Simulating Collective Agency: Joint Purpose, Presence and Power as Constraints to Learning in a Social Context

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the practice of social learning by using my experiences as a social development practitioner in two projects. The first, the Arkwork Collective, is an art-junk process that engages marginalised youth in Grahamstown, South Africa in a process that uses creative sculpture and drama to explore personal and social issues that exist in their immediate context. The second, Jonga Phambili Sinethemba looks into the impact of climate change and HIV/AIDS (amongst other issues) in the rural and peri-urban communities of Willowvale and Lesseyton in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. It seeks to provide a platform where members of each community can define the vulnerabilities, capabilities, social networks in their areas with the aim of bolstering the adaptive capacity of these communities. Snippets of my experiences in these projects are shared with the intention of demonstrating constraints to learning in a social context. Key ideas that the paper explores include honouring the lived experiences of participants as part of the process, prioritising the participation of each individual present as part of the ongoing conversation, the challenge of surfacing the vital independent links of a collective, drawing on the reflective capacity of a diverse group, assessing the quality of participation, building capabilities for 'response-ability' and rethinking facilitation. Each section sets out challenges and questions for practitioners in this field to reflect on. The paper suggests that in order to achieve the laudable aims of social learning, we need to peel back the common rhetoric of its participatory aims and acknowledge the complexity, flexibility and dedication that it requires.

Defining Social Learning

Social learning is an idea of civic engagement that presents a collective of diverse actors from different backgrounds pooling together to deliberate, understand and respond to a pertinent issue that they all identify with. The emphasis on learning within this approach believes that:

> Through communicative learning a person constructs an inter-subjective understanding of a situation with others, which becomes especially relevant in the context of wicked problems where there is no clear knowledge, or perhaps there is conflicting knowledge about the situation or the best solution. (Muro & Jeffrey, 2008:329)

The understanding here is that by involving people from different vantage points and backgrounds, a process of deliberation and action will be informed by diverse points of view. These ranging vantage points are thought to strengthen responses to complex problems by surfacing multiple dimensions of an issue as seen by hosts of affected contributors. This process implies that there is a level of interdependence between participants in the way that they are bound (perhaps in different ways) to the issue of common interest. This vital interdependence binds the process of dialogue and deliberation because each perspective tells a story without which a solution cannot be collectively forged. Self-reflexivity in this perspective is about 'finding strategies for looking at our own thought processes, values, prejudices and habitual actions as if we were onlookers' (Bolton, 2005:7). This practice embraces the collaboration of people from different genders, age groups, livelihood practices, academic communities, related institutions and the practitioner communities such as NGOs and/or governmental bodies. The focus on collective agency in social learning sees 'the working collective' as the 'pre-requisite for acquiring more knowledge, understanding and skills' in the support of transformation and change (Sarpong, 2008:24).

It is important to note that the understanding of social learning presents in a fairly formal manner something that we all do to some extent in our daily lives. When I sit down and have a critical conversation about a burning issue with friends who are members of my community, each of us unconsciously presents varying viewpoints informed by our backgrounds and interests. This provides a rich conversation that challenges each person present to reflect on and explain their understanding of the present situation whilst putting their perspective in dialogue with others. Through this process, we are challenged to think through a collective response. We might not always agree but by the end of it, diverging viewpoints are boiled down to their central arguments and our collective focus is drawn to trying to address the issue. Perhaps the extent to which we all work actively to address this issue after our conversation is limited in this example, but the foundations of the concept of social learning draws on the natural ability of affected groups to reflect on and act upon the complex issues of their time.

Keeping in mind the way that we organically perform social learning in our daily lives, its formalisation and performance as a methodology in the field of environmental education brings up interesting issues. Using insight gained from work that I have been doing in Grahamstown as part of the Arkwork Collective and in Willowvale and Lesseyton in the Jonga Phambili Sinethemba project, I will unpack some issues that are pertinent when thinking about the practice of social learning in different contexts. The following section provides brief snippets of my experience in the field. Following this, a reflection on the implications of this experience and how it relates to the idea of social learning is shared, highlighting challenges pertinent to practitioners.

Constraints to Learning in a Social Context

At the onset of the project, I arrived as part of a team that came to introduce the project to the whole community. The focus on climate change and HIV/AIDS was shared and the community was asked to share their experiences of the way that these issues affect their lives. Their reflections provided useful information. However, even at this point in the project other issues – apart from what we were specifically focusing on – started to creep into the conversation.

Later on, as we began working with the smaller 'social learning' group, we decided it was best to begin again and to start the conversation in a different way. Instead of speaking specifically about climate change and HIV/AIDS, we asked the group how they would define vulnerability in the context that they live in. They did so, and when invited to tell stories about the way in which these vulnerabilities play out in their communities, poignant examples were given. These stories described many devastatingly important issues that might have been overlooked. Also, the telling of these stories seemed to unite the group in their shared experiences. These stories, because of their relevance to the group, gave us a good place to start and made the project real in the sense that we now had an important sense of the pulse of the group and a relevant place to move on from.

The sense of collaboration highlighted in the literature of social learning presents a coalition in which participants have shared authority and purpose. The reality of this work in practice is that despite holding the concerns of the collective as a whole, some parties wield more power than others. They do so simply by having access to funding and resources that create the space for such deliberations to take place. This elevated standing in the group can be used to nurture collective responsibility or it can inadvertently undercut it.

In this instance, the impact that our group of researchers and facilitators had on the nature of the collective conversation was significant. Without the insight to open up the conversation in earnest, the focus and ethical practice of the whole project could have been compromised. The simple lesson learnt here was that the focus and content of the conversation needs to be debated and acknowledged as a burning issue to explore. The precondition of a shared interest cannot be underestimated. It has a binding influence on the quality of the conversations. It reinforces the motivation and determination of a community to engage with an issue. The results of our initial engagement clearly illustrated that what one perceives as an important issue in a community may not be as important for someone with a different profile. The focus on climate change within related fields of environmental education and development is a warranted one if one takes into account the predicted outcomes of these phenomena in sub-Saharan Africa (Wiggins & Levy, 2008). Despite this reality, work towards addressing the complex issues that are the result of changing climates needs to engage communities in a way that allows their priority experiences to come to the fore. Only by encouraging and sharing these experiences can the ongoing conversation be of vital importance to those taking part. The quality of the conversation and the ability to see the complex puzzle of experiences that comes from different vantage points is compromised when attention to lived experiences and the concerns of individuals is not given More is said on this:

> Imposing a problem definition and restricting possible solutions, can be seen as a strategy to reduce complexity and achieve order in complexity. (Van Bommel *et al.*, 2009:409)

The result of such predestined conversations can very likely lead to a strained conversation in which participants have varying levels of interest or *real commitment* to the issue being discussed. This could create an atmosphere where people are simply going through the motions and participating in a tokenistic fashion.

Challenge for practitioners

Looking at the roles that we play in initiatives, how is the problem defined? How can this be done in a way that keeps a firm grasp on the lived concerns in a particular context, even if they are not part of your predetermined focus or agenda? The element of consensus highlighted in the literature is relevant here and underscores the need to acknowledge the necessity of continuing conversations already relevant to the context. It gives a clear purpose to the exercise of social learning. This way of working simply acknowledges that what I think is important from a specific standpoint may be of mild concern for somebody else.

Balancing Power in the Face of an Essential Diversity

> At some point in the discussion, a prominent member of a local political party came into the room. There was a discernable shift in the atmosphere. The casual way in which people were relating to each other earlier became more tense. It seemed like some members of the group became slightly more cautious about their participation in his presence.
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> One of the group members had just returned from his initiation into manhood. Whereas before he might have been on equal standing with the rest of the group, now there was a clear hierarchy. There was a different formula to the way that conversations could be had now, and a new understanding of whose opinion was legitimate and whose wasn't.

Power relations are a normal and integral part of any endeavour to bring together a diverse group of interconnected persons. Any collective represents more than a group of people with a shared interest. It also represents a group of people with a set of different intentions and objectives, sometimes overlapping, sometimes dissonant. This we cannot do anything about. However, the way in which we reflect on power – our own, and that of others in the group – is important in such processes.

Gibson states that, 'there can be no sustained "movement", no collective action, where there is no participatory democracy and the explicit right to articulate differences' (2011:22). Despite this laudable principle, the articulation of differences in a collective does not always present itself through dialogue. It can often be masked behind what seems to be compliance, silence, resistance or a lack of participation. A depth of understanding of the way power plays itself out within a group needs to be continually discerned. Normally, caution is provided against neglecting power dynamics because when these issues 'do not surface directly and remain unaddressed, they constitute a hidden conflict which is likely to resurface sooner or

later, possibly with increased intensity' (Morgan in Van Bommel *et al.*, 2009:410). Conflict from this perspective is presented as a negative occurrence that compromises the exercise of social learning. Despite this, my experience in these two projects has challenged me to question whether conflict is necessarily a negative occurrence. With regard to the second vignette presented above, the tension that was evident in that instance evolved in interesting ways. The new dominance of the recent initiate resulted in his abusing his colleagues. As this ensued, the insulted participants very subtly stood in solidarity. They grew confident and made it very clear that whilst society might elevate him to a higher standing, their humanity was not going to be compromised by his sense of entitlement. New boundaries were set that restored the dignity and value of everyone present. This experience shaped an understanding that simply acknowledging the presence of conflict or skewed power relations in a group is not adequate. Instead, investigating whether conflict is surmountable is of key importance. This is especially relevant when we consider the conducive climate that can be created from the emergence of organic dissent and its resolution. These are the experiences that help create the atmosphere of respect, deliberation and participation that we seek.

Challenge for practitioners

What effect does the involvement of certain parties in the conversation have? How does their perceived power affect the ability of the collective to feel that they can contribute to the conversation? As a practitioner, how can my role be used to sensitively allow these issues to emerge in a way that appropriately thrashes out and validates the experiences of all those involved? How can the experience of conflict be used to rebuild group solidarity and renewed collective focus? Is there enough will and motivation to respond to and resolve these issues? This last question is a gentle reminder that 'people's personal emotional daily life matter a great deal' in any collective processes and also affects the ability of the collective to respond (Buchy & Ahmed, 2007:372).

Cultivating Participation and Surfacing Interdependent Links

In an attempt to bring to the surface the interdependent links in the group, each person was asked to provide a map of the daily work that they do which helps to build their community. This information was shared collectively. Participants were encouraged to add information to peoples profiles that they might have left out.

This exercise not only revealed the immense capabilities of the group, it also demonstrated the way in which the group works in different or similar ways to address the vulnerabilities they face as a community. Everyone was acknowledged as part of a vital collective, including us, as our roles as researchers and facilitators were recognised as the catalyst that helped this important conversation to happen.

Stripping down the commonalities of those present creates an atmosphere conducive to collective learning. This communal self-reflexivity creates the foundation from which those present can begin in earnest to engage in a conversation that has implications for all involved. The interdependence that is the common ground for social learning is not something that can be taken for granted. It is something that needs to be explicitly explored as a critical part of the conversation. This conversation requires a level of capability on the part of the participants that cannot be assumed to be present in every diverse group. In line with this concern, Glasser comments that social learning depends on:

> the preparedness, competence, openness, and maturity of the individuals engaging in it as on the rules that guide particular organisational learning, public participation, or decision making processes. (2007:53)

The level of participation required to sustain such a conversation needs to be assessed and gently built upon by engaging participants in activities that can develop levels of trust, communion and understanding. Ultimately, we need to work towards an atmosphere where one can feel responsible for oneself and feel confident enough to allow one's voice to emerge as a part of a group. This is essentially a commitment to go beyond the tokenism of social learning that might be satisfied with having a diverse group of stakeholders represented at a gathering. More is said on the pitfalls of this practice:

> To define our own praxis on the basis of a stakeholder analysis would be to inevitably inscribe our praxis as part of the existing order – precisely the dead-end that we needed to break with. (Butler & Ntseng, 2008:39)

The mere presence of participants cannot be assumed to be useful criteria for social learning. It is rather the *quality* of participation of those present that provides the foundation from which learning can happen. As a part of this, we need to rethink the criterion of voluntary participation as an adequate motivation for participation. All those present need to know why they are part of the process, and whether their agenda is in line with the purpose of the gathering. This is a critical issue that impacts upon the ownership of the process. The possible effects of lack of ownership are demonstrated:

> The key question has been whether participants of a deliberative processes stop learning when the facilitator and information providers walk out of the door, or whether, a more complicated process is set in motion that has the capacity to change hearts and minds resulting in a greater sense of environmental citizenship. (Bull *et al.*, 2008:703)

Participation in itself is not the purpose of social learning. Building momentum for social change is the ultimate intention of this activity.

Challenge for practitioners

If social learning processes are to form a vital learning opportunity that speaks to some of the complex problems that communities face, it needs to be a practice that understands and is ready to build on the levels of capability in a group. This needs to be done in ways that value and encourage the participation of each person present. It is a commitment to understanding presence (really being there) as a part of participation. Additionally, the quality of participation needs to be choreographed with the intention of bringing about active citizenry and change. How do we work with the opportunities and risks inherent in a context in order to build momentum for change?

Rethinking Facilitation

I stood there asking a question that I thought was relevant and suddenly I felt that the group actually wasn't really that interested in what I was asking. Eyes glazed over and I wasn't sure what their silence meant. I suddenly became aware of how weird I might seem to some members of the collective – a small young woman trying to unpack aspects of their daily experiences.

As someone who has been a part of catalysing conversations around particular issues in different contexts, I am often really anxious about my presence as a 'facilitator' in one process or another. Whilst in front of a community that knows more about itself than I ever will, I often feel as though my presence presents a formality around issues that might be obvious to them. This lack of familiarity can sometimes be an energising presence that can help bring up issues that are perhaps difficult to explore without a catalyst. Despite this, I often wonder about what remains unsaid in the balance. The issue here is a genuine concern about the purpose and effect of my presence as a facilitator. One has to ask genuinely: what is our motivation? Is this way of working really going to achieve what we have set out to do? Van Bommel adds to this line of thought by stating that social learning is wishful thinking unless we can 'rethink the criterion of interdependence' (Van Bommel *et al.*, 2009:410). Through this he raises the issue of power again by challenging us to see beyond our own 'problem frames' (2009:410). The question that remains for practitioners in this field is: how are the community and I interdependent? Gibson highlights concerns that an 'outsider' in this sort of work ought:

To be sure 'politics' does not depend on 'outsiders'; 'victims' can themselves be faithful to these events. And it certainly would be a mistake to assert that thinking and reflecting is not 'organically' carried out in poor communities. The issue is: what can and should the radical who is committed to praxis do? For Fanon, the great challenge to those who want to engage in a liberatory praxis is to find new ways to listen to those who continue to be silenced and de-humanised but who are now gaining their voices, and become 'faithful' to those events of self-determination when they occur. (Gibson, 2011:40)

Looking at the legacy that development initiatives have had in many contexts, a discomfort with being an outsider is warranted. It is important for practitioners to find ways to step out of important conversations and let the group steer itself into the heart of its own dilemma. We need to find ways to be able to concurrently do this work with the perspective of an outsider whilst being able to contribute (but not dominate) as a participant. This negotiation of being an outsider and an insider is complex. It entails the dexterity to be an invisible part of the ongoing process and also emerge when necessary, as a guide, reflecting back to the group their concerns. The idea of acting as a 'responsible participant' rather than a facilitator highlighted in the work of Dylan McGarry[1] opens up interesting possibilities towards this practice.

Challenge for practitioners

What is our 'empathic solidarity' and how does it serve the needs of those marginalised? How can we find more ways to be faithful to the groups' own self-determination? How can we act more as 'responsible participants' rather than facilitators of a process? How do we balance the scope of our influence in a way that we can consider ourselves participants just like the rest of those present? Is this possible at all in our situation? We need to be clear about overstepping our mandate as facilitators and creating a rapport that masks domination.

Conclusion: On Interpendence, Presence and Collective Action

The relevance of the practice of social learning lies in its enthusiasm to do the complex work of engaging with diverse participants. The collective self-reflexivity that it demands has implications for all those involved. This process needs to be dedicated to maintaining awareness on the lived experiences that provide meaning for participants. Only through this can the purpose of such a venture inspire the motivation needed. The challenge is not simply having spaces for participation, but whether this participation is enough to catalyse collective agency. It requires a level of ownership and capability on the part of those involved that might need to be encouraged as an ongoing part of the process. Practitioners need to reflect on their roles and ask how they can mould their practice in a way that prioritises the experiences and agency of local communities.

Endnote

1. Dylan McGarry is currently completing a trans-disciplinary, split-site PhD, entitled 'Empathy in the time of climate change', in environmental education at the Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC) at Rhodes University and in social sculpture at the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University (UK). He is developing a new methodological approach to social learning (learning outside of educational institutions in everyday life), which aims to encourage and enable ecological citizenship and reflexive justice in South Africa. To read more about his work go to www.earthfora.org.

Note on Contributor

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