

**Building an organisational learning architecture for  
strategic renewal: an autoethnography of action  
learning**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
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by

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses how the concept of action learning can be employed to build an organisational learning framework in pursuit of strategic renewal in a complex manufacturing environment. The thesis presents an analytic autoethnographic account of how action learning was used to create an organisational learning framework in the pursuit of strategic renewal at the Toyota Motor Corporation of Australia (TMCA), Melbourne, during the period 2000-2008. The scope of the thesis is restricted to this one company in order to benefit from a detailed analysis of a case study in a large and complex manufacturing environment suddenly faced with the need for an immediate strategic renewal within the company.

Analytic autoethnography (Atkinson, 2006) has been chosen as the methodology of choice to take advantage of the researcher's insider status at TMCA. As a complete-member-researcher within the social world under study the researcher has enjoyed the most compelling kind of 'being there' for the ethnographer. The fine-grained nature of the data gathered and the informed interpretation of the researcher could probably not have been achieved through the use of any alternative methodology. The analytic autoethnographic analysis is framed around the 4i model of intuition, interpretation, integration, and institutionalisation (Crossan, Lane, and White, 1999). These authors initially presented an embryonic model in the literature and invited other researchers to further develop the framework. This challenge has been taken up in the thesis.

The thesis presents a more nuanced analysis of the 4i model by developing an organisational learning architecture across multiple organisational levels (individual, group, and organisation) through the use of action learning in pursuit of strategic renewal at TMCA. A significant contribution is made to the extant theoretical literature through the development of an integrated model combining the 4i model, action learning, and experiential learning. The thesis also analyses some specific implications of the findings for lean manufacturing in general, and Toyota systems in particular, by suggesting how action learning principles can be absorbed into the newly evolving framework of Toyota Global Management Systems and Practices and its four components of Toyota Way, Toyota Business Practices (TBP), on-the job training (OJT), and Hoshin Kanri (business plan for long-term prosperity).

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I have been privileged to work for Toyota Australia, a company with great values and endless learning and development opportunities for its employees. During my 20 year career, my accumulative hands-on experience, observation, and reflection have directly and indirectly contributed to the data sources and construction of this longitudinal autoethnographic research. My involvement in organisational capability development, cultural transformation, and change management during the past 10 years has enabled me to draw new insights into organisational learning.

I wish to sincerely thank many people from shopfloor team members to senior executives who have given me extraordinary support. While it is impossible to list all the names here, I want to specially mention a number of inspirational sponsors who have played instrumental roles in constantly encouraging me in my professional and educational lives: Executive Vice President of Manufacturing, Engineering and Purchasing - Mike Harvie; Executive Director of Corporate Services - Bernie O'Connor; Senior Divisional Manager of Manufacturing - Chris Harrod; and Divisional Manager of Human Resources - David Cudmore. I am also grateful to all Change Leaders and Action Learning Team Leaders/Members. Capturing the stories of these dedicated people has added richness and depth into my research.

Finally, the love of my family and a number of life-long friends has provided me with the understanding, patience, and drive to achieve my educational ambitions.

## **Declaration**

I, Lucy (De Min) Liu, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy from the Faculty of Business and Enterprise, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne:

- Contains no material which has been accepted for the award to myself of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis;
- To the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis.

## **Ethics Approval**

This thesis has been approved by the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee in terms of **SUHREC Project 2009 / 054**

I certify that all conditions pertaining to this ethics clearance have been properly met and that annual reports and a final report have been submitted.

Signed

Lucy (De Min) Liu

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