

Session code: 6-3-A203**Title:** Social Learning Revisited : Lessons learned from North and South**Contributer/s:** Danny Wildemeersch

Abstract : Some ten years ago, we developed a concept of 'social learning' which should enable researchers and practitioners to understand better the nature of the learning processes taking place in groups, communities, networks or other social systems engaged in trying to solve social problems. A long commitment to research and practice in the field of adult and continuing education, and more recently to comparative and intercultural education, made us search for theoretical concepts which would help us understand processes of social transformation as 'learning processes'. Various learning theories which had been developed before with respect to non formal settings mainly focused on the transformation processes taking place within individuals. We were convinced it would be relevant also to develop a frame of reference which would help us to understand better the collective dimensions of these transformation processes. We thought so, because we observed in different practices an increasing interest in engaging groups and communities as vehicles of social change. We were not the only ones to take an interest in these phenomena. Various authors drew our attention on the increased importance of collective reflexive processes in response to the many challenges our society deals with. Especially in the fields of environmental planning for development and natural resource management 'social learning' became an important topic of interest, due to the limitations experienced with reductionist technocratic approaches (Leeuwis & Pybur, 2002). Ever since the interest has grown widely and even has resulted into a 'social theory of learning' which currently conquers the world of education, training, development, business and human resource management : Etienne Wenger's theory on 'Communities of Practice' (1998).

Ten years after, the time has come for an evaluation. We have applied our theory of 'social learning' as an interpretive framework to understand processes of change in various settings such as project groups in university settings (Wildemeersch, 1999), community action groups (Van Rhede, 1997), public debate on environmental issues (Vandenabeele & Wildemeersch, 1998 ; Janssens & Wildemeersch, 2003), policy planning (Van Duffel, et al, 2001), and multi party negotiations in the third world settings related to water management projects (Dang, 2003) and nature conservation (De Greve, 2004) . In our reflection on this research, we will limit ourselves, for reasons of comparability, mainly to projects which focus on environmental issues both in the North and the South. We will in the first place present a short reconstruction of our basic ideas about social learning. In the second place, we will raise some theoretical questions about issues of power. In the course of our research activities we have observed an important inhibiting and facilitating impact of power processes on the learning processes. Yet, until now, we have failed to conceptualise these dynamics very well. We will explore to what extent a Foucauldian perspective on power recently elaborated in the context of 'governmentality' studies may be inspiring. The choice of the cases we will present below (two from the North and two from the South) is directed by the expectation of the differential influences of power, of the differences in scale, and of the differences in socio-political contexts.

The origins of social learning

Initially we defined social learning as the 'learning taking place in groups, communities, networks and social systems that operate in new, unexpected, uncertain and unpredictable circumstances ; it is directed at the solution of

unexpected context problems and it is characterised by an optimal use of the problem-solving capacity which is available within this group or community' (Wildemeersch, 1995, p.33, translation DW). The learning within these systems is basically experiential and therefore can be characterised as learning by doing. Experiential learning had in the past been conceptualised mainly with reference to individuals. Our challenge now was to conceive of a kind of experiential learning taking place within groups or systems and to make clear how these groups or systems learn. In view of this, we identified four different activities taking place in groups involved in processes of collective problem solving: action, reflection, communication and negotiation. We related the learning to these four activities and hence, spoke of four dimensions of social learning. In each dimension we identified two opposite poles which create a tension. The social learning can be described as the increased capacity of the social system to manage these tensions. The four dimensions and the opposite poles are following :

Action : social learning is linked to processes of social action (e.g. developing a policy plan, organising multi party negotiations, engaging in participatory processes, establishing a task force or a study group, etc..) ; the action is triggered both by a particular 'need' (need motivation) and a set of 'competences' (competence motivation) which are present in the social system involved;

Reflection : social learning triggers processes of reflection inside and outside the social system ; the reflection dimension balances between 'distance' and 'identification' ; taking a distance may help to question the self-evident aspects of the issue at stake ; simultaneously, learning goes together with a process of (dis)identification with particular people, norms or values expressed through symbols, narratives, rituals, etc.. ; social learning is about finding a balance between these 'rational' and 'emotional' aspects of reflection.

Communication : the learning inevitably is linked to (supported or inhibited by) various communication processes taking place inside and outside the social system ; these communication processes can either be 'unilateral' (e.g. inspired by a dominant voice) or 'multilateral' (e.g. inspired by different voices).

Negotiation : the learning is related to processes of negotiation which result from differences of interest represented inside and outside the social system involved ; the management of these differences can be concordance orientated or discordance orientated, or a combination of both. The creative tension between concordance and discordance can trigger learning within the system.

The actual learning takes place when the social system which is engaged in the process of action somehow manages to find a creative balance along the four axes or dimensions. The balances will be different for every social system, depending on the composition of the system (large or small, homogenous or heterogeneous), its internal and external challenges (high pressure or low pressure), its history (young or old system), the particular context in which it operates (vertical or horizontal), the available competences, its relative openness vis-à-vis the outside world etc. Therefore the balance is the result of a careful management with regard to these elements which are moreover not stable but in flux as a consequence of the transformation which the system undergoes along the line. This management can be organised by agents that operate within the social system or by external agents who operate as formal facilitators . We also emphasised that social learning processes are never value-neutral, as they are related to issues that matter and that therefore often trigger processes of power both inside and outside the group, the network or the community. Yet, as mentioned before, we did not theorise the issue of power very clearly.

A concrete example will make the theory sound a bit less abstract. In a recent research project in Flanders (Belgium), we analysed the social learning taking place in the context of so-called 'youth work policy planning' (Bouverne-De Bie & Wildemeersch et al, 2002). In many domains of policy planning nowadays, new approaches to participatory planning on a decentralised level (local, regional) are being put into practice. The planning seems to be no longer the exclusive privilege of experts in combination with politicians. Increasingly, various stakeholders are invited to engage in the decision making process. This is also the case in the domain of youth policy where the distribution of subsidies among various youth work initiatives is made dependent on processes of collaborative planning which include policy makers, politicians, civil servants, youth workers, experts from adjacent policy domains, etc.. We analysed these processes with the help of the social learning framework. It helped us to describe these policy developments and to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses.

The action consists of a process engaging various stakeholders in the local community (a steering committee, youth work representatives, the municipal authorities, etc..) into various planning activities such