On stopping doing those things that are not getting us to where we want to be: Unlearning and critical action learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of unlearning on the basis of empirical data drawn from 73 social workers' accounts of addressing their problems and challenges in critical action learning (CAL) sets. To address intractable or wicked problems, characterised by having multiple stakeholders with competing perspectives and by an absence of obvious solution, it may be necessary first to *unlearn* existing responses and to ask fresh questions to illuminate what is as yet unknown. Action learning privileges questions over solutions in seeking learning from action on organisational challenges, whilst CAL is a variety that employs insights from critical social theory to promote critical reflection and unlearning in this process.

The paper breaks new ground in claiming: first, that unlearning in the context of the wicked problems of social work is characterised less by the discarding of outmoded knowledge and routines and more by a critical unlearning which opens up new possibilities of not knowing and non-action; and second, that critical unlearning is much more likely to take place when supported by a deliberated and social process such as that provided by CAL.

Introduction

The dominant view of unlearning has it as the discarding or forgetting of obsolete or redundant knowledge. We challenge this by arguing that this perspective is only part of the picture; that unlearning can also open up new possibilities for 'not knowing' and 'non-action'. We propose a significant role for unlearning in the addressing of the wicked problems of organisational and social life and further argue that action learning, specifically that variety known as critical action learning (CAL), can be an enabler of this unlearning.

CAL draws attention to the positioning of individual actors within institutional and social contexts, and to how power dynamics and relationships both enable and constrain action and learning (Mingers 2000; Vince 2001; 2004; 2008; Trehan & Pedler 2010). Where these dynamics extend into the workings of action learning sets themselves, this can produce a "learning inaction" (Vince 2008) which is the antithesis of what is intended. This undesirable outcome is contrasted here with a more constructive idea of "non-action" resulting from the unlearning of previous ways of seeing, thinking or doing . Where learning inaction implies avoidance and the acceptance of existing power relations, non-action, as in the Taoist concept of wu-wei (Hsu 2013: 303), is a capacity enabling self-restraint and the deliberate limiting of actions. In the context of intractable or wicked problems, where any given action might lead to unexpected outcomes, unlearning leading to conscious non-action might create the space for new questions and possibilities.

The empirical data to support this claim comes from the reflective accounts of social workers who participated in action learning sets informed by CAL ideas. Social work is an especially

relevant setting for the study of unlearning, because social workers struggle to deal with many intractable or wicked problems from child protection to homelessness to drug addiction. Their professional body requires them all, from students to senior practitioners, to exercise critical thinking, to challenge the decisions of others and to manage potentially conflicting or competing values and ethical dilemmas to arrive at principled decisions. (UK College of Social Work 2012a & 2012b *Professional Capability Framework* & *Integrated Critical Reflective Practice*)

The paper proceeds with a review of some relevant literature on learning, CAL, wicked problems and unlearning. A note on the research approach prefaces findings based on data taken from social workers' accounts of practice which are used to delineate the processes of unlearning. An analysis develops four themes emerging from the data and provides insights into the possibilities for unlearning by those working to address wicked problems in social worlds. A discussion develops these insights and argues that the processes of unlearning as revealed in our empirical data are more varied and complex than the literature suggests. In shedding light on the processes by which unlearning can take place we argue that CAL has the potential to encourage perspectives that heighten awareness of not-knowing and of the possibilities for non-action in complex and contested contexts such as social work.

Literature: Learning, critical action learning, wicked problems and unlearning

The significance of unlearning can begin in the observation that learning has become an idea almost impossible to criticise. At the present time the discourse of learning has become constituted as truth and there is a strong cultural tendency to make the assumption that learning is "a good thing" (Contu, Grey & Ortenblad 2003:933). Fenwick (1993 in Contu et al 2003: 941)

adds that this unquestioning assumption is debatable morally, politically and socially, not least because it is blind to the question of content which might "encompass anything from reading Derrida to making petrol bombs".

Problematic aspects of learning are seen in those conservative aspects of educational systems that aim to produce good citizens through "being taught certain collections of fixed, immutable subject matter" (Dewey, 1952:133). A school system that helps young people to become disciplined and productive can be seen as a "people production system" mirroring and preparing them for a profit-dominated economic system in which they are expected to become "properly subordinate" (Bowles and Gintis 1976:131). In organisational and social settings, learning may bring with it a managerialist, technocratic agenda which is exploitative of learners as indoctrinated and 'self-disciplining objects' (Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003; Hancock & Tyler, 2008; McHugh, Groves & Alker, 1998). The political function of learning in organisations may be to promote, for example, a particular view of what it means to be a good worker or manager (Willmott 1994; 1997). Hsu (2013) goes further to argue that learning can be a negative and harmful activity and that "so-called learning organisations" are exacerbating, rather than resolving, the problems confronting businesses and societies.

Wicked problems and CAL

The capacity to learn independently is implicit in Revans' action learning (1971; 1982; 2011; Brook et al, 2012), which sees instruction, or "programmed knowledge" as disconnected from the complexities of living, working and organising. "Intractable problems … where no solution can possibly exist already … (and where) … different managers, all honest, experienced and

wise, will advocate different courses of action" requires new learning via "inquiring insight" and "insightful questions" in action learning sets (Revans, 2011:4, 24).   However, this faith in the collective wisdom of the action learning set is challenged from a critical perspective that sees little hope of such managers, especially when drawn from the same or similar concerns, being able to generate deep enough critiques to question organisational practices enshrining ideologies such as individualism, consumerism and performativity "through which established exploitation, oppression and subjection (or subjugation?) become institutionalized "(Willmott 1997:171). Whilst Revans recognises the significance of power and politics in organisations, referring to the "managerial value system" (1971: 34) and "micropolitical skills" (1982: 596; 629-30), his focus tends to be on individual motivations and actions, in contrast with the relational and contextual views that characterise critical perspectives (Mingers 2000; Mclaughlin & Thorpe 1993; Wilmott 1994; 1997; Rigg & Trehan 2004; Vince 2001, 2002, 2004, 2008; Ram & Trehan 2010). Through harnessing critical social theory and deepening critical thinking and questioning of the "daily realities", a critical action learning (CAL) aspires to understand and to challenge the effects of organisational power relations on action and learning (Trehan 2011: 164). The critical challenge extends to relationships within the action learning set itself, where for example, instead of the "learning-in-action" intended, such dynamics may produce a diametric "learning inaction" (Vince (2001; 2004; 2008).

In seeking to raise situational awareness and promote challenges to existing power relations, CAL would seem to have particular relevance for the addressing of wicked problems. Such problems echo Revans' notions of intractability in resisting complete description (Churchman, 1967; Camillus, 2008) and in having no "solutions in the sense of definitive or objective answers" (Rittel & Webber

1973:155). Typically involving multiple stakeholders and complex interdependencies, attempts to

resolve wicked problems can lead to unintended consequences (Rittel & Webber 1973: 161-7; Grint

2005), and are likely to require joint working and a deliberate learning strategy on the part of those

concerned (Grint 2008: 11-18). The notion of "super wicked problems" (Lazarus 2009; Levin

2012), draws attention to elements of self-causation, where wickedness stems in part from the

actions of those also seeking urgent solutions. Given this iatrogenic ingredient, any therapeutic

strategy is likely to involve not only new learning but also some unlearning of participants'

individual and collective ways of seeing, thinking and doing, including any established but unhelpful

bodies of knowledge (Rushmer & Davies, 2004; Hislop et al 2014).

The idea of unlearning

Because of the generally positive charge given to learning, the idea of unlearning can appear

counterintuitive. Explored more than 30 years ago in the organisational learning context

(Hedberg, Nystrom & Starbuck 1976; Hedberg 1981; Nystrom & Starbuck 1984), unlearning

has persisted as a theme in that literature (Easterby-Smith et al 2004: 374), and is now receiving

renewed attention (Becker 2005, 2008, 2010; Tsang & Zahra 2008; Cegarra-Navarro &

Dewhurst 2006; Cegarra-Navarro et al 2010; Cegarra-Navarro & Arcas-Lario 2011; Hislop et al

2014). Tsang and Zahra (2008: 1437-1440) list 34 definitions of organisational unlearning,

noting their relative homogeneity in contrast to the variety of depictions of organisational

learning.

Most definitions follow Hedberg (1981:3) in portraying unlearning as part of a cycle in which

knowledge grows, becomes obsolete and is discarded. In their discussions of "organisational

forgetting" (Blackler, Crump & McDonald 1999; Easterby-Smith 2004) and "memory elimination" (Cegarra-Navarro et al 2010: 901), old knowledge and behaviour is also discarded to make way for new learning. Reviews of individual unlearning reach similar conclusions (Hislop et al 2014), so that in both literatures unlearning is generally seen as preliminary to the main business of learning. However, whilst much of the literature assumes close links between learning and unlearning (Becker 2005: 660), there is apparently little empirical evidence for this. Tsang and Zahra (2008: 1437; 1454-5) note a lack of analysis beyond initial definitions, a paucity of empirical research, and little attention being paid to the unlearning process in the organisational learning literature; views largely supported with regard to individual unlearning by Hislop et al (2104).

Given the scarcity of evidence on how unlearning takes place, is the process of unlearning as closely coupled with learning as implied by most authors? And is unlearning adequately described by the notions of discarding and forgetting?   Early studies do display interest in the process of unlearning, especially in relation to organisational unlearning (Hedberg, Nystrom & Starbuck 1976; Hedberg 1981; Friedlander 1983; Nystrom & Starbuck 1984). This process is described as "typically problem-triggered" by Hedberg (1981:16), but as also not leading to straightforward outcomes, because breakdowns in the old order may lead to disorder rather than new learning. Indeed, in the event of such a crisis, and because of the competitive struggle between the need for new learning and the desire for stability and continuity (Friedlander 1983: 214-220), unlearning may be strenuously resisted (Hedberg 1981:19).

Two more recent studies (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst 2006; Cegarra-Navarro & Arcas-Lario

2011) attempt an analysis of individual unlearning based on questionnaire data, and of particular relevance is Cegarra-Navarro et al's (2010) research with social workers which uses observational data to illustrate how unlearning may take place or not. These authors explicitly link individual with organisational unlearning to emphasise the importance of "an appropriate unlearning context" (2010: 915). Rushmer & Davies (2004) contrast "deep unlearning" with the "wiping" or "fading" implied in notions of discarding or forgetting. Where "deeply held, perhaps previously unacknowledged, assumptions and beliefs are opened to doubt and thus change", this is a disruptive process, often contingent upon a shocking experience, requiring conscious effort to set aside existing knowledge or behaviour (2004: ii11). Described as "transformative" resulting in a "loss of previous ways of seeing" (MacDonald 2002, 174) via "unusual experiences" (Garud et al. 2011), deep unlearning may involve critical questioning and reflection (Hislop et al, 2014) or "open discussion…radical debate and continuous experimentation" (Chokr 2009: 48).

Does the close coupling of unlearning with learning help to maintain the assumption that learning is a "good thing"? Some authors propose the facilitation of unlearning, understood as the elimination of inconvenient or obsolete knowledge and routines, in preparation for new, more desired learning (Srithika & Sanghamitra 2009; Magnusson & Martini 2009; Becker 2008; 2010). This positioning appears to make two assumptions: that any new learning will be better than the old; and that what constitutes "better" is unproblematic. For example, Hislop et al (2014: 556) propose that unlearning is "a key factor in the successful implementation of organizational change". This suggests that both what is unlearned, and what is newly learned, are valuable because they are supportive of current organizational purposes. In the light of

earlier discussion of the political functions of learning in organisations, this is questionable, particularly in the context of wicked problems, where, lacking agreed definition of any public good, what is valued by one stakeholder may be at odds with the opinions of others.

Another consequence of the close coupling of unlearning with learning, and the designation of unlearning as preparatory or preliminary, is that this positioning obscures any radical potential in the idea. In taking a Foucauldian line, Chokr (2009: 71-77), argues for a radical perspective on unlearning as a positive and liberating process that serves to question dominant social paradigms and knowledges. In this view, unlearning is important in its own right because it can lead to the rediscovery and revival of suppressed and subjugated knowledges that might offer alternatives for thinking and understanding. Paraphrasing Kant, Chokr calls for a general and "permanent reactivation of the critical and unlearning attitude" which he epitomises as "the desire and willful determination *not to be taken in*" (2009: 6 original italics). Building on this perspective, Hsu (2013) proposes a radical vision of the "unlearning organisation" which releases its members from dominant and taken-for-granted ideologies and educates them in the various available alternatives.

These more radical forms of unlearning can be extended to include the concepts of not-knowing and non-action. Revans' (2011:11) has proposed that the most insightful questions originate in the conditions of "ignorance, risk and confusion" that accompany intractable or wicked problems; whilst Antonacopoulou (2009: 428) views unlearning as a process of "asking new questions that embrace the unknown". Where much is unknown, then non-action becomes a viable option; in deploying Buddhist and Taoist concepts of 'Prajna' (emptiness) and 'Wu-wei'

(wisdom), Hsu (2013: 304) defines this as the preparedness "to refrain from activity contrary to nature". Because of an over-focus on the discarding and preparatory aspects of unlearning, and also from the neglect of more critical and radical readings. the literature has little to say about the positive potential of non-action. The lack of empirical studies and the largely conceptual nature of many contributions mean that there are few cases which challenge assumptions about the value of any new learning that leads to action. Yet, the wicked problems, with their contested natures and self-caused elements, defy conventional problem-solving processes and may be better facilitated via a diminishing of the attachment and compulsion to such action.

Summary

The literature reviewed demonstrates a renascent interest and enthusiasm for the idea of unlearning alongside some evident limitations in how it is currently conceived and studied. Unlearning is still most commonly interpreted as discarding or forgetting and is generally closely coupled with new learning. The unproblematic assumption that learning must be a "good thing" may help to explain the lesser role generally bestowed on unlearning and the relatively low level of interest in how this may take place. With some exceptions studies tend to be desk-based and speculative rather than empirical. However, there are alternative views to be found and some possibilities for a more positive and liberating interpretations.

The main themes from the literature are summarised in Table 1. The contesting of learning as unequivocal good and the questioning of the "discarding" and subordinate statuses of unlearning opens up possibilities for alternative readings. The deep and critical takes and the notions of not-knowing and non-action are of particular interest in understanding how unlearning may take

place in the context of the wicked problems of social work.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Research context and methods

The research reported in this article was part of a larger study by the authors conducted for *Skills for Care UK* (the employer-led authority on the training standards and workforce development needs of social care staff in England). The research questions in this study were aimed at uncovering social workers' own accounts of their experiences in dealing with wicked problems through the medium of critical action learning, and we used a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis within an overall interpretivist framework. We examined the written reflective accounts of 73 social workers who acted as the facilitators of critical action learning sets, and supplemented these with 12 group interviews with CAL sets and 8 telephone interviews with individual set members. In total some 630 social workers participated in these action learning sets. The CAL facilitators were usually senior social workers, and often practice educators or trainers; the set members were usually junior and newly qualified social workers (NQSWs).

Two of the authors worked on the delivery of the *Skills for Care* commissioned programmes which led to the award of an ILM Level 5 certificate in Action Learning Facilitation. The 73 social workers who completed this programme between October 2010 and April 2013 worked in

action learning sets over periods of 8 to 10 months, during which time they were introduced to CAL ideas and approaches. As part of this programme each person was required to initiate and facilitate action learning sets in their own organisations or settings, and then to write up accounts of their practice detailing the learning from these experiences. In addition to these written accounts of social workers' dealings with wicked and ill-structured problems, this facilitation training work gave these authors extensive access to many conversations in the CAL set meetings which are a substantial aspect of the programme. The narrative approach which is central both to action learning and CAL enables a critical examination of participants' experiences of their actions and learning within the sets and also provides stories and data that were recorded in research notes.

The data analysis began with the four authors familiarising themselves with the data, from which a thematic analysis was developed based on 7 questions: (i) what was meaningful about the experiences described and why? (ii) what evidence of 'discarding' of old knowledges is evident in the accounts? (iii) what "challenged perspectives" emerge from the narratives? (iv) what evidence is there of liberation from previously restricting mind-sets? (v) what changes to future practice are noted? (vi) what evidence of 'not knowing' and 'non action' emerges from the accounts? and (vii) what is the evidence of engagement with "wicked problems" ? This article utilises 24 exemplars, extracted from the longer accounts to illustrate the processes of unlearning in the context of the wicked issues addressed by social workers. The exemplars, 17 of which were taken from the 73 facilitators' accounts and 7 from the interviews with set members, ranged in length from 500 to 1500 words.

The thematic framework, as derived both from immersion in the data and on the basis of the literature, was then used to sort and code the data derived from the accounts. We used the the framework to document and conduct interview analysis and to develop our ideas and understandings about the part that unlearning and CAL might play in the addressing of wicked problems. In analysing and making sense of the data, the four authors met face-to-face or on-line on six occasions and as pairs or sub-sets on many others. In seeking relevant data, we were looking first for example of problems that displayed wicked aspects, and secondly for evidence of critical reflection, unlearning and any resulting action, or non-action. We paid particular attention to parts of accounts or interview transcripts that, for example:

- focused on conflict or emotionality which was relational and institutional, rather than that which is individual and interior; for example, conflicts with other professions such as medicine or police, or conflicts between the different managerial and professional roles in social work organisations, and the feelings and emotions produced in these situations

- questioned assumptions on which understandings were based especially in terms of how power - resources, interests, gender, race, rank, privilege etc. - were used, misused and distributed

- were concerned with emancipations from previous narrower perspectives and assumptions of how things are and should be

- used critical concepts to illuminate events and experiences, for example where a respondent noted, in workings of the set, the mirroring of external working or institutional relationships

- showed awareness of social and organisational contexts, and a sense of self as not just individualised actor, but as being at least partly socially constituted and as taking part in a wider network of actors, institutions, rules and cultures

On this basis we chose the 24 exemplars from which we quote in the following Findings section.

Coghlan (2013: 54-55) proposes a threefold warrant for action learning as a research methodology: through taking action in organisational settings practitioners can both develop their personal practices and add to the stock of professional knowledge; secondly, action learning enables inquiry into personal and collaborative experiences in ways that are inclusive of subjectivity; and thirdly, it offers a model of praxeology (Revans 1971: 28-70) in which the person's own learning about themselves, about the actions of others and about the wider world, are framed as a systemic unity.

In our sense-making we were conscious of the workings of the "double hermeneutic" (Giddens 1976) and the awareness that, in studying the phenomena of social life, researchers seek to understand that which is also making sense of itself. As Weick (1995: 43) puts it: "Sensemaking never starts. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops. People are always in the middle of things, which become things." The dynamic of the double hermeneutic comes into

play through our own involvement as researchers trying to understand other actors, whose experiences are already partly shaped by their absorption of other people's theories and so on. As actors in our own circle of sense making, seeking to understand the meanings of actors in other circles, there is always the danger of finding in the data that which we would like to see there. In the findings and analysis which follow, the actual words of respondents are used as the basis of readings.

Findings and analysis

Four themes or aspects of unlearning emerge from our analysis. First, as commonly found in the literature, the data confirms the presence of unlearning as 'discarding' or 'wiping'. As Hislop et al (2104: 540-541) note, there is a need for this form of unlearning in the contemporary business environment in order to maintain flexibility and agility in terms of existing knowledge, routines and skills . Yet, as demonstrated by our data, discarding is not the straightforward process implied, and what is unlearned in such circumstances is "not permanently lost" (Hislop et al (2104: 547). Second, we found instances of deep unlearning where individuals' fundamental assumptions are confronted and challenged. In contrast to depictions of 'discarding', deep unlearning is more usually a difficult and demanding process. The third theme of critical unlearning entails the development of a critical perspective that is both socially focused and socially achieved. A focus upon the power relations and dynamics in particular situations is achieved through critical reflection in a group or collective, enabled here through the CAL sets. A fourth theme considers evidence of unlearning as deliberated non-action as a response to wicked problems. Conscious and intentional non-action is distinguished from the apparently similar conception of "learning inaction" (Vince, 2008). These four themes are elaborated and

illustrated using extracts from the social workers' accounts.

Unlearning as discarding

Prior training and experience may appear in the present as ingrained routine that inhibits new learning. In these social workers' accounts, the limitations of existing knowledge and behaviours are often recognised through challenges in the CAL sets which lead to the emergence of alternative views:

> The set helped me to look at the problem with fresh eyes. (Account 18 of the 24 exemplars)

> It was the moment the set challenged me whether I was a case manager or a social worker and I decided that I had been duped by the system. What I was doing was contrary to my professional values. (Account 23)

The "fresh eyes" experience is a common one in action learning. Our data set includes many cases where, in experimenting with new and unfamiliar skills, the narrators recognise a giving up of an old way of working. However, they also illustrate unlearning as a frequently more complex process than is implied by terms such as "discarding"or "wiping" (Hislop et al 2014; Rushmer & Davies 2004). Not only is existing learning unlikely to be permanently erased (Hislop et al 2104: 547), rather than the wholesale discarding knowledge or skills, this data suggests that the result is better described as an enlargement of repertoires. In the example below, the narrator is not so much discarding a redundant skill as recognising the limitations of

an old practice and setting it aside in favour of a new one:

> I also notice that I no longer need to assume a teaching role preferring instead to facilitate ownership and deeper levels of learning by set members. My attempts to use different methods and models to assist them in this seems to me to be awkward and clumsy at times but set members tell me when I ask, that this is helpful and one likened my questioning style to Oprah. (Account 13)

Complex skills sets such as teaching are unlikely to be simply discarded. It seems more likely that whilst they may at times be displaced by a better alternative, they remain available to the owner to be used in future as part of a widened repertoire. Whilst in most cases this may be a personal experience, it can also be collective one:

> The end we all realised was that doing the same things or fighting to do the same things that worked 15 - 20 years ago was not going to work and that new solutions needed to be found. We then looked at what could be done and related this to the ASYE (Training scheme for newly qualified social workers) ….. It's not perfect but we are working with it in a different way. (Account 4)

As seen here, unlearning as discarding is not a single, straightforward process but is one element in a more complex process that involves reviewing past practices as part of developing new ways of working.

Deep unlearning

Whilst showing it to be a more complex than often described, the above analysis of unlearning as discarding depicts it as a largely rational process. In the case of deep unlearning a more protracted and challenging experience is indicated. For example, many accounts attest to the surprise, confusion and emotionality attendant upon unlearning when it poses a challenge to current operating assumptions:

> I came to the set to explore my next steps with the babies and women. The set asked many questions about safeguarding and the care of the children … Then one person in the set who wasn't a social worker noticed I had not called the women a mother and her partner a father in the case I recounted. I was surprised at this comment and then she asked me what behaviours any women might exhibit who had just had twins and what the differences in this case were. (Account 1)

This extract illustrates how the simple or naïve observation can surprise and lead to fundamental questioning. It is noticeable in this case the observation comes from someone who is not informed by social work principles and values; in the case below, the questioner probes beyond the technical:

> (The) questions were really helpful from a technical point of view, but then one person asked me about my role as the care manager / broker and I started to get quite upset. I remember saying 'I am a social worker, not a broker'. The questioner asked me gently what the difference was and what value could a social worker offer over care

management. I remember not being very coherent in my answer - it was quite a shock and I asked for time to reflect on the implications that it threw up for me. (Account 18)

"Fresh eyes" often means the loss of a previous way of seeing (MacDonald 2002: 174). Beginning in the questioning of core assumptions, this sort of unlearning is likely to be both intellectually and emotionally demanding (Rushmer & Davies (2004: 13) because the attendant shock and confusion is bound up with matters of personal and professional identity:

> … When we returned to my issue …..The set started to help me explore the problem using the core values of social work and I soon realised that the management processes I was being asked to follow were preventing me from serving this person in the way he deserved. Or more to the point I was allowing the care planning approach prevent me from doing what I should be doing as a social worker. It was a revealing moment for me. Why was I doing that … Fear? My inability to challenge? … What am I doing having this conversation in front of my managers? (Account 19)

Because of the challenge to personal and professional identities, deep unlearning has the potential to be transformative (MacDonald 2002: 174). However, this sort of unlearning is also likely to trigger defences and call forth strong resistances, in the person or in the organisation, because of the potential for disruption and loss of functioning (Friedlander 1983;Hedberg 1981). This suggests that deep unlearning is more likely to happen where there is some means of social and developmental support, such as in the CAL set, where trust and security allows defences to be lowered. The narrator of Account 19 wonders aloud why she is having this sort of

conversation in front of her manager - implying that she would normally keep it to herself and

not expose herself in this way when her manager is present; but also reflecting that her manager

is herself a social worker and a fellow set member bound by rules of equal voice and

confidentiality. The layers of reflection apparent here reveal insights into the problematic case

under examination, into the normal power relations of her organisation, and into the workings of

the CAL set itself.

Critical unlearning

The reflections on power relations evident in Account 19 are a hallmark of critical unlearning.

Whilst the focus of deep unlearning is often inward and about self, identity and values,critical

unlearning is more directed outwards to patterns of relating and organising. This can begin

through the opportunity of detachment and reflection:

> This made me wonder about the gaps between expectations of the most senior manager
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> and the reality of practice by social workers, given the views of their first line managers. I
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> wondered about the effect of this on the NQSW`s ability to use critical reflection, and the
>
> impact on their confidence and ability to become a resilient worker. I wondered about my
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> irritation at the situation where I felt the NQSW was placed in a no-win situation and the
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> organisation did not wish to take any responsibility. (Account 2)

A defining aspect of critical reflection is its social focus (Reynolds 1998; 2011). The focus is not

on the actions and motivations of individual but on the organisational and the institutional forces

in the situation. Rather than viewing working, managing, learning and unlearning as personal

and psychological experiences, critical reflection frames these as processes constituted by wider social and cultural influences:

> …. it is difficult to be aware and critically analytical of organisations in which you work who expect "bottom up" compliance from workers. This is reminiscent of the struggle for professional autonomy in social work versus the need for control by government agencies and I have reflected that hierarchical tensions have been a continuous theme in all the groups I have facilitated. (Account 15)

The practice of critical reflection is also both public and collective (Raelin 2001; Vince 2002; Reynolds 2011). Individual reflections are voiced and shared in a group or other public setting, so that critical reflection is not only socially focused but socially achieved (Raelin 2001; Nicolini et al 2004). In this extract, the narrator describes how critical reflection is achieved in her CAL set:

> The set helped me explore this. I really liked the ability to return after taking action and having a group of colleagues outside of my work area to help me critically reflect on the outcome. (Account 1)

In heightening the awareness of the institutional context of problematic situations, critical reflection can promote unlearning by bringing to light alternative perspectives, sometimes from knowledge that has been forgotten or become submerged in current operating systems:

> There was no evidence from a rational /technical point of view as to why this would not

work…. The real problem was there was no way the organisation was allowing the feelings of people to be taken into account so therefore everyone was trying to find technical / rational arguments to justify feelings that were not allowed in the system … And that was stopping everyone moving forward ….. So what would happen if we met with our managers and said just that, what if the real problem was feelings that needed to be acknowledged and addressed? (Account 20)

This author and her colleagues have forgotten or discarded what they once knew, and the way forward may lie in remembrance. Critical unlearning is seen here as a liberating process that allows for the questioning of the currently dominant way of thinking and also for the rediscovery of "subjugated knowledges" (Chokr (2009: 75/6). The purpose of such analysis in action learning is for learning and action on the problem or challenge being addressed. In the CAL set, critical unlearning, like Brookfield's critical reflection (1987: 10-18; 2011), combines reflective analysis with informed action:

What happened then was unexpected. I had the undivided attention of the group, I don't think I have ever experienced the support of peers to that extent before and with their encouragement found myself able to explore my feelings about this man and the situation. I was asked about why I felt under such pressure from the organisation to sort the issue (and)…. It was suggested that I look at the correlation between the times I was put under pressure and the media attention in the city square. To be honest I thought that was a bit cynical but agreed to look. By the next set meeting I had the data … (which) … seemed to show that whenever there was an elected members' event or other public show

> where the media were out, I got the call from my managers to sort my client out. … (I
> was) asked how I would feel about that … I felt f........ angry actually; the thought I
> might be being manipulated for the sake of the media let alone what it was doing to my
> client made my blood boil. (Account 21)

In this account, the author's anger comes from her realisation that she has been manipulated. A marker of the "critical and unlearning attitude" is the determination not to be so taken in (Chokr 2009: 6) and the experiencing of conflicts and emotions is a key ingredient in the critical reflection process. Where wicked problems are concerned, progress may be found in questioning current understandings and assumptions and by working through the associated tensions and feelings. But critical unlearning also enables the actor to distinguish between her personal experience and the institutional and political forces which are constituent to the problem situation. This opens the way for a consideration of possible actions based on a more informed analysis. It also opens up the possibilities for unlearning as a means of achieving not-knowing and non-action.

Unlearning as deliberated non action

> With the support of the set I feel brave to do the right thing. Nothing. (Account 23)

Critical reflection can result in a loosening or unsticking from a previous position without actually discarding or forgetting it. The knowledge, skill or routine remains, but is viewed and perhaps used differently. This kind of unlearning may not run straight on to new learning so

much as open the gate to alternative perspectives and previously subjugated knowledges. The

author of Account 8 below, aware of the different aspects and possibilities in the situation, comes

to a position of deliberate non-action:

> I was very conscious of dimensions of both gendered power and status power here and
>
> that their behaviour – and my challenge or, alternatively, collusion - could help or hinder
>
> their group from identifying actions. I was aware of consciously resisting approval-
>
> seeking tendencies in order to formulate appropriate challenges to them and permissions
>
> to other group members. (Account 8)

which is the avoidance or unwillingness to act and learn (Vince 2008: 100). Learning inaction is

the result of a collective production of powerlessness as refracted in the individual:

> … when a set member was discussing having to challenge the medical profession about a
>
> decision made about a service user, I began to feel the debate was going around in circles.
>
> The set felt it was powerless and stuck against the power of the medical world. Further
>
> reflection on this, whilst sitting in the set, made me ask how powerless the worker was
>
> within their own team. (Account 22)

By contrast with this stuckness, deliberate non-action, whilst apparently passive, is an actually

considered position of not taking action now in order to remain open to the emergence of other

possibilities:

It was interesting how my colleague and I handled this situation. My colleague became very angry with the NQSW's and stressed the need for them to take responsibility and use their own time to complete the portfolio. I took a very different approach….I did feel frustrated by them taking the 'victim' role, however I could empathise with them and I am well aware of the pressure of caseloads on NQSW's in the current climate. The ability to empathise encouraged me to give them time to 'vent' as I was aware that this was holding the group back from moving onto something positive. (Account 12)

This deliberate refraining from action can be powerful rather than powerless, especially in retaining a freedom for future action:

(she)… recognised in the set meeting that by being the 'expert' she met the expectations of the family by removing their responsibility in the situation. It reduced the anxiety on both sides but did it actually solve the underlying problem? Her question to the set was 'What if I consciously didn't do anything. Would this be more empowering for the family and a more sustainable solution? (Account 24)

This social worker is aware that continuing in the role of expert will not resolve the problem, and is considering non-action as a useful option. This is an example of an attempt at unlearning something that is no longer achieving the outcomes desired, which also has the effect of increasing the options both for herself and the family. This sort of flexibility, defined by Bateson (1972: 473) as an "uncommitted potentiality for change", is particularly where wicked problems are concerned,

Discussion

> "You have exercised your talents – you recite – you sing – from the drawing room standpunkt. My dear Fraulein you must unlearn all that. You have not yet conceived what excellence is: you must unlearn your mistaken admirations." (Herr Klesmer to Gwendolen in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* 1986:299)

This study focuses on the significance of unlearning in the context of the wicked problems of social work and also on whether action learning, specifically critical action learning (CAL), can act as an enabler of this unlearning. Much of the unlearning literature is conceptual, speculative and lacking in empirical data. It tends to assume that all new learning is a good thing and to couple and subordinate unlearning to learning. It offers little illumination on the processes by which unlearning can take place.

The processes of unlearning as revealed in our data are both more variable and more complex than is often suggested in the literature By distinguishing four types or interpretations we provide empirical validation for the claim that unlearning is not adequately described by notions of discarding and forgetting (Hislop et al 2014: 556). These varieties also establish the possibility of unlearning as a distinct process not necessarily leading on quickly to new learning. However the continuing dominance of the discarding view is supported by another theme found in the literature, namely the close coupling of learning and unlearning. We have argued that this follows from an uncritical acceptance of the value of learning which assigns unlearning to a waste elimination function.

Alternative readings of unlearning stress its emancipatory potential. Descriptions of deep or transformative unlearning are represented in the literature, but remain outriders, whilst accounts of radical or critical unlearning such Chokr (2009) and Hsu (2013) are absent from most reviews (eg Tsang & Zahra 2008; Hislop et al 2014). The notion of unlearning as liberating in its own right is radical because emancipation is more commonly associated with the learning idea; an apparent inversion which reveals a conceptual slipperiness and helps explains why unlearning is ascribed by some authors as a part or a form of learning. Yet as this article shows, distinguishing unlearning as a discrete concept has evident value for researchers, allowing meanings to be made and understandings to be found which would not otherwise be possible.

In these social workers' stories of their engagement with difficult problems, the process of unlearning can be complex and deliberated, and also as "intellectually and emotionally demanding" (Rushmer & Davies 2004: 13). What is "discarded" is unlikely to be permanently lost because it is too valuable; the knowledge and practices involved are too intricate and embedded to be simply jettisoned. By way of illustration, the respondent below is attempting new behaviours at the same time as seeking to give up on old ones. The difficulties she experiences are compounded from the array of sometimes contesting agencies in the situation, such as housing, police, acute, community and mental health services, and the internal attitudes and behaviours of her own colleagues:

> "It was liberating to be able to talk about the differing agencies' roles without the usual
> snide remarks from my work team and supervisor about the others (agencies). I realised
> that we as a team always jump to blame another department if a case didn't work. In this

set I was encouraged to think of everyone in an appreciative way and I realised just how much energy we waste in fighting each other instead of working together. I went away from that meeting with a number of actions to support me working with other departments and agencies …. . (Later) I came back to the set to tell them I had put my new appreciative views into practice. However, what I had started to encounter sadly was work colleagues commenting how I was betraying them by standing up for other professionals. I had thought the evidence in outcomes would be enough to persuade them this was a better approach (Account 3).

Such accounts show how existing routines and perspectives, perhaps themselves contributing to problem situations in ways not obvious or entirely understood, can become loosened or shaken by new critique and insight. In this process, existing stocks of knowledge and practice routines are not made redundant, but are re-evaluated, re-positioned and overlain in a wider repertoire, usually supplemented by some new learning. This new learning, though doubtless requiring some effort and practice, is relatively straightforward, whilst the unlearning is difficult, unpredictable and possibly painful.

Is unlearning a deliberated process or does it just happen? The "fresh eyes" experience can happen suddenly in response to a random encounter or an apparently innocuous question, but it can be also be persistently elusive or even doggedly resisted: "there are also those who *soberly and deliberately refuse to learn"* (Revans 2011, 60 original italics). In the former case new insight and learning can quickly follow, but in the latter, the outcome can be stuckness, avoidance or "learning inaction" (Vince 2008). Some form of intervention or support may assist

with this difficult unlearning. In their study of health practitioners operating in a "hospital-in-the-home" setting, Cegarra-Navarro et al (2010: 914) note the importance of "an appropriate unlearning context (which) allows other members of the community such as social workers to solve new problems or to solve old problems in new ways".

In the extract from Account 3 above, CAL creates the appropriate unlearning context, providing the space both for critical reflection and the opportunity to discover new ways of seeing and acting. As in Brookfield's usage (1987; 1994; 2011) critical reflection combines reflective analysis with informed action, and the CAL set generates considerable power because this is not only socially focused but socially achieved via the collaboration of its members (Raelin 2001; Vince 2002; Nicolini et al 2004; Trehan and Pedler 2010; Reynolds 2011). In encouraging participants to see their practices less in personal terms and more in relation to structural and institutional issues, CAL can support critical unlearning and thereby help practitioners to deal with the emotional and power dynamics in their situations.

Whereas managerial and supervisory approaches to work usually serve to individualise the problems that occur, the wicked or intractable problems are unlikely to be much impacted by personal development alone. Addressing wicked problems requires new understandings, relationships and realignments on the part of all the contributors and stakeholders (Grint, 2005; 2008). CAL represents a potentially stronger approach than "conventional" action learning, because it can produce not only insights into how institutions and organisations operate, but also result in "organising insights" where participants, individually and collectively, learn from organising (Vince 2004, 73/5). Organising insights are of particular use to participants, acting as

"tempered radicals" (Myerson & Tompkins, 2007; Attwood 2007), in attempting alternative treatments to problems and challenges that might otherwise be maintained or avoided.

In such situations CAL can encourage perspectives on unlearning that heighten awareness of not-knowing and open up to possibilities of non-action. These views of unlearning run counter to the commitments in Western cultures to expert knowledge and the many agency theories, activity theories and theories of action (eg Weber 1947; Parsons 1968; Argyris 1982; Habermas 1986; Whyte 1991; Engestrom 1999). Critical unlearning directs discriminating attention toward ill-structured situations and nurtures the capacities for detachment, questioning and challenge. This active tendency to problematise and challenge events is underlain by a strong desire not to be 'taken in' (Chokr 2009: 6). Non-action begins in attending, noticing and being present without the compulsion to act. Revans (eg 2011: 8) consistently warns against the dangers of expert approaches to intractable problems and stresses the importance of starting from not-knowing, from which position fresh questions may be asked. Where the conditions for knowledge are insecure and unstable, and thus where the outcomes of actions are unpredictable, it is also not possible to predict what new possibilities might attend the refraining from habitual actions. By asking different questions so as to inquire into the unknown (Antonacopoulou 2009; Hsu 2013), the decision not to act maintains an openness to the emergence of other possibilities not yet apparent.

Conclusion

This study adds empirical evidence to a body of predominantly speculative work and directs attention to some of the actual ways in which unlearning takes place. On the basis of this data it

is apparent that unlearning is not well characterised as the discarding or wiping of outmoded knowledge and routines, but on the contrary is usually a demanding process characterised by conflict and emotionality. This article breaks new ground in demonstrating the value of more radical forms of unlearning in wicked problem situations, and offers new insights through establishing the possibilities for conscious not-knowing and deliberated non-action in situations where actions can easily lead to unexpected outcomes.

This article also throws new light on how unlearning might be encouraged and supported. In suggesting that it is more likely to happen if it is socially supported through CAL, this research adds to the wider understanding of what constitutes an "appropriate unlearning context" (Cegarra-Navarro et al 2010: 914). As a deliberated process of collective inquiry and social action, CAL can thus contribute to significant improvements in the lives of social work practitioners and their clients.

Whilst the territory of social work, with its difficult cases involving multiple agencies with differing purposes, is a good site for the study of unlearning, it also marks a limitation on what can be concluded from this evidence. Other vocations occupy similarly contested zones and it would be fruitful to test these findings against samples taken for example from medical, military, voluntary or religious organisations. A further limitation of this research is in it its exploratory nature. Whilst it is argued that the critical, not-knowing and non-action varieties of unlearning are likely to be of most value in addressing the wicked problems, more work is needed to make detailed examinations of these interpretations and more fully illuminate such unfamiliar processes. This paper lays the foundations for more detailed analyses, which might take the form

of "thicker" and more idiographic descriptions of particular cases. For example Knott's (2014) account of Hannah Arendt's endeavours to make sense of the Nazi atrocities, describes in detail how she was driven, over a long period of time and in the face of hostility from former colleagues, to radically unlearn and break away from the established canons of European Humanism.

The idea of unlearning as desisting from doing those things that no longer achieve what we intend has thus a much wider currency than even the wicked problems of social work. In a 1964 TV interview, following the publication of her report on the Eichmann trial, Arendt notes that "the real perversion of action is in functioning" and pondered on the times when "a refusal to act becomes in itself an action" (Knott 2014: 7, 6). In the context of political economy, J M Keynes (1936) remarked: "The difficulty lies not in the new ideas but in escaping from the old, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of the mind". The influence of existing preconceptions and "mental models" contribute to the elements of self-causation in problem situations (Lazarus 2009; Levin 2012) and undermines the apparent rationality of human decisions. In difficult times the decision not to act, or at least not to act in previous and now predictable ways, can be an important action in itself.

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Table 1: Some themes in the unlearning literature

Theme	Indicative authors
Contesting the idea that learning is an unequivocal 'good'	Contu, Grey and Örtenblad, 2003
Unlearning as coupled with learning or as a distinct process requiring conscious and intentional action	Tsang & Zahra, 2008; Hislop et al 2014; Becker 2005;

	Revans, 2011; Antonacopoulou, 2009;
Unlearning as discarding obsolete or rejected knowledge, routines and ways of working	Tsang & Zahra 2008; Cegarra-Navarro et al 2010 ;
Deep unlearning which questions previous assumptions and hitherto firmly imprinted beliefs, attitudes and values	Rushmer & Davies, 2004; MacDonald, 2002
Critical unlearning as a way of challenging practices and ideologies & activating the 'critical and unlearning attitude'	Chokr, 2009
Unlearning as not-knowing and non-action	Antonacopoulou, 2009; Revans 2011; Hsu, 2013

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