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Adult Learning in Social Innovation

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Abstract: Practitioner learning in a social innovation project was expansive in character. However, relationships and broad social values also impacted investment in learning suggesting motives beyond the immediate activity system.

Keywords: social innovation, expansive learning, transformative learning

Current social and philanthropic policy for impacting intractable social problems has increasingly directed resources toward cross-sector partnerships for social innovation that create novel, more effective, efficient, and sustainable solutions than traditional programmatic approaches (Cahill, 2010). The social innovation movement is engaging education and social sector agencies in substantive organizational change processes. However, the conceptualization of learning within the social innovation framework has been broad and relatively unsophisticated. For example, Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), a popular U.S., social innovation framework conceptualizes program improvement as deriving from practitioners' collectively seeing, learning and doing, with learning broadly defined as shared understanding (Kania & Kramer, 2013). Moreover, the process of learning to improve is often characterized in linear and transmission terms, which poorly aligns with practitioner viewpoints and needs (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). A transmission-oriented and linear model of learning for social innovation contrasts with more dynamic theoretical frameworks of workplace learning (Arygris, 1999; Engeström, 2015; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Watkins, Marsick, & Faller, 2012). Yet, workplace learning theories have largely been developed through research in the private sector. Thus, there is a need to explore adult learning and organizational change in the context of urban social innovation.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine individual, project team and organizational learning in an urban social innovation initiative. Data were derived from a multi-year developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) of a cross-sector, social innovation project designed to improve education outcomes at an underperforming, urban K-8 public school. The following research question guided the study. How does individual, group, and organizational learning develop in a cross-sector collaborative and social innovation partnership?

Conceptual Framework

In the domain of social innovation there are emerging models of partnership such as Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) and Developmental Evaluation where individual and organizational learning are key mechanisms of improved program services, but conceptualizations of learning are not well articulated. In Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer,

2011), shared understanding is an outcome of collaborative groups focusing on five conditions, developing a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone organizations. However, the Collective Impact (Kanai & Kramer, 2011, 2013) model, fails to address the limits of linear-transmission conceptualizations of learning common in evidence-based approaches to improving professional practices. Rather learning has typically been conceptualized as knowledge transfer from experts to novice practitioners and failure to collaborate or improve programs is generally attributed to practitioners' failure to learn and implement evidence-based practices with fidelity (Engeström & Saninno, 2010; Patton, 2011). That is, the primary learning task to reach shared understanding is to follow the five conditions of collaboration and implement proven practices as prescribed, which assumes that the knowledge needed to innovate is whole, complete and replicable at the start of a project (Engeström & Saninno, 2010; Patton, 2011).

In contrast and from a program evaluation framework, Patton (2011) has argued that social innovation contexts are characterized by uncertainties and substantive program innovations or developments require practitioners to interpret and manage emergent factors inherent in complex and dynamic systems. In this case, the learning task requires responsiveness and adaptive action, which requires assessment of both the evidence-based practice or intervention (i.e., what to do) and implementation (i.e., how to carry out the intervention effectively). In developmental evaluation, an evaluator is embedded with the project team and uses evaluative logic and feedback to facilitate learning and innovation. Patton (2011) conceptualized the developmental evaluation learning process as adaptive, which he aligned with double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). However, Patton (2011) provided relatively little depth of theoretical explanation of the connection between method, evaluative feedback, and double-loop learning.

Given social innovation's focus on substantive change through learning and the emergent nature of program development and change suggested by Patton (2011), two workplace learning theoretical frameworks guided this study. First, the model of Transformative Learning for Organizational Change developed by Watkins et al. (2012) aligns principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) with double-loop learning (Argyris, 1999). The model focuses on transformative workplace learning that increases the capacities of individuals and organizations to adopt entirely new ways of operating. The Watkins et al. (2012) model conceptualizes the overall change process as fostered by a change leader, and suggests two routes to transformation, one via organization-driven strategy and cultural assimilation and one that transforms the organization by transforming the members (i.e., individual and group). In this model, transformative change is explained by the mechanism of critical reflection.

Second, Expansive Learning Theory, (Engeström, 2016), provides an alternative frame of learning and explains organizational change as a reconfiguration of an activity system. Expansive Learning Theory (Engeström 2015) conceptualizes learning as moving from the abstract to the concrete. Learning as transformation of an activity system is fostered by practitioners examining and resolving contradictions in the nodes of the activity system – individuals, community members, tools, rules, and division of labor. The expansive learning outcome is a new object, which can also be described as a new theoretically understood practice (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, 2011).

Method and Data Analysis

A retrospective and longitudinal case study was conducted using data generated from a social innovation project and corresponding developmental evaluation study. Five agency partners took a Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 2013) approach to improving one underperforming public K-8 school in an urban district. The authors entered the project as developmental evaluators mid-year of the first year of implementation. This study focused explicitly on data relevant to the study of adult learning. The case study method was selected because it aligns with an explanatory research question, the contemporary and emergent nature of the phenomena, and the emic positionality of the researchers who served as the developmental evaluators (Yin, 1994).

Data were collected using participant interviews, evaluation event log, field notes, and program documents. Participant interviews were conducted at three points in time. Round 1 (2014, n = 16) coincided with the start of the evaluation, which happened five months after the collaborative project was launched. Round 2 interviews (2015, n = 18) occurred near the end of the second academic year and round 3 interviews (2016, n = 12) also occurred near the end of the third academic. The second and third years of the project were directly supported by developmental evaluators embedded with the collaborative project team. The first round of interviews was conducted by the authors and the third round by the second author. The second round of interviews was conducted by a research assistant unfamiliar with the project and in this case, participants were assured anonymity. There was also substantive transition of staff members over the 3-year period, with only five practitioners participating consistently across all three years. All interviews were semi-structured and questions focused on the collaborative program model and its implementation, monthly project team meetings, and participant assessments of program processes, developments and individual, group, and organizational learning.

For the purposes of this study, the interview transcripts were read in a constant comparative manner to identify components of learning processes, learning statements and the nature and development of learning over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initial coding focused on individual, group, and organizational learning. A second round of inductive coding categorized data focusing on factors explaining or constraining programmatic improvements and other factors indicative of learning processes and outcomes. A final round of theoretical analysis was conducted in an inductive and deductive manner using theoretical frameworks of transformative learning in the workplace (Watkins et al., 2012) and expansive learning (Engeström, 2015). Theoretical codes of norms, tools, division of labor, beliefs and reflection were incorporated during this phase. All coded text was then read multiple times for themes addressing the research question and interpretative analyses focused on analytic generalization (Yin, 2016) were used to develop a framework for the findings.

Findings

Initial assessment of the project indicated that as the partners implemented their respective program services during the first academic year they were aligned around professional development activities and school culture. However, there were also numerous issues including gaps between their original plan and actual levels of staffing, confusion regarding the collaborative program model and its implementation, questions of leadership, and overall concern that they were co-locating at the school rather than collaborating. These issues served as the project team targets for learning.

Learning Processes at the Project Team Level

As illustrated in the following quotes, the project team learning process involved resolving competitiveness between partners and managing risk in favor of trust and collaboration and this happened over time.

“I think it is always around wanting to protect your organization and not wanting to put all our organizations’ things on the table because it makes you vulnerable. It’s the reason why data sharing is so difficult because how are we even going to know that people are doing the right thing. I think it is trust.” – Liza, year 2.

“Project team meetings have forced each of the organizations, and the school as well, to think about how people truly collaborate. I think that has been for the better. Even the start of the year until now, I think we are in a much stronger place as a unit and being able to think through how each organization fits into the bigger picture in a way other organizations understand how that organization fits in” – Noel, year 2.

“Content has remained similar, but tone and tenor in terms of honesty has increased. If I’m thinking what worked, I think that groundwork around the relationship building that was laid on the front end, coupled with pushing on real clear and in some cases difficult conversations...” – Grant, year 3.

The following terms and concepts were used by participants to describe their learning process: “norming talk, learning from joint program observations, problem-solving, reducing assumptions, working through it, changing practice tied to a specific goal, narrowing the focus, going more into detail, pinpointed discussions, creating clearer pathways, getting everyone on the same page, and finding the root of the unsaid thing.” Thus, learning was a discovery process involving trust development, increasing precision in dialogue on the structure, functioning and implementation activities, and resolution of dilemmas and issues. The project team learning process was the driving force for individual and organizational learning.

Individual Learning and Adaptive Leadership for Organizational Change

Individual learning was driven by insights and reflection on project team dialogue, which led to adaptive leadership responses related to partner’s respective models and staffing. In the following quote, Leah illustrates this as she describes reflecting and using knowledge in her program leadership with other schools.

“This project influences everything that I try to do with other schools and it also pushes me to think about how do I help other schools when we are the only community organization there. It pushes me to push principals to tell me what they really want. As a professional, I spend a ton of time now thinking about collaboration and what it really means to work together with organizations within a school.” – Leah, year 2.

Another form of adaptive leadership was that the partner organizations re-evaluated their services including how they placed staff at the school, the skills staff needed and how they coached and supported these staff members. After the second academic year, partners made changes for the third year to match personnel to the demands of the collaborative context. Olivia, a new member assigned to the school, describes using her observation and reflection of the project team to challenge established norms of her coaching practices.

“In the August meeting, we were all sitting at the table, there was clearly a bit of a divide that told me I needed to coach in a different way. Really intentional, about partnering with the principal saying what didn’t work, what can I do as a new coach? From those things, I was able to say, I need to step up my game in terms of frequency and turnaround of feedback and looping in the school’s leadership more explicitly so that they can see exactly what I’m doing and that I am a partner.” – Olivia, year 3.

There was some evidence that working through collaborative implementation involved premise reflection and transformation of meaning schemes or perspectives, but a sense of space and relationships were also integral as evidenced in the following quote.

“Personally, [the project team] meetings have helped me reflect on how I need to communicate with individuals, what mindsets I carry and with how my team could be operating. These meetings have truly changed my entire worldview beyond this project. I have gotten a lot personally...Specifically around trusting everyone. In the past I gave more credit to our worst selves, to people coming with their own agendas. But it was very useful to be in a space where people were genuinely coming together for a greater good more important to everyone than their own agendas. I didn’t come into this thinking that people were liars, but I came in not giving my full faith to strangers, but the relationships I have built have really changed that for me.” – Kai, year 3.

Explaining Learning in a Social Innovation Collaborative Project

The group, individual and organization learning that resulted in program developments and innovations aligned with Expansive Learning Theory and the mechanism of contradiction (Engeström, 2015). Learning required resolving a contradiction between competition and collaboration. There were fundamental dilemmas in two nodes of the activity system, norms and division of labor. A third node, tools, produced resolution. That is, creating and using data charts served to focus issues, foster interactions and understanding that made the collaborative program model evident and clarified to some extent, division of labor. Similarly, norms, especially working through the lack of established norms, affected how the team impacted implementation improvements. Norms were tested by conflicts, largely resolved between partners without intervention, yet participants wanted even more and clearer norms especially accountability, even at the end of the third year.

It was also evident that project team meetings fostered some premise reflection, yet, participants were less forthcoming about personal transformation. The project team was the space for dialogue fostering reflection. As conceptualized by Watkins et al., (2012), there were changes emanating from the group to the individual level and through adaptive leadership changes were made to the program model and partners’ respective organizations. Despite an initial program plan, there was little evidence of any deliberate learning process deriving from an organizational level characterized by assimilating agency level strategy (Watkins et al., 2012).

The learning processes were also characterized by relationship and values. For example, participants cited “doing what is best for kids,” “historic educational inequities,” and “it is better for our community if we are all working together and not constantly competing.” Others identified being energized by “focusing on the greater good” and “being part of something bigger.” Relationships and values played a role in explaining learners’ openness to learning, investment of time, persistence, and motivation.

Discussion

The results indicate that learning in social innovation with developmental evaluation had an expansive character of moving from the diffuse to the concrete (Engeström, 2015). Data, as a tool, was a means for resolving dilemmas related to norms and division of labor, which served to resolve the contradiction between competitiveness and collaboration. The high level of risk and need for critical project team conversations to develop trust may have impeded transformative-oriented learning (Watkins et al., 2012), though a few individuals did report critical reflection and a type of transformative change. Two factors, not often discussed in private-sector organizational change were relationships between members and their broader social values. Both played a role in the learning process at the project team and individual level. Relationships helped with maintaining levels of investment in group learning. Values related to member commitments to educational equity for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. These values served as a broad superordinate goal suggesting a type of motive with broader meaning related to, but also distinct from, the immediate activity system as conceptualized in Expansive Learning Theory (Engeström, 2015, 2016).

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