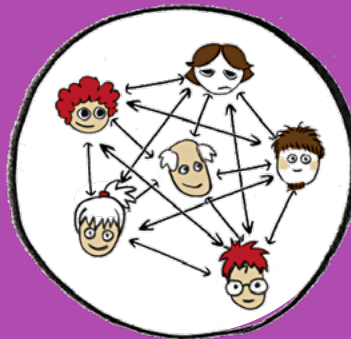


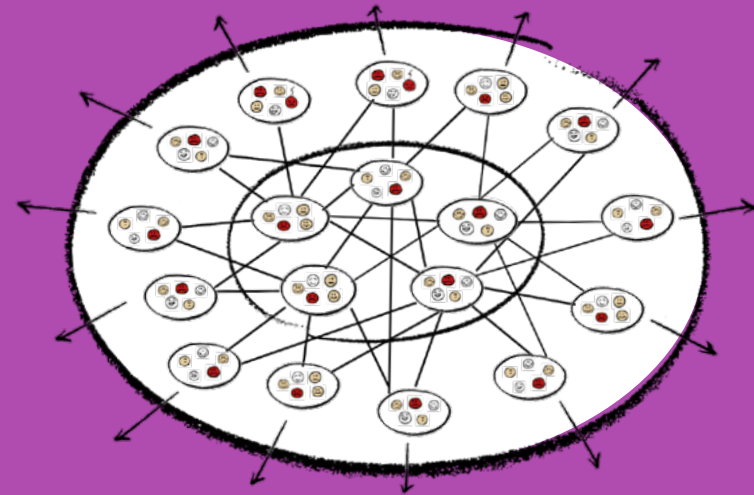
# The small group miracle: Where learning & performance meet



*Crowd*



*Small group*



*Large group/Organization*

**For any company, it is lovely and swell when its individual members learn. It is far better, however, when a company benefits from the learning of its individual members, or associates: When interactions get reconfigured, and when a positive impact on the dynamics of *performing-with-each-other-for-each-other* becomes pretty much inevitable, due to *insight, practicing, and increasing mastery* of the learners. In this paper, we will discuss why a close coupling of learning and organizational development is impossible without disciplined learning within self-organized, small groups. And why making use of such small groups is the only way out of the effectiveness dilemma that most Learning & Development is facing today.**

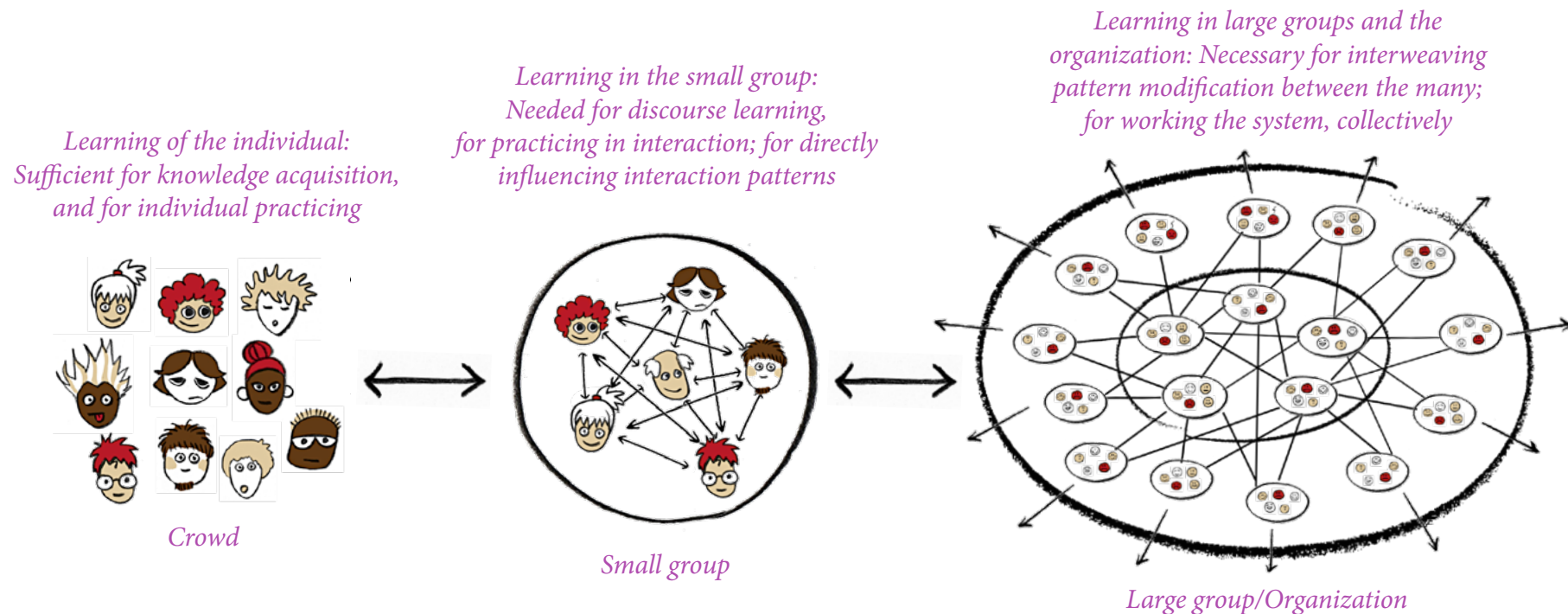
Since the groundbreaking contributions of pioneers like [Peter Senge, in the early 1990s](#), players in the Learning & Development (L&D) scene have been faced with something of a dilemma: On the one hand, they have to routinely postulate the connection between individual learning and organizational impact in their formats, tools and activities. On the other hand, upon closely observing the learning and development methods that are actually in use, that postulated connection can hardly ever be credibly proven. So, even three decades after Senge's extraordinarily insightful book [The Fifth Discipline](#), the L&D industry still finds it hard to prove its effectiveness and value.

Despite all kinds of technological advances, and growing interest around learning analytics and measurement, not much has changed about this unfortunate situation. Put differently: We constantly hope that the learning done by individual actors or certain groups of people (through leadership development, high potentials programs, talent programs) will "somehow" have an impact on our organizations. But most approaches to

learning offer little more than this hope. For decades, seminars, training courses and development programs have suffered from the stigma that they "actually produce little or no learning, if we're honest". Sadly, much the same must be said of [knowledge management](#) and [learning management systems \(LMS\) approaches](#), [e-learning](#), [blended learning](#) and [social learning](#): As soon as the fog of exaggerated hopes about a new wave of educational technology ([EdTech](#)) products lifts, the euphoria quickly gives way to disillusionment. We have to admit that organizations have not even remotely solved their learning problem to date.

### **Organizations cannot *actually* learn. But that doesn't have to stop us**

Organizations and groups of people cannot learn in the cognitive sense, of course: They don't have a brain - consequently, they do not have a cognition of their own either. So when we speak of *organizational learning* or *group learning*, this is always to be understood metaphorically. In oth-



er words, while groups and organizations cannot *learn*, strictly speaking, they can *develop*. Within social groups, development unfolds in the sense that their constellations and patterns of action or interaction change, reconfigure or become modified. Groups and organizations change by *changing interactions between the parts* (primarily between their members). This communicative change takes place continuously, relentlessly, incessantly and without pause: Groups and organizations are in constant flux and development - intentionally or unintentionally!

Consequently, we can say that *change is. Development is*. So when we speak of organizational learning and development, we don't mean just any kind of change. Instead, what we mean is *intentional changes in patterns*

that unfolds through the learning of the individual actors and through change in constellations and behaviors, triggered by the dynamics of discourse learning and learning within relationship networks.

### **Discourse learning and whole-network development: They are two sides of the same coin**

The holy grail of learning in the context of work and organizations lies in formats and tools capable of unleashing learning on three levels: On the level of the individual human, the level of the group, and the level of the organization. Simultaneously – not consecutively! And not just hypothetically, but rather extremely practically. How such discourse learning,

or networked learning, works in the *with-each-other-for-each-other* of relatively small groups as part of a large group or organization, can be observed particularly well in large group methods such as [OpenSpace](#). Because here, the constant exchange between small groups and the large group, between intimate discourse and coffee break or plenary takes place in the physical space: The self-organized, naturally flowing exchange between formats and the most diverse constellations is especially visible in the OpenSpace format. Qomenius, however, places the small group of four, five or six learners - called a *Circle* - at the center of its didactics.

Putting the small group of learners at the center allows to transfer intensive interaction and discourse into the virtual space. The dense coupling of the three levels of the individual, the small group, and the organization is made possible by the fact that:

1. Individual learners and the group are coupled within the individual Circle.
2. Discourse among and between Circles running in parallel can *swap over and interweave*. This, in turn, allows uniting learning and organizational development, and make it one: The discourse learning becomes valuable for every learning member of the organization and for the organizational as a whole. The larger the amount of Circles running in parallel, the better.

### **Individual, small group, organization: How discourse produces impact on three levels**

In the following, we will examine the mechanisms of action on the three levels in more detail.

- *Learning of the individual*: This learning arises through the development of cognition, insight and emotion, as well as the generation of individual knowledge and abilities. This type of learning occurs when we read a book or professional article. When we watch a Youtube video. While we listen to a podcast episode. While we practice on a problem or project. While we exercise to develop a skill. Here, the guidance of a *master*, in the sense of a *person with mastery aiding at undergoing disciplined practice*, is often of great importance. It should be noted that people only want to learn if the learning is somehow personally relevant and attractive to them. It needs to be *inviting*.
- *Learning in the small group ("Circle")*: But let's be clear: Several individual learners added up do not make a group that learns! They would be just a bunch, or a crowd of learners! A small learning group differs from the learning crowd in that the individuals have made an active decision to learn together, or *with-each-other-for-each-other*. Such personal decisions of the learners are a prerequisite for their participation in any Qomenius Circle. In addition to building up individual knowledge and abilities (as described above), the Qomenius Circle allows interpersonal discourse and changes in interaction patterns to unfold. Patterns can be exercised, shared insight established and implicit agreement be attained. The small group thus enables additional *relationship learning*. On the one hand. On the other hand, intensive discussion of the content within the group produces shared knowledge and insight, aided by the intimate social process within Qomenius sessions and *Cycles* (rounds of 5 learning sessions each). This form of learning improves the quality of communication and interaction within the group over time. The following point cannot

be emphasized enough: Such intense learning experience can only unfold within small groups of interactive learning. We define a small group as consisting of four, five or six people. No more, but also no less. Because it is in a mixed, relatively diverse group that the exchange is most intensive. Social density unfolds when group heterogeneity is sufficient, and when all group members can have their say at any time.

- *Learning in the large group and the organization:* When many Circles (small learning groups) become active within discourse learning in an organization, then it is inevitable that the learning experiences from the individual circles will be *interwoven*. The “spillover” of the discourse from the small groups to the large group is caused, among other things, by the fact that the learners’ cognitive dissonances are not (fully) resolved in the 90 minutes of each Qomenius session: learners end their sessions *in intellectual and emotional tension*. They leave their sessions *positively aroused*, so to speak. For this reason, informal conversations following the sessions are typical and desired, but of course by no means mandatory. Such conversations can take place within the Circle groups, but they naturally also happen with other colleagues as well. Because participants feel the need to *resolve their cognitive dissonances* caused throughout the Qomenius sessions while in conversation with other group members. Participants will naturally feel an urge to socialize the topics they have worked on, the session content and the content’s meaning. And also about the context of their real work environment, which is always actively examined throughout Qomenius sessions, too. In short: The informal exchange and discussion beyond the 90-minute Qomenius sessions is unavoidable. It is this inevitable, and purposeful continua-

tion of the session learning that leads to collective pattern formation and processing. To socialization of new insight and behaviors.

A prerequisite for intense networked, or interwoven learning is the simultaneity of insight development within individual learning groups, triggered by intensive discourse in the individual sessions. And through the largest possible number of Circles running in parallel.

In addition to Qomenius Circles, the learning in a large group or in an organization can be fueled by additional group learning formats. Various organizational formats can be used, which we have described [in other publications](#). In the context of this paper, *knowledge conferences* based upon the OpenSpace format, *tandem conversations*, *communities of problems* and *preparation wheels* should be mentioned in particular - to name just a few examples.

### **Discourse learning and network learning require authorization**

As we have shown, the self-organized small learning group is the key to ongoing, intentional development of social constellations both large and small. When a large number of learners in many small groups of an organization get active within discursive learning processes, learning *with-each-other-for-each-other*, i.e. if many are active and are developing in resonance with one another, then the organization *learns*, after all - even though it technically cannot: then shared assumptions, options for action, agreements and communication patterns between the actors shift. Very practically.

In order for this to happen, Qomenius beings with a feature that would

should be considered indispensable in all trainings, courses, learning events and development programs, but which is almost always missing. That feature is *authorization to put into practice what has been learned*. Put differently: the systematic, conscious opening of an *authorized space* for personal development, which can and should have an organizational impact. Such intentional organizational development must be wanted and authorized in Qomenius, right from the outset. Authorization and articulated intent do not take place at the end, or at some point in the process - but at the beginning of discourse learning. For this purpose, the use of Qomenius always requires the role of the *Sponsor*: a person from within the organization who formally issues an *invitation* to learn through discourse and who authorizes both the learning itself and its impacts. Formally and officially. Right from the start.

Why is a *Sponsor* required, why is *authorization* necessary? The didactics of Qomenius spark a type of conversation that does not follow the topics of day-to-day operations and work, but they establish conversations that concern the fundamentals. Debates on developmental issues like these occasionally flare up in most companies, of course. But they rarely encounter a continuously open space in which they can resonate. As a result, discourse about the quality and the design of relationships, about the effectiveness of collaboration and the organizational model usually remains sporadic. A continuity of organizational insight and learning can only be achieved if the learning in collective discussions about developmental topics is perceived as relevant and interesting - the carefully curated *content* of the Qomenius modules ensures this. And if those discussions are noticeably wanted, or desired, within the organization. This requires formal authorization by the figure of the *Sponsor*.

## Invitation & voluntary participation: The only route to self-organized learning ecosystems that scale

The fact that a Sponsor invites the learners ensures that the learners' participation in Qomenius Circles is *strictly voluntary*. Combined with the principle of self-organization of the learners within their small groups, the concept of voluntarily participation (or voluntary non-participation) means that such a format is infinitely scalable to thousands, or tens of thousands of learners. While a high level of commitment from each individual learner can be expected.

As we have seen, the *scaling* matters, in terms of impact on performance: Because reaching a critical mass of learners in small learning groups is essential if the effect of learning on value-adding interaction is supposed to emerge fully. If all of these conditions are met: *voluntariness, self-organization in small learning groups, the right learning content, the right didactics, a continuously sufficient mass of learners* - then limitless "development and performance magic" can unfold within an organization.

There is more to learning within small groups, though. If we manage to take full advantage of the *small group miracle*, then many previously common, and often largely ineffective methods or repertoires of change management and organizational development may become entirely dispensable. This also means: We can break the sound barrier to the highest possible impact on our organizations if we consistently commit ourselves to permanent learning *with-each-other-for-each-other*, within self-organized group formats. The key to this developmental power, which can only be unlocked in collective resonance, and in complete absence of coercion or repression, is the self-organized small group that learns. **qo**

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