

Encouraging Transformative Learning Experiences from Development Practice in Cambodia

On 16 July 2008, the ADI Project of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) and VBNK hosted a one-day workshop entitled *Encouraging Transformative Learning*. The workshop provided a forum for NGO colleagues to explore different understandings of transformative learning and its relevance to their work in social development in Cambodia. This paper first provides a brief description of the workshop process and summarises some of the conversations that took place. The paper then provides joint reflections from ADI and VBNK staff about what we have learned from hosting this community conversation.

1. Background

Since the publication of the 2001 seminal study, *Learning for Transformation*,¹ several NGO projects have sought to experiment with transformative learning approaches including VBNK's CHART Project² and CCC's ADI Project.³ Launched in 2002, VBNK's CHART Project aims to promote an appropriate, process-oriented, sustainable and empowering development practice within Cambodia, so that social development organizations can have more empowering relationships with their clients.

Introduced in 2006, the ADI community course seeks to develop critical thinking skills among NGO practitioners and village stakeholders to respond to emerging development issues in Cambodia. In particular the ADI community course seeks to build the capacity of participants to mobilize local communities in response to emerging issues through participatory action research (PAR).

Early conversations between VBNK and ADI Project staff about our respective efforts to build capacity amongst practitioners in the social development sector revealed a shared interest in learning for transformation. They also revealed that we were facing similar challenges. We thus formulated the following premise:

Transformative learning processes are effective and do lead to positive social change. The organisation reality is that individual implementation is often blocked by organisational culture and the needs to comply with donor requirements.

¹ Moira O'Leary and Meas Nee, 2001, *Learning for Transformation: A Study of the Relationship between Culture, Values, Experience and Development in Cambodia*, Krom Akphiwat Phum, Phnom Penh

² Creative Holistic Action-research for Relationship Transformation

³ Analysing Development Issues Project of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia

The workshop set out to explore this premise. More specifically, the workshop provided an opportunity (a) to build on our collective experiences to deepen our appreciation and understanding of transformative learning approaches; and (b) to share practical ideas for bringing transformative learning into everyday practice in the workplace.

2. The workshop process



The workshop began with a story telling exercise; participants worked in groups of three to share stories of learning and change from their own experiences.

Personal Stories about learning and change

Preparation

Remember an experience – one from your own or your organisation’s work and experience – that led to a positive change for you or your organisation. This should be about an experience of building relationships and trust, empowering or mobilising communities, or a time when you took the lead in another successful change process. It should NOT be about service/resources delivery.

*Who was involved? What was the context (place and situation)? What happened?
What was the result? And what did you learn from this experience?*

Sharing among three persons and feedback

Each person takes her/his turn to tell a story, followed by questions for clarification from the others. During the story telling, the others listen for similar ideas and points of particular interest in each story.

Summary review

After all three stories have been told and clarified the group review all the stories and identify similarities and points of interest emerging from the stories. Together the group will select

- Characteristics that are similar across the various stories
- Factors that contributed to/enabled the learning

During the morning break, the facilitation team reviewed and grouped the cards into like themes. Three major groupings emerged:

- The first set of cards emphasized the importance of starting with self. Cards in this set referred to being open and flexible to change; building relationships and trust; and getting unstuck (letting go of pre-conceived ideas and biases).
- The second set of cards was concerned with process and, in particular, the role of the stakeholders in the process. Specific cards referred to building common purpose; community led and owned development interventions; building solidarity; empowerment strategies; and committing the time and resources to support the process.
- The final set of cards was concerned more broadly with learning and included: learning through experience; critical analysis into action; reflection; learning that informs change; replication of learning to other contexts; and learning that informs policy makers.

During the plenary it was noted that thus far, we had only focused on enabling factors, and that it would also be important to uncover blocks to learning. This provided a lead into the two presentations that followed, which explored external factors and also how our internal policies and practices (our way of doing business) can act as blocks to learning.



The first presentation, a docu-drama, highlighted how the ADI Project is applying PAR (participatory action research) into its work with communities. The story focused on development issues related to management of water resources and illegal fishing practices in one Cambodian border community. The

presentation showed how community members came together to explore the 'what' and 'why' of natural resource management and how a lack of attention to local water resources was affecting livelihood security. The presentation showed how the PAR process had opened up a space for the community to shift from blaming others (i.e. these problems are caused by the dam across the border) to more critically exploring and acting on how they could become part of the solution. The presentation also showed how communities may experience strong feelings of fear, confusion and powerlessness in the face of change.

The second presentation told the story of VBNK's journey from a service delivery to a learning organisation. The story highlighted the interventions taken by VBNK to encourage staff to look at themselves and to better understand blocks to learning. At first, this was challenging to staff's confidence; it created confusion and even resentment. Some

interventions, like team building, seemed to work; others seemed to create new problems. For example drawing in external experts to challenge our thinking reinforced old ideas about learning and created dependence on consultants. The publication of Learning for Transformation was a first step in helping VBNK to understand the complexity of the challenges they had been struggling with for a long time. Thus VBNK decided to develop a long-term, coordinated strategy for building VBNK as a learning organisation, a strategy which would ensure that all staff were engaged in their own personal learning journeys.

VBNK also decided to adopt the Action-Reflection-Learning-Planning tool to provide structure to both individual and organisational learning and committed time and resources to support reflective practice. In short, “we have learned that it is wiser to take time to go deeply into learning about one approach and how to apply it, rather than to keep trying on new ideas, tools and techniques. We have also found that uncovering and addressing blocks to learning can sometimes uncover new challenges.” Issues related to power and hierarchy, mistrust and fear, the legacy of trauma and gender inequity continue to be underlying blocks to learning.

The journey is a work in progress with
“its fair share of successes and failures
...some depressing and confusing,
some ...wonderful and inspiring.”

The morning closed with a question and answer panel session, during which participants began to discuss challenges they face, for example, in linking program quality and learning, or in making space for reflective practice in the face of competing organisational demands. There was also a brief discussion about “regressive” learning and how the need to comply with donor reporting requirements and the project log frame requirements may be seen as barriers to the flexibility needed for open-ended, non-prescriptive learning.



In the afternoon, the group participated in a development café conversation⁴ to address this question: *If we want to promote transformative learning in communities, what do we have to do to first nurture it in ourselves?*

Following the café discussions, participants were asked to sit alone or with colleagues from their organisation and address the question: *To encourage transformative learning I / my organisation needs to.....*

The various responses are summarised below.

⁴ See: Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, World Cafe Community, and Margaret J. Wheatley, 2005, *The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.

Do more:

- Model learning to others; get more peaceful; more listening and understanding; more questioning and analysing; and (overwhelmingly) ensure time and space for reflection
- Continue building trust, ownership and relationships, builds cooperative relations with local authorities; seek ways to connect communities to other partners
- Build capacity amongst staff, including how to breakdown patron-client practices; foster determination
- Try out the development café; plan out an incremental, long-term approach that promotes integration of skills and behaviour change; try out strategies that maximise people participation; and ask target populations/clients to assess program satisfaction; develop models and ways to replicate to new areas

Do less:

- Less control; less content (more process); raise expectations amongst external agencies; lower time commitments to other busy work; seek out ways to balance workload; be less concerned with counting outputs; less rescuing, telling and saying; doing for instead of doing with; strengthen capacity building at community level

Two points emerged during the final plenary session:

- First, participants appreciated the opportunity to come together to talk about and share experiences with colleagues about transformative learning and called for similar learning events in the future.
- Second, there was an understanding that, if we are to effectively facilitate development processes, then we need to begin with ourselves, to look more deeply at self awareness, whole person learning and letting go. This is an area that might be explored in future forums.

3. Reflections – what did we learn from this experience?

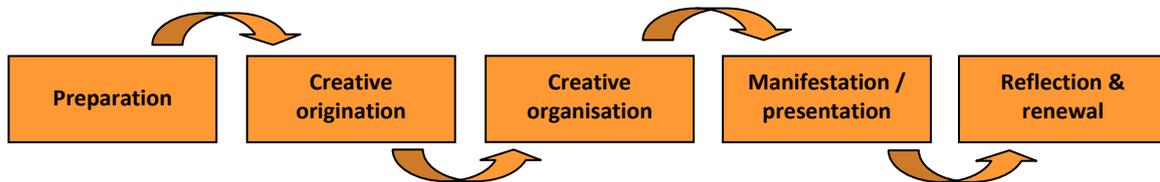
a. Reflections from VBNK

The VBNK staff that had been part of the co-preparation and co-delivery of the one-day workshop came together again during one of our bi-monthly learning week sessions⁵ to review what we had done and to identify lessons learned. The learning week (August 2008) had opened with a discussion about how well we were making use of the action-reflection-learning-planning cycle that characterises our work. One concern was that our use of the tool may have become too mechanical, and that we needed to sharpen our critical analysis.

⁵ VBNK schedules regular bi-monthly learning week sessions throughout the year for all program and program support staff. Each session includes individual and team reflection as well as focusing on specific areas for further exploration. The final end-of-year session provides a forum for annual planning.

Thus in approaching the reflection on our experience preparing for and hosting the workshop, we drew on a “Creating Methodology” framework that had been developed under the umbrella of the Centre for Creative Development at VBNK.⁶ The framework defines five phases of creative practice:

Fig 1 Five phases of creative practice



We began by retracing the evolution of the workshop from the first conversation to actual delivery of the one-day workshop. We noted that hosting the one-day event had proven to be a bigger task than we had originally thought. We felt that the enthusiasm and excitement generated in the initial discussions ‘took over’ and that we had moved ‘too quickly’ into generating creative ways to do the workshop. On reflection, we could have spent more time on establishing our common purpose with ADI, building shared ownership, scoping out the work and clarifying shared roles and responsibilities (as depicted in Fig 2). Ironically, one of the outputs generated during the workshop was a reminder about the importance of building ownership and relationships and giving adequate time to any learning process.

We also found that when we moved from creative origination to thinking about how we would organise the one-day event, we needed to go back and re-think many of our ideas. This was particularly noticeable with the presentations made by ADI and VBNK. For example, our first drafts of the story boards were long and awkward, and each of the storyboards went through several re-writes. As a result, the ‘actors’ did not have sufficient time to become fully familiar with (to have ownership for) the script. We asked ourselves if getting caught up by the excitement of an idea was a pattern in other areas of our work. It seems that, in some instances, we do let enthusiasm over-ride caution.

We also asked ourselves if we would host a forum of this kind again. The answer we came to was “yes.” Hosting community conversations is consistent with our identity statement of:

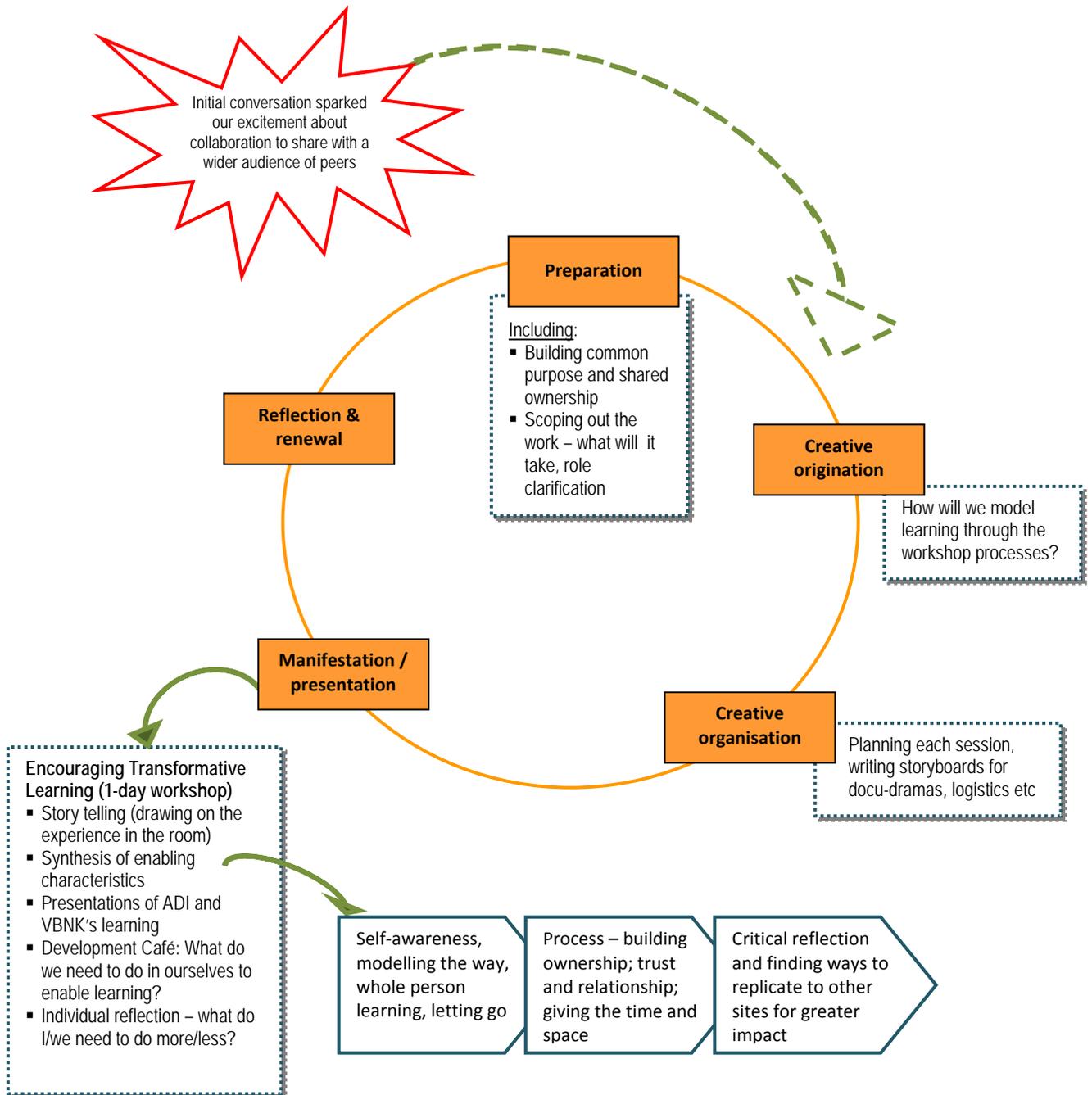
“...being a learning organisation, contributing to sustainable and positive change in Cambodia’s development... by initiating and creatively applying development methods that can generate knowledge, understanding and wisdom in our work, and in all that we do with social development organisations.”

Central to the identity statement is the understanding that we want to influence not only our own practice, but the practice of others. At the same time, though, we need to pay more attention to impact and to making sure that these kinds of forums are not one-off

⁶ Glass, D, 2003, *Creative Practice: A Guide to Creativity in Development*, VBNK, Phnom Penh and David glass Ensemble, London.

events. We also need to find ways to build linkages amongst different actors working in the social development sector. Staff recommended that our next community conversation with peers in the development sector should target Cambodian NGOs.

Fig 2 Reflecting on what we learned hosting this workshop



b. Reflections from the ADI team

The ADI team met on August 20 with VBNK advisor, Enda Moclair, to reflect on the lessons learned from the joint experience of co-hosting the Workshop on Transformative Learning. The team traced the origins of the event from the initial conversation of ADI and VBNK in late 2007, to the first planning meetings in February, to the workshop on July 16. While the time given for preparation far exceeded the initial expectations of both ADI and VBNK, the ADI team acknowledged that it had learned much from the sharing and association with VBNK and that this more than justified the extended commitment to the collaborative effort.

The ADI reflections on August 20 focused mainly on *identifying lessons learned for improving its development practice*. The discussion initially centered on how the lessons learned could serve the further development of the community course and then how the techniques learned from VBNK could be applied to ADI training sessions more generally.

Community Course

Prior to the collaboration with VBNK the ADI team had spent considerable time in reflecting on the lessons learned from the community course and the assessments conducted by external consultants. The sessions with Enda in preparing the drama presentation helped the team to deepen and sharpen its understanding of the community course experience. Unlike other trainings, the community course involved engagement with NGO programs and this had led to mixed reactions from stakeholders. But while course participants were generally excited about the PAR approach, many of their line managers found it disruptive of their project implementation plans. ADI thus realized that we needed to spend more time with the line managers and participants to explain and negotiate the changes that often arose from participation in the community course. The ADI team also became aware that the shift from service delivery to community mobilization entailed a paradigm shift that needed to be nurtured and reinforced among participating NGOs.

In sharing their exhilaration and frustration of the community course experience with VBNK staff, the ADI team learned that VBNK had experienced similar ups and downs with transformative learning initiatives. This helped to boost the ADI team's confidence as well as to provide them with insights on how to work through, the perhaps inevitable, instances of resistance.

To date, lessons learned from the ADI community course have focused largely on the process and outcomes of community mobilization. ADI has yet to engage local communities in reflection sessions on what they have learned from their own experience of community planning and action. The development of the storyboard for the ADI presentation challenged the ADI team to reflect more deeply on the process from the community's point of view. In retelling the story the ADI team described how the local villagers had dealt with their feelings of confusion, fear, and powerlessness. This became the centerpiece of the dramatic presentation. Several



workshop participants commented on the significance of this theme which underscored for ADI the importance of pursuing this issue further.

Training Sessions

While the ADI team employs a diversity of training methods and encourages interactive and participatory learning, its association with VBNK opened up entirely new ways of looking at process learning. For example, the “development café” small group discussions can easily and profitably be incorporated into ADI training sessions. Similarly, story telling will help to ground the sometimes abstract discussions of globalization, poverty, and the environment. In like manner the team came to appreciate warm-up games not simply as energizers but as ways of building trust and confidence among groups and participants. The team also looked to apply qualitative indicators to monitoring change and to using the Action-Reflection-Learning-Planning (ARLP) tool. Perhaps most of all the ADI team experienced first hand how the dramatic presentation captured the attention of the audience and enabled them to discover subtle points on their own.



Lessons Learned from Working with VBNK

Initially the ADI team members were somewhat hesitant about the creative approach to the workshop proposed by VBNK. While the team had been involved in several Issue Briefing Workshops in the past, these had been mainly structured around power point presentations presented in Khmer. Now we were being asked to participate in a dramatic presentation to be delivered in English before a large audience composed of Executive Directors and Program Managers. A joint meeting in March did little to allay our fears. [One of the ADI team remembered that meeting as being dominated by one English person, one Irish, two Americans, and one Indian.] However, during a dry run session in April, we became more familiar with the process and began to enjoy the activities. The willingness and commitment of Enda to work with the team over several practice sessions built confidence and team spirit and sparked excitement about participating in the drama.

From the point of view of the ADI advisor who worked more closely with the VBNK senior staff, the experience of working with VBNK was likewise much different than previous collaborations with other NGOs on Issue Briefing Workshops. Conversations with VBNK senior staff, unlike with other partners, centered on process outcomes and their contribution to learning as opposed to the more usual preoccupation with content. It was a refreshing change to approach the workshop in this manner. The advisor remained open to the VBNK process approach mainly because he had full confidence in the ability of the VBNK Executive Director to manage it.

The notion of “share and prepare” which came to characterize the collaboration supported the rationale for the extended commitment as it involved ADI staff development. But while ADI was willing to allow VBNK to manage the process, it had its own interests to ensure that sufficient time would be allocated for the sharing of its PAR experience in Ratanakiri. The two partners tried to accommodate each other while maintaining their own integrity. The relationship thus evolved somewhat like the exercise of two people balancing a stick between their index fingers, trying to move forward together without letting the stick (in this case the workshop) fall down.

The value of the extensive preparation put into the workshop was evident on July 16. The high point of the workshop was arguably the two presentations and the panel discussion that followed. It was evident from the comments and questions of the audience at this time that they understood and appreciated the value of what was being shared. Similarly many of the points shared throughout the day by the VBNK and ADI teams had their origin in the various preparation meetings. While the preparation was time consuming it had its rewards in the end.

4. Conclusions and follow up

Participants in the one-day workshop expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to come together to share experiences about transformational learning. During the workshop, they highlighted the importance of self-awareness, of being authentic (modelling the way) and of learning to let go of old habits that are no longer serving us well. They also highlighted the centrality of trustful relationships, of ownership and of making sure we dedicate adequate space and time to learning. At the same time, they cautioned us not to lose sight of the fact that powerlessness, fear and confusion in the face of change are deeply-held feelings for many of the people with whom we work.

They also called for similar learning events in the future and suggested that a starting point would be to begin with ourselves and to look more deeply at self awareness, whole person learning and letting go.

ADI and the VBNK CHART teams have committed to reconnecting again in 2009 through a one-day follow up session to share experiences and to reflect on how we have applied lessons learned from this collaboration. As noted, the participants at the July workshop expressed interest in furthering the dialogue on transformative learning. This reflection paper is intended to spark a conversation among Cambodian development practitioners about how we can move forward. Who knows, maybe this will be the start of the Transformative Learning Network? Or are we getting too enthusiastic again?