

## **Transformative Learning Experiments: A Conference Session at the 2019 Leverage Points Conference at Leuphana University**

*Session report prepared by: Bruce Goldstein, University of Colorado Boulder*

At the Leverage Points conference held at Leuphana University in Germany in February 2019, members of our learning community organized a panel entitled “Transformative Co-Production Experiments as a Nucleus for Societal Learning”. This panel built on activities that began at the International Sustainability Transition Conferences 2016 (Wuppertal) and 2017 (Gothenburg), where our thematic research network on learning in sustainability transitions was formed, drawing together members of the social-ecological systems research, organizational science, and educational science communities.

The session was divided in two parts. First, we gave six introductory talks that focused on specific aspects of the role of learning about sustainability transitions within transformative co-production experiments. Our panelists, and their affiliations and presentation titles, were as follows:

- Bruce Goldstein (Program in Environmental Design, University of Colorado Boulder): “Transformative Learning Networks”
- Ilan Chabay (Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies and Arizona State University): “Facilitating mutual learning for sustainability through multi-player games”
- Flurina Schneider (Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern): “Fostering multi-level learning for sustainability transformations in different cultural contexts” (Flurina could not attend, but was there in spirit).
- Johannes Halbe (Institute of Environmental System Research, University of Osnabrück): “A Multi-Level Learning Framework to Analyze and Design Transition Governance Processes”
- Richard Beecroft (Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology): “Embedding Transdisciplinary Project Courses in a Real-world Lab”
- Julianna Gwisch (School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University): “Catalyzing Global Ecological Citizenship through Transformative Learning: The Integral Role of Affective Engagement”

The primary issues we explored in our presentations were:

- Developing **learning concepts to understand co-production experiments** and their outreach. We will explore how micro (e.g., individual and group) to macro learning (e.g., structural change at the societal level) concepts help to understand how co-production experiments foster critical links between personal, small-group, and societal learning.
- Facilitation of **mutual learning among diverse stakeholders** as a lever for advancing changing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., towards global ecological citizenship). We will consider how diverse knowledge practices (traditional, cultural,

procedural, and scientific) enhance meaning making and knowledge co-production, while taking challenges like power dynamics into account.

- Designing **cross-boundary learning processes** that connect “inner” (within participating individuals and groups) with “outer” (e.g., institutional changes) processes of change. We are particularly interested in how co-production experiments can leverage paradigm transcendence through reflection on the Modernist framing of learning processes as inner/outer learning, and emergence of new ways of framing and articulating to seek a “personal-to-civilizational scale transformation.”
- Co-production experiments have complex and case-specific features that impede **transfer of findings between interventions**. What kinds of learning are possible when methods are not standardized and other conditions for reliability, scalability and transferability do not hold?

Ilan provided a lively summary of inter-related themes at the conclusion of these presentations. Drawing on the themes Ilan identified, we followed with an interactive panel discussion which Bruce facilitated, using a fishbowl format. Here is the fruit of that conversation:

How can we create opportunities to engage groups of people with scary, real-world problems and complex sustainability challenges?

- Build good containers: enable trust to form by providing safety, and comfort
- Good preparation, “priming” participants to engage
- Abstraction – or gamification – creates safety, a sense of play
- Is a traumatizing event necessary before a community engages in second-loop or triple-loop learning? Not necessarily, there are ways to prepare a community

How do we facilitate good learning processes?

- Facilitators who model loving behavior and create a virtuous cycle of reciprocity
- Foster embodied, personal connections
- Create a safe space for participants to be vulnerable
- Facilitators who aren’t too directive, or motivated by their agendas (literally and figuratively).
- Accept messiness, conflict, some loss of control of the process (productive tension that results in emergence)

How do we pivot from learning to action?

- It’s not linear, there are cycles of engaging in the world and creating safe spaces to learn and reflect
- We need to cultivate different learning contexts, which afford different kinds of interaction (e.g. ecovillages, workshops, visioning exercises)
- Not all learning is facilitated and planned – we need to engage in settings where unintended learning occurs, in order to shape it and allow it to achieve its potential
- Identifying shared, core narratives are key to making the pivot

Agenda for our research/action community:

- Continue to engage in learning about learning
- Explore how system resilience can be quality of collaborative learning
- Explore action research approaches that enable us to recognize and act on our normative commitments and engage critically
- Enhance our own transparency about our mistakes, emotional responses, experiments that are failures

At the conclusion of the session, Blane Harvey provided a brief account of the work of the learning community, and recruited a few eager souls to join our growing community (see: <http://www.tias-web.info/tias-activities/learning-community/>).

This session was linked to another session: Experiments in Transformative Coproduction, which focused on the possibilities offered by a recent explosion of transformative coproduction experiments, such as “T-Labs”, “Co-Labs”, “Bright Spots”, “Seeds”, and “Learning Networks”. In this session, we explored learning efforts that are experimental both in the sense of innovative process design and in their intention to probe the potential for leveraging systems transformation. We highlighted some promising cases, brought practitioners into conversation about the design and implementation of co-production experiments to enhance co-learning and realize their transformative potential. Through both of these panels, our hope was to increase mutual support among researcher/practitioners who share a passion for figuring out how to enhance transformative learning.