

## 2012 Distinguished Scholar Interview

Written by Kaisa Snellman  
Friday, 02 November 2012 15:19 -

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Interview with Linda Argote, OMT Distinguished Scholar

by Kaisa Snellman

One of the great traditions of OMT is that the winner of the Louis Pondy Best Dissertation Paper Award gets a chance to interview the Distinguished Scholar winner . In August, I had the great pleasure to sit down with the 2012 OMT Distinguished Scholar Award winner Linda Argote to discuss her career path and her research. Linda is the David M. Kirr and Barbara A. Kirr Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory and Director, Center of Organizational Learning, Innovation and Performance at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1979 and a B.S. from Tulane University in 1975.

**Kaisa:** *What was your path to grad school and what got you interested in organizations and organizational psychology?*



**Linda:** When I was a student, I started out as a math major and I thought that I would be a math teacher. At some point, I was doing student teaching volunteer work in schools and I was struck by how schools that were doing the same task seemed to have enormous variation in organizational culture. That really intrigued me. I switched majors from math to psychology and

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decided to go to graduate school in the field of organizational psychology. At Michigan, I worked with my advisor Basil Georgopolous on a project on hospitals where we were trying to understand factors contributing to differences in organizational effectiveness in hospital emergency rooms. It was really exciting to get to do work in hospitals. All organizations are important and interesting but hospitals have a special place in my heart. The stimulus to my work organizational learning came from a project where I visited a number of manufacturing plants and discovered that they were varying in their learning rates.

**Kaisa:** *What insights did you gain from these projects? Did you have any aha moments or findings that surprised you?*

**Linda:** Well, when studying hospitals we drew upon ideas from what would now be called the structural contingency theory. That is, we studied how the uncertainty of the task affected coordination and how that in turn was linked to organizational effectiveness. The trick for us was to figure out how to measure uncertainty in emergency rooms. One important aha moment was when we realized that there was a lot variation in uncertainty across emergency rooms. That is, although emergency rooms were doing the same work – treating emergency patients - they differed dramatically in terms of the type of patients they saw. For example, some hospitals see a lot of patients that have no insurance. Then the learning curve work gave me a chance to do longitudinal work, which was very exciting. The biggest aha experience was when I interviewed people as a preparation for the learning curve study and they said that the most important thing is to know who knows what and who is good at what. I thought to myself “hmm..that sounds a lot like transactive memory”, which Wegner had developed to apply to people in close relationships. So, Dick Moreland, Diane Wei and I started to apply this on the group level and found it was a useful concept.

**Kaisa:** *Let's talk more about transactive memory systems. In your presentation this morning you talked about interfirm mobility and the benefits of teams moving as a collective rather than*

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*as individuals. You said that individuals moving with their team benefit of a transactive memory system while those moving by themselves would not. Does this apply in the context science? Should scientists move together as teams?*

**Linda:** That is an interesting question. One thing that we have working for us is that a lot of our knowledge is explicit and so we can communicate through electronic means without losing as much knowledge than people working in areas where more tacit knowledge is involved.

**Kaisa:** *How do new tools and technologies influence learning and knowledge transfer? What are the cognitive consequences of “Googling”?*

**Linda:** There was a very interesting study by Betsy Sparrow at Columbia. Sparrow and her coauthors showed that the internet is changing what we remember and it has made us more likely to recall where the facts are rather than the facts themselves. Their findings raise really interesting questions about how the cognitive processes differ when you rely on a person vs. when you rely on the internet for information. With people you have issues of trust, with internet, of course, the issue of trust isn't there. But it is clear that technology has changed the way we seek information. There is a study from a decade ago that asked people where they got their information – and most say from other people. When I show that study to students in my class they tell me all that has changed. So we would need an updated study on where people go to get information.

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**Kaisa:** *In your talk earlier this morning you mentioned the importance of having role models. You also talked about spending a year at Stanford. Did you have any particularly important role models there?*

**Linda:** I would have to say that first and foremost, Jim March, a brilliant scholar and also a very generous scholar. He was teaching a seminar on organizational learning and he very kindly allowed me to sit in on and be a part of. It was incredibly valuable to be exposed to the ideas but also to be exposed to how Jim comported himself as a scholar. He has very, very high standards and he is also very kind and very generous. Just being a part of the Stanford community was a valuable experience. I was fortunate to be in the industrial engineering department with some great people. There were people like Bob Sutton, with whom I went to graduate school in Michigan, and Kathy Eisenhardt. There were also scholars in other areas who were very welcoming, such as Warren Hausman, who was very inter-disciplinary in his orientation. Another thing that made my Stanford experience so valuable was that they had these joint seminars across sociology, business, and engineering, which I thought was great. In fact, we replicated that idea at Carnegie Mellon in the early 1990s when we started a seminar called Groups and Organizations to foster the exchange of ideas across disciplinary borders.

**Kaisa:** *Talking about interdisciplinarity, are there some areas of research or fields that you feel like are particularly interesting to organizational learning scholars?*

**Linda:** Yes, definitely. There has been some wonderful work on how social networks affect knowledge transfer. And we are also seeing more work on how social networks affect the ability to create knowledge. I see a lot of promise in these lines of research.

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**Kaisa:** *Any advice to young scholars?*

**Linda:** I would say, go to lots of seminars. Even if it is not a topic that interests you, you can learn a lot. Seminars give you a chance to see how a scholar thinks and you may learn something that you can then import to your own work. It is extremely valuable to be exposed to different ideas. I would say that work on problems that you care about; work on things that you feel like you have something new to say about. Of course, you have to be mindful of things like promotion and tenure. But I would say that first and foremost, do work that excites you. Be open to working with other colleagues. It is a great way to learn and to come up with new combinations of ideas.

**Kaisa:** Well, thank you so much for the advice and for taking the time from your busy schedule to talk with me. Congratulations for your award!

**Linda:** Thank you. It was my pleasure. Congratulations to you, too!