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Capacity building for school improvement or creating capacity for learning? A changing landscape

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Is it really almost 10 years since we heralded in the new millennium? Time passes so quickly, yet looking back over the landscape of the last decade much has changed in terms of how we think about school improvement and ways in which capacity building enhances it. How far have we come and what has changed in those intervening years? Do we still mean the same things when we talk about capacity building and school improvement as we did a decade ago? In this article I start by addressing some definitions before exploring seven interlinked issues and their implications for capacity building and research.

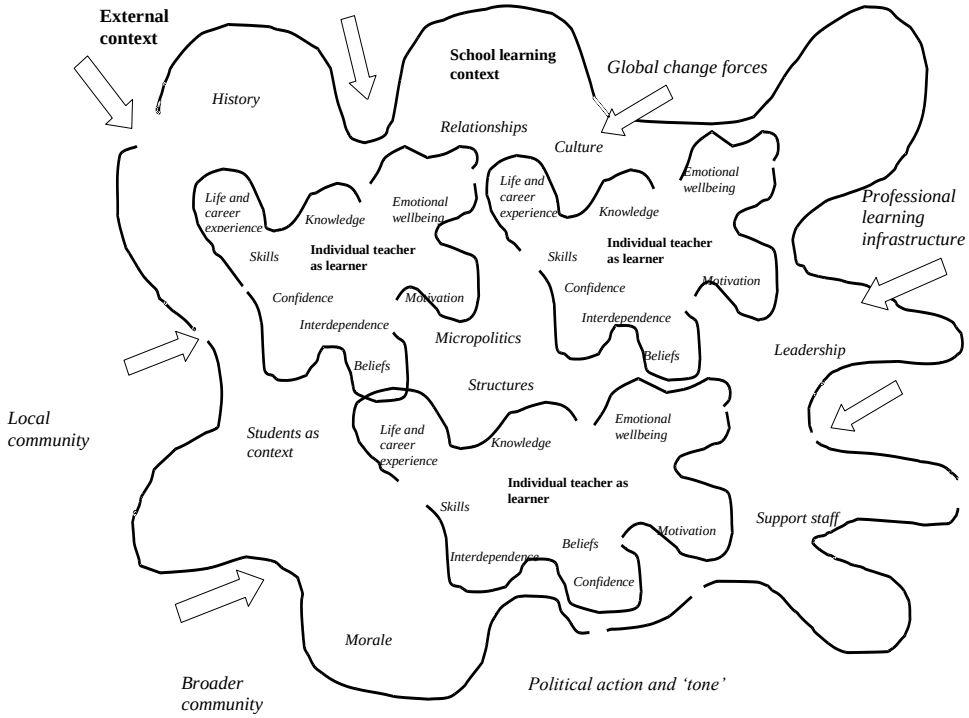
School improvement

The ultimate aim of school improvement is that it needs to make a difference for students, although it's about more than just adding value and 'doing the right things'. School improvement is immensely complicated. For some time it has broadly been viewed as "a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhances student learning outcomes *as well as* strengthening the school's capacity for managing change" (Hopkins 2001, p.13), particularly emphasising the teaching and learning process and conditions that support this. Its focus has been how schools develop those conditions and processes that support and enhance learning and schools' capacity to manage change. While school improvement is outcomes-oriented, it is a process: a journey with many subtleties that even the richest of case studies can't capture.

Capacity and capacity building

Ensuring capacity for lasting improvement is critical to address challenges of quality and equality. Ten years ago, the general orientation was towards addressing sets of improvement-related capacities, especially those emphasising change in the core business of teaching and learning. At that time I argued that while changing learning and teaching is absolutely fundamental to improvement, separating out capacities in such a way didn't sufficiently capture the complexity, interconnectedness and potential of different facets of the change process. Rather, I saw capacity as a more generic and holistic concept: the power to engage in and sustain continuous learning of teachers and the school itself for the purpose of enhancing student learning, influenced by individual teachers within a school; the school's social and structural learning context; and the external context (see Figure 1). A school with internal capacity would be able to take charge of change because it's adaptive.

Figure 1 The influences on internal capacity



(Stoll, 1999)

Capacity has been further elaborated into three mutually influencing and interdependent categories: personal, interpersonal and organisational (Mitchell and Sackney, 2001). As I hope to show, neither my description of internal capacity nor its elaboration now adequately captures the current and ever-changing context of school improvement.

What about capacity building? It's "multifaceted" (Fullan, 2006), involving both those internally and those supporting them externally – including policymakers – in:

- creating and maintaining the necessary conditions, culture and structures;
- facilitating learning and skill-oriented experiences and opportunities;
- ensuring interrelationships and synergy between all the component parts (Stoll and Bolam, 2005).

So capacity building is an extremely complex endeavour. Add to this the challenges facing school improvement in the last decade and we see a fast changing picture of what enhancing capacity for school improvement now actually means.

Issues affecting school improvement and implications for capacity building

Many issues affect school improvement efforts. Here, I describe seven interlinked issues and suggest implications for capacity building.

1. *Varied contexts and capacity necessitate differentiated capacity building*

A large body of school improvement literature highlights generic features of improvement, frequently citing the following: a focus on learning and teaching; using data to help guide improvement efforts; high quality professional development, embedded within professional learning communities; leadership and community involvement; and external support. Many reformers internationally draw on school improvement research to develop their strategies. For example, the Quality, Improvement and Effectiveness Unit of South Australia's Department of Education and Children's Services cites its purpose as "to strengthen the capacity of preschools, schools and districts to achieve and sustain a culture of quality and improvement in teaching and learning". Its Improvement and Accountability Framework is underpinned by principles of improvement and effectiveness based on research, theory and practice about effectiveness and improvement strategies (http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/quality), the unit providing self evaluation tools and working with schools to support and quality assure self evaluation efforts.

The issue of differentiated capacity building is not new. It was certainly recognised a decade ago that capacity building needs to be differentiated (eg Hopkins et al, 1997). No two schools or districts are identical and capacity building has to take this into account. For some schools implementing change is like "trying to build a structure out of sand" whereas in others "the soil is fertile and the seed . . . only needs time, nurturing and protection" (Slavin, 1998, p.1303). Improvement means something different to struggling schools in deprived areas than to cruising schools in leafy suburbs (Stoll and Fink, 1996) – also known as coasting schools – the subject of recent policy scrutiny in several jurisdictions because their value added is viewed as insufficient given more advantaged intakes. Capacity also varies in school districts, highlighted in my own country in external inspections of districts with subsequent takeover by private companies if they are deemed to be 'failing'. The readiness to be able to initiate change or even take on external change and harness it for their own purposes just isn't there in some schools, but the challenge often is that it takes capacity to build capacity (Hatch, 2001).

Where there is insufficient capacity to begin with, it's irresponsible to leave people to 'get on with it'. Capacity building approaches vary across different jurisdictions. Intervening in inverse proportion to success has underpinned the rationale of those advising the English government on national reform for some time. In addition over time, it's been argued, prescriptive strategies have been gradually replaced by those associated with informed professionalism – where school leaders and other staff play a greater role in determining how change should occur (Barber, 2001; Hopkins, 2007). Prescription, however, can be constraining and frustrating for those already with the capacity to bring about change. Evidence from evaluations of England's National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies (Earl et al, 2002) and the implementation of England's Key Stage 3 (middle years) Strategy Pilot (Stoll and Stobart, 2005) highlights how prescription can lead to teacher dependency. In capacity terms, this is diminished capacity.

In more recent years, however, there have been increasingly nuanced attempts to focus on different capacity growth states. So, for example, the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) in Canada, a provincial strategy, provides support for all boards and schools "experiencing particular difficulty in achieving continuous improvement", including cruising schools (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/ofip.html). There are also efforts in several other countries to find ways to help build capacity in schools facing significant challenges where student achievement is poor, including government initiatives in my own system (see Clarke et al, 2005 for one example).

Such challenge and poor performance is usually also connected with school context. Again, we have known for a long time that contextual differences in schools and districts affect improvement, providing further backing for differentiated capacity building. Skills required for leadership or teaching in a multicultural inner city environment aren't exactly the same as those in an affluent suburb or an isolated rural community. Promoting professional community tends to be easier in small schools (Bryk et al, 1999); conversely, school improvement is generally more challenging in secondary schools

(Louis and Miles, 1990) and developing professional learning communities is also more complex in secondary schools (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2007).

With the 'one size doesn't fit all' message gaining ground, even though many national reform efforts around the world still appear not to consider it, contextual capacity building is on the increase. Growing numbers of initiatives in my own country focus on improving urban schools. Nationally supported efforts, lead by people with track records in school improvement research or development have addressed first the London Challenge and now City Challenge, involving schools in London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/citychallenge/).

2. *Broader aims of schooling mean capacity building needs to go beyond focusing on supporting instructional improvement to emphasising learning*

For a long time, improving what goes on in the classroom was synonymous with instructional improvement; finding out what instructional strategies were linked with better student outcomes and thinking of ways to build teachers' capacity to use these strategies. For some people involved in school improvement, this is still considered to be the necessary agenda. But there has also been a shift over the last 10 years from three key perspectives.

First, a fairly extensive body of knowledge on student voice about what students think about their schooling and learning, coupled with a new generation of learners in many countries for whom digital technology is part of their way of being, raises the question about whether we have been spreading the teaching strategies net wide enough.

Second, the burgeoning knowledge base on learning itself, the role of technology in learning and ever evolving research findings on the brain might mean for learning should be forcing everyone to think seriously, particularly as learning about learning also appears to enhance the more traditional student outcomes (Watkins, 2001). Some of the evidence is not new but, as Perkins

(1992) noted, it's not the knowledge gap about learning that has been the problem; rather, there's been a "monumental *use-of-knowledge* gap". Given that it's easier to see teaching than learning when monitoring or inspecting classrooms, this has inevitably contributed to the focus on teaching with learning as an outcome.

Considering learning in its widest sense – to know, to do, to live together and to be (Delors et al, 1996) – also takes us into the realm of the purposes of schooling. While educating for democratic citizenship has been at the core of Scandinavian educational systems, in my own country and elsewhere, the major driver of reform for around 20 years has been achieving standards in the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and science. A recent widening of the educational agenda to include, among other important outcomes, wellbeing, has led to the need for educators to work more closely with people from other disciplines (eg health, social services etc) in order to address every child's and young person's learning and well-being needs. It also isn't just about getting smarter with teaching strategies; UNICEF's (2007) report on child well-being in rich nations highlights how attending to the relationship between students' subjective wellbeing and peer relationships helps enhance both educational well-being and progress.

Capacity building for this wider agenda pays much greater attention to what is known about learning (eg Claxton, 2007). It's not widespread and because many of its proponents argue that measuring a narrow range of academic student outcomes is inadequate to capture the kind of outcomes that this deeper learning promotes, it continues to be viewed by many governments (and the public they serve) as 'soft'. Time will tell.

Capacity building also needs to provide support for and development of a wider workforce. Several countries have adapted to this agenda by developing integrated community schools and services (eg in Scotland: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/welfare/Integrated-Services), extended schools (in England: http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/extendedschools/) and broad schools

in different parts of the Netherlands (Prinsen, 2008) with associated development and other capacity building needs, including developing a culture in which staff with different backgrounds can collaborate most effectively and supporting development of mentoring systems where youth workers and social care staff take on the role of personal mentor to students. 'Remodelling' of the workforce in England (http://www.tda.gov.uk/remodelling/nationalagreement.aspx) has also led to a greater emphasis on professional development for support staff.

3. *In a rapidly changing world, capacity building needs to address both the present and the future*

Global changes forces pose dilemmas for capacity building: should capacity building focus on educators', schools' and school systems' existing contexts or the fast emerging but still uncertain future? The answer has to be both. As many have observed, schools need to work towards an evolving common vision for the future, while at the same time meeting current needs and challenges of their context and community within a policy structure bringing its own demands. The same holds true at all levels of the system.

Where countries have been committed to strong accountability agendas, capacity building over the last 10 years and more have focused on identifying best practice (often described as 'what works') and finding ways to transfer it into other settings. This continues. The reason for this is to ensure that teaching strategies are engaging, motivating, appropriately challenging, varied and differentiated – a highly demanding undertaking. Given that the classroom's power overshadows that of the school in explaining differences in students' progress (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000), a logical conclusion might be just to identify 'what works' in classrooms and build capacity by finding ways to 'transfer' this knowledge about effective skills and strategies through the system. A danger is that frequently the strategies promoted were identified by research carried out some time ago: in effect 'what worked', begging the question as to whether they are still appropriate. As the last section highlights, the situation has changed; we know more and the learners are also different.

Even if 'it still works' there is a further issue of whether approaches can or, indeed, should be adopted faithfully in different contexts.

Capacity building has to connect with a world order where, as the previous point discusses, fast emerging technologies are affecting learning processes, and a new generation of children and young people bring a different orientation that, in many cases, existing models of schooling may not meet. Judged by current accountability systems, many schools and school districts yearn to be free to offer the curriculum and learning and teaching strategies they consider will provide the bedrock for future success. Teachers and school leaders, however, often find it difficult to devote attention to promoting creativity because of what they describe as "the immense pressure" of focusing on standards or being "very burdened by being driven by targets" (Stoll and Temperley, 2009a). It requires a bold decision not to be constrained and to move away from the "rigidity" of some frameworks. Balancing being creative and innovative within the context of a standards approach, mixing "tried and tested" methods and experimentation isn't easy for most educators.

With diverse scenarios for the future possibilities of schooling (OECD, 2001), new educational approaches are essential. This underpins the thinking behind 'next practice': "emergent innovations that could open up new ways of working" (Hannon, 2008). As Hannon argues, successful take up and transfer of identified best practice across all schools is "insufficient to achieve the kind of transformational reform which is increasingly recognized as essential to meet the demands of the 21st century". Next practice doesn't conform to expectations associated with best practice. It seeds and promotes innovative ideas and practices before there is evidence of their effectiveness. Developing capacity for this kind of innovative practice differs from supporting people to learn excellent practices from elsewhere, even if the practices are new to them. It demands a different, creative, exploratory, risk taking and adaptive orientation. This doesn't always come naturally, but it seems that it can be enhanced through experience (Stoll and Temperley, 2009b).

4. Ensuring sustainability depends on a capacity building 'habit of mind'

Initial urgency for improvement may be stimulated by mandating improvement strategies, but quick fix solutions rarely lead to deep and lasting change. In the last few years, attention has shifted to the pursuit of the holy grail of sustainability –something deeper, broader and lasting whilst also being fair, embracing diversity, using resources wisely, and drawing on valuable past practices (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

Capacity for change is all about learning: learning, in which people engage individually and collectively in continuous, challenging and purposeful consideration of their professional responsibilities, their beliefs, their skills, their motivations and their practices. This kind of learning has inherent benefits for teachers and other staff, but its real value in education is connected to sustainability: sustainability of honest appraisal of the conditions and outcomes that exist in the school; sustainability of inquiry and reflection; sustainability of conversations inside and outside the school; and sustainability of continuous learning designed to enhance students' success. Sustainability is the goal; capacity is the engine that will ultimately power the sustainability journey.

Capacity building can't be an 'add on'; a bandage to put around a broken limb; it needs to become a 'habit of mind' (Hill, 1997). Habits of mind are 'broad, enduring and essential lifespan learnings' (Costa and Kallick, 2000), ways of being and thinking. As any new improvement strategy is considered, the response should be 'what do we need to put in place to ensure we have the capacity for this to be sustainable'? The responses to the next three issues address the kinds of conditions, culture and new forms of structures likely to support sustainability. The first of these is changing conceptions of leadership.

5. *Leading school improvement can't be done by one person alone: developing leadership capacity is essential*

It's well known that effective leadership is closely related to school improvement, but our understanding of whose leadership is important has

changed. Until recently, the principal received most attention as keeper of the school's vision and, sometimes, 'saviour' in cases where principals were catapulted into schools deemed as failing. It's no wonder that people were drawn to the notion of the hero leader. These days, though, the demands and challenges of leading schools are simply too great for any one person (the principal). Many countries face a succession crisis with ageing principals and few candidates to replace them in what is seen as an unattractive job (Pont et al, 2008). In this context distributed leadership, broad-based involvement in leadership practices (Harris, 2008) seems to offer leadership plus (Spillane et al, 2001).

In reality, the school improvement role played by middle managers, such as heads of department and subject coordinators has been explored for some time. Recently, however, the link between teacher leadership and school improvement has been highlighted (eg Murphy, 2005) and bolstered by evidence that the link between principal leadership and student outcomes is largely indirect (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). With the introduction of whole-child development policies such as England's Every Child Matters and development of a wider workforce, leadership capacity building has to encompass a wider group of people. To maintain the link with school improvement, such capacity building needs to keep its focus on leadership that brings benefits for learning: that is, students' learning, but also influencing and supporting learning of other stakeholders playing a role in improving students' learning. It means spotting leadership potential and providing a range of opportunities for people to develop leadership practice and interactions.

Developing leadership capacity is necessary if improvement is to be more than a temporary phenomenon. To ensure sustainability, leadership has to be distributed within the school and embedded within its culture. Leadership capacity is developed in schools in which senior leaders pay attention to developing as a team. Developing team leadership was the focus of a research and development project involving senior leadership teams in a group of English schools and leadership team from their district who were

learning new ways to demonstrate creative leadership: imaginative and thought-through responses to opportunities and to challenging issues that inhibit learning at all levels (Stoll & Temperley, 2009b). Capacity building here means focusing on helping leadership teams collectively see, think and do things differently to improve all students' life chances, and find ways they can provide the conditions, environment and opportunities for their colleagues to be creative.

The most fundamental shift in developing leadership capacity may be occurring in schools, districts and jurisdictions promoting student leadership. Over 10 years ago, school improvement research was exploring student voice (eg Rudduck, 1996). But the use of the word 'leadership' is fairly recent in this context – developing the capacity for students to be leaders of their own learning, to play a role in evaluating the quality of their learning experiences and participating in selecting new school leaders, to cite three examples.

6. An increasingly networked society requires lateral capacity building

Top-down capacity building strategies rarely build the internal commitment and agency necessary to sustain improvement. Capacity building in schools is strengthened by communities of groups of teachers sharing and analysing their work (eg Little, 2002) and developing professional learning communities (see review by Stoll et al, 2006). But in an increasingly interdependent world, school-to-school learning networks enlarge individual schools' repertoire of choices, moving ideas and good practice around the system. This lateral capacity building (Fullan, 2006) is collective responsibility and moral purpose writ large in cases where members learn with one another, from one another 'on behalf of' one another, and learn more about their learning, as described in England's Networked Learning Communities initiative (NCSL, 2006).

Networking initiatives now occur in many systems. For example, in New Zealand's Extending High Standards Across Schools (EHSAS), highly achieving schools are identified and further develop processes and practices in collaboration with other schools

(http://www.minedu.govt.nz/educationSectors/Schools/Initiatives/ExtendingHighStandardsAcrossSchools.aspx). Ontario's Schools on the Move: Lighthouse Program has similar aims (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/schoolMove.html).

Networking also knows no borders. School leaders, teachers, students and whole schools in different countries now link up with each other, sharing across cultural boundaries. Aided by technological advances of the last 10 years, such opportunities are increasing and encouraged by many governments; for example in England where every school will be expected to have a partner school in another country by 2010.

Concerns are expressed that if networks are left to their own devices there's a danger of mediocre practice being distributed around the system. Certainly, so-called networks where people get together to share information or decide how to respond to a district mandate aren't true learning networks. In learning networks external expertise is fed in and used as a stimulus for dialogue that challenges people's assumptions. Capacity enhancement occurs through learning conversations that force people to re-examine their practice and explore ways to enhance it. Networking's benefits to teacher learning are well documented, but evidence is emerging of links with student outcomes, especially when widespread commitment to network learning is fed back into active school-based professional learning communities (Earl and Katz, 2006).

7. Improvement doesn't only depend on individual schools: systemic capacity building is required

A decade ago, most reforms followed a linear and segmented pattern: 'if we do X to that part of the system, we expect Y to happen'. Greater understanding of the lessons from holistic science now suggests that individual parts of any system are affected by others. Individual actions have rippling effects on their environment, suggesting the need for a holistic view of what it means to improve any part of the system. Some reformers are realising that looking at school improvement in isolation from improvement of

the wider system makes no sense. The term ‘school improvement’ may even be inadequate as we consider broader educational improvement. We’re talking about systemic change. Earlier, I argued that sustainable change depends on an ongoing process of learning by individuals, singly and collectively. This means both better learning and learning in new ways. But it's not just learning. Parts of the system previously unreached are now as significant as those traditionally paid all of the attention. This means that different parts of the system need to be aligned to provide a coherent and consistent picture and strategy for improvement, and people with diverse roles in the system will have to connect and learn together.

In England, the Local Authority’s role has changed with mergers of the education and wider social services. The Director of Education or Chief Education Officer (superintendent) has been replaced by a Director of Children’s and Young People’s Services who oversees staff with a diverse range of specialist knowledge, skills and experiences. As the imperative for integrated working across agencies gathers momentum in England (eg Lord et al, 2008) agencies are offering development opportunities emphasising cross-role capacity building.

An Austrian initiative, to develop leadership capacity, also provides a example of systemic capacity building. In 2004 the Austrian Minister of Education, Science, and Culture founded a Leadership Academy (LEA, 2007) in association with the Universities of Innsbruck and Zürich. Its initial intent was to prepare school heads – with recently acquired autonomy but little experience in operating outside a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure – with the capacity to act more independently, take greater initiative, and steer their schools through a stream of government reforms. Benefits of involving a wider group of participants became apparent very quickly and the Leadership Academy (LEA) began including district inspectors, staff of teacher training institutes, and executives from the national and provincial education authorities. These participants learn together in forums, where a range of creative pedagogical techniques introduce them to research on leadership for learning, school development and personal capacity which they reflect on and

explore. Working with a learning partner and a collegial coaching team they also focus on development problems that each brings. The change in relationships, attitudes, and orientation to leadership for the vast majority of participants has produced a groundswell at the various levels of the system where people have been involved – schools, districts, regions, teacher training institutes, and parts of the Ministry (Stoll et al, 2008).

Changing meanings, methodologies and connections between research, policy and practice

The last decade's moving contextual landscape of school improvement brings new meaning to how we need to conceptualise school improvement and enhancing capacity. Improvement is a series of concurrent and recurring processes through which different partners collaborate to enhance students' experiences and outcomes, while creating the capacity to take charge of change and sustain learning. The word 'school' does not appear here because it isn't only the school's improvement that counts. Neither does the expression 'building capacity', even though it has been used throughout this article. Capacity is a power – a 'habit of mind' focused on engaging in and sustaining the learning of people at all levels of the educational system for the collective purpose of enhancing student learning in its broadest sense. It's a quality that allows people, individually and collectively, routinely to learn from the world around them and to apply this learning to new situations so that they can continue on a path toward their goals in an ever-changing context. Can such capacity be built like a solid brick wall? Surely, if the goal is continuous and sustainable learning that enables those in schools and throughout the entire system to adapt to the inevitable changes of the next decade, we need also to find new ways of creating that capacity for learning.

The changing agenda for and nature of 'capacity building for improvement' also suggests a changing, or at least extended, research agenda. Here are just a few ways in which approaches to research and evaluation also need to change, where they haven't already. In addition to identifying robust measures of 21st Century outcomes – a task never to be underestimated –

methodologies are needed for exploring the development of creativity and innovation (some are already putting their minds to this task). Approaches that focus on evaluation *for* learning rather than evaluation *of* learning are critical here. It's of course vital to know if an innovative strategy is making a difference but ongoing evaluation will feed in to adaptation processes. The nature of networking also lends itself to different approaches, for example, network analysis and those developing accountability systems need to think how they can assess the impact when more than one organisation is involved in bringing about improvement (minds are also already being put to these methodological issues). Story telling through narrative approaches and use of visual technology may help better to capture the nuances of change and what it means to create capacity. Some of these methodologies are not new.

Finally, the relationship between research, policy and practice is crucial. Researchers who want their findings on capacity building for school improvement to be taken seriously have to find ways to help policy makers and practitioners engage with them in such a way that they can make the kind of meaning that enables them to use these findings to enhance attempts to create capacity. This process of engagement – knowledge animation (Stoll, 2008) – is also a process of learning. Essentially, it boils down to creating capacity for learning.

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