

Transformation for Resilient Landscapes and Communities Partnership

Value of collective learning

Resource Sheet No 4 (RS 4)

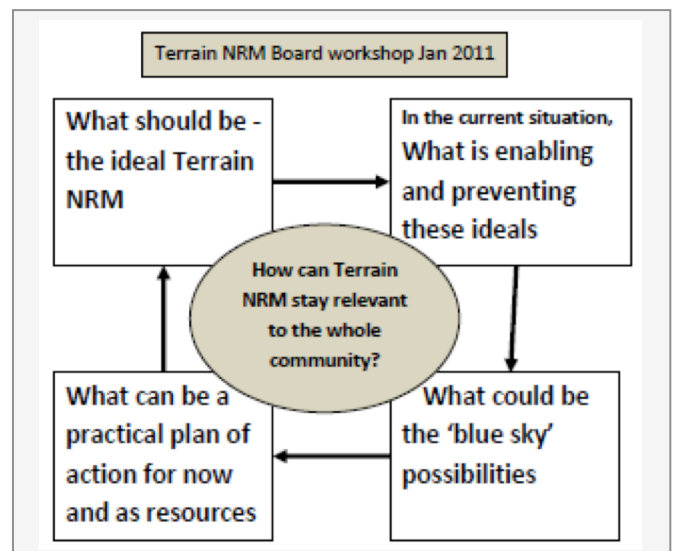
What is collective learning?

Collective learning is a form of social learning in a group setting designed by Valerie Brown to address sustainability issues and 'wicked' or intractable problems. It can also be thought of as a form of adaptive governance (RS 5), which in some circumstances, can lead to radical adaptation or transformation. In principle, collective learning is well suited to NRM and to the kinds of inter-linked social, economic and ecological problems facing regional communities in Australia.

Key principles of collective learning theory

Principle 1: Different types of knowledges should be represented in conversations and decision-making about intractable problems. The types of knowledge Brown considers important are individual, local/community, specialist, organisational and holistic. From this study we can add Indigenous knowledge, which is both community and holistic knowledge.

Principle 2: It should follow a sequenced looped process of learning based on adult learning theory – the order matters. The process starts with a shared problem space and transforms that from a problem into an opportunity to be pursued by the group. It then takes the group on to developing a set of shared ideals around that opportunity, strategically analysing the current situation for intervention opportunities and



opening them up to creative design possibilities to operationalise the shared ideals. It then leads the group to developing practical collaborative action plans for change. The loop is completed back to the shared ideals through monitoring of change. The cycle can then start again with new conversations and actions, building on the first cycle like a learning spiral.

Principle 3: The facilitated or guided process is designed to 'step up' from individual learning and knowledge to shared understandings and learning, and to uncover hidden assumptions or those taken for granted.

Principle 4: The outcomes are not predetermined. Participants openly set their own agenda and focus for the conversation and then decide along the way on the direction, scale and pace of any change that may emerge from this process.

We were interested in exploring deep systemic change in this study. So once the situation analysis identified transformation as an option, facilitation became more focused on innovation and 'blue sky' thinking.

How has collective learning been applied in this study?

- The collective learning framework was applied as a stand-alone workshop tool with NRM Boards both in its original form and trialed in modified form using resilience (RS 3) and Five Capitals frameworks (RS 12) to assist with and strengthen the situation analysis step.
- Testing in the Murray, Cape York and Wet Tropics NRM regions gave us confidence to develop a framework based on collective learning principles for building and assessing transformative capacity in NRM (RS 6).
- Collective learning principles and attributes of adaptive governance (RS 5) were applied to modify existing resilience assessment frameworks. The resultant 'clouds heuristic' (now applied in over 25 planning processes) is contributing to the emergence of social-ecological forms of planning (Overview Report);
- In all three case study regions, the principles were also applied to design community engagement processes for regional planning using social-ecological systems (SES)(RS 7) as new spaces for social learning.

Reported benefits

Partners report that using collective learning principles to design engagement events, in combination with an SES approach, has opened up new and more meaningful conversations between landholders, interest groups, land and sea managers, Indigenous traditional owners, Councils, researchers and agencies. This debunks the myth that communities are over consulted and fatigued. Perhaps they just want an

engagement approach that actually focuses on their concerns and respects all contributions.

Previously tense relationships and indifference to engagement in the Murray region were overcome and new relationships forged around a principle of localism. Grazing industry roundtables and self-organising groups of landholders in Cape York are serving as new spaces for collective learning on shared problems, capacity building, collaborative experimentation and reconciliation. Conversations with producers and community groups in the Wet Tropics are opening up new possibilities for collaborative action and practice innovation.

Pitfalls to avoid

The collective learning based engagement approach works well in its original form in situations where an issue of concern can be represented by a single focus question. For example, in Cape York we used the framework to explore how the Board could foster culturally sensitive engagement; and with the Terrain Board to explore how they could remain relevant to the whole community. However, we found the original framework did not work as well in meetings where time was limited, or as a formal planning process where the focus is on property rights or allocation of scarce resources. Models of social-ecological planning (RS 8) and engagement processes developed by partners in FNQ have addressed this gap.

Further information

Partnership Study Resource Material:

www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation

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Collective Learning for Transformational Change, A guide to collaborative action, by Valerie A Brown and Judith A Lambert (Routledge, 2013)