
Transformational Learning: Are We All Playing the Same 'Game'?

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Transformational learning: Are we all playing the same ‘game’?

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Introduction

The practice of collective social learning allows us to adapt to life in a shared world in which rapid social and environmental change are continually occurring. Many of the problems faced in Western society today are complex and lack a simple solution. Scientists, politicians, industry leaders and communities often have quite different perspectives both on ‘the problem’ and possible solutions to it. Such problems require a shared approach, in which those involved share their skills and their different ways of ‘knowing’ to build new approaches to these challenges, many of which are known as ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

In Figure 1, individuals are represented by scattered dots, indicating their wide spread of interests. Community is indicated by a wavy line, suggesting that while communities are diverse, they are linked by core characteristics found in each functioning society. Specialisations are represented by a string of unconnected boxes, showing the individual frameworks of the different disciplines. Organisations are closed circles moving in one direction, indicating that each organisation already has a strategic direction. In the centre is a star, representing a holistic understanding of the project that includes them all.



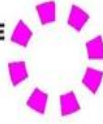


Collective social learning brings together the multiple constructions of knowledge that we acquire automatically, as part of socialisation into the society in which we live. Western society today has developed individual, **local community, specialised, organisational, and holistic** forms of knowledge (Figure 1). Each form of knowledge is so distinctive with its own language and method of inquiry as to form different sub-cultures. In practice these knowledge sub-cultures are applied individually and forced to compete with each other for attention.

Unfortunately, in our current practice, people have become accustomed to favouring one type of knowledge culture and dismissing all the others. In Figure 1, the fourth column lists the ways in which each type of knowledge construction rejects the others. While there might be a grain of truth in their criticism, that does not justify refusing to take account of other valid constructions of knowledge.

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Figure 1.
The knowledge cultures of Western decision-making (Brown, 2008)

Knowledge culture	Structure	Sources of truth	Sources of ignorance
INDIVIDUAL KNOWLEDGE Lived experience, identity		Memory Learning style Five senses	Subjective Limited Vague
LOCAL KNOWLEDGE Shared experience of people and place		Stories Events Symbols	Gossip Anecdote Inaccurate
SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE Mono, multi & trans-disciplinarity, the professions		Inquiry Measurements Observations	Jargon Irrelevant Narrow
ORGANISATIONAL KNOWLEDGE Administration, government, industry, strategic thinking		Agendas Alliances Networks	Deals Mates Corruption
HOLISTIC KNOWLEDGE Essence, core, purpose		Synthesis Focus Creative leap	Airy-fairy Impossible Impractical

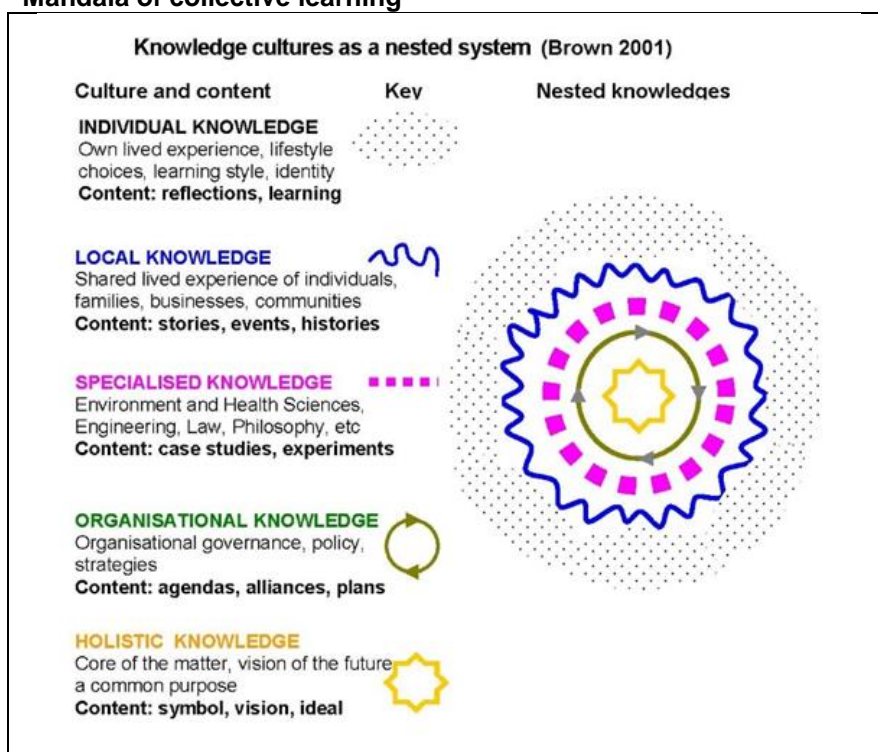
The nested knowledges in the mandala in Figure 2 represent an integrating framework which brings them all together with the knowledge cultures building on each other. All knowledge begins with the individual experience, which is shaped through local community knowledge, explored through specialised frameworks, applied through different forms of organisations and finally it can be brought into a holistic focus through putting it into practice in a particular case.

Social learning: Ensuring it is collective

Social learning is the result of groups of people learning from each other. It involves a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to their social unit or community of practice. The collective social learning model recognises the importance of bringing a diverse mix of individuals together to achieve a whole-of-community transformational change to which the participants have real commitment. Rather than starting with the situation as it currently exists, the collective learning process is a cycle that begins with ‘What should be’ – the ideals of the individuals involved, and builds a shared ideal towards which all work together.

The collective social learning approach builds on and extends Kolb’s (1984) stages of adult experiential learning, making connections between emotions and actions, facts and values. David Kolb’s extensive work on individual adult learning is based on the proposition that all individual learning occurs as a result of the individual’s reflection on their

Figure 2.
Mandala of collective learning



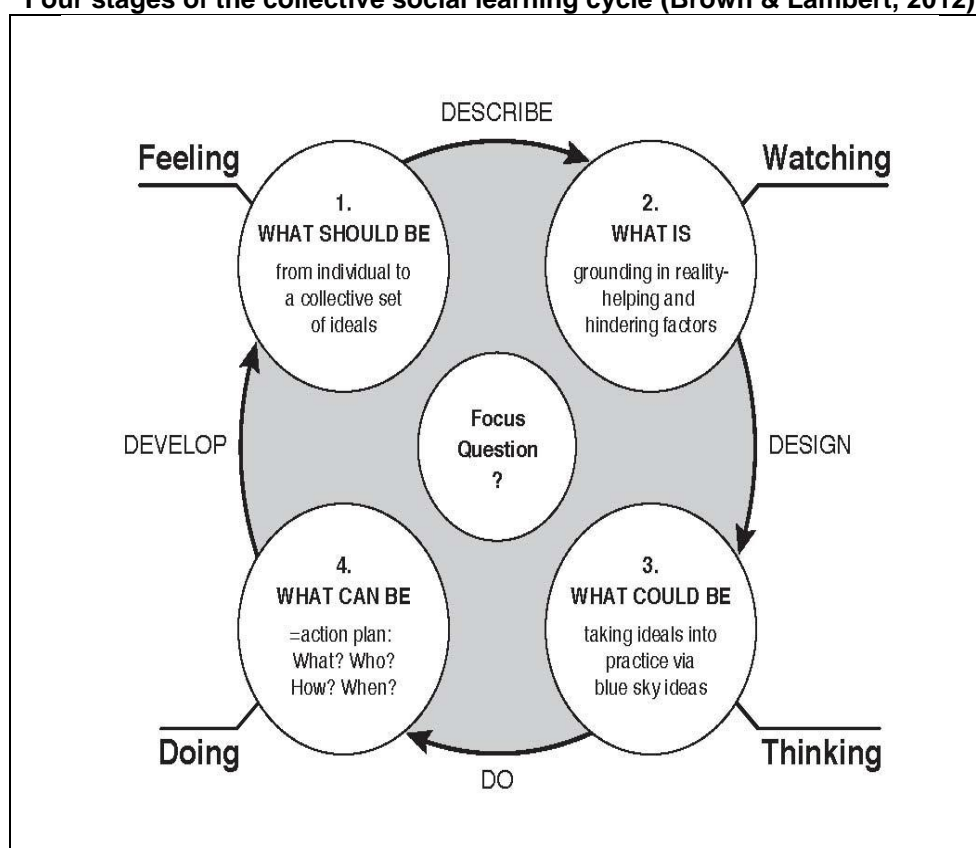
experiences. In its simplest form, Kolb's experiential learning involves the individual in developing ideals from past experience, observing the facts involved, generating new ideas by using the imagination, then testing them in new situations.

A collective social learning process seeks, welcomes difference and takes the participants on a journey to a multi-faceted outcome that satisfies the needs of all participants, without ending at a lowest common denominator result. When people from different backgrounds come together in a collective social learning setting, they bring with them their own goals; they accept certain types of evidence, with different knowledge content and language specific to their own sector. Each is part of a different knowledge culture.

Before beginning a collective social learning journey three sets of rules are important in creating and maintaining a collaborative atmosphere: Harrison Owen's Rules of Open Space Technology (2008); David Bohm's Rules of Dialogue (1996); and the rules of diversity which require mutual trust, mutual respect, inclusive language, the use of imagination, and an open mind. These rules are important in ensuring that participants from different knowledge cultures are able to 'hear' each other and contribute equally.

The collective social learning cycle (Figure 3), based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle of the individual, involves six critical steps, the central four of which, and the links between them, parallel Kolb's cycle.

Figure 3.
Four stages of the collective social learning cycle (Brown & Lambert, 2012)

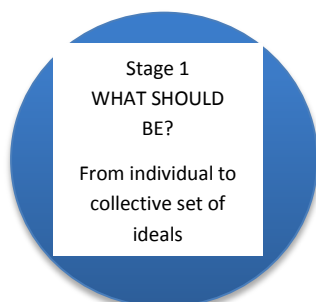


Step 1: Setting the scene

After initial preparations in which people representing each of the five types of knowledge required for successful collective social learning (individual, community, specialised, organisational, and holistic) have been identified and invited to participate in the collective social learning process, and suitable arrangements have been made for workshops and other communication, participants are asked to agree on a **core (focus) question** that includes all their core interests in the issue which brings them together. An example might be *‘How can we best progress whole-of-community change towards improving the quality of water in our river?’* At this time, the participants do not have to agree on the problems or the solution, only that there is an issue with water quality in the river.

Step 2: Learning Stage 1: Feeling

Clarifying aims.

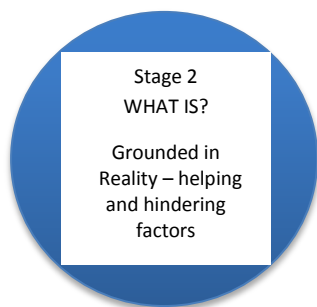


The cycle starts with participants sharing their ideals for the program: What should be?

The session involves learning about each other’s underlying hopes in taking part in the process. Answers are expressed as aims, purpose, or ideals. The session is managed so that the aims of every participant are given equal time and equal respect. None are ‘right’ and none are ‘wrong’.

Step 3: Learning stage 2: Watching

Describing the facts.

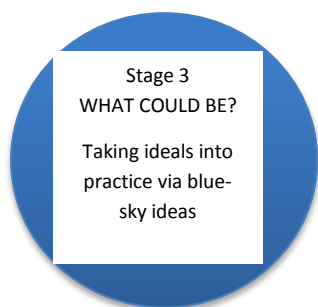


Participants establish an agreed pool of facts that set the parameters for achieving ideals: What is?

Each participant contributes what they believe are the facts of the matter. There can be no debate, only clarification. It is important that both positive and negative factors are included.

Step 4: Learning stage 3: Thinking

Generating ideas.

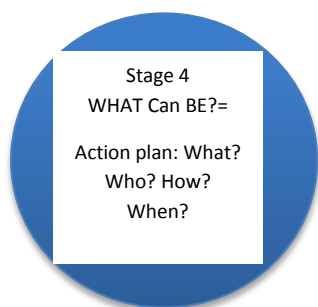


Participants brainstorm innovative ways to achieve their ideals, while taking due account of the facts: What should be?

Here, blue-sky ideas are welcome, everyone contributes their own experience and skills. Answers contain fresh perspectives generated through dialogue.

Step 5: Learning Stage 4: Doing

Taking action.



At this stage the whole group develops a collaborative action plan for collective action: What can be?

Checking new ideas against the ideals and facts will show which are relevant and practical. Those that survive become part of a shared action plan, in which participants each identify what they are willing to take on.

Step 6: Following on

Following this process, things will have changed. This can lead to considerable tension between the new direction and the pre-existing situation in the community. The change thus needs to be supported for some time after re-entry into the conditions that led to the change. That support might come from the original team or from resources gathered by the new initiative. The follow-on is necessary both to ensure real learning and out of respect for those who have committed to the change process. It might become the start of a collective social learning spiral in which each new cycle builds on what has gone before.

Community educators generally refer to the stages in collective social learning as:

1. Starting where the learners are at
2. Making a reality check
3. Introducing new ideas
4. Applying the new in the context of the old.

Example 1.1: Collective social learning to achieve improved water quality in local rivers

A group of three adjoining local councils in rural New South Wales gained substantial funding to develop a regional environmental sustainability program. One of the key issues for all three councils was to maintain and restore water quality in their shared rivers. The three councils, each of very different character and size, agreed to adopt a collaborative approach to the development of a plan for their rivers.

They were, however, nervous about involving their communities, external stakeholders and key community-based individuals in the process 'too early'.

Although Brown's collective social learning approach was proposed, the process adopted did not permit the consultants facilitating the project to fully implement the collective social learning cycle.

Staff from each of the three councils identified the 'focus question' in relation to the rivers and set the parameters for the project. Key individuals, community representatives and technical staff from relevant agencies were then brought together for two professionally facilitated workshops – the first to identify the issues and the second to develop potential solutions to the problems.

The time and resources available to this project were insufficient to enable building of trust and respect, either among the councils or between the councils and their community constituents.

Although some innovative actions were identified in the second workshop, provision for follow-up was limited. Committed staff within the less well-resourced councils subsequently reported that the goodwill and potentially innovative solutions identified through the collective learning process had not progressed.

Reflection on this case study readily identifies a number of aspects important to the success of a collective social learning process that was not addressed in this case study.

Activity 1.2

Using the case study outlined briefly above, discuss where the project deviated from the collective social learning approach and how that might have been remedied.

Using the six-step collective social learning model, design a project that would enable the three councils to work collaboratively to maintain and restore water quality in their shared rivers.

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