

# Social learning capability

## Four essays on innovation and learning in social systems

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### Introduction: context

The following essays contain some reflections on my involvement with EQUAL, an initiative of the European Social Funds, which aimed to foster social innovation. As a way to support the spread of social innovation across projects, EQUAL started a number of communities of practice and organized events for participants to learn together. This capability to organize learning across a complex social system is itself an important achievement. It is less visible than the 188 projects and 320 codified solutions that were heralded as the outcomes of the initiative. And it is still a fledgling capability, to be sure. But if it provides a foundation for new projects and initiatives aimed at social innovation, within the context of the European Social Funds and beyond, it may well be the deepest legacy of EQUAL.

I will use the case of social innovation to reflect on some key elements of social learning capability. I will draw on the case of the EQUAL initiative as well as on my broader experience with large-scale social learning systems in the private and public sectors. I am basing my reflection on my own sense of what the initiative was trying to accomplish without claiming that everything I describe here was fully realized (though it was a good start and much more would have been done had the initiative been continued). The elements of learning capability I highlight are relevant to social innovation, the goal of EQUAL, but also to all large-scale social learning challenges, whether in business organizations or in the public sector, including government, education, health, or international development.

## Summary

Innovative capability and the spread of innovation are a property of social system that depends on its learning capability. The four essays in this piece outline some fundamental components of a social discipline of learning applied to the learning capability of complex social systems. They explore the social dynamics of learning spaces, the social ethics of participating in learning spaces, the social art of enabling learning, and the systemic challenge of maximizing learning capability:

- **Social learning spaces.** Learning capability depends on people and their interactions. Books, documents, websites, and search engines play an important role in providing information, but they are not enough. Focusing on the human side of learning and innovation, I discuss the qualities of what I call “social learning spaces,” places of genuine encounters among learners where they can engage their experience of practice.
- **Learning citizenship.** The behavior required for productive social learning spaces is a substantial commitment, but it cannot be imposed. It requires a willingness to participate—an ethics of learning, which I call “learning citizenship.”
- **Social artists.** Social learning spaces are very sensitive to social dynamics. Successful learning spaces often reflect the work of people who provide inspiration to citizenship and address the social dynamics of learning. I call the people who are good at facilitating these subtle and complex dynamics “social artists.”
- **Learning governance.** Social learning spaces are part of broader social systems in which learning capability depends on all sorts of small and big decisions and choices that affect learning both locally and systemically. As a guide to the configuration of these decision processes, I discuss some principles of “governance” oriented toward maximizing learning capability in social systems.

Interest in these factors reflects a shift in the way learning is understood, from the acquisition of a curriculum to a process inherent in our participation in social systems. Increasing the learning capability of these social systems is becoming an urgent concern in a world where we face daunting learning challenges.

## Social learning spaces

Social innovation requires investigation of what works in practice. Which ideas are worth pursuing? What difference do they make? What potential do they hold for other places of application? Peer-to-peer learning focused on practice allows participants to sort out which innovations to adopt on a large scale while remaining sensitive to each context. The negotiation required depends on what I will call “social learning spaces.” These are social containers that enable genuine interactions among participants, who can bring to the learning table both their experience of practice and their experience of themselves in that practice.

### Variety of social learning spaces

Social learning spaces can take a variety of forms. The effort of the EQUAL initiative in developing a series of communities of practice was meant to create learning spaces across the projects and the countries involved. Communities of practice, when they work well, are quintessential examples of social learning spaces. The learning space of a community is built through a history of learning together over time. Commitment derives from identification with a shared domain of interest and with others who share that identification with the domain. There is enough continuity to develop a shared repertoire of language, concepts, and communication tools that make practice discussable. All this contributes to building relationships and trust that enable a joint inquiry into practice.

Similar characteristics, however, can be found in other types of spaces, which may require less intensity of commitment. Some may be short-lived, like a good conversation or a well-designed workshop. For instance, we ran a workshop for community leaders in Equal where the main driver of learning was a reflection on practice that connected the participants through their own experience with their communities. The value of learning together in this way helped the participants deepen their understanding of the social learning spaces they were trying to foster. Sometimes, when relationships are more diffuse, social learning spaces happen in pockets. For example, the “social reporters” at the final EQUAL conference were attempting to create social learning spaces in parallel with the formal conference program. They were using new media technologies to enable direct conversations with and among participants in the hallways and publish them immediately on the web in the hope to foster further conversations.

Not all contexts for learning amount to social learning spaces. An instructional space is structured by an instructor and a predefined curriculum. An academic project tends to take knowledge as something to be objectified. Informational spaces, like reports, books, or static websites, support the documentation of practice (so-called “best practice”) rather than interactions among participants. Service encounters with professionals can foster learning, but it is usually one-way. All these learning contexts can create value but they rarely constitute a meeting between learning partners. Note that under the right circumstances they can also become a social learning spaces: a classroom run by a very good teacher can be so engaging that the students and teachers create a social learning space; a service encounter can become a two-way learning partnership; a website can be interactive to the point of enabling participants to experience each other as co-learners. Whether a learning context does or should constitute a social learning space is something that can only be decided pragmatically in each case.

### Rigor of inquiry in a social learning space

Terms like experience and practice often seem to be associated with a lack of rigor. Producing knowledge that is livable in the experience of practice entails a different accountability than traditional research-based knowledge, but there is a rigor to it. It involves a discipline of inquiry that takes practice as the place of knowledge and the person as the vehicle for knowledgeability. It is useful to start by exploring this dual rigor of social learning spaces:

- **Knowing as practice.** A social learning space is not a detached inquiry that only succeeds if it objectifies knowledge or formally “documents” practice. Knowledge is not a separate

object from the people who produced it or even the process of producing it. It is part of the mutual engagement through which participants refine and expand their experience of practice. Note that the focus on practice in social learning spaces is not defined in opposition to documentation or research-based knowledge. The evaluation of social innovation, for instance, often requires systematic data collection and analysis of the research-based kind. Practitioners themselves often produce reflective documents, concepts, and other reification. If objectified knowledge or documented practice is incorporated into the inquiry of a social learning space, however, it has to be integrated into the experience of practice. In other words, its significance depends on the participants' ability to negotiate its relevance to contexts of practice.

- **Knowing as identity.** A focus on practice means that knowledge is part of engagement in the world. Knowing is a lived experience. It is personal, not in the sense of being less valid or objective, but in the sense of requiring a person's experience of engagement. The ability to engage depends on both skills and position in the world. Knowledgeability is therefore a form of identity anchored in practice. In a social learning space, participants engage their identity in the inquiry. They use their very beings—their personal history, relationships, and aspirations—as vehicles for learning. They pursue learning as a change in their ability to participate in the world, as a transformation of their identity.

To become a rigor of inquiry in any social learning space, this dual focus on practice and identity has to manifest in two ways: in the *accountability* of learning to the experience of participants (the lived experience that learning needs to enable) and in the *expressibility* of experience (how the actual experience of participants can become engaged in the learning process).

### **Accountability**

The inquiry process in social learning spaces has to produce livable knowledge, that is, knowledge that is meaningful because it enables new forms of engagement in the world. This accountability to livable knowledge includes both the relevance of knowledge to practice and the ability to become the person who will do the knowing.

- **Accountability to practice.** Learning becomes knowledge to the extent that it responds to and changes the experience of engagement in practice. In this sense, practice acts as the curriculum of a social learning space: challenges of practice are the driver of learning and experiences of practice provide resources to learning.
- **Accountability to identity.** An accountability to practice may seem to put the emphasis on “practical” aspects—on instrumental and technical knowledge. But this is a very narrow view of practice. In real life, being able to engage in practice involves a much broader set of requirements, which includes the ability to find meaning in activities and to engage competently with other people involved. Learning in a social learning space covers all the aspects of knowing relevant to a person who can act meaningfully and competently. This accountability to identity includes ways of being, behaving, and talking. It involves issues such as efficacy, legitimacy, values, connections, and power, typical of engagement in the human world.

### **Expressibility**

Achieving the accountability associated with social learning spaces requires a corresponding rigor of expressibility: participants must be able to express their experience of practice and who they are in that experience, so this can serve as the substance of learning.

- **Expressibility of practice.** Participants must be able to bring their experience of practice into the learning space and give each other access to that experience. Engagement in practice is complex, dynamic, and improvisational. It includes narrative episodes and moments of experience that do not form a coherent body of knowledge. It has many tacit elements. Tacit here does not mean inexpressible; but it means that communication

requires enough mutual engagement to negotiate a shared context of experience. This can be easy if participants already share much context, or require substantial work if their contexts are very different. With enough shared context, few words can express huge amounts. Imagine two violinists discussing the vibrato of a student or two technicians analyzing the smell of a malfunctioning machine. They may be together, on the phone, or online. It is the shared experience that serves as the main communication resource. Only then can participants start exploring what they know, what they don't know, what they only half-know, and what they could learn together. The expressibility of lived experience as a form of social engagement is therefore central to the rigor of inquiry in a social learning space.

- **Expressibility of identity.** Knowledgeability in practice is always a personal experience, which includes physicality and emotions as well as cognition. The level of personal involvement varies across contexts of practice, to be sure. But it affects our sense of self as we always locate what we are doing in the experience of life more broadly. There is a discipline to making this experience discussable. Furthermore, our identity is defined across many contexts, which are never simply turned off. It is impossible to predict in any simple way which of these contexts are going to be relevant and where significant insights are going to come from. Actually new insights often come from remixing perspectives, crossing boundaries between contexts, and thus seeing things in new ways. So expressibility of the full identity of participants, in all their areas of experience and identification, is an important condition for the richness and meaningfulness of the inquiry.

Accountability and expressibility can be in conflict. In a given social learning space a strong connection in one area may crowd out or seem to forbid expressibility of other areas of one's identity and accountability to other contexts. Two scientists having a strong experience of learning about a problem may find it difficult to express their experience as musicians or parents because the intensity of the scientific connection crowds out the musician or parent, or literally excludes it, even in cases when it has the potential of being a relevant source of insights.

This rigor suggests two questions to keep in mind for the development of any social learning space. First, what experience must the inquiry be able to induce in order to open meaningful possibilities for engagement in practice? And second, how can the space render expressible all the aspects of participants' lives that can potentially contribute to the inquiry as it unfolds?

## **Learning as partnership**

In order to achieve a high level of mutual expressibility and accountability, participants in a social learning space need to recognize each other as learning partners through the experience they bring to the space. They need to recognize the practitioner in each other. Whether or not they have equal mastery of the topic, they should be able to negotiate the mutual relevance of their respective experience. They are "peers" in a very broad, practical sense of the term. This recognition forms the basis of a mutual commitment to learning. This commitment can be made explicit but more often than not it will remain implicit, expressed in the doing of it.

### **Commitment to candor: the value of practice-oriented trust**

The expressibility of practice requires a lot of candor and such practice-based candor is a pillar of the discipline of social learning space. But it is not necessarily easy. Theory and policy are clean, but practice is messy, improvised, and always requiring judgment. It is made up of fragments of experience that are not necessarily coherent. This is a condition for its effectiveness, but also something that makes it more difficult to share, not only because of the difficulty to express what really happens, but also because there is a personal vulnerability inherent in opening the door of reflection on the messiness of practice. One's identity may easily seem at stake. Engaging with knowledge as lived in practice requires a lot of trust.

Practice is always complex and dynamic. It is difficult and challenging. In practice, there are no smooth-sailing superheroes. So when practitioners become less guarded with one another, when they recognize each other as co-practitioners, candor becomes almost a relief. There is a comfortable discomfort in the shared refuge of authenticity. Candor can then become a mutual aspiration. It is a form of togetherness—candor reinforced by its mutuality, by its effects on the partnership, and the possibility of learning together. I have seen communities of practice thaw from a terror about exposing one's practice to fellow practitioners and over time shift to a full commitment to candor. This shift was based on the quality of conversations that were possible once candor had opened a window onto practice. They had experienced how sharing the actual challenges they face in their practice was the best way to trigger significant collective learning. Admittedly, this often takes the leadership of some courageous individuals to start the process. But over time, trust becomes a property of the social learning space, not merely of individuals toward each other.

### **Commitment to openness: reframing stories of practice**

Social learning spaces involve an open-ended learning process. Participants contribute their perspectives in the hope that something will come out of the mix. No single person can direct the process because there is no knowing where significant insights are going to come from. When engagement in practice is the curriculum, the learning process has to unfold out of the interactions among participants. Mutual engagement and negotiation become ways for people to build a shared and deepened understanding of the situation at hand. By listening and giving voice to multiple experiences of practice, the interplay of diverse perspectives often reframes the initial stories. In such cases, the conversation of practitioners goes beyond sharing tips or good practices. It becomes a shared commitment to an open inquiry.

Pushing the inquiry in this way means leaving our zone of comfort. We identify strongly with our experience of practice and its interpretation. It becomes part of who we are. Reframing our stories is also reframing who we are. Learning, and the attendant need for unlearning, is a journey of the self, with birth and death, resistance and willingness, doubts and inspiration. But again, this commitment to re-understand practice and discover new perspectives through interactions can be reinforced when it is mutual. The spirit of inquiry is contagious when it takes off. It becomes a property of the social learning space.

Opening and sustaining successful social learning spaces with such a depth of reflection is not an easy thing to do. Conversations can easily remain superficial and uni-dimensional. Difficult topics can degenerate into conflicts. Many communities of practice struggle to create enough commitment and some simply fail. There are many psychological, social, and organizational obstacles. The next essays explore further aspects that I have found to be key success factors.

## Learning citizenship

Learning is not just something that happens in our heads. It happens in social spaces and across social spaces. As we engage in and move across learning spaces, we carry who we are. Our journey forms a trajectory of identity, which involves both participation in specific spaces and connections across these spaces. People and social spaces both have histories, but these histories are not parallel. They crisscross in a kind of social weave. Social learning spaces and individual trajectories are two distinct dynamics of learning, but they are in interplay. Their dynamic complementarity is key to the learning capability and innovation potential of a social system.

## Learning as citizenship

As we participate in various social learning spaces, our actions affect the nature of these spaces. They also affect the people we interact with, who in turn belong to further social spaces. So our own learning behavior can affect the learning capability of a whole landscape of social learning spaces. How we manage our participation in and across learning spaces is what I call “learning citizenship.” Learning citizenship can take multiple forms:

- **Engagement.** At its most basic, learning citizenship is expressed through the quality of our engagement in the learning spaces we participate in. In some spaces we are central players; others, we barely touch. In some we are experts; in others we are beginners. We act as learning citizens whether we ask a pertinent question, present an interesting case, probe an assumption, or talk about something relevant we just read. As we bring our experience to the table, we push the learning and build relationships with others.
  - The extent and quality of our engagement in various learning spaces is the most obvious way in which we can influence learning, ours and that of others.
- **Moving on.** The decision to disengage from a learning space is as significant as entering and engaging. It lets us move on with our lives. It affects both our own trajectory and the learning space we leave behind.
  - Unlearning and letting go are an essential part of the ability to journey forward and innovate.
- **Brokering.** We all participate in multiple social learning spaces. We affect the relationships between spaces as we carry (or do not carry) our learning from one space to another. In some cases we play a key brokering role by importing or exporting significant insights or challenges across the boundaries between spaces. Such brokering can even reshape these boundaries when, for instance, it triggers substantial interactions between the spaces involved.
  - Brokering is important because it thickens the weave of a social system. Innovation often happens at boundaries when things are combined in new ways.
- **Convening.** Sometimes we are in a unique position to see the potential for a social learning space that does not exist yet; and our position also gives us the legitimacy to step in and create it. We start a conversation, we call a meeting, or we convene a community that needs to come into existence.
  - Convening is one of the most significant acts of learning citizenship in terms of opening new possibilities for learning and legitimizing the need to care about an issue.

Our stance toward learning citizenship affects the spaces we enter, create, connect, or leave as well as our own learning. This remains true whether or not we have a choice in our participation and its form; and whether we are just a participant or take leadership in making things happen. Learning citizenship matters in all cases. The actual quality of our engagement (even if it starts as

submission or rebellion) is something that we can modulate—with deep effects on the learning potential of social spaces.

## **Ethics of identity**

With the term “learning citizenship” I want to emphasize that learning has an ethical dimension: our participation has both local and systemic effects. I do not use the term citizenship to suggest that some are citizens and some are not, that learning citizenship is an elite club. We are all learning citizens, just as we are all citizens of the world, whether we let this reality guide our actions or not.

Claiming that there is an ethical dimension to learning is not assuming that learning depends on altruism. Some altruism may be involved, but engagement in social learning spaces is for our benefit as well as our contribution. Pushing our learning, building a reputation, forging relationships, all are part and parcel of the process. When it comes to learning citizenship, the distinction between contributing and benefitting is not so clear. More often than not, the two go together.

If our moves have learning consequences for ourselves and for the social systems in which we live, our trajectory is part of the weaving of these systems. Learning citizenship is situated right at the crossroads between social learning spaces and trajectories of identity. As learning citizens, we proceed from who we are—our personal histories, connections, networks, vision, aspirations, and position in the landscape of practice—to find forms of participation that increase learning capability. When we seize opportunities to participate in social learning spaces, to bridge a boundary, to convene a community that needs to exist, it is because we understand the learning potential of our location in the world and act upon it. It is also because we understand our limitations as just one person. With this understanding, we can invest who we are in enabling learning. We can invest the perspective, capability, legitimacy, and accountability that we derive from our unique trajectory, where we have been, where we are going, and what that makes us. In this sense, learning citizenship involves a recognition that our identity, as a dynamic location in the social landscape, is a unique learning resource. As learning citizens, we are investing and developing that resource, for ourselves and for the world.

## **Fostering learning citizenship**

Recognizing the ethical dimension of learning is important because the behavior of a learning citizen it is not something that can be mandated. You cannot mandate learning of the kind that happens in social learning spaces because it requires an authenticity that cannot be perfunctory. No one knows in advance what it will look like. If one could know what to mandate, then a social learning space would not be necessary; a course or a book would do. The process of bringing the experience of practice into a social learning space can only be shaped by those who are doing it. The result of this kind of mutual engagement is never predictable. Even if you tried to mandate such learning and people did what you ask them to do, the result would probably not be what you wanted in the first place.

Because learning citizenship is fundamentally voluntary, but with broad effects for individuals and collectives, the ethical dimension of learning is inescapable. People are going to act as learning citizens out of their own experience of the meaning and value of doing so.

That learning citizenship cannot be dictated does not mean that it cannot be fostered, however. While it involves a sense of personal responsibility and initiative, it is not merely an individual experience. It is in fact very sensitive to context. It is easily thwarted by obtuse bureaucracy or conflicting demands; those in charge of organizing the context have to be very careful that it does not inadvertently discourage learning citizenship. At the same time, learning citizenship is also very contagious when it thrives; leading by example can therefore be quite effective. Manipulative rewards are usually counterproductive for the same reason that mandates do not work in that they assume that one knows what to reward in advance. Recognition after the fact works better.

Some organizations have started to recognize acts of learning citizenship explicitly as part of one's contribution to organizational goals. This puts some teeth to the assertion that learning is valued, which can seem empty when people's schedules are crowded with operational demands and project deadlines. If our ability to innovate and spread innovation depends on learning citizenship, then learning how to foster this citizenship, recognize it, and make it count is an urgent challenge for increasing the learning capability of our social systems.

## Social artists

Enabling social learning spaces is an art. And so is inspiring the learning citizenship these spaces depend on. Among the many factors that account for the success or failure of the process, I have seen again and again that one of the key ingredients is the energy and skills of those who take leadership in making it all happen. I call the people who excel at doing this “social artists.”

The name may be surprising, but it is quite apt. Artists create beautiful pieces of art that inspire us: songs, paintings, movies, sculptures, poems, dances. The presence of this art shapes the world around us and enriches our lives. Similarly social artists create social spaces where meaningful learning can take place. When these social learning spaces work well, they are magnificent pieces of art—social art—that change the way we experience the world and ourselves.

### Social artists as leaders

Social artists are leaders, but the kind of leadership they exercise is subtle. It does not engender or depend on followership. Rather it invites participation. It is a mixture of understanding what makes learning socially engaging and living the process yourself. It is not a formula; it is creative, improvised, intelligently adaptive, and socially attuned. I find the magic of this artistry difficult to describe, though I know it when I see it.

- **Opening learning spaces.** Social artists have a good understanding, sometimes completely implicit and intuitive, of the social discipline that makes social learning spaces productive. They have a knack for making people feel comfortable and engaged. They generate social energy among participants. They have a nose for the cultural and personal clues to social dynamics. They produce a climate of high trust and aspirations.
- **Inviting learning citizenship.** Social artists help us experience ourselves as learning citizens. They know how to bring out our passions. They make us care to the point of engaging our whole person in a social learning space. Or rather they help us discover we care and channel that care into learning citizenship.

This dual focus is important. Social artists are not just good pedagogues who can help people learn something. They have a natural instinct for leveraging the complementarity of learning spaces and individual trajectories. They help people experience learning spaces as part of their own trajectories so that collective and individual learning blend.

### An exercise in paradoxes

Like all artists, social artists are unique. They vary in style. Some are flamboyant and some prefer to operate almost invisibly. Some are jovial and some are sharp-edged. Some will make you laugh and emphasize the fun of learning; some will make you feel serious about the challenge. What they all seem to have in common is an ability to embrace successfully a number of paradoxes.

- **Social yet intentional.** Social artists are of course, by definition, social. Their personal touch is a cornerstone of their artistry. They connect with people and they connect people. They are natural networkers. But they are not generic networkers. They network because there is something they care about, some new learning they want to enable. Their social artistry is suffused with purpose. Yet it is not the case that they are disingenuous or manipulative in using their social connections to serve their purpose. On the contrary, they combine the two to help others identify with what they care about and become partners in the aspiration. Their ability to enlist engagement in social learning spaces is precisely due to the fact that it reflects a genuine intention to create a collective learning process.

- **Collaborative yet willful.** Social artists tend to be collaborative. They care that people feel ownership of their learning space. They listen to others and are very good at including multiple voices. They create social containers that turn conflict into learning opportunities. They are patient with social processes. They do not seek control and are comfortable with a high level of uncertainty. They can tolerate chaos, dissension, and negotiation. Given these characteristics, it might be easy to assume that social artists are easy-going or consensus-seekers. But my experience is that they are extremely willful even if this willfulness is expressed in collaborative ways. They care about making things happen. They will (gently) twist arms if need be. They will inspire people to do things these people never thought they would do and end up feeling good about doing. In the social expression of their willfulness social artists help others discover new part of themselves.
- **Idealistic yet pragmatic.** Social artists tend to be activists. They do not accept the status quo. They are not impressed by arguments that “this is the way things have always been done.” They have visions and aspirations even when they are quiet about them. But they are also practical. They may have strong opinions, but they are not ideologues. While they too visionary and socially attuned to be political beasts, they are politically astute. They are able to navigate the complex politics of communities and organizations to promote and protect the learning spaces they care about. Learning can be threatening; energized learning spaces are not always welcome in organizational contexts. Social artists pay careful attention to all the factors, internal and external, that can contribute to the success or failure of a learning space. In this sense, their idealism is of a very pragmatic kind.

Above all, social artists live what they seek to bring about. Like all artists, they use themselves, their own experience and identity, as a source of inspiration. They are themselves learning citizens of great intensity. This is how they can embrace the paradoxes of their work without falling, like the rest of us would, into an easy, but fatal resolution on one side or the other. We can all be learning citizens in our own ways, but we are not all social artists. That would be an unrealistic and unnecessary expectation.

I am sometimes hired to train people to lead communities of practice—aspiring social artists as it were. It is always a special occasion for me. I prepare a workshop agenda, with presentations and activities. I am always amazed by the amount of learning taking place. But in my heart of hearts, I know that the real secret ingredient, what is really going to make a difference in enabling a community, is not something I can teach. It is not a technique or something that can be reduced to skills, even when some techniques and skills are involved. It has to do with the heart as well as the mind, with passion and commitment. It has to do with the person, with identity as a social resource. The key is the ability of social artists to use who they are as a vehicle for inviting others into inspiring social spaces. The intensity of their own passion is the powerhouse of their artistry. Their livingness and spirit of inquiry are contagious. They infuse social learning spaces with their soul, their humanity, their restlessness, their optimism, their courage, and their own focus. If this makes it sound “soft,” nothing could be further from the truth. A social learning space is an ideal context to address thorny issues of strategic importance. And it is hard work. A social learning space can be infinitely demanding of attention. I think most social artists love what they do; but it is the most delicate and consuming work I can imagine.

## Recognizing social artists

One thing about the type of leadership exercised by social artists is that it often seems to be of a less visible kind. This is unfortunate at a time when learning and knowledge are recognized as critical to organizations and society. My experience is that this recognition has heightened appreciation for the role of experts and specialists. Experts and specialists are key players indeed, but we seem better equipped culturally and organizationally to appreciate their role. I want to shine a light on social artists because I believe their role is only going to grow in importance. The world is becoming so complex that any expertise worth caring about is too extensive for any one person to handle. Social learning spaces are indispensable—and so is the

work of social artists as the key ingredient. By helping people come together and discover their own learning citizenship, social artists build up the learning capability of social systems. I have met a number of them in my work and I have grown a profound respect for who they are and what they do. It is of extraordinary beauty and usefulness. Still social artists tend to be invisible because we do not have good frameworks and language to appreciate their contributions. I hope writing about them can help make their work more visible. Whether they do what they do because of professional responsibilities or just as extraordinary learning citizens, their role is of utmost importance. We need to learn to recognize, support, and celebrate their work. Their contribution is especially critical today when humankind faces unprecedented challenges that will place increasing demands on our ability to learn together.

## Learning governance

The EQUAL initiative is an example of a fairly complex social system. It includes a constellation of learning spaces operating within an institutional context, which consists of an overall sponsor, the European Social Funds, and a multiplicity of decentralized administrative units and local governments across numerous countries. In creating social learning spaces across innovation projects, the intent of EQUAL was to increase the learning capability of the overall system. The intentional weaving of independent projects into a learning system is a key role for the central sponsor, which differs from the role of managing the projects themselves and requires an additional layer of accountability and governance oriented to learning across the board.

Everything I have said so far about the dynamics of social learning spaces, the voluntary nature of learning citizenship and the paradoxical work of social artists suggests that increasing learning capability in a social system is a lot more complex than increasing, say, efficiency or even coordination. In addition to local factors, it is necessary to look at systemic factors such as governance and accountability that affect learning capability. I will proceed in three phases. First I will discuss governance processes oriented to learning itself. Then I will add the complication of accountability structures typical of organizational contexts. Finally, I will explore how the two interact to foster or inhibit social learning capability.

## Emergent and stewarding governance

Issues of governance are crucial to learning in social contexts. First, learning in social systems is inherently political. It involves decisions about what matters, about what counts as learning, about the direction to move toward. To the extent that learning suggests doing something better, then the definition of “better” is a contestable terrain. Second, learning capability has both local and systemic dimensions. Governance processes propagate decisions among these levels.

Governance oriented to social learning capacity must reflect two fundamental characteristics of social systems. On the one hand, our imagination gives us the ability to project what we care about, individually and collectively, into the future and across social spaces. On the other hand, our knowledge and our visions are limited. Each of us is just one node in a network. We need to respond to and embrace the unexpected as part of our learning. This suggests two types of governance processes that contribute to social learning capability:

- **Stewarding governance.** This type of governance derives from a concerted effort to move a social system in a given direction. Championing a cause or pushing an issue is a typical example. Stewarding governance is a process of seeking agreement and alignment across a social system in order to achieve certain goals.
- **Emergent governance.** This type of governance bubbles up from a distributed system of interactions involving local decisions. Market mechanisms are the quintessential example of emergent governance in that they produce decisions like prices of goods that emerge out of many transactions. Similarly, aspects of learning capability emerge as the cumulative effect of local decisions negotiated in learning spaces and spread by participants.

The two types of processes interact. What is stewarding at one level of scale can be emergent at another. Stewarding governance in individual social learning spaces can result in emergent governance at the system level. Furthermore, emergent and stewarding governance have complementary strengths and weaknesses in their effects on learning.

Participants in local learning spaces may not be aware of systemic effects. A constellation of local experiments can lock the system in unproductive patterns that are not visible or manageable from local spaces or individual action. Some things we care about cannot be dealt merely through local decisions because they require too much coordination. Sometimes we need to recognize our interdependence and act in concert to bring about the learning we need. It takes stewarding

governance to nurture the imagination of people so they can see themselves as participants in broader systems and align their actions accordingly.

From a learning capability perspective, however, stewarding governance can be the victim of its success. As the saying goes, be careful what you wish for; you might get it. The alignment and agreement sought under stewarding governance are like fire or knives: very effective but dangerous. Our designs have unintended consequences. To the extent that we inevitably act from our own perspectives, our efforts at stewarding governance require a degree of humility. Emergent governance is a learning safeguard against overreach.

Given this complementarity, it is necessary to consider both types of governance processes when learning capability is concerned. It is the combination of the two that can maximize the learning capability of social systems.

## Vertical and horizontal accountability

When one considers institutional contexts, the story becomes a bit more complicated. Social learning spaces often function in the context of institutional accountability structures. Institutional structures tend to be based on what can be called *vertical* accountability. In organizations, for instance, governance is usually implemented with hierarchical relationships configured to ensure, at least in theory, that the organization achieves its goals. Systems of government also create vertical accountability through positions of authority, legislation, policies, and enforcement mechanisms. By contrast, the kind of accountability I have described for social learning spaces and learning citizenship could be defined as *horizontal* in that it exists in mutual relationships among participants. To the extent that social learning spaces are expected to play a role in organizations, it is important to recognize both types of accountability:

- **Vertical accountability**, associated with traditional hierarchies, decisional authority, the management of resources, bureaucracies, policies and regulations, accounting, prescriptions, and audit inspections
- **Horizontal accountability**, associated with engagement in joint activities, negotiation of mutual relevance, standards of practice, peer recognition, identity and reputation, and commitment to collective learning

A common mistake in organizations is to assume that horizontal relationships lack accountability—and therefore that the only way to create accountability is to overlay vertical structures. A well functioning community of practice can give rise to very strong horizontal accountability among members through a mutual commitment to collective learning. Even a good conversation creates accountability, albeit of a temporal and tacit nature. Participants are held to an expectation of mutual relevance: they can't just go off into irrelevant topics or statements without violating such expectation. In its own ways, the horizontal accountability inherent in social learning spaces is no less binding and operative than formal vertical accountability. Horizontal accountability has to be the primary axis of social learning spaces, even when they operate in the context of institutions. Without a strong sense of mutual accountability, the learning potential of these spaces cannot be realized since genuine peer engagement and learning citizenship cannot be dictated. Social learning spaces must place governance in the hands of participants because it is the only way that learning can fully engage and reflect who they are.

Vertical accountability structures are usually not primarily geared to learning but they can deeply affect social learning capability. In fact, my experience is that learning capability is often a casualty of institutional accountability structures. Vertical accountability privileges the perspective of those to whom it gives more power to affect a system. From this perspective, if power corrupts, it is among other things because it can make horizontal accountability less expressible and thus decrease learning capability. From these observations, another common mistake is to demonize vertical accountability and romanticize local engagement in practice. A self-governed social learning space is not heaven. It can reproduce all sorts of undesirable things, such as racism or

corruption. It can be a place of collective mediocrity or contribute to systemically counterproductive patterns. When a system becomes too complex for negotiating governance issues directly, horizontal accountability is not always the best means of fostering systemic learning capability. It is useful to have certain things that are non-negotiable across a social system to limit the effects of local dysfunctions and myopia. Vertical accountability can help structure and simplify local engagement. We don't need to each decide at every moment on which side of the road to drive or whether it is a good idea to grab someone's wallet. Not everything has to be negotiable and decided anew every time. There is more productive use of our learning capability.

Even though vertical and horizontal accountability structures can both be useful, there is an inherent tension between them. Vertical accountability is based on compliance; power and expressibility tend to be one-way. By contrast, horizontal accountability is based on negotiation and tends to involve mutual expressibility. (Note that this mutual expressibility does not necessarily imply equality. For instance, when an expert interacts with a novice, their relationships may be mutual without denying a difference in knowledge and power). Coexisting vertical and horizontal systems of accountability can create conflicting demands, for instance, in the use of time. Compliance requirements can be at odds with the conclusions of engaged intelligence. It is not uncommon for practitioners to be caught in the two and have to choose between their own understanding of a situation and the demands of a policy. Finally, the two types of accountability are not easily visible to each other. The delivery of policies typically does not convey the full process by which they come into existence. Similarly, measures for auditing compliance are proxies because they need to be extractable from local practice, and in the process they inevitably lose much of the richness of the situations they are about.

The respective characteristics of vertical and horizontal accountability make the tension between them an inherent trait of institutional contexts. The tension is not to be removed or resolved; it has to be managed productively. The point is not to choose between vertical and horizontal accountability, but to configure the two so as to enable learning capability through both emergent and stewarding governance.

## **Configuring social learning capability**

Learning governance and accountability structures interact. For instance, a stewarding stance can be expressed vertically or horizontally, and in both cases meet emergent governance.

Organizations typically seek stewarding governance through vertical accountability structures, but emergent governance still operates in practice. First hierarchies are never total. They inevitably rely on local decisions. Second, attempts at bureaucratic control have unintended consequences in the local responses they generate—unexpected situations, compliance to the letter rather than the spirit, workarounds, appearance of compliance, improvised interpretations. From a purely vertical perspective, unintended consequences are bugs to iron out (or ignore). From a learning perspective, they are data that reflect local intelligence.

Social artists also take a stewarding stance by promoting what they are passionate about and enabling the necessary social learning spaces, but they typically act horizontally. Participants in social learning spaces usually do not report to them formally and they have no vertical authority over them. In expressing their stewarding, they are masters at engendering horizontal accountability. But the negotiated nature of their social work also involves a lot of emergent governance. Good social artists embrace the complexity of social learning spaces to calibrate their own stewarding. They leverage the complementarity of social spaces and individual trajectories to let unexpected encounters and emerging processes shape the learning they care about.

The interaction of learning governance and accountability structure is summarized in the following table:

<b>Governance Accountability</b>	<b>Stewarding</b>	<b>Emergent</b>
<b>Vertical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hierarchies</li> <li>▪ Policies and legislation</li> <li>▪ Prescriptions</li> <li>▪ Compliance audits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gaps in prescriptions</li> <li>▪ Local responses to design</li> <li>▪ Unintended consequences</li> <li>▪ Workarounds</li> </ul>
<b>Horizontal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Collective “self-design” in social learning spaces</li> <li>▪ The passions and caring of learning citizens</li> <li>▪ The willfulness of social artists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unpredictable interactions between learning spaces and individual trajectories</li> <li>▪ Cumulative systemic effects of local negotiations</li> </ul>

A similar table can frame the intentional use of vertical and horizontal accountability to realize stewarding and emergent governance:

<b>Governance Accountability</b>	<b>Stewarding</b>	<b>Emergent</b>
<b>Vertical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Enforcing non-negotiable alignment around what is certain, i.e., clearly known or desirable</li> <li>▪ Making the local accountable to systemic effects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unlocking clearly dysfunctional patterns to revitalize learning</li> <li>▪ Legitimizing voices that might be silenced locally</li> </ul>
<b>Horizontal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inspiration</li> <li>▪ Local initiative</li> <li>▪ Grass-root leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engaged improvisation</li> <li>▪ Joint reflection-in-action</li> <li>▪ Increasing movement of people</li> </ul>

I outline these principles because I believe we need a language to take into consideration the learning implications of the governance and accountability systems we design. For instance, if a topic of stewarding governance is going to be non-negotiable through vertical accountability, it had better be something that is worth the possible cost in learning capability: curtailing learning experiments and improvisation, privileging the stewarding perspective of those who enforce it, and usually reducing the expressibility of other perspectives. More generally social learning capability can be hindered in two opposite ways:

- If a uniform policy or “best practice” imposes compliance on all localities in a social system, the learning capability of the system is decreased because experimentation is curtailed (at least of a visible and sharable kind).
- Conversely, if governance is purely local and everyone acts completely independently, the learning capability of the system is not fully achieved because experimentation, risk-taking, success, and failure remain local.

Maximizing learning capability requires a variety of learning experiments that are independent, yet woven together with appropriate communication channels, commitment to learning, support, and distribution of risk. The beauty of this *principle of interwoven learning experiments* is that it does not homogenize practice, as a uniform policy would, and yet it does interconnect contexts of practice by generating learning interdependence among the participants.

This principle of independent but interwoven learning experiments suggests a new role for a centralized function in social systems. It is neither control nor laissez-faire, but an instance of stewarding governance aimed directly at fostering learning capability.

In the space defined by the tables above, maximizing learning capability requires all sorts of *transversal* processes that cut across dimensions:

- Vertical accountability structures make explicit room for social learning spaces without “colonizing” these spaces with vertical accountability. For instance, projects may be structured to include activities for cross-project learning. Communities of practice may have a budget.
- The role of social artists is recognized and they can engage directly with hierarchical power structures to give voice to the learning they care about and draw attention to key learning spaces.
- Learning citizenship is encouraged and valued as a carrier of learning capability within and across social learning spaces. For instance, the time people dedicate time and the contributions they make significant to their learning spaces are recognized in the vertical systems in which their performance is evaluated.
- People in the hierarchy act as learning citizens in their own ways and capacities. An executive can decide to sponsor a community of practice or to open a series of conversations as a way to steward an issue.
- Systemic patterns are made visible so they can become actionable through local interpretations.
- Ideas generated in a social learning space become proposals for new directions to be implemented across the board.

The configuration of horizontal and vertical accountability to support learning governance is key to the learning capability of a social system. But its paradoxical and dynamic character challenges traditional organizational structures. It requires transversal processes. It cannot be fully formalized and intelligence cannot be designed out through bureaucracy. Learning governance requires strategic conversations with a focus on substance rather than form. The configuration of a productive interface between horizontal and vertical accountability is perhaps *the* central challenge for 21<sup>st</sup>-century organizations in all sectors that are concerned with systemic learning and innovative capability.

## **Conclusion: a shift in mindset about learning**

What I have said here about these four factors of social learning capability is not really new. It has always been happening in small pockets. What is new is a need to become more intentional and systematic about fostering social learning capability as well as a need to do so at higher levels of scale and complexity. The learning capability that EQUAL was trying to promote across a diversity of projects, cultures, and nationalities is something we are only beginning to learn how to do. Still I am aware of a number of contexts where ideas like the ones presented here are influencing attempts at organizing for learning, including businesses, governments, school improvement programs, healthcare systems, and regional and international development agencies. I believe that a shift in mindset about learning is in the air—from a view of learning as a formal process caused by instruction to learning an essential aspect of everyday life and thus a capability inherent in social systems. I see people in a position to make a difference all over the world becoming attuned to this reality and interested in taking action. To move forward, we need two things. We need more examples to serve as living laboratories. And we need better conceptual frameworks of the type I have tried to outline here to interpret these experiments and learn from them. This combination of practical experiments and conceptual framework is an urgent need today when the world is full of pressing large-scale learning imperatives. It is what will give us the models we need to accelerate the learning of our small planet.

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