lower profile. Thus, not all learning is necessarily productive or conducive to organizational improvement, for “learning to cover your back is important learning” (Vince and Saleem, 2004, p.137), especially when things are not going to plan and there is a danger (real or imagined) of censure and scapegoating. As the following vignette suggests (box 5.2), the successful employee therefore calculates when to construct

him/herself as a 'learner', and when to draw on alternative discursive repertoires, such as 'expert'.

Box 5.2

Case Study:

Excerpt from a Research Interview on Organizational Learning with an Employee at *Department X*

Well, every few years or so, this place gets very into the idea of organizational learning. And the consultants come in, and you academics come in, and we are all supposed to, kind of, develop the 'learning mindset'. And we are all supposed to become, what do they call it, 'knowledge-brokers'. And we are all meant to share examples of best practice, and post, you know, on the intranet, the things that have happened, and gone well, and also what hasn't perhaps gone quite so well [laughs], and what we can all learn from all this stuff, so that we don't have to re-invent the wheel all the time, bla, bla. But it isn't quite as simple as that, because, you know, who's to say that what I think is best practice, another department isn't going to pick on and say that's a matter for disciplinary, you know! What happens if the learning that I am supposed to have got out of it isn't the right kind of thing, and gets me into trouble! And you know, this culture of innovation that we are meant to be encouraging, I don't know. It doesn't feel very innovative. In my own mind, I now have two tests whenever I consider sharing something on the intranet, you know, the knowledge portal thing. One: is it a good idea that others might benefit from? Two: is it safe to admit to it, or am I going to get into trouble? If it doesn't pass both those tests, then frankly, I'm going to stay quiet.

Furthermore, cues for learning can sometimes encourage people to learn and reinforce unhelpful and/or unhealthy practices. For instance, superstitious learning may occur when the subjective experience of learning is compelling but misleading, i.e., the connections between actions and outcomes, or cause and effect, are fragile, random or simply inaccurate (Levitt and March, 1988), such as subjectively associating breakthrough on a task with allowing oneself a cigarette break. Superstitious learning may happen when routines are considered 'best practice' not because they are demonstrably 'best', but because they have become associated with success or with the avoidance of failure and the reduction of risk. With superstitious learning, both people and organizations become committed to a particular set of routines, but these arise relatively arbitrarily, rather than as the product of systematic, evidence-based learning (Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984).

Such complexities notwithstanding, if the arguments for at least a degree of positive co-constitution between learning and well-being are valid, then encouraging employees' receptiveness to learning, as well as giving them time and space for learning, ought surely to be the target of organizational well-being initiatives. From this perspective, the more secure employees are - both emotionally *and* politically - the more able and willing they will be to overcome their defensiveness and access the benefits that learning is said to provide. Employee well-being is thus not just an appealing objective in its own right, it is a prerequisite for the successful learning organization, with its competitively advantageous ethos of innovation, flexibility, self-reinvention and sustainability (Senge, 2006).

Critical reflections on learning and well-being

Emerging from the discussion above is a sense that the nature of the relationship between learning and well-being depends to a great extent on how we define well-being. In the section on learning enhancing well-being (learning enough to be well), it mostly meant feelings of self-fulfilment, growth and purpose, whereas in the following section on well-being enhancing learning (being well enough to learn), its meanings revolved around the overcoming of anxiety, defensiveness and the fear of blame. This discussion highlights, therefore, that well-being is a very broad concept, involving feelings, experiences, commitments, levels of institutional performance and participation, and quality of relationships with others, *inter alia* (Grant et al., 2007). Such breadth of meaning serves a purpose, of course. The literature on life-long learning, in particular, often blurs the distinction between individual well-being and what Merriam and Kee (2014) call 'community well-being'. In other words, the efforts an individual makes with training and other forms of self-reinvention are associated at least as much with not being a burden to others as they are with feeling good about oneself (Brookfield, 2012).

Such issues take us into the territory of the politics of learning. Thus, critical scholars challenge the ways in which learning has become so established as an unimpeachably 'good thing', whether in the corporate context of the 'learning organization' (Senge, 2006) or more broadly in constructs of the 'learning society' (Hughes and Tight, 1995) and the 'learning economy' (Lundvall and Johnson, 1994). Within the context of neo-liberalism, learning is constructed as a key ingredient for success in modern society, which requires individual and collective flexibility to respond to the challenges of our knowledge-driven 'age of information'. A sustained commitment to learning (often framed as up-skilling, re-skilling or skills-refreshing) is seen as a necessary response to the social and economic pressures of an increasingly globalised world. As Berglund (2008, p.138) suggests, "lifelong learning seems to be regarded

as something of a miracle cure to whatever disease society might suffer, a kind of educational Viagra to create potent citizens for the so-called learning society". In other words, the learning society is the healthy society.

The implications of such intertwining of learning and health are profound. Critical management scholars problematize the ways in which employees within 'learning organizations' and 'learning societies' are socialised into highly individualist subject positions, responsible for mobilising and motivating their own learning in the face of whatever organizational and societal demands are thrown at them. As Contu et al. (2003, p.945) suggest:

"Learning discourse offers points of identifications for subjects of/at work to understand themselves as 'learners', as responsible agents of their own employability. The fulcrum of learning discourse is the transformation of subjects. In this sense, the accent of learning discourse is relentlessly individualistic and individualising."

As agents of their own employability, charged with relentless learning in order to realise the benefits of material and psychological security, employees are thus also the agents of their own well-being: "Healthy individuals subject themselves to the logic of the learning society and become active and capable lifelong learners" (Berglund, 2008, p.142).

Discourses of learning represent and reproduce an interesting juxtaposition of ideologies. They may serve the political and economic interests of neo-liberal self-responsibility and self-reinvention, but they do so by invoking the ideas and language of humanism. Much of the literature on the 'learning organization' is grounded in a deeply humanistic tradition, which is committed to emancipating and supporting human beings to realise their true and full potential. The emotive appeal of the learning discourse thereby hinges on the notion that the learner identity is *empowering* for those human beings who absorb it into their sense of self. Thus, cultures of learning are often associated (both explicitly in corporate rhetoric and implicitly in our 'common-sense' understandings) with notions of employee 'engagement' and 'empowerment'. These are amongst the most attractive messages in the contemporary corporate lexicon.

However, through the prism of Foucauldian analysis, this construction of the empowered, self-challenging, self-improving individual merely exchanges one form of power for another (Lupton, 2018; Siebert and Walsh, 2013). Rather than being disciplined by external force, the neo-liberal learner-subject engages in self-discipline to fashion him/herself into the right kind

of worker and the right kind of member of society. The notion of plasticity, which we previously applied to the human brain with its power of self-regeneration, now applies to the whole human being, who must mould him/herself into the type of person required by institution. As Nicoll and Fejes (2008, p.6) put it:

“The autonomous, self-reflective life does not overcome power relations. Instead, it is a particular kind of historical ‘figure of thought’ of self-government through which we become traversed by power relations *even as we believe ourselves to be free.*” [our emphasis]

We may ‘buy in’ to the rhetoric of learning as empowering, but from a Foucauldian perspective, seeing ourselves as life-long learners keeps us on a treadmill of endless self-enhancement and reinvention, serving interests which may not truly align with our own. Plasticity is thus self-constitution and self-discipline within relations of power.

Learning discourse produces and rewards committed learners, and pathologizes those who fail to live up to the rhythm and expectations of life-long self-improvement and its various operationalisations in continuous professional development / CPD. For instance, Berglund (2008) highlights the rituals that those who find themselves unemployed have to undergo, suggesting that enrolment at the job centre, and the requirement to provide proof of attendance at re-training and re-skilling programmes, can be seen as a powerful societal punishment. As she explains (Berglund, 2008, p.146):

“The unemployed has to show him- or herself to be a sinner and penitent to authority. Following such rituals the unemployed person will be ‘forgiven’ and restored to a healthy and desired condition through verbal confession, and by showing willingness to become a lifelong learner.”

The cost of this neo-liberal self-discipline for the individual human being is guilt and self-blame. The responsibility for one’s own employability, self-improvement and hence well-being is not always easy to bear; and a relentless focus on learning can reinforce a sense that one is never quite good enough. Just as the contemporary emphasis on the care of the self (chapter three) can lead to feelings of inadequacy in relation to lifestyle, so the construction of the self as life- and career-long learner can lead to similar feelings of inadequacy in relation to professional competence, security and employability. The employee-as-learner absorbs responsibility for failures, and if one’s health suffers, this is because one is not sufficiently committed to, or skilled in, self-reflection and self-improvement (Vince and Saleem, 2004). This is why many

critical scholars argue against popular constructions such as the ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schön, 2017), which places responsibility for learning and hence well-being firmly with the individual, irrespective of the organizational conditions in which he or she operates. Instead, critical theorists such as Reynolds (2017) and Vince (2002b) shift the terminology of this debate away from the notion of the ‘reflective practitioner’ towards the more collective notion of ‘organizing reflection’. The well-being that learning might inspire thereby becomes a collective endeavour, rather than a stick with which the neo-liberal learner-subject can beat him or herself up.

As suggested in the following vignette (box 5.3), arguments from this critical perspective cast an interesting light on organizational artefacts such as individual ‘personal development plans’ (PDPs). These tools have become part of what we take for granted in our understandings of performance management and evaluation at work; and we probably do not often stop to think about the politics of their construction.

Box 5.3

Case Study:

A Personal Development Plan (PDP) at *AnOther Consulting*

The *AnOther Consulting* core values are: Partnership, Innovation and Diversity

Section A: Achievements and Successes

Please refer to the core values to list your main achievements this year against each of these three criteria. Try to provide concrete illustrations for each core value.

Section B: Areas for Development

Please refer to the three core values to list your main developmental needs, and what you plan to do to address each of them over the coming year.

This mock-up probably feels very familiar. Most of the PDPs (and associated artefacts, such as 'learning contracts') that we have encountered are structured in a similar way to this. Adopting a critical lens prompts us to reflect on the interesting effects of the learning discourse on such performance management procedures, e.g., the fact that achievements and successes are not contrasted with weaknesses or mistakes, but rather, with development needs. The seemingly quite benign message is that one does not have to be *flawless* to have a successful career in this organization, but one does have to be willing to commit to *learning* (see chapter four for a similar point about the significance of 'making an effort'). Confessing to, and taking ownership of, one's development needs is thus a kind of organizational ritual through which the individual employee reaches for learning as a form of contrition or penitence (Berglund, 2008). Constructing oneself as a learner is more positively sanctioned than constructing oneself as a failure. It points to the possibility of future action, rather than dwelling on the mistakes of the past, thus reinforcing that overall sense that learning is, indeed, a very 'good thing'.

As we have highlighted, the yoking of learning and well-being involves a curious mix of ideologies, playing to humanist notions of agency *qua* search for meaning as well as neo-liberal interests of agency *qua* flexibility and innovation in the face of the challenges of market forces and globalisation. However, such yoking is not always successful in the sense of furthering organizational or political aims and objectives, and sometimes its effects can be paradoxical. Advocates of organizational learning emphasise the benefits to organizations of a positive association between learning and well-being (both in the sense that learning enhances well-being, i.e., learn enough to be well, and in the reverse sense that well-being enhances learning, i.e., be well enough to learn). In our experience, however, the relationship is often more complex than this.

Promoting a commitment to learning and reinvention is a powerful organizational strategy if the results of such a commitment are organizationally advantageous, such as encouraging an

employee to put more effort into her/his communication skills, or become more skilled at managing relationships, or develop more of a mindset for organizational innovation, etc. But what happens if the results are less organizationally advantageous? As Contu et al. (2003, p.942) suggest, promoting a love for learning might not automatically create a more flexible, employable workforce, for “enquiring minds might be led to question the assumptions about economic growth, competition and the economic primacy of the West which permeate these policy promotions”. The outcome of learning might, therefore, be a *disengagement* from organization and/or institution, rather than any deepening of commitment to organizational objectives or to any project of self-improvement geared principally towards employability.

Final thoughts on learning and health: Shifting the base metaphor

Discourses of learning and reinvention are amongst the most appealing of contemporary organizational concepts, and therefore very easily associated with notions of the good and the well. They create a sense of optimism, because they convey a message that success is something to be worked on, requiring commitment, effort and energy rather than privilege, personality or luck (a variant of the argument that leaders are made, not born). Competitive advantage and cultures of high performance can be learned into existence at an organizational level; and enhanced career prospects, and material and psychological well-being can be learned into existence at an individual employee level. As Senge (2006, p.4) proposes, the great appeal of the learning organization is that “the team that became great didn’t start off great – it *learned* how to produce extraordinary results”. Learning can convert failure into success; problem into opportunity; redundancy into employability.

As Contu and Willmott (2003) argue, learning was once considered a ‘Cinderella topic’ in organization studies, and associated in many people’s minds simply with training as one of the more formulaic, routine elements of the typical human resources portfolio. But as soon as learning was connected directly with organizational performance, the topic grew to become one of the most powerful concepts in contemporary organizational theory and practice and, along the way, became strongly associated with issues of organizational well-being. The idea of a positive correlation between learning and well-being is extremely ideologically appealing. Whether one approaches this debate through the prism of humanism, with its emphasis on meaning and fulfilment, the prism of psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the containment of emotions, or the prism of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on economic responsibility, discourses of learning foreground the notion of agency, and turn well-being into something we can influence through the workings of that agency.

However, with agency comes at least some space for idiosyncrasy and individuality (as opposed to individualism). Thus, we cannot fully predict the effects of learning discourse on individual people, for human ‘plasticity’ cannot always be controlled. In some cases, promoting a spirit of inquiry, self-improvement and continuous professional development will create ever more ‘perfect employees’, who hone their skills to align with the needs of current and future employers, and deepen their sense of well-being via this alignment. In other cases, such inquiry may trigger a desire to fashion one’s own ‘learning journey’, and to construct and explore experiences of well-being away from institutional expectations.

In this chapter, we have traced a development from learning as information processing (Oppenheimer and Kelso, 2015) and plasticity of self-organization towards a view of learning as deeply entwined with emotion and politics. This acknowledges the work of scholars such as Vince (2001, p.1326), who focuses on “the interaction between emotion and power that creates the social and political context within which both learning and organizing can take place”. If, as we have suggested, notions of emotional and political resilience lie at the heart of the relationship between learning and well-being in organizations, then we may well conclude that the metaphor of the brain is perhaps not best placed to represent this relationship. The brain emphasises spontaneous self-organization and computational efficiency, but it is not so successful at capturing issues of emotional and/or political complexity, in particular, the influences and constraints on self-organization from the wider context.

Thus, despite the power and enduring popularity of the brain metaphor (Broekstra, 1996; Morgan, 2007; Weaver, 2015), we would like to suggest a shift of imagery from brain to school to explore the contextual dynamics of the relationship between learning and well-being. We think the discourse of organization-as-school provides a more striking blueprint for the power dynamics of organizational learning and reinvention, and hence supports a critical engagement with the topic of health and well-being. Unlike the brain, which conjures up notions of individual biology and almost unprompted self-organization, the school is much more clearly associated with practices of authority and power asymmetry in the relations between learners and learning providers, and hence connects more readily with our overall interest in the theme of responsibility for health. Thus, we see learning and well-being as co-constituted within the broader context of institutional power; and we argue that asymmetrical power relations play a vital role in our understandings and expectations of institution, whether in the family (as in chapter three) or in the school-room (as we are now suggesting for discourses of learning and reinvention). The subject who learns the right things is the perfect student, and well-being is enveloped in issues of conformity, stability and alignment. The

subject who learns the wrong things, on the other hand, is expelled from school, and well-being becomes a matter of resistance and revolt.