

University of Groningen

The normative practitioner

Blaak, Marit

DOI:
[10.33612/diss.192062455](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.192062455)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Blaak, M. (2021). *The normative practitioner: adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda*. University of Groningen. <https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.192062455>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

8. Conclusion and discussion

8.1 Taking stock: organisational learning in education NGOs

Through the work and experiences of various NGO practitioners, this thesis has portrayed the colourful and diverse terrain of the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. Numerous education NGOs are offering learning and education interventions for youth and adults aiming to achieve various development goals related to livelihoods, sexual reproductive health and rights or citizenship amongst others. In chapter 2, I problematised that the epistemology of practice dominating the development sector does not optimally set up NGOs to navigate the technical, ethical and epistemological complexities that occur in the field of lifelong learning for development. Therefore, this research aimed at generating practical knowledge that could help NGOs re-position organisational learning as a critical and transformative process that helps them do the right thing in their work context.

The main research question guiding this PhD research was: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors towards meaningful lifelong learning for development interventions? This focus on the use of double-loop learning was guided by a participatory diagnostic phase. Collaboratively, NGO practitioners observed that they predominantly utilise single-loop learning and felt stuck when trying to engage in more critical inquiry or applying their professional knowledge when it would go beyond the prescribed path. The element of collective learning with community actors was also identified in our communicative space as a challenging domain. The practitioners acknowledged the need to include diverse knowledges – especially of the unexpected knowers – and collaborative action for meaningful lifelong learning programming. Based on this diagnosis, we set the following sub-questions:

1. Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently applied in education NGOs in Uganda?

2. What are enabling and limiting factors for double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda?
3. Who are the community actors involved and affected by the work of education NGOs?
4. What space is currently created for double-loop learning involving community actors and how does this influence non-formal education programmes?
5. How can these spaces be opened to increase the relevance of non-formal education programmes through double-loop learning?

Previous chapters and intermezzos have accumulated findings that helped answer these questions. Chapter 4 introduced a portrait of seven education NGOs, presenting their various OLMs. This mapping exercise illustrated that NGO practitioners find creative ways to ensure their learners' needs are met – despite system pressures and clashing paradigms of practice. Intermezzo 2 illustrated the variety of external actors affected by and involved in the work of education NGOs. Chapter 5 presented a community-based view on the NGO dynamics emerging in a locality and in specific learning spaces that brought various actors together. Chapters 6 and 7 zoomed in on double-loop learning – both looking into concrete examples of double-loop learning spaces and by distilling factors that make double-loop learning spaces stick or not. Chapter 7 also recapitulated key theoretical implications of this research – situating the concept of double-loop learning in the domain of lifelong learning for development. Overall, insights were gained into the dimensions of currently existing critical organisational learning spaces as well as methodology and ingredients that can help widen these spaces. Furthermore, we learned what ingredients help ensure double-loop learning sticks and becomes part of the mainstream organisational practice. Limitations to fully letting the 'outside-in' were also identified; persistent barriers that prevent the establishment of communities of practice to strengthen collaboration between NGOs and community actors. In this final chapter, I explore a sort-of anti-question to the research question to evaluate what value we have really added to organisational learning in education NGOs and how meaningful this was. I formulate this anti-question as: How meaningful is organisational learning in education NGOs if we want to fix the gaps in the lifelong learning for development field in Uganda?

8.2 The value of organisational learning in education NGOs

At the beginning of this thesis, I presented several premises that suggest that if education NGOs learn more effectively (and critically), they would be able to achieve greater success in delivering best fitting lifelong learning interventions. I am deeply aware that such big claims have been made about organisational learning and becoming a learning organisation in the past; if only they would learn, organisations would help create a better world. Others have tempered this optimism by pointing out that learning organisations could simply learn to do the wrong thing better or create the suggestion of democratic work practices to keep staff sufficiently satisfied to continue serving the leadership's aspirations (Jarvis, 2007; Pedler & Hsu, 2019; Symon, 2003). Based on the findings of this PhD research, what position would I take? Are the premises about the value of organisational learning valid? Using five perspectives I construct my conclusions about the contribution organisational learning can and cannot make to the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda.

8.2.1 Are education NGOs the holy grail?

First, I would like to revisit whether it is worth investing in organisational learning of education NGOs – are these organisations really the key to improved lifelong learning opportunities? In chapter 2 I argued that NGOs are currently among the major service providers of lifelong learning programmes, especially when it comes to non-formal and informal learning. However, they are not the only providers. There are public and private providers of formal and non-formal education programmes, community-based organisations, as well as spontaneous informal learning interventions in communities, and companies offering learning trajectories for staff and/or actors in their value chain. What is the role of NGOs in this landscape to ensure lifelong learning is meaningful and sustainable? Could it be counterproductive for NGOs to learn their way into offering more meaningful lifelong learning interventions outside of the formal education and learning systems? If there is no connection between the work of NGOs and government agencies the problem of educational exclusion is very likely to persist. Organisational learning, especially those processes in the border regions as I have illustrated in this work, could help transfer knowledge and wisdom and foster synergies between NGOs and Government actors. This calls for a focus on scale and systemic change as part of the learning agenda. This would also demand that government agencies are equipped with the capabilities to act more 'learningfully'. It could also be worthwhile to reposition

companies as providers of learning opportunities, if they learned with a normative perspective they could make a substantial impact on society, the economy and the environment. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of grassroots organisations that could benefit from normative organisational learning practices too to navigate the requirements to survive and being mission-driven. Through collective learning, NGOs can become allies, advocating for those whose needs are underserved. Because NGOs are in such a unique position, and their role is often focused on fostering, supporting, complementing other services we must review the legitimacy question; who and what gives NGOs legitimacy?

In this research, we have seen how the accountability paradox has affected education NGOs in Uganda. Practitioners feel pressure to set up learning systems that produce the data donors ask for. When realities clash with prescribed plans, some educators choose to go under the radar and not report what they are doing. In this context, putting educators' knowledge above 'evidence-based' knowledge almost feels like an act of resistance. Besides accountability, Lister (2003) illustrates that NGO literature commonly refers to legitimacy as a matter of representation or performance. She, however, adds that this is too simplistic and divides the world into 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' – yet NGOs may be perceived as legitimate by some and not by others. Her reference to multiple facets of legitimacy (regulatory, pragmatic, normative and cognitive) as well as her emphasis on the role of power in legitimatising organisations is helpful in this context. In this research, we have seen that legitimacy is commonly operationalised as an accountability matter, especially 'upwards' accountability. So, are NGOs really the change agents they traditionally were presented to be?

Based on the fact that there are hundreds of NGOs offering lifelong learning interventions in Uganda, they are a player we cannot ignore. However, we should rethink their legitimacy and ensure they are critically seeking normative legitimacy from the groups they serve – before anyone else. Critical organisational learning potentially is the key to achieving the real legitimacy goal of NGOs that I can formulate as learning our way out of business. Instead of learning to be smarter in seeking legitimacy from donors and (local) governments who provide funding and/or sign-off on your authority to act, critical organisational learning aims at finding lasting solutions for communities who currently do not access those learning opportunities. Once the NGO figures out how to do this effectively the problem may no longer exist or solutions may be mainstreamed, and

therefore they lose their legitimacy. At this point, critical organisational learning could lead to a loss of legitimacy, but is also the only route to normative legitimacy in my view. Most importantly, critical organisational learning, in the way it is described in this thesis, would also create new connections and partnerships, reposition actors in relative position to other actors in the field, deconstruct problematic power relations, etcetera, thereby leading to new capabilities and new fields that enable the local actors to operate more productively, justly and sustainably. If education NGOs seek to learn themselves out of business, ultimately the results of their learning efforts translate into actions of others, for example, by assisting local government in allocating resources to groups-at-risk or by instituting national-level policies that widen the lifelong learning agenda, or by strengthening communities of practice at the community level that links youth to trainers, etcetera. Education NGOs may not be the only holy grail, but tuning organisational learning to a normative legitimacy could definitely contribute to more meaningful lifelong learning for development practices.

Though NGOs carry a responsibility to strive towards this normative legitimacy, they are not the only actors who carry responsibility. Given the complex nature of change in the field of lifelong learning and development, we may have to draw legitimacy beyond the borders of a single organisation or entity. From a complexity point of view, we could say that no actor is single-handedly responsible for change (and problems). Like Guijt (2010) underlined, the accountability paradigm is not the fault of just the donor, it is systemically upheld. Therefore, it might be important to improve the way education NGOs operate – but it is not sufficient and their learning practice should not be considered in isolation from other actors. And yet, because of their positionality, those in positions of power often do not have access to information about the realities on ground (Chambers, 2010). This means that donors, regulators, CEOs and directors and community leaders need to step out of their comfort zone and engage in reflexive learning. To break through the risk adversity triggered by the accountability wave, these powerful actors should similarly act as normative professionals – ask the tough questions, embrace the discomfort that comes with it and extend power to others who know-in-action – all requiring trust. Further research could investigate the practices of other actors such as donors, regulators, scholars, community actors, etcetera and how they can expand their realms of possibility to push the current paradigm through their day-to-day choices. Related to this could be an inquiry into the role of initiatives such as GLAM or

PDIA in advancing a paradigm shift in the wider field of development cooperation (Global Learning for Adaptive Management, 2019; Harvard University, 2021).

8.2.2 Is organisational learning the only route to transformation?

Authors like Symon (2003) and Jarvis (2007) have warned that organisational learning has often remained a rhetoric or management fad. Should we really think about it from this angle if the concept has been hijacked by the neoliberal interest of companies before? Others have proposed alternative routes, for example Kunneman (2016) introduces normative professionalisation and Van der Linden (2016) hints particularly on professionalisation and practice-oriented research or research communities as pathways to change. We could also place our hopes on new generations of professionals and rethink higher education and professional courses. We could aim at making universities more practice-oriented to ensure their research projects produce the type of knowledge that can help organisations advance their actions (phronesis). And as hinted at in the previous section it may not just be about organisational learning but also about rethinking our standards of organisational legitimacy. For example, regulators could hold NGOs accountable to normative legitimacy – ensuring that NGOs make a significant contribution to their target communities.

Rather than looking at these as alternatives to organisational learning, I would say that organisational learning can be a catalyst for all of these. By engaging in critical organisational learning, for example, NGOs could generate well-defined research questions about specific barriers in the 'swampy lowlands' that scholars could help answer. Furthermore, organisational learning spaces can provide an avenue through which the embodied knowledge of practitioners can be made explicit, documented and disseminated. This is not to fall back into the generalisation that learning is automatically good. We have seen from the account of NGO practitioners in chapters 4 and 6 that they are limited in the adaptations they can make for the benefit of their learners. Thus, for organisational learning to be a catalyst for professionalisation processes, knowledge accumulation and normative forms of legitimacy, it has to be more critical, and for this to happen multiple actors should align their actions. The various empirical chapters in this thesis have provided insight into how this can be accomplished. What is important throughout is that various actors are working towards a manner of working that does justice to the complex nature of development and lifelong learning (where applicable), and that this complex nature of work requires a different definition of knowledge (and

consequentially learning) compared to the neo-Newtonian approach. Learning partnerships are to be fostered with a focus on working complementarily, strengthening learning capabilities, capturing and exchanging phronesis and accumulatively building a better understanding of the complex terrain of lifelong learning. As illustrated in chapters 5 and 7 this requires a new framing towards partnerships - one of mutuality – which requires reflexivity of individuals to address the assumptions they may have about the other. As Zeelen (2015) suggests: “we will have to leave our institutional comfort zones to work on new partnerships to influence national, European and other international agendas” (p.18).

The other element about organisational learning in education NGOs that could be contested is that this implies that agency (through learning) can unlock transformative change. Yet, as the various accounts of practitioners have illustrated, bigger forces and structures are influencing their work, and the continuous advocacy efforts of others display structural inequalities in our social systems such as racism and gender inequality. Should not these bigger structural problems be solved first? Should not the regulators and funders create an environment in which critical learning is encouraged first? This might be a matter of the chicken and the egg: do paradigms change first or do organisations and practitioners work towards an alternative future. Within the relational perspective on practice, the answer is both happen simultaneously. Chambers (2010) for example, centres paradigms around agency: “So paradigm as redefined has to be living and enacted. People are central since it they who give energy and life to make paradigms work” (p. 42). A requirement, however, is that people need to 1] know the current situation is problematic and 2] be able to imagine alternative futures (Finger & Asún, 2001). It is not always possible for grassroots initiatives alone to achieve transformative change in wider fields – what is required is a bot-top-down strategy whereby those in positions of power participate (Rampedi, 2003; Zeelen, 2015). As I mentioned before, those in power positions have the responsibility to scrutinise the realities and their own role in reproducing or transforming the field. But this does not mean that others should wait for further instruction from ‘the top’. Rather, reflexivity as demonstrated in chapters 6 and 7 has the ability to expand one’s power and extend power to others. Since the web of power dynamics is multi-directional there is always an act of empowerment one can facilitate.

What could be researched further is whether alternative assumption grounds (alternative to neoliberal focus on competition and materialism) such as African or Eastern wisdoms can act as a catalyst for such bottom-up paradigmatic change (Pedler & Hsu, 2019). In line with Finger and Asun's (2001) model, this could help people envision alternative futures. This research has been able to show what power organisational learning could have and how this over time could lead to the transformation of fields, but in our communicative space we did not explicitly talk about meta-paradigms affecting the day-to-day work of education NGOs. For example, there is a need for further research into racism and neo-colonialism using an intersectional lens in the lifelong learning for development sector. This is a real threat to ensuring meaningful lifelong learning opportunities for all (Majumdar, 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001, 2009; Odora Hoppers & Sandgren, 2014).

8.2.3 From small and fleeting to sustainable and big change

In this thesis, I made an argument to widen the definition of productive learning beyond the way Argyris' defined it. It is not just about achieving realised value, it could also be immediate value, potential value or reframing value (Wenger et al., 2011). Moreover, we have seen that 'fleeting' spaces or enclaves can be powerful in changing the relationships, meanings and rules of the game, but does this reframing of productive learning make us less ambitious? If we aim at adaptivity and finding the best fit, are we not too focused on short-term and surface-level alignment? This might indeed happen if we evaluate our learning at the level of espoused theories. Learners and community actors may espouse that a programme is great and fulfils their needs. However, learning and skill development – leave alone systemic change – takes time, and results may only surface after some time possibly when the NGO is no longer 'around' in the community. Therefore, the concept of formative and summative evaluation remains relevant. Such evaluation should look at rapid indicators of social change – such as power relations, access to resources, meaning-giving processes, as well as a long-term change in structural inequalities, etcetera. Evaluation should dig into the theories-in-use and keep a critical eye on self-sealing processes and undiscussable issues. This thesis has illustrated how this might happen both in the community and within an NGO. The layers-of-depth and -width could thus further be expanded by layers of duration – allowing for a time lag in change as well as the undoing of change.

8.2.4 Does double-loop learning equal critical learning?

In this thesis, we explored the utility of double-loop learning to overcome some of the challenges in the lifelong learning for development field in Uganda. In chapter 7, I presented a contextualised definition and learning models for the context of education NGOs. Does this mean that double-loop learning is always equal to critical organisational learning? Would single-loop learning then be an uncritical form of organisational learning? Before closing this thesis, I would like to present a little more nuance to this. If we view double-loop learning as a process that unearths theories-in-use (layers-of-depth) and connections between agency and structure (layers-of-width) then yes it would sound like a critical organisational learning process. However, we have also seen that cognitive insights do not always translate into action and/or durable results. In chapter 7, we have seen that single-loop learning can also lead to satisfactory results; sometimes it is the gaming of the system that helps new actors find ways into a new region of a field (migration) which could be an equally critical outcome of learning. The status quo does not change, but the individual's action scripts do, potentially helping them access new places of power – from which at a later point they could facilitate change. Moreover, there are many other forms of critical organisational learning and reflexivity beyond double-loop learning. For example, unlearning, critical action learning, knowledge democracy, decolonizing knowledge or human-centred design. One of the limitations of this research is that we biased our tool kit to the more conventional double-loop learning methodology of Argyris. Though this was valuable, more structural power dynamics could have potentially been unearthed by adopting a wider methodological lens towards facilitating critical organisational learning.

8.2.5 Muddling through versus generalising knowledge

In chapter 3, I presented a layered, emergent and phronetic approach to PAR. I argued that the practical knowledge normative practitioners require is value- and power-laden, and contextual. The PAR seemingly produced directly applicable knowledge for the partner NGO and co-researchers. It also seemed that a great deal of the knowledge generated was embodied already in the day-to-day actions of these practitioners. So how helpful is it to do a PAR as a PhD research if muddling through is the suggested strategy in complex situations? Indeed, we must be careful not to generalise the strategies practitioners and co-researchers in this study used to overcome dilemmas, nor would I suggest other education NGOs would implement the same organisational learning mechanisms. However, what is transferable is the knowledge about how

reflection can be facilitated to unearth the theories-in-use or which barriers and dynamics occur when implementing lifelong learning in heterogeneous communities. This research showed that as much as muddling through is something that comes naturally to educators from their experiential knowledge, it is a process that can be facilitated, deepened and widened to influence not just the actions of a single professional, but an organisation or community of practice. Though this knowledge can be generated through other research designs as well, Participatory Action Research has proven to be an effective approach, especially because it invites (co-)researchers to learn by doing – to probe, sense and act – in line with the alternative epistemologies of action. As a second- and third-person action researcher, I was able to make connections between actors in different regions of the field and to facilitate reflection through layers-of-depth and layers-of-width. Chambers (2010) underlines the need for a multifaceted toolkit to generate practical knowledge to solve complex problems. It would be very interesting to explore other research methods to investigate how NGOs (and other development actors) could form learning networks or communities of practice. For example, network analysis and modelling could be an interesting approach to study how relationships change over time and who takes which action or who contributes which knowledge. Whichever research design scholars choose to support the cause of lifelong learning for development – it is important to ensure the epistemological underpinnings of their study recognise the professional work of educators for what it is: mixed typography of swampy lowlands and hard high grounds. Though macro level trends can and should be analysed, the day-to-day operations of lifelong learning programming require practical and contextual knowledge that requires a genuinely collaborative process with practitioners (Van der Linden, 2016).

8.2.6 Recapitulation

In conclusion, organisational learning in education NGOs is not the only lens we should use as we seek to facilitate more meaningful learning opportunities for all, but it is surely a meaningful lens. The concept of organisational learning repositions organisations and their members as knowers and could operationalise epistemologies of practice that could help solve complex problems. Organisational learning could be a catalyst to other efforts aimed at improving lifelong learning for development. However, this process should not naively be viewed as automatically benevolent. This research has illustrated that it is not always the interests of the learners that drive day-to-day decision making in NGOs. The accountability paradigm still has its tentacles on the practice of NGOs, even though new

adaptive management approaches are trending and critique is rising about problematic power imbalances between the global North and South, black and white, men and women, able-bodied and disabled (Odora Hoppers, 2001). To push organisational learning as a critical learning process, double-loop learning is a practice to aspire for. However, this should not only be focused on technical solutions or debunking routines that hinder effective performance. These spaces for reflection should also include the value lens – is what we are doing right? And according to whom? This research has presented a variety of methods that could facilitate this reflection in organisations, within communities and between various actors. It has also presented lenses to detect the changes as a result of learning that goes beyond realised value, but also considers relationships and meaning.

8.3 Adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs

The title of this work can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the title refers to the action research element that sought to contribute to the organisational learning practice in participating NGOs. On the other hand, value refers to the normative and power-sensitive lenses used for organisational learning, and expanding the classic concept of double-loop learning to be a normative practice. I hope that this thesis has fulfilled both meanings of value. Practical knowledge was generated that helped practitioners (and other actors involved) take steps towards what they defined as right, often informed by their interpretation of the learners' needs and preferences. To a large extent this practical knowledge was already present amongst practitioners, though we transformed this by discovering which theories-in-use, defensive routines and self-sealing processes hinder a breakthrough in the status quo. Furthermore, the relationship between the wider dynamics in the field and one's action scripts was a useful angle to enlarge the realm of perceived possibilities. Theoretically, we re-contextualised double-loop learning according to the requirements the current field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda presents to education NGOs. For example, the learning norms should incorporate tolerance for value ambiguity, and power should be extended to participants of learning interventions as well as community actors and stakeholders from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. May this work encourage the tempered as well as the radical radicals and open spaces for critical discussion in and between organisations and actors.

