

## A Journey towards Sustainability

### Viewing the Information Literacy Network of the Gulf Region through the Lens of P.M. Senge

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#### Abstract

This paper explores issues in developing, leading and sustaining a professional development organization in the Gulf region. Launched in December 2005, the Information Literacy Network (ILN) of the Gulf Region is an organization of librarians which supports and encourages student learning in higher education. The ILN aims to provide its members with opportunities to discuss best practices and regional challenges to developing instructional programs in information literacy. The authors outline their experience highlighting the stages of development, accomplishments and recurrent challenges of the ILN. They draw parallels between the ILN and effective 'learning organizations' as defined by P.M. Senge in his book "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization". The authors reflect on the application of Senge's framework to the ILN to identify appropriate strategies and propose a set of recommendations to ensure that the continued development of the ILN as a true learning organization.

#### Introduction

The concepts in this paper emerged from the authors' continued frustration over their inability to ensure the growth and development of the Information Literacy Network of the Gulf Region (ILN). In their role as leaders they sought a theoretical basis to examine the problems and build practical solutions. Senge's work on organizational learning<sup>1</sup> provided that framework. Peter M. Senge is the founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) and a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* which was identified in 1997 by *Harvard Business Review* as one of the seminal management books of the century. Although his work originally targeted the corporate community, his theories have been applied effectively to many varied organizational structures.

The ILN was launched in December 2005, as an informal organization of librarians which supports and encourages student learning in higher education. This professional development initiative began as a collaborative endeavor led by a small group of academic librarians in the region. Although in the context of the Gulf region, the ILN is an informal network rather than a formally constituted organization, the authors view it as a *learning organization* as described by

Senge. Acknowledging Senge's terminology, the authors refer to the ILN as both the Network and the 'organization' using the terms interchangeably throughout this paper.

During the inaugural ILN meeting in 2005, representatives from many universities (listed in Appendix A) expressed common wishes for the future of the Network which resulted in a *shared vision* described by Senge as, "... a shared picture of the future we seek to create."<sup>2</sup> The common objective was to provide opportunities to discuss regional challenges and best practices in information literacy and to share relevant theory and activities which participants could apply in their own institutions. Despite initial success, the Steering Committee faced obstacles in their attempts to nurture the fledgling organization and was concerned that the ideal of a true *learning organization* was eluding them. Such an *organization* would meet the varying needs of the individual members, needs that their respective institutions alone were not able to meet. Frustration emerged from the conflict between the perceived 'common need' and the ability of members to engage in the necessary interactions to fulfill that need. The Steering Committee discussed this discord and sought solutions to help the Network grow and continue to achieve the *shared vision* originally established by the group. This discussion led the authors, in their role as leaders, to reflect and explore the possible application of Senge's five disciplines as discussed in his book "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization".<sup>3</sup>

In his research, Senge identifies five disciplines<sup>4</sup>: shared vision, systems thinking, team learning, mental models and personal mastery, all of which he deems necessary characteristics of innovative learning organizations. The authors draw parallels between their experience and context and Senge's five disciplines, which he identifies as the key to the success of a *learning organization*. They also relate the disciplines to specific situations and examples illustrating the processes that have marked the development and growth of the ILN to date. Finally the authors reflect on the application of this framework to the organizational model of the ILN in an attempt to "discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels".<sup>5</sup>

## Challenges Faced by Academic Librarians in the Gulf Region

The isolated environment in which academic librarians operate in the Gulf was the catalyst for the establishment of the ILN. The relatively small cohort of available members, coupled with the initial demands of establishing the group from "scratch" placed immediate pressure on the sustainability of the ILN. The heavy turn-over of staff in expatriate environments and the lack of professional development funding available in some institutions generated recurrent conflicts within the group and its activities. Like their counterparts in the West, many Gulf librarians understand that shared skills and shared learning are most effective and that a group can achieve much more than individuals working alone. Under such conditions, "Senge suggests, not only can there be good results for the organization,[but] members [as individual learners] will grow more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise".<sup>6</sup> Librarians at institutions of higher education throughout the region regularly made requests for information, shared resources and insight on how to apply best practice in the Gulf context. The ILN was established specifically to support them in meeting these common needs.

## **Expatriate Librarians in the Gulf Region**

A major challenge is the transient nature of the expatriate population in the Gulf region. Most institutions offer two to three- year contracts for librarians. While some are faculty positions, none offer the security of tenure. From a personal perspective the life of an expatriate is often impacted by the demands of family in their home country, leading to a recurring exodus. When individuals depart so frequently, then continuity and sustainability are challenged. This also makes it difficult to sustain a team with a *shared vision*. Each new member needs time to be inducted into the organization to foster a holistic view, thus developing *systems thinking*. Also, when individual members arrive and depart with the frequency of a revolving door, it is necessary to have a large pool of potential committee members to draw upon.

Faculty and librarians trained in a Western educational system often make incorrect assumptions about how students who have attended elementary and high schools in the Gulf region, apply information skills. Some do not properly acknowledge cultural contexts and the diversity in prior learning that occurs in the Gulf region. The lack of exposure to critical thinking, problem solving and inconsistent English language abilities may temper students' academic achievements and success.<sup>7</sup>

One of the cultural and context specific factors which affect students who have been educated in the Gulf is prior learning. Many of the local school systems are based on rote-memorization and unquestioning acceptance of the teacher and the written word as authoritative. Other contextual factors include a strong oral tradition and absence of libraries in home and community which reinforce a pervasive negative attitude towards reading. There are also very few local librarians as there are limited opportunities to obtain professional qualifications in the field of librarianship in the Gulf. With an awareness of these limitations, librarians can help students avoid potential failure by taking the time to identify their specific needs and redesigning information literacy programs to better support them.

## **Institutional Support and Advocacy**

As a non-profit, benevolent organization, the ILN depends entirely on volunteers, institutional funding and sponsorship to sustain its activities. It also needs effective institutional support for faculty and librarians who volunteer their time and talent to ILN committees and working groups. Support at this level is essential to ensure general participation in conferences and workshops. Historically the academic librarian's role has fallen somewhere between faculty and staff. Many institutions in the Gulf region are more traditional than their Western counterparts and do not see professional development as a high priority for librarians. Some would argue that it is not necessary at all.

The legal aspects of forming an official association or organization in the Gulf region preclude foreign, non-national employees (such as the librarians who initiated the formation of the ILN)

from creating a legal entity. Without being an 'official' organization, the ILN could not open a bank account. This limited the ability to handle money and complicated efforts to raise funds, to organize professional development events and to develop a sustainable organization. The lack of autonomy to effectively manage the finances of the ILN caused excessive dependence on sponsors to fund events which created conflict of interest between the values of the ILN and the commercial interests of vendors.

### **Issues of Governance and Membership**

As part of the initial charges of the ILN, all members of the Steering Committee and working groups committed to be available for two face-to-face meetings per year including the Annual General Meeting (AGM) to be held after the conference, which at this stage was to be held every year. The reality differed; everyone was too busy, especially when members returned to their home institutions. Although everyone was very enthusiastic and focused during meetings, once they dispersed, many individuals found it very difficult to carry out their commitments. Whenever individuals returned to their own organizations they lost sight of the connections and relationships between the working groups and the organization as a whole because of the complexity inherent in belonging to different systems with different priorities. This was a challenge to *systems thinking* concepts which Senge describes as a holistic discipline through which members of a *learning organization* see the big picture.<sup>8</sup> The geographical isolation and related travel costs also had a negative impact on attendance and was compounded by lack of support at the institutional level.

Attendance at the first AGM was poor and after a number of attempts to gain commitment from members to attend the second it was abandoned. The original governance model had proved unworkable but in order to sustain the Network an alternative had to be found. The awareness of this imperative was a catalyst for the authors' reflection on the structure and interactions of the ILN as a group. The inability of members to adhere to a commitment to meet as a group meant that it was unlikely that members could continue to sustain the ILN *shared vision*. It was also unlikely that they would apply *systems thinking* or be aware of the cause and effect relationships created by the interactions within the organization. As the authors scrutinized the workings of the Network they identified a major conflict between the stated vision of the group and the reality of the situation.

The Steering Committee members' eagerness to protect the integrity and focus of the Network conflicted with the *shared vision* of an organization that was open to all. Senge warns about the need to identify situations such as this where *mental models* may impede the progress of the group. He argues that "the discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'."<sup>9</sup> The Steering Committee had subconsciously based their understanding of organizational membership on *mental models* which had applied in Western contexts. Pre-conceived ideas about membership deeply rooted in the concept of democratic governance as it applies in the West were at odds with the reality of how organizations operate in the Gulf region.

“The discipline of dialogue also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning. The patterns of defensiveness are often deeply engrained in the way a team operates. If unrecognized, they undermine learning. If recognized, and surfaced creatively, they can actually accelerate learning.”<sup>10</sup>

These ongoing challenges combined with the perception that the Network was under regular threat of dissolution led the authors to reflect on the effectiveness of the *learning organization* through Senge’s lens. As a result of their initial reflection they began to identify interesting links between Senge’s work and their own situation. They hoped that a new perspective would provide insights into the interactions within the organization. The authors were keen to see if application of Senge’s five disciplines could help them understand and resolve some of the challenges the group faced. They intended to use Senge’s principles as a framework to expand their leadership repertoire in order to foster the sustainability and growth of the ILN.

## History of the ILN

The 6-year timeline of milestones and reflections presented here highlight the ambitious but often precarious progress of the ILN from inception in 2005 to its current status in 2011. Where appropriate, progress is placed in context of the five disciplines of Senge.

### December 2005

The initial meeting gathered thirty three academic librarians from various institutions based in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Egypt. Representatives from each institution shared aspects of their information literacy and reference programs followed by small group discussions about expectations for the future of the ILN. The outcomes were collated to identify future directions and potential network opportunities. Common areas of interest were subsequently outlined and prioritized: Infrastructure, Communication, Professional Development and Resource Sharing and Standards. The results of this meeting shaped the *shared vision* of the group.

### April 2006

The first formal meeting of the ILN established an organizational structure and charges. A Steering Committee and four working groups were established based on the priorities identified by the group in December 2005.

The ILN Steering Committee was charged with:

- Establishing priorities and initiatives of the ILN and its working groups: Membership, Professional Development, Communication and Information Literacy Framework
- Overseeing the creation, development and maintenance of a web site where resources could be shared and accessed by all members

- Setting provisions in place to ensure continuity and sustainability of the ILN as an organization
- Promoting advocacy of information literacy from kindergarten to university in the region
- Coordinating the activities and calendar of events of the ILN

### **November 2006**

Despite the initial hopes for the future, no progress was made by the Steering Committee or working groups during this six month period due to the unexpected temporary departure of the leader. This departure soon became permanent. A newly appointed chair called a meeting of those interested in reviving and pursuing the work that had begun optimistically in April 2006. The ILN structure and committee charges were revisited and constituted as a framework for the development of the Network. The Professional Development Working Group accepted the responsibility for planning a conference to be held in December 2007.

### **April to June 2007**

The Information Literacy Framework Working Group was mandated to develop a framework for the ILN to guide librarians and other educators. They determined that the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework: Principles, Standards and Practice (ANZILF)<sup>11</sup> best fitted the needs of the ILN. The Steering Committee identified a number of challenges and obstacles which had arisen during the previous twelve months, two of which were: the need for a more effective management of new members by the Membership Working Group and the as yet unfulfilled need for a web site. It was agreed that the web site would include online communication tools. The urgent need for technical support for the proposed web site was also emphasized.

### **December 2007**

The inaugural conference, organized around the theme of “Social Technologies in Information Literacy” introduced American blogger Jessamyn West to librarians in the region. She presented contributions to the field of alternative librarianship through Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 applications. The conference attracted approximately 100 participants from the Gulf region for two days of presentations, panels and hands-on sessions. While the conference was a success, the Steering Committee lost another member due to increased teaching load. This was another roadblock in the ILN’s frustrating journey towards sustainability. The need to develop appropriate governance strategies to ensure the sustainability of the Network became vital. It also became apparent that conflict had arisen between individual members’ desires to have a democratic voice in the running of the organization and their ability to attend face-to-face meetings.

## **April 2008**

The Steering Committee was faced with the ongoing problem of sustainability as members of working groups continued to come and go. In response to several requests to revisit and clarify the charges and responsibilities of the working groups, the Steering Committee began to reflect on the difficulties faced by the Network. It was at this time that the authors began to make links between the structures and functioning of the groups and Senge's work. In recognition of the key role played by *systems thinking* they stated that the role of each group must not be limited to their specific area but required a broader supporting role across all groups. It was recommended that working groups not operate in isolation from the organization as a whole but must identify areas of interdependence and work together to achieve the *shared vision*.

Liaison between the Steering Committee, Membership Working Group, Professional Development Working Group and Communication Working Group was deemed crucial in order to uphold the charges defined in the initial organizational structure. Without the constant sharing of information among the groups and support across groups, the attempt of each group to achieve its goals regularly came to a standstill.

## **June to November 2008**

The Steering Committee identified a need to clarify membership eligibility. There was a conflict between the ambitions to expand the Network and the limitations placed on membership eligibility. Restrictions were introduced because of a fear that members from diverse educational specializations would demand a wider range of professional development offerings, which could in turn dilute the core 'information literacy' focus of the Network.

The second successful ILN Conference on the theme "Teaching in Focus" also attracted about 100 attendees. In response to feedback from librarians who could not obtain release from work to attend the first conference, presentations and workshops were offered over two days running into the weekend. This conference featured Australian keynote speaker Judith Peacock who offered an innovative perspective on the role of the academic librarian in higher education. She presented a blueprint for integration of information literacy at the systemic level.

## **December 2008**

Once again the issue of continuity arose as the ILN webmaster departed. The inconsistent participation in the ILN governance continued to perpetuate conflict between the wish for a democratic organization and the reality. The ILN was being artificially maintained by a small group composed of the Steering Committee and Working Group Chairs. The Steering Committee's effort to address the ongoing issue of sustainability was illustrated by a series of initiatives:

- Consolidation of the ILN as a broader and more interactive group so that all members could take an active role to ensure its sustainability.
- Outreach to colleagues who did not have the opportunity to attend large-scale, face-to-face professional development events such as conferences. Providing both online and small-scale, face-to-face opportunities in a variety of locations would hopefully meet this need.
- Organization of a biennial rather than an annual conference. This would enable a shift from sole conference planning to other opportunities for professional development. It would allow the Professional Development Working Group to use the web site to offer network opportunities, provide links to information literacy resources including conference proceedings and a venue for sharing news.

## February 2009

Progress with the development of the web site stalled due to the lack of technical expertise within the Network. This affected the ability of the working groups to communicate effectively while operating remotely. Without effective communication, they could not develop the capacity to learn as a team.<sup>12</sup> Individuals and groups within the organization did not have the opportunity to share their thinking and benefit from the collective insight.

The Network had yet to reach a critical mass which would ensure sharing of responsibilities. The Steering Committee was compelled to explore creative ways to hold meetings which would allow more members' voices to be heard. They made attempts to facilitate a general meeting, face to face, video conference and using various web based technologies, none of which proved to be successful. The original ideal was for all members to have a voice, whereby the ILN would be a 'representative democracy'. The reality was that it was impractical for the general membership to meet as a group and even members of working groups could rarely travel to attend general meetings so their influence on decision making was by proxy through their chairs.

The Steering Committee requested active recruitment by working group chairs to increase the pool of potential members involved in the work and governance of the ILN. They also encouraged development of web site features designed to boost communication and promotion. This was another attempt to encourage *systems thinking*.

## June 2009

The Steering Committee faced the challenge of replacing yet another departing member. The Steering Committee distributed a letter to university administrators in which they defined information literacy and presented the activities of the ILN. They articulated its relevance and importance to the region, as well as benefits to and anticipated support from, their institutions. This was an attempt to overcome *mental models* or negative preconceptions about networking

held by many institutions in the Gulf region. As they do not see professional development as a high priority for librarians, the need for active advocacy and marketing of ILN was identified as a priority along with appropriate strategies to reach stakeholders.

## **September 2009**

The ILN web site was moved to a dynamic platform and redesigned in order to enhance its usability by members and provide greater visibility of the ILN in the region. More effective ways to advertise the activities of the ILN were discussed, such as designating a champion at each institution to ensure a broader range of representation of participants and membership. However, tension over this concept still existed. Previous attempts to develop a professional network in the region had shown that inclusion of members from fields other than academic librarianship had resulted in a demand for a different focus and the eventual demise of the group. Fear that this would happen again resulted in the ongoing restriction of membership to academic librarians, which caused continued frustration among many members and other interested individuals.

In an attempt to address this ongoing problem, the authors actively applied Senge's concept of *mental models*. Senge describes these [mental models] as assumptions based on past experiences which can affect perception of current reality<sup>13</sup>. This allowed committee members to unpack preconceived notions about membership which led to a fresh concept of 'networkers'. The 'networkers' would share ideas and participate in events, thereby upholding the *shared vision* of 'professional development opportunities for all' but would not be directly involved in governance of the organization. Therefore the specific focus determined by the ILN governing bodies would not be diluted.

## **October 2010 to January 2011**

A third successful conference was held over two days in October. The theme of "Information Literacy Assessment and Competency Standards" attracted approximately 120 attendees. Keynote speaker Debra Gilchrist from the United States, shared her expertise on assessment of information literacy from a learning-centered perspective. At the end of this period, the authors perceived a renewed sense of vigor, optimism and opportunity for growth within the Network.

## **Drawing Parallels with Senge's Disciplines**

In his work, Senge identifies five disciplines: *systems thinking*, *personal mastery*, *mental models*, *shared vision* and *team learning*, all of which he deems necessary characteristics of innovative *learning organizations*.

### **Systems Thinking**

Systems *thinking* is the conceptual cornerstone of Senge's approach. Systemic thinking is the discipline that integrates the others, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice.<sup>14</sup> A systems viewpoint is generally oriented toward a long-term view. Thus delays and feedback loops are important as is "developing an awareness of complexity, interdependencies, change and leverage".<sup>15</sup>

The Steering Committee assumed a leadership role with a responsibility to encourage conversation and interactions among team members as demonstrated in Senge's *systems thinking* model. Fostering *systems thinking* among the members has proved to be the biggest challenge since the inception of the ILN and a continued source of frustration throughout its development.

In the ILN context, the long-term view is constantly undermined by the high turnover of expatriates. The geographical isolation of members also contributes to the lack of *systems thinking*. The expense of bringing people together prohibits regular face to face communication so members become isolated from the whole. Reynolds, Murrill and Whitt use Senge's definition to explain the concept "Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots."<sup>16</sup> This seems unattainable for an organization that operates with a number of individuals or groups who see themselves as independent working groups and members, occasionally drawn together at a conference or workshop.

In order to continue to support sustainability and encourage members to see the groups as smaller parts of a whole as they interact within the larger systems, the Steering Committee recommended that chairs and co-chairs not be drawn from the same institution. Having a broader institutional representation also made it more likely that individuals could be released from their regular duties to attend scheduled meetings. This would reinforce the concept that [the Steering Committee and working] "groups are interdependent and continually affect each other over time".<sup>17</sup> According to Senge, a system thinker will look into the underlying structures in complex situations to identify the patterns that influence problematic behavior.<sup>18</sup> Smith cites Bolman and Deal who state "failure to understand systems dynamics can lead us to cycles of blaming and self-defense: the enemy is always out there, and problems are always caused by someone else."<sup>19</sup> After analysis of the concept of *systems thinking*, the Steering Committee was able to identify underlying systems dynamics as a root of specific obstacles which they could work together to overcome rather than placing blame on individuals or groups.

## **Personal Mastery**

Senge says "It [personal mastery] is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident. Paradoxical? Only for those who do not see that 'the journey is the reward'".<sup>20</sup> *Personal mastery* "is a set of practices that support people in keeping their dreams whole in cultivating an awareness of the current reality around them."<sup>21</sup>

In this paper, the authors articulate their own *personal mastery* as they reflect on the application of Senge's framework to the ILN. They embark on this journey in order to identify appropriate interventions to ensure that the ILN evolves into a true *learning organization*. In the context of the ILN, the authors recognized lifelong learning as a form of *personal mastery*. The driving force behind the original formation of the Network was an awareness that librarians in the Gulf region lacked opportunities for professional learning and growth. Opportunities for *personal mastery* were provided for members through participation in the governance of the ILN and through a variety of workshops and conferences. Yet the Network still struggled as a *learning organization*.

Senge warns that although there is a clear relationship between *personal mastery* and *learning organizations*, one does not guarantee the other. "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs."<sup>22</sup> This rang true for the ILN which continued to succeed in one aspect, while struggling with the other.

## **Mental Models**

*Mental models* are "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action".<sup>23</sup> The recognition of *mental models* is about "bringing tacit assumptions and attitudes to the surface so people can explore and talk about their differences and misunderstandings with minimal defensiveness".<sup>24</sup>

Over the years the authors have observed a practice in the Gulf region to limit the professional development of librarians to practical training rather than exposure to lifelong learning. This is one example of *mental models* which have had a negative impact on the ILN development. In an attempt to counteract this attitude, the Steering Committee regularly advocates for the ILN among university administrators. This clarifies the professional role, institutional benefits and needs of librarianship in the region. Another entrenched mental model is the Western view of democratic membership. As highlighted in the timeline, the Steering Committee was fearful that the inclusiveness of 'membership for all' would dilute the focus of the group therefore threatening its already tenuous sustainability. In September 2010, as the group re-examined the issues and arguments from many previous discussions, the authors realized that this problem was caused by tacit assumptions about membership. This new awareness based on their understanding of Senge's work enabled them to bring the group's assumptions about membership to the surface. As a result, the group was able to talk about these and formulated a new, more effective view of membership.

## **Shared Vision**

According to Senge *shared vision* is, "the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create"... "The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared 'pictures of the future' that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance. In mastering

this discipline, leaders learn the counter-productiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt”.<sup>25</sup>The *shared vision* that emerged naturally from the inaugural meeting of the ILN has been the main strength of the Network. It was clear from the start that the group shared a set of common goals that would give coherence to their diverse activities and provide the focus and energy for learning.

Despite an initially strong *shared vision*, Senge warns that “the visioning process can wither as more people get involved; the diversity of views dissipates focus and generates unmanageable conflicts. People see different ideal futures”.<sup>26</sup>In their attempt to protect the *shared vision* by restricting membership to academic librarians, the Steering Committee created a tension between the ideal vision of an organization open to all and the reality of an elite group. The change in view of membership as discussed in the section above allowed a compromise between the general membership, now called ‘networkers’ which is open to all and membership in the governing body of the ILN which is controlled through the self-perpetuating succession process. This important change allowed the realization of the vision of an open organization while ensuring the continuation of the specific focus on information literacy. Although the development of working groups created a manageable structure for the ILN it also created a divisiveness. It magnified the diversity and separateness of individuals and subgroups. Working groups were focused on their own goals and often lost sight of the bigger picture. Groups could operate as individual parts without being aware of the effect on, and relationships with, the organization as a whole.

## Team Learning

The ILN professional development opportunities were designed for individuals to share experiences and challenge each other to continually improve. Through this application of *team learning*, the sum would be greater than the individual parts: “The discipline of team learning helps transform our skills of collective thinking.”<sup>27</sup>

The ILN further embraced the concept of team learning, “the process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team to create the results its members truly desire”<sup>28</sup> by identifying and using the strengths of the individuals within its membership to produce better learning opportunities for the majority.

Senge says, “start with ‘dialogue’ and the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine “thinking together” ... allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually”. He also emphasizes that during this process members of a team must “recognize the patterns of interactions in teams that undermine learning.”<sup>29</sup>The discipline of *team learning* has been achieved with success at some levels within the ILN while remaining elusive on others. Members of the ILN have not always been able to identify the patterns that undermined *team learning*. The authors recognized the existence of such patterns in the form of sporadic communication exacerbated by geographical distances. Also, the tendency of working groups to operate in isolation meant that they did not see the

interconnecting links and the benefits that would come from interactions between them. On the other hand, the rewarding planning, development and delivery of: three regional conferences featuring international speakers, two regional workshops, interactive web site, logo, banners and brochures exemplify successful team-learning .

## Conclusion

Since 2005, the authors have assumed the role of leaders in their capacity as initial Steering Committee members. They have found resonance with Senge's description of "the leader [who] develops a unique relationship to his or her own personal vision. He or she becomes a *steward* of the vision".<sup>30</sup> The authors see themselves as stewards of the *shared vision* of the ILN. This embodies their own beliefs about the need for professionals to have opportunities to share their learning in order to continue to grow. They took on the role of leaders who "are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – that is, they are responsible for learning."<sup>31</sup>

The authors' reflection on the interactions of the organization in light of Senge's principles allowed them to understand and identify patterns that prevented the Network from moving forward. One of the most significant insights was the identification of the *mental model* that perpetuated the problematic notion of membership. This recognition allowed the group to move away from a recurring pattern and introduce a new concept of 'networkers'. The authors also identified a series of interventions to help turn the ILN into a true *learning organization*. These included the intentional creation of opportunities to empower more individuals such as encouragement to take responsibility for specific projects, purposeful identification and nurturing of members to join working groups and take on office bearing roles. In addition, the creation of a governance succession plan provided opportunities for new voices to be heard. The improved web site provided multiple avenues for communication in and across groups within the organization and clarification of the membership structure enabled the expansion of the Network while maintaining the integrity of the ILN *shared vision*.

## Recommendations

After synthesizing Senge's theory with the reality of the ILN, the authors propose the following recommendations to guide the ILN as it further develops as a *learning organization*.

1. The promotion of the concept of members as 'networkers'. This will support an optimum number of individuals for the sustainability of the ILN.
2. The continued development and effective use of the web site.
  - a. This will raise public awareness of the ILN in the Gulf region and help overcome geographical barriers faced by 'networkers'.

- b. The expanded use of the web site as a marketing tool through better use of meta language. This will improve accessibility through search engines such as 'Google'.
  - c. The expansion of communication through the development of social networking tools within the web site. This will increase opportunities for a wider range of contributions. The accessibility provided by blogs, discussion forums and RSS feeds will ensure currency of interactions on the web site and encourage innovation.
3. The continued application of principals of succession planning within the Network. This will ensure continuity, new insights and wider participation in the governing body of the ILN.
4. The cultivation of awareness to improve the effectiveness of the Network and to overcome limitations inherent in assumptions held both by individuals and groups. This may be achieved through a future workshop for the ILN Steering Committee and to explore and apply Senge's theories to the Network as a *learning organization*.
5. The continued provision of opportunities for members of Steering Committee and networkers to provide service to the profession through participation in governance and professional development. This will foster personal growth.

As the authors apply the outcomes of this personal journey to guide their reflection on the ILN as a whole. Ideally the members of the Steering Committee will work together to develop strategies to uphold the *shared vision* and to continue to enhance *personal mastery*. They will be aware of "entrenched mental models ... [ that could] thwart systems thinking"<sup>32</sup>, and will make positive efforts to nurture *team learning* and to continue to strengthen the ILN as a true *learning organization*.

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## APPENDIX

### Institutions represented at the initial meeting of the ILN in 2005

American University in Cairo <http://www.aucegypt.edu/Pages/default.aspx>

American University in Dubai <http://www.aud.edu/>

American University of Sharjah <http://www.aus.edu/>

Higher College of Technology <http://www.hct.ac.ae/colleges/> including representatives from the following campuses:

- HCT -Dubai Men's College
- HCT -Dubai Women's College
- HCT -Sharjah Men's College
- HCT -Sharjah Women's College
- HCT -Al Ain Men's College
- HCT -Al Ain Women's College
- HCT -Fujairah Women's College

The Petroleum Institute <http://www.pi.ac.ae/>

Texas A&M University in Qatar <http://www.qatar.tamu.edu/>

United Arab Emirates University <http://www.uaeu.ac.ae/>

University of Sharjah <http://www.sharjah.ac.ae/English/Pages/default.aspx>

University of Wollongong in Dubai <http://www.uowdubai.ac.ae/>

Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar <http://qatar-weill.cornell.edu/>

Zayed University <http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/>

Including representatives from both ZU Abu Dhabi Campus and ZU Dubai Campus

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Throughout this paper, the authors will refer continuously to the five disciplines and the concept of a learning organization as identified by Senge. To avoid the disruption of constant footnotes, the terminology will be acknowledged through the use of italics.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>6</sup> Mark K. Smith, "Peter Senge and the Learning Organization," *The Encyclopedia of Information Education* (2001) <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm> (accessed September 9, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Janet Martin, Jane Birks, and Fiona Hunt, "Designing for Users: Online Information Literacy in the Middle East," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 10, (2010): 57-73; Susan R. Madsen, "Transformational learning experiences of female UAE college students," *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues* 2, (2009): 20-31; N. Harb, and A. El-Shaarawi. "Factors Affecting Business Students' Performance: The Case of Students in United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Education for Business* 82, (2007): 282-290.

<sup>8</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10.

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- <sup>11</sup> Allen Bundy, ed. "Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework: Principles, Standards and Practice," (2004) <http://www.anziil.org/resources/Info%20lit%202nd%20edition.pdf> (accessed 2009).
- <sup>12</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>15</sup> Peter M. Senge, Nelda H. Cambron-McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith, Janis Dutton, and Art Kleiner, *Schools that learn: A Fifth Discipline Field Book for Educators, Parents and Everyone who cares about Education*. (New York: Doubleday/ Currency, 2000), 77.
- <sup>16</sup> Timothy Reynolds, Leslie D. Murrill, and Gary L. Whitt, "Learning from Organizations: Mobilizing and Sustaining Teacher Change," *The Educational Forum* 70, (2006) 124.
- <sup>17</sup> Senge et al., *Schools that learn: A Fifth Discipline Field Book for Educators, Parents and Everyone who cares about Education* 78.
- <sup>18</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith., "Peter Senge and the Learning Organization," 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, 142.
- <sup>21</sup> Senge et al., *Schools that learn: A Fifth Discipline Field Book for Educators, Parents and Everyone who cares about Education* 59.
- <sup>22</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, 139.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>24</sup> Senge et al., *Schools that learn: A Fifth Discipline Field Book for Educators, Parents and Everyone who cares about Education* 67.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.
- <sup>27</sup> Senge et al., *Schools that learn: A Fifth Discipline Field Book for Educators, Parents and Everyone who cares about Education* 73.
- <sup>28</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.236.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*,340.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.