Lessons for *change*

If relationships matter, how can they be improved?

Learning about relationships in development

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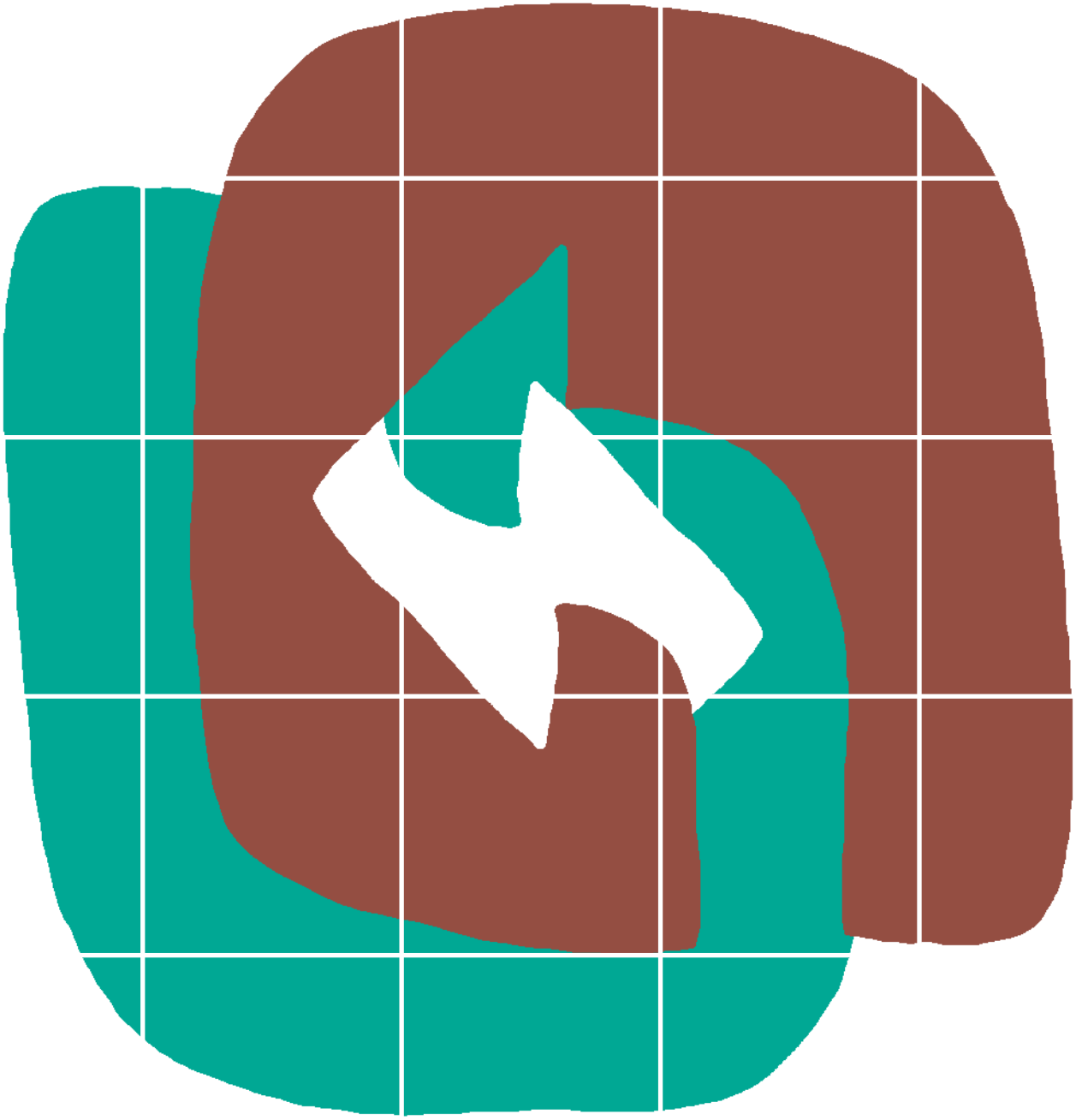

Background

Organisational learning, in which leaders and managers give priority to learning as integral to practice, is increasingly recognized as critical to improved performance. ActionAid, DFID and Sida collaborated with the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies to explore understandings of learning and to document innovative approaches.

Learning with ActionAid centred on institutionalising a radical organization-wide approach to accountability, learning and planning. The new system prioritises accountability to poor people and partners and so revolutionizes the way the organization does business. The paper by David and Mancini documents the struggle to institutionalize the new system and the extraordinary changes that it has engendered.

The learning process with the UK Department of International Development (DFID) looked at how to reflect on and improve relationships as a central aspect of aid delivery. The paper by Eyben provides a justification for the role of relationships in DFID's practice as an bilateral development organization. In their paper, Pasteur and Scott-Villiers examine the importance of learning about relationships and offer a set of questions for the organization wishing to learn. Larbi Jones describes three DFID projects and the methodologies applied at various stages to reflect on and learn about partnerships and influencing in Brazil.

Staff of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) worked to explore understandings and practices of participation across the agency. They experimented with participatory learning groups, which took different forms in Stockholm and Nairobi. In their paper, Cornwall, Pratt, and Scott-Villiers detail the learning methodology and point out pitfalls and possibilities. Cornwall and Pratt, in a separate paper, explore the realities of implementing participation in a complex bilateral development organisation.

Much of the impetus for IDS to engage in these collaborations resulted from a workshop held at IDS in May 2001 on "Power, Procedures and Relationships" which highlighted learning as a way to achieve consistency between personal behaviour, institutional norms and the new development agenda (IDS Policy Briefing, Issue 15). A group of IDS staff have pursued this subject, including Robert Chambers, Andrea Cornwall, Rosalind Eyben, Kath Pasteur, Garett Pratt and Patta Scott-Villiers. IDS also organised a workshop in February 2003 to facilitate reflection and sharing between those involved

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This paper offers a new perspective on how a development agency can approach learning so that its staff and departments can consistently look for and make improvements to their performance: by attending to their inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships. We will not be examining knowledge management systems, nor looking at training, both important elements of a learning system - but rather looking at a form of learning that is particularly appropriate to improving the quality of the relationships that are vital to the delivery of development assistance.

- **Section one** justifies a focus on learning about relationships to improve development effectiveness, and briefly outlines some literature on knowledge and organisational learning which gives insight into this domain.
- **Section two** describes experiences of learning in practice, and highlights key lessons.
- **Section three** draws attention to some implications of learning about relationships for organisational change.

Citation:

Pasteur, K & Scott-Villiers, P (2004)
If relationships matter, how can they be improved?
Learning about relationships in development
Lessons for Change in Policy & Organisations, No. 9.
Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the other two members of the Organisational Learning Partnership, Jane Clark and Mary Hobley, for their work throughout this project and their support and advice in producing this paper. Thanks to those with whom we worked in country; in Uganda to Liz Drake, Alwyn Chilver, Bill Farmer, Mike Harrison, Cornelius Kazoora, Florence Sekabanja and Ijuka-Kabumba; and in Brazil to Gail Marzetti and Emily Larbi Jones. The contributions, through interviews and discussions, of many other people in DFID London and these country offices are gratefully appreciated, but they are too many to mention by name. Thanks to Mark Jackson who provided timely help in getting us back on track. Many of our IDS colleagues deserve recognition for their invaluable ideas, input, comments and encouragement at various stages. Particular thanks must go to Robert Chambers and Rosalind Eyben.
The UK Department for International Development provided funding for this work, and gave financial support (alongside Sida and SDC) to the Organisational Learning cluster within the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Introduction

It is now widely accepted, particularly in the private sector, that organisational learning improves performance. Development agencies also need to learn in order to ensure they achieve poverty impacts and continue to work at the cutting edge of development practice. This paper explores the observation that much learning is done in the person-to-person and organisation-to-organisation relationships that make up the daily course of development work. The association of relationships and learning is two-way: not only is learning needed to maintain a successful development relationship, but relationships are needed for learning about development, about its context, processes and impact. We argue that aid needs good internal and external relationships not only to deliver its resources, but also to maintain its ability to learn, because it is in the flow of relations between people that organisations hold their greatest asset – their knowledge and capacity to change. Relationships need to be managed well or opportunities will be lost.

In the first part of the paper we propose that development needs investment not only of intellectual and organisational intelligence, but also of emotional intelligence. This latter form of intelligence needs a different approach to learning; in particular the context for learning needs to be given specific attention.

We situate our argument in current thinking about knowledge and learning for organisational effectiveness. In the second part of the paper, we draw on cases studies of reflecting on relationships, including on own experiences as the Organisational Learning Partnership, to elucidate how the practice can be incorporated effectively into the normal work of a development agency and we propose:

- Opportunities: to make the space for learning about relationships in development
- Process and Content: of learning processes in action
- Implications: for an organisational environment that supports individuals and teams to consolidate and learn from relationships, and creates opportunities for people to think and act in new ways

There are messages in this paper for individuals, about personal practice, about how to be reflexive and about how to facilitate team-based learning and sharing.

There are messages for management about the need for changes in organisational culture, incentives, performance appraisal, skills demanded/promoted that can lead to the creation of reflective and informed practice.

Section 1: Learning about relationships in development

Background: The Organisational Learning Partnership

The Organisational Learning Partnership (OLP) is a small group formed in 2001 to explore how the UK Department for International Development (DFID) might improve its capacity to learn and so improve its processes. We came together through a common desire to demonstrate, in action, new ways of building understanding and making change that would prove beneficial at different levels of the organisation.

The Partnership co-operated with DFID staff and associates in UK, Brazil and Uganda between 2001 and 2003. Our team consisted of four people, (the two authors, Kath Pasteur and Patta Scott-Villiers from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Jane Clark, then head of DFID's Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office, and Mary Hobley, an independent consultant and long-time associate of DFID). We worked together intermittently over two years to set up, support and appraise a number of reflection processes with DFID staff. In doing this we were part of a wider initiative based at IDS to look at learning and change within international development organisations (see other papers in this series about learning in Sida and ActionAid). We aimed to assist staff to engage with the development and implementation of new policies by helping them to develop more fitting learning strategies. We worked in country offices and in the UK to explore challenges and experiment with new ways of working. In this paper the members of the Learning Partnership offer a perspective on learning based on our two years of cooperation together and with many members of DFID.

Our work started as a quest to learn about ways of learning and sharing knowledge more profitably for greater effectiveness. We noted the increasing investment in knowledge management in DFID and questioned how it was coping with the elements of culture, politics and power that permeate all levels of this bilateral development organisation with global coverage and compound accountabilities. We asked "how can lessons be shared effectively within and between country offices, between the regions and DFID HQ, and between DFID and the wide range of organisations with which it works? Can DFID become a better learning organisation and what are the benefits for DFID?"

Understanding the relevance of learning to DFID

Initial consultations with staff in the autumn of 2001 revealed strong concerns about the effectiveness of new aid instruments such as budget support, sector-wide approaches and poverty reduction strategy papers. How were the new instruments going to work in practice, what were the pitfalls and how could they be avoided? People talked about how difficult it was to be sure that the interventions were pro-poor, noting their new isolation from "the field", and from poor people themselves. They also pointed out the difficulties and opportunities of operating at high levels of national policy and the associated requirements for new administrative procedures, which were sometimes slow in coming. They stressed that achieving "ownership" by national governments and maintaining effective partnerships with co-operating partners were necessary and challenging elements of the new policy directions. All these issues, they said, required

learning and change right across the organisation. The Organisational Learning Partnership proposed that rigorous and systematic reflection around the challenges posed by new aid policies and instruments would highlight actions to address them.

We should really try to learn from the way we are dealing with other donors and the way we interact with government. It's the new way of working, coming with a single voice to national and local government. (DFID advisor in London).

It emerged that many of the issues arising in the application of DFID's new aid instruments were to do with the inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships needed to deliver them. Since less of the instrument was in the form of technical intervention, and more of it in the form of budget support and policy dialogue than had previously been the case, the importance of the nature of the conversation between donor and recipient had increased. However, the quality of donor-recipient, or donor-donor relationships did not automatically improve with the increase in their importance. Learning about effective relationship building was not emphasised in official procedures, and therefore the understanding that was being generated by DFID staff across the world was not being recognised, formalised or shared. The extensive knowledge management systems of the organisation (which include a document databases, a sophisticated intranet, and numerous seminars, workshops, networks and research and documentation exercises) were not proving effective in generating learning and debate on the subject of how to build and manage effective relationships. The Organisational Learning Partnership aimed to explore and facilitate learning in practice (rather than theory) in DFID. Learning within and about relationships emerged as our key area of engagement.

The Nature of Development Relationships

International co-operation is, at its foundation, based on relationships. Whether a bi-lateral agency is delivering projects, negotiating sector-wide approaches, influencing policy, or supporting national budgets; its resources are delivered through working with organisations and individuals in recipient countries, in multilateral arenas and through a maze of interactions within the organisation itself. A quick scan of daily activities in a bilateral aid agency would reveal hundreds of meetings between people, in which their relationship is the environment that creates their ideas, knowledge, agreements and action. These interactions are the stock-in-trade of aid.

Eyben (2004) argues that relationships are the *primary* channel through which donor-dispersed financial and human resources achieve their ultimate aim: working with partners to design and implement policies and actions that lead to pro-poor outcomes. The understanding of and ability to operate well within these relationships is generated through having a robust understanding of the context in which the work is taking place. She suggests that donors have put too much emphasis on aid instruments (financial and human resource packages) and not enough on other key aspects of aid process and practice. We similarly note that while the study of aid instruments is comprehensive, and analysis of the policy/political context is increasingly valued (Unsworth, 2003), investing in and understanding relationships remains under-developed.

Relationships in development delivery are nothing new, but expectations of them are changing, and becoming more demanding. They should be *partnerships*; they should permit *participation* of a wide range of voices; they should build *ownership* of goals by various parties; they should be *transparent* and *accountable*. These words describe key elements of what is currently assumed to be good development practice, but they are ambiguous and hard to translate into reality. Indeed, recent inquiries by Robert Chambers reveal that these words have been perceived by DFID staff as being highly hypocritical (Hobley, 2003). They are open to interpretation and deeply political. Lacking clarity, these concepts often fail to deliver on their implicit promises. Close observation reveals that many frustrations in projects and programmes relate not to technical aspects of aid delivery, but to the

problems of walking the talk of partnership and mutual accountability (see box).

The reality of day-to-day development practice involves staff of bilateral agencies in relations that are often unique to the sector:

- They work as individuals, teams and departmental representatives dealing with ambiguous development concepts in relationships which often involve considerable power dynamics.

- They deal with a particular set of dynamics: political interests, cultural difference, resource imbalances, gift-obligation dynamics and polar accountabilities.

- They represent a moral perspective as representatives of rich countries wanting to share their wealth with poorer ones, to prevent suffering and vulnerability and to promote wellbeing.

- They represent an economic and political perspective, for example promoting global growth and stability.

- They operate within geographically extended, bureaucratic organisations and deal with other organisations with similarly complex profiles.

- Their approaches have to be context- and sector-specific.

- They are continuously analysing and making choices about best approaches, and spending considerable time marketing those choices within the organisation and beyond.

- They move from one country to another and from one sector or development "idea" to another with regularity.

Interpretations of these moral, economic, political and bureaucratic expediencies are constantly changing and contested. Beliefs, either explicit or hidden, play a strong role in the relationships that development officials engage in every day. All these factors imbue their working relationships with uncertainty and put a premium on an ability to build, maintain and assess relationships well.

Relationship Complexity in Uganda

The convoluted nature and powerful influence of relationships in development co-operation were illustrated in work that the Organisational Learning Partnership observed in Uganda. A study was carried out in 2001 of a public sector reform process in the Uganda forest sector (Kazoora et al, 2002). It revealed a complex scenario that included both good and poor lines of communication, strong power dynamics and contradictory accountabilities. A new forest law, which included the formation of a new forest authority, was meeting blockages in parliament and in parts of the Ugandan bureaucratic system.

An expatriate consultancy company, working with the Ugandan Government and funded by DFID, was providing a package of technical and facilitation inputs which, it was hoped, would be effective and appealing enough to overcome any local resistances from those who lost power or resources in the process. Each player had their own expectations and demands and these at times came into conflict with one another. The situation was further complicated by multi-directional accountabilities. DFID was accounting to the British taxpayer while the Ugandan government was accounting to its own citizens and the consultants were dually accountable to both the Ugandan and British governments.

Internal political struggles within the government of Uganda around the reform were written off by some as corruption and incompetence. There was some mis-communication, resulting primarily from the intersection of a 'push culture' and a 'yes culture' –the donor drive to get things done (the push) and the Ugandan tendency to say 'yes' and then resist (Kazoora op. cit.). Failure to deal explicitly with communication issues would have threatened the smooth progress of the reform. As we will detail later, a learning exercise brought these issues to the surface and helped in their resolution.

A Brief Detour into Learning Theory and Knowledge Management

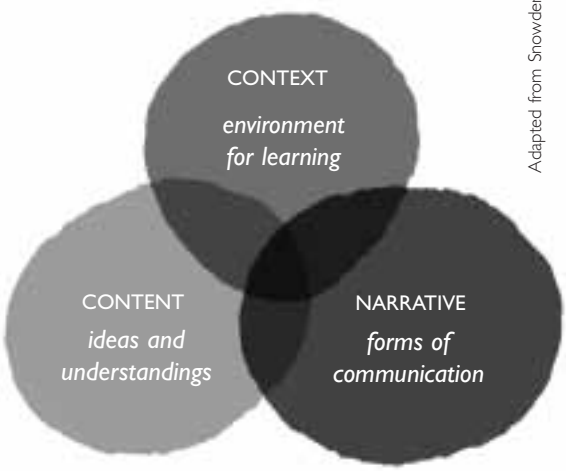
The desire to capture and develop mechanisms for productive learning is congruent with a recent rise in recognition, in both the private and public sectors, that ability to learn is a key to performance. Understanding what leads to effective performance has become a holy grail for many organisations (Collison & Parcell, 2001, Kluge et al, 2001). Evidence and theory support the contention that it is not only information sharing, but interactive learning in multiple domains that leads to better performance (see Pasteur, this series for a fuller review of organisational learning theory).

Research in the private sector has gone some way towards testing the idea that organisational learning leads to organisational effectiveness through the application of better knowledge and understanding (Denton, 1998). However it is not necessarily correct to assume that all learning is beneficial: while it may assist performance in the short term, it may actually inhibit innovation and adaptation, as people use learning to reinforce certain actions that work well; and to ignore others that may become useful as the situation changes (Holmqvist, 2003). Another negative aspect of learning may be just the opposite: learning can produce constant and destabilising change. One staff member noted, for example, that DFID suffers from "innovation-itis". Many others confirmed that the culture rewards new ideas, which is not always beneficial, because it means continuously moving the goal posts for partners, or moving to new partners altogether, losing both learning and goodwill in the process. How then to develop the best capacities inside an organisation for consolidating good practice and good relationships without hindering innovation and change?

The answer may lie in changing the view on what learning means within an organisation, moving beyond the acquisition of knowledge, to include the relationships in which knowledge is generated. This suggests an expanded view of knowledge management – not as it has traditionally been perceived, as merely a means of getting pieces of knowledge to flow efficiently around the organisation, but in its most holistic sense as a means of continuously renewing:

- **content** – what do staff members need and want to learn about? What sorts of things do they take into account when learning?
- **narrative** – how is it being learned, applied and shared and who with?
- **context** – what is the environment for learning and how is it affecting what is being learned? (Snowden, 2002).

Three aspects of learning



Adapted from Snowden (2002)

Snowden (op. cit.) describes three ages of knowledge management. During the first age, before 1995, knowledge was perceived as coming in packages that needed only to be channelled to managers. The second age came when dissatisfaction with results led to enthusiasm for Nonaka and Takeuchi's model of tacit and explicit knowledge[1]. Keeping with the idea that knowledge is a thing to be transmitted, the job of the knowledge manager was now to render tacit knowledge explicit through a process of extraction and general socialisation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

The 'third age of knowledge management' embraces the idea of learning. Learning is more than the acquisition of information and knowledge: it implies the creation of new understanding and insight through more holistic reflection, dialogue and analysis (see Pasteur 2004 for review of literature in this area).

[1] Simply put, Nonaka and Takeuchi's model argued that much of the valuable knowledge and competence in an organisation is locked up in the heads of its workers – the "how you do things" kind of knowledge. From this insight came a range of approaches for extracting and sharing "tacit knowledge" by making it explicit.

Stacey (2001) suggests that ***'knowledge is the act of conversing, and learning occurs when ways of talking and therefore patterns of relationship, change. …The knowledge assets of an organisation, then, lie in the pattern of relationships between its members and are destroyed when those relational patterns are destroyed'*** (p.98). Peter Reason suggests that we should consider not so much *knowledge*, as *knowing* as an active and useful process (2003: 113).

Thus, in terms of learning context, it is 'more about providing space and time for new meaning to emerge…' than it is about moving bits of information to accessible places (Snowden 2002:10). In this interpretation, knowledge is viewed, paradoxically, as both a thing and a flow, a constantly emerging phenomenon (Stacey, 2001), requiring the manager to concentrate not only on knowledge content, but also on the part played by relationships. communication and context in its constant generation and iteration. If one accepts the argument that learning in general needs suitable relationships, then it is also important to learn about relationships and their improvement.

Applying the above framework to learning about relationships means identifying:

- **content**: what happens in relationships? How does one start them, invest in them and end them well?

- **context**: what are the environmental dynamics affecting relationships and what are the most desirable environmental qualities?

- **narrative**: what style of communication works well to both improve the relationship itself and to learn within the relationship about development issues?

How to Learn about Relationships

Improving performance of relationships necessitates a cool look at the appropriateness and skilfulness of relational practice. It is one thing to recognise the benefits of reflecting on relationships, but it is another to translate recognition into practical tools and processes. There are numerous books advising on the subject (Collison and Parcell 2001, Goleman 2001, Fisher et al 2001), but the practice is far from simple. Not only does normal practice tend towards a bias for action, but it is often uncomfortable and risky to look at oneself and ones relationships critically.

It would be ideal if there were recognised opportunities for people to reflect consistently and honestly in their daily practice, both alone and in relationships with others. However the constant demands of the working week leave little or no time for deliberate reflection and learning. Procedural opportunities for learning (such as mid-term reviews, evaluations, etc.) are occasional and they often focus more on the achievement of tangible outputs and predicted outcomes than on the process factors such as maintenance of good relationships and their outcomes.

Narrative and Communication

In learning about relationships, people are dealing with issues that are intangible and sometimes painful to communicate. Sharing and collaboration within relationships is necessarily voluntary (honest sharing will be impossible to force) and as such trust and transparency may be critical precursors. Experiences and concepts pertaining to relationships will often be shared through stories and anecdote, and will thus involve high levels of ambiguity as well as emotion. Relationships involve interpretations of power and feelings, as well as rational negotiation. They occur in informal and irregular spaces as well as the more formal. They grow and change over time, and their dynamics and products are not easily captured. They may be chaotic, uncharted and iterative. Much of the iteration in a relationship is based on conversation, assumption and the power relations between the parties.

To address this, the first aim must be reflexivity on the part of the individual. This is based on developing self awareness and a sound understanding of the power, position and biases that one holds in relation to others and is a key aspect of learning in relationships (Marshall 2001, Scott-Villiers 2004). Understanding relationships, and making the most of them, also requires sensitivity to perceptions and behaviours of individuals with whom one interacts. This is based on self-awareness, empathy and social skills. These competences have been termed by Goleman (2001) as "emotional intelligence". A broad definition of emotional intelligence is a person's ability to:

- be sensitive to others;

- recognise their own emotional response; and

- use this awareness effectively in interaction (Goleman, op.cit.).

Added to this is what we would call "relational intelligence", that is, the ability to be aware of the nuances of individual and organisational relationships, including their political and contextual aspects, and to take appropriate action which serves the interests of the parties in the relationship and the aims of the relationship itself.

Context

Practical means of improving learning in relationships can include, for example, accountability exercises between partners which increase transparency (see David and Mancini 2004) and, workshops that are made more effective by surfacing power relationships, staff assessments that take account of what has been learned in working partnerships and "action-learning" processes that can create a new space in which to develop individual capacities to understand and act in relationships (see Cornwall et al 2004).

Opportunities for learning need to be both formal and informal and the influence of environment needs to be taken into account. Finding new ways of interacting might mean introducing new structures, for example fostering communities of practice in which peers learn with and from one another in a collegial and innovative atmosphere. Introducing new systems of reflection and peer review, as was done in ActionAid, can greatly enhance creativity (David and Mancini, op cit). Giving staff time to produce case studies of their own work can permit people to tell their stories and abstract lessons. Simply moving a learning exercise to a neutral place and avoiding line management relationships in a learning group can make a difference.

Content

What sorts of things should be taken into consideration in learning about relationships, i.e. what should be the content, as opposed to context, of the learning? Systems thinkers (Senge 1990, Checkland and Scholes 1990, Flood 1999) encourage recognition of the complex nature of organisations, their external contexts and their internal politics and relationships (see Pasteur, this series for more detail). They highlight the importance of reflecting on the inter-relationships and feedback loops in the complex and dynamic environments. This kind of thinking indicates extending one's scope to explore the interactions of various dynamic systems, including institutional, organisational and inter-organisational structures, interests, technologies, behaviours, cultures, procedures, events and patterns of change (see pasteur 2004, and see also Pasteur ibid). Towards the end of this paper we provide a useful check-list of issues to explore when learning about relationships based on our experience and using ideas from "systems-thinking".

Summary

This section has illustrated the key role of relationships in aid delivery, but also their complexity. Chambers et al (2001) highlight the importance of learning about relationships as a way of closing the gap between relational goals (such as ownership, accountability and partnership) and practice, if pro-poor ends are to be achieved effectively. Yet comparatively little emphasis has been given to thinking about what limits or promotes learning within and about relationships in development organisations. There has been relatively little attention to ensuring procedures and an organisational culture that would foster capacities to select and engage with appropriate partners, to nurture the initiation, sustenance and ending of relationships and to evaluate their success against poverty and inequality goals. New thinking about organisations and about learning in organisations has highlighted the role of relationships in learning, leading to a new view on how learning should be fostered, in which not only content, but also context and narrative are taken into account. In the next section we will concentrate on what we, the Organisational Learning Partnership, learned in practice.

Section 2: Lessons for learning about relationships

Learning in and about relationships does not come easily as it often requires a level of self-exposure. The kinds of spaces or opportunities to do so therefore need particular characteristics to be effective. They may require trust to be built, which implies prior agreement on how information shared will be used and paying attention to power relations that may affect what is said, by whom, and how. Learning opportunities also benefit from being well organised and having a clear procedure for dealing with issues arising. Finally, they need to lead to action.

This section will describe ways in which such spaces and opportunities for effective learning processes were created and the results that followed. The Organisational Learning Partnership was involved in a number of case studies of learning in action. Examples we document from Brazil and Uganda, as well as the experience of our own partnership, point to ways in which approaches to relationship learning can be developed. Here we introduce them in brief and then go on to identify lessons for learning, using more detail from the case studies to illustrate key points in later sections.

Uganda

In Uganda the Organisational Learning Partnership observed and worked alongside the team of consultants carrying out the retrospective learning study in the forest sector referred to earlier. The DFID Uganda livelihoods advisor commissioned the study in autumn 2001, to be carried out by a team of local consultants (Kazoora et al, 2002).

The learning initiative was conceived of and implemented more than mid way through the project process. The motivation was to 'analyse and document the experience of a process of policy and institutional change and draw lessons that will be of value to similar processes', through a 'retrospective learning study'. A second aim was to establish a continuing 'real-time learning' process that would 'enhance information flows, and understanding' (DFID Uganda, 2001).

Project staff recognised the need for ongoing learning to reflect on and resolve issues as they arose, but did not have tools or methods for doing this. Initiatives to promote learning were being encouraged within DFID at that time, but how to do it in practice was not clearly understood, and offices were seeking to experiment and develop good practice to share with the rest of the organisation. The forest sector team elected to use an inquiry process which involved interviewing a wide range of stakeholders and participants to ascertain their differing views on decisions that had been taken in the reform. It was proposed that the lessons would be shared in a report and a workshop.

The complex picture of a clash of relationships, politics, history and culture which emerged through the inquiry process was not the typical area of project monitoring. The learning outcomes had been expected to be a set of apolitical and generalised lessons on public sector reform, and a set of recommendations for easy-to-implement learning mechanisms for the future. As discussed in the next section, the lessons turned out to be highly sensitive, context specific and often painful because most of them were to do with relationships between people. Recommendations for future learning depended on improving relationships and addressing power dynamics. This learning

intervention contributed to keeping the reform on an even keel and demonstrated an approach to learning in the unstable domain of inter-action, but it was by no means easy or apolitical.

The Organisational Learning Partnership

The OLP had been invited to provide support to the forest sector learning study, but we also wanted to broaden our engagement more widely within the DFID Uganda office. Building relationships in which the national government has primary ownership was the key issue emerging from the forest sector work and this also appeared central to the approach of the DFID office as it moved towards budget support and policy influencing. We put together a proposal describing an action research process and how it could help staff to reflect and act on this key challenge. However, demand from those who had initially expressed an interest never consolidated.

Uganda was our first substantial engagement as the Organisational Learning Partnership (OLP). We also investigated other links with DFID offices and facilitated a number of short learning events. We explored a range of options, including collaborations in Bangladesh and elsewhere, and learned a lot about DFID, but things were progressing slowly, and the small flames which we were lighting were not yet building up into any substantial fires. Relationships with potential partners were not developing as we had hoped. In regular meetings of the Partnership we all felt frustrated, and this impacted on internal team relationships. Eventually, around nine months into the project, our morale dipped. So we paused, took a step back, and realised that we needed to do what we had been suggesting everyone else should do: reflect on our relationships and adjust.

We tested out some learning tools and methods, including organising a peer assist (see box opposite), presenting our work to date to a group involved in facilitating learning in another development organisation, and finally sharing our experiences with a process improvement facilitator with wide experience from private, NGO and government sectors.

The last of these processes was key in that it helped us to ask a broader set of questions and really question the assumptions upon which we had based our work, as well as to analyse the motivations of others to enter into a relationship with us.

It is axiomatic that one learns most from one's own experience. Of all the cases of reflection, our own gave us the greatest insight, because it was not just an observation or a theory, it was visceral. It allows us to say now with conviction that internal and external relationships become more productive if reflected upon, that more productive relationships deliver the outputs you want and generate clarity of direction for further activities.

We took these lessons on board and invested more time and effort in developing our next relationship, which was with DFID Brazil, and in gauging where our project could best add value to their work.

Brazil

DFID Brazil puts considerable emphasis on partnerships as a means of influencing pro-poor change in Brazil and the Latin American region as a whole – they consider partnerships to be central to their way of working. As such, they, like other DFID offices working in middle-income countries, have much to offer the rest of DFID in terms of innovations in partnership management. In Brazil we worked closely with office staff to reflect on how to work more effectively in partnerships and how to develop means for continually monitoring this type of relationship.

In early 2003, three reflective case studies were carried out by Emily Larbi Jones, an Associate Professional Officer[2], to understand the key elements of partner relationships, and test a methodology for monitoring them. It was decided that she would facilitate reflective case studies with three sets of partners. Successful aspects of the approach could later be broadened and institutionalised into traditional monitoring and evaluation procedures. One related to a tri-lateral partnership, in which DFID facilitated exchange between the governments of Brazil and Russia of

Peer assist:

Collison and Parcell (2001) describe a process known as "peer assist" adopted by staff in BP as an early stage in any work activity. Before embarking on a new undertaking, knowledgeable colleagues from outside the project team are brought together to share their lessons from experience and offer relevant insights and ideas in relation to the new proposal. This ensures that existing knowledge within (and where appropriate beyond) the organisation is draw upon, and that a wide range of perspectives can inform the work. Someone may know where similar work has been carried out already. It also helps to establish a support network that may last into the future.

[2] An Associate Professional Officer is a short-term contract staff member similar to a paid intern An Associate Professional Officer is a short-term contract staff member similar to a paid intern.

experiences with HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. A second looked retrospectively at how DFID developed a relationship with municipal government which led to an increase in their influence at State level. A third reported on how DFID facilitated relations between civil society, state government and an international financial institution.

Larbi Jones and her team worked with each partner to construct a history of their relationship with DFID. The partners identified the highs and lows of their engagements and shared the pressures they faced and the challenges that these posed for the collaborative work. Some went on to make substantial recommendations and suggested means of achieving them (Larbi Jones 2004).

An office 'In-day' was held in the Brazil office to share and analyse lessons from the case studies and other experiences of office staff with respect to partnerships, and to discuss implications for internal working relationships. Finally, a regional workshop was held to consolidate thinking and experiences around the DFID approach to influencing and partnerships more broadly. These exercises not only contributed to improved relations between the participants in Brazil and in DFID generally, but provided the basis for procedural innovations for more consistent and continual learning about and within relationships.

Making Space for Learning

The following section highlights key observations and lessons drawn from the three experiences outlined above, highlighting actions that were taken (or that could or should have been taken) to improve context, facilitate narrative and identify critical content, within each reflection process.

How can development staff make space amongst their routine activities for learning about relationships? Should they look to formal procedures or exploit ad hoc opportunities? Having noted that no existing DFID procedures appeared to exist for detailed reflection on relational issues, we in the OLP initially conceived of using a formal action research methodology as an alternative learning tool in selected DFID offices. We were using this methodology successfully for learning about participation in Sida (Cornwall et al 2004). This would have involved groups coming together regularly to reflect on a topic of common interest and to test out alternative actions to produce change (see box opposite).

Action research, however, requires a significant commitment of time, and this proved too heavy a constraint for busy DFID staff. Furthermore, the idea of experimenting with learning in new and slightly experimental ways did not immediately appeal to those that we were in touch with, and may not have been incorporated easily into typical office routines. This methodology was dropped partly due to their concerns and partly due to our failure to market the idea in an appealing enough way.

So the learning studies used more commonly understood learning strategies: case studies and workshops. We concluded that these could be effective for learning about relationships if we invested effort in improving their quality and appropriateness through careful organisation, taking into account complex dynamics, such as power and trust, and building agreement on outcomes. We also considered ways in which they might be integrated more into existing DFID processes and procedures. The following pages outline the lessons which emerged.

Agreement and expectations

Reflection and learning require honesty and openness. To create an environment in which people feel happy to share and build on often sensitive experiences or opinions, attention needs to be paid to building understanding and agreement around the purpose and process of the reflection, as well as how lessons will be shared or acted upon. In Brazil the DFID livelihoods advisor observed that asking partners directly: what makes a good partnership? What do you think of us? produced superficial and polite answers. Partners were slightly shocked by this direct approach and they were not forthcoming with responses. So Emily Larbi Jones was invited to start a less direct process of inquiry with DFID's partners in Brazil.

The process started with detailed negotiation,

What is action research?

Action research is a methodology which pursues action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. It does this through a cyclic process alternating between action and critical reflection. It is aparticipatory process – working on the principal that change is easier to achieve when those affected by the change are involved.

Collective enquiry takes place through group-based reflection & sharing meetings. These help deepen understanding and generate questions around a central, commonly agreed, theme. Between meetings individuals undertake enquiries or experiment with new ways of working. They then bring their findings and insights to the group next meeting. As the process progresses, methods and interpretation are continually refined in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.

Reason (2001). See also Cornwall et al (2004) and Reason & Bradbury (2001)

both within the DFID office and with the partners involved. The partners wanted to know why it had been suggested that they review partnerships together, and what would be done with the results. They were assured that the point was to learn together and so improve the relationship and DFID's ability to play its part well. It proved important to establish agreement on process and outcomes in order to build trust that permitted partners to share their experiences.

The case study approach was more nuanced than the earlier effort to elicit feedback from partners. Larbi Jones, realising that partners might be resistant to sharing their views directly with senior DFID staff, offered a less threatening environment. She allayed their fears by explaining the purpose and implications of the work, exploring the potential benefits in improving the relationship with DFID and reaching agreement on how the information would be used.

The reviews became an integral part of the relationships themselves, in each case strengthening the next stages of interaction (be it continuation or withdrawal). They allowed a systematic clarification of the learning that had been continuously generated in the management of the relationships themselves.

Trusting the facilitators

The Uganda consultants also employed a method of mediated reflection with stakeholders. This time the facilitation team were entirely external to DFID. They were, however, known and, importantly, well respected particularly by government forestry staff. In many cases the particular interviewer already had a good relationship with the stakeholder being interviewed, and thus a high degree of trust existed from the start. Much attention was paid to assuring participants that their views would be treated with respect and sensitivity. The case study process provided a safe space for stakeholders to express their frustrations about relationships as well as to share other lessons.

Difficulties arose for the team, however, when they wished to disseminate the findings. They had promised to be diplomatic in dealing with the material, and yet the most useful lessons from the process related to this sensitive input. How could they share it without causing offence? In fact, many of the key relational lessons were merely alluded to rather than substantially discussed in the final report. Nevertheless, it would appear that the process itself was effective in that it allowed people to "get things off their chest", and surfaced the key issues sufficiently that they were then addressed.

Creating safe spaces

Both the Uganda and the Brazil processes were facilitated by people who were not directly and continually involved in the partnerships themselves. They did not bring DFID and other partners together to learn and resolve challenges face to face. Rather they extracted the lessons and communicated them to the relevant counterparts in the relationship. This approach has certain advantages of creating a safe space where people can share issues that they could not do face to face with the partners themselves. It is much less confrontational and in cases where relationships are already fraught, is probably the best option. However, the downside is that most of the lessons tend to end up in the heads of the mediators, and as already noted, passing those lessons on is often difficult. A mediated learning strategy should perhaps be followed by further learning where partners come together directly.

Learning face to face, the effect of power

Partners in a relationship coming together directly to explore issues can be successful where all parties are open to learning and sharing, and once agreement and trust has been established. However it is usual in a working relationship for there to be a power dynamic existing between the parties. Gaventa (2003) describes three types of power that operate to inhibit or enhance people's ability to speak their minds: visible, invisible and hidden. Visible power might be manifest in a meeting between a president in a large office and a representative of a poor people's movement unused to opulent surroundings. Invisible power involves the unseen context in which a relationship is taking place, for example the history of relations

between one organisation and another will affect present relations. Hidden power is that whereby the participants have internalised who has power to do what, whether or not that is true – so a younger person may feel they have less valuable opinions than an older one in a given culture.

A facilitator can be used to keep an eye on and make positive use of the balance of power, to help maintain focus and to resolve conflict which might arise. One example from our work illustrates how, when people come together directly to reflect, power factors can present a significant barrier to effective communication and openness.

The "office in-day", held in order to share the case study experiences of DFID Brazil's partnerships with state, multilateral and non-governmental agencies, also looked at internal office interactions, as they affected the organisation's ability to work in partnership. The workshop was attended by staff from all levels, including administrators, project staff, advisors and the acting head of office. There were inevitable power dynamics at play and it was clear that these had to be broken down to allow for frank and open discussions. Several exercises were incorporated into the agenda to try to foster such an environment, and some degree of communication of concerns was possible through indirect expression, such as writing issues on cards. However the time permitted in a single day workshop was not sufficient to build the necessary degree of trust. Without such trust, much potential for reflection was lost. A focus on commitment to further actions to address internal relationship issues post workshop was intended to ensure that spaces for future progress remain open and indeed these were taken up in subsequent actions by the management team.

Getting the right people at the right time

A three day regional workshop on 'partnership and influencing' was held as part of the learning work. In this workshop levels of trust between participants were reasonably high. They were bound by a strong common interest in illustrating to DFID more widely the value of lessons from experiences of effective partnerships and influencing in the Latin American region. There was also a sense of urgency to the task, as budgets for DFID's work in middle-income countries were under increasing pressure from competing requirements in poorer countries. It was important to show that pro-poor work in the middle-income countries could also generate invaluable learning for often more difficult partnership situations in poorer countries. This provided a strong incentive to reflect together.

An effective space

In this case, providing a physical and mental space was important, away from the usual demands of the office, but also without creating excessive workshop demands which do not leave time for networking and relaxation. Several conscious preparatory steps were taken to ensure appropriate expectations, a positive environment for working and reflecting, and an effective process for sharing views but also developing practical action outcomes. This meant that the relations amongst participants and between participants and facilitators were also more fruitful for learning (see box opposite). The key ingredients to success are outlined in the box overleaf.

Some feedback from DFID Brazil workshop participants:

"Our department's workshops are usually awful - the power dynamic between London and the region is played out."

"The flexibility of the agenda was a bit strange at the start - but then I realised it was a tool…"

"Just the location has been very positive, and the structure was very good. I have never done a workshop like this before".

Ingredients for success

• The facilitators and hosts together spent time clarifying the context of the workshop and participants. This included understanding of the needs of the Brazil office, and doing a stakeholder analysis of participant and organisational interests. These were considered in developing the agenda.

• A clear purpose and broad but flexible agenda were circulated before the event, so that participants knew what to expect and what was expected of them

• External resource people gave intellectual input to challenge participants, highlight useful questions and stimulate more fruitful conceptual discussions. There were also opportunities for sharing personal stories.

• Time was dedicated to developing actionable strategies. These drew on both the intellectual discussion and detailed contextual analysis including a stakeholder mapping of potential allies.

• Facilitators were external to DFID, thus they did not have an internal agenda to push. They were also able to limit unhelpful norms of behaviour, e.g. domination of discussions by the more confident'powerful', participants not building on previous contributions, poor time management, or jumping to unrealistic actions. · The workshop was held in pleasant and un-distracting surroundings, incorporating options for daytime relaxation and networking, within a realistic time schedule

• A workshop report and summary were produced in a consultative and timely manner, and there has been follow up on the event to encourage participants to carry through proposed actions.

The workshop feedback demonstrates the contribution of a well-invested relationship[3] to its outcomes: many participants note that it felt unusually productive. After the event there was an unusual amount of follow-up action, despite the intangible subject matter, and a number of participants used frameworks and ideas from the workshop in their subsequent missions and projects. There were plenty of areas that could have worked better at the event, but this case demonstrates a way in which a traditional form of reflection can be made more effective by increasing the quality of its management and the skills of its delivery (including preparation and follow-up), creating an environment in which productive relationships could be developed.

Skilful conversation

In this paper we are arguing for the creation of an environment for learning about relationships which allows it to be thorough, and for a form of facilitation that generates skilful and aware conversation. What sorts of questions should be asked? What kind of framework can help guide skilful and aware conversation and decision-making? The more players involved, the more numerous the unspoken assumptions will be and the more complex their interaction.

In each of our cases above, the players asked questions to look below the surface of their own actions and those of their interlocutors. They encouraged participants to question their own underlying assumptions and to try to understand the context in which the relationships they were examining were developing.

'This workshop is good. I didn't come with any real expectations. My thinking had been on fairly conventional lines: who do we influence; how; when; and so on. I had not really questioned the assumptions on which that was based.
This has been good to examine relationships, and the power.'
(DFID Brazil workshop participant)

The DFID Brazil inquiry used an approach looking through various "systemic windows" (Flood, 1999). Using a detailed timeline, partners plotted processes and events in the history of their partnership with DFID, identifying the effect each event had on those that followed it. They were asked about interpretation and emotion, to describe how they felt about the relationship at each of these moments and the effect of these perceptions

[3] A workshop is a short lived relationship or partnership between facilitators, hosts and participants.

on actions and outcomes. They considered the effects of different stakeholders' power and knowledge on validating particular groups or ideas. They identified the structures and procedures of communication, contracting and accountability that both caused and were the result of the other two systemic areas. Finally, they looked at the whole for patterns and turning points and drew out insights and proposed activities.

Emotional Intelligence

All the case study inquiries dealt with the questions of perceptions and emotions. In the Uganda case the central guiding questions was "did the mind of DFID and its stakeholder (the interviewee) meet on content, rationale, methodology, stakeholders, information and timing as the reform went along? Where minds did not meet, was it noticed and what were the actions and impacts?" These questions led to expression of not only objective views of whether minds met, but also emotional perspectives. It became very clear that how upset or happy people were at a given interaction had strong and usually unrecognised effects on the relationship and on the reform itself.

Participants and facilitators would have needed emotional intelligence to learn, because the inquiry raised the emotional temperature. Particularly if a project or programme is not apparently going well, reflecting on its relationships may be embarrassing as opposed to encouraging, and the exercise may shut down communication rather than stimulating it. For a participant to reflect on the politics in the relations between oneself, members of government and others, means recognising one's own position and role. One's sense of identity and worth may come under threat; anger and defensiveness can be typical responses. This requires a skilled hand at preparing for and containing the reflection and involves a degree of emotional intelligence. The more emotional intelligence is present in the participants, the less will be the need for a skilled mediator.

Our own OLP experience raised the challenges of emotions and how they can constrain learning. We were under pressure to show results on a project which we had all fought for, so our meetings were quite highly charged. It was challenging, even in our small team, to be open with one another and reflect honestly, admitting that things were not going well. The process improvement facilitator who we brought in for a number of sessions helped us maintain focus in reflections on our goals and processes. In investigating our own process, we learned an enormous amount about the kinds of relationship issues faced by our colleagues in different DFID offices. Investment in reflection, as opposed to more productive action, felt countercultural. These reflection meetings took time and had financial implications, but they were very useful to later activities and final output.

Emotional intelligence is needed in order to be able to define appropriate questions and interpret what is going on in relationships; at the same time it is needed to be able to handle the results of relationship inquiries. The irony is that emotional intelligence itself can really only be learnt in action. Cherniss (2001) refers to this dilemma, pointing out that a more turbulent, dynamic and competitive environment makes emotional intelligence both more important, but also more difficult to nurture.

'***The development of emotional intelligence needs sustained reflection and learning… Only the most emotionally intelligent have the insight and determination to do so***.' (ibid:11)

Individual reflexivity and self knowledge

At the DFID Brazil "In-day", participants proposed that partnerships in a development context were not dissimilar to relationships in their personal lives and should share many of the same investment characteristics. These characteristics included:

- understanding the others' needs (listening, perceiving, finding out);
- clarifying which goals and values are shared;
- building respect, trust and confidence;
- being adaptable to the dynamics of the relationship;
- making space for each to express discontent safely.

The importance of knowing oneself was identified as a critical factor. The group

recognised that for relationships to be successful requires considerable effort to maintain them and attention to starting and ending them well (Larbi Jones, 2004). A successful relationship involves self-challenge on both sides, well-balanced levels of information sharing and continuous adjustments to the way the relationship is managed. Self knowledge comes from looking at oneself and is the basis for individual reflexivity. It can be developed in a number of ways: by having a discipline of self-review, by having time to think and reflect alone, by reading widely, by using forms of expression such as writing to explore one's own opinions and culture. (Marshall, 2001; Scott-Villiers 2004).

Institutional Reflexivity.

Learning in relationships requires a look at one's own organisation, its policies and agendas and the way it looks from outside as well as seeing interlocutors and interactions with new eyes. In the OLP we quickly realised that the first element of a successful relationship, and therefore an environment in which learning can be established, is the building of common interest between the parties. We agreed this was best approached by doing stakeholder analysis of both "them" and "us": who would gain or lose from this interaction, how would they perceive each other and what should be done to ensure that the activity has the best chance of success? This suggests some primary questions as a guide:

Awareness of self: as an individual and representing an organisation:

- Do we understand our own organisation – its culture and politics?
- Sensitivity to unequal power: who are we listening to and why?
- Own motivations, are we clear about our agenda? Why have we chosen this partner?
- Who are we accountable to?
- What is our role?

Awareness of others

- Do we understand cultural, political and historical context within which the relationship is operating?
- Their perspectives on an issue, their perceptions of 'us'
- Do they share our agenda? Why (not)? Why have they chosen this relationship with us?
- What other pressures are they facing? Who are they accountable to?
- What is their role?

Making space for relational learning means providing opportunities to see ones organisation and ones partners and interlocutors more clearly and to interact with them not only to deliver development but to learn together. This entails arriving at clear agreements about learning, using facilitators wisely, dealing with issues of power and providing appropriate physical and procedural space that generates both individual and institutional reflexivity.

Ideas for a Process of Reflecting on Relationships

As a result of the experiences, including those detailed above, we drew together the key lessons and developed a set of questions which we intend as a useful guide to other carrying out similar learning and reflection processes. The lessons and questions are not intended to serve as a linear "how to" guide, but rather as a composite of useful issues to consider or explore.

1 Delimiting the Reflection: *What are the relationships to be investigated? What is the desired output? Who are the actors in this exercise, what are their interests and who has what rights and responsibilities?* Establishing the shared purpose and parameters of the inquiry, identifying how the reflection will link to action and establishing clear rules of operation are the initial steps. The Brazil partnerships illustrate how this can be done through careful negotiation at the early stages of an inquiry.

2. Power: *What are the relationships between those taking part in the reflection? What are their accountabilities outside of the reflection? What are their perceptions of the power dynamics at play?* While relationships are central to aid practice in general, they are also central to the practice of reflection. These questions allow insight into biases and barriers to honesty and clarity and

heighten the level of creativity. Once an individual or a group of people can recognise and deal with relational forces themselves, rather than relying on the skills of a facilitator to create a levelling field, the capacity for creative and clear reflection is enormously increased.

The Organisational Learning Partnership did not recognise its own internal power variations and the different expectations acting on each member of our team until quite far into our process. In retrospect we would have avoided some confusion if we had clarified these matters earlier, a step that we were careful to take in our early relations with the Brazil team.

3. Mapping the Terrain: ***What are the key events and ideas in the relationships? Who are the players, what are their interests, interpretations, powers and interactions? When and where do things happen? What patterns are showing up?*** Answering these questions brings to the table what is already known or believed and begins to illustrate the complexity and interconnections of the themes under investigation. In the Uganda case, a small team interviewed stakeholders whose impressions combined to present a previously unrecognised picture of who was unhappy or happy with the reform and why. In the OLP we constructed a history of our activities to reveal repeated patterns from which we could learn.
A stakeholder analysis followed, giving a preliminary sketch of the players and their interrelations, laying a foundation for targeted action and helping to clarify why some of our actions had previously failed to achieve their goals. The Brazil timeline also mapped the terrain and gave participants a visible structure for interrogating the history of their partnership efforts.

4. Gathering Inputs: ***What are other innovators thinking? What new frameworks have been developed? What examples are there from other places?*** It is quite common to invite outsiders to share their thinking and experience, including research. The aim is to provide new concepts it in a context where those receiving it have already investigated their own context well enough that it will stimulate insight. In the partnerships workshop, we invited presentations of experiences and frameworks from DFID China and Brazil and a paper based on research in Latin America. These provided more data and new analytical perspectives. In the OLP we sought different perspectives from a range of sources. These alternative views provide opportunities for comparison which can call into question existing paradigms and approaches. Timing, appropriateness, quality and style need to complement the reflection process for inputs to be useful and cost-effective. Powerfully presented views may provide leadership and inspiration, but they may also seem exaggeratedly useful to participants who are desperate for a new solution. The opposite may be true for those who are far along the road to creating their own paradigm, who will not want to waste time on competing ideas.

5. Analysis: ***What meaning can be drawn from mapping the terrain and considering inputs and examples? What are the definitions of key concepts and the assumptions that are implied? What underlying values, beliefs, and powers (cultural, organisational, personal) may be influencing interpretation and actions? What are the relationships and interconnections?*** It is at this point that the reflection process can begin to feel dangerous. This is because underlying assumptions are being challenged and implications for changed approaches and relationships begin to emerge. Having laid out existing knowledge and ideas, this stage starts by standing back and looking for patterns, then digs deeper and asks difficult questions. It is useful to ask 'why?' several times, using for example an iceberg model in which the visible tip of the iceberg are the events and "facts", the area just below the waterline indicates patterns and behaviours that can be observed, and the zone deep below the waterline represents systemic structures that cannot be seen, but can be inferred from analysing the patterns and events above (Horstman, 2004). In Brazil, Larbi Jones used the timelines in a similar manner to work through with partners what was going on at each point in the history of the relationship and to draw out underlying patterns of cause and effect. Such detailed reconstructions of small but significant events can also be very powerful in producing new understandings.

6. Experiential and Emotional Perspectives: *What were your experiences and how did you feel at the time? What is happening here and now? How do you feel? Why do you feel like that? How do I feel? How do you do that? Can you demonstrate/teach it?* There was a moment during the DFID Brazil workshop when people told stories about experiences where they or others had behaved badly or in which emotions had run high. It was a bit shocking, but it resulted in an increased understanding of the forces that affect partnership and influencing. In the Uganda retrospective learning, the emotional impact of people's actions was high, yet it had not been considered proper to discuss it before the interview team explicitly asked. Once these matters had been aired, it was possible to see people's actions as not merely emotive or self-interested, but also as logical and skilful responses to situations in which they were embedded. Resistance to the reform process within Ugandan ministries was understandable once the reasons behind it had emerged.

7. Practical: *What is the new goal or vision that incorporates the insights from this reflection? What are the principles that inform it? What rules would have to change? Who would be involved in making it happen and what would they gain or lose? What roles would they play? How would these be negotiated? What is the first actionable step? Who is going to do it?* Reflection needs to result in action. Actions are often agreed to, but to ensure they are carried out and achieve success, it is useful to do a stakeholder analysis. This will highlight the interests and positions of players who will make or break the subsequent actions. After that, practical steps need to be agreed, not too early, but also not too late. In both long and short reflection processes, groups can be appointed at the start to work in parallel to synthesise the new thinking and recommend actions; interweaving action planning sessions into the flow of events rather than leaving it to the end.

Section 3: Implications for organisational change

The section above used three case studies to illustrate what we learned about relational learning. Where things went well, it was because we, and others, were working to improve existing learning procedures, recognising the effect of perceptions, ensuring good physical and mental space, making clear agreements with participants, ensuring they feel safe, actively following up, bringing in facilitators where necessary and not trying to mediate relationships that were beyond our capacity.

What behaviours, procedures and opportunities could donor organisations introduce that would make reflection on relationships easier and more effective?

A key starting point is with **individual appraisal and incentives**. What kind of actions does a development professional think that he or she gets rewarded for? All too frequently the bottom line is disbursement of funds, and other aspects of the aid delivery process, such as understanding the working context and investing in relationships, are secondary. Staff investment in forging useful relations with government, multilateral, bilateral and civil society actors needs to be given its full due. Furthermore, lessons learned from difficulties, or even failure, need to be made good use of rather than hidden. This implies rewarding honest reflection and sharing, as well as meeting deadlines and achieving outputs.

Team-working and relational skills are amongst the key competences for which development agencies such as DFID recruit. However, once inside the organisation, a strong culture of competition and independence, and a failure to **actively reward** relationship building, may undermine these capacities. Change towards an organisational culture which strongly values relationship skills alongside other necessary competencies may be slow, but it is essential if relationships skills themselves, and processes for reflecting on relationships are to become internalised. Such change may be driven in part by innovations in practice, but also requires leadership and management backing.

Related to the issue of incentives is the important role played by **leadership**. Leaders are crucial in providing guidance and models to staff to get their relationships right, and in ensuring that time invested in learning about them is recognised and rewarded. Experimentation with learning about relationships in country offices – such as the cases documented here – can be stifled if managers do not value such activities. They may need to play a role in defending this type of investment of development funds.

Contradictions of accountability were found to be a major barrier to learning in our case studies. Country office staff are under pressure to prove high levels of efficiency and effectiveness, principally in getting money well spent, which they must report upwards, in order to prove impact of government spending and secure further funding. Although the impact of development assistance is long term, indirect and not easy to measure, the demand is for rapid, attributed and accurate reports of positive results. Whilst the procedures for learning and accountability are often one and the same, under such conditions, their aims are at cross purposes. People should be held accountable, but this should not suppress their

willingness to take intelligent risks, for the good of pro-poor outcomes, nor their ability to admit to challenges, share them and seek solutions. Upward accountability needs to be balanced by **downward accountability**, i.e. we also need to know how we are doing in the eyes of recipients and partners and build systems to respond. We need to build sufficient trust to be able to give and receive honest feedback even where hierarchy influences what people are willing to say (Hobley, 2003).

The **procedures and processes** that make space for learning are a further arena for change. Could existing learning and accountability formats such as output to purpose reviews, evaluations and other forms of appraisal be improved to put more weight on the issue of development relationships? How could opportunities for reflection on relationships become more routine without becoming ineffective? Could hitherto less recognised forms of learning such as communities of practice, action research and action-learning[4] be incorporated into standard office practice? The key to successful institutionalisation of any of these strategies is ensuring that they are adequately funded, well supported, and well executed.

A number of other donors have successfully experimented with new approaches. Sida, for example, tested participatory learning groups (another variant of action research/action learning) where staff explored organisational policies in a series of facilitated meetings interspersed with investigation within the agency and with partners (Cornwall et al 2004). ActionAid abolished some of its unnecessary upward reporting requirements in favour of more flexible downward reporting which encourages reflection on, and transparency in relationships with partners. This has begun to revolutionise the way the agency learns and what it considers important (David and Mancini 2004). Neither of the above processes was simple or swift to translate into accepted practice. Some of the concepts are new, and building both systems and culture takes time. Moving from isolated instances to an organisation-wide imperative in DFID to learn about relationships will also take time.

[4] Action learning is slightly different from action research. It involves a group of peer learners in cycles of reflection and action in which each group member brings their individual questionsown particular issue to the group and the group provides assists with resolution through asking useful questions. The practice is quite widely used for learning in organisations, including at senior levels of the UK government (Pedler and Boutall, 1992).

Conclusion

As we described in the first section of this paper, the content of learning is generated from the context in which it takes place and the narratives that are chosen to communicate it. Each of these areas warrants attention if people in an organisation are truly going to learn about and improve its relationships and performance. The implications of this understanding are profound.

Efforts to improve the quality of interaction of every staff member with one another and with partners and collaborators would have a significant payoff. In the cases we describe, it was through introducing variety and depth that unusual conversations were seeded, differences of perception revealed, knowledge bases interrogated and insight and action stimulated. All the cases were seeking, and found, shifts in the patterns of conversation, i.e. learning happened. The result of attention to narrative and context as well as content will be an increase in the quality of each individual's engagement in the day to day processes that make up the work of the agency.

Observation and experience in the course of this partnership revealed an important lesson: the association between relationships and learning is two-way. Not only is learning needed to maintain a successful relationship, but that it is through effective relationships that each of us learns. New knowledge is actively created only when it is used, and it is used mostly in co-ordination and co-operation with others. Donor organisations, with their enormous mission to fulfil the millennium development goals need to recognise this. Relationships ***are the learning*** of the organisation.

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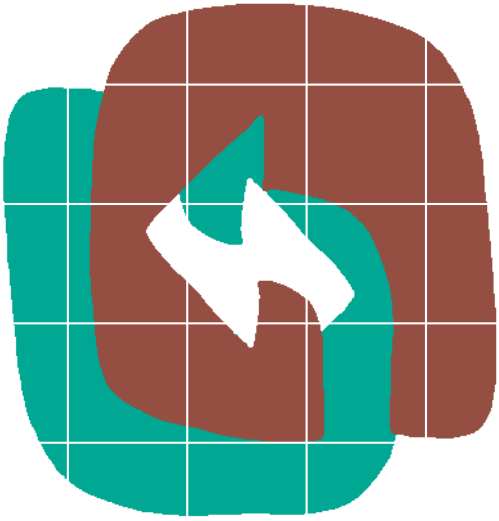

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Kath Pasteur &
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ISBN: 1 85864 823 8

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