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Learning Your Way into a Life of Crime (Fiction): Assessing Sisters-in-Crime as a Unique Learning Organization

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Abstract: Sisters in Crime (SinC) is explored as a unique learning organization dedicated to addressing discrimination against women mystery writers, and to promoting the writing of women in the area of crime fiction.

This paper provides preliminary analysis from a qualitative research study that examines *Sisters-in-Crime (SinC)* as a unique learning organization, dedicated to fostering the development of women crime fiction writers. A brief historical overview of the *SinC* will be provided, followed by a discussion around the methodology of the research project. I overview related literature, using a critical feminist analysis to explore some critiques of the concept of a learning organization. Drawing upon the example of *SinC*, I assess possibilities and challenges in developing a more inclusive and democratic framework for grassroots learning organizations.

The Emergence of Sisters-in-Crime

Twenty years ago a small group of women mystery writers came together to discuss the challenges of trying to get published and have their work successfully promoted to the public. At the time, these women had no empirical evidence to support their concerns, but they shared a sense that their work was being marginalized within the publication field. The seventies was time of conscious-raising, as the second wave of feminism emerged. Women came together to talk about their concerns, share stories, identify concerns, and work collectively to develop strategies to address these problems. Angela Miles describes consciousness-raising groups as

small, leaderless, non-hierarchical. They rooted their development of theory directly in practice...these groups represented the self-organization of women for the political purpose of achieving social and political transformation (1996, p.4).

The initial meetings of the women who formed Sisters-in-Crime followed a similar format, although not all the participants would label themselves as 'feminists'. Yet there was strong sense by all these women authors that their work was being taken less seriously than men's.

Historically, men have dominated the crime fiction realm. While there were a few famous women authors, such as Agatha Christie, many women were sidelined in the mystery field. This is a reason a number of female authors chose to publish under their initials, such as P.D. James, so as to not draw attention to their gender.

The women authors who first established *Sisters-in-Crime* had limited time and resources, but they were able to draw upon their ideas and energy to try to make some changes. As one participant explained that it "was really an example of women saying, 'Yes, let's do it for each other, and together we can'. You know, somebody donating stamps for a year, and all of those wonderful stories of women getting together".

At the same time, the women realized that they could not afford to antagonize the men that they dealt with in their professional work who controlled the publishing houses, book review publications, and other writing organizations. So they decided to establish a new, collaborative organization, to be called *Sisters-in-Crime*. The mission statement of the *Sisters-in-Crime* organization is

To combat discrimination against women in the mystery field, educate publishers and the general public as to inequalities in the treatment of female authors, raise the level of awareness of their contribution to the field, and promote the professional advancement of women who write mysteries
(www.sistersincrime.org).

Interestingly, many of the women were concerned about excluding men, so from its inception the organization has allowed a male membership. However, with the specific focus on women's issues, what has happened is it is usually only a certain kind of man – one who does not have a problem with this focus – that joins. Since this organization started it has grown to include 3600 members in 48 chapters across the world.

Methodology

This research study began with a review of literature that drew upon work from the area of crime fiction/mystery writing, feminist theory, and literature on learning organizations. I have begun a content analysis of the literature available on the *Sisters-in-Crime* organization, which included self-help publications for the members, web sites, and twenty years of archived newsletters.

In addition, I have conducted interviews with ten women who are members of *Sisters-in-Crime*. To select participants, I used a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, starting with names of individuals that stood out from the literature review, and then obtaining suggestions from different members about key individuals in the organization. Despite busy schedules, members of *SinC* have been very generous in sharing their time and their thoughts about this organization.

Concept of Learning Organizations

Peter Senge's (1990) well-known book, *The Fifth Discipline*, outlines the benefits for both individuals and organizations in developing learning organizations. To work towards this goal, there are five "disciplines" to be addressed by members of the learning organization. *Personal mastery* involves looking at individual strengths and capacities to be developed, while *mental models* entails verifying and challenging informal theories that individuals within the organization hold. *Shared vision* is the development of a joint sense of purpose and collective goals. *Team learning* draws upon the strengths of different members to grow together, and *systems thinking* encourages organizations to examine the underlying systems and connections, instead of concentrating just on localized concerns to problem-solve.

Brown explains that when Senge talks about a *discipline*, it "is a practice or an exercise that builds capacity over time, much as physical exercise builds our physical capacities over time, or the discipline of learning a musical instrument builds musical capacity" (1997, p. 6). The attributes of a learning organization are components that could be built upon to enhance the learning opportunities for individual members, and increase the overall effectiveness of the organization.

The main value of examining learning in an organizational context is that it explores one venue through which people can join together to initiate change and learn in a collective fashion. Current discourses in lifelong learning emphasize the need for each person to set his/her own learning trajectory. This focus on individual learning tends to gloss over structural inequalities, such as those created by patriarchy, that situate many groups (and individuals within those groups) at a disadvantage. With this consideration in mind, it may be possible that grassroots organizations, such as *Sister-in-Crime*, could be influential in creating more positive and supportive learning opportunities for both its members and the broader society.

A Critical Feminist Analysis of Learning Organizations

Critical feminists note that current policies and supports for lifelong learning and the notion of a learning organization frequently support individualistic and competitive approaches, that mirror the masculine culture of globalized capitalism. The idea of the learning organization has been taken up primarily by the business sector, although universities have also explored the value of this concept (Brown, 1997, Freed, 2001). Unfortunately, this literature tends to focus on challenges of implementing the principles of a learning organization in tertiary institutions, without problematizing the focus on marketplace values. In this context, the emphasis is on accommodating students to ensure they are satisfied customers, and efforts are made to gain employee allegiances primarily to gain a competitive edge.

One criticism of the learning organization literature is the underlying assumption that everyone within an organization will share the same goals. Too frequently, organizational learning is driven by corporate needs that do not provide equitable supports for all members (Fenwick, 2003). A critical feminist perspective raises concerns that interests of the leaders of the organization and the membership are not always aligned, and the notion of the learning organization is often used to co-opt employees into devoting loyalty and energy to the best interests of the employers.

Secondly, a critical feminist framework examines the role of gender within organizational contexts. As Alexiou points out that most often there is “silence found in the learning organization discourse regarding issues of gender” (2005, p. 18). The effects of systemic power relationships such as gender, race, ability and sexual orientation need to be addressed in the research around learning organizations.

Sisters-in-Crime as a Unique Learning Organization

SinC is a rather unique organization in that its primary focus is on equity issues around gender discrimination. In addition, when the organization was established it was with the intention of having a non-hierarchical structure, whereby established authors, aspiring writers, librarians, book-sellers, and mystery fan could come together to work in a collaborative fashion towards the shared goals of promoting women mystery writers. This *shared vision* could be seen as a central element of a successful learning organization. In addition, the willingness to draw upon the expertise and assistance from people coming from a wide array of different backgrounds to develop new strategies to challenge discrimination could be seen as a form of *team learning*. The women in *SinC* were able to expand beyond *systems thinking* to identify some of the barriers that

impacted on women's success rate in publishing in the crime fiction world, and develop a number of innovative strategies to address these.

Members of *SinC* openly discuss the need to address how the publishing industry has been dominated by male interests. Sara Paretsky, one of the founders of *SinC*, noted that when the organization was first formed, it was because women mystery writers had difficulty getting published and keeping their books in print once they were published.

Doing some initial action research, the founders of *SinC* discovered that men's crime fiction books were being reviewed on average seven times more frequently than books authored by women (Paretsky, 2004). As a consequence, booksellers and librarians were making orders based on reviews, and women authors were consistently losing out. *SinC* began a *Books in Print* listing of all the books of female authors to distribute to booksellers and reviewers, and worked hard to advocate for additional reviews for women writers. In this ongoing program, members volunteer to read the book reviews in local publications. Whenever a gender discrepancy is found, a nicely worded letter is sent to the book editor pointing out that, for example, of the last ten books reviewed, only two were by a woman. The organization then suggests some books by female authors to include in future review columns. Twenty years later, there are now almost as many crime fiction novels being published by women writers as there are by men.

Women of Mystery

There are numerous possible reasons why in the last couple of decades, women authors have become far more prevalent in crime fiction. For instance, Munt suggests that, historically, the detective novel/story was based in a very masculine framework that reflected current social values. She gives the examples of Sherlock Holmes, noting that "culturally, Holmes exudes and exalts a specifically upper-middle-class Victorian masculinity based on cool rationality and intellect" (1994, p. 2). In contrast, the American "hard-boiled" detective is described as "tough, stoic, honest, loyal to his own values, fighting a lone battle against urban chaos, a contemporary crusader/knight" (1994, p.3). Today, however, women (who comprise the majority of mystery readers) are often interested in reading about female protagonists. One of the participants explained,

I have this theory...women are especially attracted to mysteries...because so much of mystery is character driven...which is fascinating...Often there is some, what I call subversive writing...it is just people having fun, taking the mickey out of these characters who drive you to distraction in the real world. So there is a great deal of mischievous satisfaction reading some of the mysteries as to who gets knocked off...But I also think that women have a huge sense of outrage and justice, and those are the two things together that combine to make mystery so satisfying for us. I think we are more outraged than men because we are not part of the system, as much as they are yet. And therefore we are on the outside looking in, and saying that is wrong...[In] most mysteries you actually get the wrong [bad] guys at the end, and that is so satisfying.

Another reason that this may be the case is that *Sisters-in-Crime* has been very successful in raising the profile of women mystery writers. In reading the archives, it's clear that this organization has also had an impact upon other mystery writing organizations, such as *Crime Writers of America*, and at conferences such as *Bouchercon* (the largest mystery conference) in that they have continually and actively campaigned

against discrimination against women. For instance, whenever the slate of candidates for crime fiction awards or invited guest speakers were dominated by men, *SinC* leaders were quick to point this out and follow up with open letters to the organizers. One of the challenges in tackling issues of gender discrimination, is to avoid the ever dangerous label of being too "strident" (– is there a strident man out there?) which is perhaps revealed in the politely couched phrases of the letters to these organizers. Another strategy has been to use humour to challenge prevalent norms. This can be seen in the internal publications that *SinC* developed, such as the well-used guide to teach women authors how to promote their own books, entitled *Shameless Promotions for Brazen Hussies*.

Challenges in Viewing Sisters-in-Crime as a Learning Organization

Although the women I interviewed were willing to share their thoughts about *Sisters-in-Crime*, not all of them thought of *Sisters-in-Crime* as a learning organization. One of the very interesting aspects of this study thus far is that I have received very different responses from the participants, leading me to think that I need to expand this research to have a more comprehensive picture of the organization.

What is clear, is that as the organization has expanded and developed over time, not all groups share the same vision/focus. For example, the Toronto chapter of *Sisters-in-Crime* is the largest Canadian branch. While some of the members found that it was a very supportive group, the majority of members are mystery fans rather than authors. As a result, the focus for much of the work of the organization is not around the practical aspects of promoting authors, so much as learning about and sharing an interest in crime fiction. For many members, it is more of a hobby group than a professional organization.

One of the challenges of maintaining a shared sense of vision within an organization is that as the leadership changes, the social context alters, and the group expands, it may lose some of its initial cohesiveness. In talking to members who helped to form the original organization as well as some of the current leaders, it is clear that many concerns have changed over time. For instance, women are now taken much more seriously as writers when it comes to having their books reviewed or names nominated for prizes. However, the publishing industry has changed so that there is increasingly less support for what is known as the "mid-list" – and there seems to be a sense that this has more of an impact on female than male authors. In addition, the development of new technologies such as Print On Demand (POD) and the expansion of internet publication opportunities and vanity presses (where authors pay to have their books printed) has meant that virtually anyone can have a book published if they are willing to try these alternative venues. The non-hierarchical structure of the original *Sisters-in-Crime* has been threatened by both the growth of the organization with a large, international membership, and also by the indeterminate status or identity of its members – some of whom are uncomfortable with conferring genuine author status on someone who is self-published. Within a network that has limited energy and resources to be shared, there is also competition with other organizations. For instance, *Crime Writers of Canada* has a very strong presence and seems to be the preferred vehicle for mystery authors to promote their work within this country, so fewer writers belong to *SinC* in Canada.

Possibilities for Grassroots Learning Organizations

Grassroots organizations such as *SinC* suggest a different model for learning organizations, since they challenge traditional notions of hierarchy and competition, which are generally connected with marketplace values. For example, as one member explained "*Sisters-in-Crime* does not judge. We do not have contests. We do not pit writers one against the other, and we do not judge writers".

Sisters-in-Crime also demonstrates that learning organizations can address substantive social power issues, such as gender discrimination, in a critical and democratic way. However, it does not mean that the organization is immune to occasional conflict from its own internal politics, or that all issues of equity are satisfactorily addressed. For example, *SinC* remains a predominantly white, middle-class organization. Some of the interviewees as well as occasional commentaries in the *SinC* newsletter acknowledge that there is a need to do more to draw in minority participants.

Reflecting upon historical means of accomplishing tasks and contemplating alternative perspectives can be a constructive way of approaching organizational development. Freed argues that when learning becomes an integral part of an organization "people have a new awareness and deeper understanding of systems and interdependence" (2001, p. 18). They reflect critically upon what works well, and what could be improved. As *Sisters-in-Crime* celebrates its twentieth anniversary, a number of the participants spoke about the need to think back over what *SinC* had accomplished, to revisit their original mandate, and to reflect upon and discuss what should be the future goals for the organization.

Despite a number of challenges and issues to be addressed, *SinC* provides an interesting example of a grassroots organization that has evolved to serve the needs of many of its broader membership, while attending to issues of gender and equity. For some members it has been a valuable resource for gaining insights into the publishing industry. For a few it is merely a nominal commitment that is part and parcel of being a woman mystery writer, while for others it has been a rich social and professional learning experience, that one participant described as "a great networking organization" characterized by the "comeraderie and generosity of the women in it".

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