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AWARD
Tech Report
Series

Supporting Learning: The Spiral Approach to Professional Support Initiatives

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2015





Acknowledgements

The USAID: RESILIM-O project is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under USAID/Southern Africa RESILIENCE IN THE LIMPOPO BASIN PROGRAM (RESILIM). The RESILIM-O project is implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD), in collaboration with partners. Cooperative Agreement nr AID-674-A-13-00008.

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July 2015

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Introduction

In brief, the nature of the support provided to different professionals and institutions can be depicted in the form of a spiral. The characteristics of a spiral are that it has a definite starting point and expands outward in ever increasing circles over time. There is no pre-defined end-point and in this regard it is open-ended. A spiral and learning, (from a social constructionist view of learning), are compatible. Firstly, there is a defined starting point where what the learner already knows needs to be ascertained before any

meaningful learning can commence and the learning process proceeds as new meaning is made over time and according to a process of engagement that is socially embedded in a group or institution. Learning is a life-long process that can be punctuated by agreed upon interactions and interventions. In that sense it is a social process and allows for responsiveness to context, provided there is time for reflection. This document provides some basics to the approach.

A spiral orientation

Essentially the spiral approach is a model developed for professional support to practicing educators within the South African education context.¹ It however can be appropriate for meeting the needs of professional support and skills development in a wide variety of institutional settings.

The diagram that follows captures some of the most significant aspects of the model. It is important to note that it is an approach that emphasizes process over content, as content emerges as part of the process. Special focus is placed on the development of broad spectrum of issues such as confidence, trust, conceptual capital, appropriate competence and skills, professionalism as well as particular areas of knowledge. As

these are foundational to the professional being able to make meaning and apply new knowledge appropriately in a particular institutional setting.

This approach contrasts with traditional training endeavours where the focus is mainly on factual input and “information transfer”.

¹ The spiral model is described in a publication of the Department of Education entitled ‘The Spiral Model: new options for supporting professional development of implementers of outcomes based education’ (2000).



The trouble with information dissemination as a basis for learning programmes is that it is often done with little regard for the development of the individual or organization within which they function.

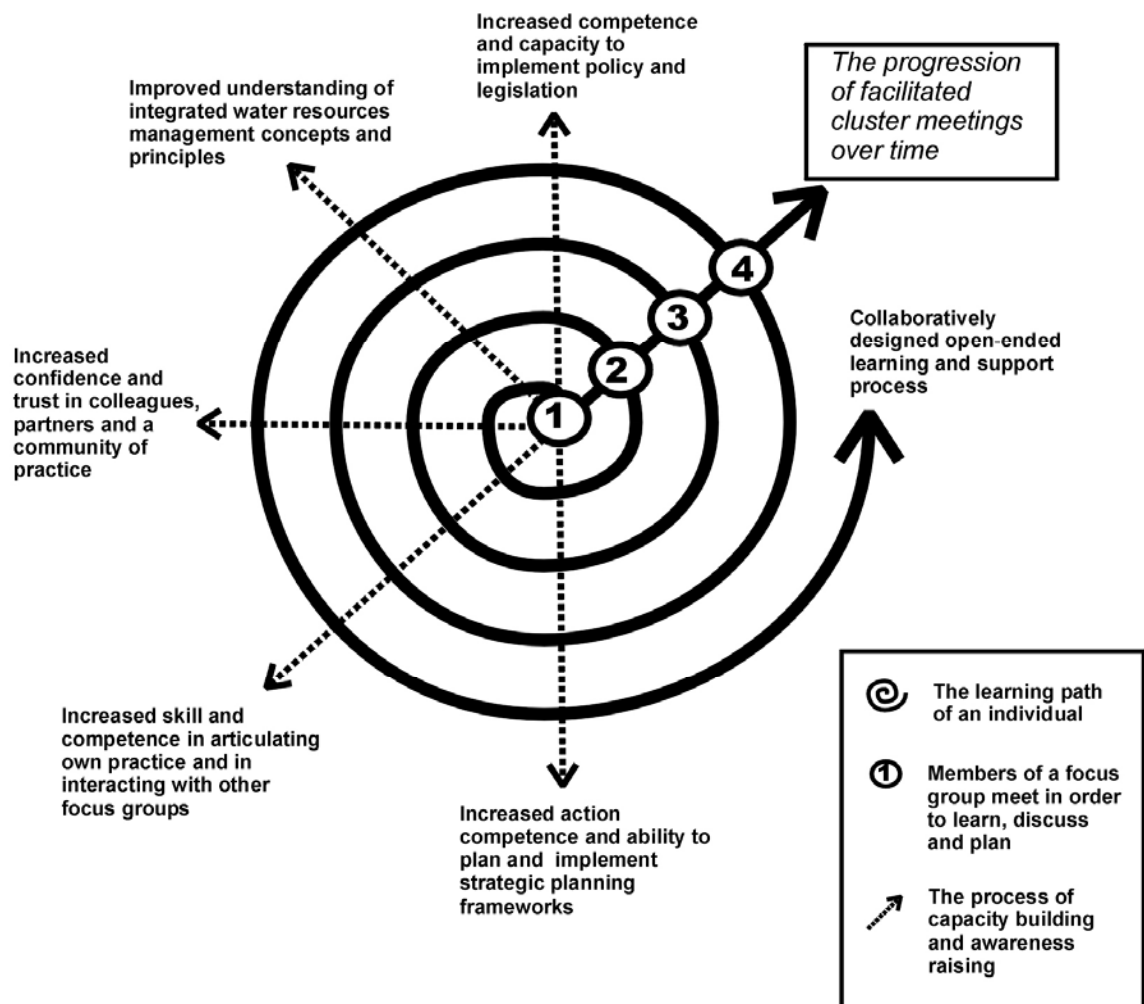
With the spiral approach there are distinct contact sessions where support and mediation of new information is provided, continuity of the learning process away from these sessions remains an underlying principle. Again this contrasts with traditional approaches that are often fragmented and place little emphasis

on integrating the learning process within the day to day routines of the participants - the assumption being that will automatically carry learning from 'interventions' over into their day practice.

Although continuity of learning and application of learning to real-life are emphasized, the operationalisation of these might exact considerable effort. Nonetheless, the spiral orientation draws attention to this important aspect and accommodates it.



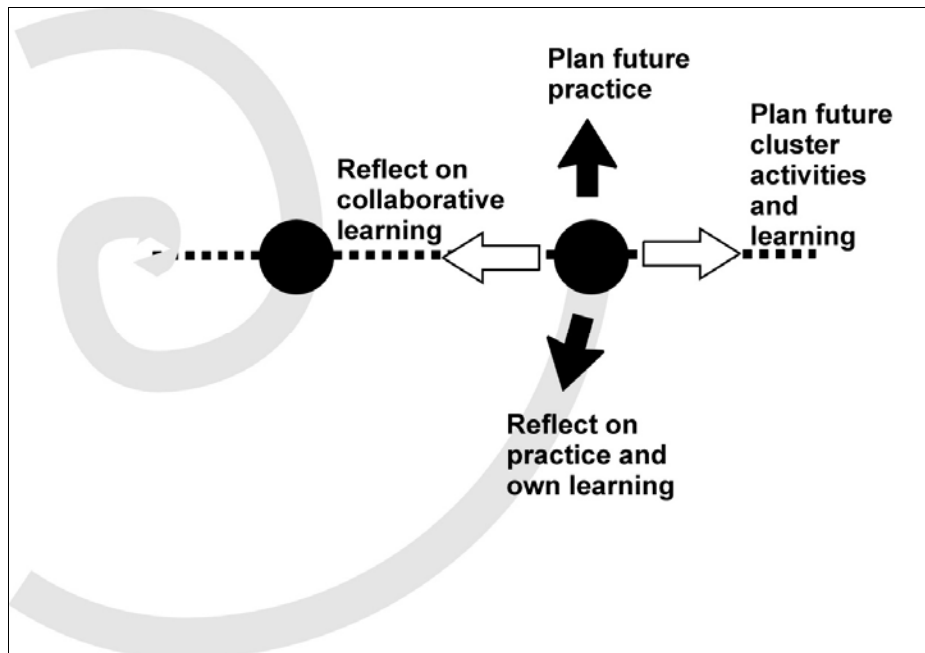
The spiral approach to professional support initiatives



The graphic depicts the spiral ‘journey of learning’ that a group of individuals (cluster) takes from a starting point at the centre. Note how with time various aspects or processes of learning are developed over time.



Expanding cycles of action planning and reflection



Number of learning groups

The spiral approach requires the identification of a number of learning or focus groups, say within a particular institution or geographic setting, that can be engaged in a 'learning journey'. For example, where the model is applied to institutions in a river basin, each focus group is defined according to its particular relationship to water management or use in that setting. However, the defining criteria are not rigid. So a focus group might be defined according to political criteria, for example local government or civics groups or they may be defined according to water use criteria, for example, emerging farmers or industry. What is important is that each focus group has its own particular focus or unifying set of interests. Worth noting is that focus groups might overlap, for example, a water committee member might also happen to be a farmer.

In addition to these features there is attention to reflection-on-practice is one of

In accordance with the spiral, each focus group embarks on a 'learning journey' during which time members of a focus group not only become more familiar with terminology and concepts but also have time to put into practice some of the key ideas. The learning journey is planned to take place over an extended period of time, say one or two years, so that there is adequate opportunity to apply, explore, investigate and modify. Essentially the opportunity provides for theoretical issues to be integrated into everyday practice.

The learning journey is conducted within a supportive and collaborative environment where the learning is mediated by a facilitator whose task it is to guide, interpret and assist. It is important that each focus group has a dedicated facilitator that remains with the group over an extended period of time in order to ensure continuity.

the most important vehicles for learning. Here participants in the programme are



expected to reflect on their actual practice. The emphasis on reflection aims to promote a situation where participants are enabled to deal with contingencies which arise out of specific contexts and to critically explore values and assumptions that prevail within a particular culture of practice.

This, in essence, is what the spiral orientation entails. In the section that follows the key principles guiding the approach are outlined.

Key principles of Spiral approach

The spiral orientation has a number of important design features. At AWARD all of these features are in the service of developing skills, conceptual capital, confidence and a host of

other competencies that will assist individuals and institutions improve their ability and capacity to manage natural resources and partake in better landuse practices.

Summary of a spiral approach to providing professional support

The spiral approach is...

- Grounded in a social constructionist view of learning and knowledge
- Guided by policy
- Responsive to the needs of participants and context
- An open-ended and medium to long-term approach to support and skills building
- Emphasize contextuality
- Recognizes the importance of critical reflection on practice



The key principles underpinning the approach are:

1. A long-term view of support & learning

Learning is a process based on a design of interaction with various focus groups in open-ended, long-term support programmes where issues can be introduced, clarified, explored, revisited, refined and questioned over an extended period of time. The steering idea here is that “not everything can be learnt in a day”. The spiral approach puts emphasis on learning as a process that takes time. And there is recognition that learning often requires the revisiting of concepts within a supportive learning environment over time.

2. Attention to dialogue & collaboration

The intention of establishing focus groups is to provide an opportunity for a core group of practitioners to explore various relevant issues with purpose in mind. The depth and purpose will be established early on and with relevant contributions from a facilitator who will mediate and provide some structure to the learning. Through dialogue issues will be brought to light and through collaborative, reflexive action ways forward will be decided upon by the collective.

3. ‘Work-together’ & ‘work-away’

The activities in the group focus on two categories of application, namely, ‘working together’ sessions, which are regular meetings where members are introduced to new concepts, policies, information etc. At

these sessions members of the group come together and discuss, deliberate and decide on a plan for action in their daily lives and also for the group.

The second category is constituted by the periods where cluster members are apart and function in their individual contexts. These are the ‘work away’ sessions and provide a way of extending the learning from the work-together sessions into personal reality. Here new knowledge is transferred into the workplace as plans for action. This approach requires reflection in- and on action.

4. Action approach to learning

There is a strong focus on action and reflection processes much in line with the action research approach. The processes of learning are taken to be collaborative explorations of context where facilitators are guides or mediators rather than experts that “control” the learning and “feed” participants with information. Activities are designed to highlight problems and then to assist with ways of tackling issues in relevant and appropriate ways.

Information should be linked to transformative processes. In this respect awareness raising has limited value. Focus groups need to engage with concepts, new ideas, legislation and ways of doing so as to enhance their practice.



5. Democracy

Members of the group take responsibility for their own learning and are in a position to negotiate aspects of the learning process and programme. A spiral orientation provides an opportunity where the members are not only consulted in advance of preparing the learning programme but they are actively involved in developing it over time. This means that groups become active stakeholders in planning the direction of their own learning giving rise to commitment.

Although this approach requires that: a) facilitators are more responsive to context, b) that specific needs of the various focus groups are addressed, and c) that planning be diverse, it represents an opportunity to make learning more relevant and context specific.

6. A framework for mediated learning

An important point of departure in designing the initiative is to focus on learning in context. It is felt that simple awareness of problems or issues does not constitute learning. It is the implication and application of information that is demanded in order to develop competence.

Given that a considerable amount of information might be 'new', either in the form of research findings or new policy and legislation, there is likely to be a need for mediation. Here awareness of research findings, either from a specific context or gathered from various research institutions, is used to inform the development of the learning framework but not seen as learning itself.

It is the function of a facilitator of a particular group to mediate new information, complex concepts and unfamiliar legislation. It is anticipated that intensive mediation will be crucial when new practices are introduced and where members are unfamiliar with a new discipline.

7. Working with professionals

The spiral model is able to accommodate the fact that most focus group participants are likely to be adults that are either employed professionals or individuals that dedicate a large proportion of their day to working within a set of principles and practices. This implies that such individuals are already familiar particular practices. Also, they are not likely to be able to allocate large portions of their day to attending training sessions or workshops. For practical reasons the model proposes a number of contact sessions over an extended period of time.

8. Working within a context of change

The nature of the social, economic and legislative change presents learning with particular challenges. Changes taking place are not always accompanied by certainty or clarity. This means that people might experience uncertainty or even be reluctant to participate where outcomes are not clear. Under such conditions it is important to provide a supportive environment where participants do not feel threatened by change hence the importance of building a safe learning environment within the group.



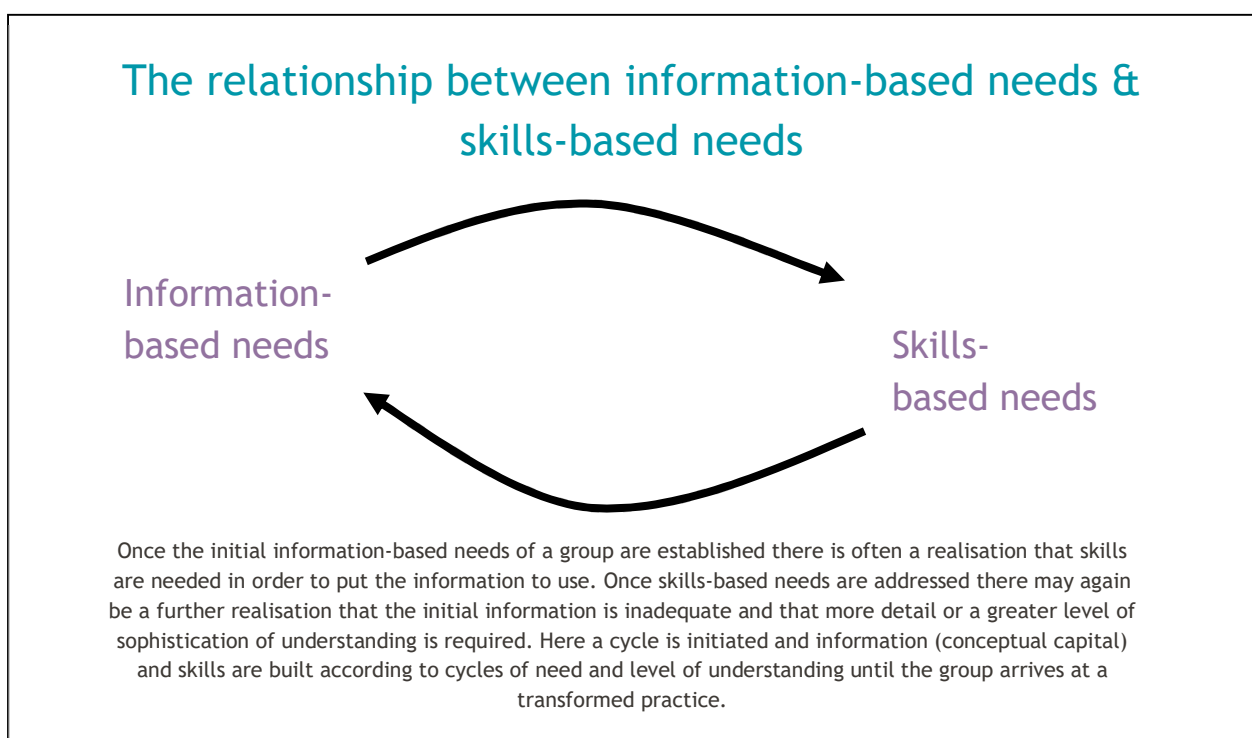
9. Reflexive learning

The intention of the approach is to focus on **action/reflection** cycles that encourage ‘learning by doing’ and then reflecting on that action, in order to improve. Given the complexity of natural resources management it is likely to be slow and incremental over time. This is where a recursive orientation can have significant value in furthering progress.

The reflexive nature of the spiral model allows ideas and concepts to be revisited time and again. Testing of the spiral approach in an education setting has shown that educators benefit from the opportunity to revisit and refine new ideas as they put them into practice. This praxiological approach is likely to have considerable benefits in relation complex legislation.

10. Needs driven learning

The orientation recognizes that the learning process must be driven by needs within a particular setting in order to be meaningful and relevant. Current work indicates that needs in relation to resources management can be categorized as either ‘information-based needs’ or ‘skills-based needs’. The two are not independent of each other with one providing impetus for the development of the other. However, need is not the only determinant of a learning process. Ideally professional support endeavours should be appropriate for a particular context and take into consideration what the group already knows or can do. Programmes that are inappropriately pitched or that provide ‘messages to the converted’ constitute wasted resources. At the same time, it is not appropriate to simply provide individuals with skills-based training if there is no real need for such training.





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The Association for Water and Rural Development

AWARD is a non-profit organisation specialising in participatory, research-based project implementation. Their work addresses issues of sustainability, inequity and poverty by building natural-resource management competence and supporting sustainable livelihoods. One of their current projects, supported by USAID, focuses on the Olifants River and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems to sustain livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment.

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About USAID: RESILIM-O

USAID: RESILIM-O focuses on the Olifants River Basin and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems that support livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment. The 5-year programme, involving the South African and Mozambican portions of the Olifants catchment, is being implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD) and is funded by USAID Southern Africa.

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The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of AWARD, USAID or the United States Government.

Acknowledgements: Project funding and support

The USAID: RESILIM-O project is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under USAID/ Southern Africa RESILIENCE IN THE LIMPOPO BASIN PROGRAM (RESILIM). The RESILIM-O project is implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD), in collaboration with partners. Cooperative Agreement nr AID-674-A-13-00008



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