

LEARNING

This chapter contains:

1. An explanation of the need for learning in peacebuilding
2. The stages of adult learning
3. The advantages of collaboration between scholars and practitioners

INTRODUCTION

“Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.”

- ABIGAIL ADAMS

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Learning is “a continuous, dynamic process of investigation where the key elements are experience, knowledge, access and relevance. It requires a culture of inquiry and investigation rather than one of response and reporting.”¹ This chapter begins with a discussion of the need for learning in peacebuilding. It explains how monitoring and evaluation contribute to learning. It also looks at adult learning, the notion of failure, and the opportunities involved in integrating field-based experience with academic thought.

Why is learning important in peacebuilding?

The work of peacebuilding often requires people involved in a conflict to learn. Peacebuilding program objectives and activities focused on learning abound: raise knowledge, improve understanding, increase tolerance, etc. Changes in relationships require learning new ways to perceive and engage others. Problem solving often involves learning about new options and alternative ways of doing things. The heavy preponderance of training activities is a testament to the fundamental importance of stakeholder learning in peacebuilding.

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One of the paradoxes in the field of peacebuilding is that many peacebuilders work so diligently to create learning opportunities for the parties to the conflict, yet they are so casual about their own learning and professional development as peacebuilders. There are several trends that block peacebuilders from learning more about the field and how to become more effective. These include:

- Changes in the conflict context occur quickly and have outpaced our ability to learn from experience.
- We are often too busy doing things right to learn about doing the right things.
- There are too few peacebuilding programs and most of those are too small to effectively rely on informal learning and ad hoc methods of retaining knowledge.
- Rapid strategic changes may result in a loss of knowledge about specific peacebuilding practices.

¹ UNDP Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluation for Results, pp.77.

In addition, peacebuilders use a wide range of excuses to exempt themselves from monitoring and evaluation. Some of the more dog-eared examples include, “Our efforts will only be achieved in the long term” and “With so many actors in the field, it is impossible to isolate our contribution.”

Financial constraints often cause peacebuilding organizations to opt for investing in additional interventions rather than investing in reflection about current programming and the identification of good practices. Obviously, the world needs both additional programming and improvements in programming quality.

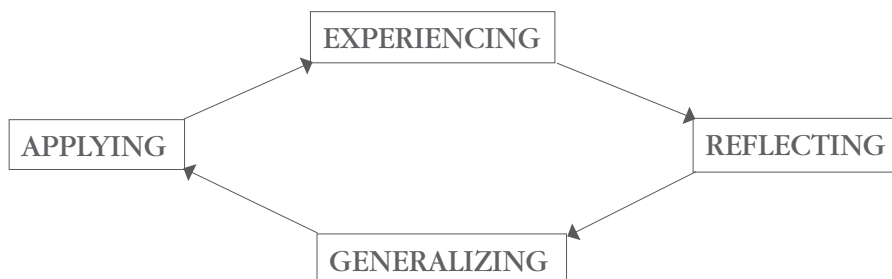
Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are the learning disciplines most accessible and useful to peacebuilding practitioners. These disciplines are accessible because many donors will pay for them, and they are useful because they are directly related to the practitioners’ experience and context. This manual will provide practitioners with some of the necessary paradigms and tools to undertake M&E, but the ardor and diligence for learning must come from the practitioners themselves.

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How can we use Kolb’s theory of adult learning?²

Most experiential learning activities used in peacebuilding workshops are based on Kolb’s four stages of adult learning: experience, reflect, generalize, and apply. The following illustration of these stages is a systems map rather than a cause-and-effect diagram. The arrows mean “influence” rather than “leads to.” Too often in peacebuilding, practitioners stay firmly planted in the experiencing stage.

Kolb’s Stage of Adult Learning



² For additional thoughts on using Kolb’s stages of adult learning, see *Teaching and Learning: Experiential Learning* by J.S. Atherton (2004). Available at <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>.

EXPERIENCE: Adults learn best by both doing and from experience. Yet more experience does not automatically result in better experience or learning. In order to use someone’s experience to full advantage, practitioners need to routinely and systematically move beyond the experience stage in the learning system.

Success merits documentation and so does learning. Anyone who has been through an audit is familiar with the bureaucrat’s refrain, “If it isn’t written down, it didn’t happen.” Undocumented experiences are difficult to share, are more easily forgotten or overlooked, and tend to become exaggerated or distorted over time. Time needs to be allocated to document the how, when, why, and who of an experience so it can be reflected upon later.

“Reflection is the exercise of translating experience into knowledge.”

REFLECTING: While experience may be the best teacher, learning requires more than experience. In processing or reflecting on our experiences, we begin to learn from them. On one occasion or another, most of us have had to experience the same situation several times before we were able to learn enough to either avoid or overcome the situation the next time around. Without processing or reflecting on an experience and learning from it, we are destined to repeat past performance.

Generalizing involves abstract conceptualization.

Monitoring and evaluation can play a critical role in processing our experiences by allowing us to translate experience into information. M&E provides us with the means to reflect on our perceptions and understanding of why things happen and to develop them into increasingly more objective pieces of information and knowledge. Put another way, “reflection is the exercise of translating experience into knowledge.”³

GENERALIZING: Generalizing involves abstract conceptualization. It is a step beyond reflection in that it goes beyond first-hand experience or knowledge of how certain things work to a more general perception about how those things work.

Most peacebuilders derive some sense of satisfaction from their experiences of working with people as they cope with, manage, and transform conflict. The privilege of being present when people risk new means of dealing with conflict comes with its own responsibilities, however. One of those responsibilities is to extract the learning from the experiences and to make it available to peers, other practitioners, and others in conflict.

The other challenge in relying exclusively on experience is that it may reach only small groups of learners, often those who have had the same experience. We do not have the time or the luxury of learning everything

³ International Institute for Rural Reconstruction, *Principles of Community Development*.

through experience, however. This was the premise of the American film “Groundhog Day” in which the protagonist was doomed to repeat the same day endlessly until he had learned everything that that one day had to offer.

Good M&E products enable others to know about and learn from our experiences. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. once said, “Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than in the one where they sprang up.” Similar data or reinforcing pieces of information enable us to make generalizations about causes and effects, theories of change, spheres of influence, systems, relationships, and attributions. Such information also helps us to understand how conflict, collaboration, peace, equity, and justice interact and function.

APPLYING: Applying new learning and knowledge allows us to modify old behaviors and practice new behaviors in everyday situations – potentially generating new experiences and nourishing the learning system. For additional information on applying learning, see page 178 on Evaluation Use in this manual.

What about combining field- and academically-based learning?

Common arrangements involve partnerships between field practitioners and university staff members and/or researchers. Professors and researchers can offer field practitioners the discipline and tools needed to ensure learning. The field practitioners can provide professors and researchers with data and insights into field realities, constraints, and opportunities. University collaborators, researchers, and professional evaluators can add value to practitioners’ learning in a number of different ways including:

- Helping to ensure adequate standards of rigor in research
- Assisting in selecting and refining the research questions
- Facilitating the analysis of data
- Developing good baseline studies
- Documenting experiences (i.e., process documentation or case study preparation)
- Conducting literature research
- Mapping logical thinking, and
- Lending credibility.

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What about failure?

Too many peacebuilding programs fail to make changes, enrich learning, or both. Successful and unsuccessful peacebuilding programs that do not translate their experiences into knowledge miss an important opportunity to help others learn from that experience. Unsuccessful programs that generate and disseminate important insights, new tools, or a richer understanding of the dynamics at play can make substantial contributions to the field of peacebuilding and to local peacebuilding practice despite the demise of those programs.

Thomas Edison noted that “many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.” Monitoring and evaluation can help practitioners know when to give up and abandon ineffective programs and when to invest energy and resources into initiatives that truly will help.

In sum, peacebuilders, like people in conflict, need opportunities to learn about their work. Monitoring and evaluation are learning disciplines that can contribute a richer understanding of the dynamics at play, greater professionalism, and more effective programming. Collaboration between scholars and practitioners can be mutually enriching.

Further reading

David A Kolb, *Kolb’s Theory of Adult Learning*, 1984.

<http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>