

FOREWORD

Arjen E.J. Wals

UNESCO Chair Social Learning and Sustainable Development, Wageningen University

How can learning not be social? Isn't all learning social? These are often the kinds of questions I get when I share my fascination with social learning. Arguably all meaningful learning is inter-relational (with others, including other species, with place and, indeed with oneself) and requires some level of reflexivity by mirroring the significance of one's encounters with the inner sediments (frames, values, perspectives and worldviews) of prior experiences. The result tends to be a process of further solidification (freezing) or a loosening (unfreezing) or a modification (re-framing) or even the parallel occurrence of all three. So yes, the 'social' as inter-relational is crucial in most, perhaps all learning, that we engage in, but even though this is emphasised in social learning, this is not what sets it apart from related learning concepts such as collaborative learning, participatory learning, group learning, and so on.

It appears that in the context of working on inevitably ill-defined and ill-structured issues and situations (e.g. natural resource management issues or sustainability issues) there is an increased awareness that there is no one single perspective that can resolve or even improve such issues. Much social learning literature therefore refers to the importance of bringing together multiple perspectives, values and interests, including marginal and marginalised ones in order to be able to creatively and energetically break with stubborn routines that led to unsustainability in the first place. Despite the range of views on social learning that currently exist, the utilisation of pluralism and/or diversity in multi-stakeholder settings is often referred to as a key component of social learning. Now it

would be naïve to think that just by putting people with different backgrounds, perspectives, values and so on together, this creative and energising process would automatically start. This is where another form of 'social' comes in: social cohesion, sometimes referred to as social capital. In order to be able to create a constructive dynamic that allows diversity to play its generative role in finding routine-breaking solutions to sustainability challenges, there needs to be sufficient social cohesion between the participating actors, even between those who don't seem to care much about each other. In much of the social learning literature stress is placed on things like: investing in relationships, *deformalising* communication, co-creation of future scenarios and joint fact-finding. The idea is that when people who don't think alike, or even disagree, engage in a common task in a pleasant and safe environment, they will find their common humanity (which is considered a first step in developing the empathy for the other) needed to open up and engage with the other's perspective. Creating such an environment is an art in itself and requires careful facilitation – another key topic area in social learning literature.

In the open-access publication *The Acoustics of Social Learning* which appeared at the launch of the Wageningen University UNESCO Chair on Social Learning and Sustainable Development (Wals et al., 2009) we used the metaphor of an improvising jazz ensemble to capture the essence of social learning.

Chaos frequently emerges in an (improvising) jazz ensemble, but structure rules. Everyone makes up part of the whole and that whole is, if it sounds good, more than the sum of the parts. Every musician has his/her own experiences and competencies, but also intuition and empathy. The ensemble doesn't know how things will sound ahead of time, but its members

instinctively know when things sound good. They have faith in one another and in a good outcome. Leadership is sometimes essential and therefore provided by one of the musicians or a director, or it sometimes shifts and rotates. The music is sometimes written down, though this is often not the case, and everyone simply improvises. If it sounds good, then the audience will respond appreciatively, that is to say, those who enjoy jazz music (and not everyone does...). People from the audience sometimes join in, changing the composition of the ensemble. The acoustics of the hall in which the music is played is important as well: not all halls sound alike and some have more character. A concert may also be recorded to serve as inspiration elsewhere, though this does not happen often... (Wals et al., 2009:3)

Indeed social learning processes remind one of an improvising jazz ensemble. They too are intangible in a certain sense, and are therefore not easily controlled. Success often depends on the people concerned and on the manner in which they became involved. There are ideas regarding which direction the participants want to go and there are even recurring patterns, but the ultimate result comes about little by little. Sometimes, but certainly not all the time,

the conditions are quite optimal and the process brings out the unique qualities and perspectives of everyone and results in surprisingly novel solutions and actions. Indeed, in social learning too the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This monograph, consistent with some key ideas underpinning social learning, brings together and confronts different views on social learning, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the potential and the limitations of social learning in the context of natural resource management, environmental management and sustainability. The monograph represents one of the fruits of a collaborative effort between Wageningen University in the Netherlands and Rhodes University in South Africa. It represents a wonderful entry point into social learning for (young) academics not only in The Netherlands and South Africa, but all around the world, as some of the literature reviewed and the issues raised clearly transcend these two countries.

REFERENCE

Wals, A.E.J., van der Hoeven, N. & Blanken, H. (2009). *The Acoustics of Social Learning: Designing learning processes that contribute to a more sustainable world*. Wageningen/Utrecht: Wageningen Academic Publishers/SenterNovem.