

The future of organizational learning is discursive & self-organized



Workplace learning is not a particularly thrilling adventure these days: Learning in organizations overwhelmingly relies on aged and worn-out formats that produce little learning or impact. The tools in use are often not fit for our time - in terms of content, or learning method, or technology - or all three combined. One cannot help but notice that in the reality of organizations, by and large, Learning & Development (L&D) is a pretty dull affair, clearly lacking innovation. In this paper, we will discuss how that is bound to change. We believe that workplace learning can be as engaging as [Maria Montessori](#) envisioned child learning to be, over 100 years ago and as humane, effective and conducive as [Ken Robinson](#) demanded in his world-famous TED talks a few years back. Sure, the current reality of corporate learning may look bleak, but there are now signs of a way out of the L&D misery in which most companies find themselves. One of these signs is the platform created by EdTech company [qomenius](#).

A few years ago, we started looking for better and more powerful approaches to learning in organizations of all kinds. Our first joint book on organizational methods that work, [Complexitools](#), published in German language in 2015, was very much influenced by this quest for learning tools, but at the time we had not yet been able to discover convincing solutions for fully scalable organizational learning.

In the following year, 2016, we came across a new and promising idea, discovered by Niels during a stay in Montreal, Canada. There, strategy guru [Henry Mintzberg](#) (a personal hero of ours) and his business partner [Phil LeNir](#) had recently developed an approach to *peer learning* that they were commercializing through their startup [Coaching Ourselves](#). In this approach, which Mintzberg and LeNir had decided to identify as *peer coaching*, small groups of managers would get together for 90-minute,

self-organized learning sessions. During each session, the group would work through a different set of learning materials. The handouts for each 90-minute session would serve several functions: 1) provide structure; 2) supply content and questions designed to spark lively interactions, exchange and debate; and 3) provide a suitable temporal rhythm (flow) for the 90-minute session.

This beautiful core idea of *peer learning* made complete sense to us: *Have learners come together in 90-minute, small group sessions, using preconfigured learning materials, with a bare minimum of external oversight and facilitation.* It dawned on us that such 90-minute units of learning could be the fundamental building block for a contemporary, sustainable learning architecture for all kinds companies – large and small. Following [Maria Montessori's](#) insights, why should adult people at work not learn

with-each-other-for-each-other, systematically, instead of being trained by teacher-experts during seminars, courses and programs, or having individual learners cramming on-line content in isolation? The concept of peer learning could be the entry gate to a practical, conceptually sound alternative to conventional Learning & Development (L&D) formats. So there *was* light at the end of the L&D tunnel, we thought.

From peer learning among managers to multi-level workplace learning among (potentially) everyone

But we also noticed a few conceptual limitations embedded in the peer learning approach pursued by our Canadian colleagues around Henry Mintzberg. Why, we asked ourselves, should participation in small group-based, self-organized learning be restricted to just a few *managers* or executives? Were managers really the only appropriate target audience of such a development format? In principle, we wondered, why shouldn't *all* members and all teams of an organization take part in such learning, particularly since peer conversations within the same constellations that are performing the work together would likely be far more effective and powerful, in terms of *impact on performance*. Involving everyone could thus be far more valuable for the companies deploying peer learning formats.

The available content for the individual peer learning sessions got us thinking, too. While that content was poignantly presented, it seemed to us that it was somewhat too strongly influenced by current business school curricula and MBA course structures – at least in our minds. Technocratic-sounding and administrative topics influenced by functional division seemed to be too pronounced, and even dominant. We

also felt that the role of executives and top managers in decision making, strategy and motivation was intentionally exaggerated and even glorified, in the way the topics were articulated and presented.

Accordingly, we systematically considered how session topics could be structured, formulated and presented, in order for them to be of interest to potentially all working people – regardless of their work roles or activities, their professional backgrounds, qualifications, hierarchical levels, or cultural backgrounds. What would learning topics have to look like, in order to be engaging and attractive to people who need to solve new, tricky value-creation problems every day? Topics for people in need of substantive, reflected exchange with peers, so that the exchange would serve their own learning and further development? What about teams and value-adding communities of practice that wished to become more successful together? How could content be formulated that was not aimed at external control and steering by managers, but geared at consistent self-organization within highly autonomous teams? We wanted to curate the content for learning sessions in such a way that it would make sense to *every* working person, without exception. The content would also have to be challenging enough to require small group collaboration. Every session, we concluded, would have to be like a riddle – exciting and intense like a contemporary *escape room* experience.

For us, this also involved the question of how the *didactics* (or: learning method) might be designed in such a stimulating, aesthetic and varied way that interest in this type of learning format would not be exhausted or fizzle out, after a while. We wanted to ensure that every single learning session would be *cool*, fun, and relevant for real-world collaboration, so that this would not just work once or twice, but a 100 times or more.

Within a few months of working on these questions among the two of us, the concept for [LearningCircles by Red42](#) emerged. LearningCircles is a social technology that does justice to the principle of *self-organized learning for everyone*, at the interface to organizational development. In early 2019, when we had also finalized design and authorship of an initial set of learning modules for organizations, we published the LearningCircles socio-tech, by making it freely available to use by anyone, through an [open source license](#). We designed a complementary [concept overview](#) that spells out the main principles and concepts of the LearningCircles approach. We published a compact, easy-to-read [concept booklet](#) in German, in the same year, and a series of articles and [white papers](#) in English that outline context, details and guidance for practical use in companies.

From progressive socio-tech to learning platform/development ecosystem in organizations

Over the past three years, we have steadily expanded the practical applications of the LearningCircles social technology. In 2019, we used the method with corporate clients from several German-speaking countries, in two languages. Back then, we exclusively worked with physical handouts, or learning sets. We supplied our client's learning groups with individually equipped, physical boxes containing the complete learning materials needed for each session. In this version of LearningCircles, learning groups meet in groups of four, five or six people, sitting around a table together. At the beginning of the 90 minutes, the group (called a *Circle*) unseals the red box with the learning materials – and works through the printed documents, which, in addition to a handout, can include worksheets and additional resources for interaction such as card decks.

In 2020, we began, not entirely unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic, to take the LearningCircles approach into the realm of the digital. Croatian entrepreneurs [Vladimir Koren](#) and [Goran Antonović](#) played a crucial role in the transition of the concept into the virtual space. The two came up with ideas and concepts about how on-line learning modules could be used in conjunction with the most common video conferencing platforms. They developed the first software prototypes with us from scratch.

In early 2021, the first clients started using the LearningCircles web platform. The new application was used in sync with common web conferencing softwares (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WebEx and Google Meet, in particular). The international launch of the digital platform happened in Autumn 2021. We undertook a re-branding of both the company and the product in July 2022, accompanied by the launch of the platform's licensing version, which will go under the new name [qomenius](#). The LearningCircles product was renamed [ninety](#), now the ready-to-use solution in the larger digital offering. Qomenius will initially work [in six languages and together with five international partners](#), from Austria to South Korea.

Discourse learning is invitation-based, immediately relevant, and seductively interactive

Over the course of developing the Qomenius approach and platform, several important concepts of discourse learning emerged. In this paper, we would like to highlight three of these insights.

All actors decide for themselves whether they want to be active in Qomenius, or not. Learners will always be invited and never be forced to participate in qomenius. If invitees accept the invitation and become learners,

they always commit themselves to a single *Cycle* of five 90-minute sessions (no more, no less!), which they will undertake together with three to five fellow learners. This *invitation-based, voluntary participation*, combined with manageable effort and risk are both critical for generating high learning engagement.

The content of all modules is based not on exposition of facts, or story-telling, but on practical theory – groups of learners or Circles unravel the content in the light of their own reality and work context. Content must be related to the complex reality of work and value creation, as well as to self-organization principles. For discourse learning to function, and in order to achieve more than mere knowledge accumulation, it is crucial that content, interactions and questions asked foster dissent and discourse between the learners within the small group. The aim is not for everyone to agree, but to have vivid discussion. Discourse learning is therefore particularly suitable for learning in subject areas that are relevant for complex problem solving. In other words, it is ideal for all topics that require interpretation, classification, judgment, reflection and integration. Topics that can only be explored by exposing oneself to interaction with others.

The learning material for self-organized discourse learning in Qomenius can be self-created or purchased: In any case, it must encourage interaction and touch all the senses. This basic insight can well be understood as a homage to the genius of Maria Montessori. In Qomenius, that insight is reflected in each of the highly interactive learning modules. In the case of the *licensed Qomenius platform*, learning modules are developed by the licensee (qualifications in *instructional design* are offered). In the case of *Qomenius ninety*, pre-designed, proven modules are employed. All modules contain the complete learning materials for 90-minute sessions.

A focus on learning or a focus on instruction - you cannot have both

Qomenius puts learners and their learning at the center of the action—not teachers/experts, not knowledge, or a technology of conveying. This undivided focus on the learning is achieved through a unique kind of *instructional design* that constantly relates the content (which one might describe as *practical theory*) to the learners' own work, their work environments and organizational context. For sure, a prerequisite for enabling discussions about joint work reality and joint problems that learners may face is that these learners must come from the same organization. If this is the case, however, then organization-specific, context-specific insights arising from the conversation in each session can be immediately interpreted, qualified, reflected upon in the light of personal work reality, and socialized among learners within a *Circle*. In this way, the content of all learning sessions becomes immediately and personally relevant for the work. Reflection of the content thus always happens in relation to the learning group's own practice. What you learn in discourse learning is "put to use" immediately, in conversation, within the 90 minutes of a session. Which makes it about more than knowledge acquisition: It is also a way of practicing in real-time.

The learning that occurs within the small-group conversation can be effectively connected with organizational development when several or *many* learning groups work on the same contents at roughly at the same time. What was learned in one group's conversation can then link to what was learned in another group, and so become a booster for networking and joint development, within a larger group, or the entire organization.



Niels Pflaeging, co-founder at qomenius

Niels Pflaeging, Qomenius co-founder, explains: *“You might say, of course, that our learning platform is innovative. It undoubtedly is. But what is far more important to us is that it is progressive – in that our approach can elevate learning and development to a level that cannot be achieved by any other means: Discourse learning with Qomenius enables everyone who is willing to learn to acquire pretty much the same insights, and similar knowledge of the same sophisticated concepts at pretty much the same time. Qomenius scales organizational learning effectively, and in a very natural way. In addition, it provides more intense learning, is far more time-saving and climate-friendly than conventional seminars, courses, trainings or development programs.”*

Discourse-based organizational learning is not a picnic

However, the process of learning throughout a 90-minute Qomenius sessions means that learners have to make a real effort. Here, learning is *work*, or as we call it: *hard fun*. This is especially true as discourse learning will inevitably take place within a social process that is at the same time highly structured *and* highly self-organized. It is *structured* through time-boxing, conceptual input, questions, exercises, iteration and rhythm. And it is *self-organized* in a sense that everybody is there voluntarily, everybody has to make decisions for themselves (within the group context) all the time, and there is no external trainer/expert/facilitator. These and other didactic elements of discourse learning are embedded in the module’s content, but also in the setting. The well-prepared, reliable setting enables the group to engage in serious, confidential and highly topic-focused conversation, within minutes. Social density during the 90 minutes

is incredibly high. And for many reasons. A few examples of what Qomenius clients have told us about this: *“It amazes me how quickly we got into a profound conversation, during our session.”* Or: *“The sessions provide a safe place for serious discussion – without drama. This is something we very rarely experience at work.”*

Regardless of the didactics, content quality, or technology, whether serious discussion can fully unfold or not ultimately depends on the learners themselves. It is *their* responsibility to engage in the discourse within their *Circle* groups or not. In this sense, discourse learning is similar to a parlor game: The prerequisite for both parlor games and learning in conversation is that all players firstly want to take part and secondly that they play the game until the end.

Put differently, in discourse learning, there is no place for babysitting. Powerful self-organization throughout the 90-minute sessions and beyond (see [Qomenius Ebook No. 01](#)) requires bringing the principle of *self-efficacy* back into the domain of organizational learning. Learners

develop themselves and their interactions with others without interference of experts or 'management', and independent of HR managers or superiors.

This, of course, is a far cry from what we usually experience during seminars, trainings, courses and programs. The kind of dependency and external control that are common in most of today's learning formats systematically reduce identification, engagement and responsibility-taking of learners – within the learning process and beyond. On the other hand, we have all experienced the thrill of figuring out something new in a completely self-determined way, or the joy of simply "getting things done" ourselves. When we do this, satisfaction and self-efficacy increase. Discourse learning enables each and every learner to have the experience of assuming maximum responsibility for her or his own learning. We can finally hand control over the learning back to learners! It is about time. **qo**

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**Silke Hermann and Niels Pflaeging,
qomenius founders**

Niels Pflaeging is a leadership philosopher and entrepreneur. He is founder of [Red42](#), and a founder/director at [qomenius](#). He is also one of the most prolific European experts on organizational leadership and transformation. Since 2003, Niels achieved international recognition as a [speaker](#) and author, with [ten published books](#) to date. He speaks four languages fluently. Together with Silke Hermann, Niels developed a series of powerful organizational approaches, which include *Org Physics* and *Change-as-Flipping*. Among his best-selling books is the internationally acclaimed [Organize for Complexity](#). Niels' 2nd book, [Leading with Flexible Targets](#), was awarded the German Business Book Award, in 2006

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