

# **Group Decision Making for Environmental Problems: The Virtual Learning Organisation**

**J. Wolfenden, R. Gill**

[jwolfend@metz.une.edu.au](mailto:jwolfend@metz.une.edu.au)

The learning organisation and system dynamics literatures typically deal with learning in the context of an individual public or private organisation. There will be an identifiable management structure providing an hierarchy of decision making, and it is within this hierarchy that investigations tend to be undertaken.

However, when one turns to environmental problems, it is no longer appropriate to deal with learning in just one organisation. Environmental problems are complex and typically require the integrated actions of many organisations and individuals for their resolution. Within such a context, established decision-making hierarchies generally don't exist and empowered decision makers in different agencies usually work in isolation from each other. Systems-theoretic and learning organisation perspectives strongly suggest that for a successful resolution of a complex problem, it is essential that system agents interact effectively within an integrated structure. Such a structure can be established – and it might be called the virtual learning organisation.

The authors have been exploring the mechanisms for creating virtual learning organisations within the context of environmental management in Australia. This paper reports on their experiences, particularly as regards the unique factors which must be addressed if such an approach to the management of environmental problems is to be successful. Drawing on a number of case studies in which the virtual learning organisation concept has been successfully implemented, the authors present a tractable approach to working in an integrated way with diverse stakeholder groups including government agencies, advocacy groups, relevant professional staff, disciplinary experts and other community representatives. This approach has been developed as an implementation of ecological economics, a transdiscipline which seeks to integrate across the social, economic and ecological aspects of environmental problems.