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Innovations in Action Learning

Connecting individual,
collective and organisational
learning in PAX's action
learning programme



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jitske Hoogenboom is Policy Advisor Learning at PAX, where she focuses on stimulating learning within and between peace programmes. She experiments with different approaches to learning, advises colleagues about the integration of learning in programmes, facilitates learning processes, and develops policy on learning. Jitske initiated and co-implemented the PAX action learning programme, and was the lead author on this paper.

Bruce Britton was, until he retired in 2019, a consultant with the Framework collective and an INTRAC associate for 20 years. He is internationally recognised for his work on learning in civil society organisations, and has published several papers on learning for NGOs available through the INTRAC resource centre. Bruce co-designed and facilitated the PAX action learning programme.

‘The real voyage of discovery consists, not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.’

Marcel Proust

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INTRODUCTION

During 2017-18, PAX and INTRAC undertook an action learning programme aimed at strengthening learning within PAX. The initiative produced some really valuable lessons.

In this paper we share our experience of designing and facilitating an action learning programme that sought to tackle learning at individual, collective and organisational levels. This goes beyond the usual focus on individual learning of many action learning activities, and includes a number of innovative aspects.

We outline lots of the tools and activities that we devised and used within the programme to address the multiple needs of participants, to manage discussions and to motivate those involved. We assess some of the costs and benefits at individual, collective and organisational levels. We describe what we saw as key success factors from our own thoughts and from evaluation responses, and also provide critical analysis (including of ourselves) about what did not work as well in the approach and what we would do differently in the future.

Producing this paper enabled us to process our thinking about learning, and we hope to encourage others to try action learning and to build on our experiences.

BACKGROUND

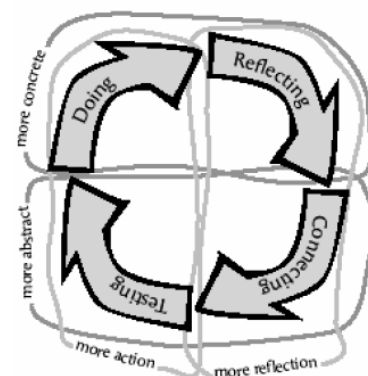
The origins of the PAX action learning programme go back to 2015, when Jitske changed jobs internally and took the position of Policy Advisor Learning. This new position, created as a result of the decision to enhance PAX's effort in learning in the organisation, aimed to:

- share and increase knowledge about programmatic themes;
- evaluate and improve theories of changes and underlying assumptions; and
- improve quality of interventions.

Jitske explains: 'While exploring and learning about my new role and field of work, I wanted to better understand why it was complicated for PAX, an organisation with so much knowledge, bright employees, extensive field experience and impressive results, to ensure that the learning dots were connected: that programme staff could build on and benefit from each other's experience, that insights from programme work systematically found their way into strategy and tactics. This exploration resulted in my first encounter with the concept of a learning organisation and different theories about factors that are commonly constraining learning in organisations. A process of consultation and comparing factors with PAX's practice led to the identification of the following four key challenges in PAX's learning.'

Closing the learning loop

PAX has a lot of knowledge about peace work and an enormous amount of experience. Much of this is documented in reports, monitoring systems, evaluations and a wide range of internal and external papers. But to actually close the learning loop¹ and ensure that this knowledge and experience is translated into practical significance for the work of programme staff – which actually impacts



¹ Kolb, D. (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall. By 'learning loop' we mean the experiential learning cycle that comprises doing, reflecting, connecting and testing. The gap often lies between testing and doing. For Jitske, PAX's gap was between connecting and testing.

the whole organisation – is a challenge as it was clear that many opportunities for improving PAX’s work were being missed.

Vision of learning

The first challenge relates to the second: it appeared that many staff in PAX understand learning more as attending a training course, seminar or lecture, and consider learning not so much as an integral part of their work. Learning was very much associated with new knowledge or new skills, and less with improving what is being done on a daily basis.

Prioritisation

PAX is a peace organisation that works in volatile and rapidly changing contexts. Our work is never done. PAX programme staff are preoccupied with improving the world, which tends to take priority over learning and improving the quality of that work. There seems to be an underlying assumption that ‘more work’ will lead to a greater increase in impact than ‘more learning’. That said, programme staff are undoubtedly learning a lot unconsciously as their work is situated in complex situations.

Communication

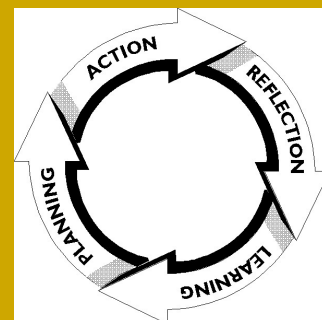
PAX’s work is political, with PAX acting as an advocate for peace in different political fora. The political aspect of its work is mirrored in the internal culture. There was considerable emphasis on discussing context and strategy, but less focus on exchange about the quality of implementation or about the personal role of programme staff and, if this was done, it was often in a judgmental way. Also, there was an inclination to talk to and try to convince each other, but not to truly listen and jointly generate new insights and a better understanding of each other’s views. A joint reflective space and culture was missing. Working towards addressing this became a key precondition for other learning efforts.

As the path to learning is not clearly defined with signposts to the intended destination, Jitske planned to undertake several experiments, using different reflective learning methods on different programme-related topics, engaging others with specific experience in applying these methods. She wanted to encourage people to participate in these experiments by focusing on programmatic topics that they were important to them, and that they had expressed their interest in, thereby using their motivation to create an encounter with reflective learning methods. Jitske’s hypothesis was that this would create a support base for wider change.

Jitske approached INTRAC to explore how they could help with strengthening learning in PAX. In the subsequent discussion we agreed that action learning (see Box 1) on programmatic topics could be a very appropriate method to meet the PAX’s needs, at which point Jitske was introduced to Bruce, an INTRAC associate, who had done a lot of work and writing on organizational learning and was experienced with action learning. Our shared journey began and we started to design the action learning programme.

BOX 1: ACTION LEARNING

Action learning is a process which involves working on real challenges, using the knowledge and capabilities of participants combined with skilled questioning, to produce fresh ideas and reinterpret familiar concepts. Action learning sets are a simple and powerful way for enabling small groups of individuals to learn from each other using a structured and systematic approach. Initially developed by Reg Revans, action learning sets follow the process outlined in the diagram to the right, of taking time to reflect on actions taken, draw out learning from that reflection, and apply that learning to further action.



Source: Action Learning Sets: A Guide for PAX (April 2017)

DESIGN OF THE ACTION LEARNING PROGRAMME

The action learning programme was a joint endeavour, co-designed and implemented together. Through this design process we discovered a shared excitement about what we were trying to achieve, namely to directly connect the action learning programme to organisational learning. For Bruce, this made it more interesting than just facilitating an action learning set, as it provided an opportunity to try new ideas. For Jitske, this meant that the programme was not only an experiment with a reflective learning method, but a process which allowed her to widely discuss, discover and practice many different elements of learning in organisations with Bruce, who had much more experience and knowledge, and was eager to share. It was an inspiring working relationship, which built on our enthusiasm for this field of work, shared values, and ideas about the importance of learning. We both recognised each other's complementary value to the programme, bringing an insider and outsider perspective.

The action learning rested on the assumption that it would be possible to connect individual interest for programmatic topics to a method that would introduce participants to a different way of learning, individually, as a team, and as an organisation. Two themes were selected through a process of assessment, first using interviews to identify topics of interest to programme staff, and then through a survey in which staff could select which themes they truly wanted to address in a learning cycle. The most popular themes were 'community based security' and 'evidence based advocacy', and these became the two generic themes for the action learning programme. Jitske participated in the action learning set on evidence-based advocacy, to experience what action learning is herself as well, and co-facilitated the community-based security set.

Key elements of the PAX action learning programme were:

- Two action learning sets
- One joint introductory workshop
- A theme for each set (evidence-based advocacy and community-based security)
- Eight participants per set
- A preparatory guide
- A buddy system (initiated after the second set meeting)
- Individual learning questions
- Four one-day meetings per set over a period of eight months, which comprised:
 - 20-30 minutes airspace² per person
 - Helpful questions by other participants
 - Time devoted to collective learning questions
- Mini lectures, exercises and some reflection about organisational learning topics
- A digital 'sharespace'
- Regular chats between participants and Jitske to see how things were going and to provide support if needed
- An evaluation workshop

² In an Action Learning set meeting each member has an opportunity to present a current issue facing them in their work. The time each person has for this is called their 'air space'. During that time, the group as a whole focuses exclusively on that person and their issue.

PAX Action Learning Programme



● Blog posts on Sharespace

INNOVATIONS IN THE DESIGN

Three design elements were introduced as innovations compared to more conventional action learning sets.

The use of individual and collective learning questions

The use of learning questions was proposed by Bruce building on his experience from previous training courses, where he found that questions were a powerful tool to focus people's thinking (see Box 2).

BOX 2: DESIGNING A LEARNING QUESTION

Action learning is most effective when applied to challenges without simple, technical solutions. The sort of problems action learning works best with will have some or all of the following characteristics:

- The issue is real and live and is something you genuinely want help with
- The issue is important to your work and is something for which you have some level of responsibility
- The issue is complex and may take a significant time to resolve
- The issue is not amenable to an 'expert' solution or ready-made correct answer. In other words, it is not something that you could work out by reading existing documentation or getting advice from a more experienced colleague.

Select your issue carefully bearing these criteria in mind.

Pose your issue in the form of a learning question.

When you have got your issue clear in your mind, write it down in the form of a question. Perhaps the most important aspect of action learning is the use of questions, so learning how to write good questions is a key part of the action learning process.

The question should have the following characteristics:

- It is an open question (i.e. ideally beginning with 'How...')
- *You* should be in the question (e.g. 'How can I ...' or 'What is the best way for me to ...')
- The question is not amenable to an 'expert' solution or ready-made correct answer
- The question will inspire you to seek an answer and open yourself up to new thinking

Remember it is you who is responsible for answering your own question – not the others in the group!

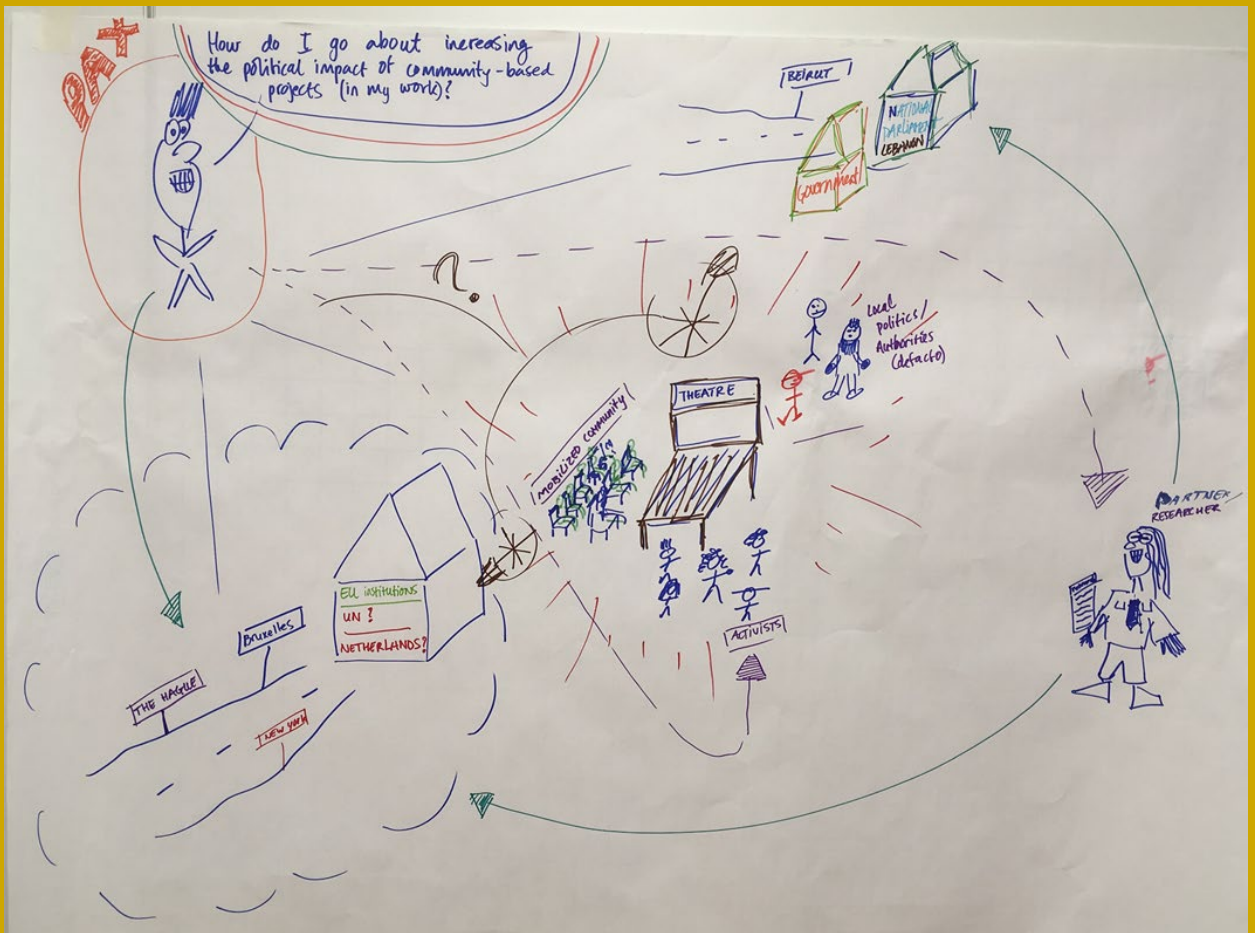
Source: Action Learning Sets: A Guide for PAX (April 2017)

On the individual level, each participant during the introductory workshop defined an individual learning question. At the start of the programme, the participants discussed their choice of learning questions and then each person drew a 'rich picture' (see Box 3)³ to illustrate their question. This learning question was the starting point of each participant's presentation during their personal airspace during action learning meetings, and participants worked on their individual question in between set meetings.

³ Reference for Box 3 Soft Systems Methodology: Checkland, P., and J. Scholes (1999) *Soft Systems Methodology in Action*, Chichester: Wiley.

BOX 3: RICH PICTURES

Rich Pictures is a method used to explore, define and understand a complex situation using a diagram. Drawing rich pictures was originally devised as part of Soft Systems Methodology but it has now evolved into a recognised standalone method that can be used in many different ways. A rich picture visualises the complex systems-nature of a situation, opens up discussion, generates creativity and insight, and facilitates shared understanding. We used rich pictures to help participants illustrate the context for their individual learning questions. The rich pictures became reference points during each person's airspace. Seeing the picture also helped other participants recall discussions at previous set meetings.



In each of the two action learning sets, participants were helped to formulate a collective learning question on the overall theme of the set. We invited each participant to identify a relevant question, and then chose a question to work on collectively by majority vote. During the action learning meetings several tools (see page 9⁴) were used to work on the collective questions. Participants planned to take action on the collective question in between set meetings.

⁴ References for page 9: Gray, D., S. Brown and J. Macanuso (2010) *Game-storming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers and Changemakers*, 56-8, Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly; Senge, P., et al. (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organisation*, 273-5, New York: Doubleday.

TOOLS AND CONCEPTS USED



Action Learning Review Sheet handout: This provided a structure for participants to reflect on their experience of each session and to encourage action planning. Participants completed the review sheet at the end of each meeting and we took a photo of each so that the facilitators and individuals could review sessions and monitor individual progress.



Making the Best Use of Your Airspace handout: This was given out at the introduction workshop and provided guidance about how best to use the limited amount of time available to each participant.



Talking Wall exercise: We regularly used talking walls to generate and share responses to issues. This simply involves placing headings, such as 'What disappointed me most during this session was ...' or 'I am interested to learn more about ...', on flipchart sheets around a room and asking participants to place post-It notes under the appropriate headings. Small groups can then be asked to summarise key messages emerging from each heading. To help one of the sets make progress on their collective learning question we used an impromptu talking wall exercise. Participants gave examples of the topic (working with youth in peacebuilding), advantages of working in this way, risks involved, and other thoughts on the issue. This provided a focus for discussion and changed the dynamic within the group.



Seven Levels of Listening handout: This described seven levels of listening, from 'not listening' through 'pretend listening' to 'engaged listening' and helped participants reflect honestly on the different degrees of attention they were providing to other participants.



Listening Bad Habits worksheet: A light-hearted way of tackling bad habits when listening to others. Participants self-assess using a list of ten bad habits, including: 'I interrupt often or try to finish the other person's sentences', 'I am a compulsive note-taker', 'I try to change the subject to something that relates to my own experiences', and 'I think more about my reply while the other person is speaking than what he or she is saying'. The self-assessment was followed by discussion using examples from meetings.



Developing Rich Pictures handout: This handout explained the basics of developing a rich picture illustrated with some examples, and was used during the introductory workshop.



PAX Action Learning Programme Timeline handout: A visual aide memoire in the form of a programme timeline, including key elements and meetings.



Affinity Mapping activity: This was used by the evidence-based advocacy set to make progress with their collective learning question. Affinity mapping is useful for finding categories and meta-categories within a cluster of ideas and seeing which ideas are most common within a group. Using post-its and clustering, the set identified categories that helped focus their thinking and provide possibilities for follow-up action.



Perspectives Wheel activity: This method can be used to increase the number and diversity of stakeholder perspectives that are brought to bear on a problem or question. We introduced this activity to generate new ways of examining a collective learning question.



Six Thinking Hats handout: Edward de Bono's concept of 'Six Thinking Hats' establishes six different types of thinking and their associated coloured hats, for example, 'red hat for feelings, intuition and emotions'. Participants used a set of large pictures of the six thinking hats to make clear to colleagues the mode of thinking that underpinned their contributions.



Force Field Analysis activity: This involved writing factors on separate cards and arranging them under two headings: helping factors and hindering factors. The visual representation of a force field helped participants clarify what factors they could control, influence or only take into consideration.



Collective Learning Question Timelines: These helped to create a shared visual memory of progress made on collective learning questions over a period of months and provided a starting point for final discussions.



Evaluation Survey: Participants completed an online questionnaire in Survey Monkey ahead of the evaluation workshop. The survey had 23 multiple choice, open-ended and ranking questions.

The online sharespace

The second innovation was an easy-to-use private digital platform that we called the sharespace. This was introduced during the opening workshop. All participants were expected to contribute at least two blog posts in between sessions about their learning journey. We felt that this would help people to maintain their commitment in between the sessions, and offer a way to document the different individual learning experiences.

Participants were also encouraged to react to each other's posts. Some participants used the sharespace extensively and wrote lengthy posts carefully detailing a thought process or reporting back on new information they had found. Several participants also actively responded to each other, and in some cases these resulted in a lively discussion online.

BOX 4: LEARNING LEVELS

Individual learning

Learning at the individual level in an organisation occurs when a person acquires new knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that change the way the individual perceives the world, understands information, and performs on the job.

In an organisation, learning at the individual level is a shared responsibility between the individual and the organisation. It is the responsibility of the individual to take charge of their own learning and development, and it is the responsibility of the organisation to offer an environment conducive to learning.

Collective learning

Collective learning involves sharing and leveraging the collective knowledge, skills and experience of a group of people. The most common setting for collective learning is a team, but other work groups can often be a focus for collective learning. It is also possible to create groups that have a particular focus on collective learning, such as an action learning set.

Organisational learning

Organisational learning involves creating an environment for the intentional use of individual and collective learning to strengthen the organisation's ability to strategise, reflect on experience, adapt to changes in its environment, solve problems and implement the changes needed to sustain high levels of performance.

For learning to occur at an organisational level the organisation needs to take a learning approach to every aspect of its functioning, such as:

- Take a learning approach to vision and strategy
- Take a systemic approach, becoming better at connecting people, teams and functions
- Learn from its experience, particularly from programme implementation and evaluation.

Source: Action Learning Sets: A Guide for PAX (April 2017)

Learning on three levels

Action learning is traditionally a method oriented to individual development. One of the experimental elements of this action learning programme we were very excited about during the design was making the connection between individual learning, collective learning and organisational learning (see Box 4). This was based on a model that Bruce had developed in his earlier writing, which resonated well with Jitske's thinking. We hoped the collective learning (through the above-mentioned collective learning question) would enable people to work

collaboratively, thus changing the dynamic of the sessions from an individual focus to a shared endeavour and making it not only about individual but also team effort. This would build awareness that learning can and should benefit the organisation as well. This process also created momentum to discuss some organisational barriers and opportunities to learning, which was further stimulated by the mini lectures that were part of the programme.

Jitske hoped that this connection would result in a palette of learning, with elements of individual learning and collective learning adding up to a result that would be of direct interest to PAX colleagues and stimulate organisational learning, as it would demonstrate that PAX has a lot to benefit from its investment in learning.

BOX 5: HELPFUL QUESTIONING

Clarifying questions:

- What happened?
- How do you see it?
- What makes you say that?
- What else can explain the situation?
- Could you say more about how you felt?
- Who will be affected if you are successful?
- Who might help you?
- What obstacles do you envisage?

Action questions:

- If all decisions rested on you, what would you do?
- What are your options for action now?
- What other possibilities exist?
- Where could you get more information about this?
- Who else might have an interest in this?
- What will you do next?

Probing questions:

- What is the difference between the current situation and the way you would like it to be?
- Can you explain?
- What exactly...?
- Who else matters to this process?
- Can you give an example?
- What happened next?
- Who are 'they'?
- How do you feel?
- What assumptions are you making?
- What effect are those assumptions having on you?

Individual: learning question, airspace and action

During each action learning set meeting, each participant had about 20 minutes of airspace, following a set pattern. The airspace started with the presenter explaining the state of his/her learning process, while the other participants were asked to listen carefully and make notes. The other participants then had the opportunity to ask one question. These questions were to be formulated with the interest of the presenter in mind (see Box 5), that is, 'How will my question help the presenter generate new insights?' This proved difficult at first because participants were so eager to give advice or examples from their own practice. In some cases, having this pointed out by the facilitator (Bruce) was so uncomfortable for the participants that it negatively affected the atmosphere. But as the action learning programme progressed, participants became more at ease with the ground rules, allowing space for Bruce to loosen the rules a bit!

In later sessions Bruce introduced new tools and methods to practice questioning. For example, he introduced the 'six thinking hats' to help people become more aware of different roles you can take on as a questioner, with each participant expected to introduce their question by mentioning their chosen hat (see page 9), and in the last session he asked the presenters to write down the questions they would like to be asked. These questions were then read out by the other participants.

At the end of each airspace session, participants noted down their learning and action point. Participants were expected to take action between sessions, and to keep each other informed about progress, insights and challenges through the digital sharespace.

Collective learning: learning question, joint brainstorming, action

The collective learning happened in parallel to the more conventional individual action learning process, involving the same group. Each action learning set agreed a learning question and during set meetings participants brainstormed together and agreed on action points. Our plan was that this would introduce participants to a different, more collaborative, way of learning and would lead to tangible results that were useful to the participants and PAX. We hoped that this experience would make participants more aware of different methods PAX can use to learn and make them more supportive of learning in PAX in general.

The collective learning questions were agreed by majority vote from a list generated by the participants focusing on the topics of the two action learning sets. These were:

What relevance, advantages and risks do we identify for working with youth in peacebuilding?

(Community-based security set)

In what different ways can we involve partners and communities in our advocacy, and what are best and worst practices?

(Evidence-based advocacy set)

After identification of the question, work was done with the whole set or in smaller groups to generate ideas and insights which were recorded on flipcharts. This work was intended to be continued in between the sessions.

Organisational learning: mini lectures, meta-learning, evaluation workshop

Organisational learning was part of our thinking about the set-up of the action learning programme, but was not a focus for activity. It provided a context for individual and collective learning and 'hovered in the background as a kind of parking space for capturing issues related to the organisational level. These included: the opportunities that the existing organisational systems in PAX provide that could be harnessed; how the organisation might benefit from the work participants did on their individual and collective learning questions; how useful tools and methods could be more widely adopted.

During the action learning set meetings a parking lot (flipchart) was introduced, on which organisational learning issues could be noted. In the fourth meeting, discussion about the collective learning question was used as an opportunity to approach organisational learning from the perspective of collective learning. In this sense, organisational learning was seen as creating a supportive environment within which collective learning can take place.

During the evaluation workshop a 'force field' exercise produced helpful and hindering factors for learning within PAX at the individual, collective and organisational levels. At this point it became clear that in spite of the limited explicit attention to organisational learning during the action learning sets, more awareness had been raised about what it can involve.

We also made some effort to embed the action learning programme within PAX, through a specialist meeting at the start, in which we discussed the set-up to human resources and monitoring and evaluation staff at PAX. This generated interest and some buy-in and helped build connections with related functions, but we did not follow this up. At the evaluation meeting, a small sharing session was held, in which all PAX staff were invited to hear about and see in practice a bit of the action learning methodology and benefits.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT LEARNING

The action learning programme was not without challenges. In this section we reflect on what we have learned from this experience about learning at the three different levels.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

Benefits

We found that action learning is indeed a method that can be very helpful for individual learning and this is where the programme had the most and longest-term impact. Eighteen months later we interviewed five participants.¹⁵ Most said that they still experience benefits, such as:

- The relations forged between those who participated; better understanding of the work of others, which continues to make it easier to work together.
- The use of helpful questioning to the benefit of others. The practice of being part of a reflective space and using questions to help others was a very valuable experience. Participants expressed how this different approach to helping others is something that they still use. One of the PAX team from which several people participated have systematically included the use of helpful questions in their team meetings. Others explained that they try to use helpful questioning in their conversations with others.
- Learning on the topic of the individual learning question, which some participants felt has made them better at their job; or has helped them make progress on a specific challenge.
- Having developed a different attitude towards learning which has changed the way the participants see things and has created much more awareness of how one can shape one's own learning all the time.

These are all very valuable benefits and long-term effects. However, they were true for some and not for others.

Addressing the commitment challenge

Our key challenge was to maintain the commitment of all participants, and we were not fully successful. Out of a total of 17 participants, eight fully participated in the programme (attended sessions, wrote blogs, took action between the sessions). Three participants left the programme after two set meetings. The remaining six struggled with their participation and either found it challenging to attend the sessions, or to prioritise the learning in between sessions. This was not an unexpected challenge: we recognise that the daily work of PAX is very demanding and it is hard to prioritise specific time for learning. This is especially the case when the person is not convinced of the benefits. We also knew in advance that this way of learning is not familiar for many PAX employees, and would require a willingness to trust the process and 'go with it'.

We had four strategies to strengthen commitment:

1. Go where the energy is
2. Preparation
3. Pampering
4. Reminding

First of all, the many elements in the programme were based on the principle of 'go where the energy is'. Participation was voluntarily, although based on the principle of 'if you're in, you have to commit'. Our assumption was that people who were very motivated about the action learning

¹⁵ We approached all former participants still working at PAX and asked whether they were willing to answer to written questions or fill in a form. Five of them responded positively. These are all participants that participated in the full programme.

themes, interested to try a new way of learning, and able to choose their own learning question in such a way that it was directly relevant for their daily work, would be so motivated that they'd put in sufficient work to reap the benefits of the programme.

Secondly, we tried to prepare the participants through the use of a preparatory guide, individual conversations, a survey and the opening workshop to ensure that they knew this was not regular training in which knowledge was transferred. We observed, however, that participants still entered the action learning set with expectations that did not fit the whole set-up and philosophy of action learning.

Thirdly, we tried to pamper the participants! We tried to make people feel welcome and comfortable through providing sufficient food (cookies, fruit and lunch) and sufficient breaks. We tried to avoid making participants feel guilty, as this mostly is not very helpful for learning. We also used energisers and other activities to create a fun and stimulating atmosphere (Box 6).

BOX 6: ENERGISERS AND ACTIVITIES



Traffic Jam Game: To change the individual-focused dynamic that prevailed and to provide a focus for discussion concerning how participants related to one another we introduced the 'Traffic Jam' game. Eight participants collaborate by using a set of rules to move around a U-shape set of nine 'stepping stones'. By applying the rules, two sets of four participants were required to exchange places and end up on the opposite side of the 'U'. The game seems more straightforward than it is and requires careful thinking through of each move. It very quickly identifies those who take a lead role – with or without the skillset to ensure the successful achievement of the task.



Communication Game: Because the effectiveness of action learning depends on clear communication, we included games to explore the participants' ability to communicate unambiguously. One such game involved pairs working back-to-back. One person in the pair had to describe a picture comprising four geometrical shapes to their partner, who then tried to replicate the drawing using only verbal instructions. Though simple, this game generated a lot of discussion, particularly about the tendency to make assumptions in communication with others.



Dialogue Booklet: To introduce variety into the evaluation workshop and help reflect on their experiences, pairs of participants worked together using a booklet of nine discussion starter statements, such as: 'What I particularly enjoyed about the action learning programme was ...' and 'What disappointed me about the set meetings I attended was ...' Participants were asked to make notes about what their partner said in response to these prompts.



Sentence Completion Card Game: This group activity was used in the evaluation workshop to open up discussions. The facilitators prepared a set of 13 cards each with a discussion starter statement including: 'When it was time for my 'airspace' I felt ...', 'I found the disciplined approach to avoiding advice-giving ...', 'What disappointed me most about the action learning set meetings was ...', and 'What I found most useful about the action learning methodology was ...'. Participants sat in a circle and took turns to pick up a card at random and respond to the statement. Others were then encouraged to express their own views or respond to the views of others.

Fourthly, we made plans to ensure that people would be reminded of working on the action learning in between sessions. The reasoning behind the sharespace was that it would help participants (who all had to blog twice in between sessions) to plan their actions more evenly. Jitske spent a lot of time going round the PAX office to give friendly reminders to participants about the blog and upcoming session, having conversations about difficulties with a certain learning question, or doubts with the process. After the second session, when it became clear

that several participants did not manage to do a lot in between sessions, we introduced a buddy system where buddies were to remind each other of the action learning work.

Factors explaining commitment levels

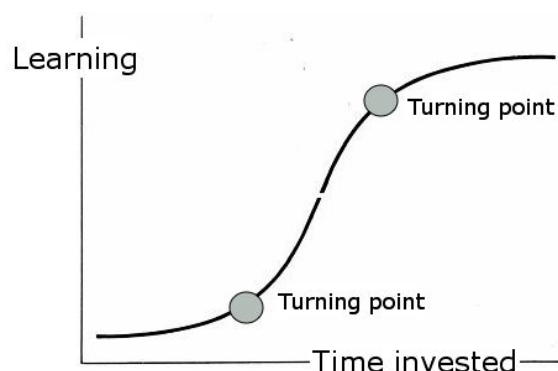
In spite of these strategies, we observed people struggling with their commitment and in several cases dropping out. Therefore, an important question guiding us while discussing this paper was to understand the difference between those that benefitted substantially and those that feel they did not benefit at all and dropped out. This consequently leads to ideas of what we could do differently to reduce the number of dropouts and increase the number for whom an action learning programme brings all of the benefits described above.

We believe there are four key factors in this: time invested; expectations; learning question; context.

Time invested

The participants who benefitted most from the programme invested time, and feel that the time invested was well spent. The participants who felt that they hardly benefitted were mainly those who did not invest much time. We conclude that participation in an action learning set requires a certain time investment before it starts paying off. Unless time is spent in between sessions, at the next action learning set meeting there was little new to explore, and the sessions revolved around the same questions. This meant that the whole process was perceived as less useful.

The graph here shows that when little time and attention is invested, learning is almost lost, but with more time invested the curve becomes steeper. After a certain amount of time has been invested and learning is happening, we believe the curve becomes less steep again. The two tipping points are most important here: how much time invested is needed for the learning curve to steepen, after which it will be easier for participants to continue to invest time? The second point, where the curve becomes less steep again, is also important as after this moment the participants will probably have passed the transformative moment after which reflective learning becomes more natural. So, what is then needed afterwards to retain this attitude?



In part the amount of time invested was a simple choice. As a participant said: 'once I decided to take part, of course I made time for it'. But another added to a similar statement: 'you need space for action learning, if your schedule is really too full, you should not do it, because once you have too many deadlines you won't have space in your head'. In some cases, the limited amount of time invested was the result of workload or personal circumstances. But it also depended on the 'cost-benefit analysis' of the individual participants who prioritised other work over set meetings, blogging, and other actions. We believe this was influenced by their expectations, by their learning question, and by the extent to which participants felt that time *helping others* through the action learning process was also time well spent.

Expectations

For all participants, the programme was different to what they expected. To what extent this was a positive or a negative experience differed. Even though information was provided in advance about how the action learning programme would be different from a training programme, this did not seem to mitigate the surprise. Even for Jitske, the experience was not what she expected. It was and continues to be hard to explain to people how action learning works 'from the outside'.

There are two expectations that we encountered that negatively influenced the satisfaction of participants. The first was their expectation that the programme would provide expert knowledge

from others, either from within PAX or from bringing in outside knowledge. The other was the expectation that participants would be able to share their experience to the benefit of others through advice-giving.

For some, the gap between what they wanted or expected and what they got was too big, which became a reason to drop out. Others stayed in, but continued to feel that their needs were not adequately met, or were positively surprised and felt that they got something different but very positive.

Learning questions

Looking back, we discovered that learning questions are a really valuable way of building an action orientation into the identification of each person's issue. Participants described how just having a learning question in the back of one's mind was helpful. It changed the way they looked at their work and actions, and focused the analysis of information. The power of questions that we experienced resonated with the work of Eric E. Vogt (see Box 7) who argues that good questions are key to creativity and innovation. He proposes that there are three dimensions to formulating powerful questions: construction, scope and assumptions within the question. We went a stage further and insisted that the individual should 'appear' in their own question and the rich picture that illustrated their question.

BOX 7: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Vogt has argued that asking the right questions is more important than finding the right answers and proposed three dimensions to formulating powerful questions: Construction, scope and assumptions.

Construction: An open question, which originated from genuine curiosity has most power to stimulate creative thinking. These often start with why; what would it take; how. 'What can we do to convince most people of the need to ban nuclear weapons' will generate less creative thinking than 'how can we contribute to a world without nuclear weapons'.

Scope: The scope of the question should neither be too narrow, nor too wide. If it is too narrow it can be helpful for learning but won't stimulate much creativity. If the scope is too wide, it will be less likely that creative thinking will generate action. 'How can we contribute to peace in South Sudan' has a less action-oriented effect than 'What would it take for us to engage more people in peacebuilding in South Sudan'.

Assumptions: While formulating a question it is helpful to explore assumptions behind a question and to consider whether a different belief system would influence the formulation of the question. 'How can we convince the Dutch government to ban the import of conflict minerals from Congo' probably involves different assumptions than 'How can we engage with armed groups in region X in Congo to create different standards for the extraction of gold'. Sometimes formulating a question from a different set of beliefs than your own can provide a totally new perspective for action.

Source: E.E. Vogt, J. Brown and D. Isaacs (2003) The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action

In the final evaluation, about one third of the participants did not assess the learning about their own learning question as positive. Several struggled with framing their question and this impacted on their commitment and learning. It seems to us that the extent to which participants felt they benefitted from the action learning programme strongly correlates with the usefulness of their individual learning question. This led us back to Vogt, to look at the architecture of the different learning questions in the programme.

The learning questions that appeared less helpful⁶ indeed lacked one of the dimensions as identified by Vogt. Whereas generally the construction of the questions seemed fine at the outset, in retrospect several learning questions were either too broad or too specific in scope. In all cases the assumptions behind the question were not adequately explored at the time of formulating the learning question. This seems to have been a hindering factor, for example where a question was chosen because a participant felt that ‘something should be done’ on a certain topic (instead of genuine curiosity) or out of frustration, or where a learning question turned out

BOX 8: EXAMPLES OF LEARNING QUESTIONS FROM THE PROGRAMME

How can I ensure continued (evidence-based) advocacy following the release of a one-off report (researched by an external researcher)?

How can I meaningfully engage with partners?

How can I support generating, documenting and sharing of lessons from within advocacy programmes?

How can I centralise action learning in the way the PAX team works with local partners to strengthen their capacities to improve work through action learning with communities?

How do I go about increasing the political impact of community-based projects?

to include several statements that the participant did not feel were truly valid or were not within their sphere of influence. It was noteworthy, however, that the participants who were most positive about their learning question and most active throughout the programme did examine their assumptions *during the action learning cycle*.

Context

The context within which participants were operating also seems to have mattered. First, obviously workload and stress are not helpful for learning. But the extent to which people benefitted also depended on the degree to which their work context and learning question had sufficient overlap with other participants. Learning questions on issues that did not truly resonate with the rest of the group were less effective because they originated from a different field of work. This made it harder for the group to ask helpful questions, and the learning was more dependent on the individual’s action between sessions.

However, another way of viewing this is that the composition of the group influences the learning processes: there should ideally both be diversity and a few common denominators. An example of this could be uniting people that usually don’t work together, but that work on programmes with similar intervention strategies.

The level of experience of participants in their job appeared to be another factor: action learning works best when one knows one’s own work context very well, and wants to look at something familiar but in a new way.

What would we do differently?

Based on our own analysis, and suggestions of participants who took part in the evaluative interviews, there are three areas where we could improve such an action learning programme on the individual level:

We would put more emphasis on **preparation and intake** to ensure that people know what they are getting into and that they have the support of the people around them. This could be done through a ‘teaser’, to experience action learning before signing up, through more extensive intake

⁶ This is our assessment. The participants may well be of the opinion that it was due to an unsuitable methodology or to the facilitators. Unfortunately, we do not have detailed feedback from the participants who were less positive about the experience.

interviews, and a briefing of the participants' team or manager. We would also stress even more that action learning requires time, and give a more realistic estimate of how much time they would need to commit between sessions. In the opening session and preparation material we'd generate more ideas about actions that can be taken between sessions to learn and experiment.

We now recognise the need to pay a lot more attention to the **formulation of the learning question**. A helpful learning question reflects something a participant truly wants to improve in their own practice; is in their sphere of influence; is neither too abstract nor too limited in scope; and generates positive energy. Finally, it should be a 'desire-question' not a 'should-question'. The testing/exploring of the appropriateness of the learning question at the start of the programme was done through peer-to-peer questioning. In future cycles we would be inclined to include a more active role for the facilitators, unless the group is very experienced in working with learning questions.

We would also give more attention to **group composition**. Participants need to be committed and open to a new method; there should be at least a few people in the group that are very enthusiastic; and the group should be willing and able to help each other. Ideally, there needs to be some overlap between the participants. Suggestions made by former participants included: creating a group around an existing topic, for example resulting from evaluations; involve a whole team, which may make it complicated for participants to be open about their concerns but might have the extra added value of strengthening a team and ensuring that the context is sufficiently similar; and first identify individual learning questions and only then create a group.

We believe that with these small adjustments, an action learning programme as implemented by PAX could be more beneficial to participants and to PAX as a whole.

COLLECTIVE LEARNING

The work on the collective learning question was rated negatively by a vast majority of the participants, with only two out of 15 rating it slightly positive. In retrospect we are also surprised at our own misgivings in this process. We do not consider the collective part of the action learning programme to have been a success.

Helpful and hindering forces

For most participants, there was a negative cost benefit analysis related to the collective learning question. Only a few participants said that what they did on the collective learning question was of direct relevance to their work. Very few did work on the collective question between sessions, and those that did felt frustrated because it did not seem to be leading to something of collective interest, or that was connected to broader PAX processes.

On the other hand, the collective learning was a clear illustration of the fact that very little is needed to surface the knowledge and experience of colleagues. There is a wealth to share. We do believe that being exposed to a 'not-so-successful' learning process has created greater awareness of how learning works and doesn't work, which has a value in itself.

During the last action learning set meetings, we jointly discussed the collective learning process. Participants identified the following helpful and hindering forces:

Helpful forces	Hindering forces
A feeling of responsibility/social pressure Actions points and joint work on those Relevance to other tasks Intrinsic motivation The availability of the blog The experience available in the group	Lack of clear ownership/too many owners over the question Not being interested in the question No clear accountability/consequences of not working on the collective question in between sessions Lack of understanding of what the collective question will lead to Not prioritising No response from the group on work done

We believe the hindering forces relate directly to the design and objectives of collective learning.

Design

The design of the collective learning was, to a certain extent, a mirror of the individual action learning, with a learning question and actions. In retrospect, we should have questioned the assumption that the elements that are so helpful for individual learning have an equal effect on collective learning. The elegance of the symmetry in the design distracted us from the most effective way to stimulate collective learning.

Similarities between the individual action learning and the collective learning were:

- The use of a learning question to focus the learning: a learning question was selected through a process in which participants proposed questions, discussed them with each other and then voted.
- Going where the energy was: the idea was that the group choose a question they really wanted to work on, then take action in between sessions.
- Participants should be committed to action in between set meetings.

Differences were:

- There was no clear ownership of the group question.
- Methods focused more on stimulating brainstorming and exchange and less on questions.

The design reveals our assumption that people would be equally motivated to work on a jointly selected learning question as on their own individual question. This is possibly too demanding. With many different competing work priorities, it was hard to invest a satisfactory amount of time in between the sessions on their individual learning questions, so the collective question became less of a priority for most, if not all, participants.

We also seem to have been convinced that a majority vote selection process, supported by a dialogue, would be sufficient to guarantee that a learning question is of relevance and motivating to the whole group. In reality, this process resulted in a 'lowest common denominator' question that was not owned by all and may indeed not have been owned by anyone (including the person who had suggested the question). When discussing the collective question with the participants, Bruce introduced the Abilene Paradox⁷ as an explanation of what had happened. The Abilene

⁷ J.B. Harvey. The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement, From Organizational Dynamics, Summer 1988, pp. 17–43 (http://homepages.se.edu/cvonbergen/files/2013/01/The-Abilene-Paradox_The-Management-of-Agreement.htm_.pdf, accessed 29 August 2019).

Paradox is used to explain the strange, but common, group phenomenon where a group agrees to do something that no individual member wants to do.

Objectives

The objectives of the collective learning were unclear. In retrospect, we assumed that a collective interest would automatically trigger the group to self-organise to generate a result which would be both useful and connected to PAX as an organisation. This did not work. We wanted the participants to own the process, but they had not asked us to design a process for collective learning, and were thus looking to us, and specifically Jitske as PAX learning advisor, to make the connection with other things happening in PAX and to own the objective.

What would we do differently?

Despite these problems, we are still inclined to try to connect individual learning to other levels.

To make collective learning worthwhile, there should either be a direct benefit to the participants themselves (either in outcomes that are relevant to their work, or in learning a new skill or method to apply in their work), or a clear benefit to others that will be helped by the investment of the participants (for example, a report that will be shared in PAX, or tackling a problem that needs to be resolved).

A new design should include: a clearer objective; all (or at least most) of the work on the collective learning question taking place in the meeting; administrative support for any action between sessions; and a follow-up in relation to PAX as a whole.

Dependent on the composition of the group, the objective could be 'learning to learn' oriented, or content oriented. For the former, we would focus on practicing collective learning methods to increase awareness of how collective learning can work, using cases from the group or addressing topics related to organisational learning. We'd be inclined to practice a lot with dialogue.

A content-oriented objective could be selected around a learning need within PAX, for example an evaluation follow-up, a strategic framework, or a question based on a team strategy. The results of the learning would then have an obvious connection to follow up in PAX or be linked to existing M&E and human resources cycles.

We would ensure administrative support and clear ownership. When the aim is learning to learn, the ownership could be with Jitske, but when the aim relates to a specific content question, there would need to be a more relevant owner. We'd also make sure that learning takes place mostly during the meetings, with the results collected and synthesised in the form of a report by someone who is not one of the participants. The owner would then be responsible for connecting this back to PAX. If the collective learning is designed at the request of a group or team, we would not use a majority vote system to agree the question, but use a different method in which the following aspects are taken into account:

- What has already been done?
- Who else is involved?
- What is at stake?
- Who has a stake?
- What will be the outcome/deliverable?
- Suitability for certain approaches
- How will it be used?

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

Benefits

Although we devoted only limited attention explicitly to organisational learning, we did see benefits at that level, some of which are directly related to the individual and collective levels. The programme created better connections between participants, who say that they know better how to find each other and cooperate more easily. We have also observed that in some cases the learning approach to evaluating has improved. Possibly most important at this stage is that there is now a larger group of people who are more aware of ways in which an organisation and individuals within an organisation can stimulate or hamper learning, and of the benefits that a learning approach to work can bring. These people create a foundation on which further developments towards a learning organisation can be built. And if the environment becomes more conducive to learning, this will benefit the organisation as a whole in the long term, which makes the investment, mostly born by a relatively small number of participants, very effective.

In a different way, a benefit of the connection of the three levels was that the joint thought process between Bruce and Jitske about the action learning programme and about PAX went beyond participant learning and extended to wider organisational questions. Our learning about the different levels has helped to strengthen Jitske's thinking about next steps in PAX.

Challenges

On our own personal level we wanted to connect the individual and collective learning to organisational level learning, but did not really have a full understanding of how the action learning programme would work in PAX. We needed it to be underway in order to develop that understanding of the context for the participants. It was only through the programme that we further developed our ideas about what would help participants and embed the learning. However, without the intention to do this, we would probably not have developed the specific ideas about organisational learning in PAX.

The participants, they seemed to need to 'grow into' the programme, and we feel that it was only after some time that it became easier to discuss organisational learning. We had that explicit discussion in the fourth (and thus last) regular action learning set meeting.

We also realised that the connection between the wider organisation and the programme was insufficient. The programme was an experiment and was framed as such to management and participants. Participation was voluntarily and decided on an individual basis. This, we now recognise, was not a strong enough basis for transfer of learning to the wider organisation. The responsibility for the success of the experiment rested with us and the participants and was not embedded in a wider organisational support group. This had an impact on individual learning, where participants sometimes worked on their learning question without explicit support or involvement of direct colleagues. It also made it more complicated to work towards impact on organisational learning.

A last challenge we see in connecting individual learning to collective and organisational learning is that there is an intrinsic tension between individual growth and learning, and the ordered and explicit results and implications that an organisation seeks. Action learning is designed primarily as a process for individual growth. Jitske noticed how, within the organisation, people that had not participated were disappointed that there was no end-product with conclusions about all the different learning questions.

What would we do differently?

Now that she has a better understanding of how action learning works, it will be easier for Jitske to better embed it in the organisation in the future. Our understanding includes the need for a more explicit buy-in of PAX's management, not so much for the sake of the content of the action learning, but explicitly for the 'learning to learn' component. Increased buy-in would require

better embedding with direct colleagues and managers to ensure their support for the participants and a better grounding of the collective learning question. We recognise the need for a supportive environment in which colleagues of participants have an investment in the learning questions. This is particularly important for collective learning questions.

We would also consider the organisational implications of the composition of the group. This could either be through connecting the group to a certain question that needs answering for the organisation; or through bringing together people involved in follow-up of evaluations; or by having participation of programme staff from different programmes to strengthen the effect on the connections between teams.

We would also focus more on generating organisational learning implications from the action learning experience. The work on the collective learning process could be particularly helpful in generating ideas about how the wider work context can be changed to stimulate and use learning. One way to do this would be by adjusting the review sheets that participants filled in after each session. We would include questions that relate more to helpful and hindering factors experienced between sessions, and about the wider implications of the learning. This would then become a revolving review sheet with changing questions, which we think would also keep people 'on their toes' by avoiding a repetitive format.

KEY MESSAGES

The action learning programme was designed to address four challenges identified in the PAX learning culture: vision of learning; closing the learning loop; prioritisation; and communication. We cannot claim that these challenges have been addressed by the action learning programme. However, we do see that the action learning programme has helped in shifting attitudes related to these challenges. Several participants have changed their vision of learning; they have thought about and applied learning in practice, have exchanged views about the relative value of learning compared to other work, and have practiced different ways of communicating.

We therefore saw that action learning is a method that can be very helpful for individual learning, and in some cases was a transformative experience. We believe the benefits experienced depended on the commitment of participants, on the topic of the individual learning, the exact individual learning question, and on the contexts of the participants. On the latter point, it became clear that participants benefitted more if they had sufficient experience to know the context of their work well and were doing work that was familiar enough to the group that other participants could ask helpful questions.

By improving the action learning programme and integrating lessons into other learning strategies, this effect will improve.

Key lessons for us include:

1. The combination of 'insider' (Jitske) and 'outsider' (Bruce) with a shared passion for learning and the willingness to learn from each other led to creative thinking about the design of the programme and equally creative problem-solving concerning its implementation. This was enhanced by Jitske's dual perspectives with the role of participant in one set and co-facilitator in the other.
2. The action learning experience can be enhanced by taking a multi-faceted approach to programme design: for example, incorporating time spent on different levels of learning within set meetings; including exposure to a range of methodologies such as rich pictures; and creating an online sharespace.

3. Linking the three levels of learning was valuable, and arguably was critical to getting buy-in to learning processes in a busy, implementing organisation with action-oriented practitioners like PAX. While it didn't work so well in reality, we still believe it was worth trying to make connections between the different levels of learning, and we learned a lot about how to do it better, including that each level requires its own approach. We also believe that being exposed to a 'not-so-successful' learning process has created greater awareness of how learning works and doesn't work, which has a value in itself.
4. A successful action learning programme requires equal attention to be placed in its design and implementation on both the formal elements like timing, frequency, structure, methodology, and participant selection, and on informal aspects, like having encouraging conversations with people between meetings, working out how best to be challenging (especially over the 'advice' issue) without alienating participants, managing expectations, incorporating some fun exercises into the sessions, having nice snacks, maintaining momentum, and creating a positive, caring atmosphere.
5. It is difficult to overestimate the power of well-formulated questions as a springboard for learning. However, it can be very challenging to help people devise well-formulated questions. In our haste to 'get people started' we didn't spend adequate time to really thinking about all aspects of the questions, which we would do differently in the future. Vogt's framework was a helpful tool to do this thinking: the 'common denominator' also proved useful for connecting individual, to collective, to organisational levels. Possibly most critical is whether or not a question inspires genuine curiosity and wonder.
6. Helping participants get past the 'turning point' where their learning curve steepens is crucial at the start of the programme.
7. Closing the learning loop requires making connections and taking action. It is while doing that we learn how to do things differently. This is how action learning is supposed to work, but it has also applied to our experience in facilitating the action learning programme. We needed to implement the programme to understand how to do it better. We have realised that it is very difficult to predict how learning from one part of the organisation's work can usefully influence another. Sometimes the most unlikely connections can be made through what appears to be happenstance, although the greater openness created in action learning sets must, we feel, be a contributing factor.

Looking back at the action learning programme long after it ended has, itself, been an interesting learning experience. It seemed that as we have thought and talked about it, we again and again came to new insights and hypotheses, questions to explore further and potential adaptations to be made to benefit future learning in PAX. Not all of our ideas have felt solid enough to find their way into this paper but may emerge more fully formed at some point in the future! Writing this paper has reconfirmed our belief that learning in organisations, and especially in organisations that work on complex problems, is not a straightforward process. Creating different learning opportunities for PAX and continuously reflecting on how to improve those opportunities will have long-term positive effects that we cannot yet predict.

We would therefore conclude by cautioning against judging learning on immediate and visible outcomes, but to be aware of the diversity (and possibly even invisibility) of these outcomes. As this quote from the Bhagavad Gita⁸ states: "participate and be fully engaged in action without worrying about the result", and add the recommendation to use learning questions to reflect on and improve your actions.

⁸ Kumar, S. (2019) *Elegant Simplicity: The Art of Living Well*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

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