

MOST TRAINING DOES NOT DEVELOP ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY **What we need to do differently?**

‘Capacity development’ (CD) has been a long-standing feature of international aid-based cooperation. The two most prominent modalities of CD-support have and continue to be ‘*training*’ and the provision of *technical-thematic experts* as advisers.

The demand of local and national agencies in aid-recipient environments for greater ‘*localisation*’, may trigger a new wave of CD. But have we learned from experience?

Reports that capture the views of the new Syrian non-state agencies that have emerged since the uprising, about the trainings they received from international agencies, suggest we haven’t. Their critical comments relate to attention points identified more than a decade ago, e.g. by Anderson & Olson (*Confronting War 2003*) or Sprenger (*The Training Process: Achieving social impact by training individuals? 2005*).



Why Does So Much Training Have Little Impact?

Why does much training, of people-in-practice, not lead to the desired changes in the participant’s behaviour, and has little to no impact on collective capacity? The most common reasons relate to the participation, content and learning approach.



Participation

- *Poor selection*: The participants are not necessarily people that can influence their teams or wider organisation, or they are not motivated to do so: the main interest is their personal development, perhaps to foster their individual career;
- *Lack of critical mass*: The re-entry problem is well known: when I return to an environment that continues with ‘business as usual’, I cannot apply the new insights or skills I have learned in a training course and I quickly give up trying. Even a participant in a position of influence will struggle to introduce some changes until there is more of a critical mass of colleagues who have been through the same learning process;
- *No ongoing support*: Even with space to try out the new learning, there is no ongoing support when our learners hit an important question or run into a problem;
- *Staff turn-over*: Trained staff leave the organisation to go elsewhere. Or we create our own loss of return-on-investment by moving them to another position where they cannot or must not use their acquired learning. How often have we seen that with colleagues trained as ‘trainers’?



Content and learning approach

- The content is experienced as *too theoretical and too general*: it doesn’t resonate with the particular context and challenges that participants are struggling with;

- *Training courses are fragmented aggregations* of topics, delivered by different people whose inputs are not harmonised substantively nor pedagogically;
- *The delivery does not respect principles of adult learning*: too many lectures, panel discussions and other formats that are not interactive and do not address the priorities and concerns of the participants;
- *Participants are not able to practice their learning during the learning event*: they may have gained some awareness, perhaps some theoretical knowledge, but not 'skill';
- *The learning doesn't engage the whole person*: Trainers and participants stay at the rational-intellectual level. But there is no *deep learning* without deeper engagement. Yet, there is a difference between a carpenter who is technically good, and one who is also passionate about working with wood and takes pride in her work. You can see the difference between an aid worker who is technically good at food distributions, and one who also remains aware of the real purpose: protecting the nutritional health and dignity of fellow human beings who find themselves in extreme circumstances. Just as a trainer with a hierarchical mind set cannot truly train on participatory methods, because s/he has herself difficulty relinquishing control.



Making Training More Impactful



Content- The content needs to speak to the priority concerns and the contexts of the target audience. That can only happen if it becomes more demand than supply driven.

This is easier when *training-in* than *training-out-of-context*. When running security management training courses years ago, it was much easier to train e.g. threat assessment, threshold of acceptable risk, acceptance strategy or incident analysis on location, in Tajikistan or Indonesia for example, than in the UK with participants from many different contexts. On location we could directly apply the frameworks with the participants. In the UK course we had to explain that there was no generic answer sheet, because all generic advice still needed to be filtered through '*situational judgment*'. The point is relevant in general: Finance training for aid agencies operating in south-central Somalia or Yemen will have to take into account what is feasible in those contexts: Three independent quotes and receipts for every expenditure might not be realistic. Just as 'feedback' or 'complaints handling' mechanisms for populations dealing with aid agencies, need to find a practical expression that will work in a given context.

One important caveat here: we do not always know what we don't know and may not appreciate the importance of something until we gain more insight in it. If one day the violence in Syria stops, we know from experiences elsewhere that there will be, as example, major disputes over land, housing and commercial property. Even if that scenario is nearer, there may not be demand (or even supply) for learning about how to handle this, until it has already become a widespread problem. Just as we may not express a demand for training in e.g. participatory budgeting or participatory polling, because we simply don't know that it exists and how it can be relevant and beneficial for us.



Learning approaches - Application and practice are central. Providing frameworks, explaining underlying principles, illustrative examples from other settings are all relevant. But the purpose of effective learning is to go beyond awareness and 'theoretical' knowledge, to skill: the ability to do.

That means case studies, exercises, role play etc. enhanced by constructive feedback. There is no learning like guided, experiential learning– and repeat exercise to improve.

You can't learn facilitation skills or get better at public speaking, without practicing (and observing yourself in action on video), You can get better at negotiating with armed actors wanting to block your relief convoy, if you have been able to try it out repeatedly in role plays with different scenarios and interlocutors. You cannot learn to become more comfortable using different leadership styles based on their situational appropriateness, without rehearsing in a safe space, or working through real-life events with a coach or other trusted sounding board.

Language can play a role: When training Libyans in facilitation skills, I was assisted by my Lebanese colleague who would translate or lead directly in Arabic. We deliberately provided regular time for things to proceed in Arabic, as even excellent translation cannot capture the finer nuances and deeper differences in outlook between Libyans having lived 40 years under the Qaddafi regime and a European.

Deeper learning requires the training to cover less, and leave more time for practice. Self-evident as this may seem, most training courses do *not* adhere to this. Simply because practice, repeat practice, conversations and learning in different languages with some translated summary, take time. And many of us, those seeking training, the trainers or those sponsoring the training, don't want to invest too much time in 'training' or 'being trained'.



Role shift - When our focus shifts from the '*delivery of supplied training*' to the '*learning of the participants*', the 'trainer' becomes more of a 'learning facilitator'.

Effective learning facilitators in our international cooperation context have to be much more than 'trainers': We need to be able to grasp the context the learners operate in, and what trajectory has brought them, their programme, organisation or network, to where they are now. We need to be able to provide relevant illustrative examples from other contexts, but be ready to explore with the participants what might be the most appropriate approach in their particular situation. This definitely must happen for a training/learning event '*in context*'. But major steps in that shift are also possible for an '*out-of-context*' learning event.

What does a learning facilitator do differently from a classical trainer?



More and different preparation: Learning facilitators want to know beforehand who the participants are and where they come from. This is about more than biographical paragraphs. As much as possible, they want to have an idea of why they seek a particular training, what their most important questions are. When they can design the course, they may ask participants to send in advance a brief 'case study' of a relevant situation that they are currently struggling with, or an important unresolved one from the past. Participant cases can then be integrated in the learning programme, also through peer-learning. When participants come from the same organisation or a few operating in the same environment, the learning facilitators want to learn about the organisation(s) and that context in advance.



An integrated learning programme: 'Buffet style' courses cover a lot of different topics and are 'delivered' by a diverse set of trainers or resource persons, without real effort to create a thematic and pedagogical integration. As a participant I too have enjoyed sampling a variety of different dishes from different cooks. But it never added up to a memorable 'dining experience' that took me to the next level. When my purpose as course director is to give my participants a real learning experience that is relevant to the actual challenges they face in their professional life and personal development, I need to create a programme flow with

thematic integration and pedagogical variation, enough time for ‘practice’, and some flexibility to respond to emerging demand. If I use different resource persons, I will extensively engage with them in advance, to ensure the best ‘fit’ of their content and educational approach to the particular participant profile and within the larger programme;



Flexible lesson/course planning: We don’t want over-prepared sessions that force participants to follow the lesson ‘plan’. We also don’t want an approach that is highly responsive to participant questions but vulnerable to criticism of being too ‘unstructured’. My best solution so far is to prepare, trying to anticipate what might be key questions for participants based on what I know about them, but also considering relevant attention points or learning they may not have thought about (yet). Early in a session, I will ask participants what their big questions are regarding the topic. Then we can together assess what my preparations enable me to engage with, and what not. If participants want to spend more time on a particular issue or exercise, then the necessary trade-off is explicitly discussed with the group. They need to share the responsibility for how we make the most of this learning opportunity.



Connect: Even for a session of 90 minutes, I will try and learn people’s names, and connect briefly, before, during and after, to at least some of them. My being more fully present invites them to do the same, so we are ready for a joint learning journey.

What other characteristics have proven relevant and valuable for me as learning facilitator? My own practical and broad comparative experience: It helps to identify with the challenges my co-learners face, and to quickly pick up important aspects of a context. Also experience as a facilitator, working with groups, including their emotional dynamics. A growing skill in asking catalytic questions that help the others think deeper and more creatively about solutions they haven’t yet seen. And an acceptance that the collective intelligence and wisdom can likely to be more than what I have in my suitcase of answers and solutions.



Beyond Individual Training: Team learning and organisational capacity.

More relevant content and more experiential approaches will improve the individual learning. But the ‘theories of change’ that assume this will then quite automatically translate into better professional practice and broader team or organisational competency, have been constantly proven wrong. There is no robust evidence that ‘training of trainers’ offers the solution here.

Where the aim is to strengthen broader capacity and not just that of individuals, the approach has to change radically. Significant shifts are required not only from ‘trainers’ but also from three other key stakeholders:

- *Organisations looking to strengthen their capacities* have a broad organisational commitment to it, and a strategy. Training moments can be part of that. But the overall organisational learning and development also takes place in many other ways: by recruiting people with strong learning abilities; identifying some organisational learning priorities; managers or team leaders inquiring as often about learning as about finance and workplans etc. Where a focused learning event is needed, a critical mass of key people is identified, and a training/learning facilitation provider that can tailor its offer to the particular context and client. Many real world challenges also require organisations to collaborate if they want to have some scale and impact.

Different organisations operating in the same environment can therefore aggregate their demand, share the costs, and subsequently benefit from easier collaboration because of their shared learning.

- *Training institutions* can continue to have a core repertoire of fairly standardised training courses. But overall they get much better at tailoring their role and input to the needs of particular clients, and much of their training takes place on or near location. Some form of blended learning can become a powerful combination: Information and knowledge can be shared through e-learning. This is then followed by face-to-face facilitated learning with an emphasis on practice and fit-for-context. Structurally, we probably need less providers of isolated training courses, and more institutions that are able to offer or facilitate a longer-term 'learning and development' accompaniment, in a more mentoring style.
- *Those sponsoring training* significantly reduce funding of one-off training courses, and invest more in longer term capacity-development strategies, with accompaniment and organisational mentorship.

Now we are ready to shift from 'outputs' in terms of numbers of courses and participants, and start working towards 'outcomes' and 'impact'.

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