

A Center for Learning¹

Introduction

I suppose that “center for learning” is an extremely broad phrase, covering an infinitely large combination of characteristics. These characteristics might include the size of the learning community, culture, educational and income levels, geography etc. Centers address common issues (e.g., the interlibrary loan of books, news groups, blogs and wikis).

The center of learning I have in mind is represented by a town library, a designation which may not convey the range of value this type of center can bring to the community. The point of view I take is that of a reasonably well-read, well-traveled, critically thinking lay person.²

Point of Departure

Life long learning has emerged, for me, as a critical characteristic of a well-lived life.

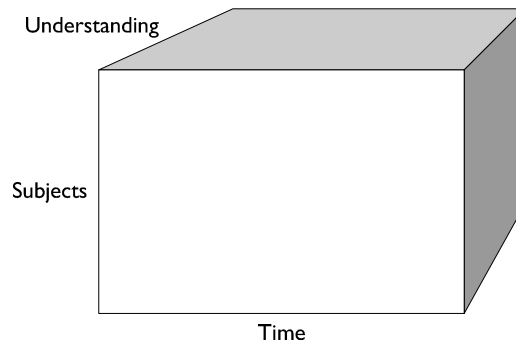


Figure 1 Learning Space

Various centers of learning have been employed as I have traversed through the learning space; parents, schools and universities, mentors, the world (?). What characterizes all of these centers, except for the schools and universities, is that their involvement has been *ad hoc*. But this is my point of view. Suppose, in reality, that all these centers were prepared for me to walk across their transom? That while our encounter was a matter of chance, perhaps the odds of the encounter were favorable. That is, the centers anticipated my arrival as well as my wants and needs.

The tools of learning or the mechanisms connecting me with the centers changed over time. AM radio now has all sorts of companions (e.g., Internet). The manner of using these tools has changed

This leaves me wondering about the characteristics of the centers of learning that will sustain me in the future.

The Town Library

When I was a child, the town library³ was a place that held books staffed by a very nice lady (never a man) who helped to find interesting books, check them out, and take your pennies when the book was overdue.

¹ This thought piece is prompted by a number of conversations with Maxine Bleiweis, Executive Director of the Westport Public Library.

² Readers can decide for themselves the veracity of this statement through a review of my website, jmsdrgn.squarespace.com.

³ Virginia, Illinois

Today's town library⁴ is a much richer environment. It has become an intellectual watering hole teeming with all sorts of species. It continues to be book-centric, but now taps into all sorts of additional data and information sources. Films, games, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, and the intellectual species are all an active part of the learning mix. The library provides meeting space for large and small groups. It is an exhibition space for various subjects. The value it provides is indicated by number of people who come through its doors and, sad to say, the number of people turned away because the capability and capacity to serve them is not there.

The library is defined by its physical space, what fills that space (i.e., data, information, knowledge, capability, capacity), and the manner in which the filling is deployed to meet the needs and wants of the community.

Learning

While learning does exist for its own sake – I want to know because I want to know – it also more importantly ought to be considered as part of larger framework.

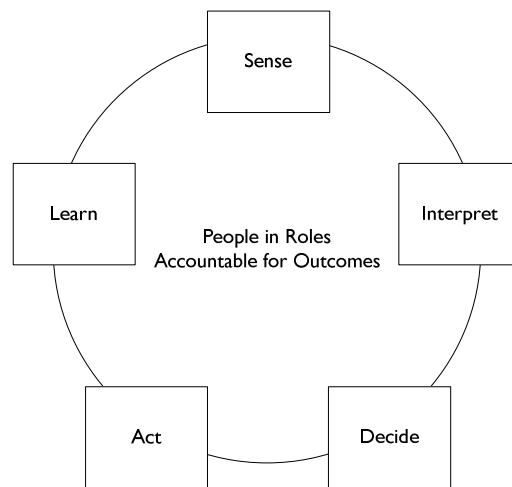


Figure 2 SIDAL Loop⁵

I suggest that it is useful to look at the role and responsibility of the library (I think I will call it the TLC, Town Learning Center, from this point forward) in this model in terms of the distribution of data, information, knowledge, capability, and capacity.

It may be useful to interject additional explanation of what I mean by data, information, and knowledge.

⁴ Westport, Connecticut

⁵ Adapted from Stephan H. Haecel and Adrian J. Slywotzky, *Adaptive Enterprise: Creating and Leading Sense-and-Respond Organizations* (Harvard Business School Press, 1999) 0-875-84874-5.

Data, information, and knowledge are not identical.⁶

The difference between data, information and knowledge

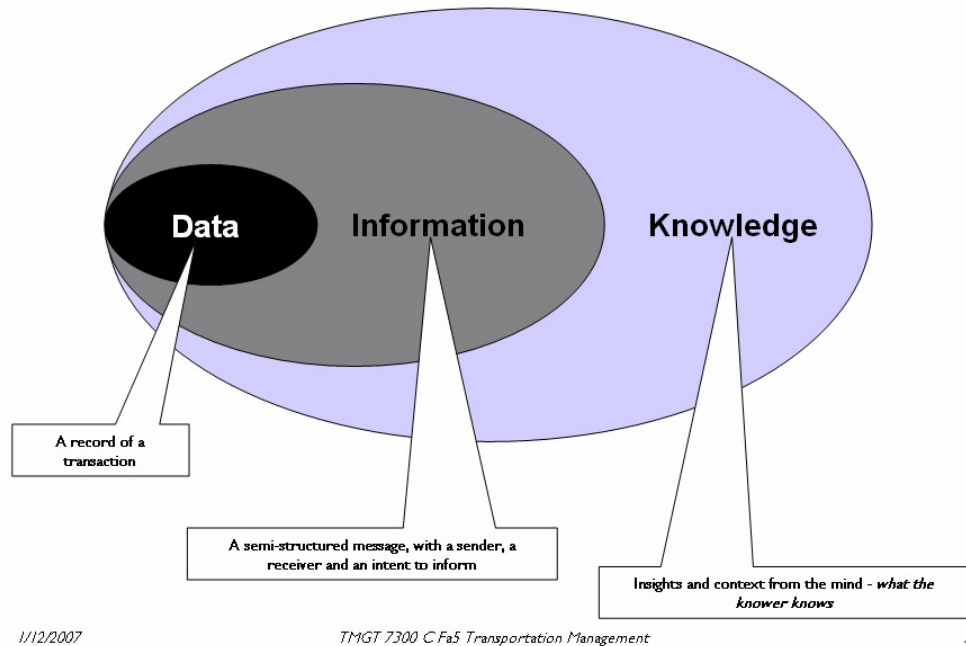


Figure 3 The Difference Between Data, Information and Knowledge

Some points:

1. Data is a prerequisite for information and information is a prerequisite for knowledge. This places a premium on the correctness of the data. Data are attributes of objects (e.g., age of a person, location of a shipment).
2. The cost of acquisition of data, and subsequent development of information and knowledge increase as one moves from the left to the right in Figure 3.
3. The value of decisions made on the basis of data, information, and knowledge increases as one moves from the left to the right in Figure 3.
4. Human involvement in an information system increases as one moves from left to the right in Figure 3.

The skills and experience required of the human to be an effective participant in an information system increases as one moves from left to the right in Figure 3. The apprentices are to the left, the adepts to right.

This distinction becomes important when thinking about capability and capacity.

⁶ J. Drogan, 11. Information Management and Technology, August 2005

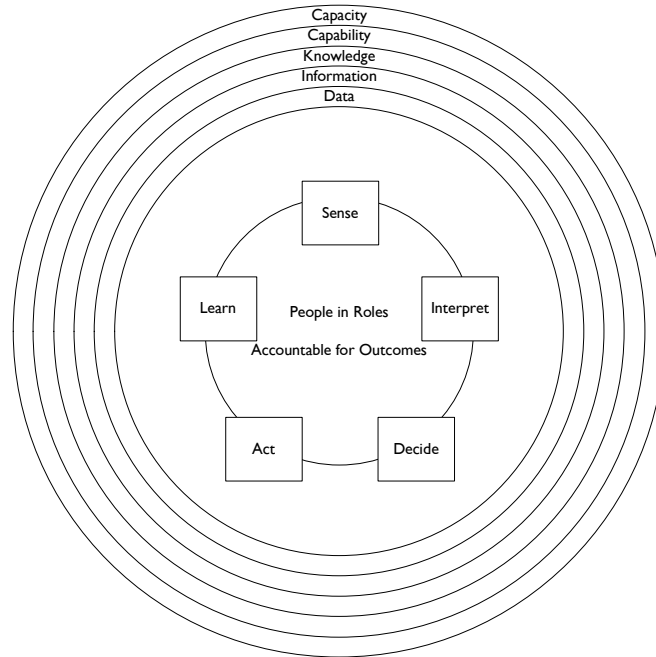


Figure 4 SIDAL and TLC

How would one distribute data, information, knowledge, capability, and capacity about SIDAL today?
 What should be the distribution for tomorrow?

One cannot be all things to all people. The topics of interest and level of interest in these topics exhibited by the TLC community serve as a guide to how these five items should be developed. I suspect that this guidance is, for the most part, contemporary. Contemporary today may not be contemporary tomorrow. There thus needs to be some capability to identify emerging issues and plan for addressing these coincident with the development of their importance in the community. I suppose we could think of this as establishing a TLC culture that is adaptive and just-in-time.

People

The TLC focus is on providing a high quality learning environment for its customers – the people who walk through the doors, be the doors be real or virtual. It's these customers that should be the focus of the TLC.

There are two other groups of people that also need to find satisfaction in their relationship with the TLC.

The first is the traditional full-time staff and part-time volunteers.

The second is an extended network of topic expertise. It's important that the traditional full-time staff and part-time volunteers know what they know, know what they don't know, and know who knows what they don't know.⁷ These communities of expertise become increasingly critical as one moves from left to right in Figure 3 The Difference Between Data, Information and Knowledge.

There needs to be a clear understanding of the satisfiers and dissatisfiers of each of these groups of people as input into designing the TLC experience.

⁷ Adapted from Drogan's First Law, <http://jmsdrn.squarespace.com/drogans-laws/> [August 19, 2007]

Support

Information system support will be a critical success factor for the TLC. Continuing discussion of the issues on the of interest will be critical in building, sustaining, and growing the communities of interest.

Physical Space

I don't quite no any other way to say this other than an essential characteristic of the physical space should be its dynamism, its ability to be easily reconfigured to meet the needs of the community. One might even begin to think how one adds a substantial chunk of physical space to the existing space. Not everyone is going to want to walk in a virtual world.

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