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RESPONSE

Learning Agility: Many Questions, a Few Answers, and a Path Forward

D. SCOTT DERUE, SUSAN J. ASHFORD, AND CHRISTOPHER G. MYERS
University of Michigan

Abstract
This article responds to and extends the commentaries offered in response to our focal article on learning agility. After summarizing the basic themes in the commentaries, we use this response to clarify points that were unclear in our original article and push back on certain points raised in a few of the responses. In particular, we reframe the rigor–relevance debate from an ''either–or'' to a ''both–and'' discussion, clarify the relationship between learning agility and ability to learn, explain how learning agility in organizations moves beyond cognition, and describe how exchanges such as the one we have collectively engaged in here are central to progressing the scientific study on learning agility and its effective use in practice.

We sincerely appreciate the responders' thoughtful and stimulating remarks in response to our focal article on the conceptual clarity and theoretical grounding of the learning agility construct (DeRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012). As a collection, the commentaries highlight important gaps in our model of learning agility and surface important questions that need to be addressed as the scientific study on learning agility and its use in practice move forward. Although we might have to agree to disagree on certain issues, we are truly encouraged by the quality of discourse and thank everyone involved in the exchange.

Some of the commentaries offer provocative extensions to our conceptualization of learning agility. For example, Mitchinson, Gerard, Roloff, and Burke (2012) emphasize a need to clarify ''learning'' as much as the need to clarify ''agility.'' Carette and Anseel (2012) situate epistemic motivation as an underlying psychological mechanism of agile learning. Johnson and Scott (2012) introduce action identification as an additional cognitive mechanism that underlies and facilitates learning agility. Vandewalle (2012) submits implicit person theory as an additional antecedent to learning agility. Finally, Beck (2012) challenges us to consider the inter- and intrapersonal aspects of learning agility by looking at within and between variance in learning agility over time. All these commentaries extend our conceptualization and theory of learning agility in important ways, and future research should incorporate these insights to develop a more comprehensive theory of learning agility.

Other commentaries challenge us to further refine our conceptualization of learning agility, consider what is novel or unique about the construct, and surface important questions and tensions related to construct and predictive validity. These are important questions that will determine whether learning agility is a passing fad or a construct with staying power. For this reason, we use this response to comment on several themes that seem particularly important to advancing the scientific study on learning agility and its use in practice. First, we

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to D. Scott DeRue.
E-mail: dsderue@umich.edu
Address: Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, 701 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109

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reframe the rigor–relevance debate from an ''either–or'' to a ''both–and'' discussion. Second, we attempt to clarify our thinking about the relationship between learning agility and the broader conceptual space of ability to learn. Third, we explain how learning agility can offer more than ''old wine in new bottles'' by moving beyond cognition as we consider learning agility as it takes place in organizations. Finally, we consider whether our conceptualization of learning agility truly is a jingle, a jangle, or a progression of science that could provide significant benefit to practice.

Rigor and Relevance: A False Dilemma?

Several commentaries make explicit or implicit reference to a classic contention that theoretical and conceptual rigor come at the expense of practical relevance. For example, De Meuse, Dai, Swisher, Eichinger, and Lombardo (2012) stated, ''A narrow definition of learning agility such as the one provided by DeRue et al. may have the advantage of conceptual clarity but provides limited practical value.'' Similarly, Mitchinson et al. (2012) noted, ''what is gained in clarity and rigor may come at the cost of practicality.'' We contend that the rigor–relevance divide is a false dilemma that undermines the ultimate, shared goal of *understanding* why and how some people are more effective than others at learning from experience. We agree with Gulati (2007, p. 775) who states, ''I firmly believe that the either/or debate is moot: our goal should be to seek rigor *and* relevance through boundary-spanning research focused squarely on phenomena of interest to managers.''

At the heart of the debate between rigor and relevance are issues of validity, in particular the relative importance of predictive validity versus construct validity. We can probably all agree that prediction without understanding is insufficient. We can also probably agree that conceptual clarity and construct validity without the ability to predict outcomes is insufficient. Where we seem to differ is regarding the importance of conceptual clarity and its role in fostering greater understanding of the relationships we observe in practice. We think such clarity is essential. Taking the Choices Architect® measure as an example, the available data suggest that it is positively related to key outcomes, but with this measure, do we understand why or how this is the case? The content of the Choices Architect® measure strays away from Eichinger and Lombardo's original definition of the learning agility construct—for example, how are items such as ''Is more a credit giver and sharer than a taker,'' ''People feel more confident when this person is in charge,'' or ''Can build and manage a high-performing team'' part of learning agility? Importantly, it has also strayed into including aspects of performance in the Choices Architect® measure itself (''Has often pulled off things with limited resources''). Is it ivory tower ''rigor'' to suggest that we keep the performance outcomes that we hope learning agility will predict out of our measure of learning agility? We think not. We think it is rigor that serves relevance. If we create conceptual clarity and measures that reflect that clarity, then when we observe a positive correlation, we can more confidently attribute it as a consequence of learning agility and not a methodological artifact. With the current Choices Architect® scale, we cannot.

De Meuse et al. (2012) seem to suggest that there is inverse relationship between conceptual clarity and practical value. We respectfully and fundamentally disagree. It is true that narrowing the definition and conceptualization of learning agility could result in a more precise measure that explains less total variance than the more general and less well-defined measures that exist today. However, with increased conceptual clarity and a more valid measure of the construct, we would actually *understand* the variance that we do explain better. It is our belief that practical value increases with increased understanding,

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and conceptual clarity and rigor are fundamental to foster greater understanding.

Gulati (2007) ends his essay with the suggestion that a starting point for bridging this pseudo-divide is to promote constructive dialog between academics and practitioners. As Gulati (quoting Weick, 2001, p. 71) notes, there is need for movement on both sides, that ''the relevance gap decried by academics and managers alike is 'as much a product of practitioners wedded to gurus and fads as it is of academics wedded to abstractions and fundamentals''' (p. 781). We hope the current exchange is a first step in an ongoing dialog about the meaning and value of learning agility.

Part Versus Whole: The Conceptual Status of Learning Agility and Learning Ability

A second strong reaction among some of our responders was to our central point about the need to portray learning agility more accurately as a part, but only a part, of a larger construct of learning ability. In our minds, three things get confused in the literature on learning agility: learning from experience, learning ability, and learning agility. De Muese et al. (2012) portray anything that predicts learning from experience as learning ability (and at times learning agility). Likewise, Hezlett and Kuncel (2012) equate learning ability and learning agility quite specifically. In contrast, we believe there is value in keeping these three concepts distinct. We agree that we should all hope for more learning from experience; where we part ways is in thinking that anything that predicts learning should be called learning agility. We strongly contend that both theory and practice are not well served by equating learning agility with the totality of experiential learning or equating learning agility with all that makes up learning ability. *Agility* is only one aspect of the overall ability to learn from experience, and as we define in our focal article, we believe there is value in focusing on the unique contribution of agility as referencing the speed and flexibility of learning.

Learning from experience, like many outcomes studied in our field, is a function of both ability and motivation. The ability to learn, in turn, is likely made up of a cluster of related abilities, including learning agility, the ability to regulate emotions, and relevant abilities in self- and interpersonal awareness, among others. This cluster interacts with individuals' motivation to learn such that a learning-agile individual may not learn much in a given context if she is not motivated to learn from the experience. Yet, this does not mean that our construct of learning agility needs to *contain* this motivation; rather, it merely suggests that the two are interdependent factors that interact to affect individuals' learning from experience. In other words, the utility of one is partially dependent on the other (Baron & Kenny, 1986), but they are not the same, and lumping them together muddies our understanding and reduces the conceptual utility of the construct.

Clearly articulating the conceptual boundaries of the learning agility construct is also crucial for the practical utility of the concept, something of great importance to many of our responders. As Mitchinson et al. (2012) note, ''it is important that we continue to measure learning agility in a way that is accessible and adds value to selection and development efforts in organizations.'' Although these authors and others (particularly De Meuse et al., 2012) use this claim as a basis for refuting our conceptualization of learning agility, we argue that a narrower, more precise definition can in fact add *more* value to organizational selection and development efforts. Specifically, a precise conceptualization and focused measure of learning agility will allow organizations to identify the incremental value-add of learning agility relative to other facets of overall learning ability (and compare their relative validity with other nonability predictors of learning from experience). Creating and using precise measures of all facets of ability and nonability predictors of learning from experience (or importing

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established scales) allows organizations to more reliably and effectively predict performance and select ''high potentials.'' Indeed, in the space and time taken by the 80-item Choices Architect® measure, or the 116 items of the new viaEDGE® measure described by De Meuse et al., a number of conceptually precise and empirically valid measures (e.g. of learning agility, motivation to learn, cognitive ability, and ability to regulate emotions) could be administered. This change would allow for not only an overall summative measure of learning ability and a general prediction of performance or potential but also an examination of the specific factors driving the bulk of the explanatory power and an understanding of how these various factors interact with one another to predict important leadership outcomes. As De Meuse et al. note, learning agility is not always a positive predictor of performance in all contexts. This multimeasure, interactional approach would allow a greater understanding of *when* learning agility matters for performance and selection, as well as *how much* it matters relative to other attributes of a more general construct of learning ability.

Old Wine in New Bottles or a Fresh Vintage in Waiting?

Several responses characterized our conceptualization of learning agility as nothing more than ''old wine in new bottles.'' For instance, Wang and Beier (2012) posit that learning agility is a derivative of *g*, and Arun, Coyle, and Hauenstein (2012) assert that our conceptualization frames learning agility ''in traditional cognitive ability nomenclature.'' The frequency with which this issue arose in the responses tells us that we failed to communicate our intent adequately in the focal article. We do not believe that learning agility is a purely cognitive process. In fact, we think that the learning agility construct is actually a nice example of how applied organizational psychology moves us beyond a pure cognitive approach. That is, although we respect the research that Arun et al. raised, we contend that this purely cognitive approach, largely established through laboratory experiments and solely measuring what is going on within one individual's head, is inadequate to capture what we mean by learning agility as it occurs in organizational settings. When individuals learn within an organizational setting, it is an inherently contextualized and interpersonal process. The learning takes place in a context where meanings are contested, at times politicized, frequently rapidly changing, and often ambiguous, sometimes intentionally so. Furthermore, in organizations, individuals learn with and from other individuals who frequently have their own (often imperfect) sense of meaning and try to shape interpretations based on it. Learning in such settings requires risk (e.g., the image risk of conveying that one does not already know) and is accompanied by real emotions (e.g., anxiety that one cannot keep up or the dread created by the implications of what one is discovering through the learning process). We believe that these realities make learning agility, as well as the more general concept of learning ability, much more complex than the intrapersonal and cognitive processes evident in much of the existing research.

For example, consider a rapidly changing organizational setting. Rapid change makes learning speed difficult as things may be confusing or ambiguous as the changes sort out. In such environments, the flexibility aspect of agility becomes even more important as individuals need to drop some understandings and adopt others to keep up. However, if these environments are also politicized, learning flexibility also becomes challenging. In politicized environments, individuals become associated with a point of view, and others, invested in that point of view, expect them to exhibit consistency over time. Dropping one lesson of experience and adopting another becomes much more difficult. Individuals become caught in a web of expectations. This brief example shows how our understanding of learning agility needs to be much broader than pure cognition to capture learning as it occurs in organizations.

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Indeed, it is the nature of this organizational milieu that may explain why prior research has found that general mental ability does not predict training transfer (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010) or leadership development (DeRue & Wellman, 2009) in organizations. As Argyris (1991) noted, it is often the smartest people who have the hardest time learning in organizations. Although it is left to future research to fully describe and theorize about these processes, we believe strongly that these processes go beyond intrapersonal cognition. We appreciate our responders' comments for prompting us to state this more clearly.

In addition to contending that our conceptualization simply imported notions of cognitive ability, Arun et al. (2012) also contend that we did so incorrectly, as we failed to embrace ''the traditional understanding of cognitive ability as a disposition'' that is biologically based and fixed and cannot develop with experience (as we suggest is true of learning agility). On this point we disagree. We draw our conceptualization of cognitive ability from a tradition that recognizes cognitive ability as mutable over time and through educational intervention (even for adults; Schaie, 1994). This perspective stands in stark contrast to Arun et al., who note that ''such an argument [developing agility from experience] implies that processing speed, a biological-based specific aptitude, improves from experience!'' This tension in the cognitive psychology literature suggests that there is still much ambiguity regarding cognitive ability itself, and perhaps, it is the case that the ''old wine'' is actually still just a field of grapes, waiting to be pressed and fermented, let alone bottled or rebottled.

Jingle/Jangle and the Progression of Understanding in I–O Psychology

Hezlett and Kuncel (2012) comment that we have committed both a jingle and a jangle fallacy. These fallacies, first noted in the 1800s and referenced several times in the modern era, are related. A ''jingle'' fallacy involves conflating constructs that superficially appear similar but are fundamentally distinct, whereas a ''jangle'' fallacy involves the presumption that similar constructs with different names are actually different (Block, 1995; Kelley, 1927; Marsh, 1994). We understand the issues here and also lament the proliferation of constructs in our field (e.g., DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). However, these fallacies typically occur when independent researchers pay no mind to existing constructs in the field while inventing new ones. Independent research streams emerge and confusion ensues. We, on the other hand, are attempting to directly interact with authors about their conceptualization. We are arguing for the *replacement* of the current construct of learning agility as it is conceptualized and operationalized by Eichinger et al., with a narrower definition that distinguishes it from an overarching ability to learn.

In our minds, we have committed no fallacy. Rather, we have engaged in a conscious attempt to aid the progression of our understanding of a construct by proposing a more careful conceptualization, labeling, and definition—one that will hopefully enable subsequent improved operationalizations and practical application of the construct. To rule out or marginalize efforts such as ours by labeling them a fallacy of one ''J-type'' or another is to set back progress in our field. Intellectual fields progress through an active and vibrant ''marketplace for ideas'' in which scholars introduce their best ideas, construct definitions and conceptualizations, and those ideas are vetted by their colleagues. This vetting happens within the scholarly publication process and through the rigorous and provocative work presented at conferences by both academics and practitioners. The field is served by this lively debate about what concepts mean and whether they are needed. For example, consider the discussions about the construct of employee engagement that took place within several SIOP meetings over the past decade. Practitioners loved this new notion and many

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scholars wondered whether it differed from motivation (e.g., Macey & Schneider, 2008). Our field does not operate by a ''first-come first-served'' notion of truth and utility in which we always need to consider the first definition on record as dogma. Rather, definitions can be (and in our minds should be) contested over time as people with different ideas interact with the original ideas and embellish or refute them.

We believe that an error in conceptualization was made by Eichinger, Lombardo, and colleagues when they decided to rename learning ability as learning agility. By labeling the whole construct (learning ability) with what we believe is a part of the construct (learning agility), they introduced confusion. As such, when practitioners use the Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) conceptualization to state that a manager is learning agile, it connotes a very specific ability; but what is tested is a very broad set of learning ability (and learning from experience) dimensions, as well as concepts that are seemingly not part of the ability to learn. Eichinger et al. had their reasons for relabeling learning ability to learning agility, as De Meuse et al. (2012) articulate: They didn't like the traditional association between the phrase ''learning ability'' and a cognitive approach that explains the mental process of learning. They also did not like that ability is often interpreted as intelligence. Although we empathize with their frustration, we do not think it is solved by calling one thing another. Indeed, did they not commit a jingle fallacy long before we are being described as doing so? Learning ability has a longstanding research tradition in our field (Kolb, 1974; Woodrow, 1946). To rename it ''learning agility'' and then to create a measure of it as a more general learning ability creates confusion both in the scholarly community and the world of practice.

Managers are most likely happy about the positive correlations they can show between learning agility and outcomes such as performance. But we wonder—when they really need an agile learner (as opposed to someone who is a generally able learner or a strong performer), would they ever be able to find one using the current measure? In addition, there are reasons to be suspect of the positive correlations that have been presented to date. As previously stated, the Choices Architect® measure has come to include aspects of performance in the measure itself. Likewise, most of the data presented to date suffer from common method and source biases, and despite De Meuse et al.'s (2012) claim, large sample sizes do not reduce or reconcile these biases. Given these measurement and research design limitations, should we be that surprised that current measures of learning agility show positive associations with employee performance and potential? We hope this exchange is the impetus for scholars and practitioners alike to enhance the conceptual clarity of learning agility and the rigor of our measurement and research design, and together create a path forward where we explore, debate, and discover the merits of learning agility in today's complex and dynamic world.

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