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Toward Learning Organizations And Organizational Growth: Perspectives On Experiential Learning And Organizational Learning

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ABSTRACT

The current paper aims to develop a conceptual framework that addresses how institutional enablers of an organizational learning culture can influence both collective learning efficacy and experiential learning in knowledge-intensive or learning organizations. The study is not only based upon a review of complementary theoretical and empirical literature on organizational knowledge and experiential learning, but it also borrows numerous insights of John Dewey's philosophical perspectives. Drawing from institutional theory and Experiential Learning Theory of Development and Growth (ELT), the study also suggests that employees' collective learning efficacy will positively influence experiential learning, which is posited to surge the absorptive capacity (ACAP) of the firm. Additionally, the study suggests that plentiful investments in institutional enablers will ultimately lead to higher intensity of organizational knowledge through the lens of knowledge exploration and knowledge exploitation. It is ultimately theorized that the intensity of organizational learning is positively associated with a newly introduced metric of competitive advantage – "organizational growth" – through the collective learning of the individual employees in a frame of continuous learning.

Research Limitations
The current study is merely conceptual and needs further in-depth exploration. Moreover, empirical research is still needed to validate the conceptual framework and propositions of the research.

Keywords: Institutional Enablers; Knowledge Management Systems; Collective Learning Efficacy; Communities of Practice; Absorptive Capacity; Experiential Learning; Intensity of Organizational Knowledge; Organizational Growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Firms in diverse industries are thriving to initially obtain and sustain differentiating strategies and competitive advantages given the vast contemporary intensity of global competition. Firms immensely struggle with implementing strategies that harness their internal vigor and external opportunities while abating both internal weaknesses and exterior threats (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1981; Porter, 1985). It is the age of knowledge-intensive economies in which creativity and innovation have become two significant sources of highly distinctive competitive advantages (Daghfous, 2004). Flourishing innovations are affected by several contextual and environmental dynamics (Roberts & Amit, 2003; Roberts, 2003). For instance, most firms engage their employees in the core of their business through learning various job activities and operational tasks through popular practices such as in-job training, training, and apprentice programs. These are examples of very common practices in the world of business, but they usually don't contribute to enhancing the firms' innovation capabilities or momentously thrive in the context of fast technological advances and soaring global competition. Especially in knowledge-intensive industries, Research and Development (R&D) and hiring external expertise can be discernible means of resolution, though both are tremendously costly and arduous to manage.

According to John Dewey, Lewin, and other behavioral theorists and social philosophers,

learning is an undoubtedly social process as learning involves transactions between the individual and the environment. From their different perspective of learning emerge some different prescriptions for the conduct of education, the process of learning, other life activities, and the construction of knowledge. In educational sciences, this proposition must seem rather recognizable yet strong enough; its practical and social implications seem to have been widely ignored in research on operations management and knowledge co-creation literature. In business, one prominent facilitator of knowledge transfer and co-creation can be the effective utilization of internal and external sources of knowledge, which can be implicit (within the beholder's mind) or explicit (codified in some physical or electronic communication means). Usually, such knowledge transfer between the sender and the receiver takes place one-on-one with a lack of effectively designed social interaction. This can be a challenging task, yet it also can, to some extent, be overcome by supporting practices that induce information exchange and cooperative learning culture or a collective learning-concentrated social climate.

As John Dewey puts it in his remarkable work - Democracy and Education, “As societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need of formal or intentional teaching and learning increases. As formal teaching and training grow to an extent, there is the danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school. This danger was never greater than at present because of the rapid growth in the last few centuries of knowledge and technical modes of skill”. However, there is still a lack of research investigating the element of social experience as a core source of knowledge building in a social learning environment, specifically in the corporate world. There needs to be some power to learn from the experience for education and to learn to be effective. Dewey refers to such power to learn from experience as “Plasticity”.

In contrast, in business literature, this power is referred to as the firm's absorptive capacity (ACAP), which is usually measured at the firm level rather than at the individual level. Absorptive Capacity has never been tied to learning through experience per se. Similarly, the extant body of literature in knowledge management and organizational learning assumes learning is occurring but does not directly address the importance of learning as a social process nor frame it as a reconstruction of experience - a bridge for the functioning learning process. Hence, this study attempts to reference experiential learning to fill this gap.

One key claim of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is that the acquisition and transformation experience is central to the learning process (Kolb, 1984). The experiential learning theory is an integrative perspective that unites the prior knowledge, perception, cognition, and experience (Kolb, 1984). The theory forms solid conceptual grounds to uncover why some individuals acquire and transform information differently, how they combine it with existing knowledge stocks, and why such behaviors give various opportunity recognition and exploitation abilities. Thus, it is theoretically viable to theorize that by mapping the learning modes of ELT onto the process of social-based organizational learning, we better understand various linkages between different enablers of learning culture, absorptive capacity, and some new perspectives on organizational growth.

With that said, this study addresses three key research questions: how can the investments in institutional enablers of learning culture improve the firms’ experiential learning and absorptive capacity? Does absorptive capacity positively affect organizational growth through the intensity of organizational learning? Will improvement in organizational learning capacities of a firm through its learners improve the organizational growth in the long run? To answer these questions through scientific inquiry, the study proceeds by reviewing Dewey's pertinent theoretical work on education, experience, and knowledge. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the ELT, showing how it can inform and further extend the body of research in knowledge management and organizational learning. The next part is the development of the research propositions. Then, the conceptual research framework and the underlying basis for construct measurement are

provided. Next, the design and methodology of the study are briefly discussed. Finally, the paper concludes with some predictable research implications, limitations, and future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Dewey Conceptions of Education and Knowledge

Dewey articulates his notions that education is an unfolding from within appears to have more resemblance to the conception of growth that has been set forth. To Dewey, education or learning is not an end but merely a means of making explicit what is already implicit. According to Dewey, the idea of education is all about the continuous reconstruction of experience. Education can be viewed as the preparation for a remote future, as unfolding, as external formation, and as a recapitulation of the past. Dewey continually argues that education and learning are social and interactive processes; thus, schools are social institutions through which social reform can and should take place. In addition, he believed that students thrive in an environment where they are permitted to experience and interact with the curriculum. All students should have the opportunity to take part in their learning. Dewey makes a strong case for the significance of education not only as a place to gain content knowledge but also as a place to learn how to live. To Dewey, the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. Dewey defines the “good” as maximizing human capabilities and individual growth. For example, Dewey considers democracy in education as good because it maximizes learners' freedom. To him, democracy is education, and education is a democracy because freedom adds to the meaning of students’ experiences and expands their abilities to self-direct or self-reflect on those experiences. (Dewey, 1916)

Dewey re-imagined how the learning process should take place and the role that the teacher should play within that social and interactive process. According to Dewey, the teacher's role should be facilitator and guide. As Dewey (1897) explains it:

“The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these. Thus the teacher becomes a partner in the learning process, guiding students to discover meaning within the subject area independently. This philosophy has become an increasingly popular idea within present-day teacher preparatory programs.”

The theory of knowledge of John Dewey drastically differed from those of his contemporaries, who viewed knowledge as a product of thought rather than a process - a process of inquiry and reflection. Dewey believed that humans interact with their environment, much as Charles Darwin believed organisms evolved due to their surroundings. So, according to Dewey, as thought stems from interaction with the environments, it is the knowledge that guides this interaction.

2.2 Dewey and Experiential Learning

Dewey's philosophies had influenced numerous other advocates of experiential models. For instance, Problem-Based Learning (PBL), a method used widely in education, incorporates Dewey's notions pertaining to learning through active inquiry. Dewey has, undoubtedly, become one of the most renowned proponents of hands-on learning or experiential education, which is related to but not synonymous with the so-called experiential learning. According to Dewey, experience is the awareness of the conjoint activity and its value through meaning, social purpose, and use. The experience is then reconstructed by adding meaning to past experiences through thinking and reflection. So, the reflective experience can be regarded as a continuous experiment of inquiry that will engage a habit of self-directing subsequent experiences. This indicates that, to Dewey, knowledge cannot be transmitted but reconstructed, organized, and re-organized.

Learning through experience is not a fresh concept in educational sciences; distinguished educational theorists such as John Dewey, Carl

Rogers, and David Kolb have provided the underpinning of learning theories pertinent to "learning by doing" or "learning through experience". Dewey promoted experiential education that focuses on problem-solving and critical thinking rather than memorization and rote learning. Similarly, Rogers considered experiential learning "significant" compared to what he called "meaningless" cognitive learning. Also, Kolb suggested that concrete learning experiences are critical to meaningful learning, which he named Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Kolb has also suggested the theory of the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to support the identification of preferred ways of learning. One key element of experiential learning, therefore, is the learner, and that learning takes place (the knowledge gained) as a result of being personally involved in this pedagogical approach. The focus of EL is placed on the *process* of learning and *not* the *product* of learning. Proponents of experiential learning assert that students will be more motivated to learn when they have a personal stake in the subject rather than being assigned to review a topic or read a textbook chapter. Therefore, it is vitally important to recognize the EL phases of experiencing (doing), reflection and applying. In addition, "the stages of reflection and application are what make experiential learning distinctive and more powerful than the "learn-by-doing" or "hands-on-learning" models.

Experiential learning involves a set of steps that give learners a hands-on, collaborative, and reflective learning experience, which helps them to "fully learn new skills and knowledge" (Haynes, 2007). Although the content of learning is imperative, learning from the process is at the heart of experiential learning. During each step of the experience, learners will engage with the content, the instructor or trainer, and each other and self–reflect and apply what they have learned in another condition. As noted by Haynes (2007) and Davis (2011), below are the fundamental steps that comprise experiential learning:

- **Experiencing / Exploring / Doing**

Learners will perform or do a hands-on minds-on experience with little or no help from the instructor, e.g., making products or models, role-playing, giving a presentation, problem-solving, playing a game, etc. A central component of experiential learning here is what the learners learn from the experience rather than the quantity or quality of the experience.

- **Sharing / Reflecting**

Learners will share the results, reactions, and observations with their peers. Learners will also get other peers to talk about their own experiences, share their reactions and observations, and ultimately discuss their feelings produced by the experience. The sharing is associated with reflecting on what they discovered and relating it to past experiences, which can be used for future use.

- **Processing / Analyzing**

Learners will discuss, analyze and reflect upon their experiences. Describing and analyzing experiences allow learners to relate them to future learning experiences. Learners will also discuss how the experience was carried out and how themes, problems and issues emerged due to the experience. The learners will finally discuss how specific problems or issues were addressed while identifying recurring themes.

- **Generalizing**

Learners will connect the experience with real-world examples, find trends or common truths in the experience, and identify real-life principles that have emerged.

- **Application**

Learners will apply what they learned in the experience (and from past experiences and practice) to a similar or different situation. The instructor should help the learners feel a sense of ownership for what was learned. Learners will also discuss how the newly learned process can be applied to other situations.

As Dewey suggests, when we experience something, we act upon it, we do something; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing, and then it does something to us in return. The correlation between these two phases of experience measures the productivity of experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience. (Dewey, 1916).

According to Dewey, experience is our 'lived' experience. The experience is at the heart of experiential learning; therefore, it is not something separate or additional but something that embraces the lives of individuals. To Dewey, experience is at the heart of the educational process. Education can be defined exclusively in how it develops and reconstructs experience. To him, education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. Dewey offers a technical definition of education as the reconstruction or reorganization of experience, which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience (Dewey, 1916). Reflective thinking for Dewey was also concerned with the emphasis on the importance of 're-conceptualization of experience' and the importance of beliefs. For instance, reflective thinking was described by Dewey as an 'investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief' (Dewey, 1910). Therefore, one critical facet of the 'reconstruction' of experience and the basis of experiential learning can be the explicit incorporation of Dewey's notions of 'trying' and 'undergoing'. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory discloses a commitment to Dewey's dual aspect of experience making up the inner dimension of Kolb's model, known as a 'dialectic' relationship.

2.3 Dewey and Absorptive Capacity

It is worthwhile to revisit Dewey's perspective on knowledge as a process of inquiry and reflection rather than a product of thinking. Organizations need to obtain the capabilities and the solid business routines/processes in order to effectively acquire and utilize internal and external experiences or know-how. This will surely enhance the innovation output and overall performance. This implies that organizations need to have the capacity to effectively acquire, assimilate, and apply knowledge – Absorptive capacity – to succeed in the information and knowledge-oriented economies. **Absorptive capacity (ACAP)** is defined as the organization's ability to effectively acquire and utilize external along with internal knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), which affects the organization's base of innovation (Fichman, 2004). However, organizations cannot rely solely on their external networking but must also develop their absorptive capabilities to acquire knowledge (Matthyssens et al., 2005) actively. In other words, organizations need to have sound approaches and mechanisms to learn, disseminate, and exploit knowledge, which can lead to organizational innovations (Daghfous, 2004). A firm's ACAP can also influence the effectiveness of its innovation activities and financial performance (Cockburn & Henderson, 1998). The literature has a wide range of studies that show the significance of the relationship between absorptive capacity and sources of superior, innovative output, financial performance, and competitive advantages (Wheelwright, 1984; Deng, Doll & Cao, 2008). For example, Zahra and George (2002) suggest that a potential capacity provides firms with strategic flexibility to adapt and evolve in dynamic environments in order to sustain a competitive advantage. Also, Zahra and George (2002) recognize that ACAP, as a dynamic capability, can influence the nature and the sustainability of a firm's competitive advantage. Another example, Cohen & Levinthal (1990) affirm that absorptive capacity greatly affects the firm's innovative performance in evolving market conditions.

Zahra and George (2002) redefine ACAP as "a set of organizational routines and processes by which firms acquire, assimilate, transform and exploit knowledge to produce a dynamic organizational capability." Zahra and George (2002) extend the theory by specifying two dimensions of ACAP: Potential ACAP and Realized ACAP. Potential ACAP makes the firm receptive to acquiring and assimilating external knowledge, while realized ACAP is a function of the transformation and exploitation capabilities (Zahra and George, 2002). The same authors presented two elements of the *potential* absorptive capacity:

- **Knowledge acquisition:** refers to the firm's capability to identify and acquire externally generated knowledge vital to its operations; and

- **Assimilation:** a capability that refers to the organization's routines that enable it to analyze, process, interpret and comprehend the information obtained from external sources.

Realized absorptive capacity is made up of two elements:

- **Transformation:** refers to the firm's capability to develop and refine the routines that facilitate combining existing knowledge and the newly acquired and assimilated knowledge; and
- **Exploitation:** refers to the firm's capacity to apply the newly acquired knowledge to products or services that are economically viable. This element undertakes after the transformation.

The literature strongly urges future researchers to explore and/or validate ACAP's diverse antecedents and consequences. To the best of my knowledge, no prior study concurrently explores the impact of knowledge management systems, learning support, and communities of practice, as antecedents of absorptive capacity, only where experiential learning mediates this relationship. To make a valuable contribution in the literature, this study seeks to fill this theoretical gap by providing a conceptual framework that builds a sound ground for further empirical findings.

2.4. Institutional Enablers for Learning Culture

The learning literature is largely descriptive and conceptual. Many researchers have described why learning organizations work; there are only a few studies about how the learning organization works to improve performance (Kaiser, 2000). To bridge this gap in the learning organization literature, Kaiser and Holton (1998) identify several parallels between the characteristics and recommended procedures in the learning organization literature and the innovation literature. The authors suggest that the learning organization and innovation literature both focus on the facilitating role of the same organizational variables and strategies that will enhance the adaptability and flexibility of organizations in ways that improve long-term performance. Organizational learning and innovation appear to reflect closely related processes and to be influenced by many variables, including culture, climate, leadership, management practices, information acquisition, retrieval, and sharing, and organizational structures, systems, and environment (Kaiser, 2000).

Organizational culture is defined as organizational behavior's shared meanings and manifestations (Kopelman et al., 1990). It emphasizes the common beliefs, values, and assumptions of organizational members. Individuals and groups learn organizational culture as they encounter, work through, and resolve problems and challenges. The learning organization literature underlines the role of organizational culture in building the value of learning and using new learning for creative purposes in pursuing organizational goals and objectives. For example, Watkins and Marsick (1993), Marquardt (1996), and other researchers view a culture that supports the acquisition of information, the distribution and sharing of learning, and provides rewards and recognition for the learning its application as critical for successful learning organizations. Hence, organizational learning culture becomes imperative in consideration of innovation because it enables an organization to anticipate and adapt to the dynamics of a changing environment. Organizational learning culture highlights the open exchange of information and ideas in ways that facilitate learning and its creative application. In effect, learning organization culture can be seen as a critical facilitator of creativity and innovation because it supports inquiry, risk-taking, and experimentation.

Climate emerges from aspects of the organizational context that individual employees perceive to be important and influential in their work. Organizational culture differs from climate because culture is based on shared beliefs at the organizational level, while climate is based on what individuals sense in and about the organizational environment (Reichers & Schneider, 1990). Thus, the climate is viewed as a more salient feature of an organization to the degree that different beliefs and meanings form

individual expectations, perceptions, and interpretations of the organizational environment that affect behavior (Schein, 1990; Denison, 1996). This view is also consistent with numerous studies on organizational climate, recognizing social climate as a multidimensional construct applied to a variety of organizational and perceptual variables reflective of organizational-individual interactions (Schneider, 1980).

As noted earlier, organizational learning cultures support the acquisition of information, the distribution and sharing of learning, and that reinforce and support continuous learning and its application to organizational improvement. Such a culture is reflected by an organization-wide pattern of values and beliefs about the importance of learning, its implementation, and dissemination. These values and beliefs are based on observable, salient work context factors such as norms associated with creativity and innovation, human resource practices that support ongoing employee development, and managerial practices that facilitate efforts directed at change and innovation. These values and beliefs shape the individual psychological climates associated with acquiring and applying new knowledge and skills and are reflected in factors such as individual expectations and self-beliefs about learning application and beliefs about the value of change and improvement through learning. Briefly, learning organizational cultures support the development of functional learning transfer climates that facilitate and enhance organizational outcomes such as innovation and productivity through their effect on individuals' motivation, attitudes and behavior. Our third hypothesis is designed to examine the role of climate as a mediator between learning organizational culture and organizational innovation:

According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction and cultural influences had a major effect on the formation process of learning. Similar to Dewey's conception of reconstruction of knowledge, knowledge is defined as adding, elaborating, and evaluating ideas, summarizing and synthesizing external information, and combining different facts and ideas (Veldhuis-Diermanse et al., 2006). This structure of knowledge construction and learning process is considered active and dynamic rather than passive and static, while a collaborative working culture can encourage knowledge-based networking and community building so it can provide lifelong learning.

Jansen et al. (2005) indicate that ACAP is affected by both internal forces (e.g., organizational structure and culture) and external forces (e.g., knowledge diffusion). This study draws on the institutional theory (Scott, 1987; Scott, 1995), which provides a profound justification for how institutional structure impacts members' cognition and behavior (Scott, 1995). Explicitly, institutional enablers shape individuals' beliefs and behaviors by (a) providing meaning to and understanding of the situation, (b) proposing normative templates to validate a specific behavior, and (c) regulating individual actions using control (Choi & Chang, 2009). So, this study focuses on the organizational resources and structures that support utilizing two sets of institutional enablers or factors: resources of learning (knowledge management systems and communities of practice) and culture of learning (learning support). The institutional enablers are posited to have a direct positive effect on employees' collective learning efficacy and experiential learning, which altogether lead to improvement in the absorptive capacity.

2.5 Organizational Learning

Firms may have different trajectories to involve their employees in activities of learning. March (1991) defines two sets of models of organizational learning that framed the idea of exploring new possibilities (exploration) and exploiting existing ones (exploitation). Exploitation comprises things captured by terms such as refinement, choice, production, efficiency, selection, implementation, and execution. On the other hand, exploration comprises things captured by terms such as search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, flexibility, discovery, and innovation. Exploration reflects radical innovations that require new knowledge or departure from existing knowledge (Benner and Jushman, 2003; Levinthal and March 1993). Conversely, exploitation reflects incremental innovations that

typically require existing knowledge and reinforce existing skills, processes, and structures (Benner and Jushman, 2003; Levinthal and March 1993).

Table 1 below portrays the types of organizational learning activity, exploration versus exploitation, and their corresponding dimensions as outlined in the literature.

Types of organizational learning activity	Dimensions		
	Learning	Technological innovation	Change in organizational code
"Exploration"	A new domain of knowledge (discovery).	The different trajectories of technology.	Code learns from members (codification).
"Exploitation"	The existing domain of knowledge.	Same trajectory of technology.	Members learn through codes (socialization).

Table 1: Types of organizational learning activities and their respective dimensions

To exemplify, Jansen et al. (2006) analyzed the technological innovation routine by segregating innovation to radical (explorative) versus incremental (exploitative). They operationalize March's learning rate through different coordination mechanisms such as connectedness at the unit's social network. A wide body of literature, such as Nonaka (1994) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), has explored the change in organizational code dimension (codification versus socialization). However, the learning dimension received little empirical evidence and is still lacking further development and investigation.

3. PROPOSITIONS DEVELOPMENT

This study focuses on the collective unit of learning because healthy learning culture and effective organizational learning would require collective and coordinated action. In other words, the degree to which an employee can utilize knowledge management sources and shared knowledge in the organization calls for concurrent actions of interdependent others (Holahan, 2004). The collective processes that represent shared and aggregated patterns of beliefs and behavior of employees would appear to be a very favorable area of research (Klein & Knight, 2005). By employing the organizational level throughout the framework, consistency in the level of conceptualization, measurement, and inferences from the empirical analysis can be maintained.

3.1. Knowledge Management Systems and Experiential Learning

Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) refers to the organization's IT-based systems for managing knowledge in organizations to support the creation, capture, storage, and dissemination of information (Akscyn et al., 1988). Knowledge management systems have explicit knowledge management objectives such as collaboration, sharing good practices, or the like. Awad and Ghaziri (2004) outline the following characteristics of KMS:

- KMS deal with knowledge from external as well as internal sources, including documents and databases;
- KMS embeds and stores knowledge in business processes, products, and services;
- KMS promotes growth, transfer, and sharing of knowledge within the organization; and
- KMS aims to assess on a regular basis the knowledge assets of an organization and its impact.

Other studies pose different advantages of KMS, such as sharing of valuable organizational

information throughout the organizational hierarchy, reducing redundant and manual work, reducing training time for existing/new employees, and retention of intellectual property after the employee leaves if his/her knowledge can be codified or documented (Benjamin, 1995; Lococo & Yen, 1998).

Several studies suggest a positive relationship between organizational learning/knowledge creation and innovation performance (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). A well-developed knowledge collaborative environment can invent ways to improve information and knowledge sharing effectiveness and hence enhance the quality and reliability of the firm's products or services through continuous hands-on practice.

Knowledge management systems can form critical capacities that boost the organization's abilities to acquire and assimilate knowledge, i.e., potential absorptive capacity. Likewise, KMS can establish multiple communication channels between employees, customers, and strategic partners via the common interface for knowledge sharing. In addition, organizational resources, by themselves, without being turned into capabilities through experiential learning, furnish no recognized benefits to the firm. For instance, data mining or customer relationship management (CRM) tools do not mean that the firm has knowledge management or organizational learning without giving the users the exposure to learn through working on those platforms. Conceptually training the users will not turn the required results.

3.2. Support for Learning and Experiential Learning

Support for learning refers to the extent to which an organization motivates and provides a supportive environment for learning-related activities (Choi & Chang, 2009). Indicating a lack of knowledge resources or motivation to learn, lack of learning support can form barriers to knowledge acquisition or sharing and thinning the availability of knowledge (acquisition) and/or the skills needed for employees to engage in the generation/sharing of new ideas. Similarly, lack of support for learning indicated by reduced investments in routines that enable the assimilation of existing information or knowledge will demotivate employees to analyze, interpret, and comprehend information and thus will negatively affect their level of experiential learning.

3.3. Communities of Practice and Experiential Learning

Education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies with shared interests by all its members and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups. A society that makes endowment for participation in the good of all its members on equal terms and secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life. Such a society must have a type of education that gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control and the habits of mind, which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (Dewey, 1916)

Dewey defines social efficiency as cultivating the power to join freely and fully in shared or common activities. This is impossible without culture, while it brings a reward in culture because one cannot share in interaction with others without learning, i.e., without getting a broader standpoint and perceiving things of which one would otherwise be ignorant. To Dewey, the most feasible definition of culture is the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings. (Dewey, 1916)

Communities of practice refer to a group of people formally or informally bound together by shared expertise, passion, or interest for a joint enterprise to come up with a resolution to an existing problem or common interests (Wenger, 2004; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Wenger (2004) and Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that communities of practice promise to complement existing structures to galvanize sharing of knowledge (tacit or explicit), learning, and change. Communities of practice are held together by passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise for as long as there is interest in maintaining the group (Wenger, 2004). They are conducive to integrating and creating knowledge as

interdisciplinary teams often integrate it (Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Grant, 1996). They positively influence experiential learning through increasing motivation and the ability of members to share experiences in social interaction settings (online, offline, or both) to reconstruct prior knowledge to discover feasible solutions to the problem at hand.

Based on the foregoing discussion of Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, Proposition 1 addresses the impact of the firm's institutional enablers of learning culture on experiential learning of the firm:

Proposition 1: There is a direct and positive relationship between the firm's institutional enablers for learning culture (KMS, learning support, and Communities of Practice) and experiential learning.

3.4. Institutional Enablers of Learning Culture and Collective Learning Efficacy

A systematic review of the literature suggested numerous institutional enablers, such as structure (e.g., complexity, decentralization), leadership, resources, supportive climate (e.g., risk-taking, incentives), and knowledge utilization practices (e.g., learning, knowledge sharing). In this research, however, I attend to three institutional enablers that are associated with the agency: (a) and (b) knowledge management systems and communities of practice as resources available to enable the development of healthy learning culture; (c) support for learning as a crucial factor to develop a climate that is supportive to learning and knowledge sharing. While the three enablers are far from comprehensive, they address vitally significant factors for the effectiveness of management of knowledge at the organizational level.

Bandura (1997) defines perceived self-efficacy as personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals. Adapting from Bandura, I am introducing a new construct – collective learning efficacy – which can be defined as the employees' collective perception of the extent or level of confidence to which they, as a group, are capable of learning effectively in organizations. Existing studies on collective efficacy have largely focused on its outcomes, but only a few explored the antecedents of collective efficacy (Choi & Chang, 2009). To the best of my knowledge, antecedents of collective learning efficacy are not well studied in the literature. Therefore, the current study addresses this gap and proposes that collective learning efficacy can be shaped by the institutional enablers of the learning culture that is discussed in the previous section.

Although general efficacy is a belief that is partially dependent on actual competence, it is also a situation-specific judgment based on the resources, opportunities, and constraints available in a particular setting (Choi & Chang, 2009). When an organization executive or a supervisor of a department supports, emotionally or legitimately, different learning activities, employees are more likely to believe that they have the authority to engage in learning activities or practices. This will increase their collective confidence in embracing factors that enable an organizational culture of learning. In other words, all behavior related to learning can significantly shape employees' collective efficacy. In addition, learning support may provide conceptual and time resources that facilitate the development of skills and knowledge among employees. This condition can boost their collective efficacy regarding innovation use. These learning activities positively relate to collective efficacy, perhaps due to a greater understanding of the task and increased replication among employees. Hence, support for learning at the organizational level fosters positive learning behaviors among employees, which can increase the employees' collective learning efficacy. Typically, investing in knowledge management systems, human capital, and knowledge-related social resources such as communities of practice will positively affect how employees jointly perceive a healthy culture of learning. This will, in turn, positively impact the employees' perception of their abilities to learn in the organization.

Based on the foregoing arguments, Proposition 2 addresses the impact of institutional enablers of

learning culture on employees' collective learning efficacy:

Proposition 2: There is a direct and positive relationship between the institutional enablers of learning culture and the collective learning efficacy of the organization's employees.

3.5. Collective Learning Efficacy and Experiential Learning

Researchers in psychology, organizational behavior, and other disciplines have recognized that people's beliefs about their capabilities are essential in their motivation to achieve. According to Bandura (1997), it is in peer relationships and socialization activities that employees broaden the self-knowledge of their capabilities. The most experienced and competent peers provide models of efficacious styles of thinking and behavior, and hence vast amount of social learning occurs among peers. In addition, employees' belief in their capabilities to master certain tasks has an enormous impact on their aspirations and level of interest in learning activities, affecting their work accomplishments. So, it is very practical to assume that the more the firm employees perceive their abilities to learn, the higher the level of experiential learning by the collective doing.

In view of the previous arguments, it is posited that collective learning efficacy has a positive effect on the experiential learning:

Proposition 3: There is a direct and positive relationship between the collective learning efficacy of the organization's employees and their levels of experiential learning.

3.6. Experiential Learning and Absorptive Capacity

Table 3 below is a synopsis of the reconceptualization of ACAP components and corresponding roles by Zahra and George (2002).

ACAP Dimension/Capability	Components	Role and Importance
PACAP: • Acquisition • Assimilation	- Prior investments - Prior knowledge - Intensity - Speed - Direction - Understanding	- Scope of search - Perceptual schema - New connection - Speed of learning - Quality of learning - Interpretation - Comprehension - Learning
RACAP: • Transformation • Exploitation	- Internalization - Conversion - Use - Implementation	- Synergy - Recodification - Bisociation - Core competencies - Harvesting existing resources

Table 3: Dimensions of ACAP and its components and corresponding roles.

Referencing the discussion and rationale on experiential learning stages in section (2.2) along with Table 3, it is suggested that experiential learning will have a positive effect on both PACAP and RACAP:

Proposition 4a: There is a direct and positive relationship between experiential learning and Potential ACAP.

Proposition 4b: There is a direct and positive relationship between experiential learning and Realized ACAP.

3.7. Absorptive Capacity and Intensity of Organizational Learning

Bhatt and Grover (2005) implicitly define the intensity of learning as the extent and rate at which an organization can learn and react more quickly than its competitors. Their study finds that higher levels of learning intensity have a significant impact on (a) IT infrastructure

quality, (b) level of IT-to-business experience, and (c) the quality of related infrastructure. However, the study could not establish a positive correlation between learning intensity and competitive advantage that is measured by economic-based measures.

3.7.1 Potential Absorptive Capacity and Knowledge Exploration

Without first acquiring knowledge, firms cannot feasibly exploit knowledge (Zahra and George, 2002). Table 3 shows that both dimensions of PACAP signify activities that make the firm receptive to acquiring and assimilating external knowledge. Table 3 provides some keywords that establish a theoretical connection between PACAP and knowledge exploration, e.g., the scope of the search, speed/quality/intensity of learning, and new connections denote important components or roles of ACAP that determines the quality of a firm's acquisition and assimilation capabilities – PACAP – and the same time indicate knowledge exploration. Zahra and George (2002) theorize that comprehension promotes knowledge assimilation, allowing firms to process and internalize newly generated knowledge. Moreover, they suggest that as the firm's experience not only reflects its events of success and failure over time, it can also determine how the firm acquires and assimilates new knowledge. In other words, PACAP established the locus of the firm's future technological search and continued knowledge exploration. The foregoing discussion establishes some theoretical ground for Proposition 5.

Proposition 5: The relationship between PACAP and knowledge exploration will be stronger than the relationship between PACAP and knowledge exploitation.

3.7.2 Realized Absorptive Capacity and Knowledge Exploitation

As per Realized the ACAP reconceptualization by Zahra and George (2002), RACAP is a function of the firm's capacity to leverage the knowledge that has been absorbed for viable outcomes. Transformation facilitates combining existing knowledge along with newly acquired and assimilated knowledge. Although transformation can generate new knowledge and facilitates the recognition of opportunities, the primary function of the exploitation routines is to derive benefits from accessible knowledge, core competencies, and harvesting of existing resources. Moreover, RACAP routines provide structural, systematic, and procedural mechanisms that offer the firm sustainability in knowledge exploitation over time (Zahra and George, 2002).

Proposition 6: *The relationship between RACAP and knowledge exploitation will be stronger than the relationship between RACAP and knowledge exploration.*

3.8. Intensity of Organizational Learning and Organizational Growth

Zahra and George (2002) postulate that the distinction between PACAP and RACAP is vitally important to evaluate the contribution of ACAP to the firm's competitive advantage. The current study suggests that knowledge exploitation and knowledge exploration mediates this connection to explain further why some firms are more efficient than others providing that they all have comparable levels of absorptive capacity. The study by Bhatt and Grover (2005) does not establish a correlation between the intensity of organizational learning and competitive advantage. However, Bhatt and Grover (2005) affirm that the intensity of learning does not directly contribute to competitive advantage mainly because firm-level capabilities mediate learning capabilities before they transform into competitive benefits. In other words, aligning the intensity of learning with available competencies provides benefits to the firm's absorptive capacity.

Nevertheless, innovation is a key source of competitive advantage in the knowledge era (Daghfous, 2004). *Innovation output* is the product or harvest of innovation activity that yields economic or non-economic value to the firm (Govindarajan & Kopalle, 2006). Successful innovation can make it extremely difficult for competition to imitate, allowing firms to better sustain their competitive advantage. As a result, a firm's innovation output would clearly impact the sustainability of its competitive advantage.

However, one goal of this research is to borrow Dewey's conception of organizational growth (from a learning perspective) as a new metric of competitive advantage for the so-called learning organizations. Organizational growth without reaching a certain level of organizational learning intensity. Therefore, firms should focus more on this type of growth on top of any other known metrics, such as financial performance, brand loyalty, etc. It is hypothesized in this study that if continued growth transpires at any learning organization, most other metrics will be steadily pursued. According to Dewey, since growth is the characteristic of life, education or continuous learning is all one with growing.

Based on the foregoing arguments, Proposition 7 addresses the impact of a firm's organizational learning intensity and organizational growth.

Proposition 7: *There is a direct and positive relationship between the intensity of organizational learning and competitive advantage.*

4. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study suggests seven propositions from which the research framework is developed. The framework is shown below on Figure 1.

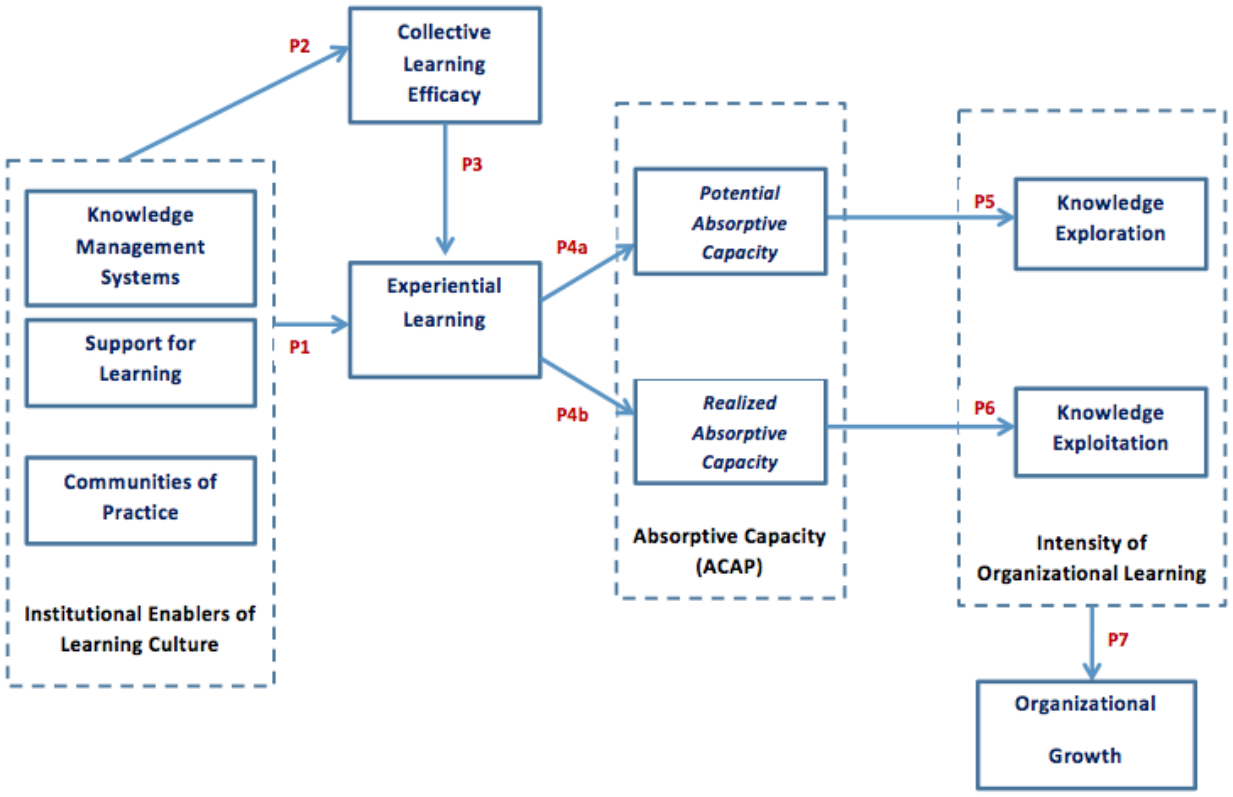

Figure 1: Research Conceptual Model

5. MEASUREMENTS

Zahra and George (2002) suggest that ACAP is a dynamic capability with different sub-dimensions embedded in specific organizational processes. But, the most commonly used measure for absorptive capacity is R&D intensity, which is the ratio of R&D expenditure to annual sales (Cockburn & Henderson, 1998). Nonetheless, R&D intensity is not comprehensive enough to cover the content domain of the ACAP construct. Some other studies measure absorptive capacity through perceptive instruments where validated ACAP measures are adopted from Jansen et al. (2005) and Tu et al. (2006). Measures of organizational growth still need to be developed. Drawing on existing measures (Choi & Chang, 2009; Choi et al., 2003), collective learning efficacy will be

measured using a number of items that are yet extendable, including, but not limited to, organization members' perception of possessing the skills and abilities required to effectively run operations, organization members perception of being confident in using knowledge management systems, and perception of employees of the value of communities of practice. Appendix 1 lists the definitions of the study constructs and their possible measures.

The measurement scale of the questionnaire items in this study will be on a seven-point Likert Scale from "1 to 7", rating from strong disagreement to strong agreement. This will make it easy to measure positive or negative responses to the questionnaire items while representing an interval level.

Two control variables will be used to capture the effect of other possible factors: *Sector* – to reflect technological specificity, and *Firm size* – to control for unalike effects caused by the difference in firms' sizes.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

6.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The unit of analysis in this study is at the firm level. This research is conceptual, but the avenue for the forthcoming empirical study will employ an online questionnaire survey. Motivated by the relatively high response rate (over 90 percent) and the great coverage for conventional survey modes in Saudi Arabia Al-Subaihi (2008), the author intends to target firms in Saudi Arabia as the research population. The research will try to focus on industries with high-moderate uncertainty levels and intensive competitiveness, such as communication, medical/ biotechnology, food and textile, and the like.

Prior to emailing survey requests to respondents, a number of experts and/or scholars will be requested to revise the format and content of the survey. Next, questionnaires will be randomly mailed to CEOs, and executive managers of manufacturing operations, marketing, purchasing, HR, and R&D. Respondents will be asked to fill the questionnaire and identify the ambiguities in terms, meanings, and issues (DeMaio & Landreth, 2004).

To increase the valid survey response rate, the researcher(s) will personally call the top management of each of the sampled firms, explain the study's objectives and the questionnaire contents, and then confirm the names and job titles of the respondents prior to mailing the questionnaire. Such a sampling technique that separates informants will be essential for this study as the casual attribution by a single informant for perceptually related constructs is considered a major source of common method variance (CMV) (Ayers et al., 2006). Accordingly, the respondents of different constructs in the questionnaire will be different to avoid CMV. Key respondents of the constructs of competitive advantage, support for learning, and communities of practice will be CEOs and executives; respondents of the ACAP construct, and learning intensity will be Research and Development (R&D) and Human Resources (HR) managers; the respondents of the construct of collective learning efficacy will be other employees. This surveying method, however, will be very challenging if typically conducted. Each questionnaire won't be complete if the responses are generated for all constructs. Therefore, the electronic questionnaire will be firstly sent to CEOs or executive managers of the targeted firms who agreed to participate in the survey. Then, after top managers fill out the relevant part of the survey, they will be requested to forward the remaining sections to the respondents. The indirect enforcement can, by and large, mitigate the issue of incomplete response. After the questionnaire has been fully completed by having responses for all survey items, the last respondent will be requested to submit the survey to the online database.

6.2. Empirical Testing

The author intends to use SPSS 17.0 to ensure the empirical distinctiveness of the study's variables. To validate the research framework, structural equation modeling (SEM)-Robust Likelihood method will be conducted as it supports simultaneous testing of multiple predictive relationships (Choi & Chang, 2009). This type of analysis has the advantage of

correcting for the unreliability of measures and also gives information on the paths between multiple constructs after controlling for potentially perplexing variables. In other words, the results of the empirical study will build upon Structural Equations Modeling (SEM), which estimates the strength of relationships, correcting for measurement error. More accurately, a two-step procedure will be used to evaluate the measurement model and, subsequently the structural model. The measurement model quality test will build upon Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), while the structural model quality test builds upon path analysis.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS & LIMITATIONS

In order to continue building on the concepts developed in this study, further theoretical refinement will be needed because greater theoretical development will form a strong foundation to test the suggested propositions empirically. For example, it would be useful to incorporate cognitive interviews to validate and improve the validity of measurement scales or possibly use multi-method longitudinal data to be collected from different and relevant agencies. It would also be valuable to integrate additional institutional enablers into the framework, such as organization structure (e.g., decentralization, reward system, etc.) and leadership. Future researchers can also extend the exploration of the relationship between the dimensions of ACAP and the dimensions of the intensity of organizational learning to enrich the literature on ambidexterity further. Organizational growth is still in an initial stage of conceptualization and needs further exploration.

The study has several limitations; a primary limitation is that it is a theoretical paper. Hence, future empirical research is needed to examine the propositions presented herein. Furthermore, comprehensive operationalization for the variables posited in this study is needed. It would be interesting to view the results of future research that apply this study's theories in the service industry to improve the generalizability of the empirical results of the current study.

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