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Collective Learning towards Sustainable Tourism

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to discuss collective learning as a tool for a deeper understanding of sustainability. The author describes how collective learning can be incorporated by organisations involved in tourism. The discussion is based on literature review. It is argued that the introduction of powerful learning processes in the organizational context can generate a new kind of thinking, which can lead to individual and organizational transformation. The article makes a contribution to the study of learning in organisations.

Keywords: sustainability, tourism, collective learning, organizational learning, organizational behaviour

Introduction

The definition of sustainable development created by the Brundtland Commission is the most used and accepted: “Sustainable development is the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Brundtland meant that sustainable development includes economic growth but with protection of the quality of the environment, also, that the economic growth and quality of environment should reinforce each other [Park & Allaby 2013].

Since then, sustainability is a well-used term, appearing almost daily in the media and increasingly in everyday conversation, often as something to strive for. Moving towards a more sustainable way of living will inevitably require some

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radical changes in attitudes, values, and behaviour [Hahn et al. 2014; Gullikson & Holmgren 2015] And perhaps the best way to strive for sustainability is through organizational change initiative [Appelbaum et al. 2016a].

During the last decades, it is undoubtedly so that environmental problems, e.g. pollution, deforestation and desertification have become real to us. The environmental threats are consequences from the exploitation of Nature. Those threats together with structural changes in manufacturing and production of goods and services, i.e. how we live and consume, shows that we still have environmental challenges ahead of us [Hahn et al. 2014; Gullikson & Holmgren 2015; Thurén 2015].

There have been discussions about the definition of sustainable development [Dobson 2008; Rambaud & Richard 2015; Appelbaum et al. 2016a], about how to interpret the concept in organisations and companies [Hahn et al. 2014; Appelbaum et al. 2016b]. Also, research about how companies can create measures in order to get facts for decisions has been conducted. For instance, the Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL), created by Elkington in the 1990s is nowadays a well-known concept that many organizations use. TBL is an accounting framework, including the traditional financial measures of profits, return on investment, and shareholder Value. Also, TBL includes environmental and social dimensions of corporate performance [Slaper & Hall 2011].

However, the TBL concept has limitations and does not protect human and natural capital, Rambaud and Richard [2015]. Also, in the manufacturing industries there is a need for measurement science with respect to sustainability [Mani et al. 2014].

According to Naess [1995], the essential ideas informing an environmental worldview can be broadly shared without prescribing or predetermining ultimate premises, or specific interpretations and actions. We are in need of plural interpretations and actions appropriate to local cultures and conditions – echoing the ecological principle of diversity in unity. Paradoxically an environmental worldview yields many different views of the same thing, and the same view of many different things.

It is obvious that the result from the Brundtland Commission created challenges for countries and corporations. Corporate managers and other leaders in organizations have to make decisions in their companies and organization with economic, environmental and social considerations, which is to some extent paradoxical and difficult [Hahn et al. 2014].

Over the last 20 years the public awareness of environmental issues and the consequences of unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have increased dramatically. As a result of these changes, the idea of sustainability and its three pillars of economic, environmental and social action became an important consideration in decision making by governments, businesses and consumers (see in

particular The UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme initiated in 2013). There is an increasing expectation from the public that companies should recognize their social and environmental responsibilities and make changes to their business practices in order to improve their sustainability [Burns and Bibbings, 2009]. This notion is supported by academic and trade literature that suggests there are a number of reasons that should motivate companies to engage in socially responsible behaviour (e.g. McIntosh et al. 2003; Juholin 2004).

Special attention is being paid to the tourism industry, which on one hand is seen as having huge economic, social, and environmental impacts due to the large number of resources it consumes, and on the other as having the potential of becoming “one of the drivers for the conservation of natural areas and biological diversity” [Schaper & Carlsen 2004: 197]. Given the forecasts of significant growth of tourism volume in the future, there is an increasing pressure on tourism companies to become more sustainable. The existing research that investigates the implementation of sustainability initiatives by tourism companies focuses mostly on large companies, and therefore provides guidance and recommendations that are not always applicable to the small business context (see Ayuso 2006 for Spanish hotels). There is a need for research on small tourism firms’ experience and challenges in adopting sustainability initiatives that could provide them with recommendations and best practices. Small firms constitute a significant part of the tourism industry and although their individual negative impact on the environment is limited, their collective one is significant [Tzschentke et al. 2008a, 2008b]. As Schaper and Carlsen [2004: 197] argued, “although it is hard to gauge the overall environmental effect of small firms around the world, it has been previously claimed that they may indeed be responsible for up to 70% of global environmental pollution.” Sustainability has become a sale argument even within the tourism industry and has been increasingly requested by the customers. Small organizers or actors in tourist industry have everything to gain by learning sustainability issues collectively.

The purpose of this paper is to, the background of the structural changes and the increasing need for active work with sustainability including understanding; discuss collective learning as a tool for deeper understanding of sustainability as a concept. The discussion includes how collective learning can be incorporated in organizational context within organizers and actors working with tourist activities.

A literature review has been carried out in order to discuss how sustainability through collective learning can be incorporated in organizational context. The main key words were sustainability, collective learning and tourism.

As demarcation in this paper there will be no discussion about management systems in organizations.

Appelbaum et al. [2016b] discuss corporate sustainability as an organizational change, and changes can be performed through learning. What is clear by now is that to break deeply entrenched, unsustainable patterns (assumptions, behaviours and values) requires a new kind of thinking inspired and informed by powerful learning processes that simultaneously lead to individual and collaborative action and transformation.

David Selby [1999] even speaks of a need for ‘quantum learning’, which is a powerful and engaging teaching and learning methodology that integrates best educational practices into a unified whole. This synergistic approach to the learning process covers both theory and practice. It has been proven to increase academic achievement and improve students’ attitudes toward the learning process.

1. Learning

Learning, as a concept, has been looked at from various disciplines and perspectives throughout history, including cognitive psychology, social psychology, education studies, management studies, innovation studies, policy science studies, development studies and complex systems thinking. As a result, the concept of learning is used to cover “a wide society of ideas” [Minsky 1988: 120]. In this paper there is no attempt to give a full overview of the results of conceptual richness (for an overview, see e.g. Lundgren, Säljö & Liberg 2010). Instead, the choice here is theories that can bear relevance to the perspective on learning sustainability. Especially interesting are those perspectives that address joint processes of learning that take place in regular organizational contexts rather than in formal educational settings.

Contrary to widely held views in social psychology, political science, planning, and management [Goldstein 1981; Friedmann & Abonyi 1976] the author of this present article does not believe that learning must necessarily engender behavioural change. Not all learning warrants behavioural change and, sometimes, competing interests, goals, and objectives militate against change. This is clear from our growing knowledge of, and scientific consensus around, the existence of anthropogenically induced climate change with our dismal, individual and collective failure to effectively respond to this knowledge [Speth 2004].

2. The learning individual

Theories of individual learning are crucial for understanding organizational learning. Psychologists and educators have studied individual learning for decades,

but they are still far from fully understanding the workings of the human mind. Likewise, the theory of organizational learning is still in its embryonic stage.

The importance of individual learning for organizational learning is at once obvious and subtle - obvious because all organizations are composed of individuals; subtle because organizations can learn independent of any specific individual but not independent of all individuals. Psychologists, linguists, educators, and others have researched the topic of learning at the individual level. They have made discoveries about cognitive limitations as well as the seemingly infinite capacity of the human mind to learn new things. Piaget's focus on the cognitive-development processes of children and Lewin's work on action research and laboratory training have provided much insight into how we learn as individuals and in groups. Some of these theories are based on stimulus-response behaviourism. Some focus on cognitive capabilities and others on psychodynamic theory. Numerous other theories have been proposed, debated, and tested, such as Pavlov's classical conditioning, Skinner's operant conditioning, Tolman's sign learning, Gestalt theory, and Freud's psychodynamics [Lundgren, Säljö & Liberg 2010].

It seems though, that the more knowledge we gain on learning processes, the more we realize how little we know. A number of theorists make connection between thought and action, according to Schein [1993]. Argyris and Schön [1978] argue that learning takes place only when new knowledge is translated into different behaviour that is replicable. For Piaget [1970], the key to learning lies in the mutual interaction of accommodation [adapting our mental concepts based on our experience in the world] and assimilation (integrating our experience into existing mental concepts). Kolb [1984] states: "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." This means what people learn and how they understand and apply that learning. For example, a teacher who has not understood the grading system cannot utilize skills of learning effectively. Learning can then be defined as increasing one's capacity to take effective action.

Theories about learning that focus on the individual, the importance of concrete experience is often emphasised. Kolb [1984] developed a model of the 'learning cycle'. According to Kolb, an individual must go through the following stages in order to learn: experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, deciding and acting. Concrete experiences of actions start the learning process. After that the individual observes the effects of his or her actions and reflects on these. Then the relation between action and effect is conceptualized and generalised into theoretical terms. At last s/he tests the theory by acting accordingly in a subsequent situation.

Not all kinds of experiences lead to learning; learning occurs mainly when there are conflicts between expectations and experiences or between ideas and desires. Kolb's theory offers a concrete framework for developing activities within evolving networks for the different phases of the learning process.

This theory on learning is interesting from the perspective of learning of sustainability because it focuses explicitly on the relationship between cognition and action, rather than on the increase of an individual's stock of knowledge, though Kolb's theory has limitations. The focus in the theory is on learning from and through (primarily) individual experience. The theory does not take into consideration the contextual aspect, i.e., how some learning is influenced by social settings. It also overlooks the role of values and interests that influence human action. In the pursuit of learning sustainability it is important to take both these issues into consideration [Kolb 1984].

Schön [1995] is an author who integrates values and beliefs in a theory on learning. According to Schön cognition cannot be separated from values and beliefs, nor can cognition and action. Importance of by illuminating the relationship between learning and action, that is, between thinking and doing by Schön [1995] sheds light on the nature of the changes that an innovative project must seek to provoke. Changes in so called theories-in-use that often are tacit, remain implicit and go unnoticed. In order to challenge them, they need to be brought to the surface: people will have to be made aware of their tacit rationalities, and be tempted to reconsider them. A second relevant aspect of Schön's insights is that, even though theories-in-use play a role in the actions of various actors in a similar way, they differ in terms of contents depending on professional training and experience, social background, up-bringing and so on. Because of their intrinsic and fundamental divergence, the theories-in-use that people from different professional and cultural backgrounds hold, will influence the possibility for them to learn collectively, a topic to which this paper will now turn.

3. Collective learning

Organizational learning is more complex and dynamic than a mere magnification of individual learning. The level of complexity increases tremendously in the change from a single individual to a large collection of diverse individuals. Issues of motivation and reward, for instance, which are an integral part of human learning, become doubly complicated within organizations.

Although the meaning of the term "learning" remains essentially the same as in the individual case, the learning process is fundamentally different at the organizational level. A model of organizational learning has to resolve the dilemma of imparting intelligence and learning capabilities to a nonhuman entity without anthropomorphizing it. What do we mean by organizational learning? In the early stages of an organization's existence, organizational learning is often synonymous with individual learning because the organization consists of a small group

of people and has minimal structure. As an organization grows, however, a distinction between individual and organizational learning emerges, and a system for capturing the learning of its individual members evolves. Argyris and Schön [1978] posed one of the main dilemmas shared by all who tackle this issue: There is something paradoxical here. Organizations are not merely collections of individuals, yet there are no organizations without such collections. Similarly, organizational learning is not merely individual learning, yet organizations learn only through the experience and actions of individuals.

Collective, collaborative and collegial learning are terms often used in the context of joint learning processes. Ohlsson [2008] describes learning as a social process when the individual change their way of thinking about something. Collaborative learning in turn can be considered as a form of joint learning, as a special type of phenomenon, where the starting point is that all learning is based in social activities, but with the collaborative learning processes is meant something beyond the social. Collaborative learning is a situation in which at least two people learn something together [Bruffee 1993; Dillenbourg 1999]. Collaborative learning activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, debates, study teams, and other activities. The approach is closely related to cooperative learning, which is the instructional use of small groups so that individuals work together to maximize their own and each other's learning, [Johnson et al. 2008]. The difference between collaborative and collective learning is still vague. But according to Granberg and Ohlsson [2016] this difference can consist of that in collaborative learning there is group of individuals trying to learn something together but without to specify or clarify the social context. In collective learning however it is decisive to try to achieve a common understanding.

Collegial learning however, often used when schools and teachers are discussed, is related to the concept of collaborative learning.

Collegial learning can be seen as a combination term for various forms of professional development where colleagues through structured cooperation acquire knowledge from a broad concept of knowledge, which also contains abilities and skills. In general it is emphasized that peer learning or collegial learning is a method by which a more experienced person helps a less experienced to absorb specific knowledge. Useful methods for peer learning are among others, learning study, lesson study and auscultation with feedback and peer tutoring.

The importance of the joint learning synergistic effect is often highlighted in the descriptions of the collective learning [Wilhelmson 1998; Döös et al. 2001; Döös & Wilhelmson 2011]. Synergy means that collective processes based on interaction and communication, leads to the new common beliefs that had not been possible for individuals to come up with on their own [Granberg 1996; Ohlsson 1996; Wilhelmson 1998; Döös & Wilhelmson 2005; Granberg & Ohlsson 2005].

Wilhelmson [1998] also draws attention to the importance of symmetry between the participants in a dialogue. Symmetry means that all participants' observations and opinions are given the same weight in the conversation, and to recognize each other's experiences as valid. An asymmetric situation means a situation where power positions and opinions consolidation and an evaluative approach prevent an open and common search for new opportunities. Symmetrical relationships can thus be seen as favourable to collective learning.

Habermas [1996] argues that inter-subjective founded collective agreement will not occur from the fact that someone has been manipulated or forced to a particular approach, but requires certain symmetry between the participants. Ohlsson [1996] has developed the concept of collective learning and created a model of the relationship between individual and collaborative learning, which can be used to illustrate the collective learning. Ohlsson [1996] notes, that the collective learning shapes how the individual perceive their practical work and thereby shape the collective learning individual experience potential. It is important for the collective learning that the experiences described in the collective so that the community can jointly problematize and reflect on the experience [Dixon 1994; Granberg 1996; Ohlsson 1996; Wilhelmson 1998; Larsson 2004].

Ohlsson [1996] points out the learning dynamic character and the on-going co-constructing of borders for example, the permissible and the impermissible, is something that can be perceived as a condition for learning processes. There is a critical, emancipatory dimension of awareness rising of these unconscious conditions for learning. If the individual is unaware of its potential and limitations, the individual cannot respond fully to promote learning.

The actors' understanding and interpretation of the change in thinking is significant for the way in which they assume change for fulfilling what they are commissioned to do. The understanding includes the cognitive and psychological processes and shows in turn how the assumption of change can be shaped [Reeve 2009].

When the understanding of change describes what happens to the professionals and in turn leads to heightened competence, the concept of change can also be viewed as a pedagogical concept [Lindensjö & Lundgren 2002; Scherp 1998; Ohlsson 2004; Alexandersson 1994] The understanding of assignment and change of thinking can thus be regarded as a learning process, which is in turn essential for active assumption of collective learning. This learning process is deemed to be an important part of the organization staff's competence development and professional development [Ellström 2011; Madsén 1994; Ohlsson & Stedt 2003; Ohlsson 2004; Goodson 2005].

Discussion and conclusions

Ever since the Brundtland Commission in 1987 a vast work has been done in countries and organizations with what and how to implement the result from the commission. Even if there are different interpretations of sustainability the one of Brundtland Commission is the most used and accepted. However, there are still difficulties and confusions in organizations about how to implement the aspects of social, cultural, environmental and economic aspects. According to Naess [1995] the essential ideas can be shared without prescribing specific interpretations and actions. However, that can be complicated for managers and leaders in organizations when they have to make decisions with social, cultural, environmental and economic considerations. Hahn et al. [2014] point out that the decision-making can be paradoxical and difficult. There are also still needs for research about measuring the different aspects in organizations. [Rimbaud & Richard 2013; Mani et al. 2014].

The difficulties for managers and leaders in tourist industry and the need for changes in attitudes and values in general in our way of living generate the necessity of learning. Perhaps the best way to do it is, as Appelbaum et al. [2016] suggest, through organizational change initiative and learning processes. Hence, the purpose of this paper, which was to discuss collective learning in organizational context within tourism as a tool for deeper understanding of sustainability as a concept.

Any planned, directed change by individuals or collectives is built on learning. Learning can be defined more generally as the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, norms, values, or understanding through experience, imitation, observation, modelling, practice, or study; by being taught; or as a result of collaboration.

In theories on learning that focus on the individual, the importance of concrete experience is often emphasised. Concrete experiences of actions start the learning process (Kolb) This theory on learning is interesting from the perspective of learning of sustainability because it focuses explicitly on the relationship between cognition and action, rather than on the increase of an individual's stock of knowledge.

However Kolb's theory has limitations: the focus is on learning from and through (primarily) individual experience. The theory does not take into consideration the contextual aspect, that is, how some learning is influenced by social settings. It also overlooks the role of values and interests that influence human action. In the pursuit of learning sustainability it is important to take both these issues into consideration [Kolb 1984].

Because of their intrinsic and fundamental divergence, Schön points out that the theories-in-use that people from different professional and cultural backgrounds hold, will influence the possibility for them to learn collectively.

The learning process is fundamentally different at the organizational level. To sum up the discussion, there are important factors relevant for collective learning in an organization. Those factors are mostly unconscious conditions for learning but if the individuals are unaware of their own potential and limitations, they cannot respond fully to promote learning. Also, the actors' understanding and interpretation of the change in thinking, is significant for the way in which they assume change for fulfilling what they are commissioned to do.

Prerequisites, according to Dixon [1994]; Müllern and Östergren [1995] for collective learning are: the organization should have a structure which promotes learning; interaction, communication and reflection skills are needed; it is important to create a organizational culture with openness to change; working methods and ways to inform and communicate with each others are of importance.

Collective learning has a dynamic character. The process for collective learning includes awareness of the level of complexity collective learning in organizations compared with learning as an individual process. Awareness of that learning can be a social process when the individuals change their way of thinking about something is essential.

Collective learning in organizational context requires certain symmetry between the participants. Furthermore, Illeris [2007] emphasizes that for successful collective learning it is important that the group or team must be included in a common situation. Participants should have roughly the same opportunities to learn. The learning situation should be of such a character (emotional and jointly) so that it mobilizes the mental energy required to get at a position of substantially learning. It is necessary with synergy, based on interaction and communication, which generate new common beliefs [Dixon 1994; Müllern & Östergren 1995]. It is also important that the experiences are described in the collective so that the community can jointly problematize and reflect on the experiences. Additionally awareness of that the collective learning shapes how the individuals perceive their practical work is important and thereby shapes individual experience potential. The on-going co-construction of permissible and impermissible borders is elementary in the process. Furthermore it is decisive to achieve a common understanding. It is also significant, according to Granberg [2014] to develop action strategies for how the collective knowledge can be used to create collective expertise.

Further work is needed for a better understanding of the role of both individual and organizational learning in order to learning sustainability. We are in need of knowing what kind of types of mental models that are favourable, which models are appropriate for representing dynamic complexity of learning sustain-

ability; we need methods with which we can capture the understanding of such complexity as well as means through which new learning for sustainability can be transferred to the whole organization. The task for educators and collective learning agents is to facilitate participative and systemic critical learning systems and situations where these conditions can be realised.

Collective learning can be seen and used as a tool for actors in the tourist industry. The tourist organizers are probably sharing quite the same problems and challenges according to issues of sustainability. Using collective learning as a tool and a model can give them a common and deeper understanding of customer requirements and needs towards sustainable tourism.

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Uczenie się zbiorowe drogą do zrównoważonego rozwoju

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest omówienie uczenia się zbiorowego jako narzędzia służącego lepszemu zrozumieniu pojęcia zrównoważonego rozwoju. Autorka opisuje, w jaki sposób ta forma uczenia się może być wykorzystana przez organizacje w branży turystycznej. Rozważania oparte są na przeglądzie literatury. Główną tezą artykułu jest stwierdzenie, że wprowadzenie skutecznych procesów uczenia się w kontekście organizacyjnym pozwala zapoczątkować nowy sposób myślenia, który może prowadzić do zmian na poziomie indywidualnym i organizacyjnym. Artykuł jest przyczynkiem do szerszego zagadnienia uczenia się organizacyjnego.

Słowa kluczowe: rozwój zrównoważony, turystyka, uczenie się zbiorowe, uczenie się organizacyjne, zachowanie organizacyjne