

## From one-off events to learning systems and communities of practice

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### Abstract

This paper considers some of the challenges and skills involved in designing and facilitating events such as workshops, meetings and conferences as part of learning systems and Communities of Practice. It focuses mainly on processes of learning that involve interaction rather than on solitary activity though acknowledges the relationships between individual and group levels. Three examples from the author's experience are presented, two from the contexts of environmental decision making and rural change in the UK and one from direct involvement in an event that focused on Communities of Practice (CoPs) at international level. Three inter-related areas of challenge for learning system design emerged from this inquiry and are discussed. These areas are *distribution* with respect to both cognition and communities; the need to take account of *different systems of interest, timeframes and purposes* and the need for *continuity in dialogue* to support the learning of both individuals and groups.

### Background

Three things prompted me to write this paper. First, an evaluative comment about one-off learning events that may reinforce the isolation of agricultural producers, received from a participant in a workshop I ran with my Open University (OU) colleagues. Second, a week spent in May 2003 with members of an organisation called CP Square, in which the importance of events was recognised in the context of cultivating Communities of Practice (CoPs). Third, a realisation that came from my own research in the UK - that the learning that people referred to as most useful to them in their environmental decision making came from their interactions with people and community. Events seemed to have a role in enabling interaction but other elements and processes were important too.

I think of these three things as 'critical incidents' in my own learning processes (Brookfield 1990, Flanagan 1954) with respect to designing and developing learning systems. They were all experiences that were significant to me as a practitioner who sets up and facilitates many 'learning events' i.e. events with a primary purpose of learning and that also use learning approaches as methodology. These incidents challenged some of my assumptions about what constitutes a 'good' learning event. Behind each is an example that I will go on to describe and analyse in more detail later in this paper. My examples all focus on the role of events in learning processes, albeit in different ways. They also highlight the place of processes of learning that involve interaction within learning trajectories of individuals.

Processes of learning that involve interaction have been of recent interest to many. For example Illeris (2002) notes that "It is characteristic that the interest in learning in recent years by the development of concepts such as social learning and, very radically, social constructionism, has moved in the direction of interaction processes. In this situation it is important to maintain a conception of the internal psychological processes as an integrated part of learning." Roling (2002), Ison (2000) Jiggins et al (2002) and others involved in the European project SLIM (Social Learning for Integrated Management

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and sustainable use of water at catchment scale), which includes me, have stressed the importance of social learning that enables concerted action. Cook and Brown (1999), in making a distinction between knowledge and knowing, describe knowing as 'the epistemic work that is done as a part of action or practice'. They build on observations of others, including John Dewey and Geoffrey Vickers, and point out that knowing does not focus on what we possess in our heads but on our interactions with the things of the social and physical world

In terms of the focuses of this IFSA workshop, my emphasis in this paper will be on some of the learning processes and skills that agencies, actors and communities need in the context of multidimensional agriculture.

### Three examples

I will now expand on my three examples and subsequently analyse some of the learning process and skills-related issues they raised for me, drawing on a range of different theoretical and methodological perspectives.

#### *Example 1 UK LEARNing events*

The first example came from one of two exploratory workshops my OU colleagues and I organised in the UK as part of the second (WP2) of seven work programmes in the European project LEARNing (Learning in European Agricultural and Rural Networks: institutions, networks and governance). (Hubert, 2002). Our focus within the wider LEARNing project, which has eight European research teams and one Australian partner, was on exploring issues of managing increasing organisational complexity being experienced by participants in the context of rural change in the UK. In the WP2 workshop from which my example comes, held on May 1st 2003, participants drawn from a wide range of rurally-related organisations in the UK worked in a mixture of small group and plenary sessions to: (i) identify sets of issues for people and organisations concerned with agriculture and rural areas; (ii) develop systems maps of actors concerned with 'managing' current complexity in English/Welsh agriculture and rural areas and (iii) to consider how and why their organisations learnt or did not learn to manage change. Further details of this process are explained in another paper to this conference. (Ison, Blackmore & Shelley 2003).

The detailed evaluative comment that made me stop and think was made anonymously and stated that *'The issues dealt with at this workshop have generated approaches to the provision of learning ...but such learning as has taken place has been event driven rather than in the form of continuous interaction. The provision of one-off learning events has reinforced the isolation of many agricultural producers, who need a framework to continue the dialogue which has begun'*. I surmised that the commenter included our own series of events for the LEARNing project in his or her observation as in discussion at the end of the event several participants requested continued dialogue and networking. It was suggested this could be done, in addition to further workshops, through email and a list server. I was unable at that time to find out what experience had led to the comment. However, our LEARNing project is current as I write this paper and there will be opportunity to find out more.

Our starting point had been the LEARNing project on this occasion but we were building on other projects (our own and those of others) and working relationships already established with some participants through their various connections with the Open University Systems Discipline. Our main

brief with LEARNing was to identify a future research agenda of mutual interest to participants and ourselves. We had indicated some opportunities for continuing conversations begun in the workshop (both at UK and European levels) and had announced our intention to continue with theme-based round tables in the UK as part of the LEARNing project's fourth work programme. We had also indicated that we were trying to find synergy with and not to replicate work being done by others along similar lines. We had not however explicitly addressed the need for continuous interaction between events. Indeed as facilitators of the workshop, our previous experience had led us to believe there was a need to first identify more clearly our systems of interest and their perceived purposes and to map our own activity with that of other actors before assuming that as a group we wished to develop our network.

However, the comment did make me sharply aware that there were other perspectives besides our own and that there were needs for continuity in dialogue that probably extended well beyond our project. It raised an ethical concern for me about event-driven learning and made me question the place of our own events in participants' learning trajectories as well as within the objectives of the project. I began to wonder whether our process was too much driven by events and whether we needed to pay further attention to more continuous interaction.

### *Example 2 CP Square - the Community of Practice of Communities of Practice*

Later in the same month (May 2003) I attended another event. I still had the question of the role of events in learning systems very much in mind. This time it was in Santa Cruz in the United States and I was there neither as designer nor facilitator, but as a participant.

Since reading the work of Lave and Wenger and their associates (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger, 1999, Wenger, Snyder and McDermott, 2002) on situated learning and Communities of Practice I had become aware of both widespread enthusiasm for and critique of the ideas of Communities of Practice. Enthusiasm was evident from the sheer numbers of people who seemed to be buying Wenger's 1999 book, finding the ideas useful and developing or at least referring to Communities of Practice. Critiques had appeared for example from Fox (1997, 2000) and Lorenz (2001) who compared and contrasted a Communities of Practice approach with other theories and approaches. In Fox's case the comparison was made with Actor Network theory and with traditional cognitive learning theory and in Lorenz's with information processing and cultural-historical perspectives, in particular looking at the influence of activity theory. My experience had been that I found Wenger's focus on 'learning as practice' both intriguing and useful in researching learning, as discussed in my paper to the 5th European IFSA symposium (Blackmore 2002). But an exercise OU colleagues and I conducted using soft systems methodology (SSM) to interrogate CoPs theory also highlighted some quite major theoretical differences between what was described in Wenger's book 'Communities of Practice' and a second book he had written with Richard McDermott and Bill Snyder called 'Cultivating Communities of Practice'.

Etienne Wenger and Bill Snyder had started the organisation CP Square to develop and strengthen Communities of Practice approaches. I joined the organisation as a member because Communities of Practice seemed to me a way forward in several areas of my work. I was struck by the emphasis Wenger, McDermott and Snyder had placed on 'events' as important in developing Communities of Practice and wanted to see for myself how they went about it.

My experience of CP week was a good one. I recognised the role this particular event was taking and the importance of events in general in the CPSquare community. Wenger et al (2002) distinguish a Community of Practice from other structures through attributes such as purpose and what holds them together. One key purpose of a CoP is 'to create, expand and surface knowledge, and to develop

individual capabilities'. Holding them together is 'passion, commitment and identification with the group and its expertise.'. In the case of CPSquare the passion, commitment and expertise or practice of the group is around building and cultivating Communities of Practice. The purpose of the event seemed to be to build relationships and understanding of CoPs, individuals' roles and traditions, making it easier for this group to function as a community. I began to understand better how others had developed Communities of Practice, mainly allied to organisations but complementing traditional organisational hierarchies and supporting participants in their practice. Although I didn't come across many examples of multi-organisational Communities of Practice, which I felt may offer some ways forward for our LEARNing project participants, multi-organisational and distributed Communities of Practice appeared to be emerging themes. As Hildreth, Kimble and Wright (2000) had observed elsewhere there was a lot of evidence of 'people moving fairly rapidly from one situation to another as globalisation affected businesses and many companies take steps to downsize, outsource and deskill'.

### *Example 3 What helps and hinders learning for environmental decision making?*

My third example comes from interviews I conducted with nine individuals involved in different aspects of environmental decision making in the UK in one phase of a research project I am conducting alongside my other research and teaching at the OU. The individuals came from different organisational contexts, ranging from multi-organisational to national and local government to small businesses. They had different roles with respect to environmental decision making ranging from very action-oriented and hands-on for example in managing woodland in southern England, to facilitating others e.g. managing the issues of flooding or waste management to policy making e.g. regarding diffuse pollution and agriculturally related water issues. As part of these interviews individuals reflected on their own learning and/or practice and that of others working with them. Many comments on learning and making changes came out in accounts of people's activities and decision-making processes. Following Wenger (1999) and the approach I described in my last paper to an IFSA conference (Blackmore 2000), I did not distinguish too sharply between learning and practice in these interviews as I found it wasn't a distinction that interviewees were making. They were asked what had helped and hindered them in their learning and environmental decision making. Their answers included:

#### *Specifically event related*

- Tools, techniques and methodologies to help facilitation of events.
- Good venues
- Explicitly establishing ground rules for engagement with other stakeholders
- Space - physical and time

#### *Interactions and making connections*

- People who show us how to do things (eg use of chainsaw or how to coppice) rather than formal training and events
- Making connections among people, projects and other activities (eg between national agencies and local authorities)
- Networking
- Joining up different plans and strategies and working on them together
- Looking at parallel examples of processes (eg example of process of participation of stakeholders in radioactive waste management had lessons for water management)
- Skills in associating one thing with another - systems skills.
- Skills to look at cross-cutting issues
- Developing good relationships with others working on similar issues

- Sustainability and integrated policy appraisal tools

#### *Overall process*

- An evolutionary process - not trying to address everything at once

I realise that this list takes features that people found important to their learning and environmental decision making out of context which makes it difficult to draw useful conclusions but what I see here is a list of some of the elements and processes that make up learning systems. Most also seem to be about the 'interactions with the things of the social and physical world' that Cook and Brown referred to as knowing (see above). Although my interviewees did mention specific skills and tools that they found important to their learning they rarely mentioned formal training when they discussed how they had acquired skills or learnt how to use different tools. I was struck by the repeated reference to what could be interpreted as 'systems skills' - i.e. the ability to make connections and understand a situation within a wider context. Though what is recognised in education circles as the 'key skill' of 'working with others' was much in evidence also.

### **What do these three examples reveal and conceal?**

A question arose for me from these three examples about the role of events in enabling processes of interaction and their place in individuals' learning trajectories, past, present and future. However, events clearly only formed part of the picture. In line with Open University and other (e.g SSM & Hawkesbury) Systems traditions (Open University 1997, 2000; Checkland; 1981, Bawden 1994), I have found it useful in my own practice to think of a learning system as a construct, a combination of interconnected elements and processes, which together form a whole that has learning as its purpose. At the OU we have found thinking of situations as if they were learning systems to be a good way of standing back and exploring issues before focusing on problems and opportunities, making it less likely that we concentrate on the 'wrong' ones. In our experience we have also found learning systems approaches can help to legitimise a learning culture where people accept there are uncertainties and unknowns and a need to learn a way to situation improvement rather than lay blame. Those who have used learning systems ideas in practice (e.g. at the Open University, Hawkesbury and University of Hull) have found them useful for working out what elements and processes need to be included or excluded in a process of inquiry so that learning can take place that may help improve a situation from the perspectives of stakeholders. Wenger, McDermott and particularly Bill Snyder with his interest in CoPs in cities, have considered aspects of 'world design' through considering the world as a learning system with a 'worldwide web' of interwoven communities that focus on various civic practices at different levels, including district, municipal, regional, national and global.' They have noted that this approach raises many challenges and questions regarding governance, and more generally for civic participation. On hearing this from Bill Snyder at CP Week I wondered whether there were similar or different challenges and questions applying to rural areas. That is still a question for me but I found that three specific areas of challenge had emerged from my incidents/examples that I will now discuss.

### **Three areas of challenge in designing and facilitating learning systems.**

#### *1 Distribution*

There were elements of 'distribution' in all the three incidents. Both distribution of community and of cognition.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) discuss the challenge of distributed communities and note that factors such as distance, size, organisational affiliation and cultural differences can make building and sustaining communities significantly more difficult than in local communities. They state that "Distributed communities need as much or more than local communities, a set of regular events to give the community a heartbeat." "Purely online connections can feel timeless and out of sync with the often urgent rhythm of everyday work."

Hildreth, Kimble and Wright (2000) also commented on the place of 'events' and noted how one group (the management team of IT support of a major international company) had managed to function as a Community of Practice in a distributed environment but met on a twice-yearly basis. They noted that 'the members of the group felt that during the face-to-face meetings they managed to get a lot of work done and develop much more quickly the relationships with their colleagues. During the periods of communication on e-media, they felt that the momentum gradually slowed until a physical meeting picked it up again.'

The roles and nature of Communities of Practice clearly vary a great deal. The examples of Wenger et al and Hildreth and Kimble did not come from agriculture but I see links between what they have discussed regarding distributed communities and observations on 'distributed cognition' that have been made in the context of managing land and water resources. They have also had insights that I find useful in thinking through the design of learning systems in the context of agriculture and rural change in the UK.

Roling (2002) explores how multiple cognition can grow into collective or distributed cognition through a process of social learning. According to Roling collective cognition emphasises shared attributes (myths, theories, values and collective action); multiple cognition emphasises totally different cognitive agents in one situation with multiple perspectives and distributed cognition emphasises different but complementary contributions that allow concerted action. He stresses that 'a sustainable society must be capable of concerted action.'

As a systems practitioner I have long extolled the virtues of valuing multiple perspectives as part of a process of systemic inquiry and am interested in processes of synthesis that bring them together. Roling's linking of multiple perspectives with multiple rather than collective or distributed cognition intrigues me. More so, his comment that 'multiple cognitive agents tend to maintain their mutual isolation' resonates with the first of my 'incidents' described at the start of this paper. Roling talks of 'perceived interdependence' as a crucial factor that drives multiple cognitive agents to collective or distributive cognition. He also describes influencing this move from multiple to distributed cognition as one of the main tasks of leaders and managers and declares an interest in how multiple cognitive agents can be *facilitated* in the direction of collective or distributed cognition.

In many ways I see the challenge Roling describes in moving from multiple to distributed cognition as very similar to that which Wenger et al (2002) describe in cultivating distributed communities of practice. Both seem to me to provide key insights into the design of learning systems. In the design of workshops that have been intended to bring multiple perspectives together as in my first example, or indeed in events intended to help individuals to develop skills or use tools of relevance to my third example, has interdependence been perceived? Has synthesis in perspectives really taken place or have apparent changes in people's perspectives remained fairly superficial? Have workshop participants increased their capability for concerted action? Perhaps not or only partially and this might partly explain why individual workshops can increase rather than reduce a sense of isolation.

Events have an important place within distributed communities of practice but if trying to develop learning systems that achieve concerted action then not just different but complementary contributions are needed. This point takes me onto the second area of challenge.

## *2 Different systems of interest, timeframes and purposes*

In our first workshop for the LEARNing project (example 1) we started our process by exploring the context of issues of agriculture and rural areas. We were aware that participants all identified with the theme of how organisations can change and learn to manage emerging complexity but we were also aware that they had many different systems of interest, timeframes and purposes. Systems maps produced by participants as part of our workshop made some of these differences apparent. In our second workshop, in which we had some of the same and some different participants we looked more closely at timeframes of participants' critical incidents and key events in relation to agriculture, food, environmental and rural issues. As we go into the next stage of our project we have work to do in focusing on what we collectively and individually want to achieve - our research agenda. I am mindful of the point made by one of my interviewees in my third example - that we need an evolutionary process to support our learning and cannot address everything all at once.

I am uncertain whether social learning for concerted action can take place in such a situation. How can a group of people who are trying to work together because they identify with a particular issue achieve concerted action when individuals actually have very different systems of interest, timeframes and purposes? Our situation is very different from the much used example of navigating a ship presented by Hutchins (1995) and referred to by Roling (2002) when discussing the distributed cognition needed for concerted action. The metaphor of a 'concert' suggests that at minimum timing must synchronise. I suggest that iterative and evolutionary processes of inquiry are needed to ensure that even if systems of interest, timeframes and purposes are different then they are at least complementary. Otherwise a group may never get past multiple cognition and may depart from a situation where there may have been potential for social learning for concerted action with their separate (possibly slightly changed) multiple perspectives in tact.

## *3 Achieving continuity in dialogue*

In this paper so far I have considered the importance of learning events. I have also suggested some other elements that have formed part of individuals' and groups' learning systems - people, relationships, skills, tools, on-line technologies and processes of inquiry. My third area of challenge concerns how to achieve the continuity in dialogue that individuals and groups need to support them in their processes of inquiry. The participant in the LEARNing workshop who I quoted in my first example called for a 'framework' to achieve this continuity and I have mentioned what could be considered as one such framework - Communities of Practice. Illeris (2002) describes Communities of Practice as a framework for social learning and my experience of CoPs suggests they could, and in some sectors already do, serve this purpose. The 'practices' of those involved in agriculture vary a great deal as there is a wide range of agencies and actors involved, as is well recognised by IFSA. There is also a range of understandings of what constitutes a CoP, as I became aware, from my interactions with other members of CPSquare. CoPs are not without some of the issues of other structures e.g. they require resources and people in key roles such as co-ordinators, to develop and keep them functioning. Wenger et al (2002) claim that CoPs 'evolve and end organically and last as long as there is relevance to the topic and value and interest in learning together.' This focus is certainly not far from some of the objectives of the LEARNing project

and taking a wider community-based approach may well help us to provide the continuity in dialogue that participants feel they need.

The call for this IFSA workshop asked a range of questions concerning new 'skills (of relevance to)..... some of the radical transformations at work in individual identities and social structures such as professional bodies, farms, agri-enterprises and local communities.' This workshop brief also called for a wide range of disciplines in human sciences and bio-technical sciences to address these questions. However, I do not see on that list some of the disciplines working to address questions similar to those this IFSA workshop raises but in other sectors and wonder why not. In my current work with people from the agricultural and rural sectors, as well as those involved more widely in environmental decision making, I attempt to draw from three particular areas of academic writing with respect to knowing and learning that I find very useful in terms of both conceptual and practical ideas and processes, namely adult education, (second order) systems and (third generation) knowledge management (described by Snowden 2002). I am particularly interested in ideas from within these areas that take account of epistemology and ethics and find an increasing number that do.

## Conclusions

I have come to two main conclusions as a result of my inquiries and reflections.

First, that skills in designing and developing learning systems that account for distribution, different systems of interest, timeframes and purposes and that also allow the continuity of dialogue that individuals need, are among the skills required to manage change for a multidimensional and multifunctional agriculture.

These are skills of both analysis and synthesis that may be learnt through formal and informal means such as:

- Open University Systems courses (Open University 1997 & 2000) which support students in learning how to manage complexity they experience in their own situations. Exploring contexts before formulating problems and opportunities and negotiating and representing boundaries of their systems of interest are among the systemic skills learnt.
- An advanced facilitation training programme in which I participated in the UK run by the consultancy 'Learning Edge' (Learning Edge Consulting 2000). Following an initial one-day event, participants tried out various techniques learnt in their own workplaces returning to reflect on their experiences at another event.
- A community-leadership programme designed as a critical learning system with residential and community phases run by the Centre for Systemic Development in Australia. (McKenzie 1997)
- Web-supported activities such as those that form part of the practice of the organisation CPSquare (see my Example 2 in this paper).

What these examples have in common is that they were designed to facilitate learning for managing complexity and change through encouraging reflective praxis. They incorporate one-off events but they also contextualise skill development within learning systems and communities of practice. They are not specific to any one domain of practice but are, I think, relevant to the domains of multidimensional agriculture and sustainable development.

My second conclusion is that there is a great deal to be gained by communities such as IFSA from looking outside the agricultural sector to see how others are learning to cope with challenges of emerging complexity and change as societies evolve. This point relates to my experiences of working with and reading the work of a wide range of sectors focusing on knowing and learning as described in this paper.

Some paths that I think are important for future research and also relevant to multi-dimensional and multi-functional agriculture are as follows:

- 1 Multi-organisational and distributed communities of practice. What purposes do they serve? How do they work? What supports them? What is the role of e-learning and face-to-face elements within them? What advantages and disadvantages are there in conceptualising groups that are working together as communities-of-practice?
- 2 Systems skills: what are they, how can they be developed and what is their role in decision making and managing complexity and change?
- 3 What further examples can be identified that could be conceptualised as people moving from multiple to distributed cognition through social learning? What and whose purposes have been served in doing so and how? Can we learn more from a range of sectors about how 'concerted action', as discussed by Röling (2002), may be brought about?
- 4 What further insights may be gained into multi-dimensional and multi-functional agriculture from other inquiries underway in the disciplines and communities of adult education, (second order) systems and (third generation) knowledge management?

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