

Experiential learning

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DOI:

[10.1080/13511610.2022.2121268](https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2121268)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Bartels, K 2022, 'Experiential learning: a relational approach to sustaining community-led social innovation', *Innovation: the European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 2022, pp. 1-20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2121268>

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To cite this article: Koen P.R. Bartels (2022): Experiential learning: a relational approach to sustaining community-led social innovation, Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, DOI: [10.1080/13511610.2022.2121268](https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2121268)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2121268>



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Published online: 23 Sep 2022.



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Experiential learning: a relational approach to sustaining community-led social innovation

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(Received 24 January 2022; final version received 30 August 2022)

Community-led social innovations have great potential to drive sustainable change but often struggle to sustain themselves in urban governance systems. Social learning is a prevalent strategy for sustaining social innovation, but limits understanding of, and abilities for transforming its relational dynamics. Drawing on classical pragmatism, I explain how experiential learning offers a relational framework for facilitating an interactive, holistic and embodied process of learning to transform engrained relational patterns and hegemonic forces that constrain personal and social potentialities. Based on action research conducted with an impactful community-led social innovation struggling to sustain itself, I conceptualize experiential learning as learning-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world: cultivating capacities and resources for growing individually and together in relation to hegemonic forces. I conclude that learning should not be treated as an internal responsibility of social innovations but as a key condition for ecosystems that sustain social innovation and transform urban governance.

Keywords: Social innovation; experiential learning; social learning; classical pragmatism; relationality; action research; urban governance

in times of rapid social change ... it is likely to be forgotten that the actual problem is one of reconstruction of the ways and forms in which men [sic] unite in associated activity (Dewey 1927, 211–212).

Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is on a treacherous path to sustainability. Supported by an extensive and rapidly growing evidence base, SI is widely recognized in policy and practice as a vital source of alternative solutions to unmet social needs and more sustainable responses to an alarming ecological crisis, widespread political turmoil, and structural socio-economic inequalities (Addarii and Lipparini 2017; Domanski and Kaletka 2017; Bragaglia 2021). Yet, SIs often struggle to be sustainable themselves (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Smith and Seyfang 2013; Hossain 2016; McCabe and Phillimore 2017; Bartels, 2017). As SI has proliferated in many different forms and contexts, it means different things to various actors, and constantly evolves as they negotiate diverse understandings, interests, and values across multiple organizations and scales of governance.

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This double-sided struggle for sustainability is especially common to ‘community-led SI’ – or: grassroots innovation (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Smith and Seyfang 2013), community-led innovation (Moulaert et al. 2010; Kitcher and Heales 2017) and community self-organization (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2015; Atkinson, Dörfler, and Rothfuß 2018). Community-led SIs are small, low-profile and locally rooted organizations run on a voluntary basis and driven by local needs and a wider, transformative vision. Commonly depicted as operating in ‘niche spaces’, they are celebrated for their unique potential to nurture innovative ideas and practices for addressing local problems and transforming hegemonic systems (Seyfang and Smith 2007). Going beyond the call to step up where existing governance systems prove inadequate and unaffordable, they aim to transform the underlying relationships, values, and rules of the game (Thompson 2019). However, they exist in a precarious relationship with their institutional environment (MacCallum 2009; Moulaert et al. 2010; Wolfram 2018; Thompson 2019; Pel et al. 2020; Galego et al. 2022). Community-led SIs usually spend ample time on surviving and are hardly resilient. Innovative skills and learning tend to remain tacit and non-transferable and are not well-documented and institutionalized (McCabe and Phillimore 2017; Beukers and Bertolini 2021).

Social learning is widely seen as ‘a key to the success of social innovation’ (Jessop et al. 2013, 119; see also Smith 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Moulaert et al. 2013; Macintyre et al. 2018; Wolfram 2018; Cools and Oosterlynck 2020). So much so that it features in the sub-title of the *International Handbook on Social Innovation* (Moulaert et al. 2013). Social learning goes beyond technical or instrumental (first order) learning of what to do by enabling collective and situated (second order) learning about how to holistically address a complex societal challenge, its stakeholders, and hegemonic systems. It creates social spaces for surfacing dominant values, engrained social relations and habitual practices, and transitioning to alternative, more sustainable ways of (inter)acting, valuing and organizing (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). Building on a robust interdisciplinary body of literature on social learning (Wals 2009; Blackmore 2010; Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2018), this view of learning in SI has gone virtually uncontested.

However, predominantly focusing on learning in a social and situated sense inhibits a more relational understanding of ‘learning-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world’. This is a notable shortcoming given aspirations for developing more robust, anti-teleological theoretical frameworks of the complex dynamics of transformative change (Grimm et al. 2013; Gurrutxaga Abad and Galarraga Ezponda 2022) and advancing the relational approach to SI as ongoing processes of ‘becoming’ through interactions between a multiplicity of interdependent actors and systems (Author, 2017; Haxeltine et al. 2017; MacCallum 2009; Pel et al. 2020). Learning currently tends to be treated as a ‘black box’: it is something that happens *within* SIs which we know relatively little about¹ (Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2018; Beukers and Bertolini 2021). The upshot is that the onus for learning is placed on SIs: it is their responsibility to foster learning if they want to sustain themselves and change hegemonic systems, highlighting ‘the deeply uneven urban geography and polarized politics of social innovation’ (Thompson 2019, 1186).

The main focus and contribution of this article is to explain *how experiential learning can sustain community-led SI*. Experiential learning (Kolb 1984) is a well-developed yet under-utilized approach that highlights the intricacies of changing relational dynamics. Going beyond the currently limited perspective on experiential learning as an individual process of knowledge creation, I conceptualize it in relational terms as *learning-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world: cultivating capacities and resources for growing*

individually and together in relation to hegemonic forces and breaking through the relational dynamics SIs are entangled in. Building on classical pragmatism (Dewey 1927; Follett 1918), I explain how experiential learning offers a relational framework and an actionable method for facilitating an interactive, holistic and embodied process of personal and social growth (Bartels and Wagenaar, 2018, 193-196). Experiential learning opens the black box of learning in SI by revealing how it emerges at the interface of ‘internal’ relational patterns and ‘external’ hegemonic forces (Dias and Partidário 2019): it creates conditions for learning to change relational dynamics in urban ‘contexts in which what it means to be a human individual and what it means to live in a ‘polity’ are in continuous formation’ (Healey 2009, 279).

This article offers the first-ever empirically grounded analysis and conceptualization of experiential learning in SI. It is based on the experiential learning process of Blossom Liverpool². This community-led SI aimed to improve local wellbeing by organizing a range of free and accessible activities in and around the local park, including gardening, tree planting, yoga, litter picking, child-led play, philosophy discussions, street art, and film screenings. Their goal was not merely to bring people together and improve shared spaces in an area scarred by decades of disinvestment and decay. What made Blossom so innovative was that it nurtured psychologically safe environments to enable local people to transform the hegemonic forces that made them feel disconnected, incapable, and unworthy (Bartels, 2019). Despite significant impact, Blossom was engaged in a profound struggle to sustain itself in Liverpool’s urban governance system – a city recognized for highly contradictory dynamics at the interface of a vibrant civil society characterized by high incidences of SI and a neoliberal urban regime characterized by high levels of deprivation and inequality (Thompson 2019). Blossom was run entirely on a voluntary basis by, with, and for local people, supported by multiple pockets of funding but lacking any structural resourcing. I conducted action research (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018) to help sustain Blossom by co-producing a learning visit abroad, an animated movie, learning videos, and a collaborative event.

The first section reviews how social learning has been conceptualized in the SI literature and beyond and clarifies why a relational model of learning is needed. The second section discusses the relational framework that experiential learning offers based on classical pragmatist philosophy. The third section outlines my action research design to explain how and why I co-produced an experiential learning process with Blossom. Next, I explain how relational dynamics of ‘letting it grow’ were at the heart of its struggle to sustain itself and, in four sub-sections, critically appraise how the experiential learning process addressed these relational dynamics. The conclusion discusses how and why SI ecosystems should support experiential learning to sustain SI and transform urban governance.

Sustaining SI through social learning

A key question in the SI literature is how new ways of thinking, acting and organizing germinating at the grassroots can be sustained within, and ultimately transform, the multi-scalar systems that have contributed to and maintained the unsustainable situation they are addressing (Moulaert et al. 2010; Smith 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Smith and Seyfang 2013; Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2018; Cools and Oosterlynck 2020). A guiding idea is that community-led SIs operate in relatively protected spaces (‘niches’) for incubating new ideas, experimenting with radical practices, and cultivating transformative capacities and resources. When sufficiently impactful and robust, these

innovations can be diffused, scaled, and translated across hegemonic systems (or: ‘regimes’). Following strategic niche management (Kemp, Schot, and Hoogma 1998) and the multi-level perspective (Hargreaves, Longhurst, and Seyfang 2013), studies have identified a variety of approaches to transforming the institutional environment (for an overview, see Hossain 2016), including managing expectations, networking, and learning.

Learning is crucial to sustaining community-led SIs as studies have found their ‘significance resting not so much in the [activities and outputs], so much as in the diverse knowledge and associated material, personal and cultural capacities built through those activities’ (Smith and Seyfang 2013, 828). Such learning is almost exclusively understood as *social learning*. Following Bateson (1972, 166–170), SI does not involve mere ‘simple learning’ (or: first order learning) about how to solve a problem but also ‘deutero-learning’ (or: second order learning): ‘learning to learn’ by acquiring new abilities for problem-solving and insight into the social patterns of relationships, habits, and perception that maintain the status quo. Social learning generates both new knowledge about doing things differently and shared visions and capacities for transforming underlying values and relationships. It supports SI by creating social spaces for collectively assessing hegemonic systems, articulating needs and aspirations, and engaging in a struggle for change towards a new normative order (Parra 2013; Macintyre et al. 2018).

Such transformative change can only be achieved by learning in interaction. Based on practice theory (Shove 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Hargreaves, Longhurst, and Seyfang 2013; Jessop et al. 2013; Howaldt and Schwarz 2016), the conventional cognitive model of behavior change—focused on educating and convincing individuals—is argued to do little to loosen deeply rooted entanglements with the status quo. Because the issues SIs address are complex, changing and contested, participants need to learn to identify limitations in *what* and *how* each of them knows, question existing values, relationships and systems, and develop alternative aims, roles and practices (Collins and Ison 2009). By ‘developing new *social practices* within supportive social contexts’ (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012, 397; emphasis in original), social learning brings to light conceptions of normality deeply embedded in everyday activities and interactions and, secondly, helps to transform these by co-creating new sense-making devices, socio-technical infrastructures, and institutional resources.

The dominant focus on social learning is backed up by an interdisciplinary literature (Wals 2009; Blackmore 2010; Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2018). However, there is still limited understanding of how learning emerges, becomes transformative, and can be institutionally supported (Beukers and Bertolini 2021). It is inherently difficult to capture, share, and sustain the emergent, interactive, and experiential nature of learning (Seyfang and Smith 2007; 598 Seyfang and Longhurst 2013, 889; McCabe and Phillimore 2017, 257–258). A key shortcoming is that ‘social’ tends to be interpreted as collective and situated, as opposed to individual and cognitive, rather than *relational*, in the sense of selves-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world. For instance, Pellicer-Sifres et al. (2018) advance understanding of how micro-politics and struggle for empowerment are key to moving from first to second order learning, but recognize that their ‘framework fails to capture the full complexity of the origin of these learnings’ (110) because it does not connect the personal with the collective sphere. This conceptual limitation is not without practical repercussions. It keeps the onus for learning on SIs; i.e. learning is an ‘internal’ process and not shaped by or the responsibility of the ‘external’ institutional environment.

Instead, in a relational perspective, the focus is on learning to *relate* to others and evolving contexts in different ways in the process of developing, enacting, and communicating

new values, activities, and modes of organizing. The wider social learning literature has already taken a relational turn by moving ‘away from the individualist ontology implied in the focus on the intended meanings ... to a relational understanding of interpreted meanings’ (Grin and Loeber 2007, 214). Learning is ‘a function of a particular kind of relationship’ (Freeman 2006, 381) at and across five levels:

- *individuals* who draw lessons by acting as ‘reflective practitioners’ in response to complex situations that ‘talk back’ (Schön 1991);
- *institutions* that create a social environment for individual behavior change and for organizations or networks to learn as a whole (Pelling et al. 2008);
- interactive sense-making of *social meanings* embedded in discourse, tacit knowledge and ontological assumptions (Fischer and Mandell 2012);
- interaction in and with a *socio-political context* through argumentative struggles over underlying assumptions, values, and goals (Hall 1993); and
- *systems* creating conditions for ongoing learning and their own transformation (Schön 1973; Loeber et al. 2009; Macintyre et al. 2018).

The relational turn in the SI literature has increased understanding of how relational dynamics of resistance and change at the interface of SIs and their institutional environment influence the spread and institutionalization of alternative ideas and practices (Bartels, 2017, 2020; Haxeltine et al. 2017; MacCallum 2009; Pel et al. 2020). It offers a robust, albeit developing approach for advancing

multi-faceted understanding of innovation that is not confined ... to analysing the intentional actions and practices of social players based on pre-defined social objectives ... [but] incorporates the socio-political and economic contexts wherein said actions are carried out ... , along with the social systems that are conditioning them (Gurrutxaga Abad and Galarraga Ezponda 2022, 12).

A relational approach to learning could take us beyond a dichotomous view of learning to a dynamic understanding of how it takes shape relationally and offer new insight into ways in which it could be transformative and sustain SI. The next section explains how experiential learning offers such a relational framework.

Experiential learning: transforming the relational dynamics of SI

Experiential learning was coined by Kolb (1984) as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (38). He developed the famous ‘four-stage cycle involving four adaptive learning modes—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation’ (40; see Figure 1). While commonly understood as a cycle of four distinct stages, it actually revolves around transactions between these four learning modes along the abstract/concrete and active/reflective dialectics. Experiential learning requires both *grasping* the representation of experience (experiential apprehension and conceptual comprehension) and *transforming* that grasp (reflective intention and active extension). It is an iterative process, meaning that deeper learning takes place when engaging in the cycle several times.

Experiential learning is a prevailing method in education (Kolb 1984; Warner Weil and McGill 1987) but has hardly been adopted in SI (but see Rizzo, Deserti, and Cobanli 2017; Pappas et al. 2018; Beukers and Bertolini 2021). A key reason seems to be a limited interpretation of experiential learning as an individual process of transforming

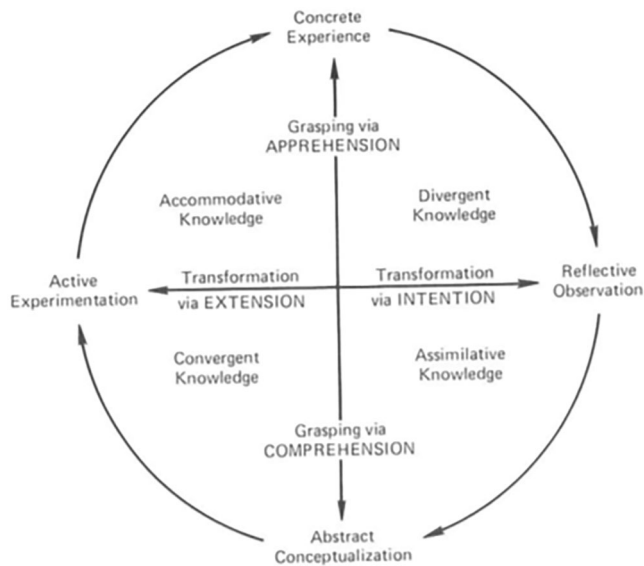


Figure 1. Experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984, 42)

experience into knowledge. It has been criticized for ignoring the influence of social settings, values and interests on learning (Loeber et al. 2009, 85–86) and that learning is a social practice which occurs tacitly while people engage in situated activities (see Ison et al. 2000, 39). This article offers an important conceptual corrective by demonstrating that experiential learning is an interactive and transformative group process. By delving into its foundations in classical pragmatism, I offer a relational understanding of experiential learning as enabling individual and social growth constrained by hegemonic forces (Healey 2009; Ansell 2011; Hildebrand 2013; Stout and Love 2015).

Classical pragmatism promotes a relational worldview in which human beings exist in association to each other and their environment (Follett 1924; Dewey 1927, 74–76, 208–209). Follett (1918) calls for replacing the ‘self-and-others illusion’ (79–84) with a worldview of ‘self-in-and-through others’ (8) in which ‘life is one of manifold relatings’ (6). Criticizing narrow individualist models that describe behavior and account for its meaning and consequences in isolation, classical pragmatists understand experience as situated at the interface of personal being and social environment (Dewey 1916, 11, 22; Follett 1924; Cochran 2010). This means not just appreciating the situated and associative nature of our being but devising ‘ways of making our togetherness fruitful’ (Follett 1918, 149; see also Dewey 1927, 183–185).

Learning in social groups is the path to fruitful interrelating. Classical pragmatists see experiential learning as an interactive, practical, and holistic process that ‘shapes and actualizes developmental potentialities’ (Kolb 1984, 133) and generates personal and social ‘growth’ (Dewey 1916, 52–53; Follett 1918, 363–373). Learning occurs when a problem is experienced in a concrete situation that invites reflection. ‘When individuals and groups learn to use experimentation and inquiry to ‘reconstruct’ their experiential knowledge and skills, this approach can lead to continuous learning or growth’ (Ansell 2011, 10). By creating ‘communities of inquiry’, they develop both what they know and do *and* who they are and aspire to become (identity, character, values, sense of

purpose, and relationships). Learning to communicate about experience and to mutually adjust enables ‘liberation of the potentialities of the members of the group in harmony with the interest and goods which are common’ (Dewey 1927, 175; see also, *ibidem*, 178-185, 214-221; Follett 1918, 8–11, 363-373; Healey 2009; Cochran 2010).

Experiential learning can enable self-organizing groups to break the moulds of hegemonic forces and develop ‘democracy as a way of life’ (Dewey 1927, 81, 182; Follett 1918, 159–160, 189-213; Shields 2003; Healey 2009; Ansell 2011; Hildebrand 2013). Democracy is not an external institutional system that represents isolated individuals, but, as Follett (1918) puts it, ‘the rule of an interacting, interpermeating whole’ (156) that needs to be learned through ‘modes of living and acting which shall teach us how to grow ... interdependence’ (363) ‘in a self-directed, self-governing community’ (368). Such experiential learning is a transformative process as ‘[i]ndividuals find themselves cramped and depressed by absorption of their potentialities in some mode of association which has been institutionalized and become dominant’ (Dewey 1927, 213).

Following this relational framework, I define experiential learning as creating conditions in which a group of people can accumulate experiences (concrete experience), identify relational patterns (reflective observation), develop new sense-making devices (abstract conceptualization), and intervene in their situation (active experimentation) to grow individually and together in relation to hegemonic forces. It is a holistic, interactive, and emergent process of accommodating the deep ‘challenges [to] the system of relations that sustain us, give meaning to what we do, and by which we define ourselves’ (Bartels and Wagenaar, 2018, 196). What we learn and who we are resides in the relational dynamics ‘in-between’ selves, others, and environment (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wagenaar and Cook 2011). Experiential learning addresses the cognitive, emotional, and social ‘defence mechanisms’ that inevitably emerge to maintain a sense of continuity of the conventional, taken-for-granted relationships we have with each other and our environment (Laws and Rein 2003, 202–205; Bartels and Wagenaar, 2018, 193-196). It does so by growing new ways of doing and being together that challenge habitual modes of association and hegemonic forces that constrain individual and social potentialities.

Clarifying what this looks like and how it works in practice is a key purpose and empirical contribution of this article. The next section explains the research design, process and methods I used for abductively developing and empirically grounding my experiential learning framework.

Action research design, process and methods

This article is based on action research conducted between February 2016 and August 2017 with Blossom Liverpool. Action research is a popular approach to enabling SI researchers and stakeholders to co-produce knowledge and action that addresses urgent problems, builds capacities and resources for learning and change, and promotes sustainability transitions (Moulaert et al. 2013; Wittmayer et al. 2017; Bartels, 2020). Like experiential learning, action research is grounded in classical pragmatism and revolves around a cycle of collaboratively identifying a problematic situation, reflecting on shared experiences and knowledge, and planning, carrying out and evaluating interventions (Greenwood and Levin 2007). I will explain how and why we co-produced an experiential learning process by reflecting on four key dimensions of its critical-relational dynamics (Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018): starting point, roles and relationships, hegemony, and impact.

The *starting point* was in October 2015, when Blossom invited me to co-produce an evaluation of its approach, impact on local well-being, and urban governance implications. We co-created a three-page report based on my qualitative analysis of twelve unstructured interviews, sixteen qualitative surveys, participant-observation of activities and the community, and posts from Blossom's website and Facebook page. In February 2016, my involvement turned to developing a more sustainable way of running the organization. It was on the brink of collapse as founder and main driving force Eleanor had depleted all her financial, physical, and emotional resources in the absence of any structural funding and external support. She was to step back and six other core members were to take more collective responsibility, while shifting the focus from obtaining external funding to prioritizing that everything was done in the 'right spirit' and in collaboration with like-minded people. We co-designed an experiential learning process (details below) for which I secured ESRC Impact Acceleration Account funding from my University.

As is common in action research, I played multiple *roles*: I was not a member of Blossom (outsider) yet appreciated what it stood for and actively contributed to sustaining it (insider). I was facilitator of the learning process but also participant, sharing personal reflections to learn and grow together with the others. This multifaceted positionality meant that the research process, outcomes, and ethics were shaped by various *relationships*. For instance, my involvement strongly depended on Eleanor's support and the mutual trust and understanding we had built up, yet was also shaped by the friendship, humor, frustrations, and care shared with the six core members. The learning process required everyone, including me, to be open and vulnerable, sharing and confronting strong emotions and some deep personal issues and relational tensions. In addition to standard ethical guidelines for consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and transparency, I followed the distinctive action research ethics of care for the participants' wellbeing, responsiveness to their needs and emergent issues, and reiterative reflection on roles and responsibilities (Manzo and Brithbill 2007)³.

Blossom was challenging *hegemony* by trying to get recognition and resources from the 'external' urban governance system, but also, more fundamentally, to change the 'system within' local people. By addressing unmet social needs, including mental health problems and the decaying local park, it was 'fixing a broken community' (anonymized) caught in a negative spiral of economic decline, poverty, low educational performance, social fragmentation, crime, and other forms of destructive behavior. Reinforced by decades of disinvestment and austerity, local people felt disconnected, unworthy, and incapable. Blossom sought to transform these hegemonic forces by nurturing enabling, psychologically safe environments in which people could 'connect' to themselves, others, and their environment (Bartels, 2019). Its six core members had been harmed by these hegemonic forces too, yet also had invaluable competences for co-organizing many innovative activities. The experiential learning process would let new ways of doing and being together grow counteracting hegemonic constraints on the potentialities of its core members to collectively organize and sustain Blossom.

Impact was generated through all four parts of the experiential learning process. First, we went on a 'learning exchange' visit to Amsterdam in October 2016 to *experience* a range of different SIs in another context and build capacities for reflection, learning, and taking responsibility. Second, we held a series of meetings to *reflect* on the visit, formulate lessons, and plan courses of action. Third, we *conceptualized* our learning by co-producing a short animated film and learning videos, and, fourth the *experimentation*: a collaborative event in April 2017 at which we launched the animated film, shared lessons, and tried to develop a mutual support network. We had several follow-up

meetings to plan next steps, but the process stopped abruptly late August 2017. As the next section shows, the process had a deep impact on personal and group learning and growth, but unfortunately proved insufficient to sustain the organization in the absence of external recognition and support (I will return to this in the conclusion).

The experiential learning framework was developed abductively through a grounded theory analysis (Charmaz 2006). Throughout the process, I kept hand-written field notes and an electronic research diary (117 pages) with observations and reflections on emergent findings and issues. I took pictures of the visit and event and recorded our meetings, all with verbal and written consent. After the research, I coded all transcribed data, generating 12 new codes and further developing 5 codes from the first research phase (Bartels, 2019). Through memo-writing (12 pages), I identified **letting it grow** as the underlying pattern and 5 other core codes (highlighted in **bold**) that best capture it. The next section discusses my findings along the four dimensions of the experiential learning cycle.

Letting it grow

Blossom was a SI, in the words of core member Emily, with

no final state and it is ... not an organisation or an institution in that sense. It's actually of a voice of individuals ... who have come together over a kind of collective responsibility to each other and the people around us and our world. (Emily, interview 18-11-2015)

Blossom was driven by a profound shared vision, yet the way those involved gave shape to this 'collective responsibility' was ever-evolving. Its shape and impact depended on what emerged in-between people while organizing and during activities, and how this affected their abilities to grow. **Letting it grow** captures the double-edged nature of these relational dynamics, which made it innovative and impactful, as well as difficult to sustain.

In the first research phase, I identified **letting it grow** as the innovative organizing principle that all local people were free to participate in activities and the organization in a way they felt comfortable with and helped them grow. There was no pressure to do or say something, no judging of who they were or how they participated, and no pre-set goals or processes to follow. By **letting it grow**, conversation came naturally, people felt 'seen', opened up, and gradually **recognized** their capacities for changing the course of their lives. The impact this had on local people was profound and widespread (Bartels, 2019).

The second research phase revealed that **letting it grow** created fundamental tensions for sustaining Blossom, because its nature, value and impact were insufficiently **recognized**. Externally, it was not **recognized** by funders and public bodies, which usually did not grasp and value the elusive nature of **letting it grow**. Internally, tensions emerged between those taking responsibility for creating conditions for **letting it grow**, who felt frustrated that their organizing efforts were often insufficiently **recognized** by others, and those **doing what you can**, who felt that their personal blend of competences and constraints was insufficiently **recognized**. On the one hand, it becomes possible for two people to make a deep connection during urban gardening because someone made a schedule, got seeds, plants and trowels, coordinated with the City Council's Parks Department, and actively monitors that everyone participates in the right spirit. On the other hand, such connection and activity are only genuine if they emerge organically from what everyone is able to bring to the situation. The next sub-sections explain how the experiential learning process unearthed and tried to transform these relational dynamics to help Blossom **sustain** itself.

Experiencing: learning visit to Amsterdam

The visit created experiential conditions for personal and group learning to occur. The purpose of the visit, as Eleanor outlined in a ‘commissioning document’, was for the six core members (from hereon, ‘the group’) to learn to 1) **vocalize** the nature and value of Blossom, 2) identify new ways of resourcing and **sustaining** it, and 3) **grow** their capacities for developing themselves, the group, and the organization. Supported by collaborators from my prior research project in Amsterdam-West, we (the group and I) co-produced a three-day visit in October 2016, including visits to 12 innovative individuals, community groups, social enterprises and public agencies enhancing local well-being through e.g. arts-based interventions, cooking, youth work, and urban gardening, as well as four group reflections and a final joint evaluation. First-order learning about innovative practices in a different context went hand-in-hand with personal and group learning. For instance, we learned that the physical setting shapes the quality of conversations after Mary and Emily ‘shut down’ during a lunch with a group of elderly residents because the setup of the room did not ‘feel right’ and prevented meaningful conversation (field notes, 11-10-2016).

The visit also enabled more fundamental personal and group learning. For example, Emily said: ‘Up to the moment I went I wasn’t open to learning, but, once I recognized this, I was’ (meeting, 06-12-2016). And Johnny reflected: ‘I didn’t realize until the visit how organized we actually are... , so it was massive in terms of self-understanding’ (meeting, 20-10-2016). The group was also confronted with the relational dynamics of **letting it grow**:

we had a very uneasy conversation on the Thursday morning about the evaluation [planned for later] that afternoon. The group responded strongly against the format that [one of the local organizers] and I [the researcher] had been pouring our soul and last bits of energy into until 11.15pm the evening before [at the bar, while others were having drinks]. [The group] fed back that they just shut down when asked a question or reflecting according to a specific format (‘I’m not very good at this’; ‘I can’t remember where we were’; ‘I feel so stupid’), whereas just having a conversation about what we saw or did would let insights and reflections emerge naturally (visit report, 19-10-2016).

The group felt they should be **recognized** for **doing what you can**: they felt more comfortable having spontaneous, meandering conversations and believed they could not engage authentically in the proposed structure because they felt it created a power dynamic which positioned them as research subjects rather than active, equitable co-inquirers. In turn, I did not feel **recognized** for the effort I had put into organizing the evaluation in an empowering way and the visit more generally, driven by my appreciation of their capacities, values, and needs. In the end, they actually enjoyed the evaluation and managed to formulate a range of important lessons. Without *experiencing* this, first-order learning from the visit would not have enabled the group to address the underlying relational dynamics.

Reflecting: visit evaluation

We further uncovered and addressed Blossom’s relational dynamics by reflecting on our experiences with the visit. From October to December 2016, we had three reflective meetings to evaluate the visit, formulate lessons, and plan follow-up activities and ways to share our learning. We identified new ways of **sustaining**, including re-using old buildings, creating a ‘mobile cooking unit’, mapping partners, adopting a new youth-led

participation method, and developing alternative modes of reporting impact. These developed into several concrete courses of action through which the group took more responsibility for **sustaining**, such as a way of resolving a tension with the yoga teacher they hired and organizing an intercultural cooking event at the local Adult Learning Center.

Most of our meeting time was spent on personal and group learning. We initially reflected on how the visit had surfaced tensions around feeling **recognized**, and formulated lessons about the value of structure, the pace of developing the organization, and the importance of openness and honesty (field notes, 20-10-2016). The second meeting was entirely dedicated to reflection on personal issues and relational dynamics. Eleanor emphasized that ‘a safe environment is not where everything is nice and happy; it involves having difficult conversations and challenging people to act or think differently’, inviting the group to take more collective responsibility for **letting it grow**: ‘so the question is: can we instigate that safety in the way we behave or do we sit there waiting for it to turn up?’ (meeting, 24-11-2016). I facilitated the group in visualizing their position in Blossom with Playmobile figurines. The result was a circle with a gaping hole in the middle, visually demonstrating the lack of shared understanding of, and collective responsibility for what was at the heart of Blossom. The ensuing conversation revealed that several core members struggled with being **recognized** as worthy and capable, simultaneously giving Eleanor the feeling that her efforts to endorse their capacities were not **recognized**. For instance, when Britt said ‘I don’t feel I have a skill’, Eleanor replied ‘So now you’re diminishing me because I’m esteeming you’ (meeting, 24-11-2016).

This reflective process enabled the group to identify and address their relational dynamics. Consider for instance this conversation:

Mary: I’m not sure I feel able to articulate what I learned.

Britt: But when we had the Skype call you made [a local innovation] come to life and really inspired me⁴. ...

Mary: I can put things together but unless it comes naturally I don’t wanna do it.

Eleanor: But this is the difficulty of anyone who is creative, you need to learn the conditions that elicit it, so it needs self-discipline. ... Let’s help each other doing it.

Mary: But sometimes when people tell me to do something I really don’t want to hear it.

Eleanor: But if you tell me not to tell you that, then I’m holding on to a fictional reality for you and am patronizing you. If we’re going to speak to an audience [at the collaborative event] we need to build up a powerful presentation which you would be part of and that’s how it is. We need to have some discipline otherwise nothing will happen and we’ll have lost our opportunity to influence. (meeting, 24-11-2016)

The third meeting demonstrated that the experiential learning process was **growing** the group’s capacities to **recognize** both themselves and each other and take more collective responsibility for **sustaining** Blossom. For instance, Mary reflected how the visit

helped me learn that **I need to enable myself to pursue my own needs and those of others in a better way**. When I didn’t do this at some point during the trip, my energy changed and I was not as open to what followed as I was before. I had an inability to express my needs. I will listen and listen and feel my needs don’t matter. My head is there but not my self. **I didn’t feel entitled to express my needs and didn’t have the voice to say it**. I learned this hard lesson because I was there and couldn’t run away. **This is a huge life lesson**. (meeting 06-12-2016)

Mary now **recognized** that she ‘didn’t feel entitled to express [her] needs and didn’t have the voice to say it’ but now wanted to take responsibility for **letting it grow** by ‘enabl[ing]

myself to pursue my own needs and those of others in a better way'. Her strong appreciation for how the visit had generated a 'huge life lesson' suggested a significant breakthrough in Blossom's relational dynamics.

Conceptualizing: co-production of animated film, learning videos and collaborative event

Conceptualizing our learning helped to **grow** capacities and resources for **sustaining** Blossom and continued to address the tensions around **recognized**. Over the course of six meetings up to April 2017, we learned to better **vocalize** the nature and value of Blossom's approach by co-producing an animated film, learning videos, and collaborative event. We contracted a local production company to create the animated film and spent hours reviewing the storyboard and several draft versions, discussing the storyline, characters, plot, pace, colors, music, sounds, message, narration, credits, and title (field notes, 18-01-2017). From recordings of the visit and post-visit reflections, Emily created learning videos to share at the collaborative event and later online. Codes I developed during the first research phase helped to select the animated film title and synthesize a list of twelve Blossom principles into four 'key ingredients' (do, dare, connect, grow) that the videos would focus on (field notes, 01-03-2017).

Preparing the collaborative event further developed capacities for **vocalizing** by discussing who to invite and why, what we wanted to achieve, what to share, how to structure it, and what kind of atmosphere to create. We developed an eight page 'live' document with the event's purpose and structure, a 'to do' list, an invitee list, and everyone's responsibilities. This process made us realize we did not want to put on a marketing event to obtain funding and support, to which people would come to represent an organization or passively consume our learning. Instead, we wanted a *collaborative* event 'to articulate something that we suspect more people have' and enable participants to 'be and feel responsible' for 'recognizing our individual power and the power emerging from being connected to others' (field notes, 14-02-2017).

Preparing the event also supported the group in **growing** capacities for **sustaining** Blossom. We discussed how to **let it grow** by creating a welcoming atmosphere with decorations, plants, music, and reading packs, structuring it in a way that participants would share and contribute rather than consume or dominate, and facilitating small group conversations focused on experiences, feelings, and values (field notes, 14-02-2017). Everyone was responsible for inviting people they suggested and knew, preparing the room on the day, co-facilitating the small groups, introducing the learning videos, and providing mutual support where others felt less confident.

Conceptualizing our learning further unearthed how deep-seated the tensions around **recognized** were. For example, when Kirsten made a mistake with the password for the Eventbrite website we used for registration, Eleanor got exasperated she had to resolve it (field notes, 08-03-2017). Eleanor often talked at length to ensure that the underlying idea and format were clear to everyone, with the group often tacitly agreeing. This raised questions about whether we were really transforming the underlying tensions between Eleanor's drive to have her efforts and vision for Blossom **recognized** and the group's tendency to stick to **doing what you can** instead of feeling capable and worthy enough to ask for clarification, challenge ideas, or share anxieties. Most responsibility for organizing the event was taken by Eleanor (developing the format and monitoring the invitee list), Emily (taking care of the videos, materials, and IT) and myself (sorting out the budget and location), while Mary was absent at several meetings and

Britt dropped off completely. Here we should have dedicated time to further reflect on and address the underlying tension, but we inadvertently focused our attention on preparing the event and dealing with a range of unexpected issues, including postponing the event when the animated film was not ready in time.

Experimenting: collaborative event and next steps

By holding the collaborative event, we experimented with the capacities and resources we had developed to build a mutual support network for **sustaining** Blossom. The event in April 2017 was a showcase of **letting it grow**. Setting up the room happened organically as everyone just started doing things. The animation resonated strongly with all 42 participants and elicited many similar emotions and experiences, including feeling frustrated, being made to conform to the system, a desire to change the status quo, and a sense of hope. The learning videos were introduced in a very confident and captivating way, triggering the small groups to articulate insightful shared lessons about the ‘key ingredients’, such as ‘we can support people to be healthy and grow in their communities by having the courage to get out there and doing things in a different way than the current system values’ (event report, 02-05-2017). Finally, participants proposed several follow-up activities and a desire to **vocalize** the key ingredients and **grow** mutual support.

The intended mutual support network and next steps for **sustaining** Blossom did not materialize initially. Participants made quite generic and passive suggestions for next steps and did not commit to anything specific. Some expressed fears about potential backlashes against organizing new initiatives and confusion about the purpose of the event and next steps. There was not enough time left to address these issues as we ran over and had to vacate the room (field notes, 05-05-2017). However, a month later we identified a range of next steps for **sustaining** Blossom, including a follow-up meeting in September to create a ‘mutual support consortium’ for turning the local Adult Learning Center into a multi-purpose ‘well-being hub’, strategically sharing the learning videos and animation, submitting the latter to film festivals, and creating a handbook about Blossom’s approach (field notes, 13-06-2017). These plans laid the basis for a second experiential learning cycle.

Unfortunately, this did not happen. Because the event did not generate the hoped-for mutual support network and next steps, Eleanor said she was left in a state of ‘disappointed hope’ (field notes 05-05-2017) that what we offered up was insufficiently **recognized**. She did not want to organize a reflective meeting with the group as she felt we could not have done more or better. In my view, we could have reflected on many issues, such as the group’s experiences with facilitating conversations, why public officials who had promised to come had not showed up, our approach to developing the mutual support network, and ways in which the tensions around **recognized** persisted. While the aforementioned next steps seemed to continue the experiential learning process, in August 2017, Eleanor withdrew her involvement in the organization and support for the research when hoped-for support for creating the ‘well-being hub’ fell through and she felt it was no longer possible to sustain Blossom.

Conclusion

One of the perennial questions facing SI research and practice is how to sustain new ways of thinking, acting and organizing, especially when these are community-led. This article challenges widespread reliance on social learning for sustaining SI as it limits our

understanding of ‘social’ to situated and collective and maintains unequal dynamics between ‘internal’ learning and the ‘external’ institutional environment. I argue that experiential learning offers a relational perspective that opens the black box of ‘learning-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world’ in SI. My findings from action research with a community-led SI demonstrate that relational dynamics are fundamental to how they operate and can be sustained. The SI was entangled in relational dynamics that maintained tensions between recognizing, on the one hand, the effort and fortitude required to create conditions for change and, on the other, the competences and constraints of diverse people. The intransigence of this relational pattern was due to hegemonic forces creating deep-seated aversion of imposing structure and a tendency for self-bellittling. Capacities and resources for learning to be different in-relation-to-others-and-the-world proved vital in the struggle to sustain this SI.

The main contribution of this article is that it offers the first-ever empirically grounded analysis of how experiential learning can sustain community-led SI. It extends conceptual and empirical understanding of the relational nature of learning and the interconnections between internal dynamics and external forces for sustaining SI (Dias and Partidário 2019), an issue which Gurrutxaga Abad et al. (2021, 11) identified as key to advancing ‘a structurally embedded interpretation of SI’ and its transformative capacity. Experiential learning has hardly been used in the SI literature, because it is often misrepresented as narrowly focused on turning individual experience into knowledge. Following its foundations in classical pragmatism, I explained that experiential learning is an interactive and transformative process of personal and social growth that challenges relational dynamics rooted in hegemonic forces. I developed Kolb’s (1984) four-stage cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation into a relational framework of *learning-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world: creating conditions for a group of people to accumulate experiences, identify relational patterns, create new sense-making devices, and intervene in their situation to grow individually and together in relation to hegemonic forces*. My findings show that experiential learning can enable community-led SIs to grow new capacities and resources for sustaining themselves by turning experience (learning visit abroad) into conceptual representations (animated film and learning videos), and transforming reflections (personal, social, and organizational) into experimentation (collaborative event). Learning to change in-relation-to-each-other-and-the-world can transform relational dynamics and create a path towards sustaining SI.

An apparent limitation is that the SI dissolved despite the experiential learning process. Experiential learning had a fundamental impact on personal and group learning, exposed and addressed the underlying relational dynamics of ‘letting it grow’, and developed new capacities and resources for sustaining the SI. However, it was a very extensive, gradual, and challenging process of confronting strong emotions, deep-rooted identities, and engrained relational dynamics. All the while, hopes, confidence and resources continued to be battered by a lack of recognition and support from across the urban governance system, taking its toll on the propensity to embark upon a second experiential learning cycle. This raises fundamental questions for the sustainability of community-led SIs with ambitions to transform ‘the rules of the game’ (Thompson 2019).

A key implication of these critical reflections on the transformative potential of experiential learning is the need for SI ecosystems characterized by *systems learning*, i.e. ‘systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation’ (Schön 1973, 30). SIs operate in ecosystems in which dynamic interactions between a multiplicity of actors and institutions generate a complex mix of drivers and barriers to developing and sustaining SIs (Pel et al. 2020). Experiential learning adds to our emerging

understanding of SI ecosystems that relational dynamics within a SI are reciprocally intertwined with its ecosystem. Learning should not be treated as an internal matter and responsibility for SIs. ‘An actor’s ability to redirect his/her course of action ... critically depends not only on available resources, but also on the institutional arrangements and (juridical, economic, infra-)structural settings that restrict the ‘room for manoeuvre’ s/he has (or thinks s/he has)’ (Loeber et al. 2009, 91). My research suggests that more SIs should engage in experiential learning following my relational framework, but also that they need reassurances to embark upon the challenging process of *learning-in-relation-to-others-and-the-world* without having the rug pulled from under them. Urban policy-makers and commissioners should invest resources and support in experiential learning to offer SIs protected space, funding and time, and actively engage in a mutual learning process (Wolfram 2018; Galego et al. 2022; Beukers and Bertolini 2021). This could be an important strategy for creating the ‘more relational, networked, way of working in and with communities’ (McCabe and Phillimore 2017, 285) needed to sustain SI ecosystems.

Experiential learning addresses the need for research, policy and practice that embed learning into urban governance (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Beukers and Bertolini 2021). My approach to co-producing experiential learning contributes to growing understanding of how action research can support SI (Bartels, 2020). Future studies should ideally work in research teams to deal more reflexively with the inevitable influence of action researchers’ positionality. There were limitations on the extent to which I was able to become aware of everything that happened during and since my involvement. I continuously sought to foster mutual understanding and rapport by steadfastly being responsive to many complexities, emergent needs, and unforeseen challenges. Arguably, this got me too much drawn into the relational dynamics myself to be in a position to help transform them. Another recommendation is to further explore interactions with the conditions for learning provided by urban governance systems as part of a longitudinal study that methodically uses the experiential learning framework through multiple iterations to structurally transform relational dynamics of community-led SIs and SI ecosystems. Experiential learning needs to become a systemic feature of research, policy, and practice to sustain SI to bring about more transformative, equitable and sustainable urban governance.

Notes

1. In addition, virtually all studies of social learning in SI are set in an environmental context (e.g., Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Smith and Seyfang 2013; Pellicer-Sifres et al. 2018), leaving community-led initiatives concerned with the imperative issue of wellbeing unexplored.
2. For privacy reasons, the name of the organization and the names of all those involved have been changed and only limited details can be provided about their backgrounds and identities.
3. Ethical approval was obtained from the CBLESS Ethics Committee, Bangor University.
4. Britt did not come to Amsterdam because of last-minute serious health issues. During one of the group reflection periods we had a Skype call with her to share our experiences.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to everyone who collaborated with me on the research. I have benefited from constructive comments of Blossom, two anonymous reviewers, Ainhoa Arrona, Hendrik Wagenaar, and panel participants at the Public Administration Theory Network conference 2018 and the ECPR General Conference 2018. I also acknowledge the support of INLOGOV writing retreats in 2018 and 2021. All omissions remain my own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council: [grant no Impact Acceleration Account Fellowship].

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