

Critical Social Learning Systems

... ideas, in practice, and learning



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Social Learning Systems – Origins & Ideas

Gregory Bateson: learning and context - learning theory about communication and learning levels.

Donald Schon: the Learning Society, government as a learning system, as a method for discarding structures and mechanisms grown up around old problems. Public learning applied to institutions such as the church, labour unions, hospitals and social care. Learning as a rational process, through inquiry into issues, new policies, emergence of good ideas, dynamic conservatism, using 'crisis'.

Geoffrey Vickers: communication as a way of changing state, discriminating a situation from general confusion, learning to appreciate and learning how to act.

Checkland and Casar's interpretation: the power of conscious reflection, appreciation as a 'world of represented contexts'.

Hawkesbury: Bawden, Ison – social learning as a 'system', praxis-based, institutional, politics, ethics and worldview dimensions.

West Churchman & Etienne Wenger: societal capacity and action-learning, learning, communities of practice, boundaries, identity and domain, learning trajectories.



Critical Social Learning Systems – a landscape

Social Learning Systems praxis has **14 distilled themes**, derived by Chris Blackmore, from the flux of thinking associated with social learning theory and practice ... some may look familiar ...

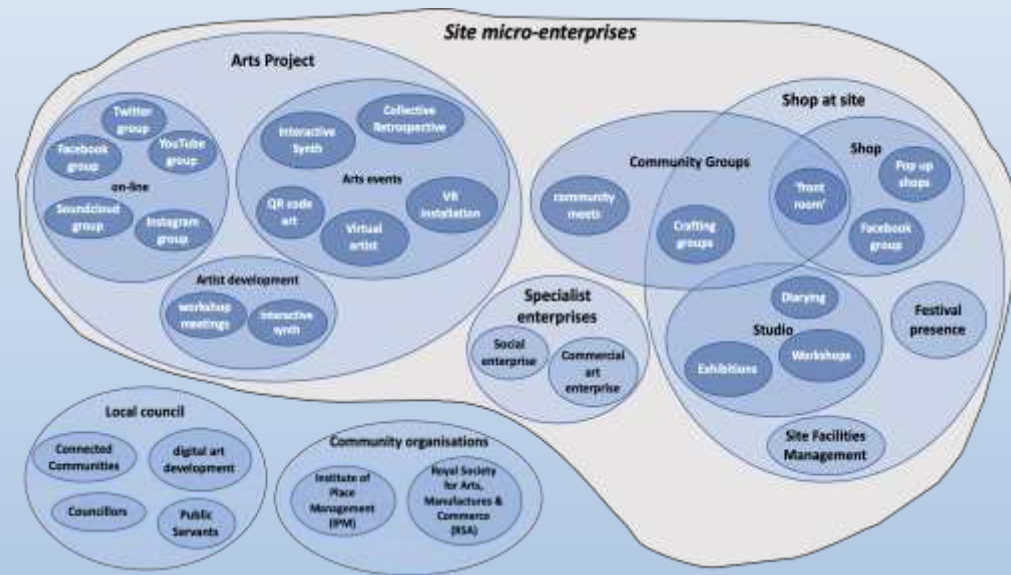
1. **institutions, organisations and institutionalising** – forms of interconnectedness, reach, structure, enablement or constraint,
2. **ethics, values and morality** – judgment, worldview, responsibility, values, communities,
3. **communication** – context, appreciation, language, meaning, dialogue,
4. **facilitation** – patterns of interaction, knowledge development,
5. **managing interpersonal relationships and building trust** – collegiality, reciprocity, power,
6. **communities and networks** – groupings with unity, collectives,
7. **levels and scale** – system, sub-system and wider system, types of learning,
8. **boundaries and barriers** – culture, history and norms, brokering, artefacts and interactions,
9. **conceptual frameworks and tools** – models of learning, appreciative systems, experiential and inspirational learning, communities of practice,
10. **knowledge and knowing** – epistemology, metaphors and dialogue, self-organisation,
11. **transformations** – influencing, discourse, practices, roles worldviews,
12. **time lag and dynamics of praxis** – emergence, feed-forward and feedback, trajectory,
13. **design for learning** – discipline of design, emergent learning experience,
14. **stability, sustainability and overall purpose** – dynamics in learning, strategic ‘stewarding’

Introduction – the Situation of Concern

Situation - **social learning in micro-enterprises**, whether, how and why participants in those enterprises might more effectively learn through collaboration and co-operation, so that they might become more effective at operating as a collective.

Owners had no discernible learning system and operated with few contractual or oversight mechanisms

- represents, in microcosm, the way that many micro-enterprise owners connect with each other, having little focus on social learning,
- framework used is potentially applicable to groups of interconnected individuals and organisations.



The situation is framed as one requiring an **improvement** in [social learning](#), to explore opportunities to extend critical social learning systems approaches.

Using Social Learning Praxis Themes in a critical mode

	As-is assessment in situation of concern	Ought-to-be in desired system(s) of interest
1. institutions, organisations and institutionalising	Not clear how those involved are conceived as a coherent structure, or how systemic factors are incorporated into policy development or implementation.	Effort expended and focus on power and control is balanced with a need for social learning, so micro-enterprises are mapped as learning systems, including influences, processes, and communities of practice.
2. ethics, values and morality	Ethical aspects are understood and evaluated superficially, although there is recognition and concern about health and care for contributors.	There is clear understanding and ownership for ethical aspects of how welcome, wellbeing and boundary issues are managed, shared values and purpose monitored.
3. communication	There is communication and control, but not evidence of appreciative system evaluation to identify emergent qualities relating to operation(s).	Measures are used to create a healthy, ethical approach to control, as well as a structure of social and technical networking, to encourage learning.
4. facilitation	No defined approaches for facilitating knowledge development across groups or participants.	Brokering of learning operates across of groups, and new or evolving groups are supported to become defined communities of practice.
5. managing interpersonal relationships and building trust	There is evidence of trust and reciprocity, but little recognition of the value of 'non-economic professional capital', or of key enablers or potential hindrances relating to social learning.	Emotional and communal value of non-economic social capital is understood in groups or defined communities of practice; with responsible individuals for relationships across groups.
6. communities and networks	Numerous groups, but only one recognised as a community of practice, so it's not clear how the groups are community-minded or pursue learning.	Groups should have some definition, and formal communities of practice given visibility, to support a sense of community across relevant networks.
7. levels and scale	Only ad-hoc learning, and no meta-level or epistemic learning, and scant engagement with wider participants or communities.	Learning and brokering are built into expectations for communities and groups, with meta-level learning a responsibility of enterprise owners.

Using Social Learning Praxis Themes in a critical mode

	As-is assessment in situation of concern	Ought-to-be in desired system(s) of interest
8. boundaries and barriers	Groups and networks appear to be emergent with no evaluation of fit or co-ordination, and are supported by few artefacts or evidence of interactions relating to the activities of participants.	Boundary artefacts and interactions are designed into creating, sustaining efforts and retiring learning groups or communities, integrated with brokering and relationship-building, for 'owned' or external groups.
9. conceptual frameworks and tools	There is little understanding of what constitutes a social learning system, or of distinctions between experiential and inspirational learning.	Enterprise owners are supported by education, artefacts and approaches, to enable practice of social learning, and to assist communities of practice or groups.
10. knowledge and knowing	There are no designed or self-organising groups for promoting learning beyond individual disciplines. No formal mechanisms exist to share, capture or promulgate the use of knowledge.	Dialogue is facilitated and valued, hence occurs on a periodic basis within normal management interactions, to capture, share and increase the knowledge base across micro-business owners.
11. transformations	Lack of clarity relating to the structure of operational systems and underpinning roles have no notion of the nature of social learning systems. This affects the attention awarded to learning.	Learning defined as an intrinsic aspect of all roles, so there is a line of sight from social learning systems 'operation' to the transformation of all roles into 'learning experts' in their own right.
12. time lag and dynamics of praxis	Emergence at a systemic level is not systematically considered, so there is not an interconnected intent across enterprises, or how they learn.	The time aspects of emergence, the ideas of feedback and feed-forward, are used in considering the trajectory of micro-enterprises, and their inter-relationships.
13. design for learning	There has been no attempt to design any social learning, so what has evolved is informal, low priority and barely discernible.	A design for learning incorporates management structures and relationships, as well as stakeholders and defined groups.
14. stability, sustainability and overall purpose	There is no stewardship of learning in micro-enterprises or as a whole; as such social learning is 'not owned'.	Clear stewardship roles are embedded into key roles, to make clear what is expected of enterprise owners and contributors.

Critical Social Learning Systems – Reflections

- Systemic inquiry into the nature of social learning systems can be used practically to explore usable pointers for improving learning ... and there are **many connections** to systems thinking methods, and particular synergies with Critical Systems Heuristics.
- The **landscape** of social learning systems themes provided a useful approach:
 - for evaluating the nature of the social learning system needed, and
 - to **critique ought-to-be** versus **as-is** factors in an amorphous and informal situation, and
 - could be applicable in more formal organisational and institutional structures, especially where there already is formal co-ordination to manage relationships within the situation.
 - allowed participants to arrive at an understanding of how people could apply different kinds of learning,
 - detailed how social learning space ‘processes’ might work in practice for different learning needs.
- Valuable to employ basic **system mapping** to understand the situation, as well as positioning social learning as a sub-system for collaboration - stakeholders could see how social learning could be part of a system of operation and management.
- A key challenge in using the social learning systems themes framework was **recognising and managing my role as ‘practitioner’**; providing insights, and balancing learning interests, whilst accepting the reality of being part of the situation myself.

Thank You

... credits ...

- **Blackmore (2010a)**, *Managing Systemic Change: Future Roles for Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice?*, pp.201-218, in *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice*, ed. C.Blackmore, Springer for Open University, Milton Keynes.
- **Blackmore (2010b)**, *Social learning, interaction and systemic change*, pp.98-145, in *TU812 Managing systemic change: inquiry, action and interaction Study guide*, Open University, Milton Keynes.
- **Ison.R (2017b)**, *Systemic Inquiry*, pp.251-274, in *Systems Practice: How to Act*, Springer for Open University, Milton Keynes.
- **Wenger.E (1998)**, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.