



A Learning Orientation to Improve Impact Across Sectors

Learning plays a critical role in fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and impactful outcomes. This article presents a comprehensive learning framework that includes four interrelated steps: developing skills within communities to build expertise, facilitating dialogue across communities to share and expand knowledge, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue to challenge and refine best practices, and engaging in reflexive learning for personal and community transformation. Emphasizing the importance of situational learning, dialogic learning, and reflexive practice, the article argues for an intentional and iterative engagement with learning to improve the quality of relationships, spur innovation, and increase impact across sectors.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION//COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE//DIALOGIC LEARNING//REFLEXIVE PRACTICE//EXPANSIVE LEARNING



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*'If you want truly to understand something,
try to change it.'*

— KURT LEWIN

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant global focus on improving the impact of research on practice. Governments, research funders, academics, practitioners, and businesses all perceive value in enabling a stronger connection between research and practice to improve practical outcomes (Haley, 2021). For this to work effectively, there is a need to understand not only the roles that academics and practitioners play, but also how we can adapt to create new practices and processes. While more traditional translational work can be

effective in some application areas, such as adapting a technology to a new context, in cases where there is a need for behavioral, attitudinal or cultural change, the flow of knowledge should be multi-directional rather than one-way. This is true for many business and organizational developments, but also in areas such as health, social change, sustainability, and tackling global issues such as poverty and inequality (Beech and Anseel, 2020).

We suggest that learning is at the heart of our ability as academics and practitioners to adapt our skills and knowledge for collaborative solution-making (Beech et al., 2022). This learning is not straightforward, and in this article we set out four steps for learning to improve impact, each requiring a specific mode of learning. The steps are: honing skills in the home context; gaining insight through dialogue with practice; inter- and multidisciplinary dialogue to shape action; reflexive learning to improve our basis for future collaborative practice. The concomitant learning relates to situational learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) within a community of practice and then between communities of practice, expansive learning to develop novel solutions (Engeström, 2018) and reflexive learning (Hibbert, 2021, 2024).

Academics and practitioners can be regarded as cultural communities with their own language, norms of behavior, identities, and fundamental assumptions (often unconscious or unrecognized) about the world and their place in it. Although there are potential compatibilities between the two communities, there is a significant possibility of misunderstanding and miscommunication (Boix-Mansilla, Lamount and Sato, 2016). For example, one empirical study found that practitioners can view academics as slow, too narrowly focused, and lacking relevance to the world of practice. Correspondingly, academics can view practitioners as lacking rigor and method, jumping to action without sufficient analysis or learning from history (Beech et al., 2010). However, it is possible to find ways to communicate and collaborate. While there are a number of factors that influence whether academics and practitioners can work together effectively, such as agreeing

on a shared purpose, having access to appropriate resources, and ensuring that the collaboration is sufficiently aligned with the priorities of each organization (Huxham and Vangen, 2004), without the ability to learn at the pace and in the manner appropriate to the step being taken, the creation of impactful work is more likely to stumble than fly (cf. Sharma, Greco, Grewatsch and Bansal, 2022).

HONING SKILLS IN THE HOME CONTEXT

In practice, problems and their solutions tend not to conform to the boundaries of academic disciplines, and the understanding of how solutions might be delivered is often practical. Therefore, impactful work typically requires collaboration across disciplinary and functional boundaries. For such collaboration to be effective, a first step is for each collaborating party to have something to contribute that is valued by the others, and this typically includes some degree of practical or academic expertise.

Situational learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) describes how expertise is developed. Although expertise involves abstract knowledge, it is also a social form of learning. An expert is not just someone who knows things; they are recognized as such by peers in their field and embody expertise not only in what they know, but in how they think, analyze, and practice. For practitioners in any field of expertise, there are accepted, often tacit, ways of being that lead to produce new knowledge that is cutting-edge rather than mundane.

Academic fields are not only realms of theory, but also realms of practice in which communities develop their methods (skills), methodologies, agreed-upon knowledge, and agreed-upon areas of debate (Beech, 2022). By becoming part of the academic community in a field, an academic adopts values and attitudes, is socialized into understanding what is most important and becomes more skilled in methods and knowledge development over time. The same is true in practice, as communities refine best practices, build shared (vicarious) experience

through exemplary cases, and internalize behaviors that are infused with the accumulated knowledge of the community. In this way, people move through the stages of apprentice, skilled, and then advanced practitioner (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The fact that mistakes can be made and that the supportive social environment of the community keeps people motivated and encourages perseverance are crucial and liberating aspects of community-based learning. A limiting factor, however, is that while there may be debate and disagreement in communities, the emphasis is on agreement and learning the way things are done. This means that assimilative and “linear” learning are easily supported, but disruptive learning may require exposure to a different way of thinking or practicing (Engeström, 2001). When collaborating with experts from other fields, the insights and knowledge gained from disruptive learning enable colleagues to contribute something of value. Example 1 shows someone entering academia from a practice background. As an established professional but a newcomer to the academic world, their account highlights transitions into and through roles and ways of being in the context of the home community.

GAINING INSIGHT THROUGH DIALOGUE BETWEEN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Adopting a worldview and a particular focus of interest that does not easily translate to other academic fields or to practice is a natural consequence of immersing oneself in a community of practice. The effort to stay current and at the forefront of a community of practice makes it difficult to engage with others who have different worldviews, interests, theories, and methods. The learning challenge in this step is to open one’s focus to perceive potential contributions that could be made to others’ goals, and to open one’s expertise as a resource for the other community. Contributing to a collaborative outcome will rarely be a simple “packaging and delivery” of existing knowledge. It will entail using our methods to adapt what we know to offer insights that are defined as useful by the receiver rather than the sender.

Dialogic learning is a form of interaction that leads to new insights or perspectives. Dialogue can play several roles in learning, including a coaching mode in which the coach elicits from the learner insights that the learner is capable of making but



EXAMPLE 1

HONING SKILLS IN THE HOME CONTEXT

“... I’d worked in industry for some years, then did a PhD.... but when I took my first academic post, I found the strangest things helpful in learning how to “be” in a room as an academic: it was a very different way of being. When I went to conferences and seminars, I found that listening hard to

the questions that colleagues asked was perhaps more informative than listening to the presentation – the questions were where I could see the years of experience, the critical thinking, the different onto-epistemological positions of people, and how that affected what they brought to a theoretical or practical problem.

I was struck by the kindness, openness, and generosity of some senior colleagues in particular – how they used their curiosity to work with

presenters to understand what the presenter was trying to do, where they were coming from, and why they thought what they were doing mattered. There was nothing to prove, just things to discover and a theory to unpick. I found this way of being very different from the world I’d come from. I began to realize what a deep onto-epistemological and theoretical understanding of an area actually looked like – how it was embodied and performed as ‘professorial’

- and that the only way you could really achieve this was by sharing your knowledge with people who were genuinely curious about what you were trying to understand. All these years later, I’m now co-director of a research center at my university which helps Early Career Researchers from around the world, using the particular theories I use, to hone their skills in theorizing and exploring the world by putting these theories to work in very practical settings.”

has not yet made. This involves learner-centric questioning that allows the learner to see new applications or implications of their knowledge, thereby expanding knowledge (cf. Mason, 2012). In some contexts, debate can be a form of dialogic learning in which two opposing points of view are tested against each other. The hallmark of dialogic learning is that it is not a process in which one actor or community imposes its view on the other and the other resists. Rather, it is a process in which engagement leads to a new way of understanding, which could be a synthesis of the two views or something entirely new (Hibbert, Siedlok, and Beech, 2016). In collaborative settings, dialogue is often based on an intense interest in what the other has to contribute. This can lead to a new shared output, or it can lead to a change in the internal perspective of the “receiving” community as a result of what it absorbs from the other. This is not necessarily a traditional exchange between communities, but can be a process in which one offers its expertise to the other as a resource, which may then be interpreted and used in a partial and “inaccurate” way. From a conventional perspective, this might be regarded as problematic learning, but from a dialogic perspective it can be highly productive, as

one community adapts and absorbs useful elements of the other’s expertise, even if they do not conform to the mode of knowledge that led to the expertise being developed in the first place. This recalls Galison’s (1997) conceptualization of trading zones, in which, in his case, theorists, experimentalists, and instrument makers engaged in scientific research do not exchange expertise, reach a shared perspective, or engage in synthetic learning, but operate in a zone in which the value of what each contributes is determined by the other. In Galison’s approach, there is no universally agreed-upon value for the given “knowledge objects,” only an agreement on their exchangeability. One challenge in this type of learning is that experts must operate with a low ego and must not expect others to give the knowledge they are using the respect that would be due in their home community. In a sense, it less about exchanging and more about giving.

The insights gained from this learning phase can refine the framing and definition of the opportunity or problem to be explored, the methods to be used, and the intellectual and practical resources to be drawn upon in taking action. In Example 2, an academic reflects on the experience of working with senior policy makers. There is a learning transition



EXAMPLE 2

GAINING INSIGHT THROUGH DIALOGUE BETWEEN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

“... When I started working with civil servants and policymakers, it wasn’t long before I realized, no.... I was ‘told’ actually that I had to change the language I used. I was so used to talking to my own community [of scholars] and using all the

peculiar language associated with economic sociology.... And then suddenly, I was talking to this group in the Cabinet Office, and one of them just said, “I haven’t got the foggiest idea what you’re talking about” and this person was a real expert in communications technologies, and it hit me.... if he started talking about all his kit, like I’d been talking about its socio-economic transformation, then there is no way I’d understand

him either. That was a transformative moment for me. Being an expert in this policy context meant using minimal technical language. ...I now have a rule of three – I allow myself to use no more than three theoretical terms and then, only if I have time to introduce them, give a one-line explanation (which always feels compromised), and a practical example. ... I went to talk to the Ministry of Defence once – they gave me one slide to summarise 15 years work,

and they insisted that half the slide had a photo of me on it... so there are very different communications norms. Having the right questions at hand, to help you understand and reveal those norms can be helpful. These questions – how are you understanding this problem? How are you understanding x or y? What brought you to this understanding of x? – can help you open a dialogue, which always changes what you end up saying, and thinking.”

in which they recognize that their expertise can be helpful in principle, but in order to connect with others, the language needs to change. However, it is not just a matter of translation; the academic also learns a different way of being and develops their own rules of behavior that enable a productive learning dialogue.

INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE TO SHAPE ACTION AND NUANCE IDENTITY

The next phase of learning may involve what Engeström (2001) calls expansive learning. Expansive learning is not cumulative, linear learning. Rather, it is learning that influences both what people do and who they are (Illeris, 2014). It does this by questioning not only what knowledge is used, but also the rules that underpin the development of knowledge in a community.

Engeström examines a case within health and social care communities where collaboration efforts faltered. The dialogic process they engaged in was aimed at improving the flow of patients/service users. However, the dialogue encountered periods of discord, defensiveness, and the imposition of one view over another, leading to disruption. The breakthrough came when one participant recognized that a protocol inherent to their profession was hindering the other community by altering the identities of patients/service users as they transitioned from health care to social care, profoundly affecting the professional self-identities of both communities. For healthcare professionals, success was defined in terms of patient care, while for social workers it centered on empowering service users. These different perspectives led to different degrees of agency being attributed to patients/service users, with protocols assigning patients and practitioners to different roles, with different risks, statuses, resources, and targets. Failure to manage risks and meet performance targets had significant implications for professionals' self-esteem and their respective fields. As a result, the change extended beyond behavioral adjustments

and affected professional conduct. This kind of consequential learning is non-linear because it involves a combination of shifts in knowledge, skills, social dynamics, and identity. It is a form of dialogue in which self-transformation, though potentially nuanced, is achievable through engagement with others.

This phase of learning produces insights, but more importantly, it can reorient communities, often in subtle but meaningful ways that shape future practices and approaches to impactful work. It does not require experts in one field to become experts in another, but rather an orientation to discern the specificities of different disciplines/practices as they relate to the subject/event to be changed, along with an awareness of cultural and procedural differences – and the ability to bridge those differences as needed (Siedlok, Hibbert and Sillince, 2015). In Example 3, an academic reflects on learning from and with a different academic community. Transitional learning involved embracing the freedom to deviate from the norms of their home community, a form of risk-taking that can feel very uncomfortable at first. Over time, however, this process led to the development of a new methodology that facilitated new and further research and practice.



EXAMPLE 3

INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE TO SHAPE ACTION AND POTENTIALLY NUANCE IDENTITY

"...I always describe myself as an interdisciplinary researcher. It's important to me, because I've had to invest significant effort into understanding not just what other disciplines do, but how they work and how interdisciplinary researchers work – which is different

again. I now do some things that seem a bit weird or 'unscientific' when I work with my own scholarly community – because I've had to adapt to work with, and sometimes around, others. It was only after I'd started working with plant scientists that I started to call some of the work I was doing with SMEs 'experiments'.... We developed this idea to create a demonstrator, and so we could 'experiment' with the business model as well as the light, heat and planting."

REFLEXIVE LEARNING TO IMPROVE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Reflexive practice, and the resulting learning, overlaps with the process of dialogue discussed earlier, yet delves deeper by enabling – and indeed inevitably leading to – changes in our future ways of being and doing. Reflexive practice focuses on how we engage with, understand, and are changed by experience, and how we can become more aware and present in the midst of this process – rather than letting experience shape us almost unconsciously (Hibbert, Coupland & Macintosh, 2010). Because of this focus on awareness, reflexive practice supports transformational learning (Illeris, 2014). It has both an inward and an outward focus, and both inform how we learn and change: the inward focus involves *looking at the self* to see how we are shaped in our decisions and actions by our contexts and situations, and the outward focus centers on *looking from the self* to see how we might change our ways of being and

doing through connections with others (Hibbert, 2021). In this way, reflexive learning shapes social scientists and their work with others in the same process (MacIntosh et al., 2017). In other words, reflexive learning through research supports awareness, critique, and shifts in positionality for both social scientists and practitioners as they interact in the field (Hibbert et al., 2014). This in turn leads to novel ways of being that are richer in understanding, and more suitable for our interconnected existence with others (Cunliffe, 2004). These adaptive benefits stemming from reflexive learning can support better collaborative practices in the future, as illustrated by Example 4.

The potential for future collaborative practice lies in reflexive learning processes that engage our “whole selves” as we seek to “engage with otherness” and “enact connectedness” (Hibbert et al., 2014) – that is, to understand and build bridges. Engaging the whole person – including paying attention to our bodies, emotions, thoughts, and relationships, and how they influence one another



EXAMPLE 4

REFLEXIVE LEARNING TO IMPROVE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

“I had been appointed to run a troublesome transformation project. It was troublesome because there had been a failed attempt already, which had seen the last project leader moved out of their management post. If we didn’t succeed this time around, it would cost us an important accreditation that we needed to hold on to. It was also an important

project for staff because it would have a real (and positive) impact on their working conditions. The stakes were high and some people felt that I was not up to the job – and a few wrote an email, that they signed collectively, to express this opinion to my boss. I had the backing of my boss, but I was still concerned about how to respond to the people who had no confidence in me and the process. I got an organization-wide, regular communication strategy up and running, so that hopefully I could get my message out to all staff.

We needed the confidence of the community. But I also realized – with a sinking feeling – that I would need to bring some of the people who wrote to the boss into the tent, by including them in some of the working groups that were delivering parts of the project. I did that. I can’t pretend that it was always easy in the group meetings. However, I think the people who were negative got to realize over time that I was not as hopeless as they thought, and that I really cared about the project and the staff. More importantly

for me, I realized that the negative folk had a lot of useful insights about what went wrong with the previous attempt to deliver the project, and what they knew could help make a difference this time around. They cared about everyone in the organization too and became an important part of the process that made the project an eventual success. If I had followed my immediate instinct to keep them out of the process, it would have been a huge mistake...”

(Hibbert, 2021) – in this way will provide the potential foundation for collaborative routes to impact in the future. It can also support impact in two more direct ways.

First, impact can be embodied and enabled by social scientists through this reflexive research, practice, and learning as they collaborate and connect with others in academic contexts and research communities in more thoughtful and adaptive ways.

Second, future-oriented collaborative practice can include attention to the ways in which reflexive learning enables collaborative leadership (Hibbert, 2024) of the kind that helps us bridge disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields, manage everyday conflicts, and resolve confusion on the way to a shared understanding of the new possibilities that lie ahead.

CONCLUSION

The role of learning has been less recognized as it has grown along with increasingly sophisticated methods. Learning is not a single process, but occurs in a variety of ways and can enable and sustain personal, interpersonal, intra- and intercommunity change.

In some fields such change may be encapsulated in, for example, new technologies or products, but in the social sciences and in organizational and management practices, learning underpins changes in people, the quality of their relationships and the changes in outcomes they are able to achieve as a result.

We have suggested four steps of learning to improve impact. These are: skills honing within communities, which prepares people as experts capable of working together; dialogue between communities, which enables learning about the other and the relationship; interdisciplinary dialogues, in which “best practice” of communities can be changed; reflexive learning, which can be transformational for the self and for impactful outcomes. We are not suggesting

that the steps will necessarily take place in this order or be entirely discrete. Learning in practice is often a somewhat irregular series of processes. We are suggesting, however, that we should be aware of these learning steps and use them when we encounter difficulties in engaged research projects and when we review projects and seek a new starting point for co-creating the next piece of impactful work.

MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- Developing expertise through community engagement:** the initial phase of honing skills within a community underscores the importance of developing expertise through practical and social learning. For managers, fostering an environment that encourages learning from peers and through direct experience can enhance the collective expertise of their teams.

Managers should encourage open communication and dialogue within and across teams to leverage diverse perspectives for innovative solutions.
- Reflexive practice for transformational learning:** reflexive learning involves a deep, introspective look at how experiences shape decisions and actions. By fostering a culture of reflection, managers can guide teams toward more mindful and informed approaches to their work, leading to transformational changes in practices and outcomes.

Managers should encourage open communication and dialogue within and across teams to leverage diverse perspectives for innovative solutions.
- Interdisciplinary collaboration:** effective collaboration across different areas of expertise requires recognizing and valuing the contributions of each party. Managers can facilitate impactful work by encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and ensuring that diverse expertise is integrated into problem-solving and project development.

Managers should encourage open communication and dialogue within and across teams to leverage diverse perspectives for innovative solutions.
- Dialogic learning for insight generation:** engaging in dialogue between different communities of practice allows for the exchange of perspectives and the generation of new insights.

Managers should encourage open communication and dialogue within and across teams to leverage diverse perspectives for innovative solutions.
- Fostering an environment for expansive learning:** creating opportunities for expansive learning, where team members are encouraged to question and move beyond traditional knowledge boundaries, can lead to significant shifts in both individual identities and collective practices. Managers should support the experimental and risk-taking behaviors that drive such learning.

Managers should encourage open communication and dialogue within and across teams to leverage diverse perspectives for innovative solutions.



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