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SYNTHESIS REPORT OF THE WEBINAR

HOW A SOCIAL LEARNING APPROACH CAN SUPPORT THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERVENTIONS

TUESDAY, 27 JUNE 2017, 14.30 – 16.00 AM CET (GMT +2)

Prepared by: Caroline Lumosi (TIAS and University of Osnabrück), Romina Rodela (Södertörn University) and Joanne Vinke-de Kruijf (TIAS and University of Twente)

Introduction

Social change has been widely investigated and is still of a great interest to scholars who seek to understand its underlying mechanisms. Much of that knowledge is used to inform interventions (e.g. projects and other activities) meant to support change towards more sustainable futures. As part to this, there is a growing interest for interventions that, while seeking to achieve specific short and long term objectives (e.g., reduce pollution, restore a mangrove), are also able to trigger and support learning processes among the involved individuals and affected communities. A commonly shared assumption is that learning-based interventions can reconcile problem-solving with capacity building and, in so doing, offer additional opportunities for communities to take an active role in leading their own change processes.

The literature on social learning and natural resource management has been reporting on case studies where interventions were understood to function as a trigger for social learning. Yet, since this literature mostly focuses on reporting on the positive cases, issues with the design and implementation of interventions are largely unacknowledged and under-discussed. This webinar aims to present and explore:

- How social learning concepts and theories can inform the design and implementation of interventions;
- The influence given choices of intervention design, coupled with contextual factors, have on social learning processes.

Concrete examples of selected interventions will be presented and discussed. In doing so, the purpose of this Webinar is to kick-off a discussion and offer a platform for an exchange among those interested in the design and implementation of learning-based interventions.

This webinar is the second in a series of webinars of the [Learning Community](#) and is chaired by Romina Rodela (Södertörn University and Wageningen University) and Joanne Vinke-de Kruijf (University of Twente). The Learning Community is an international, online community of circa 80 members (i.e. scientists, policymakers and practitioners) who share an interest in learning for sustainable development. This community was set up in 2016 to enhance the learning capacity of those who examine or seek to stimulate or organize learning processes by providing them opportunities to learn and exchange. The Learning Community brings together people working on learning in transitions and those working on social learning in natural resources management. By connecting these usually rather separate communities, we hope to create synergies and to identify and address cross-cutting questions. The learning community is coordinated by [Johannes Halbe](#), [Claudia Pahl-Wostl](#), [Geeske Scholz](#) and [Joanne Vinke-de Kruijf](#) and kindly supported by [The Integrated Assessment Society](#) (TIAS).

Link to the recording: <https://webconf.vc.dfn.de/p5thrr13454/>

Synthesis of presentations and discussions

Expansive social learning: the work and role of the formative interventionist researcher

Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Environmental Learning Research Centre, Rhodes University, South Africa

- Heila is currently working on a project focusing on transformative learning, which includes social learning as well. The focus is on the “how” of transformative social learning from a perspective of environmental learning sciences where issues are multi-level, complex and require interventions.
- The focus on the meaning of ‘social’ and ‘learning’ in social learning took Heila and her team in the direction of focusing on the socio-cultural nature of learning in the context of social-material realities and relations. This type of research takes into account the context of the complex social-cultural issues and understand that these issues are multi-layered and embedded within a complex context thus requires specific interventions to resolve the problem
- In their research, they draw a lot on Vygotsky’s work, which draws attention to the fact that learning precedes development. Activity-based learning is very interesting for sustainability sciences.
- Their research led them to bring mediation to the fore. The key role and focus on mediation as a process within expansive research focusses not only on the expanding and elaborating the concepts, tools and symbolic systems but also on the mediator who plays a role in assisting in the reflection on issues and processes and support the application of simulation tools. Mediation involves collectively learning what is not yet there.
- The socio-cultural tradition in learning sciences draws on ethnographic and qualitative methods. This is also where the challenge lies for social learning research interventions.
- Heila refers to the work by Yrjö Engeström, who published on expansive learning and explains that learning is best analysed and promoted as being embedded. Expansive research and the type of interventionist research becomes effective when there is a continuation in the process, this can be supported by an endogenous research (with local community efforts) who would support the ‘local staying power’ and thus support the continuation and uptake and ownership of the issues and the research process
- Implications for researchers are that they need to understand and uncover historical dynamics and to mediate new knowledge. Social learning is supported by mediation processes. If we want to see change we need agents who can transform. This implies that researchers need an entirely different set of skills that allow them to understand systems, ethics, mediation skills, collaborative and collective.

Q&A

Q: How do you relate design-based research (i.e. building the airplane while you try to fly it) to formative intervention research?

A: For formative interventionist and expansion research the focus is having an open ended learning that is open and supports reflexivity in the research and the learning process. For the design the main different is that they system has a pre-determined approach of dealing with issues.

Q: The proposed approach has major implications for capacity building, training of researchers. Could you reflect on that?

A: Researchers indeed need a new set of skills such as reflexivity, capacity to understand mediation process, capacity to understand systems, understanding ethics and the processes of co-engagement, collaboration and collective relationships within set social-cultural contexts

In addition, with regard to training the new set of researchers. Especially in higher education programmes there is a need to better understand the required skills and processes and to reflect on the implications.

Q: How would you contrast the formative interventionist researcher with the role of the participatory action researcher? Are there some key differences?

A: Formative research stems from a learning theory that is associated with the careful support of established mediation and expansive learning processes. In addition this type of research is situated

in cultural and historical context that one can use to identify contradictions and encourages the use of double simulation tools that expands the learning process, these aspects are not explicit in participatory action research.

Q: Would you be able to relate to a well-documented example of where this type of formative intervention happened? Lots of projects happen but are not well written up and accessible.

Social learning in development interventions: A reflection on the limits and opportunities

Blane Harvey, Risk and Resilience Programme, Overseas Development Institute, UK; Faculty of Education, McGill University, Canada

- Compared to the previous presentation, Blane has been looking at exogenous processes rather than endogenous processes as they are implemented as part of development projects and programmes.
- The focus of his work is on climate adaptation and development. Adaptation is deeply intertwined in international development processes (programmes, NGOs etc.). Adaptation was initially tackled as engineering challenge. However, now there is more recognition of the complex, multi-scale nature of climate problems.
- Some made the argument that adaptation can be seen as social learning. There has been a rise in funding for climate and resilience programmes, including a lot of programmes that embed social learning.
- The literature on social learning and adaptation and on environment and adaptation show that a range of tools and approaches have been used and a lot of impacts and outcomes may be achieved. This is actually very encouraging: social learning may contribute to adaptation.
- Blane has looked into many initiatives to engage communities around climate change adaptation and development. Learning-oriented approaches remained in the margin and most are supply-driven. If they play a role: they are very small-scale.
- Little is done to draw learning at the community level to higher levels. So, how do we bring that transformative potential to a wider scale of action?
- There is enthusiasm for changing programmes. We need to establish an evidence base in terms of processes and outcomes. Also, we need to use of longitudinal approaches.

Q&A

Q: There are tensions in terms of time, scale, budget line etc. Is there research into higher-level learning processes and achieving long-term policy objectives?

A: There are examples. Yet, what is done in development planning and policy is not so well documented and hard to track. What plays a role is that development processes are often sensitive as well. Communities increasingly recognize that you cannot easily address complex, intertwined problems. There are initiatives to establish learning labs that support reflection processes on what can be done differently. One example of such a lab was recently shut down 1.5 years into the process since it was not seen as effective. There seems to be discomfort with the fuzziness of learning processes, i.e. the poorly defined nature of learning processes. Their goals and expected outcomes need to be clarified. There is a need to make a case for the aspects that cannot be measured such as ethics or attitudinal changes.

Addition by Heila on the need for connecting scales: it is relevant to connect scales and to understand how scales work. However, it is important not to lock down social learning in place-based settings and thinking. Heila poses the question: What role can the formal learning system play in linking perspectives on issues to the world of social learning? This is under-researched as there is a tendency to separate formal learning and informal learning. Perhaps it is relevant to understand how formal and informal learning can be mixed.

Q: What could a double simulation tool (mentioned in Heila's presentation but with a link to both presentations) be with people who are used to think in, e.g., Gantt charts? How could this open up the conversations at a higher organizational level?

A: There are different types of double simulation tools that are used for different types of work. For example, the use of 3-dimension mapping in Ethiopia opened up the process by predicting the unpredictable change and thus putting people in a reflective mode of thinking about the issues. Blane further reflects on the use of community radio. In this case, a mix of action research and reflective social learning among radio broadcasters had a domino effect and impacts well beyond the actors

involved.

Q: How do you see the learning incentive for stakeholder settings with some stakeholders that actually do not want to be involved, even though they could learn from co-management processes? I am now thinking about highly politicized topics such as a coal phase out or something like that.

A: Opinions vary on this. Some believe you should have a staged approach that engages with stakeholders who hold oppositional perspectives on the challenge in question once trust and cohesion have been built. Have a look at Transformative Scenario Planning. This is a very interesting approach to this challenge.

Additional questions:

- With regard to the lack of social learning approaches in development programmes: could it also play a role that learning outcomes are more difficult to measure than concrete outputs? Do you feel we need to become better at measuring learning outcomes/transformative processes?

Roundtable discussion

Q: To which extent do you consider that insights (e.g. required skills, which methods or instruments work etc) can be shared across different interventions? Or is this a rather place-based, situated experience? More precise - to which extent can an analytical component of comparative work be useful to improve our understanding of what works under which conditions?

Heila: On place-based/ situated/ expansive learning vs generative learning. This research allows one to elevate insights from one level of the system and bring it to another level. Since all issues are connected, mirroring data from one level to another level can support a sort of generative perspective. Formative research can play a critical role in these processes.

Blane: We should bring sceptics on board, social learning isn't a concept used on the converted. If we want social learning approaches to be used widely we need to document, test robustly how these processes work in a wider range of contexts, what can we do to understand scale and context.

Participant: Also upscaling, i.e. embedding a social learning process into a wider context and identify leverage points could profit from more comparative work.

Participant: I have the idea that these interventions (methods, works etc.) are applied through social activism, or in other words when a community of practice actually adopts and applies the new "reframed" practise. And this social activism has the potential to expand to other communities.

Heila: the concept of expansive social learning could be applied at multiple levels.

Participant: In a recent project on climate adaptation and water governance (Cadwago) we tried bringing together within a social learning process champions, those who are embedded in programs and organisations, but who are pushing the boundaries. This was relatively successful with some learning that has continued to affect an organisational structure to this day.

Q: According to the different nature of the two types of problems in common pool resources (by Elinor Oström), do you make any distinction between required types of learning interventions in "Appropriation" (e.g. wetland restoration) and "Provision" (e.g. restoration of an over-exploited aquifer) problems?

Blane: one difference might be in looking at social learning as governance mechanism (how participants negotiate questions of governance together using social learning principles) versus social learning as a model of concerted action (how social learning can serve as a process of experimentation/learning toward testing new ways of working/doing/knowing). This distinction might be helpful between those types of common pool resource dilemmas.

Wrap-up

Romina concludes the session by reflecting on the two questions as outlined in the Introduction :

1. *How can social learning concepts and theories inform the design and implementation of interventions?*

- First, it helps to make a shift from an engineering perspective towards a more adaptive point of view. Second it helps to shift from outcomes to processes and context. Such a shift is needed as it allows to

better consider the skills needed to facilitate change processes. This implies an emphasis on the role of reflexivity and a combination of skills for those engaged in transformative change. This can be done during the process, or prior to the process.

- Learning over longer timescales is hardly explored in literature. Projects have fixed budgets and timelines and as a result we have little research that has a longitudinal research design. Hence, it is hard to have an in-depth comprehensive analysis of interventions over longer periods of time. This is perhaps what is needed.
2. *What influence does intervention design, coupled with contextual factors, have on social learning processes?*
- Context plays an important role in terms of culture, language etc. Content has an influence on research and needs to be taken into account. Different people report on socio-cultural aspects in different ways.
 - Social learning is not the golden key to solve all issues but a useful idea that can guide our work. It can inform the practical choices of research design we make as well as the analytical frameworks we use. A multi-level framework could help bringing together local level changes, high level change, e.g. in policy objectives and other set ups.

Closure of the webinar

About the presenters

Professor **Heila Lotz-Sisitka** works in the Environmental Learning Research Centre at Rhodes University in the Faculty of Education, where she holds a South African National Research Foundation Chair in Transformative Social Learning and Green Skills Learning Pathways. The Chair's work focusses on ways in which transformative learning and green skills learning pathways can strengthen people's participation in securing more socially just and sustainable forms life and living. It foregrounds collective agency for transformative change in society. Professor Lotz-Sisitka has a background in critical research methodologies and a long standing commitment to furthering and extending participation in education. Her current research interests focus on the relationship between environmental learning, agency and social-ecological and social system transformation.



Blane Harvey is a Research Associate with ODI's Risk and Resilience Programme and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University (Canada). His research examines the construction, validation and diffusion of climate change knowledge, and how learning-based processes can support action on climate change in the global South. Blane previously led work on learning and knowledge sharing the IDRC's Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIIA) and with the Climate Change Team at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.



About the organizers

Romina Rodela is a researcher working in the interdisciplinary field of environmental governance. She has a research interest in participatory approaches, collective action and social learning. As part to past projects she was engaged on research synthesis of conceptual and methodological aspects of the literature on social learning in the field of natural resource management. Romina is currently managing the project "[Environmental Governance in Context](#)" at Södertörn University (Sweden). She is collaborating with Wageningen University (the Netherlands) and Can Tho University (Vietnam) on the assessment of the learning effects of serious games in the context of climate smart technologies in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.



Joanne Vinke-de Kruijf is Assistant Professor at Civil Engineering and Management, University of Twente and the honorary secretary of The Integrated Assessment Society. Until recently, she was postdoc researcher at the Institute of Environmental Systems Research, University of Osnabrück. Her current research focuses on smart and resilient cities with specific attention for international cooperation, (social) learning, policy transfer and governance in the domains of water management and climate change adaptation. Before joining the University of Osnabrück, Joanne worked for one year as international project manager at a Dutch regional water authority. She obtained her PhD degree from the University of Twente, the Netherlands in 2013.

