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BOOK REVIEW

Collective learning for transformational change: a guide to collective learning, by Valerie A. Brown and Judith A. Lambert, London, Routledge, 2012, 296 pp., $135 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-4156-2292-9

> I love this concept of celebration of collective learning.
> (Jackie Ohlin, Foreword, p. v)

Collective Learning for Transformational Change: A Guide to Collective Learning (hereafter 'the Guide') is a book about social learning. It is a guide for action, a methodological resource for those interested in engaging in activities of social learning. The Guide is the result of an impressive fieldwork, conceptual research, and learning process of the authors.

I read the Guide through the lenses of my experience promoting processes of social learning. Reading was like a dialogue between the authors' approach and my own reflections. In this sense, these notes are quite subjective, and my limitations may have affected my perceptions and comments.

My reaction

Social learning is a slippery subject. It is by nature an open (hard to delimit) process. It involves multiple actors and is absolutely context dependent. The participants may have different, and some times conflicting aspirations, and also may come from different knowledge cultures, with different epistemologies, and communicating their opinions through different narratives. To address social learning is a difficult task.

The authors navigate these complexities wisely using the compass of experience. The Guide is practice-oriented both in its origin and perspective. The conceptual piece of the Guide supports the methodology, illuminates the reasoning behind the method, and helps the reader to understand what social learning is about. The step-by step methodology and the portfolio of cases give the reader a concrete sense of how social learning processes may evolve and the conditions a facilitator should look for to enable this kind of process.

The Guide is an invitation to experiment with social learning.

It shows that social learning can be a fruitful and enjoyable experience. It provides five elements about social learning: a conceptual introduction, a step-by-step methodology, a collection of inspiring cases, a set of methodological resources, and further sources of knowledge for those who wish to adventure in the field.

What can we get from the Guide? It will depend of the reader, of what the reader brings as background to understand the authors, and of what the reader is looking for. From my perspective, the Guide can be seen as:

(1) An inspiring way of understanding learning (as celebration), moving from conflict to collaboration, going beyond our cognitive limits through collective learning, and making of diversity a source of creativeness.

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(2) A conceptual and methodological approach to address *wicked problems*, those complex problems that resist simple solutions and require change in the rules of the game where they emerged.
(3) An innovative way of conceptualizing knowledge, and a system of categories of the diversity of knowledge (multiple knowledges).
(4) A constructive way to understand social learning involving people from different epistemic cultures and different interests, and clues to build bridges between different epistemic cultures.
(5) A flexible framework to a learning-based and creativeness-oriented approach to facilitation, with orientations about the many facets facilitation may have.
(6) A set of methodological resources to promote social learning experiences, resources that can be applied inside the methodology or in an ad hoc manner.
(7) A collection of cases that evidence the possibilities of social learning and the usefulness of the methodological approach of the authors.
(8) An expanded version of David Kolb's work on learning cycles and learning styles, enriched by conceptual insights and examples of the authors.
(9) An understanding of facilitation as action research, where the facilitator does not limit to be an external enabling expert but becomes a partner in a collective learning process.
(10) A groundbreaking reference for those interested in working with social learning.

Conceptual arrangement

In the first section, the authors introduce their understanding of social learning as 'the pathway through which we learn to live in a shared [and changing] world' (p. 1), and as a requirement to find sustainable solutions to complex problems. They say:

> social learning can be conservative or innovative, forward or backward looking, [and] mainstream or deviant. (p. 10)

In their approach, social learning is a way to move situations beyond existing rules, and start creating a new set of rules.

The authors developed the methodology to address complex problems. They focus their work on problems that are messy, always changing, with unclear frontiers, not well understood, whose frame depends on conflicting perspectives, and solutions are beyond technology, but which despite all these elements of intricacy, are socially relevant. They name these problems as *wicked problems*. (Donald Schön would say *swampy lowlands*). Economic and institutional practices that threaten sustainability and reproduce social problems are examples of these problems. The twenty-first century is, and will be full of them.

Based on their experience, the authors argue that when social change is promoted, a conflict between innovators and traditionalists emerges, and propose social learning as a way to move from a conflictive scenario toward a collaborative one, from an attitude of resistance towards a process of collective discovery. To make that move, they suggest starting from values and aspirations instead of the traditional way of starting from facts and situations. This order is fundamental in their method, as we will see later.

Learning from differences is a leading idea of the process promoted by the authors. Instead of looking for consensus, frequently unfeasible, or ranking ideas, which could

undervalue or exclude some actors and groups, the authors invite the participants to engage in working together in an environment where differences are welcome. They suggest that the differences may contribute unforeseen perspectives, improving the understanding of complex problems and helping to decipher their intricacies.

The frameworks of David Kolb to (individual) experiential learning and learning styles are presented as conceptual support to the authors' approach to social learning. However, reflecting on the contributions of the authors, both in the methodological section and in the portfolio of cases, I have found a high grade of similitude of their reasoning with theorizations developed by other authors such as Argyris and Schön on double learning cycles, Schön and Rein's approach to solving intractable problems, Lewin's approach to action-research and social learning, and also Lave and Wenger's concept of situated learning. In my opinion, the authors' contributions are beyond the frameworks of David Kolb both in theorizing social learning and in conceptualizing the methodology.

Still in the conceptual field, the authors bring the idea of knowledge cultures. Knowledge cultures refer to different types and ways of expressing knowledge and also to the epistemology behind knowledge. They introduce five knowledge cultures: individual knowledge (lived experience and identity), local knowledge (shared experience of people and place), specialized knowledge (mono, multi and trans-disciplinary knowledge of professions), organizational knowledge (management, governance and strategic thinking), and holistic knowledge (essence, core and purpose). The interaction between these knowledge cultures will influence the processes of social learning and act as a framework for the composition of the group to involve.

Despite possible other ways of categorizing knowledge, the idea of respecting diversity in the way people may organize, express and support knowledge is fundamental to any process of collaborative learning and to make a source of creativity of cultural and epistemic diversity.

Step-by-step methodology

In the field of methodology, the Guide's approach is structured around two main elements: a learning cycle and a learning process. The learning cycle takes the same four elements of Kolb's experiential learning cycle: feeling, watching, thinking and doing. The way they apply the learning cycle is through: ideals (what should be?), facts (what is?), ideas (what could be?), and planned actions (what can be?). By building a common ground of different, but mutually respected sets of values and aspirations, the participants can discover why they perceive facts so differently. Having found acceptance to their values and aspirations, the actors get motivation to dialogue, and reasons to make the effort of thinking about different points of view, and to engage in collaboration.

The Guide conceives the learning process in six steps: the first step is *setting the scene*, the second, third, fourth and fifth steps are the same four steps of the *learning cycle*, and the sixth step is *follow on*. In most cases, the four steps of the learning cycle take place during a brief workshop. The complete process of social learning may repeat itself in a long-term period, similar to the way Kurt Lewin has understood the continuity of the learning cycles in action research.

The first step, *setting the scene*, consists of gathering the right group of people and in agreeing about a *focus question*. The authors define five categories of participants: (a) key individuals, (b) affected communities, (c) specialist advisors, (d) influential organizations, and (e) holistic/creative thinkers. As we can see from these categories, the authors select participants combining cognitive skills (c and e) and groups of interests (a, b and d). Each

of them brings a different perspective and a particular cognitive contribution, from their particular knowledge cultures.

The *focus question* defines the purpose of the learning cycle. Examples of *focus questions* are: 'How can we help our region survive under these [unsustainable] conditions?' (p. 46); 'How can we establish safe conditions for children growing up in Elizabethville?' (p. 151); 'How can we give Rivermouth a future?' (p. 155); 'How do we achieve this synergy not only among the [European and African] knowledges but also between different societies?' (p.168). Because the *focus questions* start with 'how can we' or 'how to', the answers they generate are predominantly orientations for practice (common objectives, principles, policies, strategies, and actions), creating conditions for collaboration among people with diverging interests.

The authors make a case for the importance of respectful relations between social actors and groups from different knowledge cultures, between people with different epistemologies, and conflicting bodies of beliefs. For the Guide's approach, the enriching role of *multiple knowledges* is fundamental to expand the understanding of the problems and raise the innovative capacity of the group to the level required to come up with robust solutions to complex problems. The idea of a collaborative dialogue between actors with diverse and contradictory knowledge cultures is indeed a core strand of the processes of social learning proposed by the Guide.

The second step, *collective ideals*, starts the learning cycle. It is an exploration of facets of the world that participants feel should exist. The product of this step can be understood as motives for commitment or sources of motivation to work together. It can be seen as glimpses of the future the participants would like to be part of, and also can be understood as gleans of light to rediscover the present.

This step is in itself transformational. By accepting to listen and respect a diverse set of values and aspirations, the actors are building the ground for a different relation among them. Instead of competing, stereotyping or discriminating against each other, the actors start engaging in collaboration. This short-term change opens the door for much deeper transformation of the way the actors relate to each other and also to the way they define themselves. It is a 'small' change that makes big changes possible.

The third step, *collective facts*, redefines what reality is. The crystal through which exploring reality is the set of ideals, defined in the first step of the learning cycle. Each participant has to explore the present situation looking for elements related to his or her values and aspirations. The facets of reality and facts that become relevant are those that impact at people's values and aspirations. To do that, authors use the Force Field Analysis developed by Kurt Lewin, a map of enabling and hindering factors. In the workshop, groups do the Field Force Analysis, and afterwards the groups share their results. Once shared, this map of force fields becomes the context for addressing change.

The fourth step, *collective ideas*, defines possible courses of action. The product of this step is a collection of creative strategies, projects, institutions to build, and policies to implement or to advocate for. It represents the pathways of success in the territory between *what is* and *what should be*.

In this step, creativity is crucial. The authors suggest imaginative thinking, such as Lateral Thinking of De Bono, and intuitive (right-brain) ways of thinking. They also suggest brainstorming, scenario-building to expand the universe of possible futures. The experience of listening, and respecting values and opinions different of their own (the first step of the learning cycle) weakens cognitive barriers and contributes to assuming an open posture, a creative disposition, when the group arrives to this point.

The fifth step, *collective action*, is about conceiving concrete actions. It looks for people taking responsibilities and getting involved in practical actions. At this step, an action-plan

is developed, connecting actions, people, resources, timelines, and indicators. The agreement around an action-plan represents new conditions for interaction between people and institutions, and represents the kick-off for a renewed system of rules. These actions aim at changing the direction of the social dynamics toward the strategic orientations envisioned in the previous step. It concludes the first round of the learning cycle.

The sixth step, *following on*, is about implementing and adjusting the action-plan designed in the fifth step. Now is when most actions take place, and the reality beyond the participants (the pre-existing environment) starts transforming. This step begins when the workshop (steps 2 to 5) ends. It is when the ideas developed in the workshop have to validate their viability, and when the innovative forces develop their new identity and build their new social legitimacy. It is when the innovative initiatives can go through the process of scaling up and spreading toward other social actors. By the end of this step, a new learning cycle may start, creating a sort of spiral of a social-learning process.

Portfolio of cases

The authors have applied their methodological approach to over 300 cases, in 12 countries, in four continents, an extraordinary portfolio of practical experiences. They introduce the cases as a short collection of 16 experiences: 'eight pairs of case studies of transformational change enabled by a particular approach to celebrating collective learning' (p. 91). I saw this section as an exposition of photos, pictures illustrating what can happen when we address social change applying the Guide.

Together with the cases, I found insights that enrich the understanding of the methodology. Despite the simplicity of the method, these cases provide evidence that the methodology drives energy and enthusiasm in participants, facilitating the emergence of spontaneous initiatives from multiple actors and institutions, making difficult problems approachable.

The cases are diverse, from big to small, from short to long term, from medium to high levels of complexity. As a whole, they provide proof of the effectiveness of the method and illustrate different ways social transformation can become viable. The categories of the cases are: (1) managing whole-of-community change, (2) introducing new ideas, (3) initiating long-term change, (4) changing problem communities, (5) achieving collective thinking from individual knowledge, (6) monitoring and evaluation teamwork, (7) transforming teamwork, and (8) working from the guidebook in other cultures.

The case of Beaconsville provides a glimpse of the portfolio. Beaconsville is a mid-size city and port of Australia, whose local institutions and businesses were concerned with issues of sustainability. A visionary leadership at a government agency led the process of social learning. The process involved over 150 people and went through three learning cycles. As result of the experience, a multidimensional pool of sustainability projects were designed, funded, and implemented. Other impacts were produced as well: local policies and institutions were adjusted to address sustainability, local institutions trained staff on sustainability, a Sustainability Office was created at the City Council, over 40 workshops were carried out to move the city's sustainability forward, and many other fascinating stories emerged.

The tools

This section brings a generalized concept of tools. The authors present a collection of methodological resources for social learning. These resources bring concepts that clarify

the authors' approach, and support the reader with reasoning to facilitate processes of change. This enriched treatment of the concept of tools prevents mechanistic applications and greatly increases the value of this section.

Examples of these methodological resources comprise: alliancing (collaborating instead of competing), balancing the players (combining actors from diverse knowledge cultures), consultation (Amstein's ladder of participation), conversation (principles for powerful dialogues), forecasting (illuminating the present with glimpses of the future), gatekeepers and knowledge broking (maintaining information and knowledge flowing), imagining (mobilizing creativity), multiple knowledges (bridging cognition between different epistemic cultures), pattern language (breaking power dynamics in knowledge sharing), questioning (focusing the intelligence in what is relevant), yarning (sharing stories around a campfire), and so on.

Each one of these resources comes with a conceptual introduction, orientations for use, very detailed instructions in some case, and also sources for further reading, a kind of required reading list for those interested in engaging in processes of social change. As a whole, they expand the understanding of the method and constitute a high-value asset of methodological resources and principles.

For someone interested in social learning, like me, reading Brown and Lambert's Guide can be an illuminating experience.

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