Building Capacity for Social Learning in Environmental Management

Margaret J Kilvington

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Abstract

Social learning has emerged as an important concept in the discourse around ways to address complex environmental management challenges. It has simultaneously surfaced in the planning and policy literature, and the environmental management and sustainable development literature. It also has implications for the arena of post-normal or sustainability science. The multiple venues in which social learning appears have led to divergence in terminology, which poses challenges for the theoretical and practical development of the concept. From a review of the literature around social learning I propose four interlinked areas for focusing awareness and developing practice in complex-problem-solving situations:

1. How to manage group participation and interaction
2. How to work with and improve the social and institutional conditions for complex problem solving
3. How to improve the learning of individuals, groups and organisations
4. How to enable systems thinking and the integration of different information

The literature also reveals that more has been written about the meaning of social learning, or whether social learning has occurred in any given situation, than about the ‘how to’ of social learning, suggesting the relationship between practice and theory is incoherent. This thesis proposes that new approaches in evaluation can offer mechanisms by which the ideas of social learning can become an implementable basis for practice. In particular I examine participatory and developmental evaluation approaches and suggest four specific arena in which participatory and developmental (P & D) evaluation approaches and social learning can intersect. These are:

1. Scoping the environmental-management-problem situation
2. Supporting the capacity to enquire and problem solve
3. Supporting the management of programmes or interventions in the problem situation
4. Research and development that facilitates the growth of theoretical and practical knowledge about addressing complex-environmental-management situations

This thesis goes on to examine the practical experience of using P & D evaluation to support social learning through four case stories from the work of the Collaborative Learning for
Environmental Management group (CLEM) based at Landcare Research. The cases illustrate the pragmatic potential of using P & D evaluation to support discrete aspects of the social learning potential of a given situation. While social learning is a comprehensive concept, the selection of specific areas of social learning capacity that are most amenable to progress is a practical necessity in a resource-constrained reality. The cases highlight three factors important to the practice of using P & D evaluation to support capacity for social learning in complex environmental problem solving situations (i) the evaluator, their skill, values, and role; (ii) the mandate and location of the evaluation; and (iii) organisational disposition to learning and change.

Furthermore, guidelines for working with P & D evaluation to support social learning are to (i) find champions who are interested, willing, and able to make change happen within their organisation; (ii) review the social learning challenges of the situation; and (iii) use this contextual analysis to design an appropriate response that can take forward some aspect of the social learning potential of the situation.

Skills, understanding and motivation to work in the field of building capacity for social learning remain a limiting factor in the New Zealand environmental management sector. In conclusion I propose a reconsideration of what is currently regarded as core expertise in environmental management, i.e. rejecting the primacy of biophysical science, and planning, and rather seeking proficiency in integration, facilitation, systems thinking and knowledge brokerage. Furthermore, social learning is a sophisticated concept of high practical value. However, to be a conscious framework of use to resolving resource use and environmental management dilemmas there must be greater literacy about the core elements of social learning and their relationship to the problem situation. Finally its practical application requires rigorous attention that is responsive to the individual conditions of the situation.
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Table of Contents

Abstract
Acknowledgements
List of Figures
List of Tables
List of Boxes
Glossary

Chapter 1
Social learning, environmental management and evaluation: the emergence of a research question

1.1 Introduction
1.2 Background and key concepts
1.2.1 Environmental problem solving – a changing role for management agencies
1.2.2 Programmes to tackle environmental management issues
1.2.3 Social learning: an emerging concept
1.2.4 Building social learning capacity: participatory, developmental evaluation
1.3 Thesis scope
1.3.1 Linking literature
1.3.2 Reviewing practice
1.3.3 Establishing a field of enquiry for this research
1.3.4 Significant stories – cases of building capacity for social learning
1.3.5 Relationship with other work
1.4 Research methodology
1.4.1 Learning cycles
1.5 Chapter outline
1.6 Summary

Chapter 2
Social learning and environmental management

2.1 Introduction
2.2 Definitions, descriptions and relationships between ideas
2.2.1 Social learning and collaborative learning
2.2.2 Social learning in planning and policy making
2.2.3 Social learning in environmental management and sustainable development
2.2.4 Social learning and science
2.3 The challenges of the social learning concept
2.3.1 Challenges of practice
2.3.2 Challenges of theory
2.4 Summary – the value of the social learning concept

Chapter 3
Building capacity for social learning: what evaluation has to offer

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Building capacity for social learning – what does this mean
3.3 Overview of the development of evaluation theory and practice
3.3.1 Definitions of evaluation
3.3.2 Critiques and new directions for evaluation
3.4 Offerings from evaluation to capacity building for social learning
3.4.1 Increasing stakeholder participation in evaluation
3.4.2 Construction of knowledge and meaning in evaluation
3.4.3 Putting theory into evaluation
3.5 Tools and techniques for participatory developmental evaluation
3.5.1 Frameworks for seeing across scale and systems
3.5.2 Ways of asking questions
3.5.3 Reflection and dialogue in evaluation
3.6 Summary: Linking social learning and P & D evaluation
3.6.1 Putting evaluation into practice to support social learning

Chapter 4
Social learning in community-based environmental management
Case One: The Whaingaroa Catchment Management Project

4.1 Introduction
4.2 Overview of the Whaingaroa Catchment Management Project
4.2.1 The Atlantic Coastal Action Programme
4.2.2 WCMP process and major events
4.3 Social learning challenges for WCMP: scoping the problem situation
4.3.1 Group participation and interaction in the WCMP
4.3.2 Social and institutional settings for the WCMP
4.3.3 Promoting holistic thinking and enabling learning through the WCMP
4.3.4 Theoretical basis and programme logic of the WCMP
4.4 The WCMP evaluation
4.4.1 Outcomes of the WCMP evaluation
4.5 Summary – evaluation and social learning in the WCMP

Chapter 5
Developing critical thinking in teams
Case Two: The Target Zero waste minimisation programme

5.1 Introduction
5.2 Overview of the CCC waste minimisation work
5.2.1 The Target Zero company training programme
5.3 Social learning challenges for TZ: scoping the problem situation
5.4 The TZ teams’ evaluation project
5.4.1 Developing an approach for working with teams and organisational change
5.5 Outcomes of the TZ teams’ evaluation
5.5.1 Task – ability of teams to achieve in the TZ programme
5.5.2 Process – development of teams in the TZ programme
5.5.3 Teams and their environment
5.5.4 Response to the evaluation approach
5.6 Evaluation as an intervention in the TZ programme
5.6.1 Embedding evaluation learning in TZ training
5.7 Summary – evaluation and social learning in the Target Zero programme
Chapter 6
Frameworks for seeing across complex social systems
Case Three: The social spaces of the Integrated Catchment Management programme

6.1 Introduction
6.2 Overview of the ICM programme
6.3 The social learning challenges for the ICM programme
   6.3.1 Foundations of the ICM programme
   6.3.2 Social learning theory and praxis needs in the ICM programme
   6.3.3 Role for social research in the ICM programme
6.4 Supporting social learning in the ICM programme
   6.4.1 Evaluation in the ICM programme
6.5 The Social Spaces Framework evaluation of the ICM programme
   6.5.1 Developing the Social Spaces Framework
   6.5.2 A review of the social spaces in the ICM Programme
   6.5.3 Using the Social Spaces Framework in a participatory evaluation
   6.5.4 A comparative framework based evaluation exercise
6.6 Summary – framework evaluation and social learning in ICM

Chapter 7
Integrated environmental research: platforms for dialogue and reflection:
Case Four: The Watershed Talk project

7.1 Introduction
7.2 Overview of the Watershed Talk project
   7.2.1 ICM programme needs
   7.2.2 Platforms for dialogue and learning in the ICM programme
   7.2.3 Previous experience of the Watershed Talk team
7.3 Addressing social learning challenges in Watershed Talk
7.4 Design of Watershed Talk
   7.4.1 Design principles
   7.4.2 Evaluation, learning and development in Watershed Talk
7.5 Watershed Talk in action
   7.5.1 Engagement – building capacity for conversation
   7.5.2 Creative conversation
7.6 Outcomes of Watershed Talk – content and learning
   7.6.1 Altered ideas about the Motueka catchment and its community
   7.6.2 Seeing itself and others
   7.6.3 Ideas about meeting and problem solving
   7.6.4 Preparedness for further engagement and action
7.7 Significant learning from Watershed Talk
7.8 Social learning as an explicit goal in ICM research
7.9 Summary
Chapter 8
Discussion: social learning and participatory developmental evaluation

8.1 Introduction

8.2 Scoping the environmental management problem situation
8.2.1 Using the Social Learning Framework as a basis to programme development

8.3 Using P & D evaluation to build social learning capacity in four cases
8.3.1 Case One: The Whaingaroa Catchment Management Project (WCMP)
8.3.2 Case Two: The Target Zero waste minimisation programme
8.3.3 Case Three: The ICM programme, and the Social Spaces Framework evaluation
8.3.4 Watershed Talk – a platform for collaborative learning

8.4 Practical issues for using P & D evaluation to support social learning
8.4.1 Evaluator, skills, values and roles
8.4.2 Mandate, location and role for the evaluator

8.5 Observations on the case story methodology

8.6 Summary

Chapter 9
Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

9.2 Summary of research findings
9.2.1 Additional conclusions from the case stories

9.3 Implications for environmental management in New Zealand
9.3.1 The Social Learning Framework as a practical tool
9.3.2 Social learning and environmental management professionalism
9.3.3 Value of the social learning concept

9.4 Summary and future research

References

Appendices

Appendix 1 Critical conversations
Appendix 2 The New Zealand context for community based environmental management
Appendix 4 Summary of TZ company training programme rounds
Appendix 5 Target Zero teams’ evaluation checklist
Appendix 6 Workshop process for the Target Zero team performance evaluation
Appendix 7 Teams involved in Target Zero teams’ evaluation (with identifier code)
Appendix 8 The ISKM (integrated systems for knowledge management framework) (origin Allen 2001)
Appendix 9 Evaluation check sheet based on ISKM framework
Appendix 10 Watershed Talk initial interview questions
Appendix 11 Watershed Talk follow-up interview questions
Appendix 12 Watershed Talk post-workshop evaluation questionnaire
Appendix 13 Summary of case story findings
List of figures

1.1 Case stories and evolving research focus in CLEM
1.2 Learning cycles in the research process
2.1 Social learning understood as a framework of elements critical to complex environmental problem solving
3.1 Four branches of evaluation theory and practice
3.2 Criteria for transformative experience (from Merriam & Heuter 1996)
3.3 Linking social learning and P & D evaluation
3.4 A SWOT analyses of the social learning challenges of a problem situation
4.1 First 2.5 years of WCMP (phase 1)
4.2 Three continuums of CBM initiatives
4.3 Components of the social learning challenge for the WCMP
4.4 The first few months of the WE timeline (derived from Kilvington 1998).
4.5 Critical reflection spaces for CBM
5.1 Overview of Target Zero cleaner production methodology
5.2 Components of the social learning challenge for the TZ programme
5.3 Four stage of the TZ teams’ evaluation project
6.1 Examples of project development in the ICM programme
6.2 Components of the social learning challenge for the ICM programme
6.3 Social engagement spaces of the ICM programme
6.4 Worksheets from the social spaces evaluation exercise at the ICM AGM (2007)
7.1 Phases and events of Watershed Talk
7.2 Aspects of social learning addressed in Watershed Talk
7.3 Map used for the ‘ice-breaker’ exercise (courtesy Pete Frew, TDC)
8.1 Suggested planning stages for behaviour change programmes (from Kirkland-Smith 2008)
9.1 Questioning the social learning capacity of a problem system (Kilvington & Allen 2009)

List of tables

1.1 Questions for case stories
2.1 Components of social learning (from Weblar et al. 1995)
2.2 Seven stages of soft systems methodology (Checkland 1985)
2.3 Examples of situations utilising social learning ideas
2.4 Challenges of practice for social learning
2.5 Summary of critical elements of social learning theory
3.1 Conceptual levels for evaluation terminology (from Duignan 2003, pp. 78–79)
3.2 Changes and trends in evaluation
3.3 Four phases in fourth generation evaluation (from Guba & Lincoln 1989b)
3.4 Typology of questions (from Garvin 1984 in Preskill & Torres 1999, p. 97).
3.5 Aspects of programme management that can be supported by evaluation
5.1 A three-phase model for understanding teams and organisational change (Allen & Kilvington 2001, p. 6)
5.2 Teams involved in ‘TZ teams’ evaluation
7.1 Traditional and resilience approaches to problem solving
7.2 Using photography in collaboration and dialogue processes
8.1 Coupling the Social Learning Framework with evaluation
8.2 How P & D evaluation contributed to social learning capacity in each case
List of boxes

3.1  Schema of questions for case studies
4.1  Summary of the Whaingaroa Catchment Management Project
4.2  The Whaingaroa Catchment
5.1  Summary of Target Zero and the teams’ evaluation project
5.2  Example of three-level reflection based around the teams’ checklist
6.1  Summary of the ICM Programme, and the Social Spaces Framework evaluation
6.2  Overview of the Integrated Catchment Management programme
6.3  Activities contributing to the social learning capacity of the ICM programme
6.4  The IRAP (Integrated Research into Aquifer Protection) programme
7.1  Watershed Talk: a platform for dialogue, reflection and systems thinking
7.2  Phases and events of Watershed Talk
7.3  Core principles in Watershed Talk
7.4  Shifts in learning receptiveness
8.1  Identifying a personal evaluation philosophy (from Trotman 2009)
Glossary of terms and acronyms

ACAP  Atlantic Coastal Action Programme
AGM  annual general meeting
ANZEA  Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association
Artsci  abbreviation for projects which unite artists and scientists
CBM  community-based management
CCC  Christchurch City Council
CEMP  comprehensive environmental management plan
CLEM  Collaborative Learning for Environmental Management (LCR group)
Creative NZ  Creative New Zealand – arts council of New Zealand
CRI  Crown Research Institute
CRG  community reference group
DOC  Department of Conservation
DSS  decision support system
EAG  end-user advisory group
ECNZ  Electricity Corporation of New Zealand
ENSIS  forestry research agency (a CRI)
FG evaluation  fourth-generation evaluation
FRST  Foundation for Research, Science and Technology
ICM  Integrated Catchment Management programme, Motueka 2000–2010
IGNS  Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences (a CRI)
IRAP  Integrated Research into Aquifer Protection programme 2004–
ISKM  Integrated Systems for Knowledge Management
LAMS  local area management strategies
LCR  Landcare Research (a CRI)
MAF  Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MfE  Ministry for the Environment
MIRMAK  Motueka Iwi Resource Management Komiti
MoRST  Ministry of Research, Science and Technology
NIWA  National Institute of Water and Atmospheric research (a CRI)
P & D  participatory and developmental [evaluation]
RMA  Resource Management Act 1991
SMF  Sustainable Management Fund (grant administered by MfE)
TDC  Tasman District Council (unitary resource management agency)
TNS  The Natural Step (a sustainable business framework)
TQM  Total Quality Management (a business management framework)
TZ  Target Zero waste minimisation programme run by the CCC
WCMP  Whaingaroa Catchment Management Project
WE  Whaingaroa Environment (group established from the WCMP)
WEC  Whaingaroa Environment Centre
WMU  Waste Management Unit of the CCC