

Introduction to section 1 – Learning as a process: Understanding one's role in the new learning demands of multifunctional land use systems, working with different actors, tools and scales

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Learning processes associated with research and extension in rural and farming systems have made up a regular and prominent theme in past symposia of the European IFSA network. Theories of learning and their implications for practice, the role of researchers as facilitators of learning in the interplay between farmers and their providers of service, and experiences of using different approaches and tools in such learning-oriented research have featured in workshops under this theme in previous symposia. At the last gathering of the network two years ago in Vila Real, Portugal in 2004, some 33 papers were discussed under the theme of 'Knowing and Learning: labour and skills at stake for a multidimensional agriculture'.

The 2004 workshop on learning identified several challenges facing farming systems practitioners. Some of these relate to their changing roles from experts to participants of new networks, when they have to create the networks and also facilitate meaningful dialogue in them. A new challenge confronting them as part of the new visions for rural areas is that their R&D would now take place in new locations and in new contexts; researchers have to develop new competences; and make learning more explicit for themselves as well as for the multiple stakeholders.

The evolution of farming systems towards multifunctionality ties in needs of sustainability as well as needs of society. The new thrust on rural development demands learning processes in motion, some of which would involve people at the individual farm while others may encompass a whole rural area. Some will involve specific projects; others may take in farmers, citizens and many other local and non-local stakeholders. The future challenge will be about learning processes in open networks and less so in well-defined and often familiar groups. Learning among heterogeneous groups of stakeholders, and among different epistemologies has become one of the most central issues today.

Such a move has to be put in relation with the increasing interest for issues of resources management. If the primary focus in the past was mainly on the building of farmers' capacity to cope with uncertainty and production stakes, it has now moved towards the building of collective action among rural inhabitants who share common resources and they have to agree upon their way to use and keep such resources. Therefore the range of situations in which researchers and developers are involved has expanded, requiring them to appeal to concepts, which would enable them to address problems encountered in such situations.

Irrespective of the situations, the common thread for learning-oriented researchers has been to consider learning as a process, and to agree on the fact that knowing and acting are intertwined. This can also refer to many theories as pointed out in a publication on this theme by the LEARN Group (Cerf *et al.*, 2000). The papers being presented at this workshop have touched on many angles one could take on this learning – knowing – acting theme.

One of these angles is to look at how human interactions can result in or foster learning processes. While understanding how interactions between individuals could support learning at the individual level still remains as a field of interest, communication and dialogical processes have increasingly become meaningful for coping with situations in which people do not necessarily share stakes, epistemologies, practices, or tools (whether symbolic or material artefacts). While some papers leaned on theories of discourse and conversation analysis and elaborate these, others develop some practical tools such as diagramming, use of metaphors or of intermediary objects in order to promote such processes. This is still an open field of questions, and some papers in the current workshop will allow us to discuss those questions further.

A second focus is on identity and capacity building. While understanding practices of reflexivity and the conditions favouring individual stakeholder's practices of reflecting upon their own process of learning and working out how such process can be promoted, increasing interest has developed on how to address collective identity through for instance the development of work on Communities of Practice. This concept was first introduced by Etienne Wenger and then further developed within the theoretical framework of situated learning (see Wenger, 1998).

Finally, a third focus is on the development of collective action and the understanding of public action as a bottom-up process. While aiming at developing approaches that can improve the capacity of stakeholders to be actors in the process of knowing in such situations, it also aims at understanding how knowing, as effective action, operates across scales ranging from the individual to the group, community, organisation and polity. Studies have emerged about social learning, systems social learning, and participatory learning in order to address such questions (Leeuwis and Pyburn, 2002). Social learning refers to (i) convergence of goals, criteria and knowledge leading to agreement on concerted action among interdependent stakeholders where (common pool) resource dilemmas have arisen, (ii) co-creation of knowledge needed to understand issues and practices and (iii) changes in behaviours, norms and procedures arising from mutual understanding of issues. Social learning is thus a feature of doing and knowing within a situation, and an emergent property of the process to transform a situation. Systems social learning insists more on the systemic dimension of the collective action by questioning what lies within a system of interest that enables it to function as a system with the purpose of learning, what lies in its environment that affects or is affected by social learning, what transformation takes place and what the underpinning world views are. Participatory learning places the emphasis on authentic participation by relevant stakeholders at all stages of the exploratory process and their reflective learning on action.

In this section, 18 papers are presented. These take on learning as a process and practice, and its facilitation as a professional role to help meet the new demands. Rural development and the future of rural areas in Europe require formulation of new visions and design of new tools and approaches for enabling learning across the different levels of society. The social, participatory and transformative learning we have been discussing hitherto, when taken in such a collective, societal sense, become 'societal learning', and the new magnified set of epistemic challenges that come with it are, therefore, ours to deal with.

References

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