

Sustainability partnerships: Relationships worth celebrating

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ABSTRACT

The interests that need to come together to achieve local sustainability are many-fold and diverse. State agencies and local governments, local communities and those representing economic, social and environmental interests all have a legitimate interest. Rarely will simply bringing these diverse interests together at the same table under existing conditions result in a successful and enduring partnership.

Using the collective learning cycle developed by Brown and her colleagues, an informed but impartial facilitator can help build shared ideals, assist the participants in recognising all the necessary facts underpinning a project, encourage the exploration of new ideas that go beyond what is at present, and finally come up with shared actions of which all can be proud. Three case studies document that this mode of collective learning offers much to celebrate, and celebrate we should, because this is a new way of doing business.

KEYWORDS: partnerships, sustainability, collective learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Brown, Harris and Russell (2010) identify multiple risks to human well-being in today's cities and towns. Increasing deficits in fresh water, renewable energy, recreational space, personal safety, and protection from pollution continue apace "in the face of multiple well-informed warnings". The problems facing sustainability are 'wicked problems' – "complex problems that require whole-of-community change, not the short term solutions currently in place".

Recognising the need for shared effort, we find government policies and programs at all levels calling for partnerships and the integration of different interests. However, it is at the local scale that these policies are finally delivered. In this paper we report

on the practice of collective learning and collaborative action as the driver for community at the local scale.

Successful partnerships, whether personal, professional or political, need to be underpinned by mutual understanding and respect, shared commitment and trust (Elix, Lambert & Williams, 2005 and many others). A different agenda, re-directing time and effort is required to establish and maintain this type of collaborative working environment. A set of case studies illustrates the benefits of following a collective learning spiral. The key to success is the celebration of difference, replacing the current tendency to look for divergent views and conflicts of interest.

2. METHODOLOGY

Through a broad range of action research studies over two decades (Local Sustainability Project (1997, 2005, 2008), Brown and her colleagues have identified five essential contributions to decisions leading to whole-of-community change. The studies confirm that effective decisions combine the contributions of key individuals, the local community, expert advisors and influential organisations with creative thinking. Whenever a combination of these interests made an active effort to collaborate, effective action followed. Where the same set of interests continued to defend their existing positions, nothing changed.

Blocks to working together were:

- Each interest group drawing only on their own knowledge source
- Participants expecting a conflict of interest
- Participants' goals being regarded as competing
- The interest groups speaking 'different languages'

Working together required:

- Collective learning from combining the different knowledge sources
- Participants celebrating collaboration
- Participants supporting each other's goals
- Communication through dialogue (Brown 2008)

From these findings it becomes apparent that a collaborative working environment must:

- a) find a way to bring the different sources of knowledge together;
- b) change the work environment from expecting conflicts of interest to celebrating collective learning.

The previous work of Brown and her colleagues identified the knowledge bases of the interest groups who make up the decision base on local sustainability. These can be represented as a nested set of knowledge cultures which together provide a mandala of collective knowledge used in shared decision-making.

Figure 1. The mandala of collective learning (after Brown 2001)

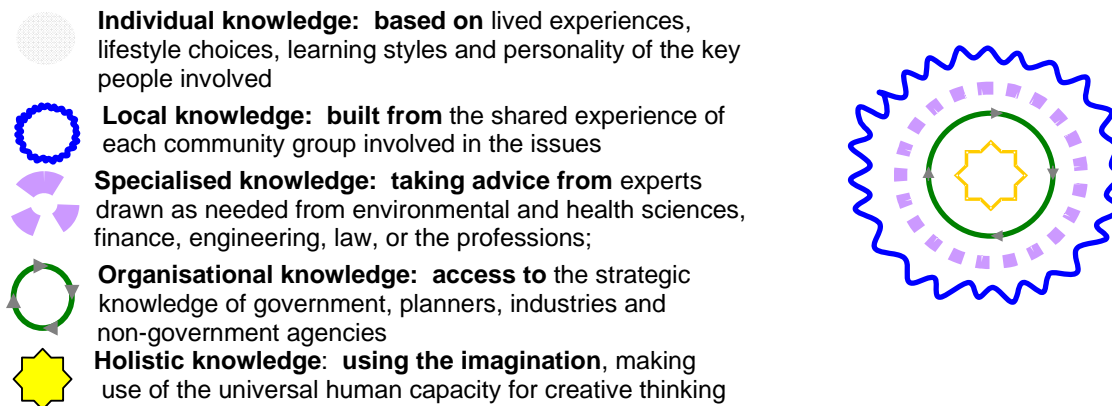


Figure 1 suggests one of many ways that the different knowledge sources can be connected to one another. The relationships form a nested set, with knowledge that is originally developed in people’s own heads (represented by a cloud of dots) adding up to local knowledge, the aggregated understanding of local conditions and events (wavy line). Specialised researchers collect evidence from individuals and communities using the methods of the bio-physical and social sciences (ring of boxes). Powerful organisations use individual, local and specialised knowledge in developing strategic direction (closed cycle). The use of the imagination contributes to the collection and application of each of the others (the star representing the shared focus) (Brown et al. 2010).

Bringing the sets of interest together to learn from each other requires a learning framework, an obvious candidate being David Kolb’s 1984 experiential learning cycle. Established over decades as the underlying framework in all adult experiential learning, the cycle is never complete since all adults learn from experience and the learning cycle becomes a spiral.

Figure 2. The collective learning cycle

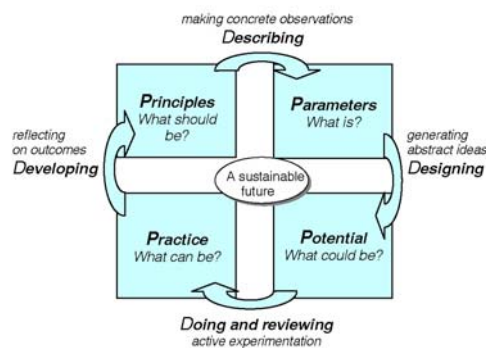


Figure 2 represents the Kolb learning cycle, originally designed for learning from individual experience. In the collective learning cycle, participants learn from each other at each of the four learning stages:

1. What should be? Discover each other’s ideals and goals;
2. What is? Establish the facts that underpin the set of ideals;
3. What could be? Generate creative ideas for achieving the ideals;
4. What can be? Design practical actions that ground the creative ideas.

For sustainability issues, participants are drawn from each of the five knowledge groups. Someone needs to be responsible for guiding their collective learning. As the three sample case studies illustrate, this guiding role can take many forms - as facilitation, team leader, negotiator, change agent, researcher, agency representative, theatre producer, host, fellow learner and even more. The three case studies of the collective learning process in action are from sites in coastal NSW, Townsville Queensland and Canberra ACT.

3. THREE CASE STUDIES IN BRIEF

Social change for sustainability does not come easily. It certainly has not arrived through decades of defensiveness and debate. A change in mindset is needed. In a collective learning process, participants celebrate their intended collaboration at every learning stage, first in sharing ideals and identifying facts, then in brainstorming ideas and translating them into practice.

Funding programs increasingly require a demonstration of partnerships between the applicants. There are benefits to be had in moving beyond 'the usual suspects' and celebrating the contributions of new perspectives round the table. The experience of the Local Sustainability Project (2005) is that in any complex project there should be participants from community, experts and government, plus individuals committed to the project and some creative thinkers.

3.1 Case Study 1: Regional collaboration for a government sustainability grant

Within the New South Wales Urban Sustainability Program, three adjoining local governments came together in 2009 to seek major funding for local initiatives that improve biodiversity outcomes at both a regional and local level.

The integrating question, developed between consultants and the Councils was *"What is the importance of the natural environment for the future of your own local government area and your shared bioregion?"*.

***'What should be?'*- Sharing multiple goals**

As Brown's local sustainability work has repeatedly identified, it is important that partnerships begin with respecting the different visions of *"What should be"* (Brown 2008). Starting with a set of ideals allows the partnership to work towards a different future. The aim is not to arrive at a lowest common denominator, or one party's priority, but to celebrate the strength of diversity.

The three councils involved in this Urban Sustainability case study brought to the table very different expectations, based on differing socio-demographic factors, organisational size and political realities. Ideals generated from answering their diverse aims for *"What should be"* included: building habitat connectivity and ensuring survival of the region's rich biodiversity, minimising waste, protecting Indigenous cultural heritage, encouraging nature-based tourism, facilitating local sustainable power generation and energy efficiency, providing sustainable transport across the region, encouraging sustainable development in infrastructure and services and protecting and supporting local supply-dependent primary industries.

'What is?'- Describing different starting points

Each council and each interest group has a different perspective on the factors that would determine achievement of these ideals. Rather than falling into an argument about who is right, a simple activity allows all participants to nominate the facts of the project that are important to them. The exercise, using management expert Kurt Lewin's 'Field Force Analysis' (1943) is fun to do and lays all the cards on the table.

Participants draw and label on a shared large sheet of paper, their own upward and downward arrows reflecting factors inhibiting and supporting achievement of their ideals. Working together in this way allows for informal conversations to take place and for concerns to become transparent.

In the environmental sustainability case study project, inhibiting factors were identified to include limited personnel and resources, competing demands on staff time, political pressures and priorities of councillors. Supporting factors included the importance of the natural environment to tourism and the economies of each of the councils, recent community support for sustainability initiatives, opportunities to link up existing works, availability of external funds and a need to meet State government integrated planning requirements.

'What could be?'- Finding creative ways of achieving goals

Once having established the collective participants' ideals for the partnership and the context in which they are set, the next stage is to think of creative ways to achieve them. Brainstorming ideas is the classic way to come up with fresh solutions. Brainstorming does not happen in a vacuum – it requires the guide to establish a stimulating environment where it is safe to experiment.

The outcome for the coastal environmental sustainability partnership was a set of projects that included a 60 kilometre world-class coastal walkway linking the three areas; local energy conservation and generation leading to building self-sufficiency by 2030; encouraging development of 'green' buildings, with 10% of new buildings meeting this criterion in the first two years, then 5% in each following year; and a region-wide car-pooling system across the three council regions by 2011.

'What can be?'- Developing a shared work plan

As an initial step in a much larger project, the partner councils developed a shared Routemap to Environmental Sustainability.

Shared measures of success can be developed from the steps in the action plan.

3.2 Case Study 2. Expanding a local government sustainability service

The collective learning framework was applied in a coastal city on a rather bigger scale than in Case Study 1. Initiated from within the Integrated Sustainability Services of the then Townsville City Council (since amalgamated), the goal was to develop a three year collaboration between Council, industry and community on furthering sustainability goals for the city. The collective learning workshop was held over two days for 150 people in a large conference centre.

The focus question agreed by all participants was: *"What collective actions can the corporate sector, experts, council and community take to progress a Sustainable Townsville?"*

The learning stages:

1. 'What should be?'

The workshop process began with three keynote speakers from engineering, business and action research. Participants were seated in tables of 10, each with a mixture of individual change agents, community members, technical experts, industry and government, and creative thinkers. Each table had the diagram from Figure 2. in the centre, A3 size. The participants agreed that their goals were to

- a) prepare a comprehensive Sustainability Plan or Road Map for Townsville;
- b) encourage community self-support; and
- c) develop a cost/benefit equation under conditions of environmental change for local business.

2. 'What is?'

Each of the 15 tables had a paper tablecloth on which they drew the field force analysis. Influencing factors were diverse across the tables, but a general summary looked like this:

Impeding factors:

individuals scattered across isolated regions
conflict between tourism, mining, and environmental interests
incompatible specialised solutions
competing organisations
absence of holistic focus
unfamiliarity of collective thinking

Supporting Factors:

individual learning from integrated project

unifying sense of place
collective action strategies
collaborative projects
new focus: A Sustainable Townsville
enjoying collective thinking

3. 'What could be?'

Each table developed individual plans on how they could take a specific action from ideas into practice, with each group taking direct responsibility for their own action plan. From the answers to this third question a list of 46 potential projects was created.

4. 'What can be?'

Each table was asked to commit to at least one action plan. Three of the most significant change strategies were:

Action plan: Prepare briefing papers for Mayor and next Council meeting in 3 weeks

Outcome: A Sustainability Office was created within the Mayoral unit of Townsville City Council to develop new policy directions, as well as to manage the current Sustainability Services.

Action plan: Draw on technical expertise to design a solar power test facility in Townsville

Outcome: Townsville was selected as one of five \$5million Australian solar city sites.

Action plan: Establish a Walking School Bus project in which each school rosters adults from each school catchment to pick up children along the way and walk them to school

Outcome: The coordinator of a local art gallery took up the challenge of developing the project, using her expertise in lobbying and marketing. Project development is under way.

3.3 Case Study 3: Community-based strategy on sustainability and health

The Nature and Society Forum sponsored the development of a Sustainability and Health Action Strategy for the ACT with seed money of \$30,000 from an ACT Health Promotion Grant Program. The strategy was developed through a series of community-based workshops. Twelve projects were generated, of which seven gained establishment funding from the Health Promotion Grants program in 2005. Three of the action plans are outlined briefly below.

Project "Concerned Citizens of West Kambah (CROWK)".

Website: http://www.gotoaco.com/act/group/CROWK__Concerned_Residents_of_West_Kambah.html

1. **What should be?** Engender a common community interest in and commitment to influencing sustainable development.
2. **What is now?** Planning completed; contacts with local community groups being built; a survey of the community and a community forum planned; and a community walk across the area ready to go.
3. **What could be?** Potentially, a process whereby sustainable interest and commitment in this community is strong enough for them to become a natural part of the local planning and development processes.
4. **What can be? Outcome:** Strategies to develop support from a) Catchment and Landcare groups; b) Local business, shops, etc.; c) Media, links to government planners, politicians, community groups, websites; and d) the other projects.

Project "The Art of Moving". ACT Environment and Sustainability Centre.

Website www.artofmoving.net.au

1. **What should be?** Raising people's awareness of the health and sustainability outcomes of active transport.
2. **What is now?** Existing program of engaging creative artists from primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors and the general public to produce cultural change material.
3. **What could be?** Postcard competition for design class at the University of Canberra; post cards placed on buses, street sculptures; street theatre; a book on the art generated by the project.
4. **What can be? Outcome:** Public exhibition "ART OF MOVING: IMAGE AND TEXT"; preparation of a book; free distribution of post cards; obtained free space on ACT buses.

Project "Sustainable Youth Filmmakers Workshops"

1. **What should be?** Aim: to create fun and generate interest and excitement about sustainability issues; to bring cross-generations together to learn.
2. **What is now?** Interest from ACT High School and local filmmakers; grant to purchase cameras and equipment.
3. **What could be?** Use older students, and community volunteers to provide briefing on knowledge content; mentoring from University of Canberra and Nature and Society Forum.
4. **What can be? Outcome:** First round of filming in schools evaluated. Quality of films varied; a useful learning process but needs links to the Art School for mentoring, funding, and wider ownership of the project

4. CONCLUSIONS

Good partnerships, like the people who enter into them, come in many shapes and sizes. However, all are a coming together of very different interests to achieve a shared outcome. As defined by the Australian Government (2010), a partnership is "A cooperation of different groups with complementary skills and interests who will work together to more effectively deliver projects". The experience documented in the three case studies confirms that far more than simply delivering projects, partnerships can develop and deliver innovative new programs.

The case studies provide a snapshot of the ways in which the collective learning spiral can set a positive working climate, overcoming barriers to working together. With a shared vision (the essential starting point for any shared journey to sustainable outcomes) and the help of an independent facilitator, groups starting out from very different points along the journey can, at the same time, reach their individual goals and deliver shared outcomes. The journey itself is a celebration of collaboration, rather than a mundane duty.

Those outcomes and the journey to them, require time, effort and goodwill. As Svendsen and Laberge conclude “co-creative engagement is almost always worth the investment when dealing with complex cross-boundary issues because the payoffs can be far-reaching and long lasting”. The examples above demonstrate that this prediction is achievable where the partnership collaboration is treated as collective learning worthy of celebration.

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