

# A Learning Organization in Action: Applying Senge's Five Disciplines to a Collections Diversity Audit

**Kaitlin Springmier, Catherine Fonseca, Laura Krier, Rita Premo, Hilary Smith, Mary Wegmann**

**abstract:** For more than 30 years, Peter Senge's theory of learning organizations has influenced the study of leadership and organizations. Researchers have studied various components of his framework: team cognition and mental models, team learning, shared vision, systems thinking, and personal mastery. But few articles have explored what it looks like in practice when the five disciplines of the learning organization are enacted in an organization. This article explores the ways in which these disciplines influenced the implementation and outcomes of a collection diversity audit at Sonoma State University Library. The authors discuss the ways that Senge's learning organization framework enabled them to create a sustainable model for evaluating diversity in selection and acquisition practices.

## Introduction

In 1990, Peter Senge published *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* and launched a movement to transform organizations into places where people could learn and grow while improving their organizations' outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Senge's book led to the development of the Society for Organizational Learning and had an enormous impact on the fields of management, leadership, and organization development, laying the foundation for theories of transformational and servant leadership, among others.<sup>2</sup>

A learning organization is one that can adapt to changing circumstances by practicing five disciplines that enhance the ability of teams to understand and solve complex problems. The five disciplines are closely connected—each enhancing and enabling the others—and are enacted as teams engage in dialogue and work together collaboratively

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to address organizational challenges and meet goals. These five disciplines—mental models, team learning, personal mastery, shared vision, and systems thinking—provide a framework for collaboration intended to enhance not only organizational effectiveness but also individual satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

Within the Sonoma State University (SSU) Library, librarians use Senge's framework within a model of shared leadership to cultivate a learning-oriented mindset. Consensus-based decision making, transparency, and shared responsibility among

team members are key elements of an individual- and team-learning work environment that improves day-to-day operations and decision-making. This paper showcases the way that librarians cultivate and practice the five disciplines of the learning organization and how they were actualized through a collections evaluation project designed to assess how well selectors were meeting one of the central goals of the collection development policy: building a diverse and inclusive collection.

### The Learning Organization

In the 1990s, Senge rose in prominence with the theory of the learning organization as a counterpoint to the prevailing system of management, one that he believed privileged organizations over people to the detriment of both. Senge believed that learning is "the heart of what it means to be human" and that organizations could develop practices that not only improve organizational performance but that also allow people to reach their full human potential.<sup>3</sup> A learning organization is one in which people can try new things, evaluate the impact of their decisions, and refine processes to improve outcomes. To do this effectively, Senge posits that teams need to practice five disciplines: shared vision, systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, and team learning.

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need to get people to adopt the leader's vision in order to create a shared vision. But Senge argues that a vision cannot be shared if it originates from one person. Shared vision arises from a process in which individuals in a team collectively cultivate a vision of what they want to achieve together. He argues that it is through dialogue that each person's vision can combine with others to create a shared vision and purpose that is more compelling than the vision of any one person would be. Develop-

ing shared vision requires that each member of the team develop personal mastery and have a sense of their own vision. A shared vision also requires that the team have the skills to effectively engage in honest dialogue, to question existing mental models and assumptions, and to learn together to create common cause.



Systems thinking is the ability to see the big picture and understand the complex forces that impact the outcomes of organizational decisions and actions. Without the ability to think systematically, it is difficult to assess a situation and make effective decisions. Systems thinking requires us to see the whole, rather than trying to understand any one decision or action in isolation. It is especially important to recognize when an action has a desired outcome in one area of the system but produces vastly different effects in another area of the system. Being able to see what is impacting our organizations can help us make more informed decisions.

The discipline of mental models requires us to challenge our ideas about how things work. Senge writes, “new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works.”<sup>4</sup> To learn and bring about change in our organizations, we must surface these internal images and make them explicit. Mental models will limit the actions we perceive to be possible if we are not aware that they exist or consider how they affect our thinking.

Personal mastery acknowledges that for an organization to learn, the people within the organization must be willing to learn. Personal mastery is not just about gaining skill and competency in one’s area of expertise. It is about continually expanding one’s ability to grow and honestly taking stock of the gap between where they want to be and where they currently are. According to Senge, “people with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas.”<sup>5</sup> Only by being honest about where we are can we take meaningful action to move toward where we want to be.

Team learning embraces the idea that many minds can be more intelligent than one. A team of people together must cultivate a set of skills and practices to make team learning effective. These skills include the ability to help surface each other’s mental models; to engage in respectful and honest dialogue that is focused on finding the best solution rather than on ensuring that one’s own position prevails; and the ability to recognize when to explore options and when to make a decision. A team of people must learn together how to reflect and

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inquire, how to establish a framework for building consensus, and how to create spaces that are safe for raising difficult and “unspeakable” questions, to truly ensure that the team is able to be honest about the current situation and explore all possibilities.

These five practices or disciplines work together to support teams in shared decision making, especially when responding to challenges or organizational problems. To create a high-functioning learning organization, all five disciplines must be cultivated; they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. By collectively practicing systems

thinking, surfacing assumptions and mental models, building shared vision, creating space where people can acknowledge areas for growth, and facilitating constructive dialogue, teams can work more effectively, and the work environment can become a source of great personal satisfaction and growth.

Senge's work is not without its critics. Senge does not address issues of power, agency, and dominance in the workplace. His vision of how team members can work together assumes every member of the team holds equal decision-making power, status, and cultural capital and does not explore what might be necessary to create inclusive spaces within a cultural context that contains unequal layers of status, privilege, and power. Senge also presents a model of systems that is distinctly apolitical. He proposes a set of system archetypes that neglect to explore political, economic, and social dynamics in a critical way.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Senge does not acknowledge the ways that self-interest can conflict with the needs of the organization, assuming instead that individuals will be willing to sacrifice their needs to the needs of the whole. While Senge's work does not engage with questions of agency, unequal distribution of power, and the political aspects of systems, it also does not foreclose this analysis. Combining a critical perspective on leadership and organizational dynamics with an analysis of Senge's work can provide a richer, more complex view of the practices of a learning organization.

### **A Learning Organization in Place**

Librarians at Sonoma State University developed an organizational practice that draws on many aspects of Senge's work within a broader framework of shared leadership. The organizational structure of the library at Sonoma State is very conducive to creating a learning organization. Sonoma State University is a public liberal arts university and one of the smaller campuses of the California State University system, serving approximately 6,500 undergraduate and 800 graduate students.<sup>7</sup> The library employs about 30 library faculty and staff; at the time of this project, there were six tenured or tenure-track librarians, each of whom held an operational leadership role. At Sonoma State, librarians work across operational areas, supporting priorities from all areas of the library. They work collaboratively to establish policies and best practices as well as to implement projects and initiatives.

The small size of the library and cross-functional nature of the work are supported by a practice of shared leadership. Leadership responsibilities are specifically identified in the library's reappointment, tenure, and promotion criteria as a requirement for all tenure-track librarians. Each librarian is responsible for operations in a specific program area of the library including collection development, instruction, research and access services, special collections, scholarly communication, and outreach. In operational areas, librarians establish goals and priorities, plan and implement specific projects and initiatives, and evaluate how effectively goals are achieved. Librarians also work across program domains, participating in other areas under their colleagues' lead. Library faculty meet regularly to discuss projects, solicit input, evaluate and revise organizational policies, assess and evaluate work, and establish goals and priorities. The meetings provide a learning laboratory or practice field for librarians to continuously hone the skills and habits of a learning organization. In this way, the structure at Sonoma State



requires librarians to be both leaders and learners—that is, equally capable of leading in their own areas of responsibility as they are of following their peers' direction in other domains. For such a model to work effectively, librarians must have a strong sense of inquiry, collaboration, commitment, and engagement, and be willing to share leadership with their colleagues.

To ensure a shared understanding of the leadership model among faculty, ground rules and expectations are established amongst the librarians. The ground rules include a recognition of individual contributions, mutual respect and trust, honest communication, commitment to a shared vision, accountability, and a recognition that mistakes lead to greater learning. These ground rules are periodically reviewed and revised to ensure that they remain centered in practice. They closely reflect the behaviors outlined as necessary for effective shared leadership: accountability, equity, partnership, and ownership.<sup>8</sup> These values and expectations are also at the heart of Senge's vision of dialogue as a tool for building team learning, uncovering mental models, and creating shared vision. Without mutual trust and respect, open communication, and accountability, meaningful dialogue is not possible, and team learning cannot occur.

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### A Diversity Audit in a Learning Organization

A recent diversity audit of the library collections at Sonoma State provides an illustration of the interconnected ways that the disciplines of the learning organization play out when a team of people work to achieve an organizational goal. Each of the five disciplines impacted every stage of project implementation, from the initial impetus for conducting the audit to the evaluation of the pilot and subsequent operationalization of the evaluation process.

Diversity audits have become a topic of frequent discussion in the library community in recent years, with numerous workshops, webinars, and articles devoted to the process; however, attention to diversity in library collections is not new. The American Library Association first published a statement on diversity in library collecting practices in 1982. The statement, most recently revised in 2019, declares that library workers have an obligation to develop well-balanced collections that meet the needs of all members of the library community and that represent a wide range of perspectives and voices.<sup>9</sup> Librarians have documented multiple methods for evaluating and improving the diversity of collections; however, the resurgence of collection diversity as a prevalent topic in LIS literature indicates that North American academic libraries still have yet to arrive

at widely-applicable solutions that produce comprehensively diversified and balanced collections.<sup>10</sup> The challenges to comprehensively evaluating library collections are many: insufficient staff time, limited budgets, insufficient metadata schema related to racial and ethnic subject matter, cataloging systems that impose a Western perspective on materials related to other cultures, and substantial coverage gaps in standard bibliographies and periodicals indexes.<sup>11</sup>

Librarians at Sonoma State employed dialogue and team learning, built a shared vision, surfaced and questioned mental models, worked to understand the ways that collection development is impacted by multiple systems, and used their drive to achieve their vision of a diverse collection to overcome the barriers and challenges of conducting a diversity audit. The following sections will break down each step of the process to reveal how the disciplines of the learning organization surfaced and were enacted in interconnected ways throughout.

### Establishing Collections Goals through Shared Vision

In 2020, the library revised its collection development policy to include a specific emphasis on building diverse and inclusive collections that represent multiple perspectives and voices. Librarians reviewed collection development policies from other libraries and individually contributed aspirational statements, sections, and considerations. In addition to common ambitions, librarians also offered bounding and constraining deliberations that could yield more attainable goals. The collection development librarian facilitated dialogue about the purpose of the library's collection, allowing librarians to surface assumptions and implicit beliefs about what the collection should contain and how it should be used. Leveraging those conversations, the collection development librarian drafted a new policy that was iteratively reviewed, revised, and approved by the faculty. In short, this visioning process resembled one of inquiry, where the byproduct of shared goals slowly developed as a result of ongoing conversation, listening, and the interaction of individual visions—all core tenets prescribed by Senge for arriving at authentic, shared vision.

The now-revised collection development policy includes a specific emphasis on building diverse and inclusive collections that represent multiple perspectives and voices. In many ways, creating a new policy catalyzed diversity audit efforts. This is predicted by Senge, who notes, "visions are exhilarating" and shared vision "fosters risk taking and experimentation."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, SSU librarians embraced the diversity audit as a means to operationalize their commitment to diversifying collections, as stated in the revised policy.

The process of developing a new policy illustrates two advantages to shared visioning. First is the momentum afforded by shared visions. As people contribute and listen, a common vision becomes clearer. That clarity then begets enthusiasm, leading to a "reinforcing spiral of communication and excitement."<sup>13</sup> Not only can this reinforcing spiral help to move the organization from visioning to actualizing, but it can also serve as a reward-conditioning model for continued investment in shared learning and open communication. Subsequent actions following the shared visioning, then, can borrow from the discipline's democratic, consensus-building elements. Indeed, the shared vi-



sioning process that produced the new library collection policy at SSU later informed visioning around specific goals for the diversity audit. Anchored by a governing policy and modeled after earlier procedures for arriving at collective aspirations, library faculty identified four diversity audit goals:

- Identify disciplines or subject areas lacking in diverse perspectives
- Establish a model for future diversity audits
- Inform more intentional collection development
- Set measurable benchmarks that reflect the library's commitment to building diverse collections

Because the initial visioning around broad collection goals was shared, it fostered group commitment in both subsequent visioning and continued collaborative action.

### Designing an Audit to Uncover Mental Models

After creating a new collection development policy, library faculty recognized that while providing a diverse and inclusive collection was a stated priority, the library possessed little evidence regarding the actual diversity of the collection. Librarians suspected that the library's collections lacked diversity and were inadequate in representation. By articulating a gap between stated goals and present condition, librarians began the process of surfacing mental models, or "internal pictures," about the environment for the work.<sup>14</sup> Senge indicates the dangers of leaving mental models unseen: to do so could trap organizational participants in insulated modes of thinking, which results in inaction or action disconnected from responsive learning. In this case, unexamined assumptions regarding the state of the library collection's diversity would inhibit needed change to bridge the gap between established goals and the current reality of the library's collections.

### Deciding to Conduct a Collections Audit

According to Senge, the first antidote to inertia caused by entrenched mental models is to distinguish between direct observation and generalizations only inferred from observation.<sup>15</sup> The librarians made this very distinction by recognizing assumptions regarding the collection's diversity were generalizations built from indirect evidence. The generalization largely derived from our practitioner knowledge of how academic library collections are built over time and that historical whiteness of academic publishing and scholarly communications structures have impacted acquisition practices.<sup>16</sup>

Once librarians determined that perceptions about collection diversity resembled a generalization rather than a direct observation, it was time for Senge's countermeasure: directly testing that generalization. Senge encourages questioning the data upon which a generalization is based as well as a willingness to consider the possible invalidation

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of that generalization.<sup>17</sup> Undertaking a diversity audit of the library's collections would allow librarians to test their assumptions. To achieve goals of an inclusive collection, the librarians first had to know the true state of the collection.

### Creating a Feasible Audit Process

As much as mental models can "impede learning" and preserve "outmoded practices," effective management of mental models also holds the potential to "accelerate learning."<sup>18</sup> SSU's library faculty found this to be particularly true, as the group quickly progressed from investigatory stages to the actual development of an effective audit plan and mechanism. Finding a dearth in literature and professional guidelines for defining or developing a diverse academic library collection, the librarians agreed to enroll in a professional development course focused on assessing the diversity of public library collections.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the month-long course, library faculty met to reflect on course material and how the content could be applied to Sonoma State's diversity audit. While the course was focused on public libraries and the assessment methods presented were not always applicable to academic collections, the course provided an opportunity to reflect on the proposed project and to discuss data that would be most relevant for an academic library collection. The process allowed librarians to deepen their collective understanding of what diversity in an academic library's collection means, the challenges of a diversity audit, and potential action.

Initial discussions focused on assessing the entirety of the general collection. Overwhelmed by the scope of the project and finding no consistent method for automating data collection, library faculty soon pivoted to a sampling approach. Indeed, labor intensity has been highlighted as one of the most significant challenges to conducting collection audits.<sup>20</sup> Rather than embark on a large-scale assessment, librarians focused on materials purchased in the last three years. Aiming to assess approximately 4,000 titles purchased between 2017 and 2020, the proposed sampling would allow librarians to test their assumptions surrounding the collection's insufficient levels of inclusivity, verify whether recent acquisitions aligned with stated diversity goals, illuminate acquisition decisions being made by current library faculty, and allow librarians to better gauge subject-specific selection patterns.

Discussion next turned to how to scope and define the broad and complex concept of "diversity" into manageable and meaningful terms for assessment. Without a clear definition of "diversity," the project would become unwieldy and result in inconsistent data. This dialogue around the definition of diversity carried heightened sensitivity. As Senge notes, an unconscious defensiveness can arise in any organization where even highly competent members might instinctively protect themselves "from pain and threat posed by learning situations."<sup>21</sup> Institutionalizing openness and reflection is key to overcoming a natural avoidance towards changes in thinking and discomfort that such changes cause. To avoid being trapped in stale mental models, leaning into temporary discomfort is necessary.

As such, this phase of the project required a safe space for discussion and sense of trust among selectors. Luckily, the librarians had cultivated a certain degree of psychological safety prior to the diversity audit. Even if the faculty group had not devoted





previous energies to fostering an ethic of openness, simply articulating that the discussion might feel awkward or difficult can relieve some individual anxiety around contributing to seemingly risky conversations. In the process of defining diversity for the audit, assessors probed topics of gender, religion, class, race, nationality, other structures of oppression, as well as the intersectionality of all these lenses. Assessors found they held very different understandings of diversity as it pertains to materials, largely because of

the distinctiveness of each selector's assigned disciplines. At times stiff and contentious, several discussions were devoted to exploring the limitations of and possibilities for assessing different aspects of what might define a diverse collection. Senge notes that working with mental models should not carry the expectation of congruity among the group. Yet, an authentic process of mental modeling will ultimately lead to cohesion.<sup>22</sup> By focusing on dialogue and conversation—as opposed to arriving at agreement—a group vision for the best path forward developed amongst the librarians. In the end, the faculty decided to focus the audit on black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and non-Western representation.

In this planning stage, librarians surfaced the mental models that were implicitly shaping their personal visions of the process and desired outcomes, as well as mental models about how diversity might be defined in the context of a library collection. Exploring mental models requires a learning organization to create a space where people feel safe to make mistakes, surface uncomfortable assumptions, and engage in non-judgmental scrutiny. Establishing trust for risky conversations enabled librarians in this project to engage in challenging dialogue to define the scope of diversity and inclusion that was prioritized in the project. By discarding congruency as the goal of these conversations and instead prioritizing reflection and dialogue itself, librarians were surprised to find that the process of advocating for one's views while listening to others' yielded harmony in selecting race and geography as assessment measures.

### Team Learning in the Pilot Assessment

Guided by the discipline of team learning, the library faculty determined that a rubric would be the optimal mechanism for evaluating titles in the library's collection. According to Senge, the discipline of team learning largely involves honing and balancing the distinct practices of dialogue and discussion. Team learning must first begin with dialogue, in which the group uses many points of view to probe complex issues.<sup>23</sup> In order to create a viable rubric and elicit various points of view, the librarians started a design process by allotting time for independent deliberation and reflection. First, each selector separately reviewed a small sample of monographs in their subject areas to consider evaluation criteria and compiled their brainstormed criteria in a shared docu-

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ment. Using the collaborative document to guide dialogue, the librarians shared their findings with one another but held their "own point of view gently," so as to ultimately take full advantage of collective insight on the matter.<sup>24</sup> Allowing time for individual inquiry cultivated a space for "free exploration" that surfaced "the full depth of people's experience and thought."<sup>25</sup>

Next, assessors leveraged individual insight to enter into dialogue, or "a genuine thinking together."<sup>26</sup> In the dialogue, librarians became "observers of their own thinking."<sup>27</sup> This meta-cognitive process allowed the group to identify how each librarian framed diversity criteria and surface commonalities and discrepancies. Dialogue allowed the assessors to tap into a broader intelligence that was inaccessible at an individual level. In dialogue, different views are explored as a group. In discussion that should inevitably follow dialogue, certain views are defended or refuted, a process that converges into a group decision about the best action to take. For effective team learning to take place, productive discussion is "the necessary counterpart of dialogue" and serves as the mechanism for decision-making.<sup>28</sup> Through discussion, library faculty were able to finalize three categories for auditing titles for BIPOC or non-Western representation: authorship, subject, and research methodology. In addition to finalizing the set of three assessment criteria, shared definitions for each criterion were established (See Appendix A).

### **Norming the Rubric for Personal Mastery**

With a rubric in hand, librarians conducted an initial assessment of purchases made between 2017 and 2020. While assessing titles based on rubric criterion, assessors informally took note of where they were able to locate relevant information, the average time it took to assess a single item, and any issues they discovered in applying the rubric. At the end of the audit period, the librarians met to reflect on the process and the rubric. Librarians also engaged in a norming process by individually evaluating a select number of titles and comparing how each individual had rated the item. Norming the rubric further enriched librarians' learning and shifting of mental models.

Throughout the audit, librarians acknowledged that a diversity assessment would never be easy or straightforward and that different disciplines require different types of reflection or put greater emphasis on different criteria. However, it was helpful to have three central criteria for which each assessor could consider collection diversity. Overall, librarians concluded that the assessment process was less useful for evaluating purchased materials and more formative for developing an intentional purchasing praxis in future acquisitions.

### **Moving Forward using Systems Thinking**

Performing a diversity audit resulted in several meaningful outcomes. Librarians were able to better understand how multiple systems impact collection decision-making and user discovery tools, including cataloging and classification; the availability of author information; and the ways scholars discuss research. The act of auditing the library's collections for diversity surfaced discussions surrounding external influences on library collection development, including academic publishing and scholarly communications



structures and the needs, constraints, and priorities of the university in which the library is embedded. An understanding of the systems within which library collections exist and are built bring greater awareness and intentionality to acquiring new materials, deaccessioning titles, and creating library displays, and lead to greater intentionality in how library faculty teach and support research and publishing at a university.

Performing a diversity audit results in meaningful data that shapes future decision making while strengthening the selectors' ability to work together in a spirit of learning,

growth, and partnership in the framework of a learning organization. This project illustrates how the disciplines of a learning organization operate in practice and contribute to an environment where people are encouraged to try new things, assess, and grow to meet the organization's goals.

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*Kaitlin Springmier is the instruction and learning assessment librarian at Sonoma State University. She can be reached at [kaitlin.springmier@sonoma.edu](mailto:kaitlin.springmier@sonoma.edu).*

*Catherine Fonseca is the culture and social sciences librarian at West Virginia University. She can be reached at [catherine.fonseca@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:catherine.fonseca@mail.wvu.edu).*

*Laura Krier is the collection development librarian at Sonoma State University. She can be reached at [laura.krier@sonoma.edu](mailto:laura.krier@sonoma.edu).*

*Rita Premo is the scholarly communications librarian at Sonoma State University. She can be reached at [premo@sonoma.edu](mailto:premo@sonoma.edu).*

*Hilary Smith is the special collections librarian at Sonoma State University. She can be reached at [hilary.smith@sonoma.edu](mailto:hilary.smith@sonoma.edu).*

*Mary Wegmann is the assistant director of collections at Western Washington University. She can be reached at [mary.wegmann@wwu.edu](mailto:mary.wegmann@wwu.edu).*



## Appendix A

### Audit Rubric

| CRITERIA  | YES | NO |
|---|-----|----|
| <b>Author</b>   |     |    |
| <i>Does the author self-identify as BIPOC?</i>  |     |    |
| <i>Is the author from the Global South or a non-Western culture?</i>                      |     |    |
| <b>Subject</b>  |     |    |
| <i>Is the book about BIPOC individuals or groups?</i>                                     |     |    |
| <i>Is the book about non-Western or Global South issues or topics?</i>                    |     |    |
| <i>Does the book discuss disparities or historic inequities as they relate to racism?</i> |     |    |
| <i>Is the book's perspective cross-cultural?</i>  |     |    |
| <i>Does the book take the perspective of oppressed vs. oppressor?</i>                     |     |    |
| <b>Methodology</b>  |     |    |
| <i>Does the book use anti-racist or restorative methodology?</i>                          |     |    |
| <i>Does the book include anti-racist or inclusive pedagogies?</i>                         |     |    |

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This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 24.2.