

Critical Social Learning Systems

... an inquiry, case study, and some learning



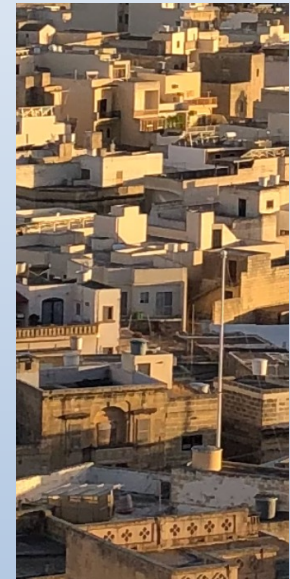
Tony Korycki

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 social learning system and operated in a fragmented way, governed by a few contractual and ad-hoc oversight mechanisms

- This represents, in microcosm, the way that many micro-enterprise owners connect with each other, having little focus on social learning,
- The 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 approach; from this situation to a wider set of micro-enterprises.

Social Learning Systems – Origins & Ideas

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

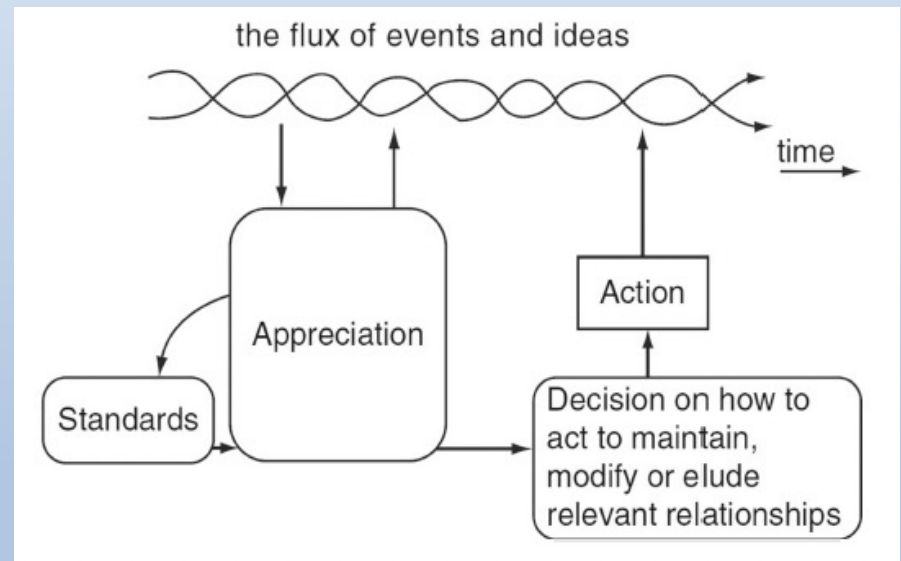
Donald Schon: the Learning Society, government as a learning system, as a method for discarding structures and mechanisms grown up around old problems. Public learning applied to institutions such as the church, labour unions, hospitals and social care. Learning as a rational process, through inquiry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

Geoffrey Vickers: communication as a way of changing state, discriminating a situation from general confusion of events, 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 systems, communities of practice, boundaries, identity and domain, learning trajectories.



Ison.R (2017b),

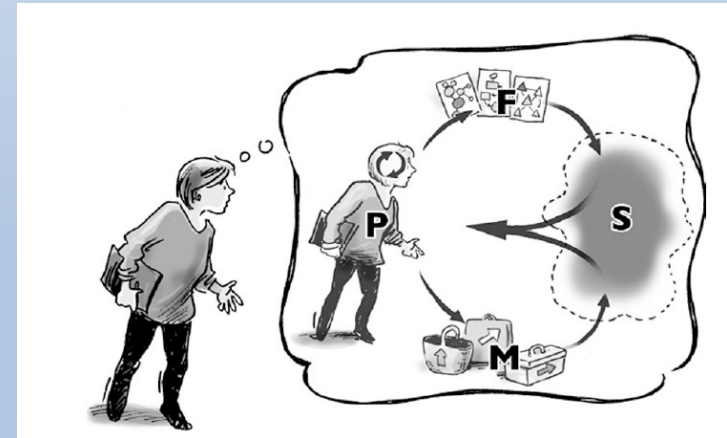
Critical Social Learning Systems – a landscape

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’

Critical Social Learning Systems – Principles of Inquiry

- Setting up and sustaining social learning is difficult; keeping initiatives fresh and stimulating participation. Organisations often lack structural redundancy to allow for learning - everyone busy - this seems relevant to any enterprise.
- Design and progression of this inquiry draws upon approaches that should have a positive impact on social learning.
 - Starts with a systemic inquiry **Design Turn**, to incorporate stakeholders, approach, social technology factors, situation, goals, purpose and sensible boundary choices.
 - Key practice concept is relational dynamic of: **Practitioner; Frameworks; Methods;** and interaction with: a 'situation of concern' **Stakeholders;** and relevant systems.
 - Vital to take on board perspectives, and consider: system(s) of operation, social learning praxis, critical appraisal of social learning, and, how relationships were shaped by organisational and commercial factors.



Ison.R (2017b),

Inquiry – boundary and structure

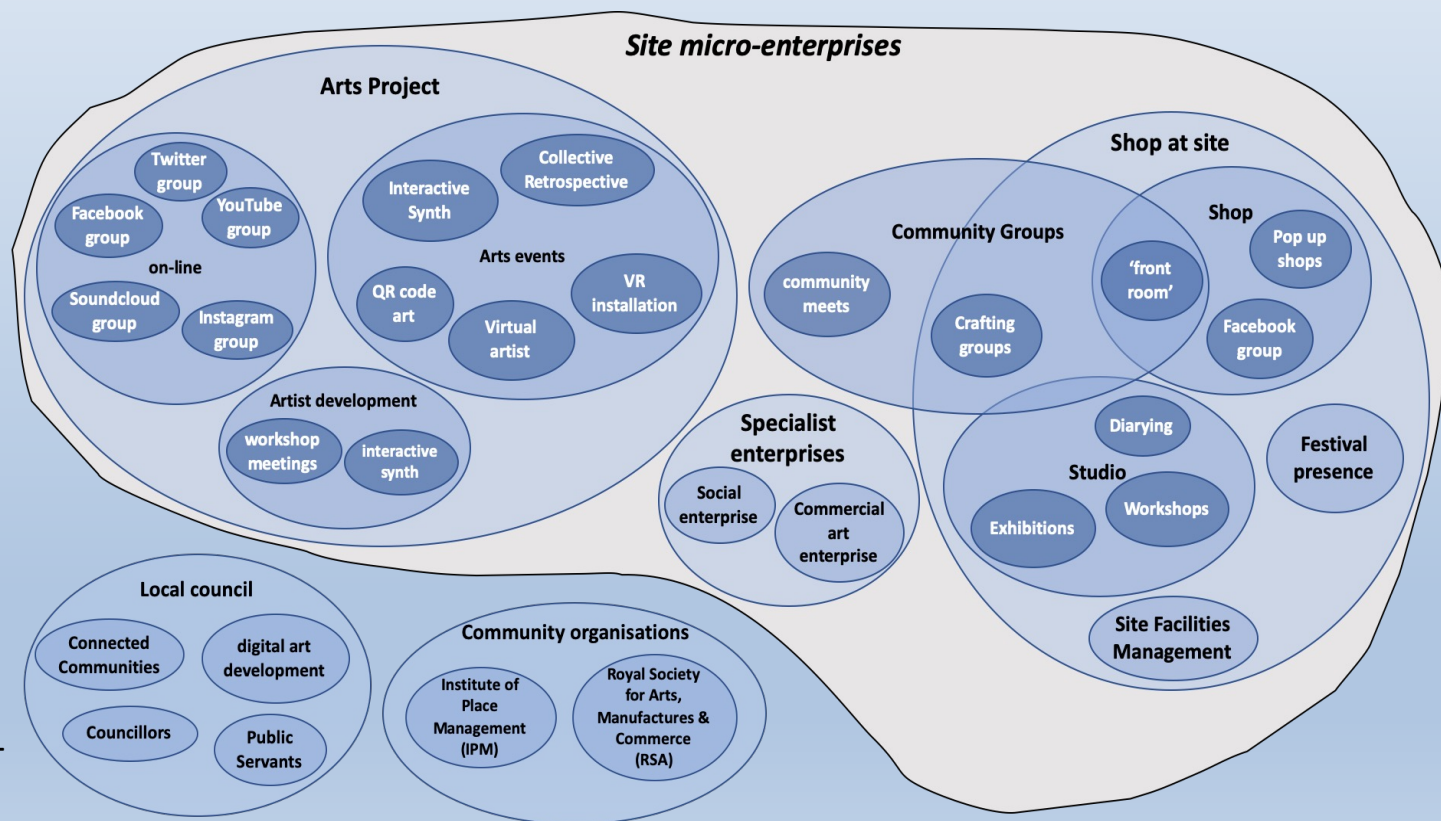
There are four **diverse activities** in the situation; a shop, specialist enterprises, arts project and community events, and their functional structures were largely emergent.

Micro-business owners and event/project leads had relationships with local and national institutions, but boundary relationships were carried out by isolated individuals, with **little sharing of learning**.

Much achieved informally; 'community events' groups, though well organised, were not connected.

Some of these **co-ordination gaps** reflect a lack of participants perceiving of themselves as a system ...

... little exploration of whether they could work together better, e.g. how artists and community events might inter-relate or learn from each other.



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	It's not clear how the micro-enterprises 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	Whilst there is some communication and control, this is not evidence of appreciative system evaluation to identify emergent qualities relating to the 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	There are 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	Whilst there is evidence of trust and reciprocity, there is little recognition of the value of 'non-economic professional capital', or of key enablers or potential hindrances relating to social learning.	The 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.

Using Social Learning Praxis Themes in a critical mode

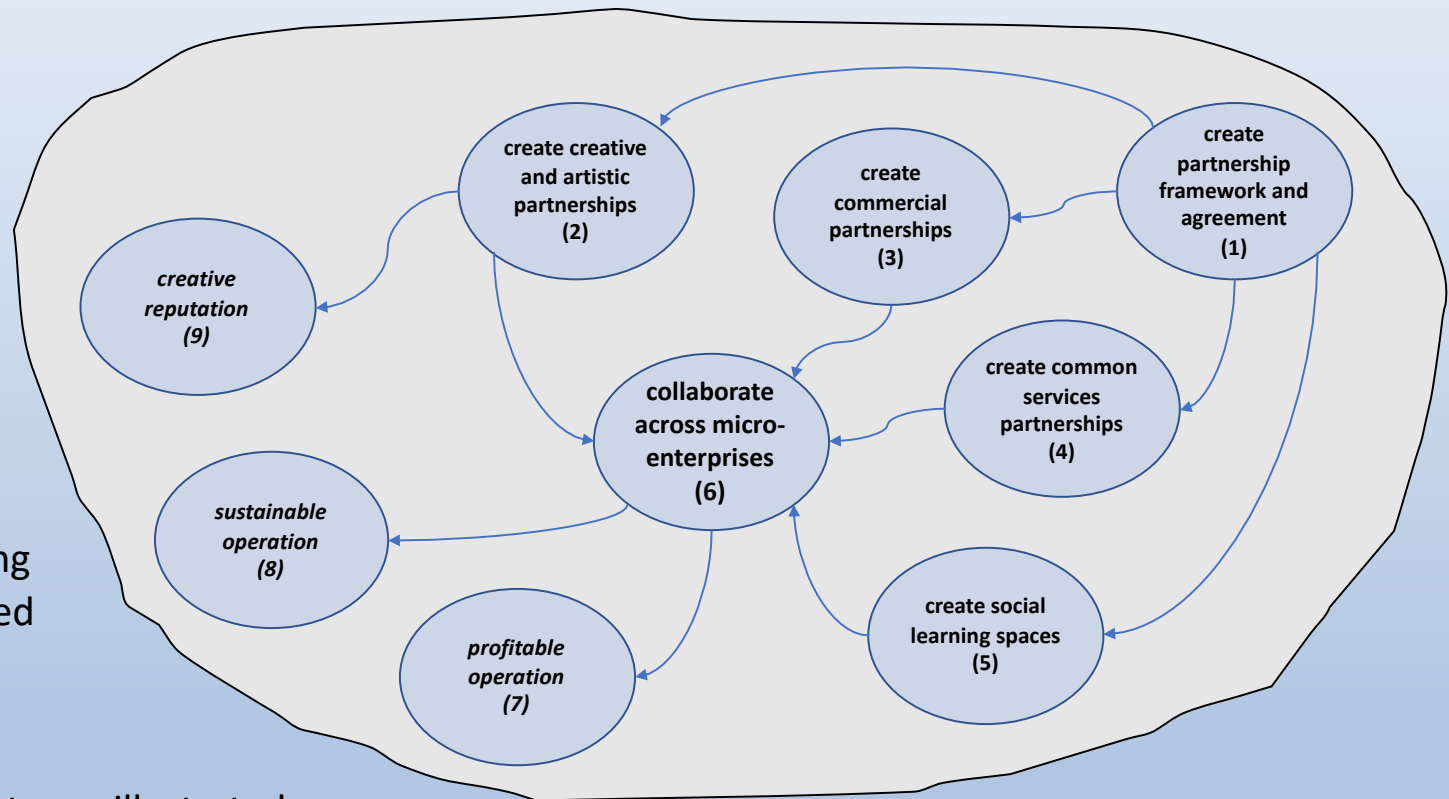
	As-is assessment in situation of concern	Ought-to-be in desired system(s) of interest
6. communities and networks	There are numerous groups, but only one was recognised as a community of practice, so it's not clear how the groups are community-minded or pursue learning.	Groups should have at least some definition, and formal communities of practice given visibility within authorised Internet presence, 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.
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.	Micro-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.

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
11. transformations	There is a 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 is 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 micro-enterprises, or how they learn socially.	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.

'Redesigning' learning processes

Useful to create a designed system of interest to address issues; it defined processes, controls and information flows, to allow social learning to be integrated into daily work and governance.



A clear flow of influence can be seen from enabling activities to desired outcomes.

Three crucial points are illustrated;

- organising** and **guiding** partnership activity, commercially and artistically, need support from 'common services',
- learning needs a **partnership framework**,
- social learning '**spaces**' need to be established and supported.

'Redesigning' learning outcomes

A valuable approach relating to social learning systems concerned arriving at an understanding of how people could apply different kinds of learning, in the situation of concern.

This was drafted as an ought-to-be design, focusing on micro-enterprise activity of participants, to detail how social learning space 'processes' might work in practice for different learning needs.

	'Creative Learning' Outcomes	
Processes	Individual	Collective
Individual	<p>Learning for participants contributing products, ideas or works for a project.</p> <p>Learning derives from praxis in the personal execution of any contributor's activity.</p>	<p>Learning from participants contributing products, ideas or works shared via social interaction; either through workshops, or via feedback and discussion in any on-line forum, e.g. Facebook or Soundcloud.</p>
Collective	<p>Learning from social interaction in workshops, or via feedback and discussion in any one on-line forum, that's reflected in the work of participants contributing products, ideas or works to a site or event.</p>	<p>Learning from social interaction in workshops, or via feedback and discussion in an on-line forum, that's reflected in collective efforts of workshop participants, collaboration towards events, or in the management of activities.</p>

Critical Social Learning Systems – Conclusions

- A number of recommendations could be considered to create a social learning system relevant to inter-related micro-enterprises:
 - Improve **understanding of social learning**, covering benefits and approaches for first-order learning about situations or tasks, as well as ‘meta’ learning, relevant to enterprise and community owners.
 - Define social learning systems **enablers**, that work for micro-enterprise owners, and also for the plethora of contributors connected to those enterprises.
 - Social learning **design into processes**, so that owners can see this approach as part of the overall method for managing enterprises and related projects.
 - Create a **partnership framework** agreement and use this to define critical aspects of collaboration, as well as how to create, support, and own physical and virtual social learning spaces.
 - Build within management **oversight mechanisms** relevant monitoring and co-ordination for social learning, so that capture, evaluation and outcomes are owned and collaboratively progressed.

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
- Unsurprisingly, there are **many connections** to systems thinking methodologies!
- 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.
- 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 consultative insights, and balancing learning interests, whilst also 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 (2017a)**, *Making Choices About Situations and Systems*, pp.39-57, in *Systems Practice: How to Act*, Springer for 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.