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Learning History

Entry in the forthcoming Encyclopedia of Action Research (Sage)
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Introduction

Learning history is an action research approach to capturing the learning from a project, initiative or event in a way that emphasizes the human experience of those involved and via a participative process that is devised to stimulate wider learning from those experiences. A learning history is therefore both product and process. The product is the story – told through the voices of those involved and mediated via the reflective thoughts, questions and analysis of the researcher. It is co-produced between outsider researcher and insider protagonists. Typically a learning history takes the form of a written document, often divided into 2-columns, whereby original, verbatim quotes from the protagonists are woven together with researcher reflections and narration. Together this counterpoint is often termed a 'jointly told tale' – a term borrowed from ethnographer Van Maanen - that charts a reflective history that in its presentation is intended to stimulate further reflection and inquiry.

The history product then forms the centrepiece of a learning process that splits into two parts. During the co-creation of the history the attention is on the learning that those involved in the original initiative derive from voicing and reflecting on their story. Post-production the attention moves to consider the learning that more broadly can be derived from the history

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itself. As a quick short-hand a learning history is sometimes described action research version of a case study. This is a helpful analogy but can also be misleading. It is true that the production of a written learning history draws on standard qualitative research approaches – for example semi-structured interviewing and grounded theory - more than other action research approaches. However the emphasis of a learning history on story and in particular on the vivid detail and personal voice of those involved is fundamentally different from a case study that emphasizes a more generalized, abstracted description. Similarly the tighter relationship between the history and the process of learning in which it is embedded differs considerably from case study approaches.

Origins of learning history

Learning history was developed first in the early 90s at MIT's research centre for organizational learning[1]. The idea of the 'learning organisation' as an entity with the capacity to learn effectively and hence to flourish had been popularised through the work of Peter Senge and others at MIT. Their text, *The Fifth Discipline* and its associated fieldbook had wide appeal to management practitioners and academics alike. However the link between learning and business success remained tenuous. Could learning be claimed if it wasn't clear what lay behind good or bad practice, successes or failure? It was in an attempt to both clarify how learning occurred and to stimulate it more widely that learning history was conceived. It was, in part, a response to an imperative for evaluation but also for a different kind of experience-based learning.

Though working in the management learning field and situating themselves clearly within the action science tradition of Argyris and Schon, the originators of learning history, Art Kleiner and George Roth took wider inspiration from the age-old practice of oral history. Looking to

[1] Which later went on to become the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL)

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this and recent works of social history (e.g. Studs Terkel's oral history based stories of America), they set the ideas of oral history - listening, voice and story - at the heart of a research process. The emphasis on personal story is crucial to learning history. It brings specificity, detail and feeling and so surfaces that which is tacit. As cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner writes, narrative deals with the "vicissitudes of intention". An oral history will describe the ups and downs of experience, the changing fortunes, moments of doubt and reasons for action caught in a moment of time. These are unique but also universal in their way. It is by staying close to these specifics of experience that learning history is attempting to get past what Roth and Kleiner called a mere listing of "best practices" and into "the thinking, experimentation and arguments of those who have experienced the same situation".

Early application

The first learning history was conducted by the MIT team in the mid-90s at an automobile manufacturing company with the pseudonym 'AutoCo'. This followed the experiences of a team leading up to the launch of a new product. An edited version of the resulting learning history was published in 1999 in Roth and Kleiner's book: '*Car launch: the human side of managing change*'. Through the 90s a number of learning histories were reported by the MIT team to have been conducted in a range of corporate settings. Two histories charting successful business transformation at the consumer-products company Unilever and at an anonymised OilCompany were published as books. Further histories were created at telephony and electronics companies. By the late 90s learning history was being taken beyond corporate settings to the not-for-profit and educational sectors. In 1998, for example, Hilary Bradbury co-created a learning history with the Swedish environmental charity, the Natural Step. And in 2001 Rupesh Shah developed an inter-organisational learning history with Shell Oil and the international environmental NGO Living Earth work to explore the

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contentious issue of environmental damage in the Niger delta. Shah's work brought learning history to the Centre for Action Research (see also CARPP) in the UK.

Drawing on the AutoCo and other early learning history projects at MIT, the *Learning history field manual* was developed and first published in 1996. This set out in detail the recommended form for a learning history as well as the steps involved in producing one. The principles and methodological steps set out by this early work established a trajectory for learning history that sustained over time. Over the subsequent decade, learning history started to emerge as a genre[2] where each instance, though situated and context-dependent, shared a number of recurring characteristics and methodological principles.

Learning history characteristics, method and form

Characteristics

The following are five key characteristics of the learning history process

1. Tangibility: the learning history centres on tangible events

   A learning history charts something tangible, past or present, that has occurred. This provides the storyline that ideally is situated within an agreed timeframe. Some learning history projects explicitly start with tangible outcomes or success and chart how these came about. Others track a particular project initiative as it unfolds. Focussing on a tangible achievement or a time-bounded event means participants are better placed to ground the history in their personal experience.

2. Co-production: between insider and outsider researchers

   The collaboration between insider and outsider research team to co-produce the history – often called the 'jointly told tale' - and guide the associated learning process

[2] See Steve Amidon's 2007 paper on learning history as an emerging genre

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is a key characteristic of learning history. Throughout the process the insider protagonist and outsider researcher have distinct and differentiated roles bringing different skills into play.

3. Multi-stakeholder involvement: participation at all stages of the process

The production of a learning history is embedded in a participative process that explicitly seeks to draw out multiple perspectives so that hidden assumptions, and taken-for-granted storylines can, through the process be challenged. From design to dissemination, stakeholder involvement is actively sought.

4. Tells a polyvocal story: centering on the voices of those involved.

The learning history reproduces the words of the insider protagonists and thus places primacy on their original voice, style and idiom. In this way it centres on subjective experience and further seeks a polyvocal account whereby multiple voices are represented. It is in the contradictory fault-lines between individual stories that often the rich learning opportunities lie.

5. Involves a parallel research process:

Learning history production generally includes a rigorous research process whereby the interview data set is distilled for key themes, storylines and illustrative quotes. Thematic work often follows more standard qualitative research approaches – for example Strauss and Corbin's approach to grounded theory. These themes are then woven into the resulting learning history either explicitly or implicitly. Roth and Kleiner highlight the importance of cycling between the data and the story (they call it the 'research' and 'mythic' imperatives) in order to keep the resulting learning history 'honest'.

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Method

There are a series of distinct stages in the design of a learning history project. In the literature these have variously been combined to suggest between four and six stages. The table below outlines five stages where the first four stages relate to the front-end production of the learning history and the fifth relates to the back-end post-production learning stage.

Nr	Stage	Description
1	**Planning**	Insiders and outsiders come together to co-design the project. Multiple stakeholders are invited to negotiate the storyline and the range and scope of the history. An insider/outsider 'learning historian' team is set up. This stage culminates in identification of insider protagonists and an invitation to interview is issued to them.
2	**Data gathering**	The main data gathering stage. Learning historian(s) conduct reflective 1:1 or sometimes group interviews that are recorded to provide verbatim quotes. Additional material from company documents, websites may also be gathered at this stage.
3	**Distillation and production**	Recorded data is usually transcribed and distilled for (i) key storylines (ii) key themes (iii) key illustrative quotes. These, together with any background data are crafted into the chosen learning history form where thematic, narrative and insider voices are placed side by side.
4	**Validation**	A draft of the learning history is shared with those who contributed. Validation can occur on an individual or group basis.
5	**Wider learning**	The backend stage where the agreed learning history is now taken more widely to support wider learning – either within the originating organisation or further afield. Sometimes termed dissemination, this stage has more recently been interpretted as have significant potential for system-wide learning by taking a more participative approach to it.

Table 1 The five stages of a learning history project

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There are many choices and varying degrees of freedom in each of the above stages. For example the way research projects are commissioned might mean the planning stage cannot involve as many stakeholders as might be desired. Similarly, during distillation, the question of whose purposes are being served will drive how the learning history is produced. For example a learning history for an academic thesis will have different exigencies during distillation than a history that is explicitly commissioned for the purposes of organisational learning. At each stage, learning historians must balance pragmatic considerations of budget, resource and politics with the participative and pluralist principles underlying the approach.

Researchers have themselves variously interpretted the degree of co-production and participation in a learning history process. Learning histories often can end up being crafted or written by the outsider researchers. Similarly validation can sometimes be interpretted as a stage of checking and 'sign-off'. In contrast it be a key stage of collaborative learning where different stakeholders are brought together to share their different reactions and perspectives on the history that has been created.

Open system method

It is worth noting that the final post-production stage 'wider learning' has until recently been underplayed in the learning history literature. This stage is often referred to as 'dissemination' suggesting that once the history is written, the model for propagating the learning from it reverts to more conventional and non-participative styles of learning – for instance presentations and circulation of the 'document'. In recent years questions of deriving broader, future-focussed and actionable learning from learning histories have come to the fore and this has led to more interpretations of stage 5 that are pro-active and focussed on learning beyond the originating organisation.

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One key example of this is the EPSRC/ESRC funded Lowcarbonworks action research project at CARPP that applied a learning history methodology to the inter-organisational and sectoral level with a view to understanding better the complex systemic issue of low carbon change. On this project, over a dozen learning histories were created across the private and public sector. Focussing on UK local authorities and successful low carbon initiatives that had occurred there, Gearty's doctoral work articulated a new form of learning history – the 'open system learning history' where multiple learning histories fed a series of varied 'learning events'. Far from being passive then, stage 5 was conceived as pro-active and engaged, bringing multiple stakeholders together in different learning communities.

Form

In the decade following the first learning history at AutoCo a distinctive learning history form has become established. At its heart is a written, 2-column format whereby insider protagonists' interview quotes on one side converse with researcher reflections and narration on the other. The 2-column format was not a learning history invention but drew inspiration from the earlier work of Chris Argyris and Orlando Fals-Borda both of whom had experimented with the 2-column format much earlier as a means of supporting reflective learning. Fals-Borda reports using the format in his community development work in Columbia as far back as the 70s. The 2-column format creates a dialogical text whereby the reader is invited via the experiences of the protagonists, and the reflections of the researcher to reflect the history and relate any learning to his or her own context.

The 2-columned format then sits within an overall presentational form that has varied from project to project. The AutoCo learning history for instance was a 90-page document that was structured into six themes whereby each theme was then illustrated with a 2-column presentation. The right hand column told the story in the words of the participants. This

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material was drawn from the primary research data. The left hand column contained the voice of the researcher, providing interpretive material and drawing attention to questions, analysis, implications and so on that came out of this material. Further framing, explanation boxes and background information rounded out the document.

In his analysis of the learning history genre in 2007, Steve Amidon noted the appearance of more standard reporting devices such as abstracts, executive summaries and conclusions in a number of learning history documents and points to the prevalent managerial need for summaries and outcomes as potentially being at odds with the goals of creating dialogue and reflective inquiry.

Emerging new forms

By 2009 and in the context of the Lowcarbonworks program, the distinctive, 2-columned written form was itself called into question. In her doctoral work Gearty suggested that the dialogical quality of learning history could be achieved in a number of ways and indeed these were not confined to written media. Her set of written learning histories interspersed quotes, photos, themes and theoretical links in bubbles and boxes around a core, time-bound narrative. She proposed that digital and dramatic forms of learning history might be equally valid and indeed more appropriate in certain settings and therefore worthy of consideration. Dramatic and artistic forms of learning history were then further explored in the context of Lowcarbonworks and these experiments in turn inspired further research projects at CARPP and elsewhere that had lighter and often more flexible forms of learning history at their heart.

Learning history and action research

Learning history is a particular form of action research. The centrality of the research output – the learning history – distinguishes it from other more process-driven kinds of action

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research. Though still fundamentally participative, the process is also more differentiated in terms of 'insider/outsider' skills and roles. The 'outsider' researcher(s) draws on standard research methods – interviewing and thematic analysis – more so than other forms of action research where outputs are often more provisional and emergent. The structuring of the collaborative inquiry differs also from other forms of second-person action research. In learning history, inquiry occurs in relation to the story that is being created or that has been told. This contrasts with co-operative inquiry for example where inquiry evolves in relation to the practical issues and concerns of the participants.

Recent developments in learning history research discussed above have recognized the catalytic nature of learning history within the wider system and so open it up as a piece of third-person action research. The open system learning history places the 'artefact' at the heart of a learning process that extends outwards to include face-to-face inquiry but that can also, in its way, speak for itself in a third person context.

Trends in learning history research

Learning history continues to appeal to researchers and organisations as an approach though it does not appear to have been widely applied. Steve Amidon's survey of learning history in 2007 turned up just twelve published instantiations. However there may be many more. Learning history practice is located on the boundary between research and consulting Given their often proprietary and sensitive nature, many learning histories are not in the public domain or documented in the academic literature. and this makes the extent of learning history application both hard to assess and the methodology itself hard to progress but it is fair to assume it has not been widely adopted. Learning history requires time and resources. It asks for the space to be made for reflection where fast-paced organisational life is generally set up in the countervailing direction.The resource intensive and rigorous nature of early

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learning history forms has no doubt contributed to this and recent trends to work with lighter, flexible forms might to some extent counteract this, though not entirely.

Going forward there are many interesting trends in learning history. With the loosening of form links to the emerging field of arts-based action research are starting to be made. Systemic work with learning history is also an emerging area and Lowcarbonworks is but one possible interpretation. In her unpublished work with a global religious community, Paula Downey[3] has combined learning history with a living systems perspective in an exciting way. In this work, a small 'insider' group, were facilitated over an extended period to harvest and distil conversations and experiences from across the community into thematically based learning histories. By 'listening' closely to the many different voices and experiences of others, and reflecting together on these, the 'insider' team found they gained deep insights into the nature of life in their organisation and its development needs at that time. The process was experienced as profoundly transformational on a personal level for some members of this team, simultaneously contributing to their leadership development and greatly enhancing the capacity of the small group as influencers in the wider system.

This suggests that sustained, actionable learning from learning history can be derived in many different ways as the dance between product and process continues to be explored.

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See also: Arts-based action research, Storytelling, CARPP, Second-person inquiry, Third-person inquiry, Organisational learning

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