A Review of Social Learning as a Function of Student-centered Outreach in African Universities

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ABSTRACT

There are attempts in African universities to strengthen their engagement with communities through student-centered outreach (S-C-O). Although the concept of social learning has been introduced in S-C-O, there is still limited theoretical understanding of how the mechanism of social learning in the S-C-O model works due to inadequate availability of indicators for empirical assessment of social learning in S-C-O programs. This review paper explores possible indicators for measuring social learning in S-C-O. A desk review was conducted to obtain literature in the key concepts of the university outreach and social learning. A thematic-content analysis was employed to obtain indicators for measuring social learning. Our review has revealed that communities of practice theory (CPT) of social learning provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of social learning in S-C-O. The key tenets of CPT include practice, community, identity, and meaning. This implies that social learning occurs through collaborative learning processes as a result of social participation. Thus, efforts to investigate social learning in the S-C-O model should focus on farmers in order to assess their interactions in the prevailing social setting and/or institutional context.

Keywords: Communities of practice, Indicators, Outreach, Social learning, Student-centered

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, African Universities have been called upon to move from their “Ivory Towers” and contribute to community development (Adipala and Egeru, 2018). This can be through strengthening the university community engagement for enhanced exchange of knowledge and ideas between communities and the universities for enhanced change in farming practices and technologies (Kalule and Ongeng, 2016; Ramesh and Rana, 2016). According to Mulu-Mutuku et al. (2017), community engagement in most African Universities is through outreach - one of the core mandates of the universities besides teaching and research. However, the outreach function has always received very little attention (Nampala et al., 2016). One way of strengthening university outreach to communities perhaps could be through enhancing student outreach whereby students are attached to communities where they interact through social learning. However, most universities in Africa still lack well developed field-based curricula (Kalule and Ongeng, 2016), that can be used as a basis of initiating the social learning processes for change.

Field attachment of students is sometimes referred to as internship if the attachment aim is to promote learning between universities and communities (Kalule et al., 2016); thus complements agricultural extension activities (Kalule, Sseguya, Ongeng and Karubanga, 2019a). However, how this is ensured and embedded in the theory of social learning remains unclear from the perspective of farmers hosting the students. In this study, we adopt the definition of social learning by (Reed et al., 2010) who defined social learning as “a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social networks” pp. 6 but there remains little consensus over its meaning or theoretical basis. There are still considerable differences in understanding of the concept in the literature, including a number of articles published in Ecology and Society. Social learning is often conflated with other concepts such as participation and proenvironmental behavior, and there is often little distinction made between individual and wider social learning. Many unsubstantiated claims for social learning exist, and there is frequently confusion between the concept itself and its potential outcomes. This lack of conceptual clarity has limited our capacity to assess whether social learning has occurred, and if so, what kind of learning has taken place, to what
extent, between whom, when, and how. This response attempts to provide greater clarity on the conceptual basis for social learning. It is reported according to Kalule et al. (2016) that the functions of the S-C-O model in terms of knowledge transmission and retention, knowledge generation and knowledge assimilation can be assessed through application of community of practice components such as practice, community, identity and meaning. For example, knowledge transmission and retention occurs for instance when faculty teach students how to prepare business plans, this knowledge gets retained within the students who can then use this kind of knowledge to establish their own enterprises. On the other hand, the students can decide to transmit this knowledge to the community through the interactive learning processes. Whereas knowledge can be generated directly by the faculty and students, the community can also generate its own new knowledge and/or adapt the existing technologies to suit their local conditions (Waters-Bayer et al., 2006; Ssebaggala et al., 2016). The third function of the S-C-O model is associated with knowledge assimilation which according to Fletcher and Prashanthan (2011) is the ability to analyze, process, interpret and understand information obtained from the surrounding. In the case of S-C-O model, assimilation is depicted through knowledge acquisition, interpretation and processing research outputs as well as various products obtained as a result of system interactions (Kalule et al., 2016). Still, how this is anchored in the social learning processes with reference to community of practice is still underscored.

In particular, at Gulu University, in S-C-O, the students are attached to smallholder farmers in a radius of 10Km from the university for a period of not less than one year. This time period is critical for enhanced knowledge flow through interactions that lead to acquisition of new skills and experiences as a result of social learning and sharing of experiences between students and communities (Kalule et al., 2014; Nampala et al., 2016). The model has been updated to encompass attachment in a range of 60Km after the introduction of postgraduate programmes in the Faculty of Agriculture in 2014 (Kalule et al., 2019b). This provides a better opportunity for assessing whether S-C-O enhances social learning among the widely geographically distributed farmers. The S-C-O model consists of 3 actors; faculty, students and community. These actors interact together to facilitate knowledge flow (Kalule et al., 2016); which is cardinal in facilitating social learning through community of practice. Thus, it is imperative to explore how the theory of social learning can be anchored in the S-C-O models to initiate and sustain actor interactions. Two cardinal questions have guided this paper including: 1) how can social learning theory be conceptualized to explain social interactions through S-C-O programmes? and 2) how can the components of community of practice theory (CPT) be employed to explain social learning through S-C-O programmes?

Theoretical framing

Learning is an important component of the S-C-O model because the actors interact with each other (Kalule et al., 2016), but how such interactions are initiated and sustained through social learning in the S-C-O model is not well grounded in literature related to community of practice. The concept of social learning is rooted in the field of behavioral psychology as described by Albert Bandura (Tran et al., 2018). Other scholars such as Bandura and Walters (1977) viewed social learning as a casual and/or directed observation of behavior performed by others in everyday situations. This earlier conceptualization of social learning shows the existence of feedback mechanism between learners and their environment. That is, learners change the environment and at the same time the environment influences their learning behavior (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2008)

To-date, the concept of learning has also been extended to S-C-O through the analysis of farmer learning behaviors (Karubanga et al., 2017; Kalule et al., 2019b) however, with limited attention on how such behaviours are influenced by social learning processes. For instance, Kalule et al. (2019), in their study on contextual determinants of learning behavior differentials amongst host farmers of the University-Student Outreach in Uganda describe four main farmer learning behaviors indicators as reported by Edmondson (1999). These indicators include; seeking information, knowledge sharing, seeking feedback and giving feedback. Such literature advances knowledge on individual learning behavior within S-C-O programmes but there is a dearth of information on learning as collaborative process; of course using the leas of community of practice theory. Thus, an assessment of social interaction between students, staff, famers and other actors in S-C-O can provide greater opportunities for social learning. In a nutshell, the kind of interactions in the S-C-O model can provide a platform for advancing new forms of collaborative learning that foster grassroots innovation (Grobbeerlaar, 2017; Kalule et al., 2019b).

Conversely, it is against this background that this review paper focuses on the CPT of social learning by Wenger (1998) as the analytical framework for assessing social learning through S-C-O. According to Wenger (1998), social learning theory encompasses four main tenets including community, practice, identity and meaning. The CPT of social learning extends the understanding of social learning beyond an individual to include social participation as collaborative learning process (Farnsworth et al., 2016). Although the communities of practice theory has been proposed in literature as an analytical framework, there are still few studies that have reported application of this theory in empirical research within the African research context especially in assessing social learning through S-C-O programmes. Elsewhere, some empirical studies have been done involving the application of CPT of social learning especially in the rural communities of the Vietnamese Mekong Data (Tran et al., 2018) and in other research settings such as environmental management (Noguera-Méndez et al., 2016) and organizational
environment (Angelle, 2008). However, empirical literature is generally lacking on interactions between rural communities and other actors in the context of the S-C-O model. Earlier research studies form a strong basis for assessing social learning through S-C-O programmes in African Universities, particularly Gulu University in Uganda. This review study therefore contributes to exploring this knowledge and research gap. Thus, this review paper aims at exploring the theory of social learning in order to obtain indicators for measuring social interactions in S-C-O models.

Conceptualizing social learning for assessing S-C-O programmes

Social learning extends from the theory of situated learning which emphasizes that, for learning to occur, there must be interaction between people (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Karubanga et al., 2017). Learning through interaction is expected to lead to some kind of behavioural change and this qualifies it as social learning (Cai and Abbott, 2013; Karubanga et al., 2016). Learning can also be considered a multi-loop process consisting of levels namely single, double and triple loop learning (Argyris, 2003; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2011); which are important for assessing how social learning occurs through S-C-O programme. For example, according to Pahl-Wostl et al. (2011) single loop learning involves incremental enhancement of actions and routine functions without changing any underlying assumptions whereas double loop learning leads to revision of underlying value assumptions. Meanwhile, triple loop learning leads to scrutinisation of underlying ideological and value systems. The application of multiple loop processes in understanding social learning is critical towards enhancing innovative and adaptive capacity as well as change in governance systems (Tabara and Pahl-Wostl, 2007) (E; in this case governance of outreach in African Universities. Social learning that leads to innovations is situated in double loop learning (Sol, 2013). Innovations are thus ultimate outcomes of the social learning processes and can be defined as learning to do things differently as a result of exposure to S-C-O programmes that initiate and sustains the interaction processes (also see Karubanga et al., 2017). In this case social learning through S-C-O can be viewed as an exploratory process that seeks to overcome challenges of farmer learning for innovation (Tran et al., 2018) through enhancing interactive learning for behavioural change.

Explaining social learning using CPT components in assessing the S-C-O model

The concept of communities of practice has now been widely adopted by scholars to explain social learning (Figure 1). Community of practice is denoted as learning which is practice, community, identity and meaning (Wenger, 1998). The detailed explanation of these elements is provided in the subsequent sections and how they can be anchored in social learning while assessing S-C-O models. As reported by Graven and Lerman (2003) in their review of Wenger’s 1998 book on Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity, practice is regarded as a way of doing and encompasses things like shared historical and social capital, perspectives and frameworks that initiate and sustain the interactive relationship; in this social learning through case S-C-O. On the other hand, community instils a sense of belonging, social configuration in community enterprises and recognizes participation as way of demonstrating competence (Figure 1); which is associated with sharing of information and experience through social interactions embedded in social learning process.

![Figure 1: Components of the community of practice theory for social learning (adapted from Graven and Lerman, 2003).](image-url)
With reference to Figure 1, identity means learning to demonstrate how the actors change how they are; whereas meaning refers to experience and that is the capacity to see the world as meaningful and producing desired outcomes; of course through social learning where actors are expected to common and shared meaning of the acquired knowledge and skills through S-C-O. Today, communities of practice are vibrant when there is need for mutual engagement around a joint enterprise, which requires a strong bond of communal competence that leads to knowledge creation (Wenger, 1998). In short, three key dimensions have been reported to foster social learning through S-C-O models namely; mutual engagement, shared enterprise and a shared repertoire of communal resources (Tran et al., 2018)

Identity

Our review has indicated that the construction on an identity in social learning goes beyond just changing the mind but a complete involvement of the whole human body explained in terms of heart, brain, relationships, aspirations and human experiences involved in meaning-making (Wenger, 2010: p.181). These are critical for critical reflection, adaption and application of the acquired knowledge and skills as affirmed by Karubanga et al. (2017). According to Handley et al. (2006), learning is not merely a matter of developing a person’s knowledge and practices, but includes an understanding of who we are and whether we belong and are accepted in a given community of practice. Identity is a key part in the construction of meaning because it allows participant (in this case a student or farmer) to negotiate meaning through participation to express level of competence and as well judge for oneself if as a member of the community or not (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger, 2010). In the S-C-O, students need to develop a feeling of being accepted in rural communities and develop a new sense of belonging (Kalule et al., 2019); which can be achieved through interactions as a key component of social learning (Karubanga et al., 2017). The S-C-O model involves knowledge flow between actors (Kalule et al., 2016), calling for the development of an identity through creation of new forms of knowledge. As noted by Farnsworth et al. (2016), identification exists in three modes including engagement, imagination and alignment which are important learning processes. In relation to social learning, Wenger (2010) explains three (3) modes of identification as follows; Engagement which entails participating in activities, doing tasks, working alone or as group, talking, using and producing objects. Imagination involves the creation of mental models about the world to reflect on various perspectives and explore new possibilities of doing things (Bandura, 1997; Karubanga et al., 2017). Wenger (2010) asserts that imagination is possible because the world provides us with instruments like language, stories, maps, shows, role models and so on to support the learning process; in this case through S-C-O models. For instance, through the S-C-O model, students, staff and farmers can effectively participate in agricultural shows and field days thus providing them opportunities to expand knowledge and skill levels; and in the process more interactions will be harnessed through social learning. Conversely, alignment refers to the coordination of activities, ensuring that laws or regulations are respected in pursuance of university’s core mandates and ensuring that communications follow a two-way process of synchronized actions, viewpoints and contexts (Wenger, 2010). Generally, the conceptualization of identity formation is well reported in literature basically for organizations but less focus on rural communities of practice as noted by (Tran et al., 2018).

Practice

Practice is critical within the community of practice theory of social learning because it entails meaningful engagement through interactions in communities (Handley et al, 2006) and includes aspects like shared social capital and perspectives that sustain learning through well-established relationship (Graven and Lerman, 2003). It encompasses shared learning activities or practices by a community of practice (Tran et al., 2018). In this case, practices are developed through interactive observations, imitations, adapting and developing new practices that are in line with community norms (Handley et al., 2006). It is reported that all these occur through social learning for innovation (also see Karubanga et al., 2017)

Community

Social learning occurs within individuals belonging to particular communities where they interact and learn from each other in order to change. In the process of interaction, a community instils a sense of belonging to various actors; in this case farmers, students and other actors in the S-C-O programme. A review indicates that it is worth noting that one’s participation in a community of practice, in this case S-C-O programme is an incremental process where one moves from peripheral participant to an active participant in a given community of practice by developing certain levels of competence (Farnsworth et al., 2016) which are acquired through social learning. Reviewed literature indicated that within the S-C-O model, farmers are expected to develop a community as a result of their interaction with students (Kalule et al., 2019b). Hosting the students, for example, as individuals and groups of farmers is reported to have the ability of shaping their sense of belonging in the process of fostering farmer learning (Erickson, 2010; Kalule et al., 2019; Preece, 2013).
As a result, the S-C-O introduces a new dimension whereby rural communities have an enduring association with universities through student field attachment which form a strong foundation for building and strengthening social learning among the farming communities.

Meaning:

Meaning refers to the ability to see the world as meaningful (Graven and Lerman, 2003; Wenger, 1998); and this can be acquired through social learning characterized by inherent interactions which are necessary for knowledge and information flow (Singh and Gupta, 2016). Available literature indicates that meaning is the final product of the learning process (Graven and Lerman, 2003) and it is reached by sharing knowledge and experiences among the participating individuals especially in the S-C-O models. Specifically, anchoring meaning in the S-C-O model is reflected in the ability of individuals, in this case farmers, taking up new technologies and/or innovation(s).

Conclusion

This desk review study was intended to explore how the theory of social learning can be anchored in the S-C-O models to initiate and sustain actor interactions. Our review findings indicate that a well facilitated S-C-O model can initiate and sustain social learning processes that occur as a result of inherent interactions among the key actors notably students, staff and communities. The tangible impact of social learning is expected to be realised mostly by the rural farming communities because they continuously interact within the same social setting even after the students have left the field attachment. This is possible due to a well-established and functional community of practice. In this way, farmers are able to create meaning and develop new identities or regimes of competence within their connections created through social learning. We strongly recommend that the thorough analysis of social learning in the S-C-O model should focus mainly on farmers or farming communities within their prevailing social and/or institutional context for more adaptive assessment of farmer learning behavior.

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