



EXTENSIONNET

NEWSLETTER OF THE AUSTRALASIA PACIFIC
EXTENSION NETWORK (INC)

AUSTRALIA POST APPROVED PP 34763700014

“Connecting World Views” - A Reflection On Implementing An Experiential Learning Project In Nepal

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Preamble

This is a brief description of how I attempted to implement an “experiential learning project” in a research centre in Nepal. This project is a major component of my PhD research which I am undertaking at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury. Prior to beginning my PhD, I was the Director of Social Sciences in Pakhribas Agricultural Centre (PAC) where I facilitated areas of research which fall under the “social science” category. It was indeed a far cry from my initial training as an agronomist.

Background

It will be necessary to first give the background to my research project by describing my workplace. PAC is a British-funded agricultural research centre in the eastern hills of Nepal. The centre is mandated by the government to produce technologies suitable for 150,000 households in the eastern hills of Nepal. It was initially established as a British Gurkha Army resettlement centre in 1972 to provide training and distribute inputs to retired army personnel. It soon became clear that the centre had to conduct some of its

own research to generate and select technologies suitable for the specific biophysical and socio-economic needs of the farmers in the eastern region. It has therefore evolved from a training centre to an applied research centre. This transformation was made possible due to the centre’s innovative members. The generous support of ODA (UK) enabled the hiring of highly qualified human resources and the provision of training to inject new ideas through short and long term courses abroad. As such, PAC has become one of the two best agricultural research centres in Nepal.

There are three categories of research in PAC - on-station research (research in a controlled environment), on-farm research (research in the farmers’ field with farmers) and household acceptance research (research controlled by the farming household and research staff). PAC has 350 staff members, including 54 masters level personnel working in various multi-disciplinary teams composed of crop, livestock, forestry, horticulture and socio-economic specialists.



Sharan KC

Context

I decided to do more work on issues surrounding food security for the subsistence farmers as I believed that there must be dimensions to their farming and living which we have not considered in our research to improve their livelihood. It may seem improbable to some in Australia where food is readily available that there are hundreds and thousands of farming households in Nepal who face food shortages for up to six months in a year even though they have some land on which to produce crops.

Working over the years in PAC has convinced me that the current methods and conceptualisation of research carried out by the centre has not provided food sufficiency status to the farmers. As such, I embarked on this research project in Hawkesbury. (Continued page 3)

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From the Chair

John Bourne

With the year now two thirds over it is time to think about an annual general meeting and national forum. The forum at Roseworthy in South Australia in December will focus on partnerships in extension between the private and government sectors with a theme of "**Partnerships in Extension - Extending the Boundaries**".

Not only is the private sector rapidly taking up much of the traditional extension role of government, it is developing its own culture of extension. In developing this culture, partnerships between private and government sectors will be critical. Government has considerable expertise to help the private sector establish extension services, and opportunities for this should be explored by both groups.

A special effort is being made to invite private extension people to the Roseworthy forum, by the newly formed APEN working group on Commercial Sector Extension.

The forum will be a chance for extension people from both private and government to begin a dialogue leading to effective partnerships. An example of such a partnership already in the making is the Property Management Planning Program, and experiences from PMP will be featured during the forum.

You should find a flier in this issue of Extension Net. Fill it in, plan to visit Roseworthy in December and experience some great SA hospitality.

Elwin Turnbull our hardworking *ExtensionNet* editor is spending several months in Nepal, however he still managed to get this issue (and the next one) together before he went. Emma Leonard from South Australia has agreed to put together some stories from the forum in December.

From the Editor

Elwin Turnbull

As promised we have found some contributions from members who are working outside of the Australian situation and it is clear that they are facing and rising to the challenge of huge problems. In reading their experiences it is obvious that they are being creative and the steps they are taking to go back to working with the real needs at a community and farmer level are a strong plank in their new ways of making a difference through their efforts. I hope that there is learning for us all in their efforts and **if any readers can find ways of making links to support their efforts our network would be shown to be working.** Even a word of advice or encouragement or a critical question could be of major help to them as they work on their day to day problems.

On the administrative front thanks Roe (Rosemary Currie) for really doing the editing once again while I am off in Nepal learning first hand about a systems learning approach to extension. I can still be contacted if you have an article for the Newsletter but it would be best to use either Rosemary's address or my email contact e.turnbull@uws.edu.au until I get back in my office at Hawkesbury in February 1999.

(Continued from page 1)

It was a revelation to find that there is an alternative means of conducting research which is participatory and one which grounds it in a "learning" paradigm. Needless to say, the whole concept was revolutionary to PAC and my research proposal which advocated the use of "experiential learning" and participatory action research was rejected. In many ways, it was a good metaphor for the work of extension agents (EA). EAs who go out into the "real world" with new ideas are often met with suspicion, and sometimes, rejection. It became a challenge for me to understand how the situation can be changed so that my research project could move ahead.

Process

The whole process of getting my research proposal approved became a learning experience itself on the dynamics of change and how institutions deal with change. The simple task of discussing and implementing a research proposal became a monumental one when a new concept and new ways of doing things were advocated. It was clear that my proposal was doomed in the committee room where my peers gathered to give their opinions. They could not agree on whether it should be "approved" or not and endless meetings were called over it, resulting in severe entrenchment of individual positions. The initial committee of 7 members then handed the task to another larger committee of 14 people to make the decision! A change of game plan was called for and I modified my course of action.



Establishing open communication depends on building a relationship of trust. As such, I began to cultivate a more holistic relationship with my colleagues by visiting their homes and making a connection with their family lives. By spending time with them on an informal basis, I could introduce ideas of experiential learning on a one to one basis which did not threaten their professional standing nor encourage them to defend a "position". Opening up a real dialogue meant that our world views could "connect" and I could build on our similarities while understanding our differences.

Establishing such relationships with the key players in the committee provided me with a valuable opportunity to present my ideas without the dynamics of a formal meeting interfering with the process of listening and understanding.

Another strategy I adopted was to organise a one day trek for the committee members to the village where the research was to take place.

I had previously undertaken a "fact-finding" trip and established some connection with the villagers

and could therefore provide the farmers themselves with an opportunity to inform the committee members of their needs.

Finally, I had to look to other external factors which influenced decision making in the institution. By meeting up with local politicians and officials from the National Agricultural Research Council (NARC), I was able to ascertain their priorities and ensure that some pressure is brought to bear on the institution to focus more on research which involves greater farmers' participation.

Outcome

As a result of all this, the proposal for the action research project was accepted by the centre. The blueprint to improve the food situation of farmers in the study site was prepared through experiential learning exercises with the farmers, EAs and research staff. The project was approved and fully funded by the centre.

The farmers have already obtained tangible benefits from this project. They have improved their food sufficiency status and developed strategies on how to work with government agencies.



The staff involved experienced great satisfaction from seeing the positive results. The staff are also motivated by the continuous new insights they are gaining from the action research project.

There is, of course, much more that can be said about each step and the challenges which presented themselves along the way. If you would like to know more about my project, you can contact me through email at s.kc@uws.edu.au.

In summary, while the circumstances surrounding the

whole process are specific to my workplace in Nepal, there are some valuable insights I gained which may be applicable to many of your situations.

- **Changes in work practices and thinking can occur when we engage in open dialogue and establish a relationship of trust.**
- **Connecting the world views of stake holders is vital and it is a challenge for us to seek ways in which to do so.**

The following cartoon (*next page*) is an attempt to underline the need for and value of sharing and relaxing in bringing forth new ideas.

Pictures L to R, Top and Bottom

1. *Field staff explaining their world view to the farmers.*
2. *Engaging in a participatory exercise with the women farmers.*
3. *Farmers taking a look at the kitchen garden in the demonstration site and the field staff are trying to understand how the women farmers make sense of the varieties they see.*
4. *The above exercise with the male farmers.*



Transforming the PNG Oil Palm Industry Corporation Into a Cohesive and Highly Motivated Group

*Felix Bakani, General Secretary of OPIC, Port Moresby PNG;
and Bob Macadam, Centre for Systemic Development, UWSHawkesbury*

Felix begins:

In January 1996 I was appointed General Secretary (CEO) of the Papua New Guinea Oil Palm Industry Corporation (OPIC). OPIC was established in 1992 by an Act of Parliament with a charter "to provide advice and disseminate information and educate smallholders regarding oil palm production methods". There are 9000 smallholder farmers. Before OPIC was established the extension service was provided by the Department of Agriculture and Livestock (DAL). A significant number of

the 110 extension staff of OPIC were transferred from DAL.

I was aware before I took up the post of serious problems affecting the smallholder sector of the industry and the management of OPIC. I thought I would be able to sort them out but soon realised that the extension officers, who were expected to manage interactions with smallholders effectively and efficiently, were not empowered to do so.

I decided to use soft systems methodology to improve what now seemed to me to be a very complex situation. I was conscious of problems related to communication, inter-personal relationships, roles and responsibilities, consensus and achievement of agreed goals, co-operation, and planning.

Emerging from my analysis was "a relevant system" I defined it as "a system to facilitate the development of a COHESIVE and highly motivated OPIC extension group". Cohesion was

the transformation sought and facilitating was the key to it. Transforming an apparently aimless collection of individuals into a cohesive group needed to be facilitated by someone who understood group dynamics and was an outsider looking in. Because cohesive groups can deteriorate into low cohesiveness the facilitating needed to be on-going.

The Board of OPIC approved my request to give staff development and training a high priority. The European Union was willing to provide financial support. One of the organisations we sought an expression of interest from was the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury. I studied there as a postgraduate student during the 1980s and knew the value of the collaborative learning I experienced there.

Bob takes up the story:

The Leadership and Learning Program we began in October 1997 has 5 modules and will finish early in 1999. In addition to this Program for 110 field staff

we also ran a corporate planning program for senior management (including some of the field managers) in Port Moresby during April 1998.

Each module begins with a 2.5 day workshop during which participants design a learning (situation improving) project they carry out back in their home or work situation. There is another workshop 5-6 weeks later. Participants report on their projects and reflect on what was learned. Experiential learning is the underlying concept and the aim is to develop participants as reflective practitioners.

Module 1 introduced the principles and practice of experiential learning. It did so by encouraging participants to "find out about" their personal situation, "make sense" of this in the light of a vision of a preferred future for themselves, and "take action" to move themselves toward the envisioned future through their individual "learning project" for the module.

Module 2 saw a partial change in focus from participants life in general to their life and work within OPIC. The emphasis on experiential learning and "learning how to learn" was continued and reinforced but OPIC was brought to centre stage.

Participants explored and analysed the external environment of OPIC and developed a vision of a desired future relationship between OPIC and its stakeholders. They then designed and carried out team learning projects to "find out" about specific situations in their local OPIC environment, and practised collaborative teamwork in doing so.

In their project presentations and reports many said that they were keen to continue working with the people they had contacted and whose situation they had found out about. They suggested to the facilitators that subsequent modules should enable them to do this.



The corporate planning program in April identified smallholders and their families as the prime beneficiaries of OPIC's work and **empowering** them as OPIC's primary task. This is consistent with the views now being expressed by the extension officers.

In module 3 the emphasis is on designing and carrying out a learning project which develops

participants' capacity to facilitate the learning of their clients. The clients will be empowered to the extent that they also develop an understanding of the learning process and how to use it.

Figure 1 is a copy of the graphic used in the initial workshop in June to orient participants to module 3.

The commitment and openness of the participants to the learning process is an exceptional feature of the program. Their enthusiasm and lack of defensiveness is enabling a staged process of transformation where, despite individual differences in capacity, no-one appears to be "dropping off". It is a rewarding experience for the 8 facilitators who have so far worked in the project. Ω

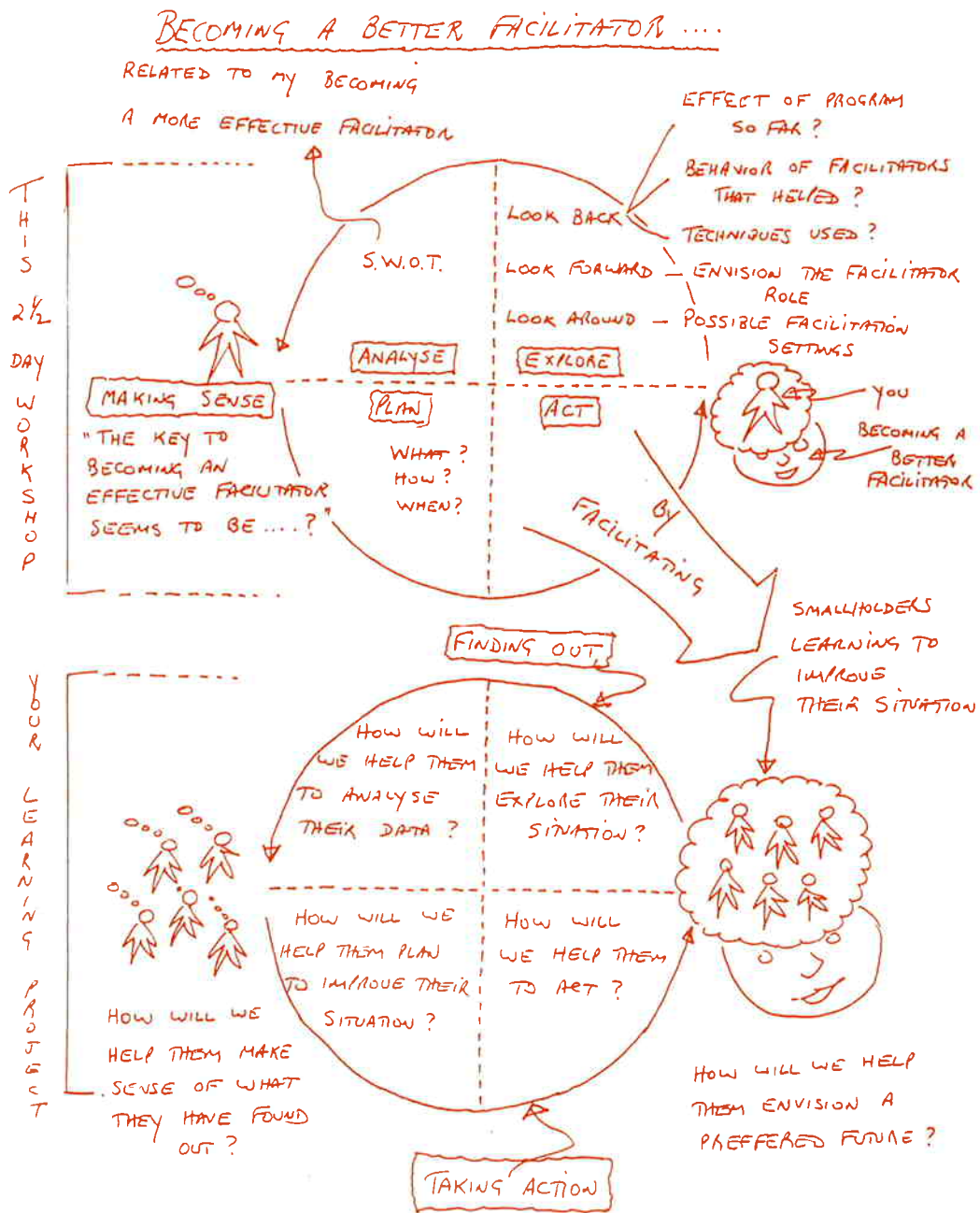


FIGURE 1. THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE AS THE BASIS OF THE WORKSHOP AND THE LEARNING PROJECTS PLANNED DURING IT.