



Praxis Paper No. 17

## Organisational Learning in Civil Society:

*Influences of Culture,  
Relational Dynamics  
and Informality*

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## Executive Summary

In January 2006 a workshop was hosted by INTRAC's Praxis Programme and VBNK, Cambodia's leading capacity building NGO. It brought together a group of practitioners with a commitment to organisational learning. The workshop drew on the combined knowledge and experience of participants to deepen our understanding about the concepts and practice of organisational learning in the development sector. This Praxis Paper details and documents the rich discussions and learning that occurred at the workshop.

The paper highlights that organisational learning requires both individual and collective learning processes which purposely contribute towards changed organisational behaviour and practice. The key message of the paper is that organisational learning is a developmental process that integrates thinking and doing at both individual and collective levels. The practice of organisational learning needs to recognise and respond to:

1. the contextual and cultural elements that influence the way learning is perceived and put into practice within organisations
2. the complex set of inter-relationships which influence, and are influenced by, both the process and outcomes of organisational learning
3. the informal and unconscious processes of learning which occur within organisations.

Development agencies have not always provided an enabling environment for organisational learning. Learning is often seen as less valuable than 'doing'. It is difficult to find donors who will recognise the value of, and fund, adequate time, space and resources for learning. Ultimately, development organisations need to decide on, and take responsibility for, their own learning. Putting organisational learning into practice may seem daunting. However, with supportive leadership, taking small steps and changing daily practices can contribute towards a gradual process of strengthening an organisation's culture of learning.

## Acknowledgements

This paper draws on the combined experience and wisdom of all the members of the Praxis Learning Group on Organisational Learning who met in Cambodia in January 2006.<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank all participants for their contribution to the ideas expressed here and the useful comments they made during the writing process.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for a list of the workshop participants.

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# 1 Introduction

*"Learning how to learn is life's most important skill" (Anonymous)*

If organisational learning is to be effective NGOs need to understand the motives, the means and the opportunities for their own and their partners' learning. This was the premise of Praxis Paper 3: *'Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity.'*<sup>2</sup> The paper provided an overview of organisational learning and knowledge management in the context of aid and development and pointed to the need to address major challenges. It demonstrated the significant appetite amongst NGO staff for practical examples of how to translate theory into practice. The paper highlighted the need to move beyond a Western understanding

There is still an enormous gap between what many organisational learning specialists intuitively know and understand from their own experience and the practices and policies of the sector as a whole.

of individual and collective learning to explore a wider range of methods and tools that are relevant and appropriate to different cultural and organisational contexts.

Praxis Paper 3 aimed to 'open' a learning process by stimulating debate and inviting reactions. As a result an informal network of southern and

northern practitioners with a commitment to organisational learning was established. Members came from local, national and international NGOs and included freelance capacity building practitioners. In January 2006 these members<sup>3</sup> came together for a workshop hosted by the Cambodian NGO VBNK.<sup>4</sup> At the workshop different approaches to OL were explored, drawing on the combined knowledge and experience of participants. The rich discussions that followed highlighted that meaningful learning is still elusive despite decades of knowledge derived from innumerable evaluations and mountains of reporting. There is still an enormous gap between what many specialists in organisational learning intuitively know and understand from their own experience and the practices and policies of the sector as a whole. The workshop was designed to deepen our understanding of organisational learning and share experiences of how this improved understanding may influence future practice.<sup>5</sup>

This paper details and documents the learning that occurred so that it can be shared with other development practitioners. However, a note of caution should be expressed about how the learning was documented. Given the diversity of the learning that took place, and the way it is interpreted differently by each participant, it would be unrealistic to claim that this paper 'captures' the learning that took place

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Britton, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1 for a list of meeting participants.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on VBNK see [www.vbnk.org](http://www.vbnk.org)

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 2 for a description of the Workshop programme and process.

at the workshop. It could be argued that a large part of the learning was essentially an experience of the moment that is difficult to subsequently share with others who were not there to experience it. However, while not claiming that this paper represents the learning of the whole group, the authors of the paper drew on 1) the experiences and knowledge shared by participants during the workshop 2) our own subsequent interpretation of that learning and 3) constructive feedback received by participants on the paper's first draft. The writing of this paper has therefore been an iterative learning process in itself!

In the paper we start with an understanding of organisational learning as 'individual and collective learning in an organisational context that contributes to changed organisational behaviour'.<sup>6</sup> As such, organisational learning is integrally linked to, and part of, wider and on-going processes of organisational development and capacity

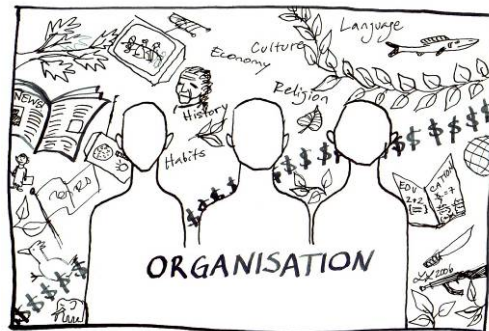
In the Paper we start with an understanding of organisational learning as 'individual and collective learning in an organisational context that contributes to changed organisational behaviour'.

building. More broadly we recognise that learning is itself a developmental process that integrates thinking and doing. It provides a link between the past and the future and requires us to look for meaning in our actions.<sup>7</sup> Effective organisational learning can help organisations make sense of their world, create meaning and act with purpose. This type of learning inherently

creates shifts within organisations, or even disturbances, which can lead to transformations in existing systems and structures and also in power dynamics.

The key message of the paper is that, in order for organisational learning processes to be effective, there is a need to recognise and respond to the influences of:

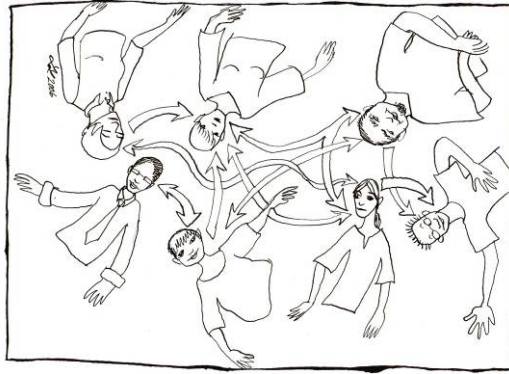
1) culture and context



<sup>6</sup> Britton, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Britton, 2005

## 2) relational dynamics



## 3) informal and unconscious forms of learning.



In relation to each of these influences the paper raises reflective questions to help those involved in organisational learning explore issues which may be affecting their own practice. Section 2 of the paper explores each of these influences in more depth. Case stories are provided based on the experiences of participants at the workshop. Each of the sub-sections concludes with reflective questions that summarise the issues to guide organisational learning specialists. Section 3 concludes by summarising the implications of the issues raised for future organisational learning practice.



## 2 Deepening our Understanding of Organisational Learning

*"That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something that you have known all your life, but in a new way." (Doris Lessing)*

Organisational learning and how to be a 'learning organisation' are much talked about in the field of development. However, success stories of organisations that are able to learn from their experiences in a way which contributes towards improved organisational actions are rare. In practice there is often a focus on the information-based dimension of learning, characterised by the rapid increase in uptake of knowledge management strategies<sup>8</sup> amongst NGOs across the globe. And yet it is all too easy to "assume that by gathering *information*, storing it and making it accessible that we have somehow increased our knowledge and learning. This overlooks the fact that knowledge is information that individuals have reflected on, understood, internalised and are able to use" (Britton, 2005).

Organisational learning can therefore be seen not as a deposit or collection of information but, where truly internalised, as a process of transforming ideas into actions to achieve social change

But why is there such a gap between the aspirations we have for being learning organisations and the reality of current organisational learning practice? It is the premise of this paper that to improve the effectiveness of organisational learning there is a need to take time to better understand the processes and dimensions that influence learning in development organisations.

The Western understanding of learning tends to focus on intellectual and formal learning processes. Development actors may often talk about the importance of local forms of knowledge but in reality they attach more value to a university degree than to a lifetime of learning from practical experience. It is clear that some forms of learning are valued over others. Freire's concept of the 'banking' system of education, where the educator makes 'deposits' in the educatee,<sup>9</sup> illustrates that many value learning as a process of acquiring knowledge. In contrast Freire was more concerned with the idea of *praxis* where learning is about informed action (linked to certain values). In his view learning is therefore not just about deepening understanding but about making a difference to the world. This is similar to the concept of experiential learning<sup>10</sup> which is a cyclical process which takes those involved through a process of observing and reflecting on concrete experiences before using this reflection to develop new concepts which are then tested in practice through novel experiences. Organisational learning can therefore be seen

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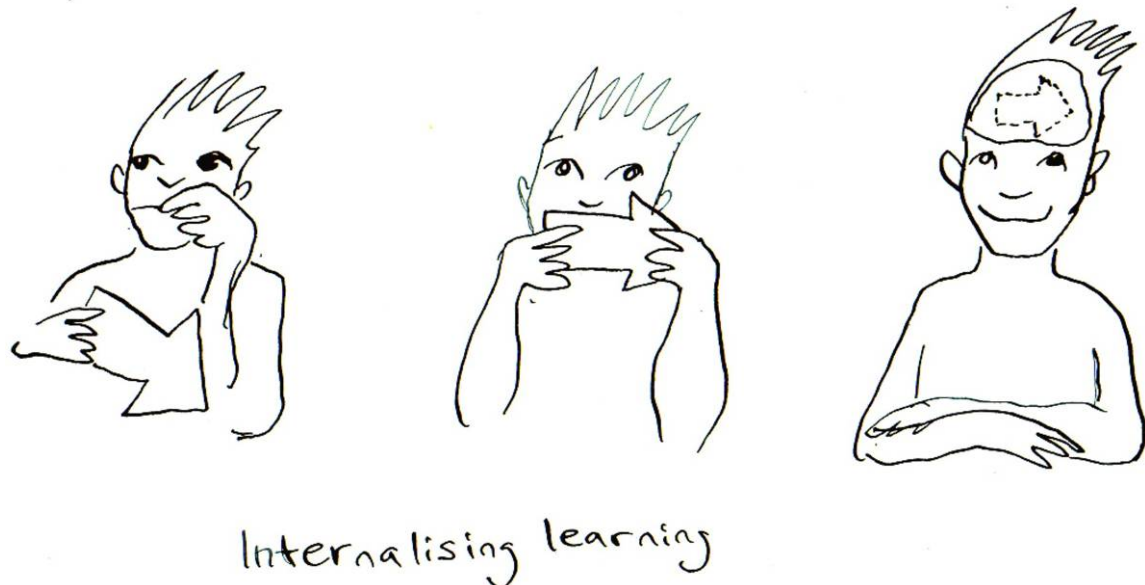
<sup>8</sup> See Britton, 2005 for an explanation of the differences between knowledge management and organisational learning.

<sup>9</sup> Freire, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the four element of Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning.

not as a deposit or collection of information but, where truly internalised, as a process of transforming ideas into actions to achieve social change.

**Figure 1: Internalising Learning**



Organisational learning involves establishing visible structures and processes through which learning can be promoted or enabled (as well as contained and constrained). However, learning as a process of generating new knowledge and understanding also involves being able to work at the edge between 'knowing' and 'not knowing'.<sup>11</sup> It is not just a matter of having an appropriate level of knowledge but, more importantly, to be open to exploring what is not known. This can make it difficult to predict or control what the outcomes of learning might be. The fear of losing control can be a powerful disincentive for learning, especially for those in positions of power. Organisational learning processes therefore require people to have the confidence and courage to live with, and manage, uncertainty. A culture of learning therefore depends just as much on nurturing mutual relationships of trust as it does on establishing formalised structures.

Informal, relational and emotional dynamics have a crucial role in paving the way for organisational learning and in establishing conducive conditions. However, current understanding of their influences is limited. Perhaps this is because the knowledge and understanding we have about learning itself, and about how we learn, tends to be 'tacit' rather than 'explicit'.<sup>12</sup> In other words it is highly personalised, hard to formalise, unconscious and difficult to express verbally. We are often not explicitly aware of how we learn. It is therefore a process that is difficult to communicate and discuss with others.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> French and Simpson, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on tacit and explicit knowledge see Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, London: Routledge

<sup>13</sup> See Smit (2007)

The role that those facilitating organisational learning processes can play is to support, catalyse or inspire learning in others. Crucially this can involve learning, or re-learning, how to learn. Those external to the process can 'help' others to learn but can not learn for them. Building on participant's discussions at the Cambodia workshop, this paper contributes to the debate by exploring our understanding of the factors that influence effectiveness of organisational learning. The underlying assumption is that organisational learning, as part of developmental practice, is a process of transformation which should lead to increased understanding but also to informed action. In the following sections we will explore:

1. the contextual and cultural elements that influence the way learning is perceived and put into practice within organisations
2. the complex set of relationships and interconnections which influence, and are influenced by, both the process and outcomes of organisational learning
3. the informal and unconscious processes of learning which occur within organisations.

## **2.1 Influences of Culture and Context on Learning**

Since people lie at the heart of any organisation organisational learning depends on deeply personal processes. We must be careful not to assume that people naturally want, need and know how to learn or that everybody learns in the same way. The culture and context in which people learn can strongly affect and shape the way they learn individually and collectively. The relevant influences of culture and context include: values and beliefs, attitudes and assumptions, sense of space and time, language and communication, habits and traditions, history, social hierarchies, gender and faith.<sup>14</sup> The ways in which learning is influenced by culture, and multiple sub-cultures, is neither static nor homogeneous. Without gaining an understanding of the cultural and contextual dimensions of learning we can have little sense of the potential success or failure of an organisational learning intervention.

The development sector necessarily involves situations where people are expected to learn across cultures and contexts as a result of, exchanges between international and local partners and/or between urban and rural staff. When facilitating organisational learning processes those from different cultural backgrounds need to be particularly aware of the way they interpret and respond to diverse organisational contexts. With this awareness their role should be to support the organisation to reinforce its own locally appropriate styles of learning, rather than inadvertently imposing ones that are unfamiliar. But in what ways do culture and context influence the way learning is perceived and put into practice within organisations? In this section we explore examples of how culture and context can affect organisational learning. We look at the diverse ways that people perceive and interpret the purpose and value of learning and explore how contexts of conflict and uncertainty can influence learning.

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<sup>14</sup> See Gould, 2006.

### 2.1.1 Diverse Perceptions of the Purpose and Value of Learning

Some of the difficulties associated with organisational learning processes can stem from a lack of common understanding about what learning is and the role it plays within a culture or society. Different interpretations of the concept and purpose of learning can make gaining a consensus and translating learning across cultures a complex task. This is illustrated by the experience of one workshop participant:

#### Reflections from Practice: Translating the Concept of Learning<sup>15</sup>

At VBNK, a local capacity building provider in Cambodia, we found difficulties in translating the language associated with organisational learning into Khmer. In Cambodian culture the primary purpose of learning is to be able to 'do' something, so learning is viewed as the acquisition of tools and techniques in a classroom or workshop setting. Learning is the responsibility of the teacher, not the student. Everyone in Cambodia over the age of 25 experienced a didactic teaching methodology which actively suppressed independent and analytical thinking. In this culture a question which cannot be answered results in 'loss of face'. Thus, questions (and especially 'why?') tend to be viewed as something negative, rather than helpful. There is an almost universal expectation that everything has a 'right' and 'wrong' answer, with little tolerance of anything in between.

Within this context the language of learning is of critical importance. At VBNK we had a major breakthrough in strengthening our own learning processes when we started using the Khmer translation of 'wisdom' instead of learning.

The way that different forms or styles of learning are valued can also vary considerably across cultures and context. In Central Asia education and study are seen as formal while learning can be seen as informal and therefore of less importance. Accustomed to the Soviet education system, people are used to receiving knowledge and information but not necessarily taking ownership and responsibility for their own learning.<sup>16</sup> In the Caribbean people's perception of learning has also been heavily influenced by colonialism. Teachers from abroad often brought a formal learning style that was not necessarily appropriate or relevant to the local culture.<sup>17</sup> The context and culture within which people learn how to learn clearly influences both their preferred learning style<sup>18</sup> and also the value they place on learning and knowledge. Staff in a local NGO who have university degrees may place little value on the ideas of rural staff who have less formal education, overlooking the fact they have years of practical experience.

<sup>15</sup> See Pearson 2006, Praxis Note 20. Available to download at <http://www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote20.html>

<sup>16</sup> See Pearson, Praxis Note 20: '*Organisational Learning Across Cultures*', January 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See Praxis Note 20: '*Organisational Learning Across Cultures*', January 2006.

<sup>18</sup> There are a number of systems for describing learning styles. One identifies the four learning style preferences as 1) *activists* (seeking challenge and immediate experience); 2) *reflectors* (standing back, gathering data, pondering and analysing); 3) *theorists* (thinking things through in logical steps and assimilating disparate facts into coherent theories) and 4) *pragmatists* (seeking and trying out new ideas, enjoying problem solving and quickly making decisions (adapted from Kolb's Experiential Learning Model by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford).

It is clear that partners, colleagues or clients may expect those facilitating organisational learning processes to be 'experts' who 'know all' while they as learners 'know nothing'. In a sense, this takes the 'responsibility and anxiety of not-knowing away from them'.<sup>19</sup> The perceived qualifications of the facilitator/trainer evidently influence participants' attitudes towards learning. The unpredictable nature of transformational learning processes can create resistance where those in authority are expected to know all the answers and to make decisions unilaterally. Tensions can arise where external facilitators, managers and staff have different perceptions about the purpose of learning, the needs of the learners and what forms of learning are most appropriate within the organisation. For example, one workshop participant shared an experience of being an expatriate facilitator. Their role was to support an organisation through a capacity building process which aimed to strengthen the organisation's learning processes.

#### Reflection from Practice: Doing the 'Right' Thing?

*'Am I condoning what I perceive to be poor practice in order to be able to better work with my colleagues?'*

I was an expatriate management adviser working with the director of a large NGO in Southeast Asia. My role was to help build the capacity of the staff (including that of the director) and help the organisation to learn and become more sustainable.

The director had a particularly authoritarian approach to management and was very 'directive' when dealing with the staff. In most circumstances she would directly 'instruct' the staff what to do, no matter how small the task. This meant that staff were given few opportunities to consider the situation for themselves. The result was that they became increasingly unable to take decisions or solve their own problems.

As I came to understand the organisation's dynamics I was concerned that the director's authoritarian approach was a significant barrier to capacity building, learning and sustainability. In an attempt to resolve my concern I first tried to ensure my own interactions with staff reflected good practice, hoping that my behaviour would be noted and adopted by the director. I tried this approach for several months before realising that little was changing.

My next approach was to sit down with the director and discuss the implications of her behaviour (which I personally found a challenging process). She listened politely to what I had to say, and in many cases agreed with my reasoned arguments for why treating staff differently was better for the organisation's development. I would often bring 'theory' into our discussions as a means to support my arguments, because I had come to learn that she placed great store in its validity. Indeed, she would quote chapters from management reference texts on issues such as 'leadership' and 'organisational learning'.

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<sup>19</sup> French and Simpson, 1999.

At the end of our discussions she would look me straight in the eye and tell me why these 'Western' notions of empowerment, consultation and participation did not work in this culture. She told me staff needed to be managed with a 'firm hand' — this is what they expected, and this, she said, was the only way to manage them. Clearly, such an approach allowed little space for staff to engage meaningfully in reflection on past experiences and left them unable to learn from and improve their practice.

My response to this understanding was to try and work within the director's values and culture, trying to find ways of working that resonated with her. This included being more understanding of why she adopted the approaches that she did, and altering my approach to fit with what she found acceptable, both for her and the other staff. In this way we did work more effectively together. Over time, she came to more readily accept my advice. And sometimes, just sometimes, she allowed the staff to make their own decisions.

The question I grappled with is, '*Did I do the right thing?*'

Using unfamiliar forms of learning such as participatory or experiential processes may take people beyond their comfort zone. Rather than stimulating and reinforcing learning processes this may create confusion and heighten resistance to new ideas. An alternative can be to start by respecting local forms of knowledge, exploring what learning means in each particular culture and identifying the safe, comfortable and local forms of inclusive learning that already exist. For example, where it is more acceptable to learn from, and with, peers rather than from authority figures separate spaces can first be created for colleagues to explore learning together. This is illustrated in the following participant's experience:

#### **Reflections from Practice: Respecting People's Comfort Zones**

In Church World Service in Cambodia we initiated annual retreats for support staff where they could discuss issues in a comfortable space without the presence of managers. This process allowed colleagues the time to build trust within a group and explore what learning meant to them before engaging in wider organisational learning processes with other staff.

### **2.1.2 Learning within Contexts of Conflict and Uncertainty**

Learning is also about linking the past and the future. However, reflecting on the past is often painful and envisioning the future is difficult. In post-conflict, post-genocide or post-apartheid contexts, for example, looking back, reflecting deeply and analysing learning may be too emotional or traumatic. Processes of organisational learning frequently ask individuals and organisations to map a path towards, or vision for, the future. However, in situations where the future is uncertain — for example due to conflict or a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS — people find it difficult to

think beyond the present.<sup>20</sup> In such contexts learning processes — such as the Truth Commissions that were established in South Africa and Rwanda — can be a powerful tool to try to understand, and begin to look beyond, what has happened.

Some conflict situations can also catalyse deeper processes of internal learning. This is illustrated by the experience shared by a Nepali participant at the workshop:

#### **Reflections from Practice: Learning Experiences Through Conflict**

Search Nepal is one of the few national NGOs which has been working actively in the districts of Nepal where the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) has a presence. NGOs and CBOs working in these regions have had to learn quickly how to negotiate with both the security forces and the rebels in order to survive and function. In 2005 Search Nepal were caught unprepared during a monitoring visit to a remote mountainous district. Five members of staff, including the director, were captured by CPN and held hostage in separate locations for a week. Our 'crimes' included continuing to work directly with communities, working closely with the state, and trespassing into rebel territory. The experience was traumatic and harrowing. We felt threatened, vulnerable, harassed and inadequate. Eventually, we negotiated our release but it was a humiliation. We temporarily lost the respect of many peer workers and NGOs.

After this experience we began soul searching. Where had we gone wrong? Can, and should we meet, the demands of the rebels for money, materials and operations? Should we break this news to our donor partners? Should we seek the support of international human rights organisations in Nepal? What if we ignore the warnings of the rebels? The heightened conflict created suspicion and lack of trust amongst staff. Will this lead to the undermining of our own organisational vision, mission and values? What were the communication gaps and crises of confidence?

Search Nepal decided to spend three months focusing on the issues of working on, and working, in conflict. The organisation felt that each one of us had to be psychologically capable of dealing with such issues in the future. We decided that this experience was a good learning opportunity to be translated into pragmatic programme and organisational strengthening processes. We also realised that we lacked the proper structure, authority, mechanisms and review processes to deal with such issues. Personal and professional relationships were important.

We have put into practice some of our learning from this episode. The participatory monitoring and self-evaluation systems are sharper and more sensitive. Information flows among staff are more transparent. Contingency plans exist to respond to similar crises in the future. We have actively pursued external relationships with the media, human rights organisations and other NGO networks in order to be better prepared.

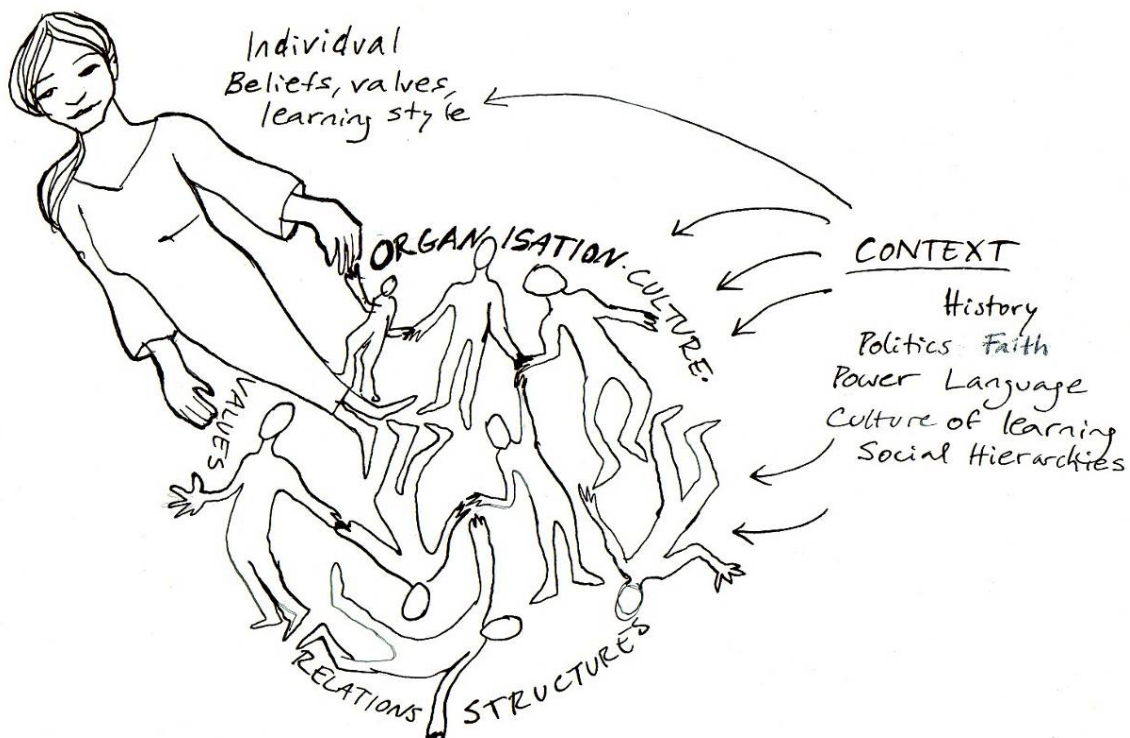
<sup>20</sup> See for example Shepherd, Praxis Note 23: *'HIV/AIDS in Southeast Asia'*, March 2006.

Although conflict transformation is a new subject in Nepal, we are now actively involved in peace and reconciliation in all our rural development work. Our capacity to empower others to face similar challenges is now much more robust. From this experience our advice would be:

- *High intensity conflict will enter right into the heart of an NGO because we are the product of our society. Learn to deal with it.*
- *Prepare your organisation to play a useful role. Be proactive. Learn from and adapt to the conflict situation. Don't wait for it to resolve itself since it is likely that the socio-economic and political landscape will change during and after the conflict period.*

To summarise, in this section we have explored some of the ways that cultural, historical and personal contexts can influence our understanding of learning and the way we learn individually and collectively. Taking a cultural and contextual approach to organisational learning therefore hinges on a creating a space and process which enables the organisation to understand and develop its sense of itself within its working environment. This involves exploring the perceptions and assumptions of those involved, being explicit about the objectives of the learning and the needs of the learners and responding to cultural diversity at individual and organisational levels.

**Figure 2: Individual and Collective Influences of Culture and Context on Organisations' Learning**





For those facilitating processes of organisational learning, the following reflective questions can help to identify and respond to some of these issues.

### Reflective Questions: Influences of Culture and Context

*Understanding learning across contexts and cultures:*

- What is the staff's understanding of the concept and purpose of learning?
- How might different understandings be shared appropriately in a language which is locally relevant and meaningful?
- In what way might events in the wider context (e.g. crises or conflicts) affect an organisation's ability to reflect on the past or look towards the future?
- What contextual and cultural factors may enable or constrain learning in organisations? What resistances to learning might exist?

*Value of learning:*

- Are some forms of learning valued over others?
- What impact might this have on inclusive learning processes?

*Exploring locally appropriate organisational learning processes:*

Organisational learning is not just about the contribution made by individual staff members but is about the interactions and collective processes between individuals

- What individual learning styles do people feel most comfortable with?
  - What are the safe, comfortable, local forms of successful, inclusive learning?
  - How can these spaces be nurtured within the organisation's culture of learning?
  - Is there a consensus about the learning objectives and the needs of the learners?
- Can people be supported to move beyond their learning 'comfort zone', to explore more transformational forms of learning? Is this appropriate?
  - What are the individual and cultural differences within the organisation and how can these be accommodated within learning processes?

## 2.2 Relational Dynamics of Learning in Organisations

Each organisation has a unique combination of individuals at its heart which is constantly evolving as people leave and others arrive. They each come with their own personal histories, values systems, beliefs and behaviours. Individuals within an organisation may all be contributing their experiences and learning but unless this is part of a collective process that influences organisational behaviour it cannot be described as organisational learning. For organisational learning is not just about the

contribution made by individual staff members, but also the interactions and collective processes between individuals and organisations. These internal and external interactions bring a relational dynamic to the effectiveness of organisational learning processes that is rarely recognised. These dynamics can be particularly complex in larger organisations where learning processes are more about connecting levels, structures and hierarchies rather than individuals.

If we accept that there is a relational dimension to learning the challenge is then to understand what characterises 'healthy' learning relationships and how these can be nurtured. How can we encourage each individual to look to others to form a diversity of *learning relationships*. That is, those people or groups they feel they can most learn with and from in formal, informal, hierarchical or spontaneous, external or internal ways? Learning must aim to build the confidence and self-esteem of individuals and collective relationships of mutual trust. These learning relationships can open a dialogue which shifts the thinking and behaviour of individuals and groups but also the relationships between them. However, unconstructive relationships can equally limit meaningful sharing, connection and learning and create tensions. This can happen where a partner organisation might be fearful that being open about their learning might lead to punitive funding decisions by their donor.

Within a developmental process collective learning processes should therefore involve people working with each other as subjects, rather than objects, of learning.<sup>21</sup> If we are to take a more dynamic, relational approach to organisational learning it may be valuable to start by focussing on 'organisation' as a process rather than an end state — with learning forming an integral part of its transition and development. In the following sections we will explore the dynamic relational nature of organisational learning, the patterns of relational behaviour within organisations and the influences of power relations.

### **2.2.1 Understanding Dynamic Learning Relationships**

Learning relationships are inherently dynamic because learning needs, staff and external networks change over time. High rates of turnover of NGO high staff can affect relational dynamics, not least at the senior management/leadership level or as expatriate staff pass through on two- to three-year contracts. But do we understand enough about how patterns of learning relationships are formed and how they can be developed to constructively influence organisational behaviour and practice? And how can each organisation find the most effective network, or web, of both internal and external relationships to achieve its organisational learning objectives?

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<sup>21</sup> See Freire, 1972.

There are subtle and often unconscious influences on the relational dynamics of groups which may in turn influence the way they learn collectively. For example, the Abilene paradox<sup>22</sup> refers to a process by which the limits of a particular situation can force a group of people to act in a way that is directly the opposite of their actual preferences. This can lead groups to continue with misguided activities which no group member desires because no member is willing to raise objections. Workshop participants acknowledged the influence of group theory and social psychology but raise the question of whether this type of relational behaviour can affect collective organisational learning processes. For example, stakeholders may agree to an evaluation's terms of reference which no one really wanted, ending in a report that does not meet anybody's learning needs and is barely used.

As mentioned previously genuine learning is about being at the edge between 'knowing and not-knowing'.<sup>23</sup> The uncertainty this brings can add an exciting, creative dimension that provokes significant learning. However, if people feel that there is no safe space to discuss their views, uncertainty can be unsettling and anxiety-provoking. It can lead to a sense of incompetence, fear and loss of control which can obliterate all sense of role, identity and ability to address the task in hand.<sup>24</sup> If ignored or handled badly the resulting tensions can block people's willingness and confidence to learn or take associated risks. A group may ultimately become 'stuck' in a pattern of collective learning behaviour in which no individual actively engages.

Each individual will look to others to form a diversity of learning relationship, whether these are formal or informal, hierarchical or spontaneous, external or internal

To avert this risk it is therefore necessary to create 'safe' learning spaces where individuals can express uncertainty and tensions constructively in a way which encourages creativity and experimentation, increases consensus and reshapes organisational behaviour.<sup>25</sup> At least some of these spaces should include external actors in order to ensure that partners can input and share their knowledge and experiences.

If we accept that dynamic learning relationships are important for effective organisational learning then a starting point could be to map an organisation's internal and external learning relationships. One way of doing this could be to ask staff to draw a relationship map of the individuals and groups from and with whom they learn most. This would allow the organisation to both recognise and build on its most constructive learning relationships but also identify where there might be blockages to learning. For example, an organisation which has invested in using a coaching management style might learn that junior staff really do benefit from the learning relationship they have with managers. However, the mapping process might

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<sup>22</sup> Described by Jerry B. Harvey in his 1988 book *The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*.

<sup>23</sup> French and Simpson, 1999. Also see page 7.

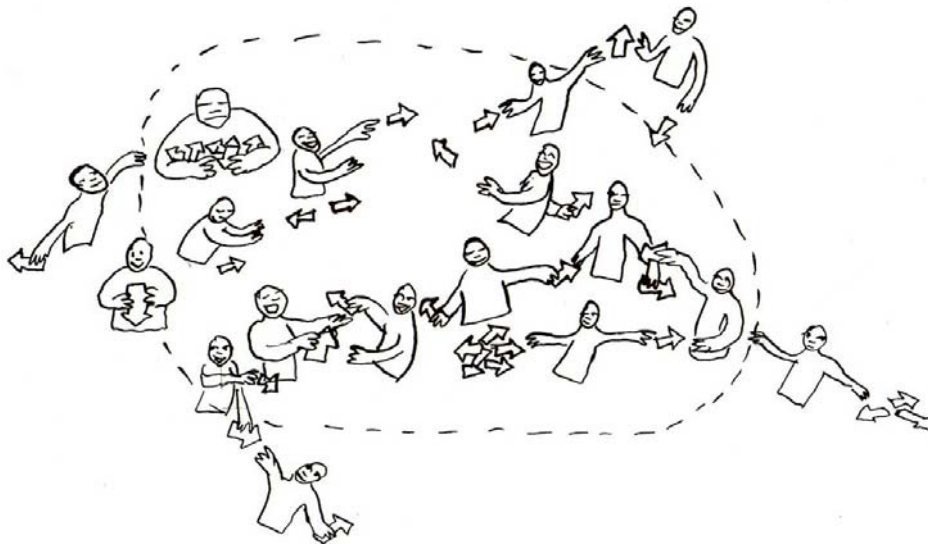
<sup>24</sup> French and Simpson, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> See Sorgenfrei and Wrigley (2005) Praxis Paper 7: *Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacity for Organisational Effectiveness*.

also reveal where organisational learning 'silos' have been created, self-contained processes cut off from the organisation's activities and relationships. It might also help an organisation to recognise that it is not engaging constructively with external learning and knowledge in a way which influences its own practice and relations with partners or local communities.

Mapping learning relationships might help to identify the opportunities and constraints to learning more widely in the development sector. While horizontal learning relationships between individuals and organisations, such as those involving networks and communities of practice, have gained some momentum over the past five years, two-way mutual learning between donors and recipients still seems to be rare. Hierarchical structures in the field of development and failure to address issues of power have complicated the development of collaborative learning between stakeholders.

**Figure 3: Dynamics of Internal and External Learning Relationships**



### **2.2.2 Working Consciously with Power Relations**

If learning is both relational and transformational then the process of learning also inherently involves shifts in power relations. This can create many disincentives for organisations to learn since the outcomes can be deeply challenging to those in positions of authority and control. Knowledge gained through learning can also be co-opted by those in powerful positions, therefore creating more inequality, rather than empowering those involved. There are concerns about diversity and equality if people's ability to engage in, or benefit from, learning differs according to gender, ethnicity or disability. Women can face significant barriers to learning if their knowledge is not equally respected. As one Kenyan NGO leader recently noted, her father's first question on hearing she had won a place to study law at university was: *'which man will ever accept your judgment?'*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See James, 2005.

The challenge is to recognise power — derived from seniority, expert status or other less formal sources of authority — to understand how it is used and to respond

The process of learning involves shifts in power relations. This can create many disincentives for organisations to learn since the outcomes can be deeply challenging to those in control

appropriately. In contexts where there is a 'high power distance'<sup>27</sup> — a situation in which less powerful members of organisations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally — hierarchical relations and authoritarian decision-making can act as a block to learning relationships. Critical thinking, questioning, analysis, creativity and innovation can be stifled, especially where there is a lack of supportive leadership. Learning therefore becomes a passive

process, involving little reflection or experimentation. It becomes difficult to question those with power or authority. This was the experience of one Cambodian participant at the workshop who faced challenges in sharing learning with his boss (see Reflection from Practice, p. 17).

A tradition of hierarchical relations can provide a comfortable space within which people feel able to question without overtly challenging those in authority. It should be recognised that the perception of power as negative is by no means shared across cultures. In many contexts power is perceived positively as 'power to' rather than 'power over' — that is as a position of influence rather than control. Leaders who use their influence to actively support learning, and act as positive role models, can inspire staff to take collective ownership and responsibility for learning. A constructive relationship between leadership and staff is therefore vital for creating organisations which plan for, encourage and value multi-dimensional forms of learning.

Within organisational learning processes we need to be better at recognising and questioning issues of power if we are to avoid reinforcing power relations rather than transforming them. Reflecting on the patterns of power relations can help the members of an organisation to explore the nature of their own power, and the way power is used in their organisation, but also to hold each other mutually accountable. However, inequality and powerlessness can also be accentuated where people lack confidence and self-belief, where there is a widespread sentiment: *the more insecure I feel, the more powerful I want to be: the more secure I am, the less I care*. Supporting people to reflect on the causes of their insecurity may help to enable those individuals to engage in organisational learning in a meaningful way which shifts their power relations with others.

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<sup>27</sup> Hofstede, 1991.

### **Reflection from Practice: Learning Relationships between Boss and Staff**

In Cambodia, peer colleagues often learn from each other and subordinates learn from their superiors. It is not common for a boss to feel the need to learn from staff, lest they lose status or respect. The fact that Cambodians often view the boss as a person who should know more than their subordinates leads middle managers to feel they do not themselves need to learn from junior colleagues.

I was appointed as Training Manager for a micro-finance institute and line-managed by Mr S, the Director of Operations. Mr S had extensive field experience — monitoring and following up on loan activities, problem solving and estimating loan requirements. It was great for me to have him as my line manager and to learn from him. He was very kind to teach me his knowledge and experience and this kind of learning relationship (subordinate learning from the boss) went very smoothly. I have learned a lot from my boss and he felt very happy to see me learn from him. However, I also came to observe that Mr S lacked skills and knowledge in some areas, such as general knowledge of credit

and banking, proficiency in English and management and IT skills. In addition to my role as Training Manager, my boss used to ask for specific support in areas such as IT, and editing letters, contracts and forms. I was very happy to help and to ensure that my boss received the necessary support he needed. This kind of learning relationship continued for several months.

A while later, I observed that my boss was not happy and felt insecure about our working relationship. He started to feel very frustrated and seemed to believe that he lost respect when he learnt from me, although I was not sure why. One day, in front of other staff, he asked me, “who is the boss between us?” I was surprised by the question and I could see that he was fairly angry with me. I asked to go into his office to explore the issue face-to-face. About an hour later the situation was clarified and we both felt better. The problem seemed to be solved, although not 100 per cent.

A while later, due to a performance appraisal and the creation of new positions, Mr S was moved to a new role with a similar status as mine. At this point, he felt that people should learn from each other regardless of status and position. Now, he felt very comfortable to learn from and share his learning with me. He also recommended a study training paper written by a student group so that I might share experiences with them. Our relationship improved significantly and he remains one of my best friends. I can now learn from him and share learning.

At a practical level, discussions about power within the development sector most frequently centre on donor-partner relationships. However, donors can be an easy target, or scapegoat, for our collective discomfort around issues of power. Understanding, working consciously with, and attempting to change the power relationships and power-laden hierarchies that exist within our own organisations are far harder tasks. We can start by opening opportunities to discuss internal

hierarchies and power relations in non-threatening ways. An example of how to do so was provided by a participant.

#### **Reflection from Practice: Evaluating Power Dynamics**

Search India uses role-plays a lot to discuss power issues. Some of the staff play themselves, others play the role of their donors. This helps people to evaluate their responses to donors because it is a non-threatening environment. This can catalyse the process of reflecting on internal power dynamics. Understanding the other's perspective is central in working within power relationships!

What role should an external facilitator play? What skills must they deploy when responding to the shifts in power that can emerge as an organisation learns? As external facilitators spend time understanding the behavioural patterns and power relations within an organisation they can expose tense or difficult issues. They may readily become scapegoats unless they are very skilled in dealing with the consequences. Another participant, an expatriate, described how the learning process he was facilitating exposed uncomfortable and intractable power relations and dynamics. By ignoring the 'elephants in the room'<sup>28</sup> — the issues that everyone was aware of but previously ignored or denied — the organisation was seriously constrained in its ability to reflect on and learn from its past experiences and improve its own practice. This phenomenon is illustrated by the 'Reflection from Practice' on the following page, describing the contribution from a workshop participant.

In this section we have explored how relational dynamics affect collective organisational learning processes and the ways in which the outcomes of learning can impact on those relationships. At the centre of this discussion is the idea that constructive learning relationships between individuals and groups form the basis of collective organisational learning processes. However, unequal power dynamics can act as a barrier to transformative learning processes.

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<sup>28</sup> For a further exploration of the concept of the elephant in the room see Zerubavel, E. (2006).

### Reflection from Practice: Surfacing what has been Ignored or Denied

The director of a country office of an international NGO asked to facilitate a staff retreat as part of an organisational learning process. He said he had discussed the idea with staff and that all had agreed. He gave me a list of what he thought were the issues to be addressed, and said these had been discussed with staff. It was well-known that the office had had problems for a couple of years. Staff morale was low and many expressed doubts about trying to address these issues as the director was just about to leave.

Despite some reservations, I agreed to take it on. I insisted that staff would be free to discuss in confidence the matters they thought important. I spent a long time developing a programme which I discussed both with the director and with a respected local staff member. It became clear to me that perceptions of what was wrong varied between international and local staff. Some very personal conflicts were affecting the ability of the staff to work as a team.

On the first day I used a variety of techniques which staff seemed to enjoy. This led to discussions on some 'meaty' issues. However, when I asked for feedback it became clear that most people felt that key issues had hardly been addressed. Several people talked to me individually about what was wrong. The next morning I began by saying that this was a chance for the participants to speak and take responsibility for changing things if they were not happy. I asked people to write letters to each other with the format, 'I really like it when you.. It would really help me if you ...' By lunchtime we had touched on what was really bothering some people. However, three people were in tears and we had to abandon the session to support them. We only just started touching on the real issues by the end of the retreat.

International staff gave the impression there was a lot of negative gossip behind people's backs. However, local staff felt that talking to peers about problems with bosses was a way of trying to address the issues. The organisation had established systems to encourage staff to take issues to the director if they were not satisfied with results of discussions with their line manager. This did not sit readily with the local cultural expectation that seniors should not be challenged. The local staff were using their own methods of dealing with problems but this was not seen as constructive by international staff.

A few weeks later I facilitated another session to take these issues forward. We looked at alternative locally appropriate systems for staff to take up issues with management, the use of a neutral third party. It seemed to go well. However, in the next month three more people resigned. This caused me to reflect on:

- *Did I do any good? Or did I just make things worse?*
- *Could I have done things differently?*
- *How can organisations learn from something like this and respect confidentiality?*



For those facilitating processes of organisational learning, the following reflective questions can help to recognise and respond to the relational dynamics of organisational learning.

### **Reflective Questions: Relational Dynamics of Organisational Learning**

#### *Learning relationships:*

- Who is involved in the learning process — both internally and externally?
- How are these people interconnected?
- Which relationships do people most value for learning?
- Which are the relationships and spaces which support organisational learning?
- Do these learning relationships differ at individual, organisational and inter-organisational levels?

#### *Power relations:*

- What formal and informal hierarchies exist and how might these support and/or constrain learning?
- Can power relations be recognised within the organisation?
- Do people recognise the power they have and the way they use it in their relationships?
- How do people respond to others who wield power?
- Who defines the objectives of learning and change? What influence does this have on the learning process?
- Does the organisation itself have the power to make choices about its own learning processes?
- How might the learning process shift power and how might this affect people differentially? Might some groups lose out?

#### *Responding to change:*

- Do people feel 'secure' enough to respond to the outcomes of learning?
- How will the resulting changes or shifts in relationships be handled?
- How will it be handled if the process of learning and reflection opens up sensitive issues or reveals an 'elephant in the room'?

## 2.3 Shedding Light on Informal and Unconscious Learning

Organisations, like the individuals that work within them, have their own collective spirit, identity, multiple personalities and purposes. Some of this is expressed formally and explicitly but much of it is expressed informally and unconsciously through the organisation's 'shadow' side, the reality behind the public façade. Often the real learning happens in the shadows and especially where formal learning processes are ineffective. In other words, the organisation learns despite itself. So how do these informal and unconscious processes, and the way they are expressed through organisational culture and relationships, influence an organisations ability to learn?

Every individual and organisation learns. People within organisations, whether individually or collectively, acquire skills and knowledge formally — perhaps as the result of strategic reviews, workshops, team meetings, learning seminars and other training — but also informally through talking, lunchtime conversations, coffee breaks, observing others, trial-and-error and simply working with people 'in the know'.

Where formal spaces for reflection and learning are insufficient, unconstructive or ineffective people can be obliged to take advantage of spontaneous opportunities when they arise

Without this informal reinforcement people rarely retain enough of the new skills and knowledge they learn through structured/formal processes to put them into effective practice. Informal processes can therefore play a crucial role in ensuring that learning becomes part of an organisation's culture and translates into improved performance. Recognising that the 'real' learning often happens in coffee breaks has led to the development of learning methodologies such as 'open space'<sup>29</sup> which formalise informal learning. Informal spaces can allow new insights to emerge that can then be shared in more formal settings. They can also provide an opportunity for people to express anxiety by discussing the 'un-discussables' that they feel unable to address in more structured settings.<sup>30</sup>

Where formal spaces for reflection and learning — whether individually or collectively — are insufficient, unconstructive, ineffective or even dysfunctional people can be obliged to take advantage of spontaneous and informal opportunities that arise. Informal learning opportunities may be of great benefit to individuals. However, unless at some point this individual learning: 1) influences and is integrated into collective learning processes and 2) leads to purposeful changes in organisational practices then it cannot be said to be part of an *organisational* learning process. One workshop participant shared an experience in which an unexpected event created a valued opportunity for informal, individual learning and reflection. However, the

<sup>29</sup> See for example Owen Harrison, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 1997.

<sup>30</sup> BOND, *Barriers to Organisational Learning*.

experience also created frustration because it was a one-off event where there was no opportunity to exchange learning collectively or influence organisational practices.

### **Experiences from Practice: One of my Best Working Weeks Ever!**

The largest power outage in decades swept across parts of North America in 2003. The blackout left us in the dark for one or two days. I was working in a tall high-rise building in Ottawa and my employer decided to send us all home for a week to lessen the energy demand. We were told this would be a 'working week', so people could take their laptops home or use their own computers.

For a very long time it seemed (weeks? months?), I had been accumulating articles, book chapters and other papers in a neat pile on my desk. This was the 'to read' pile, a familiar sight to knowledge workers everywhere. I never managed to make a dent in this pile, only occasionally succeeding in reading the top article. There was always a great deal of guilt associated with the fact these were documents that I should be reading but never managed to. But now, a golden opportunity presented itself: I gave myself 'license to read' and to reflect.

However, it was very hot (the main cause of the power outage was North America's enduring hunger for air conditioning) and sunny. I grabbed my reading pile and a blanket, and headed off to a nearby park. Nestled comfortably in the shade, I started reading. The best part was that I could stop, stare into the distance at the birds flying away and reflect on what I had just read. I didn't have to binge, I could savour...

I ended up working on my laptop from home in the mornings, and then heading off with my papers and blanket to a different park each afternoon. I read my entire pile in that week and learned a lot. I gave myself the time to reflect. The one thing I didn't do — and now really wish I had — was to invite my work colleagues to come sit on my blanket and discuss the ideas, approaches and methodologies that were in these documents. They could have read them too and we could have had great exchanges, I'm sure.

So what happened once the week was over? We all went back to our air-conditioned offices and I started to grow another pile on my desk, which eventually grew dusty. But I still see that week as a wonderful gift. I was given the time to read, reflect and learn — a luxury in the busy lives we lead!

These informal spaces should no longer be dismissed as 'unproductive' but they should instead be legitimised. Care would need to be taken not to institutionalise them and thereby, inevitable, to stifle them.<sup>31</sup> How can we establish organisational processes which enable and create both informal and formal spaces for learning and bring unconscious learning to the surface? There is a need to shed light on, and tap into, all the spaces where successful learning is taking place within an organisation

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<sup>31</sup> BOND, *Barriers to Organisational Learning*.

— whether formally or informally, consciously and unconsciously. Without this recognition we risk establishing inappropriate formal structures and mechanisms which inadvertently displace the effective learning that already exists. Understanding these processes takes time, so we should avoid the tendency to launch into a learning process too quickly without first taking the time to discuss and reflect on what is already happening within the organisation. This in itself can be complex since people are often not conscious of when they learn most effectively and how. Without this explicit understanding it is difficult for people to articulate and analyse their own learning processes. However, only when we can find ways to recognise and discuss the patterns and diversity of existing learning within an organisation can we propose constructive ways to improve them.<sup>32</sup>

The next steps would be to: 1) create a variety of complementary spaces where different types of formal and informal learning can occur and 2) find ways to purposely integrate the outcomes of this learning into improved organisational action. This could start with small interventions which bring issues into the light and trigger new insights but which do not pose too much of a threat to the existing organisational culture. However, this does require the courage and openness for an organisation to reflect critically on its structural make-up and existing modes of learning. It also needs to be recognised that opportunities for learning can be created but the outcomes cannot necessarily be controlled.

**Figure 4: Purposefully Integrating Formal and Informal Learning**



In this section we have explored the importance of recognising and reinforcing informal and unconscious learning opportunities and purposefully integrating these into improved organisational practice, not necessarily by institutionalising them but by legitimising them. For those facilitating processes of organisational learning, the following reflective questions can help in shedding light on informal and unconscious learning:

<sup>32</sup> See Smit (2007)

### **Reflective Questions: Shedding Light on Informal and Unconscious Learning**

- What informal/formal opportunities and spaces for learning exist and how do people make use of these?
- Can people be supported to articulate and share insights about their own learning, whether conscious or unconscious, formal or informal?
- What do people view as the most valuable learning processes and how have these come about?
- How could informal and unconscious learning spaces be legitimised so that the learning can be shared in more formal settings?
- Is there an appropriate balance between formal and informal learning opportunities?

### 3 Concluding Discussion

*"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing" (Albert Einstein).*

This paper documents the reflections of a group of organisational learning practitioners on our understanding of organisational learning and our experiences of putting it into practice. This reflection highlights that organisational learning requires both individual and collective learning processes which purposely work towards changed organisational behaviour and actions. The key is to create powerful reasons in favour of learning as an integral part of developmental practice which taps into people's individual and collective motivation. The paper has started a process of asking insightful questions about organisational learning which recognises the inherently emotional, relational, personal, collective, intellectual, formal and informal elements of the learning process. It is clear that those responsible for putting organisational learning into practice need to: 1) be aware of, and sensitive towards, culture and context; 2) understand the influences of relational and power dynamics and 3) recognise and legitimise constructive forms of informal and unconscious learning. By asking reflective questions about organisational learning the aim is to draw on practical experiences in order to look beyond existing solutions. For those facilitating organisational learning some of these questions might include:

Organisational learning requires both individual and collective learning processes which purposely contribute towards changed organisational behaviour and actions

- Does the organisation view learning as a means or an end or a valuable process in its own right?
- Is the organisation in a robust position to take on a long, potentially painful learning process?
- Are those in a leadership position willing to actively champion the process?
- Are staff at all levels willing to put words into actions by embracing and internalising learning?
- Is the organisation willing to prioritise and commit the time, resources and energy that is required?
- How will change be handled?

The development community must recognise that it has not always provided an enabling environment for organisational learning. Many perceive themselves as working in a hierarchical, linear and authoritarian climate of unequal power relations. Many organisations are forced to make an uncomfortable trade-off between fulfilling their own mission and achieving the results expected by funders. Learning is seen as less valuable than 'doing' and is therefore not prioritised. It is very difficult to find

donors who will recognise the value of, and fund, adequate time, space and resources for organisational learning. Donors are not open to the risks associated with innovation. Funding structures and procedures have created formal channels that are largely based on externally driven agendas. Unfortunately, they do not encourage collective and mutually accountable processes of questioning, reflection and learning.

Ultimately an organisation needs to decide on, and take responsibility for, the value it places on learning. In Cambodia organisational learning facilitators use the analogy of a garment factory and ask organisations to reflect on 'which type of garment factory do we want to be?' The one that churns out tried and tested models that sell because they are cheap? Or would they rather position themselves at the cutting-edge and make time and resources available for learning, understanding the market and customers, recognising trends, designing innovative products and thinking ahead? Whatever their aim, organisations must invest in learning and take a fresh look at ways of thinking and acting. This is not as daunting as it may sound. With supportive leadership, taking small steps and slightly changing every day actions we can hasten a gradual process of changing an organisation's culture of learning.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Workshop Participants

Brenda Bucheli	Independent consultant, Peru
Bruce Britton	Framework, UK
Chhay Leng	VBNK, Cambodia
Deepak Tamang	Director, Search, Nepal
James Taylor	Director, Community Development Resource Association, South Africa
Jenny Pearson	Director, VBNK, Cambodia
Josephine Barbour	Director, Church World Service, Cambodia
Karin Shulz	Capacity Development Adviser, SNV, Laos
Lara Yocarini	Research and Development Officer, SNV/ UNDP, USA
Liz Goold	Independent consultant, UK
Lucie Lamoureux	Senior Program Officer, Bellanet, Belgium
Maaïke Smit	Learning Facilitator, PSO, Netherlands
Mark Shepherd	Independent Consultant, Thailand
Meas Nee	Independent Consultant, Cambodia
Freddie Stephen	Executive Director, SEARCH, India
Peter Morgan	Independent consultant, USA
Rebecca Wrigley	Programme Manager, INTRAC, UK
Susie Prince	Programme Coordinator, INTRAC, UK
Tracey Martin	Regional Programme Learning Advisor, Voluntary Service Overseas, Cambodia
Vanly Virya	Programme Unit Manager, VBNK, Cambodia
Vicky Costick	Independent consultant, UK

## Appendix 2: Workshop Process

The aim of the three-day meeting (31 January–2 February 2006) was to bring together a group of practitioners with a commitment to OL in order to establish a Learning Group to deepen knowledge about OL and best practice in applying it.

### Objectives:

- to share experiences of the practice of OL, especially in working across cultures
- to share and explore different approaches to OL
- to identify successful practices and the factors that support success
- to establish an agenda and identify the process for the ongoing collaboration of the learning group.

### Day 1

On the first morning, participants discussed questions using World Café methodology<sup>33</sup> — our 'Learning Café' — where small groups at café tables introduced themselves and discussed an open question. Participants then moved tables, leaving one 'host' to feedback the discussion so far and build on this with the new group. Each group then gave feedback of key points arising from their discussion to a plenary 'Town Square'.

Two questions were discussed on the first day, the first in the morning and second in the afternoon:

1. *What assumptions are we making about OL?*
2. *What is specific about OL in the development context? And how is it influenced by the dominant paradigm?*

### Day 2

The first part of the day was spent synthesising the key issues and questions arising from the previous day. The remainder was used for a process of peer support and reflection around case stories, particular issues faced by members of the group. The process used is outlined overleaf.

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<sup>33</sup> See [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com) for details

## ***PROCESS***

### **Preparation (20 mins):**

- Identify the issue or situation you want to talk about
- Who are the characters involved?
- Where does it happen? Describe the place and the situation.
- What happens? Choose what to tell and what to leave out.
- How do you want it to end?

Introduction      —————>      Action/problem      —————>      Ending: resolution or question

### **Sharing and Feedback in Trios (1.5-2 hours):**

Join in a group with two others. Each person in turn:

- Tells their story (10 mins)
- Gets feedback, comments, suggestions, etc. from the other group members (20 mins)

### **Summary/ Review (30 mins):**

Creative feedback to the whole group

## **Day 3**

The morning of the final day was spent on three questions which were felt to capture the key areas which had arisen over the previous two days. Participants self-selected into groups to discuss:

1. What would an organisation with effective processes to enable, create space for and encourage organisational learning look like? How would it get there?
2. What would an organisation with culturally relevant and meaningful organisational learning practices look like? How would it get there?
3. What would an organisation that is learning effectively within and through its power relationships look like? How would it get there?

Then each participant shared one point which had arisen from the three days which was felt to be of strong significance to their practice. In the afternoon two members of the group shared insights from their experiences of working in learning organisations. Finally participants committed themselves to taking the topic forward in a number of ways and then evaluated the meeting process.

Praxis Paper No. 17

# Organisational Learning in Civil Society: *Influences of Culture, Relational Dynamics and Informality*

Susie Prince and Rebecca Wrigley

Development agencies have not always provided an enabling environment for organisational learning. Learning is often seen as less valuable than 'doing'. It is difficult to find donors who will recognise the value of, and fund, adequate time, space and resources for learning.

Building on the ideas and challenges introduced in Praxis Paper 3: *'Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity.'*, this paper argues that organisational learning is a developmental process that integrates thinking and doing at both individual and collective levels. Ultimately, development organisations need to decide on, and take responsibility for, their own learning. Putting organisational learning into practice may seem daunting. However, with supportive leadership, taking small steps and changing daily practices can contribute towards a gradual process of strengthening an organisation's culture of learning.

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