# Lessons from the LCCRD Hub
## Learning in Highly Distributed & Network Organisations

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## Overview

This paper reflects on the author's experience of designing and facilitating learning processes for the DFID Learning Hub for Low Carbon Climate Resilient Development (hereafter the Hub). Its point of reference is the report 'Learning in Highly Distributed Organisations'[1] which fed into the pre-design scoping stage of the Hub in early 2010. From 2010 to 2011 four interlocking learning cycles were held involving for each cycle a Framing Paper, International Learning Event, Synthesis Outputs, Online Knowledge Sharing, and Commissioned Follow-up Research. The reflections here focus mainly on Learning Events, with more general observations on the other elements of the learning cycles in which I was less directly involved.

## Introduction

In 2010 the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) was scoping out the need for a learning hub that would aim to:

> Improve knowledge and information flows between practitioners and experts in the field of low carbon climate resilient development [...] It will build the capacity within DFID to champion best practice, support innovation, and access practical tools and methods that enable appropriate action.

As part of this scoping IDS commissioned a report from Westhill Knowledge Group to provide an organisational learning and change perspective on three questions:

- How do organisations with highly distributed staff learn effectively?
- How have comparable learning hubs operated, what has been successful and not so successful?
- What lessons/recommendations should be considered by the IDS learning hub team?

Drawing on seventeen examples from the international development sector, the report Learning in Highly Distributed Organisations reviewed dimensions of organisational learning and change including networking, training, capturing experience, practice communities, different forms of communication, (dis)incentives to learning, functioning of expert/resource groups, capacity support and validation of principles.

The report suggested that Highly Distributed and Network Organisations (HDNOs) typically adopt a form of bounded pluralism in their selection of organisational learning methods. HDNOs avoid unduly overloading or restricting learners' access to methods and typically use four contrasting methods. These sets of methods evolve over time in response to changes in demand and in the operating environment for each HDNO. Drawing on theories and models of learning associated with David Kolb, Paolo Frère, knowledge sharing, organisational learning and capacity development the report identified those methods that should have the best fit for HDNOs. Sharing Own Experience and Communities of Practice showed the best fit, followed by Open Innovation, Reflection/Reflexivity and Socialisation. Reading across these methods the report identified seven activities that have shown greater success in supporting learning: spontaneous group conversations; face to face interaction; open networks /communities; responsive technical training and practical operational guidelines; bespoke synthesis of publications; critical friends; and stories / neighbourhood visits. Distilling experience from successful components of learning the report presented lessons for supporting learning in HDNOs relating to the themes of: complexity; trust and access; learning journeys; co-creation and improvisation; time for learning; existing learning processes; and risks from learning.

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[1] Carl Jackson with Victoire Ngoune (2010), Learning in Highly Distributed Organisations, Hastings, Westhill Knowledge Group, prepared for Climate Change and Development Centre at the Institute of Development Studies with support from the UK Department for International Development (Full paper available and comments welcome at: carl.jackson@wkg.uk.net)

In conclusion the report set out eight recommendations for further exploration in a design phase of the Hub. Drawing on the experience of designing and facilitating the hub over two years this paper offers reflections and lessons for each of these recommendations as follows.

1) Recommendation: Explore the complexity of work circumstances and learning demands in a highly distributed / network organisation which will call for a multimodal (bounded pluralism) response in terms of learning methods and approaches with about four options for people in different circumstances.
   a) Reflection: The scoping, design and implementation phases of the Hub did explore the complexity of DFID's work circumstances in each of the country locations that Learning Events were held and at DFID Head Quarters (e.g. through interviews, co-production of framing papers and event agenda, and client feedback). Exploration in the implementation phase was mainly reactive to client needs but the Hub's response to circumstances and demands was well tailored within each cycle. However the higher level purpose of how to improve knowledge and information flows across the whole of DFID (rather than in particular countries / regions) may have been less emphasised as a result.
      i) **Lesson: Construct a hypothesis about the complexity of work circumstances and learning demands at the whole organisation level at scoping to guide the choice of methods and approaches and then adjust and update this in light of subsequent experience and in balance with maintaining of the higher level purpose of the intervention.**
   b) Reflection: The learning methods and approaches used were a plural yet limited set (e.g. co-design, research evidence intermediation, online knowledge sharing, peer learning) and did evolve in response to the changing needs and operating environment of DFID in its HQ and country locations over two years (e.g. introduction of Peer Assist, Chat Show, Case Studies and Market Place of Commitments methods and dropping Skills & Needs Mapping, Generating Principles for Action, and Fishbowl methods). This evolution did benefit from client feedback and reflection by the Hub team at IDS. There was though a reluctance to persist with one method that was initially unproven (i.e. teleconferences) and to scale back one that was underperforming (online knowledge sharing).
      i) **Lesson: Initial selection of the set of learning methods and approaches should be translated into a set of criteria against which subsequent evolutions can be compared so as to ensure plurality is maintained and inertia is guarded against.**

2) Build a very flexible and responsive capacity strengthening window into the hub so that catalysts of existing guerrilla and country based learning processes can access support if they wish. Otherwise do no harm and do not compete with or smother what is already working informally.
   a) Reflection: Responsive research on the Political Economy of Climate Change was commissioned by DFID from IDS and partners in the form of an IDS Bulletin[2]. However this was one step removed from the direct capacity strengthening of catalytic actors within DFID envisaged in the recommendations. The principle of no harm or competition with what was already working informally within DFID would appear to have been followed.
      i) **Lesson: A flexible and responsive capacity strengthening window is probably best provided by an organisation able to deliver a wide range of services at country and HQ sites, like the planned DFID Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Services (PEAKS) centres, rather than an academic one.**

3) Offer professional facilitation and logistics for large face to face events of staff and boundary partners (60-80 people) using simple rules for interaction and allowing people the freedom to co-define, share and socialise whatever content they find valuable
   a) Reflection: Face-to-Face events were properly resourced in terms of facilitation and logistics support. Significant lead times for iterative planning of these events helped them to be very close to client needs.
      i) **Lesson: Commitment by the client and supplier to a long-term collaborative provides an enabling environment for proper planning, experimentation and**

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[2] Political Economy of Climate Change, Tanner, T. and Allouche, J. eds (2011), IDS Bulletin, Issue 3, Volume 42, Wiley

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**learning on facilitation and logistics for face-to-face events. It is more typical to commission such events at shorter notice and as one-offs which can lead to rushed planning, little experimentation and disjointed learning.**

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   b) Reflection:  The content of face-to-face events was significantly determined by the academic Framing Papers produced for each learning cycle theme. Although these papers were produced by IDS and partners in close collaboration with commissioning staff at DFID they did restrict opportunities for all DFID participants at the first two face-to-face events to co-define, share and socialise whatever information they found valuable. In later events the Framing Papers were less central and case studies of ongoing work by participants were introduced.

      i) **Lesson:  Committing to a face-to-face process whose content is determined during the event (e.g. Open Space[3]) is a leap of faith for researchers and technical advisers used to judging relevance and quality on published evidence.  Check awareness and if necessary introduce key stakeholders to novel processes to build commitment during the design phase.**

4) Open and moderate an email list serve linked to monthly teleconferences for spontaneous conversations where practitioners can share their own questions and learning.  Start from existing country champions in DFID and building out to an open network/community of practice

   a) Reflection: An online collaboration space on the Eldis Communities platform provided discussion forum type functionality (e.g. Resources and Support area) with optional email updates of new topics and posts.  The forum did not generate very much discussion.  An email list serve would have offered more limited functionality but could have been more userfriendly, especially for DFID staff used to accessing email from their smart phones.

      i) **Lesson: Selection of tools to support spontaneous conversations should be accessible and robust in the lowest level online connectivity operating environment within the user group.**

   b) Reflection: Online discussion fora need many more members to generate self sustaining discussions than was possible with the 140 DFID staff signed up or have a very narrow focus. Where possible whole group discussion online should be supported / prompted by small group discussion using a low-fidelity and robust tool like teleconferencing (not Skype as this is not universally accessible across different organisations / locations).

      i) **Lesson: Selection of tools to support spontaneous conversations should fit the functionality likely to be sustainably used by a low level of interaction by a realistically estimated size of user group. Conversation is the killer app.**

5) Produce a small number of very high quality co-created knowledge products linked to external process (relevance and timeliness are key). These should synthesize practical experience, research, indigenous knowledge and other evidence with an emphasis on sharing contact information and using reflexive storytelling approaches as well as analytical findings.

   a) Reflection: Each learning cycle produced a small set of relevant knowledge products (video experience notes, event reports, research synthesis papers) combining a range of evidence. Reflexive storytelling was used effectively in the video experience notes.  There was though a tension between presentational quality and timeliness which resulted in products often arriving after the momentum generated by face-to-face events had somewhat dissipated.

      i) **Lesson:  Open up the knowledge production process so that pre-publication content is accessible to key stakeholders within two weeks of discussions (e.g. circulating draft watermarked PDF texts and unedited video). Fully checked, proofed and graphically laid out knowledge products can then follow up and be distributed to other stakeholders.**

   b) Reflection:  Contact information (email and mobile especially) was excluded from knowledge products partly to encourage DFID staff to use the online knowledge sharing platform to communicate following events.  The low level of interaction on the Eldis Communities Learning Hub space indicates this was not the result.  Moreover, not sharing contact information and photos (although this was probably available from DFID's own systems)

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[3] Open Space processes have a theme, but agendas and contents are created by all participants in real time: http://www.openspaceworld.org/

placed an unnecessary hurdle in the way of participants at learning events who intended to network with peers more (especially from other country offices).

    **i) Lesson: Restricting access to networking information will not drive users towards a collaboration space. Enabling increases in the volume and frequency of links made within a growing network through a broad range of tools is the lower risk way to build participation in anyone particular tool. Successful media are social.**

6) Pre-purchase blocks of individual expert's time to allow them to be co-opted into the hub as critical friends and then engineer collaboration between experts as necessary rather than in a group.

    a) Reflection: Experts contributing to the hub were brought in on theme by theme basis and the process of face-to-face events did bring them into more flexible collaborations with their peers and with DFID staff. Their primary role as authors of Framing Papers did though mean that they often expected to play the role of advisers rather than critical friends and were sometimes uncomfortable with the lower profile roles they were asked to play in face-to-face events.

        i) **Lesson: Expert groups with call down contracts are hard to program and tend to generate unhelpful rivalry compared to pre-purchase of blocks of individual expert's time. Assign experts roles that are internally coherent and triple check that expectations are mutually understood.**

7) Staff an open innovation help desk team with an experienced team leader to crowd source knowledge from networks of expertise (including but not limited to individual subject experts) to meet complex policy innovation challenges

    a) Reflection: A helpdesk was not taken forward in the design of the Learning Hub but demand for helpdesk like responses to meet complex policy innovation challenges continued to surface. IDS suggested that DFID staff direct this demand to their existing resource centres but for the Climate, Environment and Livelihoods group no equivalent to the open innovation style help desk run for Governance, Social Development and Conflict advisers by the GSDRC was available. This will be a component of the planned CEIL PEAKS resource centre.

        i) **Lesson: Improved knowledge and information flows will tend to stimulate demand for responsive analytical support to complex policy innovation challenges. Funded arrangements should be put in place to access this support if the expected impact of improved knowledge and information flows is to be realised.**

8) Always use low cost, established commercial and public Web 2.0 / social media and mobile tools in preference to bespoke or private ones (email list serve, social bookmarking, teleconference, social networks). Carefully manage subscriptions to modulate trust and access in different spaces for participation.

    a) Reflection: Eldis Communities did offer an established and optionally public platform for online collaboration with blogging web 2.0 functionality and social bookmarking. It does not offer a mobile phone interface for its website and as bespoke tool is less efficient to manage and use than commercial public alternatives (which also offer optional private spaces).

        i) **Lesson: Decide on the choice of web 2.0 / social tools primarily from a user perspective rather than supply drivers associated with existing investments in online collaboration platforms**

    b) Reflection: Mobile tools, teleconferencing and email list serves were not taken forward in the design of the Learning Hub. It is not easy to produce counterfactual evidence that their inclusion would have significantly improved flows of knowledge and information. However, given the low land line connectivity levels and high use of mobile and smart phones by DFID staff and their partners in country to access the web, voice and email their omission was probably unwise.

        i) **Lesson: Smart phones have more relevant functionality and resilience in the operating environments typical in international development and so should be considered as the design reference point when selecting collaboration tools and not the PCs or laptops.**

9) Plan and design learning support in ways that will enable qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation of the complex impacts and outcomes of learning, rather than bolting on linear methods after the fact.

   a) Reflection:  The process of face-to-face events was designed so that participants, with the support of facilitators captured a high degree of process information as well as conclusion from their interactions in a range of complimentary media (visual, text, video, photo).  Specific session were also included for participants to record their commitments to action flowing from the events and to feedback on the difference events had made to their perception of their individual and DFID's organisational capability to act on the LCCRD theme under discussion.  Experts participating in the events were also commissioned to write reflection papers on the content and process of the events.  A specific session was also held towards the end of the two years at the DFID CEIL retreat where participants in Learning Hub events reflected with their wider peers on the impact the Learning Hub had had on their work.

   b) **Lesson:  Monitoring and evaluation can be integral to initiatives to promote flows of knowledge and information if the needs of evaluation are taken on board during the design of processes.**