



Lessons for change

# Learning for development: **A literature review**

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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 a 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, Pratt, Cornwall 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, Garrett Pratt and Patta Scott-Villiers. IDS also organised a workshop in February 2003 to facilitate reflection and sharing between those involved in each of these initiatives.

## Learning for development: A literature review

Organisational learning is increasingly being viewed as key to improving development performance and impact. However, there remains confusion around what the term means and how it translates into practice. This literature review aims to provide some insight in this area. More specifically, it will:

-  Highlight the importance of learning in the context of the current development environment.
-  Briefly summarise literature on knowledge, learning and the learning organisation from both the corporate and the development sectors.
-  Develop an understanding of learning as reflection and reflexivity.
-  Review a number of key theories which help to inform an improved understanding of learning as reflection and reflexivity.
-  Explore some of the organisational implications for institutionalising this type of learning.

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# Introduction

**“Learning our way into a mysterious future calls for continuously revisiting what might be going on, what we are doing and achieving, and the way we are doing it”**

*(Flood 1999: 90).*

The environment in which development agencies are working is characterised by complexity and uncertainty. The development process itself is non-linear, unpredictable and poorly understood: a complex range of social, economic and political factors are at play over which donor organisations, and even partners, have very little control. Furthermore, decisions are shaped by personal behaviours and organisational norms and constraints. Organisational learning is considered a key discipline for dealing with the “white water” of dynamic, unfamiliar and uncertain contexts. When individuals are in the position of doing things they have little experience with or have never done before, effective learning is a clearly a critical skill (Vaill, 1996).

The Organisational Learning Partnership<sup>1</sup> explored existing opinion and practice of organisational learning in DFID, and tested new ideas and methods. The review and analysis of literature was an evolving process throughout the life of the Partnership. Given the wide range of literature relating to learning in the public, NGO and private sectors, and the huge array of definitions and perspectives, its aim was to develop focused and clear analysis of the type of learning appropriate to the context within which the Partnership was working. This context was characterised by DFID staff aiming to influence country level policy through building effective relationships with partners, demonstrating alternatives through project and advisory work, and trying to build local ownership for these initiatives in order to influence longer term change.

The work of the Organisational Learning Partnership, as well as that of the other strands

of work documented in this series, emerged from concerns that important shifts in development policy and rhetoric were proving challenging to translate into practice. New approaches increasingly stress the importance of working in partnership, building ownership and improving transparency and accountability (Chambers et al. 2001; Hinton and Groves, 2004). Such aims imply having a more nuanced understanding of local policy and institutional contexts (Hinton and Groves 2004; Eyben, 2004).

How can development professionals gain a more nuanced understanding of these highly contextual and often ambiguous environments and relationships in order to make appropriate choices and decisions? More consistent and collaborative processes for holistic and profound reflection and learning are seen as fundamental to improving practice in this respect. This requires new theories, methods and tools for learning, as well as shifts in attitudes and relationships to permit greater openness and honesty. The implications for personal behaviour and institutional norms and procedures must also be taken into account (Chambers et al. 2001).

This paper briefly scans the breadth of literature on organisational learning, before focusing in on a closer interrogation of learning as reflection and reflexivity, leading to the reframing of knowledge and understanding, and improved actions and outcomes. Organisational learning is more than the transfer of knowledge around an organisation: it implies additional analysis and judgement to translate knowledge into new insights and action. Improved strategies for personal and collaborative

<sup>1</sup> The Organisational Learning Partnership (OLP) is a small group which came together to explore how the UK Department for International Development (DFID) might improve its capacity to learn and so improve its processes. The team consisted of four people: one staff member of DFID, two researchers from the Institute of Development Studies and an external consultant. They worked together intermittently over two years to set up and appraise a number of reflection processes with DFID.

reflection which seek to build a more holistic understanding of an issue or problem are necessary in order to achieve the kinds of insight that result in profound learning and change.

The implications of this type of learning for an organisation are thus less to do with knowledge management systems and processes, and more concerned with developing new tools for dialogue and holistic analysis, and attitudes and skills for working collaboratively. There are also implications for the guiding ideas (or paradigms) upon which organisational practice is founded, and the types of organisational culture, structures, incentives and procedures which dominate.

## What do we mean by learning and the learning organisation?

The literature on organisational learning is vast. This body of work, coming principally from the private sector, covers a range of disciplinary perspectives, with many different but often overlapping understandings of the goals, dynamics and problems associated with learning. A summary of these different perspectives on organisational learning is outlined in box 1. As a result Easterby-Smith (1997) argues that “*the creation of a comprehensive theory is an unrealistic aspiration*” (p. 1085).

### Box 1: Diverse perspectives on Organisational Learning

- **Management science:** concerned with gathering and processing information in and about the organisation
- **Sociology and organisation theory:** focus on the broader social systems and organisational structure where learning becomes embedded and which affect organisational learning
- **Strategic perspective:** focuses on competition, and the ways in which learning gives one organisation an advantage over another
- **Production management:** looks at the relationship between learning and organisational productivity and efficiency.
- **Cultural perspective:** describes how organisational and national cultures are a significant cause and effect of organisational learning
- **The learning organisation:** concerned with implementation, and the characteristics of organisations which are able to effectively share and use knowledge to achieve organisational goals

Source: Easterby Smith, 1997

Interest in organisational learning in the context of development has tended to concern itself principally with issues of either monitoring and evaluation, or knowledge management (e.g. Korten, 1984; Marsden Oakley and Pratt, 1994; Davies 1998; King and McGrath, 2002. For a full review see Hovland, 2003). Both are important ways of understanding and practicing organisational learning. They do not, however, fully respond to the deeper concerns and contextual challenges described in the introduction. More recent literature, including new titles in this series (Lessons for Change in Policy and Organisations), a recent issue of Development in Practice (2002) and a volume edited by Groves and Hinton (2004) describe and analyse experiences of innovative learning and reflection methods and practice which greatly advance the thinking and understanding in this field. These will be referred to in more detail later in this review.

This section will briefly explore some of the different understandings of knowledge and learning. Given the wide array of meanings, the purpose of this section is to try to articulate and contextualise an understanding of learning as reflection and reflexivity in practice.

### The nature of knowledge

How does organisational learning differ from other similar concepts such as information management and knowledge sharing? Ackoff (1989) identifies a hierarchy stretching from data, through information and knowledge to the pinnacle of wisdom. The distinction between each of these stages is the degree of cognitive processing of raw data or experience, from mere assimilation through memorising, to transformation into new insight and action.

Data and information principally provide answers to "who", "what", "where", and "when" questions. Application of data and information leads to the building of knowledge, or "know-how". This distinction is similar to Nonaka et al.'s (1996) between explicit and tacit knowledge and their differing means of transmission. Explicit knowledge – like Ackoff's information – is unequivocal and readily observable. As such it is clearly transmittable in formal, systematic language, and therefore can be documented or articulated with relatively ease. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is often based on experience and skills. Such first hand, experiential knowing is naturally personal and often context-specific. It is much less easy to express, and can only really be transferred through socialisation processes, such as jointly performed tasks, face to face discussions, informal meetings, communities of practice etc (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). There has been considerable increase in interest and investment in these forms of information management and knowledge sharing amongst development NGOs and some bi-laterals and multi-laterals in recent years (King and McGrath, 2002; Hovland, 2003).

Ackoff takes his hierarchy two stages further. Firstly, whilst knowledge results in learning which improves efficiency, *systematic*, ongoing learning and adaptation require a further level of understanding: knowing "why". Understanding is achieved through enquiry, analysis and diagnosis. Finally, wisdom is the pinnacle of the hierarchy. It involves a greater element of evaluation and judgement, and is more greatly

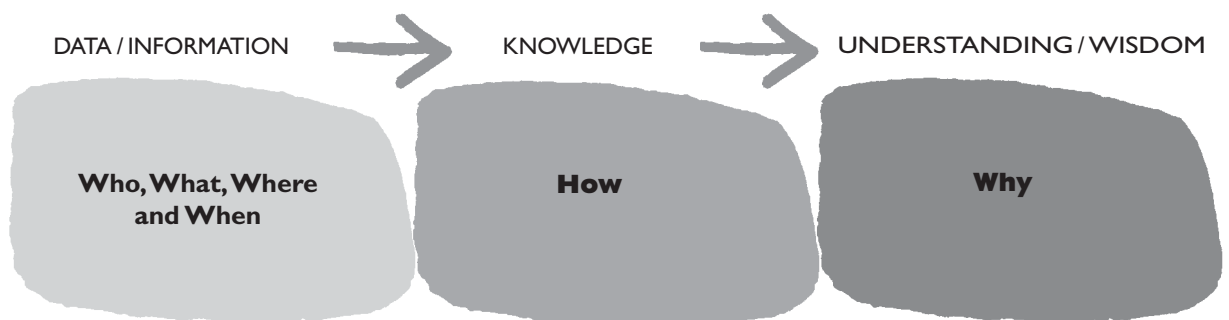
influenced by values, ethics, aesthetics and morality, i.e. it takes into account long range as well as short range consequences of any act (op cit).

Machine based systems can help share data, information and even knowledge. However, understanding and wisdom require higher order mental faculties to be able to analyse, diagnose and make judgements. These can only be achieved through human psychological and social systems, whether individual or interactive level (op cit).

People who have understanding and wisdom can use it to improve effectiveness, rather than merely to increase efficiency, of actions and outcomes (Ackoff, 1989). They can reinterpret and adapt knowledge and thus are able to improvise in different or unforeseen situations and environments. Knowledge is transformed into something that generates more generic insights, and so performance can be improved in a wider range of contexts. Learning is therefore less concerned with capturing and storing knowledge, as with transforming knowledge and experience into improved action.

*"Taking in information is only distantly related to real learning. It would be nonsensical to say, 'I just read a great book about bicycle riding – I've learned that.' Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it"* (Senge 1990: 13)

**Figure 1:**  
**An information, knowledge, learning continuum**



Source: based on Ackoff (1989)



Thus, several authors view learning as something distinct from the mere assimilation of information and knowledge. It implies the creation of deeper understanding and insight, which expands the range of action options. Learning in this sense principally requires processes of human interaction and socialisation, rather than technological systems. Snowden notes that learning is both a thing (something absolute, awaiting discovery) and a flow, i.e. an *“ephemeral, active process of relating”* (2002:3). Thus, it is not merely the content of learning that is important, but also the context within which it happens, and the quality of the narrative or relationship through which it flows.

Learning, as outlined above, should not necessarily be considered superior to information systems or knowledge sharing – only distinct. Different types of information systems, knowledge sharing and learning

processes are appropriate to different types of work settings, and thus the strategies or mechanisms employed will differ accordingly.

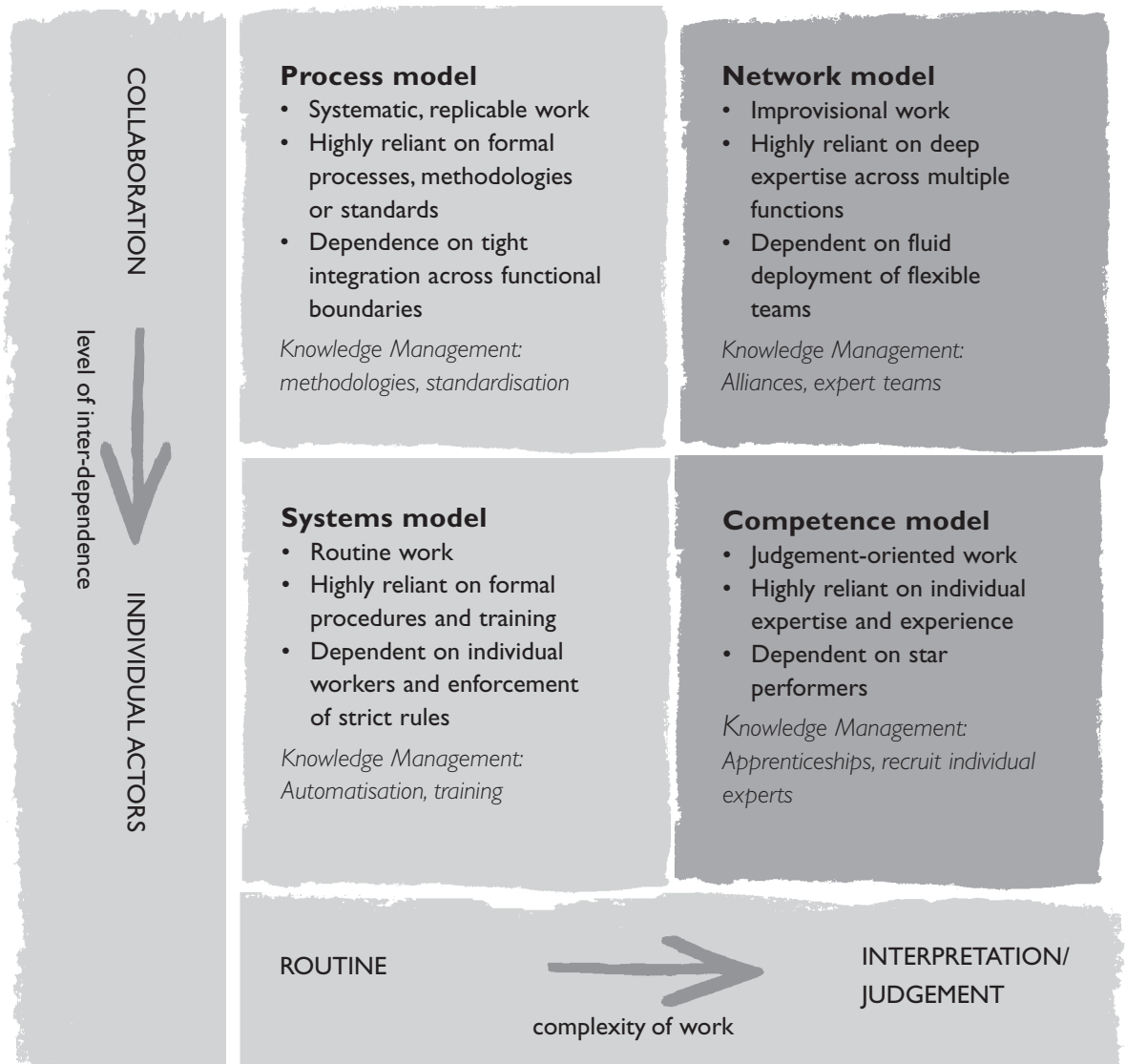
**Appropriate learning within different work settings**

Pickering (2002) notes that the characteristics of particular work settings, and thus of the particular learning needs of each, will depend on:

- a. the level of interdependence of actors, i.e. the level of cross-functional or cross organisational collaboration required by the job; and
- b. the complexity of work tasks, i.e. the degree of judgement or improvisation that is required.

This highlights four distinct types of work setting as illustrated in figure 2.

**Figure 2:  
Work styles matrix**



Source: Adapted from Pickering 2002

The Systems and Process Models are appropriate to work settings which are highly routine and do not require elements of judgement or interpretation. In other words what is needed to perform tasks is principally “know-how”. Learning in the context of Systems and Process work settings takes place through more standardised mechanisms such as generalised training or “how to” guidance materials and sharing evaluations and other reports.

Network and Competence Model work settings involve far greater levels of judgement to carry out tasks, and are dependent on deeper understanding and insight and an ability to improvise amongst staff. In these types of work environment, standardised instructions, or even generalised lessons from other contexts, are not always directly applicable. Work tasks in the development context – whether project based, negotiation, or policy influencing – clearly fit within these two domains, and principally within the Network Model. Thus, the context of learning will differ to that of routine tasks,

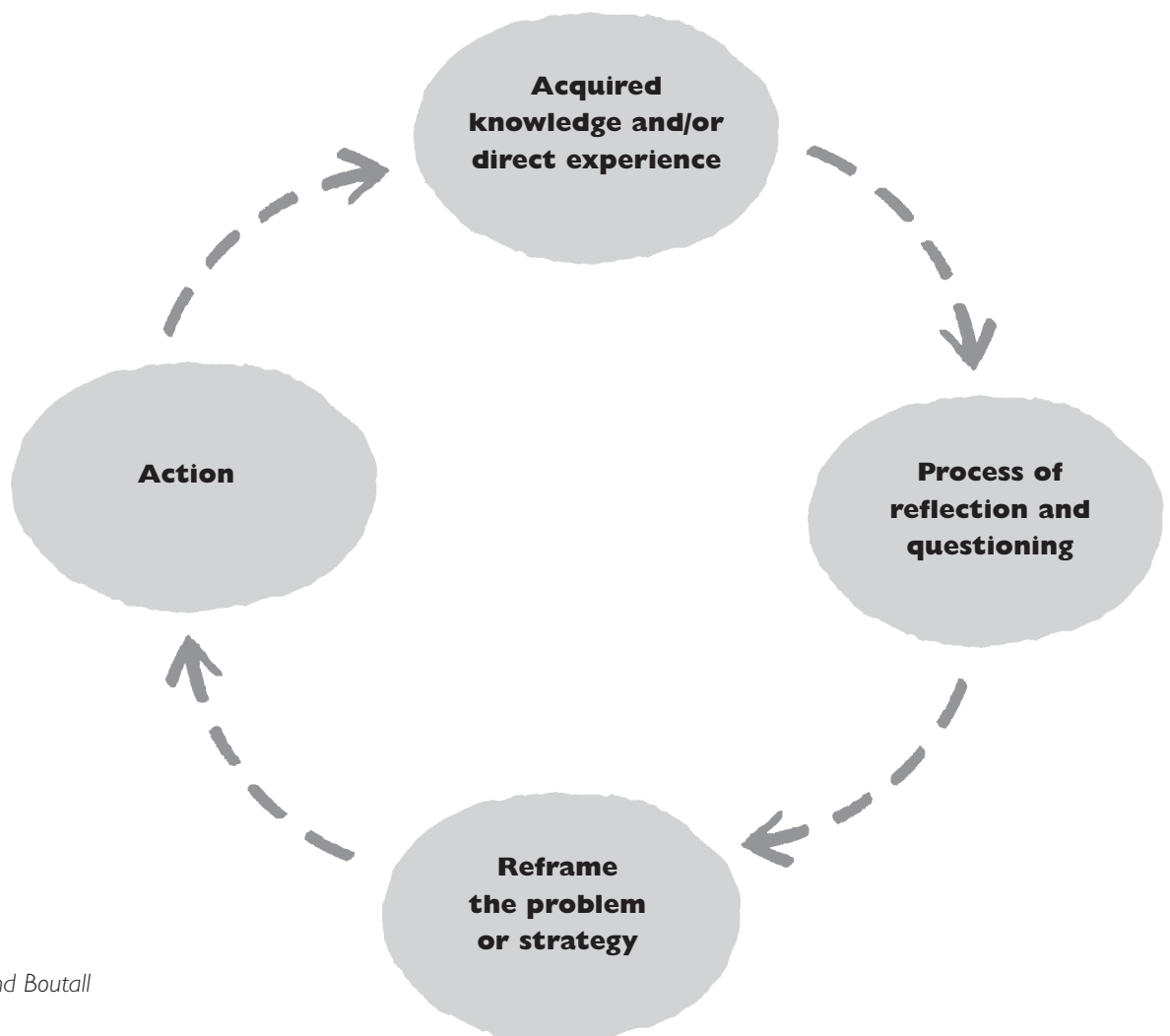
being more associated with interactive formats, as well as individual expertise based on reflection on experience.

### Learning leading to action

Much literature on learning in the context of knowledge management focuses on ways of improving access to knowledge based on the assumption that more knowledge leads to better outcomes. This assumption has been questioned (Ackoff, 1989; Senge, 1990). The purpose of learning in the context of organisations is to improve practice, i.e. there should ideally be an action outcome (Binney and Williams, 1995; Pedler et al, 1991; Pedler and Boutall, 1992).

Learning is viewed by many authors as a cyclical process, whereby people reflect on actions, knowledge and experience, and as a result reframe their perceptions of their original experience or strategy, leading to new actions or strategies in the future (Kolb, 1984; Pedler and Boutall, 1992; Boud et al. 1994; Binney and Williams, 1995) (see figure 3)

**Figure 3:**  
**A cycle of action and reflection**



Source: Based on Pedler and Boutall 1992.

The stage of reflection and questioning is critical to an effective learning cycle. The quality of the reflection process is key to achieving the next stage in the cycle of learning, the reframing of the initial understanding or beliefs relating to that action. This outcome makes the learning process different from the simple acquisition and application of new knowledge (Pedler and Boutall, 1992). Dewey describes reflection as *“active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions towards which it tends”* (Dewey, 1933: 118). The greater the depth, breadth and honesty of reflection, the greater the insight and understanding that can be gained. The following section explores in more detail the nature of the reflection or questioning processes that constitute learning as opposed to knowledge assimilation.

### **Individual and organisational learning**

The above sections have described characteristics of knowledge and learning which often refer to individual rather than organisational processes. What is the meaning then of organisational learning? Prange notes that *“one of the greatest myths about organisational learning is probably the who question, that is the way in which learning might be considered organisational”* (1999:27).

Some authors view organisational learning as individual and team learning in the organisational context, whilst others propose that organisational learning is somehow an aggregate or cross fertilisation of individual learning or a process (distinct, though perhaps similar to individual learning) by which an organisation as an entity learns and adapts (Prange, 1999). Even within the latter interpretations, what constitutes an organisation as an entity is open to dispute (Morgan, 1986). Taylor et al (1997), for example, note three sets of learning relationships within organisations: between individuals acting together; between individuals and the organisation; and between the organisation and others outside it.

This review does not aim to reconcile these different perspectives, but has merely drawn attention to them for the sake of clarity. In each of the interpretations the content, context and

quality of individual and team learning are considered important to producing relevant insights, actions and outcomes at an individual, team or organisational level.

### **Organisational learning and the learning organisation**

This review is principally concerned with furthering an understanding of what is meant by learning and reflection processes. However, it is also pertinent to touch briefly on the significance of the literature on the learning organisation. This gives insight into an effective environment for learning and reflection which will be returned to in the section on challenges. Definitions of learning organisations highlight characteristics such as adaptability, responsiveness, vision, and transformation (see box 2).

#### **Box 2: Some definitions of the learning organisation**

*“[An] organisation with an ingrained philosophy for anticipating, reacting and responding to change, complexity and uncertainty.”* (Malhotra, 1996).

*“A Learning Company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself”.* (Pedler et al. 1991: 1)

*“Learning organizations [are] organizations where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together”* (Senge 1990:3).

Much of the learning organisation literature is aspirational, i.e. it seeks to describe the organisational ideal where learning is maximised. It tends to be focussed on practical implementation, and generating action and change to create an environment that is conducive to learning. There is an emphasis on creating the kinds of conditions in which individual and collective creativity and performance flourish and thus contribute to the organisation's ability to achieve results. Some of the key organisational challenges to reflective and reflexive learning in the development

sector are returned to in more detail in section four.

### **Summary of key points:**

- Learning implies more than assimilation of information and knowledge: it involves achieving new understanding and insight. This is achieved through deeper levels of analysis and diagnosis, and taking into account values and ethics.
- Information management and knowledge sharing systems are appropriate to more routine work settings. Many work tasks in the development context involve high levels of judgement, and require more interactive and reflective styles of learning.
- Learning can be viewed as part of a cycle involving a phase of reflection and questioning. This results in a re-framing of prior knowledge or experience, and leads to improved action.
- Organisational learning is a contested term: it can mean the learning of individuals in an organisational context, the aggregate of learning in an organisation, or a process of organisational learning somehow akin to individual learning.
- The learning organisation is a concept used to describe an organisational environment in which learning is maximised. This will be returned to in section four.

## Characteristics of learning and reflection processes

As noted in the introduction, implementing the shift towards influencing and supporting policy processes, and working in closer relationships to ensure ownership by partner countries, pose new challenges to development professionals. Hinton and Groves (2004) identify a number of key dimensions of learning and change which are central to achieving more effective impact:

- **Shift from linear, outcome oriented perspectives on development towards a more complex systemic understanding of the aid system, its actors and the relationships among them.**
- **Understand power and politics, and ways in which they influence actions and relationships at many levels from inter-personal to international.**
- **Question the ways in which procedures might be reinforcing pernicious cultural and political dynamics.**
- **Recognise and reflect on the role of the individual as well as the organisation in transforming and implementing the poverty reduction agenda.**

What does a learning process based on reflection and reflexivity which can fulfil these aims look like? This section will explore some key theories and concepts which help to inform an improved understanding of reflection and learning processes. Principally they are methods that encourage a broader and more inclusive analysis of issues and problems, as well as putting emphasis on individual, personal reflection on ones own attitudes, beliefs and how these influence learning, decisions or actions. Four broad areas of theory and

practice will be reviewed: systems thinking; exploring assumptions; reflection through enquiry and dialogue; and reflexivity or self-reflection.

### Systems thinking

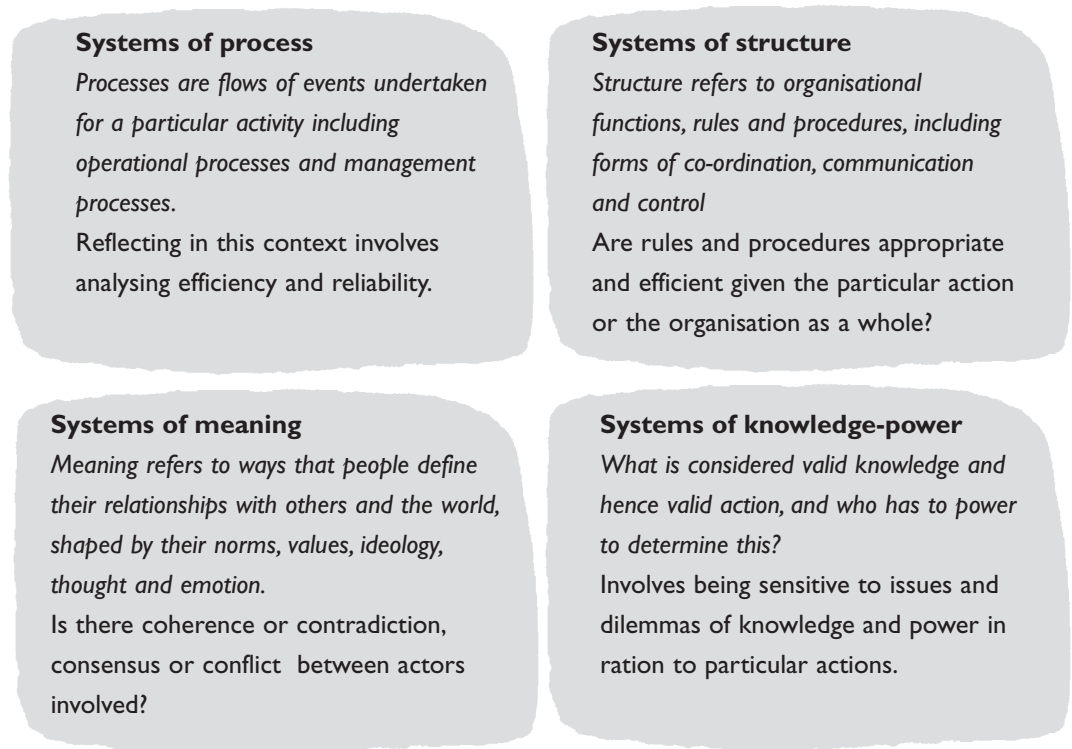
Systems thinking highlights the need to see, or think, in 'wholes' rather than in parts, drawing attention to the importance of recognising relationships and feedback loops in the complex and dynamic environments in which people work, interact and learn (Senge, 1990; Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Flood, 1999, 2001).

*“Systems thinking is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’... Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing the ‘structures’ that underlie complex situations, and for discerning high from low leverage change”* (Senge, 1990: 68-9).

Western education teaches from early age to break things into parts in order to make them more manageable and enable us to study the isolated elements. But reality is complex and it is important to recognise and appreciate the interdependency of the different elements of any system (detail complexity), as well as to changes over time (dynamic complexity), in order to fully analyse and understand (Senge, 1990: 92).

Flood (1999) likens systems thinking to opening contrasting “windows” on a particular, bounded action area to generate a more holistic appreciation of issues and dilemmas (see figure 4): *“Each window opens up your vision to one aspect of a complex activity... A holistic perspective of the interrelationships ... is formed in this way”* (96)

**Figure 4:**  
**Four “windows”**  
**on learning**



Source: Based on Flood, 1999

Human thought is not capable of knowing the whole, but it is capable of seeing greater connectedness between the known elements, and of recognising and appreciating better what is unknown. Viewing an action or situation through all of these windows and recognising the inter-relatedness of the issues and dilemmas revealed by each, will suggest more creative courses of action and transformation from which improvements can be made. Taking a systemic approach to an issue in a social organisational context (as would be the case for many development issues) will reveal a number of interpretations of any particular action context. The aim of systems thinking is not to achieve a new and improved model of 'reality', but that interpretations or models should be used to explore and discover; and in this way generate a more meaningful understanding of the context in question.

*"It might be reasonable to conclude that more learning has occurred when more and more varied interpretations have been developed, because such development changes the range of the organization's potential behaviours..."*  
 (Huber 1991:102).

Senge highlights the importance of systems thinking in the context of organisational learning. It helps people to recognise their

connectedness to the world and the consequences of their action; it constitutes a shift from linear thinking, helps people to reflect on their current mental models, and thus expose prevailing assumptions (this concept will be expanded in the next section on exploring assumptions); it provides a shared language for improved team discussion and dialogue; and it allows a shared vision to emerge through collaborative feedback processes.

The learning methodology (the "tensionometer") applied by Larbi-Jones (2004) to learning about partnerships in Brazil followed a systemic approach. Alongside tracing flows of events, she tried to gain insight into the broader structural, procedural and political context within which those events were taking place, the ways in which those involved interpreted their relationships, and their emotional responses to events and outcomes. This was achieved through facilitating self-reflection with individual partners. Triangulation of that information gave useful insight into DFID's role and approach to partnership.

### **Exploring assumptions**

Whilst systems thinking, at its simplest, calls for an expansion of the range of factors that are taken into account in developing understanding and insight within a particular learning context,

Argyris and Schön's (1978) theory of learning similarly calls for a deepening of the level of questioning. They note a tendency in organisations towards "single-loop learning" in which the emphasis is on more immediately observable processes and structures, whilst taking organizational goals, values, frameworks and strategies for granted. This type of learning leads to adaptation, but only within the existing organisational framework for action. Double-loop learning, in contrast, involves questioning the role of the framing and learning systems which underlie actual goals and strategies.

***"Single-loop learning is like a thermostat that learns when it is too hot or too cold and turns the heat on or off. The thermostat can perform this task because it can receive information (the temperature of the room) and take corrective action. Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies and objectives"***  
(Argyris and Schön, 1978: 2-3).

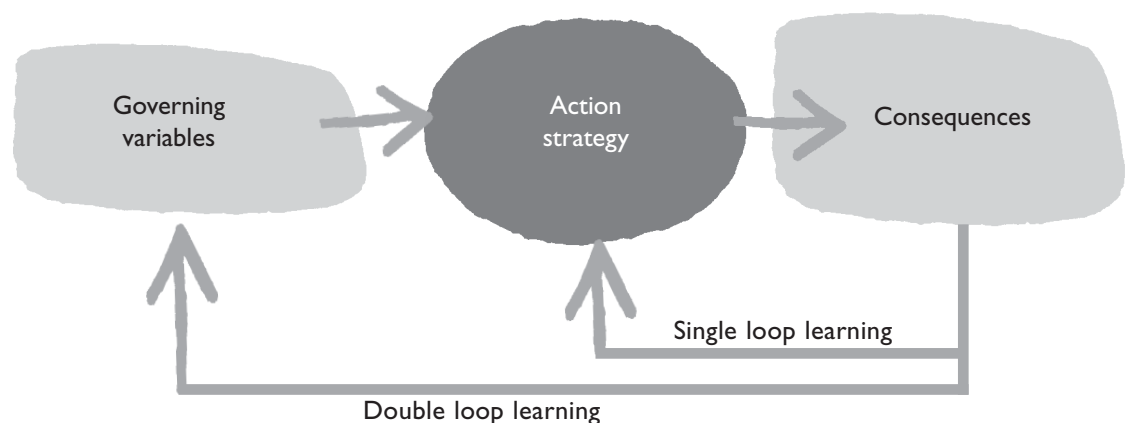
Thus, double loop learning emphasises closer examination and questioning of organisational values, beliefs and assumptions upon which actions and strategies are based. Exploring these governing variables and their implications can help the learner to see the problem in a new light, to develop new concepts, policies and strategies, and to change existing standards

of judgement. Double loop learning leads to fundamentally new ways of looking at the issue in question, or a reframing of the problem (figure 5).

At a practical level, Senge proposes the five "whys" as a useful tool for steering away from blaming first order causes or individuals, and reaching an deeper level of understanding of the factors underlying the issue. When the question "why is this happening?" is asked in relation to a particular problem, rather than taking the first answer(s) as the cause(s) of the problem, one should ask the question "why?" again in relation to each response. As the levels of probing get deeper the tendency is to move from specific technical aspects towards broader questioning of values, incentives or policies.

Pasteur and Scott Villiers (2004) and Larbi Jones (2004) document experiences with learning processes which also aimed to question assumptions in a more fundamental way. A reflective learning process carried out in a DFID programme in Uganda questioned a range of stakeholders on their perspectives on events that had taken place and asked them to question why they believed others had behaved in the ways they did. This helped to avoid a culture of blaming and seek deeper causes of particular actions and consequences (Pasteur and Scott Villiers, *ibid*).

**Figure 5:**  
**Single-loop and double-loop learning**



Source: based on Argyris and Schön (1978)

## Reflection through enquiry and dialogue

Enquiry is a means by which further information is obtained through which can help to build a better understanding of the bigger picture and to interrogate and challenge assumptions. Enquiry can take a range of forms whether as an individual or group process, or through activities of observation, investigation or dialogue.

Some authors view the reflective process as essentially an individual mental activity, in which others are not involved (Dewey 1933; Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985; Schon 1983). In contrast, others, in particular proponents of systems thinking, maintain that learning requires dialogue with, and even participation of, others (Flood 2001). A range of tools or methodologies for enquiry and dialogue exist which facilitate communication and exploration of values and understandings, and the emergence of shared meaning (Preskill and Torres 1999).

Some strategies that have been used to improve the quality of dialogue and enquiry include those from the discipline of action research, including action learning, co-operative enquiry and participatory enquiry (Cornwall et al, 2004). These approaches involve the establishment of small groups or 'sets' of participants who meet on a regular basis. In action learning each brings to the group a situation or problem they are engaged in, e.g. a policy they are working on, or an issue relating to work relationships. They share their experiences relating to the issue with the group, and through reflecting together gain a deeper understanding of the issue, its dynamics and dilemmas. On the basis of new insights, ideas for action are developed. Between group meetings participants consciously reflect on their current ways of working, and explore new and better ways of operating to address the particular issue under enquiry. They then return to the group with an account of the consequences of their actions for further reflection and exploration (Pedler and Boutall 1992; Reason and Heron 1999).

Forms of enquiry can differ in the number of participants involved, whether they have individual or shared questions around which to

enquire, and the nature of the actions taken between meetings (active research or simple reflection on practice in the light of discussions) (Reason and Heron, 1999). Staff in Sida<sup>2</sup> engaged in a participatory enquiry process into the practicalities and meanings of people's participation in development. Staff in Stockholm and in Nairobi formed participatory learning groups, applying a hybrid action learning methodology, and met over a period of 18 months to share experiences and reflections. A follow-up review with participants found that almost everyone had gone about their work in a subtly different way as a result of their involvement in the reflection process. They had begun to question their actions more frequently and seek different opinions before taking decisions (Cornwall et al, 2004).

Workshops, meetings, retreats, and even email discussion or online communities of practice, can also be used as spaces and opportunities for improved learning through dialogue and enquiry. It can require developing particular skills and disciplines to be attentive to what others say and be tolerant of multiple interpretations of events. Such events need attention in their planning and execution to ensure an environment that supports and facilitates honest reflection and sharing (see Pasteur and Scott Villiers, 2004). People need to become practiced in reflecting, talking more openly and making their assumptions explicit, in order that conversations can become more penetrating (Senge et al, 1994). Alternatively, skilled facilitators can help elicit learning by encouraging different directions for reflection and drawing attention to assumptions (see Pasteur and Scott Villiers, 2004; Larbi-Jones, 2004).

## Reflexivity – self reflection

Argyris and Schon note not only the tendency not to question organisational or other broader underlying assumptions, but in later work they also highlight the tendency of learners not to question personal values and assumptions (1996). Marshall, similarly, contrasts two simultaneous streams of enquiry, which she calls her inner (personal) and outer (external) arcs of attention (2001). Mental models, cognitive maps, paradigms and other schema shape how

<sup>2</sup> Swedish International Development Agency



individuals interpret information and experience. Unless individuals explore what underlies their own typical thinking and action, they are likely to make superficial changes to existing strategies, which will limit the potential for more fundamental learning and change (Preskill and Torres, 1999).

Chambers, in much of his work including *Challenging the Professions* (1993) and *Whose Reality Counts* (1997), has pointed out the importance of the role of the individual development practitioner in achieving development goals, in particular their attitude and behaviour in relation to those with whom they are working. He defines reflexivity as “*self-critical epistemological awareness. It means critical straining for honest reflection on how one’s own ego, mindset, institutional context, and social and political interests combine to select and shape personal knowledge*” (Chambers, 2002: 153).

Hence, a reflexive approach requires individuals to be aware of who they are, and what they themselves are bringing to the table: the position and power they hold, the biases they have, and assumptions they as individuals are making (McGee, 2002; Eyben 2004; Chambers, 2002; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Marshall, 2001).

How does personal reflection take place in practice? Marshall (2001) notes that each person’s enquiry approach will be distinctive and disciplines cannot be cloned or copied. She has made a conscious commitment to self-reflective practice, and as such she dedicates time to this purpose, making notes to capture and track her sense-making processes. Chambers (2002) also notes that the act of writing a diary helps reflection, and gives one something to return to, when later experiences may have caused unconscious manipulation of memory.

Another stimulus for reflection is by challenging oneself through exposure. Immersion programmes involve development agency staff who are principally based in cities or developed countries undertaking extended visits to the field to spend time with poor people. These are key opportunities for learning more about poverty through enquiry and dialogue, but also

for reflecting on one’s personal assumptions, and testing them against the realities observed. Accounts of such reflective processes are often quite powerful and reveal radical shifts in thinking. As Ravi Kanbur<sup>3</sup> reflected on his 10 day exposure trip: “*this program...has been one of the most educational and moving experiences of my life*” (cited in McGee, 2002:28).

Chambers (2002) and Eyben (2003) both note the challenges of reflexivity in practice.

Chambers identifies three constraints to self-reflection:

- **Fear of exposing oneself**
- **Loyalty to colleagues and friends**
- **Space and time**

Eyben, after leaving her post as head of country office for DFID in Bolivia, did find the time to deeply reflect on and analyse her experiences there. She admits that whilst in post she was so engaged in action she often forgot to observe herself. Only having left the post, could she legitimately take the opportunity to reflect, and was released from the relations of power and position which might have made such reflection uncomfortable (ibid).

*“Reflexivity is particularly challenging for a person of relatively high status and power. It is not comfortable for anyone committed to social and political justice to inquire into one’s own behaviour as a member of an elite cosmopolitan group, the donor community”* (Eyben, 2003).

### **Summary of key points**

- **Effective reflection should be holistic or systemic in nature, i.e. it should try to capture inter-relationships, and explore different perspectives on an issue.**
- **Reflection requires one to question organisational norms and policies, rather than only their manifestations and impacts.**
- **Methods exist which can facilitate improved processes of enquiry and dialogue which help in the achievement of the above.**
- **Reflection on the self is also fundamental.**

<sup>3</sup> Leader of the World Bank team commissioned to write the World Development Report 2000/01: *Attacking Poverty* (World Bank 2000)

## Challenges to reflective learning

The above section has explored some key concepts and methods which facilitate improved learning and reflection. However, translating these ideas into organisational practice is likely to pose a number of challenges. What is required, as noted in an earlier section, is an organisational environment that facilitates such practice: the environment of a 'learning organisation'. Senge et al (1994) capture some key dimensions of change required to build a learning organisation in a useful framework (figure 6).

These dimensions are adopted as the structure for this section. It draws on the Lessons for Change series to illustrate progress and frustrations in addressing them.

### Guiding ideas

According to Eyben (2003) there is a dominance of positivism in development practice, and dominant professionals have been economists. Bureaucratic organisations, based on a positivist paradigm, tend to find reflection difficult, due to their centralised control, mechanistic thinking, high levels of specialisation,

and over-specification of plans (Olson and Eoyang 2001, Morgan, 1986).

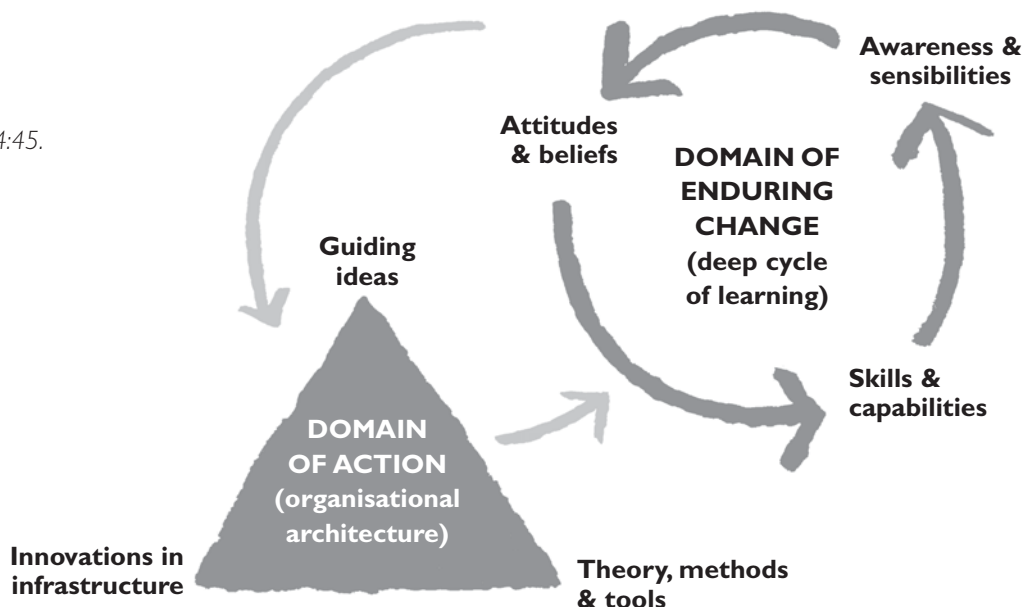
Despite the high levels of uncertainty within the development environment, there is a pressure to be able to predict, and to appear infallible.

Ellerman (2002) notes a tendency amongst donors to seek a "one best way" to achieve poverty reduction outcomes, and become wedded to these "official views". This attachment to single solutions seriously limits learning within the organisation, and the ability of partners to share ideas and learn together.

It is argued, therefore, that a shift in fundamental assumptions – a new paradigm – is needed for development agencies to become learning organisations (Eyben, 2003; Hinton and Groves, 2004; Ellerman, 2002). The alternatives proposed include an 'open learning model' (Ellerman, 2002), a complex systems approach (Hinton and Groves, 2004) or critical theory (Eyben 2003) – the key characteristics of all being a more open and experimentalist, holistic and pragmatic perspective, and the encouragement of greater collaboration.

Figure 6

Source: Senge et al 1994:45.



## **Theory, method and tools**

Achieving a paradigm shift might seem a daunting proposal. Change begins to happen through the introduction of new theory, tools and methods, and the elimination of old ones (Chambers and Pettit, 2004; Hopley and Shields, 2000; Senge et al, 1994). David and Mancini (2004) observed that whilst the philosophy of ActionAid promoted the participation and rights of a range of stakeholders, their internal procedures did not reflect this. They recount how ActionAid reinforced their guiding ideas by developing more consistent accountability and reporting methods. This meant a shift from a traditional upward reporting system to a more participatory, 360° learning approach called ALPS (Accountability, Learning and Planning System). Other alternative theories, tools and methods which facilitate reflective and reflexive learning have been outlined in section three above, including action learning, systems thinking, double loop learning, participative enquiry and immersions.

Pasteur and Scott Villiers (2004) recount examples of adapting and improving existing methods and tools (such as workshops and meetings) to better the quality of learning that takes place within them, rather than introducing wholesale change.

Some tools, such as the logframe, embody the linear logic and attempts to eliminate unpredictability and objectify associated with a positivist paradigm, and these need to be modified or alternatives sought if they are to reinforce a new development philosophy (Chambers et al 2002; Eyben 2003).

## **Innovations in infrastructure**

Infrastructure refers to the means through which an organisation makes resources available to support people in their work, in other words, time, management structures, incentives, money, information and contact with other colleagues, etc (Senge et al. 1994). This raises a whole range of issues and areas for change to facilitate learning.

In terms of management, decentralised structures allowing for participation, flattened hierarchies which reduce power differentials, and small units that communicate and interact

well with one another all facilitate better learning relationships (Finger and Brand, 1999). In development agencies 'silo' mentalities often associated with disciplinary training and departmental membership, and strong hierarchies associated with more bureaucratic agencies are counter to learning (Hopley and Shields, 2000; Pasteur and Scott Villiers 2004). They tend to result in relationships of competition or of fear, and do not foster openness and sharing.

Recruitment, job descriptions, training, performance assessment, incentives systems, and promotion criteria can all be adapted to ensure capacity and incentives for reflection and learning (Chambers et al 2001; Hopley and Shields 2000). Pasteur and Scott Villiers (2004) highlight the importance of creating space for learning: ensuring that time is available for learning and that this activity is valued by managers; and that existing procedures could be better adapted to help facilitate learning. They note tendencies within DFID, which may be typical of other development bureaucracies, to reward competition and independence over team working, honest reflection and sharing. The drive to spend budgets also tends to devalue investment of time in other aspects of the aid delivery process, such as understanding the working context and investing in relationships (ibid). On a more positive note, Eyben (2004) recognises that a shift in DFID towards recruitment of national staff is helping to improve staff investment in institutional relationships which aid learning.

## **Skills and capabilities**

Relevant skills and capabilities are also essential if individual organisational members are to be able to apply new theories, tools and methods. Skills such as reflection, effective dialogue and systemic conceptualisation may not come naturally to people and are not typical components of academic training (Senge et al 1994). Organisations may need to invest in awareness raising, training and skills development in this area to ensure that organisational policy is effectively transformed into practice (David and Mancini, 2004; Pasteur and Scott Villiers, 2004).

ActionAid used channels such as an impact assessment network, in country workshops and a set of guidance notes to help develop understanding of ALPS and skills in application of the new approach (David and Mancini, *ibid*). Bloch and Borges, (2002) describe in some detail how they developed new skills for more effective listening, dialogue and communication, linking these to the monitoring and evaluation system to that they could monitor qualitative improvements over time. This required considerable investment of time and effort in order to achieve profound change in team behaviour. However, they note: "there are no miracles – changes take time" (468)

### **Awareness and sensibilities**

Senge et al (1994) suggest that as new skills and capabilities are learned and practiced, then new awareness will emerge: an ability to 'see' the underlying structures driving behaviour, and assumptions and practices that may previously have gone unquestioned. This type of sensitivity is a form of emotional intelligence, defined by Goleman (1998) as a person's ability to be sensitive to others, recognise their own emotional response and use this awareness effectively in interaction. Emotional intelligence is important to learning, because enquiry processes often centre around issues of tension and power dynamics are often at play (see Larbi Jones, 2004 and Pasteur and Scott Villiers, 2004). Emotional intelligence is hard to learn, *per se*, however as individual or groups consciously attend to these factors in their practice of reflection, dialogue and reflexivity, awareness will begin to become apparent.

### **Attitudes and beliefs**

Changes in attitudes and beliefs represent a shift at the deepest level of an organisations culture. This signals that learning has really become embedded in the organisation, rather than being merely an espoused value (Schein, 1992). Characteristics such as an ability to surrender control, to admit uncertainty or fallibility, a broadening of ones analytical perspective, increased levels of risk taking and improved communication, transparency and trust, all start to become internalised (Finger and Brand, 1999).

As attitudes and behaviours start to become internalised within the organisation, this should not imply the achievement of a new steady state. The principle of questioning assumptions holds for assumptions about learning as well as about other areas of organisational practice. This process of reflecting on the learning process itself is termed by Argyris and Schon "triple loop learning" (1978), (or as "deutero-learning," by Bateson, 1972) and involves inquiring into the context of learning as well as the content of learning.

### **Summary of key points:**

- **The learning organisation can be seen as being based on an architecture of guiding ideas, innovations in infrastructure and theory methods and tools which support the learning practice of individuals, teams and the organisational whole.**
- **New skills and capabilities should be complemented by fundamental shifts of individual and collective attitudes to ensure enduring change in the learning organisation.**

## Learning in development organisations – an achievable goal?

It is increasingly recognised that an organisation's ability to evolve and improve its impact depends greatly upon the capacity of its staff to reflect collaboratively and to envision change. Recent literature illustrates a growing interest in questioning the meaning and practice of reflection and learning in the development sector (Development in Practice 2002; King and McGrath 2002; Hovland 2003, Groves and Hinton 2003, and recent papers in this Lessons for Change series).

As experience and analysis builds in this field personal behaviour and working relationships are emerging as fundamental issues to be addressed. The implications for this are not just operational, but also depend on shifting guiding ideas, power, culture and values (Roper and Pettit 2002). As Chambers and Pettit note, becoming a learning organisation: *“is about instilling new norms and behaviours that value critical reflection and enable fundamental changes in an organization's direction and strategy. The goal is not simply to improve effectiveness, but to create conditions for rethinking basic organizational principles and values”* (2004). These are long term processes of change requiring strong organisational backing and commitment.

The Lessons for Change series, of which this literature review forms a part, illustrates some important and encouraging examples of changes in learning practice in development agencies. Such experimentation and documentation are key to stimulating and facilitating more sustainable long term change. It is hoped that this work will stimulate further adaptation of existing concepts theories and methods to ensure their relevance to the development sector and the analysis, documentation and sharing of such experiences to ensure that learning and change in this field continues.

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