

# LEARNING YOUR WAY INTO A LIFE OF CRIME (FICTION): ASSESSING SISTERS IN CRIME AS A GRASSROOTS LEARNING ORGANIZATION<sup>1</sup>

Patricia Gouthro

Mount Saint Vincent University

## Abstract

*Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization is used to provide insights into understanding how learning can occur within grassroots organizations—organizations that emerge from the ground up. This paper draws on three qualitative research studies to examine how Sisters in Crime (SinC) can be viewed as an example of a learning organization, dedicated to supporting women crime fiction writers and addressing issues of gender inequality. SinC provides an interesting example of a grassroots organization that has evolved to serve the needs of much of its broader membership while attending to issues of gender and equity. When the central focus on learning is related to social justice issues, members of the organization are more likely to have a strong commitment to the same vision, leading to collaborative and creative forms of learning.*

## Résumé

*Le concept de l'organisation apprenante pour Senge (1990) est utilisé pour fournir des indications pour comprendre comment l'apprentissage peut se produire avec les organisations de base populaire - les organisations qui émergent du sol en place. Ce document s'appuie sur trois études de recherche qualitative pour examiner comment les Soeurs en Crime (SinC) peut être considérée comme un exemple d'une organisation apprenante, qui se consacre à soutenir les femmes écrivains de fiction du crime et résoudre les problèmes d'inégalité entre les sexes. SinC fournit un exemple intéressant d'un organisme de base populaire qui a évolué pour répondre aux besoins de bon nombre de ses nombreux membres,*

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1 This paper builds on research that was initially reported in an earlier conference paper: Gouthro, P. A. (2007). Learning your way into a life of crime (fiction): Assessing Sisters in Crime as a unique learning organization. *Proceedings of the Joint International Conference of the Adult Education Research Conference and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education*, 247–252.

*tout en s’occupant de questions de genre et d’équité. Lorsque le point central sur l’apprentissage est lié à des questions de justice sociale, les membres de l’organisation sont plus susceptibles d’avoir un engagement fort pour la même vision, conduisant à des formes de collaboration et de création de l’apprentissage.*

### Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, the concept of the learning organization, developed by Peter Senge (1990), has attracted interest as well as critiques within business, higher education, and adult education discourses. While the idea of acknowledging the importance of learning in everyday contexts is attractive, the logistics of creating space and supports for learning linked with risk and creativity within organizations are often challenging (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008). The assumption that the goals of leaders/managers will be the same as those of employees, faculty, or staff is problematic for anyone who uses a critical lens to understand the landscape of learning. In addition, structural power issues created by variables such as race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and ability are frequently overlooked in the literature regarding learning organizations (Alexiou, 2005). Within the adult education literature, feminists have raised important critiques regarding learning organizations (Fenwick, 2003; Mojab & Gorman, 2003), but this paper moves the discourses about learning organizations in a new direction by exploring the potential for this concept to explain learning within a grassroots, women-centred organization—Sisters in Crime (SinC).

Marsick (2000) argues that “people have found the idea of a learning organization inspiring, but difficult to implement” (p. 13). Despite these concerns, Nyhan, Cressey, and Tomassini (2003) argue that there is merit in exploring how learning organizations can be fostered. One possibility is to consider how this concept can provide insights into understanding how learning can occur within grassroots organizations—organizations that emerge from the ground up through the active initiation and support of their members. Within these kinds of organizations there may be a stronger sense of shared purpose between the leaders and the membership, as they frequently focus on social justice issues. Grassroots organizations often depend on creativity, since they do not usually have the same kinds of resources that a corporation, health care system, or university have to draw upon, and much of the learning that occurs is within informal, non-formal, and everyday contexts. Therefore, the types of learning that occur within grassroots organizations may be more readily understood within the model of a learning organization.

This paper draws upon three different qualitative research studies to examine how SinC can be viewed as a unique learning organization, dedicated to fostering the development of women crime fiction writers. Beginning with a brief overview of the context in which women mystery writers were situated, a conspectus of SinC is provided to explain how it emerged as a grassroots organization. The concept of the learning organization is then overviewed. After a brief discussion of the studies drawn upon for this paper, a thematic analysis of findings using the concept of a learning organization is given. The

paper concludes by assessing possibilities and challenges in developing a more inclusive and democratic framework for grassroots learning organizations.

### Women in Mystery

Historically, men have dominated the crime fiction realm. While there were a few famous female authors such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, women were frequently sidelined in the mystery field. Munt (1994) states that, historically, the detective novel/story was based in a very masculine framework that reflected the current social values. She gives the example of Sherlock Holmes, noting that “culturally, Holmes exudes and exalts a specifically upper-middle-class Victorian masculinity based on cool rationality and intellect” (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” (p. 3). These characteristics have typically been linked with male protagonists.

In her discussion about gender roles in crime fiction, McChesney (2008) talks about Edgar Allan Poe’s influence in creating the classic 19th-century mystery, in which male characters solve the crimes and engage in action while the women are either insignificant criminals who are caught or victims of the crime: “The obliterated female loses a voice in the plot and is barred from the very process of poetic production ... [Poe’s texts define] the genre’s origins through a male order that is established at the cost of the brutalized and silenced female” (p. 2). Women are portrayed as having less power and importance.

At the same time, Radcliffe (2004) notes that women protagonists predate the emergence of real-life female detectives.

Although the London police did not employ female detectives until 1927, the idea of women investigating crime was in full swing by the mid-1860s. The anonymous *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (usually attributed to WS Hayward) and Andrew Forester’s *The Female Detective* were both published in 1864. (p. 15)

In her discussion regarding the emergence of women crime fiction authors, Sussex (2011) says, “For an era where women were ideally domestic, separated from the sensational matter of crime, there being no female lawyers or policewomen until the following century, a surprising number of lady sleuths can be found in early nineteenth-century crime writing” (p. 185). In this way, crime fiction offered an imaginary prelude to the social changes in women’s roles that would occur in later centuries.

In her autobiographical text that discusses her work as one of the leading female crime fiction writers in the last century, P. D. James (2009) speaks about women’s entry to the world of crime fiction, noting that:

the 1914–18 war had, of course, very greatly advanced the cause of women’s emancipation. They gained the vote and already had the right to a university education but not to a degree until 1920, when Dorothy L. Sayers was one of the first women to receive an Oxford degree.

The professions were now open to them, but their lives were still extraordinarily restricted compared with today. (p. 117)

Sussex (2011) notes that early female crime fiction writers were often influenced by family connections of some kind: “Most early women mystery writers had some family connection with crime; and Trollope was typical in being married to a lawyer ... she used a plot structure that ... was very definitely crime in its narrative trajectory, ending in a climactic trial” (p. 183). Since women were often restricted in their own ability to participate in broader aspects of society, such as having the experience of being detectives or lawyers, they sometimes relied on knowledge gained within the homeplace in order to imagine these kinds of roles and contexts.

Crime fiction has historically been dominated by white writers and protagonists. Dr. Frankie Bailey, a criminal justice professor and the current president of SinC, traces the evolution of mystery writing in the African American community, in which she notes that family, understood in a more inclusive way than that of the immediate nuclear family, is highly valued and plays a significant role in the lives of others: “The extended family in the fiction of Black mystery writers has its parallel in the research of social scientists and historians who write about the presence and the importance of the extended family in the lives of real-life African Americans” (2008, p. 81).

In recent years there have been many changes in perceptions about what is appropriate for crime fiction. Jeremy Healy (1992) discusses how the historical trend of male protagonists in private investigator novels reflected real-life situations until the later part of the 20th century, but points out that:

society has changed dramatically.... Accordingly, the perception [the “rule” that private investigators have to be male] has changed, and with it, the reason behind the rule as well. Thanks to Sue Grafton, Linda Barnes and Sara Paretsky, we now have Kinsey Millhone, Carlotta Carlyle and V.I. Warshawski, respectively. This “rule” can be abandoned so long as the character, male or female, is credible. (p. 10)

But how did gender identity “rules” such as these change? In tracing the emergence of SinC, we can see that this organization was a significant influence in reframing the environment in which women mystery writers now work.

### **The Emergence of Sisters-in-Crime**

SinC was founded in 1986. During this time, women mystery writers in the United States began meeting collectively to discuss the challenges of trying to get published and have their work successfully promoted to the public. While they had not yet obtained empirical evidence to support their concerns, these women shared a sense that their work was being marginalized within the publication field, noting that they were often excluded from book reviews and crime fiction awards (Sisters in Crime).

During the second wave of feminism, the idea of consciousness-raising emerged as women came together to talk about their concerns, share stories, and work collectively to

develop strategies to address these problems. Angela Miles (1996) 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. (p. 4)

The initial meetings of the women who formed SinC followed a similar format, although not all the participants would label themselves as feminists. One member stated her initial reluctance: "I was worried about it when I first joined because I thought it would be a bunch of feminists and they would be up there yelling and burning their bras and that kind of thing. And that does not interest me at all. And I found it to be not the case" (SinC Study 1). Yet there was a strong sense shared by all the women who came together that their work was being taken less seriously than men's and that they needed to address this collectively.

The women who first established SinC 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, 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" (SinC Study 1).

At the same time, women were concerned about antagonizing the men whom they dealt with in their professional work who controlled the publishing houses, book review publications, and other writing organizations. Members saw a need to balance the fight for equity with maintaining positive connections in the writing community: "We were making enemies and we wanted to make friends; we wanted to be an organization that made people want to like mystery writers ... and yet we were talking about injustice and unfairness" (SinC Study 1). They decided to establish a new, collaborative organization, to be called Sisters in Crime. According to the bylaws, the purpose of the 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. (Sisters in Crime)

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, usually only a certain kind of man—one who does not have a problem with this focus—joins. While some members felt that including men might work against their original mandate, the majority of women welcomed their presence: "It is about women but men can see that there are some inequalities too and if they want to join the group and help us move our writing ahead fairly they can. And we can be big enough to let men into the group because we understand that working together will be more positive" (SinC Study 1). The organization has now grown to include over 3,000 members in 48 chapters, most in the United States but some in other countries such as Canada and Australia (Sisters in Crime).

### Concept of a Learning Organization

Peter Senge's well-known book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) outlines the benefits for both individuals and organizations of developing learning organizations. To create a learning organization, five "disciplines" need to be addressed. Brown (1997) explains Senge's concept of a *discipline* as "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" (p. 6). The attributes of a learning organization are components to be built upon to enhance the learning opportunities for individual members and increase the overall effectiveness of the organization.

The five disciplines are personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking. *Personal mastery* involves learning that supports the development of individual capacities, while *team learning* draws upon the strengths of different members to grow together. *Shared vision* leads to a sense of joint purpose and collective goals, while *mental models* entails verifying and challenging informal theories that individuals within the organization hold. *Systems thinking* encourages members to examine the underlying systems of the organization and consider connections to larger social, cultural, and economic issues instead of concentrating just on localized concerns to solve problems.

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. Critical theorists and feminists note that current policies and supports for lifelong learning frequently support individualistic and competitive approaches that mirror the market-oriented focus of globalized capitalism (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Taber, 2011). Current discourses in lifelong learning emphasize the need for each person to set his/her own learning trajectory (Gouthro, 2010). 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, grassroots organizations such as SinC could be influential in creating more positive and supportive learning opportunities for both their members and the broader society.

The idea of the learning organization has been taken up primarily by the business sector, although schools, colleges, and universities (Brown, 1997; Freed, 2001) have also explored the value of this concept. While sometimes this literature concentrates on the experiences of learners and educators (see Comley, Arandez, & Holden, 2001; Fenning, 2004), unfortunately it often incorporates the values of a business model in which the emphasis is on accommodating students to ensure they are satisfied "customers" or "clients," and efforts are made to gain employee allegiances primarily to gain a competitive edge (see Scott & Dixon, 2009).

One criticism of the concept of a learning organization is that there is an underlying assumption that everyone within an organization will share the same goals. Nyhan, Cressey, and Tomassini (2003) note that "addressing the competing interests of the *organization* and the *individual workers* is very difficult to achieve" (p. 13) [emphasis in original]. Too frequently, organizational learning is driven by corporate needs that do not provide equitable supports for all members (Fenwick, 2003), and within academe there may be tension

regarding different expectations from faculty, administrators, and students (Gouthro, Taber, & Brazil, 2006; Scott & Dixon, 2009). Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino (2008) argue that the implementation of learning organizations has not been widely successful because too often the process is carried out in a top-down manner, with management trying to create a learning organization that does not have buy-in from the wider membership. Realistically, the interests of the leaders of an organization and the membership are not always aligned, and critical educators raise concerns that the notion of the learning organization may be used to co-opt employees into devoting loyalty and energy to serve the best interests of the employers (Fenwick, 2003; Mojab & Gorman, 2003). A feminist framework examines the role of gender within organizational contexts, and as Alexiou (2005) points out, most often there is “silence found in the learning organization discourse regarding issues of gender” (p. 18). To effectively address some of these critiques, the effects of systemic power relationships such as gender, race, ability, and sexual orientation also need to be addressed in the research regarding learning organizations.

Using the concept of the learning organization to look at grassroots organizations may draw attention to some of the strengths of these kinds of organizations. When the central focus on learning is related to inclusion and social justice issues, it can serve as a gathering call or focus. Members of the organization are more likely to have a strong commitment to the same vision or similar objectives. Within grassroots organizations there may be valuable opportunities for collaborative and creative forms of learning.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws on three qualitative research studies. My methodology is informed by critical feminism, whereby I am committed to exploring issues pertaining to gender inequality using a critical theoretical lens to take up social, political, and cultural structures that shape adult learning contexts. Hastings (2010) notes the tensions in feminist research between accurately representing the voices of participants through their narratives (more of a grounded theory approach) and developing analysis by drawing on existing theories, but argues that reflexively exploring these interconnections can provide valuable insights into learning.

The first two research projects—an initial study and a follow-up study, both funded by internal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants—focus on SinC as a learning organization. These studies include a review of relevant academic literature as well as an overview of the literature available on the SinC organization, including educational publications for members, websites, and over 25 years of archived newsletters.

The first study (SinC Study 1) involved 10 interviews with women members to explore SinC as a feminist learning organization. After these interviews, many questions remained because of the varied responses, including whether the organization could be considered feminist. In addition, questions arose regarding the differences between American and Canadian perceptions of the organization and the impact of new technologies in the publishing industry. As Hastings (2010) argues, “There must always be an emergent aspect of the research—an interplay between the design and what emerges” (p. 313). I



decided the research would be strengthened by doing a follow-up study that would include a member check with both individuals and groups of organizational members.

The follow-up study (SinC Study 2) included a feedback loop with six interviews—three with previous participants who were willing to do follow-up interviews and three new ones. Prior to the interviews, participants were given a summary of initial findings and asked to comment on them. In addition, presentations of findings and requests for feedback were given to the American organization at a conference breakfast, to the SinC executive at an annual meeting, and to the largest Canadian chapter, located in Toronto. These presentations generated a significant amount of oral feedback and some written responses. Information was also posted on my website with an invitation for responses, but only a couple of electronic answers were received.

The third study that I draw upon to inform this paper is a larger research project funded externally by SSHRC to look at connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing. In addition to an extensive literature review, this study includes life history interviews with authors who have traditionally published literary fiction, crime fiction, and/or children’s/young adult fiction, as well as interviews with “key informants”—individuals in government, publishing, and education whose work is linked with fiction writing.

Some of the crime fiction authors in this SSHRC study are involved with SinC. Scheibelhofer (2008) discusses how a PCI, or problem-centred interview, can sometimes be used within qualitative research to combine some of the benefits of narrative research with more structured forms of inquiry, as is found in semi-structured interviews. In this way, “the main goal of qualitative research—that is, to give voice to the persons who are studied—is thus more effectively achieved than with classic semi-structured interviews” (p. 411). After completing the initial round of life history interviews for this SSHRC study, I decided that to ensure that some of the guiding research questions regarding learning and citizenship would be addressed, I would ask more specific questions toward the end of the interview if these issues did not come up in the participant’s narrative. Therefore, these interviews began in an open-ended fashion to ask broadly about the participant’s life/learning experiences, but during the latter part of the interview I might have asked more specific questions about particular supports, structures, and challenges that have impacted on the interviewee’s development as a writer, including her involvement in organizations such as SinC.

In this study, I was delighted to have the opportunity to interview Sara Paretsky, widely acknowledged as being the driving force and one of the key founding members of SinC. Consistently, when I interviewed members, they would say, “You really should ask Sara.” I prefer to conduct face-to-face rather than telephone interviews, because as Irvine (2011) notes, you are more likely to have longer, more detailed answers from the participants when interviews are conducted in person. I also attended two public sessions where Dr. Paretsky was speaking, and took notes from these talks.

In the ethics for the first two studies I guaranteed confidentiality to the women I interviewed. Many of these women are well known, and since a couple raised concerns about being identified through their comments, quotes are not attributed to any particular



participant so as to better ensure confidentiality. In the present SSHRC study, however, the authors (such as Sara Paretsky) agreed to have their identity revealed.

In each study the participants were given the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts. In keeping with feminist beliefs, this strategy provides participants with control over what information they choose to share through research. Providing participants with transcripts helps to ensure accuracy and encourages feelings of trust and reciprocity between the participant and the researcher. However, there may be detrimental implications, as Mero-Jaffe (2011) notes, in that participants may decide to significantly edit transcripts, removing valuable data and changing wording because they are embarrassed with how their conversation sounds. “Spoken language is constructed and uses language which is different from written language; however, when speech is represented as written text, readers evaluate it according to the conventions of written text” (p. 240). Participants in these studies were mostly writers who pride themselves as wordsmiths and are used to writing dialogue. In some instances, they indicated discomfort with notes such as “I had no idea I sounded so incoherent!” scrawled across returned transcripts. For the most part, however, they did not significantly alter their transcripts, so the benefits of sharing control outweighed the negative aspects of losing some data.

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.

### **Sisters in Crime as a Learning Organization**

Although SinC was not established with the intention of being a learning organization, and the concept was not familiar to the membership, when I first learned about SinC I thought it seemed to characterize many of the positive aspects of what should ideally constitute a learning organization. I used Senge’s (1990) five disciplines as an organizing tool for developing a thematic analysis of both the interview data and materials reviewed for this study, and then presented this back to the SinC executive and membership during the second SinC study. While a couple of participants in the initial study indicated uncertainty about using this concept, almost all of the responses I received in the feedback loop indicated that this was a useful way of framing issues and insights regarding how the organization had evolved, with comments such as “you really understand us” and “this explains many of our important concerns” (SinC Study 2).

### ***Personal Mastery***

Comley, Arandez, and Holden (2001) note that “a learning organization has a *culture and value set that promotes learning*” (p. 3) [emphasis in original]. Over the years, SinC has developed numerous educational supports for its members. Providing opportunities for learning seems to be an integral component of the organization. In addition to a regular newsletter, SinC has developed publications about how writers can promote their work, has organized pre-conference events where industry experts are brought in to speak to the membership, and in recent years has used the Internet for educative workshops and to

create a large support network for aspiring writers called the Guppies (abbreviation for the Great Unpublished) chapter. A Guppie explained that she joined because “being with other women writers you are going to face the same problems, and I knew that would benefit me.... I could learn from their experience because I was one of them” (SinC Study 1).

At the regular chapter meetings held monthly in locations across the United States (and in some international locations), there is usually an educational component in which various experts are brought in to speak. For example, at a session I attended in Toronto, an investigative reporter discussed his research regarding organized crime. SinC has also run special events, such as the Hollywood Camp, where writers met up with screenwriters and film directors, and a Forensics University, where experts in the field were brought in for a short educational conference.

### *Team Learning*

The willingness to draw on 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*. When SinC was established it was with the intention of having a non-hierarchical structure, whereby established authors, aspiring writers, librarians, booksellers, and mystery readers could come together to work in a collaborative fashion toward the shared goals of promoting women mystery writers. Many members value the cooperation and support of the group setting. As one participant noted, “Groups like Sisters in Crime, the camaraderie, the networking, it gives you the strength, it lets you empower yourself, it gives you confidence. And when you believe in yourself you can accomplish everything and that is what the group is for” (SinC Study 1).

Many interview participants talked about the wonderful women with whom they had the privilege to work, and recognized that different individuals brought unique strengths. One participant discussed her own contribution:

The public perception was a little negative at that point. And so what we needed was a little bit of peace making and we needed a little bit of charm offensive.... I could do that. That much I could do. I don't have any particular organizational skills ... but I could go on TV and I could go on radio and I could talk about the organization in a positive way. (SinC Study 1)

Gephart, Marsick, VanBuren, and Spiro (1996) discuss how “as members of the organization leave and new ones join and are socialized, knowledge and competence are transferred across generations of learning” (p. 38). At the same time, it is important for organizations to have new energy, or there is a risk of stagnation. One of the members explained, “Once you have been President then you are elevated to a nice status of respect but you are never active again. And I think that is very important ... let there be new and fresh voices, and wisdom, and vision, and not create a perpetual group that is in charge” (SinC Study 1).

### *Shared Vision*

SinC is rather unique in that its primary focus is on equity issues around gender discrimination, and this commitment has helped to create a sense of shared vision that seems to be a key factor in sustaining the organization. One participant talked about the importance of having a central mission statement to keep the membership aligned with its priorities. Often the leadership is concerned with members recognizing the benefits of belonging to SinC, but she believes:

it's an organization you join because you feel strongly about making women's mysteries survive. It was founded because we realized that we weren't getting published, we weren't getting advances, and we weren't getting reviews. It was founded to level the playing field. As a writer, to help make sure that the kind of mystery you write will be published, as a reader, to make sure that the kind of mystery you read continues to see the light of day ... so the fact that we all derive a lot of benefits from it is also important, but it's secondary, in my mind, to the cause of trying to further that ultimate mission, which is why it was founded. (SinC Study 2)

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. One person noted that it is important to revisit the original goals to ensure a thread of consistency: "I think all organizations, people even, should look at mandates ... and say does the original premise still hold? And are the activities that we're undertaking now continuing to support it?" (SinC Study 2). In this way, the organization can sustain a sense of shared vision.

### *Mental Models*

Gephart, Marsick, VanBuren, and Spiro state that "culture is the glue that holds an organization together. Its culture encompasses basic, often-unexamined assumptions about how things are done" (p. 39). Senge (1990) notes that one of the challenges of a learning organization is getting people to openly assess their taken-for-granted assumptions, or *mental models*, about how things work. Although one of the strengths of SinC is that its membership is open not only to traditionally published authors (authors who have been published through an established publishing house) but also to librarians, booksellers, readers, publishers, and aspiring writers, this also creates some challenges. Many of the authors interviewed believed that the purpose of SinC was to focus primarily on the needs of published writers.

They are not trying to be all things to all people ... they have not chosen to work towards the lowest common denominator, which in this case of a writers organization would be the unpublished people. They have said, "We are an organization to support women, published women writers. That's our focus." (SinC Study 1)

Yet in some chapters, the interests of readers or of aspiring writers may take precedence. An author wryly noted that at her local SinC chapter she found "a group of

women who might like to write a mystery at some point, or who have a number of mysteries in their desk drawer," but that there was little practical support for published writers (SinC Study 1).

Senge (1990) claims that the "ability to carry on 'learningful conversations' that balance inquiry and advocacy" (p. 8) is important when members of an organization have different mental models or assumptions regarding how an organization should develop. In order to be effective, members need to be able to resolve differences in a constructive way. Marsick (2000) argues that for a learning organization to thrive, it requires opportunities for members to engage in critical reflection and collaboration and to communicate effectively. As one participant commented, "Not everybody wants to be an author. But there is a place for them in Sisters in Crime as long as they are committed to parity for women in crime fiction ... [it's] an interesting situation because we don't have just one constituency" (SinC Study 1).

One of the biggest challenges that SinC has faced in recent years is how to address the rapid changes that technology has had on the publishing industry. Marsick and Watkins (2001) note that "technology is changing the face of organizations and having an impact on the nature of informal and incidental learning" (p. 32). New technologies such as print on demand and the expansion of 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. Frustrated with the amount of rejection and competition entailed in going the traditional publishing route, a significantly larger number of "indie" authors are finding that with minimal expense and basic computer skills, they can now upload and market their own work on the Internet using vehicles such as Amazon to enable sales.

The non-hierarchical structure of the original SinC has been threatened by the indeterminate identity of some of its members; those who are self-published are often anxious to claim genuine author status and are sometimes resentful of traditional authors. "There is a growing ... hostility, because a self-published author ... sees other traditionally published authors in the bookstore, they think it's our fault that we crowd them out" (SinC Study 2). Another person commented on the experience of traditional authors who went to events "where they have been savaged, verbally savaged by self-published writers who attack them as being elitist" (SinC Study 2).

The leadership has trod a careful line in negotiating the sometimes competing demands of its membership. Anyone who wishes to claim professional membership, which involves paying a slightly higher fee, can do so, unlike other organizations such as Mystery Writers of America that limit active membership to individuals who have been traditionally published within a list of approved publishing houses (people outside of this category can obtain an associate membership). With regards to special events, outside guidelines sometimes impact decision making: "The Hollywood Conference was sponsored completely by Author Coalition funds (whereby published authors assign monies received from Access Copyright to SinC); because of that we had to limit attendance to traditionally published authors. On the other hand, our November 2007 Forensics University was open to the entire membership" (SinC Study 2).

Interestingly, education is the route that SinC seems to have decided on to deal with this issue. Rather than imposing a particular mental model on what constitutes a legitimate author, they have done what one person suggested, which is “to find a way to spark some open, non-confrontational talk about the issues. That basically, it’s [self-publishing vs. traditional publishing] not a quality issue, it’s an economic issue ... it’s a market distribution issue” (SinC Study 2). At the last Bouchercon (mystery conference), I attended a full-day SinC pre-conference session about the logistics of publishing online, marketing books by yourself, and resources available from indie publishers; there were also some frank discussions about the costs, time, and technical skills required. While this obviously won’t resolve all issues, it seems a constructive way to move forward.

### *Systems Thinking*

From SinC’s inception as an organization designed to combat gender discrimination, members 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. “Rather than jumping on a soap box and yelling, ‘We are being unfairly dealt with!’, they said, ‘Okay,’ quietly, ‘we are being unfairly dealt with. How can we fix that?’ and this is what they have addressed” (SinC Study 1). This strategic approach to dealing with discrimination in the publishing industry has made SinC successful in promoting women’s work while not alienating the writing community.

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, explains 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 research—what adult educators would frame as action research—they were able to obtain a list of all books published in English. Paretsky notes that from this:

we found that while women wrote about thirty percent of the crime novels, a book by a man was seven times more likely to be reviewed than a book by a woman. What that means is, especially back then before you did your own promotional work, libraries which rely on two or three reviews before buying a book, were not buying books by women. Bookstores didn’t know we existed so our books tended to go out of print very quickly, and we weren’t often invited to have extended careers in the same way that men did.

As a consequence, 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 letter is sent to the book editor pointing out that, for example, of the last 10 books reviewed, only two were by a woman. As Sarah Paretsky explains:

We did this book review project and showed this act of discrimination. Then we began writing all of them, be it our local newspapers or the New York Times, and not in a confrontational way because we needed the industry. We simply said that this is what we've seen, and most media outlets began to address it once it was pointed out. That was fortunate because we had nothing; we couldn't boycott because we didn't have anywhere else to go.

At the same time, when SinC was first formed, the reaction from some men in the crime fiction realm was initially quite hostile. As Paretsky noted, "There was a lot of anger and opposition towards us when we got started. One woman on the West Coast was told that she would never get a publishing contract again if she agreed to serve on our initial advisory committee."

The overall focus of SinC to promote women mystery writers has led the organization to address systemic concerns that have hindered women in achieving equity in the field. Marsick (2000) argues "that systems learning cannot occur unless the system as a whole is adequately prepared to absorb and use the learning so that it becomes shared, easily accessed, and productively employed in the service of the system's agreed-upon vision" (p. 18). In reading the archived newsletters, it's clear that this organization has continuously explored different strategies for working toward this goal of equality, and their work has impacted other mystery writing organizations such as Mystery Writers of America and crime fiction conferences such as Bouchercon. SinC has 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.

With the development of *Books in Print*, SinC was able to demonstrate that there are many titles by female authors to be considered for reviews and awards. Paretsky argues:

We grew the genre [of crime fiction] incredibly. I think we are probably responsible—and I don't think that this is a vainglorious statement—that the crime novel has become a growing revenue for publishers; we brought women back to it. They would say that they didn't think there was anything to read after they outgrew Nancy Drew, and then they discovered books by members of Sisters in Crime. We were really good for the genre, so that began to change the perception of what we were doing.

As a recent market research study by SinC revealed, women now comprise the majority of mystery readers (Sisters in Crime). Reflecting on the reasons why women are drawn to crime fiction, one participant explains:

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. (SinC Study 1)

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 book reviewers and conference organizers. Another strategy used by feminist organizations such as the Raging Grannies (Roy, 2004) is to use humour to challenge prevalent norms. This can be seen in internal publications that SinC has developed, such as the guide that instructs authors about promoting their own books, entitled *Shameless Promotions for Brazen Hussies*, and in the tongue-in-cheek approach to organizational pomposity in passing on the SinC Official Seal of Office (a fluffy, white stuffed toy seal cub) from one president to the next.

Reflecting on historical means of accomplishing tasks and contemplating alternative perspectives can be a constructive way of approaching organizational development. Freed (2001) argues that when learning becomes an integral part of an organization, “people have a new awareness and deeper understanding of systems and interdependence” (p. 18). They reflect critically on what works well and what could be improved. In considering the future of SinC, one member explained:

I think that is part of who women are, you nurture. I mean whether I am talking about being a mother or not, you take charge, you nurture the things that you care about and you reach out and you help injustice and that’s part of helping writers. (SinC Study 1)

### **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” (SinC 1). One of the critiques of implementing a learning organization is that there are often problems with collaboration, but that may be because within a neo-liberal framework that prizes competition, it is often difficult to get people to work in more egalitarian and cooperative ways.

Within grassroots organizations such as SinC, having a broad consensus that there is a need to work toward an objective linked with a social justice issue such as gender equality has proven to be a driving force for the organization. Since the organization has a rotating group of leaders, all of whom are expected to work their way up through the ranks, it is less likely to have decisions imposed in a top-down manner.



SinC 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. One member comments: “There has been a constant, conscious effort to try and enlarge the organization in terms of diversity. But it is very hard to do when you are working in a field in which there is not a whole lot of diversity.” At the same time, the current president is African American, so perhaps gradually the organization will be able to make some inroads in supporting a more diverse membership.

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 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 describes as “a great networking organization” characterized by the “camaraderie and generosity of the women in it” (SinC Study 1).

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