

Applying learning theory to shape ‘good learning’ in emergencies: experience from Dadaab, Kenya

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Applying one learning theory retrospectively to a non-formal education programme for youth shows how learning theories can be used to assess learning in diverse EiE programmes and how including such theories when programming could help ensure quality and relevance.

Rarely do humanitarian agencies and donors have the opportunity to meaningfully reflect on how and what type of learning occurs as a result of education in emergencies (EiE) provision. The lack of a theoretical base, however, may decrease a programme’s effectiveness in supporting learners’ ability to generate positive social change or pursue professional and vocational aspirations.

We applied a learning theory retrospectively to a project targeting youth in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. The project, entitled Youth Capacity Building for Social Change, was launched by RET International in 2012 to empower disadvantaged refugee youth, aged 14–24, and to increase their social engagement through active participation in community-led projects and initiatives, initially focused on ensuring children’s right to education.¹

Those participating in the programme attended five days of training during the first year, followed by three to five days of consolidation during the second year, with subsequent opportunities for selected youth representatives to develop leadership and peer educator roles within their respective associations and communities. The programme included the following topics: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD),² conflict resolution skills, and youth–adult partnerships. As part of the ABCD curriculum, learners mapped the needs and problems affecting their communities, and what community assets were available, with the goal of developing community projects to address the problems identified. The youth then spread the training curriculum to their peers, employing a peer-educator approach, and ultimately led the design, planning and

implementation of social change projects in their communities with the support and guidance of RET International field staff.

Good learning

Michael Newman's theory of 'good learning'³ incorporates a number of different aspects of learning, which he calls: instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, passionate and moral. We analysed the RET project and its results in terms of each of these aspects, relating the theory of types of learning to how the young learners actually learned throughout the project and to where any gaps in their learning were.

Instrumental learning: This aspect focuses on skill-based content – exemplified in this case by the young refugees learning to write short proposals, develop activity plans, conduct monitoring and evaluation, and report on activities and their results, communicating to others in English. Much of the instrumental learning, then, relates to encouraging youth to engage in their communities to take on roles as planners and leaders.

Communicative, affective and passionate learning:

This type of learning is based on relationships, social behaviour (communicative learning) and how learners interpret and act on their emotions (affective and passionate learning). Youth in Dadaab are often under-represented in community leadership positions as elders traditionally fill these roles. This aspect involved developing learners' leadership skills and engagement within their communities, enabling them to become more proficient at presenting themselves and others to older community members, particularly to those in positions of power, other youth and the wider camp society. The discussions that formed part of the training helped to challenge misconceptions about youth and to encourage learners to value other community members' views. However, it was difficult to identify evidence of affective and passionate learning.

Interpretive learning: This relates to self-awareness: understanding oneself in the world and how one is perceived by others. For the young people in Dadaab, this was also about gaining a greater understanding of what they, as young refugees, can do within



Refugee youth engaged in a discussion with an education facilitator, Dadaab.

March 2019

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the systems in which they live in order to help create social change – particularly important in light of recognised dependency patterns between refugees and service providers. The ABCD training starts with identifying individual assets (discussing personal strengths and weaknesses) and then expands outwards to the group and community.

Essential learning: Essential learning is the understanding of what Newman describes as the “symbolic significance, value, and beauty (or otherwise) in people, objects, and events”: an appreciation that is important given tensions between diverse communities in Dadaab. Learners were able to identify change in the camps and the significance of their work in their own communities to bring about these changes, especially through ABCD, as an aspect of essential learning. Although we found some evidence that learners gained an appreciation for people in their community who were not like themselves, and that learners acted as mediators, especially in disagreements among other youth, it was difficult to discern much evidence of essential learning in the programme.

Critical learning: This refers to how learners understand power relationships. From the inception of the programme, the power dynamics in the camps – where youth were often excluded from decision making – were addressed by encouraging youth-adult relationships through training and specific activities (such as youth-adult forums). In order to develop community voice (and pave the way for eventual repatriation), youth were encouraged to see themselves as both current and future leaders. However, although the social action projects established by the trained youth were initially dedicated to increasing access in education, they did not address the root causes of children dropouts in emergency contexts. Instead, they focused on encouraging children who were at one time unable to attend school to return. The learners did not critically consider, for example, under what conditions the children had originally left school, and why the existing school system is unable to retain

vulnerable children and respond to their specific needs, thereby suggesting that they approached the problem with preconceived ideas rather than with an openness to others’ experiences or with a critical understanding of power relations in others’ lives.

Political learning: The political aspect of ‘good learning’ relates to part of the process of understanding power in the community and to community members’ capacity to take action. It appeared, however, that both political and critical learning were limited by restrictions imposed by the learners’ status as refugees. For example, although learners mobilised the community around the issue of low retention levels for children at school, the issue was approached at the family and individual level only, rather than with reference to Dadaab’s political systems or to the lack of continuum between humanitarian and development funding in the education sector.⁴ The refugee youth involved in the project did not believe that they – as refugees – could change systems so instead they focused on the more immediate issues within their control. Programme planners could perhaps further consider the pre-existing limitations, both systemic and self-imposed, that constrain learners’ ability to address critical and political elements in programming.

Moral learning: This centres on questions of right and wrong: how learners make judgements and appraise situations – in this case, how learners come to their own conclusions concerning marginalisation and disputes within the community, and concerning collaboration across and within youth associations. Moral learning was in evidence in the youth-led projects where participants emphasised the importance of education, avoidance of drugs, and need for conflict resolution between groups and interpersonally.

Recommendations

The RET Youth Capacity Building for Social Change project did not set out to apply Newman’s learning dimensions – and thus this evaluation is indeed

an academic, retrospective exercise. However, by applying such a theory at the planning stage, the planners might have been able to think more deeply about what different elements make up 'good learning' and how a programme might thereby achieve more of its objectives.

Irrespective of whether the learning theory was applied before the project was designed, it is evident that, for refugee youth in Dadaab, restrictions on movement plus the lack of quality education available throughout childhood into adulthood, combined with the lack of development opportunities, would in any case have affected the degree to which they could fully develop Newman's political and critical learning dimensions. Further replication of this type of study in contexts where refugees have greater access to education, employment and host-society benefits may enable a fuller assessment of the extent to which structural contexts have an impact on 'good learning' as defined in Newman's theory.

The main recommendation emerging from this exercise is to encourage greater application of learning theories during training for practitioners and in the development of education programmes, whether formal or non-formal. We recognise that non-governmental organisations (NGO) are not always able to prioritise how learning occurs in their programmes (given time constraints, isolation and other challenges prevalent in emergency-affected environments) but we suggest that NGOs need to build internal capacity specialising in learning, or to work with education specialists in programme development (and in implementation and monitoring and evaluation), particularly by translating the main aspects of such theories into measurable performance indicators, even in emergency contexts.

We recommend that donors serve a supportive function to increase efficacy of programmes by explicitly investing in the application of learning theories. This could be reflected in donors' evaluation criteria and in the allocation of specific funds; donors could also organise or sponsor events and

working groups in which practitioners, donors and other key stakeholders come together to discuss and define guidelines, roadmaps and methodologies in order to mainstream learning theory when designing, implementing and evaluating EiE programmes.

Further study is needed to understand how affective and passionate learning could occur in EiE and refugee education. Although less quantifiable than other aspects of Newman's learning theory, the achievement of these could increase the efficacy of educational programming, particularly in conflict-sensitive education. It is also vital that the voices of practitioners, learners, teachers and other education personnel in emergency settings inform the theory that shapes their educational programming and the goals they aim to achieve.

As emergencies change and the learning environment alters, educational programming must also adapt. This study shows that 'good learning' in emergency settings can happen – and can be part of a process to develop individual and community agency, to give voice to marginalised youth and, in the best of cases, to work towards changing those local, national and international systems that lead to marginalisation.

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1. After the first, education-focused year of the project, youth focus on other issues which include peace building and conflict mitigation and prevention of gender-based violence.
2. Kretsmann J P and McKnight J L (1993) 'Introduction' in Kretsmann J P and McKnight J L (Eds) *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University.
3. Newman M (2010) 'Calling transformative learning into question: Some mutinous thoughts', *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62, 1: 36–55. His theory complements INEE's conflict-sensitive education guidance about establishing "new positive identit[ies] in the community" and about resource mobilisation. Explanation and tools at www.ineesite.org/en/conflict-sensitive-education.
4. The existing funding cycle of one year is not conducive to planning and implementing comprehensive, sustainable responses to refugees' education needs. Programmes tend to be primarily donor-driven, instead of learners' needs-driven.