

Individual Adaptation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Personal Identity and Learning during Organizational Change

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Introduction

Writing that “libraries are changing” seems both simplistic and understated; however, it is really the only place to start. Changes in information technology, library user expectations, and the skills that citizens need to succeed in a global context are impacting the definition and direction of academic libraries in 2015. The *Ithaca S+R US Library Survey 2013* notes that while library directors overall are more confident in their libraries’ abilities to meet some of these changes, these leaders feel hindered by a lack of resources, including funding and staff.¹ This report also notes that planning processes related to organizational change vary from institution from institution, but primarily focus on library staff.²

Focusing on library staff as a key to strategic organizational change can be both effective and complicated. Sara Gray of University College London points this out when she writes that meanings behind the term “librarianship” are fragmented and ambiguous because so many shifts in professional values and responsibilities have occurred throughout the history of the library and information science field.³ The profession of librarianship likely is undergoing another major shift in direction at this very moment, but that is the topic for another, much longer, paper. This paper will focus on how individuals experience change and the role of the individual in the organizational change process. Given the evolving nature of the library pro-

fession, this paper may also have implications for the larger profession as we continue to redefine what it means to be a library worker today and in the future.

In her dissertation on individual adaptation to changing workplaces, Jane Parent notes that most studies of organizational change focus on the “macro, structure-oriented, organizational level of change.”⁴ Parent, however, posits that individual employees’ ability to adapt to change plays a significant role in successful organizational change.⁵ But what factors contribute to an individual’s ability to adapt to and thrive within change? Furthermore, if we can understand these factors, are there then specific strategies that library leaders can use to evolve individuals’ professional identities and enhance library professionals’ desire and ability to change along with an organization or a profession? Different disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, management, and education and learning, have used their own, unique lenses to explore these questions. Their perspectives and big ideas on how individuals experience change can and should contribute to the library world’s discussion of professional evolution and library leaders’ management of organizational change.

Perspectives on Individuals and Change

Theories and research on reactions to change occur in a variety of scholarly traditions. The perspectives explored here by no means represent a comprehen-

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sive list of disciplines and theories related to individuals, identity, change, and learning, but rather represent a selection of big ideas that converge on the single notion that individuals experience change differently. Each perspective selected for this discussion lends a new angle to the discussion, and ultimately offers library leaders a more complete portfolio of considerations when initiating large-scale change.

An Anthropology Perspective

Dorothy Holland, a cultural anthropologist, offers a framework for understanding how individuals interact in organizations and with each other through her work on “figured worlds.”⁶ Holland and her colleagues define a figured world as “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others.”⁷ This theory of identity has been used in a number of different contexts to explore how individuals develop identities and participate in communities. In particular, the concept of figured worlds focuses on the ability of individuals’ identities to shift through their participation in surrounding communities. As Holland writes, “identities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them.”⁸

Angela Calabrese Barton and Edna Tan use framework of figured worlds to explore how younger students’ identities play a role in the students’ overall engagement in the process of learning, in both formal and informal settings.⁹ Through their research, Barton and Tan note that the students’ identities are “situationally contingent and under constant transformation.”¹⁰ Similarly, Luis Urrieta uses figured worlds to examine how a group of Mexican-Americans developed identities as activist educators.¹¹ Urrieta’s research explains that, through participation in communities or figured worlds, “people can reconceptualize who they are, or shift in who they understand themselves to be.”¹² Furthermore, Urrieta writes, as individuals participate in these figured worlds, they also “come to understand

their ability to craft their future participation” in their figured worlds.¹³

This extremely brief treatment of the concept of figured worlds serves to open up the discussion of the significance of individual identities during organizational change. Numerous studies in the library and information science literature have focused on professional identities of librarians, but, like studies on organizational change, many of these studies take place on the macro level, or discuss outside perceptions of the library profession.¹⁴ The concept of figured worlds helps us understand that individuals’ identities and interpretations of their figured worlds are all different and constantly changing. Even if a figured world is highly scripted or rigidly structured, Urrieta reminds us that figured worlds are always in a state of transition.¹⁵ This is an important piece of the conversation related to organizational change within libraries. Skill sets are not the only components that need updating as academic libraries evolve in new directions; library professionals’ different experiences and outlooks influence their understandings of the library profession, their institution, and their role(s) within these figured worlds. Library professionals in the same institution may have very different self-identities and interpretations of their surrounding world. Holland and the other researchers who have used her work to explore identity and community were successful in helping individuals “imagine and create new ways of being” by recognizing and respecting the identities that individuals have built, and using communities to shift those identities into something more constructive for both the individual and their surrounding community.¹⁶

Psychology Perspectives

Predictably, the world of psychology may have the most to say on human behavior and reactions to change. In fact, much of the literature in the field of management related to workplace change relies heavily on psychological research. There are many areas within psychology that focus on adaptability and change, but two areas of thought seem particularly

relevant to this discussion of organizational change in libraries. Carl Rogers' person-centered approach and research related to individual resiliency represent two very different but significant areas of psychological research that can contribute to a larger discussion of organizational change.

Rogers' person-centered approach originated in the realm of counseling and psychotherapy but since being developed in the 1940s has been applied across many different disciplines and professions. In his foundational work entitled *On becoming a person*, Rogers explores how therapy can help individuals change, recover from stress more quickly, become more adaptive, and become "more able to meet situations creatively."¹⁷ Rogers' hypothesis that therapists can encourage personal growth by creating relationships with clients that are characterized by genuineness, transparency, acceptance, and sensitivity is one that can shape relationships in any context. Indeed, Rogers himself writes that this hypothesis "offers exciting possibilities for the development of creative, adaptive, autonomous persons" in school settings, industrial settings, or even military settings.¹⁸

Like Holland's figured worlds, Rogers' person-centered approach is a huge idea that researchers in a variety of fields have embraced and studied. Rogers calls any relationship that promotes the growth, development, and improvement of a person or a group a "helping relationship."¹⁹ Defining the characteristics that make these helping relationships successful, Rogers cites trust, being understood, and a feeling of independence as critical components in helping relationships supported clients, pupils, or employees to grow or improve.²⁰ Rogers' work provides insight on how genuine and respectful interactions with individuals may open them up to the possibility of change and support them through the change process.

Next, in her work on "thriving," Virginia O'Leary explains how individuals experience and adapt to change, outlining three foundational models of resiliency: the compensatory model, the challenge model, and the protective factor model.²¹ The compensatory model identifies personal characteristics that directly

lower risk associated with change, such as personal optimism or a strong faith. The challenge model of resiliency describes a situation that treats the stressor or challenge as something that will ultimately strengthen individuals' ability to adapt and prepare individuals for the next change they may experience. Interestingly, one researcher compared the process in the challenge model to an inoculation that prepares people to deal with future exposures to change.²² The third model of resiliency that O'Leary describes, the protective factor model, refers to indirect factors such as socioeconomic status or family stability that may ultimately lower a person's risk associated with challenges or change. O'Leary is quick to note that although these models of and factors related to resiliency are all different, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.²³ Ultimately, though, this research reveals that many personal and social factors affect how well an individual reacts to change or a challenge.

Perhaps more importantly, O'Leary and Jeanette Ickovics also identify four different ways that individuals may respond when confronted with change or a challenge; individuals may succumb, survive, recover, or thrive.²⁴ Succumbing and recovery are both states where individuals function below their pre-change or pre-challenge levels. Recovery refers to the individual's return to their pre-challenge level, and thriving, which is the desired outcome, means that individuals have enhanced their level of functioning or state of being. O'Leary's research indicates that change events, like organizational change, can be beneficial and help individuals ultimately become more flexible and more skilled at navigating challenges. However, research on resiliency also emphasizes how personal the experience of change really is.

These perspectives from psychology offer the library world some specific frameworks for thinking about organizational change by offering insight into the sort of factors that play roles in how individuals experience change. First of all, the concept of thriving, rather than simply recovering or surviving, is inspirational; libraries will continue to evolve, and adaptability is a characteristic that library professionals must

have in order to continue to succeed. Similarly, the challenge model of resiliency suggests that it is possible for individuals to be strengthened by engaging in the change process. As the protective factor model describes, the idea that library leaders can help “inoculate” workers against the possibility of succumbing to change in the future exposing them to and supporting them through manageable changes is also encouraging. Furthermore, through his person-centered approach, Rogers offers guidelines for using organizational change to benefit both the individual and the organization. Rogers’ work, in particular, makes it clear that focusing on strengthening the individual will ultimately strengthen the entire organization.

Management Perspectives

The field of leadership and management studies offers a large body of literature on organizational change. However, as Parent notes in her dissertation, much research on change focuses on organization-level change and not on the individuals involved.²⁵ Indeed, just as Holland’s work focuses on the unique self-understandings that individuals bring to their communities, Parent’s research focuses on individual characteristics that influence how, and to what extent, people adapt to change in the workplace. Her literature review reveals that changes in the workplace can be traumatic for individuals as they force individuals to develop new schemas about the world.²⁶ Similar to Holland’s figured worlds framework, the idea of personal schemas, or mental models about the way the world works, helps explain how people perceive their individual roles in communities and organizations. It is clear, though, that different individuals experience different levels of success adapting to change and to reconstructing their schemas and identities. The research makes it equally clear that adaptability in individual employees is essential for successful organizational change.

Parent’s research identifies four personal characteristics that influence an individual’s adaptability: optimism, self-esteem, locus of control, and previous transition experience.²⁷ In multiple studies, Parent

found optimism to be the most significant personal predisposition linked to a person’s ability to adapt to changes in the workplace.²⁸ The study and discussion of personal characteristics, personality, and dispositions, however, remains solidly in the world of psychology, where these factors are considered in research related to individual resiliency. The management perspective focuses on specific strategies that organizations can employ in order to empower and enable individuals to better adapt to change. Parent uses the phrase “organizational factors” to describe general categories of these strategies.

Parent draws from role theory, studies of career resiliency, and research on individual resiliency to arrive at the four organizational factors that impact an individual’s ability and likelihood to adapt. These factors include: perceived social support, role clarity, receipt of information about the change, and amount of participation.²⁹ In her own research, Parent examined both personal factors and organizational factors across five different workplaces, including a public library, and found that amount of participation was the strongest indicator of adaptability.³⁰ She links participative decision making to the empowerment of employees, summarizing her research with a well-known quote from Rosabeth Moss Kanter stating that “change is disturbing when done to us, but exhilarating when done by us.”³¹

Where anthropology and psychology offer big ideas related to personal growth and adaptability to change, research from management offers library leaders specific, practical strategies for managing change at the individual level. Offering opportunities for individuals to participate in a transparent change process appears to be key, which is promising for change occurring at the library level. Even when change may be initiated in a library organization because of outside forces, such as lack of funding or institutional priorities, the findings from management research indicate that offering individuals the opportunity to participate in decisions related to solutions and paths forward will support the likelihood of individuals thriving throughout the change.

Learning Perspectives

Finally, perspectives from the field of education offer ideas related to human learning, which plays a role in the ability of individuals to respond to change and adapt to new environments and structures. Specifically, Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave co-wrote a well-known book, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Wenger and Lave each brought their own perspectives to this work; Lave, originally trained as an anthropologist, brought the concept of “practice learning” to the collaboration, and Wenger, a computer scientist brought his social theory of learning. Although Wenger and Lave come from very different traditions, their work has heavily influenced learning theory, which is why their work is classified here as a “learning” perspective.

Lave’s work on practice learning views learning as “a process of changing understanding in practice.”³² She critiques classroom learning as decontextualized from the “lived-in world,” noting that people learn through community and through activities, and that “people in activity are skillful at...helping each other to participate in changing ways in a changing world.”³³ Similarly, Wenger’s social theory of learning looks at social participation as part of the process of learning and knowing. Because of this, Wenger does not view learning as a separate activity that individuals can stop or start at any given moment. Rather, Wenger offers his social theory of learning as a way of thinking about learning by “engaging in and contributing to the practices of...communities.”³⁴ The social theory of learning is related to the concept of communities of practice, which Wenger also developed. Essentially, Wenger argues that individuals learn by engaging and participating in various communities. Wenger would classify organizational change as a time “when learning is intensified” because it may “shake our sense of familiarity” or offer an “opportunity to engage in new practices.”³⁵ This theory is similar to Holland’s figured worlds concept, as it emphasizes participation in communities as a way of making meaning out of the world and developing a sense of identity.

Lave and Wenger worked together on their theory of situated learning, which essentially argues that individuals learn through social activities and in communities.³⁶ Unlike acquiring knowledge or skills by reading about them or going through a training, situated learning emphasizes that people learn from each other, and through activity in specific contexts. Students working toward a degree and taking classes as part of what Lave would call a decontextualized learning situation may experience situated learning if they have the opportunity to learn in a real-world setting; a good example of this is medical students interning in a hospital. For organizational change in libraries, situated learning emphasizes the importance of people working together and learning from each other in day-to-day practice, rather than simply going through training sessions or workshops on an emerging topic. This is a significant perspective to consider when library professionals are being asked to fill new roles, offer new services, or gain new skills in order to help their library grow and evolve.

Implications for Managing Change, Learning, and Growth in Libraries

Each of the perspectives explored here should offer library leaders evidence that different individuals experience change very differently. Additionally, these perspectives indicate that change, when managed well, can help both organizations and individuals grow and thrive. Although these perspectives come from different disciplines and may use different vocabularies to discuss learning, change, growth, and adaptability, there are a number of considerations and ideas that appear multiple times throughout these perspectives that start to provide a picture of what an interdisciplinary portrait of change managed well might look like.

First and foremost, each of the perspectives explored here acknowledges the significance of accepting and respecting the unique individual. To borrow from Rogers, organizational change needs to be “person-centered” in order to take advantage of the strengths and opportunities for growth that each individual brings. Rogers writes about administrators cre-

ating a climate that builds self-directed and adaptive employees.³⁷ Constructing relationships within the workplace that are authentic, empathic, and transparent can be challenging and even scary, but also, according to Rogers, essential for change to really occur at both the individual and the organizational levels.³⁸

Next, the concept of identity appears in nearly each of these interdisciplinary perspectives. For Holland, an identity is a construct that is constantly transforming based on the way a person understands the communities of which he is a part; similarly, Lave and Wenger both view learning as closely tied to the way individuals view themselves and participate in the communities of which they are a part. Rogers writes about therapy clients and students needing to develop a consciousness of their real selves before change can occur, and O'Leary points to role clarity as an important organizational factor in individual adaptation. For the library world, identity is a significant consideration. It is not only new skills that library professionals need to build as libraries evolve; library professionals need to understand and embrace transformations in their identities and mindsets. Library leaders need to be aware that identity shifting is a process that helps library professionals make sense of the changes taking place and be able to conceptualize their place in the changing world.

Finally, many of these perspectives on change and adaptation emphasize individual participation in change processes. Parent highlights participative decision making as the strongest indicator of worker adaptability to changing work environments.³⁹ Rogers writes about freedom as an important condition in "helping relationships," since freedom can empower people to explore themselves and provide real self-direction.⁴⁰ Lave and Wenger emphasize the individual's participation in a community as a, and perhaps the only real, learning tool. The word that Holland uses for this type of participation and empowerment is "agency;" she also uses the term "self-direction" to explain the power of individuals being able to participate in the evolution of their own future. Identity and participation are entwined concepts, since they

alternately enable and shape the other. If library leaders fail to consider both identity and individual participation in the process of organizational change, individuals may get left behind in the change, succumb to the challenges associated with change, and miss opportunities to grow themselves and their organization.

Re-envisioning Organizational Change in Libraries

When publications like the *Ithaka S+R US Library Survey 2013* report that library directors are focusing on library staff during times of change, it is often in the context of library staff learning new skills to respond to changes. After exploring different disciplinary perspectives on change and growth, we know that true transformation takes into account the whole person and individuals' social structures, and is an ongoing process. Successful organizational change may use a variety of approaches to respect and support the individual as they adapt to and participate in the changes surrounding them. The ideas of reflective practice and communities of practice provide two examples of these approaches that have been used in a variety of professions, and demonstrate that individuals can be supported at different levels throughout the organization.

Reflective Practice

Many professions that rely on practitioners to be adaptive and to continuously learning rely on reflective practice to help professionals manage constant change. Professionals in the field of health care and medicine, teaching, and finance, for example, use reflective practice to keep up with profession trends and continue their professional growth. In his book on reflective practice, Donald Schon defines reflective practice as a process that can help professionals keep up with the changes that their professions may be demanding of them.⁴¹ Schon points to competing images of the professional role, competing values in a profession, and shifting standards of knowledge and skill as components that make it difficult to in-

dividuals to grow with their professions.⁴² In general, the idea is that professionals who take time to reflect on their actions and connect their actions back with professional philosophies or goals are able to become self-aware and gain insights that allow them to deal more effectively with future complex situations.⁴³

In the academic library setting, reflective practice may take a number of different forms. Journaling, or even blogging, can represent a form of reflective practice, if a professional is consciously thinking about his work, and how it may be evolving or changing. Other models of reflection may be more structured, such as the model developed by Christopher Johns, where a professionals share reflections with colleagues or mentors.⁴⁴ Reflective practice gives professionals time, space, and possibly even the social support for transforming their identities and growing their capacity for change. By encouraging reflective practice for the individuals in their libraries, library leaders could assist library professionals as they consider their new roles and identities in the profession. Furthermore, as reflective practice helps professionals think through complex situations, it prepares them to be able to participate in change movements and decision making processes.

Communities of Practice

Professions that require practitioners to continually learn and grow often use communities of practice to facilitate innovation. Wenger defines a community of practice a community with mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.⁴⁵ While Wenger (1998) specifically states that a community of practice is not a synonym for a group or a team, a small group or team can certainly become a community of practice by engaging in the shared vision and team learning discussed by Senge (p. 74). Significantly, Wenger emphasizes the fact that communities of practice negotiate their own learning and growth, and that outside factors or powers have no direct influence over a true community of practice. Wenger warns that “communities of practice are a force to be reckoned with...as a locus of engagement in action, interper-

sonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises.”⁴⁶

For a *Harvard Business Review* article, Wenger identifies two examples of communities of practice in action: line technicians at a pet food plant and consultants at Hewlett-Packard.⁴⁷ At the pet food plant, the line technicians wanted to install a new technology that managers did not understand. The community of practice worked together to gather evidence and hone a proposal that was eventually accepted by management. At Hewlett-Packard, consultants came together and identified common problems that they are able to work together to solve. In both examples, professionals participating in the communities of practice were learning together and ultimately re-shaping their shared practices.

Examples of communities of practice can be found in the library literature, and it is clear how communities of practice can help individuals adapt to change.⁴⁸ Library leaders can provide the infrastructure for supporting and encouraging communities of practice within their libraries by legitimizing them, providing resources for them, and rewarding the collaboration that occurs within them.⁴⁹ Providing the infrastructure could be something as simple as providing time during the workday for library professionals to meet and talk or identifying a specific project that a community of practice could collaboratively complete. Communities of practice recognize the importance of the individual, since each person brings and shares their expertise, but also emphasize participation and engagement. In this sense, communities of practice integrate many of the elements that are central to an individual’s ability to adapt to change. In addition to supporting individuals through change, communities of practice, as seen in the examples here, often help entire organizations improve. The organizations improve because the communities are tackling problems that are tricky and complicated, but they also improve because the individuals within the communities of practice are strengthened through their interactions and better prepared to transcend new challenges.

Conclusion

The individual is the foundation of the organization and an important building block in organizational change. Many disciplinary perspectives note the difficulty that individuals can experience when they are confronted with change, but these perspectives also offer solutions that academic libraries going through major change can apply. It is important for library leaders to understand the different factors that impact an individual's ability to adapt to change. However, it is just as important for library leaders to enable and empower individuals in their organizations to enact change, as the role of change agent is one that librarians increasingly will play in the future. Furthermore, it is imperative that library leaders offer the professionals in their organizations opportunities to learn, grow, and redefine themselves as part of their professional practice so that they will be able to both react to and enact ongoing change. In the largest sense, libraries are institutions devoted to advancing learning and knowledge. Library organizations should also be this for the individuals that work in them, and this starts when library leaders view each employee as a learner and an active contributor to the transformation of the organization.

Notes

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