

Become a broker: the metamorphosis of an advisor.

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Abstract: This paper explores the experience of an advisor in acquiring and implementing new skills aimed at stimulating and managing learning processes with different stakeholders. The paper also takes in account the role of researchers in such process.

The experience can be divided into three stages: the training course, the cooperation between advisor and teacher in a facilitation project, the performance of the new profession.

The training course was aimed at making the participants learn and experiment new ways of working and relating with farmers and rural people, based on cooperative learning in the attempt to move from a model of knowledge dissemination to a model of knowledge generation in an interactive network with a variety of actors. The course was structured with classroom activities, whose main topics were facilitation, participatory methods and communication techniques, and activities on the “field”, aimed at developing a working group with farmers under the coaching of researchers.

After the training period, the advisor implemented her own achievements cooperating with the teacher in the realization of a project of “creative communication” with farmers. The advisor had the opportunity to see her teacher acting as a facilitator, to set up a working group with farmers and to cooperate in its facilitation.

Finally, performing her new profession the advisor/broker set up (among others) a network among organic farms, who had no previous relationship, with the aim of drawing a new model of organization within / between farms and promoting collective learning approaches. Such network, which was studied as a case of LINSIA – Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (Brunori et al., 2013), has been characterized by mutual understanding and sharing of knowledge and experiences, laying the foundation for a highly collaborative process among involved farms.

Keywords: facilitation, cooperative learning processes, knowledge generation, participatory methods, communication techniques

Introduction

Historically, knowledge and innovation for agriculture have been organized linearly around knowledge transfer from scientists to farmers through extension services, without any degree of market integration (Hall et al., 2006). Across the last decades, the coherence of this model has been eroded: agricultural knowledge systems are often fragmented, which hampers the circulation of knowledge and the ability of the research results to be usefully applied to innovation, and not enough responsive towards recent changes and newly emerging societal concerns and demands

(EU SCAR, 2012). Moreover, over recent years, the variety of interests related to agriculture and rural areas (e.g. climate change, food security, the provision of public goods, the quality of life of rural population, etc.), as well as the expansion of the goals related to innovation activities to include strategies, ideas and organizational models that respond to emerging social needs (Mosley, 2000), implicate an evolution of linear approaches towards, a more open, inclusive and coordinated innovation system, that involves a wide range of actors in knowledge generation and use (Knickel et al., 2009).

These dynamics makes learning the core of innovation processes, as any change in social or economic organisation improving a certain state of the matters brings to a change in the available knowledge. Moreover, it highlights a specific type of learning – social learning – which affects shared cognitive frames at the basis of coordination into a network (Knickel et al., 2009).

To support this innovation pathways new competences in mediating knowledge are required in order to overcome possible gaps in terms of cognitive, normative and value systems (Klerkx and Lewis, 2009), which can hinder effective communication. Besides, facilitation skills are needed to cover the wider task of empowering and involving people, as well as of managing learning processes.

In this context, the organizational processes of knowledge creation should be based on the setting-up of networks with the purpose of generating or enhancing learning processes through social interaction, instead of transferring knowledge. In other words, the need for actors whose main function is not transferring knowledge, but specifically stimulating and facilitating the formation of innovation partnerships has become increasingly important. Howells (2006) called these actors innovation brokers, describing them as “agents or brokers in any aspect of the innovation process between two or more parties. Such intermediary activities include: helping to provide information about potential collaborators; brokering a transaction between two or more parties; acting as a mediator, or go-between bodies or organizations that are already collaborating; and helping find advice, funding and support for the innovation outcomes of such collaborations.” In a wider view, these actors have also to be agents of the process to accompany the group, leading the dialogue and the learning process through a continued focus to develop appropriate actions. In fact, enhancing alignment in heterogeneous networks requires continuous interface management (Smits and Kuhlmann, 2004), as well as the performing of a host of facilitation tasks that ensure that networks are sustained and become productive, e.g. through the building of trust, establishing working procedures, fostering learning, managing conflict and intellectual property management (Leeuwis, 2004).

Starting from these considerations, the idea of some researchers of the University of Pisa⁷⁸ was to design a training course aimed at breeding ‘facilitators’ able to undertake new paths of advice for farmers that were not strictly technical and individual, but aimed to develop more effectively the capacity of the dialogue and collective learning, according to a problem finding (identification of relevant problems) and problem solving (implementation of effective solution strategies) approaches.

The paper presents a case study that can be ideally divided into three parts: the training course, the cooperation between a teacher and a trained advisor in a facilitation project, the performance of the new profession by the latter.

The authors of this paper were directly involved and participated to the training activities while the latter parts are mainly the result of an observation activity carried out by the authors after the training course.

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Facilitator training course for Tuscan advisors: methodology and results

Strategies for the active construction of knowledge

The training course for technicians of the extension and advisory services of Tuscany Region was designed as pilot project, under the financing of the Regional Agency for Agricultural Innovation and Development (now suppressed). The aim of the course, that was held in a timeframe of 6 months (from June 2005 to January 2006), was to instill knowledge and go through new models of knowledge building based on cooperative learning in an attempt to move from a one-way model of knowledge dissemination to a model of knowledge generation in interactive network with a variety of actors.

In particular, the course concerned new methods of group training – animation – dissemination, supported by facilitators, aimed at solving specific problems as well as developing new ideas and realizing joint projects (something similar to the Dutch study clubs).

Following this approach, the course was aimed to develop learners' ability to: a) identify relevant problems; b) redefine the context of the problem in relation to the available strategies; c) develop solution strategies,

The training course was designed using the same methodological approach that we wanted to teach the trainees based, therefore, not on a linear model of knowledge transfer, but rather on a model of active construction of knowledge, under the assumption that knowledge is a dynamic entity that anyone can contribute to build and integrate with his own experience.

The operating strategies for the active construction of knowledge have been: teamwork, critical evaluation of the transmitted knowledge, progressive comparison between different ideas and opinions to activate and support the advancement of common knowledge, internal evaluation of the produced knowledge and strategies of labor used.

The classroom's activity was organized as a learning community aimed at building new knowledge: the trainees were encouraged to think of themselves as bearers / producers of knowledge and not only as users of existing knowledge and were invited to offer their expertise, to analyze their own work and that of others by interacting with lecturers.

The classroom's days, fifteen in all, involved an alternation of theoretical lessons, designed to train the students to the role of facilitator and develop the skills needed to deal with the various phases of operating work, and of meetings with tutors to put knowledge into practice through exercises and simulations and to discuss developments advances in knowledge as well as any problems in its comprehension and application. The objectives of the classroom's activities were developed in four training modules:

- Module I: make the participants comprehend their 'mission', the meaning of the experience to be developed and its objectives,
- Module II: teach methods of creating and setting up a 'working group' with the farmers as well as designing activities of training / divulgation / animation with this group,
- Module III: foster the skills to develop, lead, manage and administer the experience with farmers,
- Module IV: develop the skills to self-assess and report to third parties the results of the activities with farmers.

To achieve these objectives, the course focused particularly on a few core topics, such as communication techniques, participatory methods, design and management of projects.

The classroom's activities were conducted through lectures, presentations of experiences, discussions, 'games', participatory methods, simulations.

For a concrete learning the course was divided into classroom activities and activities on the "field". Regarding the last point, the trainees were called to spend ten days working with group of farmers with the double aim of supporting the development of skills through practical performance and troubleshooting and contextualizing knowledge by transferring it to concrete situations. Particularly, the trainees had to set-up a group of farmers, to analyze with them their main problem and to identify the possible solutions, under the supervision of the tutors. As a final result of the course, the ideas that emerged from the discussions between the farmers and the "trainee-facilitator" had to be articulated in a project.

The works on field were no set in a precise date, but were carried out in the time interval between one class and another. In fact, each working group, being based on the principle of self-organization was free to organize itself according to its own needs.

Specific guidelines were prepared to facilitate the students in the definition of their operating path with the groups. The guidelines focused on the capacity of trainees to concretely work with the group and achieve the goal, in order to increase their self-determination.

The trainees had to submit regular report about the activities on the field to the classroom in order to exchange knowledge and impressions and sharing problems: in the end, all the students' projects were built together, bit by bit.

The lecturers of the course were from different disciplines, such as communication, sociology, psychology, agronomy, economics and management; the tutors were the same researcher that designed the course, all agrarian economists except for an expert in communication.

The experts in charge of lectures, and particularly the tutors, played a role not so much as the maximum carrier of knowledge but rather as a model of "how to build knowledge", taking on the task of maintaining the group's work focused on the identified issues and objectives, overseeing activities and giving the necessary instructions for their implementation, searching for information and evaluating them.

The task of lecturers, and especially of the tutors, was also to support the activities of the trainees, giving examples and showing how to perform specific tasks, until the gradual emancipation of the subjects, through the achievement of their own and specific competence and independence of thought and action. The support offered was similar to that of the "scaffolding" of the "work in progress": as "the building" is being built, the scaffolding is removed until it disappears completely. The trainees were encouraged to move into learning more and more independently, while constantly discussing with their peers and knowing that they could count on a mentor when they needed help.

Researchers acted as facilitators of the learning processes being a leading figure but, at the same time, letting trainees operate independently taking responsibility for the process of knowledge building through the progressive refinement of ideas related to the problems the class was facing.

Increasing the awareness of a new role

The trainees were all agronomists, accustomed to work in technical support to farmers, under the regional extension and advisory system, with knowledge and tools they acquired over the years, according to conventional approaches.

The reasons that prompted them to enroll in the course were various ranging from increasing knowledge on technical assistance, responding to a need of personal growth, improving communication skills, hanging new methods of dissemination, learning how to design a project from a bottom up approach, increasing communicational skills, finding a proper language for interaction with farmers, up to helping farmers to work together. Someone also expected to create a group of peers to exchange knowledge and share problems. All of them seemed to look for answers to a growing feeling of inadequacy of their know-how with respect to the changes which affected agriculture and rural areas.

The monitoring activities of the course, carried out with participatory methodologies, represented a tools by which the group and the individuals were able to challenge their expectations, to direct their own activities, to reflect on themselves, their role and their relationships with farmers, as well as an information base for the final evaluation of the experience⁷⁹.

These activities showed that the trainees worked with interest and cooperation, in a highly positive environment, setting up a cohesive group despite their different individuality, interacting with experts, liaising directly to mutually help and share knowledge, evaluating their own results and their way of working as well as setting continuously new goals for improvement.

The professional progress of trainees and the projects they designed made the researcher extremely satisfied. The goal of training a new professional figure in the panorama of agriculture and rural development, in a position to put into communication knowledge from different disciplines, rather than transferring scientific knowledge in a one-way direction, was very ambitious. And it was very difficult to determine beforehand which inputs would be able to induce such a change in the professional role of advisors.

The researchers thought that the best way to foster learning was to confront people with other innovative and inter-sectorial experiences. It was not easy for the trainees to understand immediately the goal and to metabolize such a different information and stimuli: It was a slow process, even disorienting, which took a long time to be assimilated, as a trainees reported: *“at each lesson different pieces of a mosaic were added to the first, but we could not perceive the overall design... then, at a certain point everything fell into place: the initial disorientation, the phase of deconstruction of the previous educational process, gave way to the reconstruction.”*

These results, probably, were also influenced by some mistakes in designing the course: in retrospect, the researchers reached the awareness that some lessons could be addressed into a clearer and more appropriate targets and / or more practical activities. In this context, the gradual emancipation of each trainee through the achievement of a proper and specific competence and independence of thought and action required a great effort by the tutors, both in showing and exemplifying how to perform certain specific tasks and in encouraging to proceed in learning activities in an increasingly autonomy.

In the end of the course, in addition to developing new communicational skills, as well as the ability to use participatory methods and to design and manage a project, the participants developed their awareness of:

- the importance of participation of actors in their development

⁷⁹ Two different tools were used for monitoring and evaluation activities: the first was the "diary of the working group (the class)" which, as the name implies, was a kind of track of activities, stimuli and achievements. For its drawing-up at a time for discussion and sharing of the elements that emerged during the work was devoted at the end of each class section. The diary contained a summary of the activities having in mind the idea to to analyse the path of the course, the elements of continuity between lessons, incentives and ideas to explore new issues, the operational proposals for the continuation of activities. In addition, a survey of user satisfaction was carried out, both through the use of questionnaires and through direct discussion. All the information collected were integrate by the direct observation of the researchers.

- the exchange of experiences to generate new knowledge
- the need to put in communication different types of knowledge, from different disciplines and different actors, through building bridge between researchers, advisors, farmers and other stakeholders, recognizing full dignity to knowledge based on experience
- the fact that an effective advisory requires social and communicational skills for interfacing, animating, creating relationship, analysing the context, listening to the actors, and so on
- the involvement of stakeholders in the design, using a bottom-up approach, leads to implementation projects that respond more effectively to the real needs
- the observation of a problem cannot be separated from putting in relation the opinions, ideas and experiences of all involved in its definition and solution.

Despite the positive experience, the course was not rescheduled by Tuscany Region because it was considered too detached from the context of that time.

The evolutionary path of a participant

Assisting the teacher in performing facilitating functions

After the training period, researchers and trainees interrupted their relationships, except for one participant who had the opportunity, not prearranged, to implement her own achievements cooperating with the teacher in the realization of a project of “creative communication” with farmers, funded under measure 3.3 of the EU Reg. 1257/99 and carried out in 2006.

The project arose from the need to design a new development model by providing tools for intervention and assistance aligned with the strong heterogeneity that characterized the productive agriculture in the park area of ‘Cinque Terre’ in the Liguria region. With the arrangement of this participatory project the two tried to start from the real problems of farmers to undertake development paths directed towards a more homogeneous model of entrepreneurship, while drawing a new form of extension and advisory for farmers not strictly technical and individual, but aimed at developing more effectively the ability of interrelation, dialogue and collective learning, according to a problem finding and solving approach. Farmers who participated in the project were facilitated in setting up, according to their needs and interests, a self-organized path of learning and empowering around certain issues, recombining their knowledge and / or by producing a new one (Proietti, 2006).

The farmers themselves identified the object of the study, designed their own training path, produced and reproduced knowledge, with the help of some experts, but especially through the joined production of ideas. These processes, which required reciprocity and cooperation of all the farmers involved, led to the identification of strengths and weaknesses of each farm and, consequently, to the strengthening of individual positions.

The project was designed using a combination of different participatory methods with the aim of creating both opportunities for exchange and horizontal dialogue between farmers, and to activate a process of benchmarking and simultaneous transfer of knowledge through farm visits in which the host farmer taught to the others by showing techniques, processes and services he/she used.

Through this experience, the advisor had the opportunity to see her “teacher” acting as a facilitator, to set up a working group with farmers and to cooperate in its facilitation. For this person it was very instructive to assist her mentor in this task, exchanging impressions and opinions, putting into practice lessons learned, as well as to comprehend the potentiality of the used approaches. In this phase, the advisor had the opportunity to learn how to use tools that have the common goal to empower the capacity and skills of each individual, through creating a non competitive

and dynamic learning environment, highly responsible and cooperative, able to mitigate the anxiety generated by the unknown and the resistance to changes by the individuals, and to produce, as a consequence, cognitive processes of higher-order.

Certainly, this second formative experience was crucial for the evolution of the professional profile of this advisor, compared with her colleagues. In fact, it allowed her to develop more communicational and social skills as well as a strong interest in designing projects and promote relationships between farmers, in addition to instill courage and self-confidence.

Standing on her own feet

Once these experiences were concluded, the advisor returned to do her former job. Giving technical assistance to small organic farms in Lunigiana, a disadvantaged territory of the Tuscany region, she perceived the existence of three main problems: the difficulty in carrying out the production process (due to the problematic finding and the high price of inputs), the lack of marketing opportunities in conventional channels and a poor technical support for organic farming. As a consequence, in 2008 she started to network with organic farmers known throughout the professional experience as advisor as well as with new ones, in view of generating their interest in participating in a common project. The use of participatory methods (eg. exchange of experiences, farm visits, etc.) to promote relationships between them allowed to start a first learning process within the core of this farmers' network, which was composed of small farms located in disadvantaged areas. As a result, farmers developed an individual pro-active attitude as well as a common awareness of cooperating to face difficulties.

The need to look for more marketing opportunities, induced the broker-advisor to strive in order to favor the entry into contact of the farmers' network with three GAS (solidarity purchasing groups) standing on the same territory. This new partnership allowed farmers to establish a direct relationship with critical consumers, in addition to the opportunity to enter into the main farmers' markets in the area. For both parties, this relationship was a stimulus to promote deep internal changes aimed at acquiring new knowledge and skills, reorganizing routines, redefining identities and responsibilities, in order to produce a significant change in production-consumption practices. This experience further contributed to enhance farmers' self-esteem, encourage self-organization and cooperation, strengthen the dimension of collective action, in addition to increase their external visibility, both to consumers and to the local institutions.

At a later stage, the establishment of new relationships led to a further enhancement of the network, both in terms of management and values. The result was, in 2009, the institutionalization of social capital in an association (composed of the group of farmers, the GAS and other organizations) but also in a cooperative (composed of some farms, cooperatives and other firms). The network, named Crisoperla, gained a wider capacity of collective actions, establishing local relations with other organizations from civil society, local governments, educational institutions, but also interacting with a wider territorial level, dialoguing with the regional government or connecting and exchanging experiences with other networks both at national and European level (eg. IFOAM within the EIP network or French Amap). This led, among the others, to a recognition of the role of organic farming and solidarity economy as a tool for the development of marginal areas, and recognition of the socio-economic and environmental value of a local product (Favilli et al., 2013).

On the other hand, the growth of the multi-actorial network corresponds to a directly proportional weakening of the brokerage role played by our advisor.

At the beginning of this experience, that is still going on, the role she played as mediator and facilitator was significantly perceived by farmers that agreed to recognize her a remuneration.

When the initial project and the money ended, the broker-advisor tried to explain to farmers that the tasks she continued to perform, coordinating the group and communicating with the outside world, had to be compensated (maybe indirectly, through technical assistance funded under Measure 114 of RDP), but they did not want to accept. Anyway, she continued to work within the group for the love of it, without any reimbursement. Fortunately, she had other activities as advisor and she was able to play facilitating functions within the Crisoperla group as voluntary work.

As the network grew and new actors came in, the recognizing of brokering function became more and more difficult (every time, a new process of creating trust should have to start), although it was increasingly needed (the more the group was bigger, the more an organized brokering function, as it was in the beginning, was needed). In addition, among the newcomers some strong personalities emerged, taking on a leader position and weakening, as a consequence, the role of the facilitator. At the same time, disputes became to arise among actors, so much to require the acquisition by the broker of skills on consensus method and management of conflicts.

These dynamics have had a direct repercussion in terms of management and organization (internal and external communication, division of roles) of the network, as well as of effectiveness of its learning approach.

Final consideration: towards which model of innovation broker?

The paper shows a training course that had to trigger a double transition: from conventional to multifunctional farming and from linear innovation to network-based innovation.

To this aim, the course was based on a model of active construction of knowledge and on a trans-disciplinary approach, both regarding topics, methods and lecturers.

Indeed, the training course was in itself a network building process. Trainees had to mobilize their contacts to build a network. It is interesting that they already had a network but they were not aware of the potential of participatory approaches, nor they had a self-acknowledgment of their own role into a possible innovation process (Cristiano and Proietti, 2014).

The course adopted “involving” methodologies that were able to develop the active participation of those to whom it was addressed, by stimulating them with the appropriate "techniques", "classroom games", simulations, practical exercises, discussion and various types of working groups. The case study shows that the direct involvement of the students in actually experienced problems in order to manage them, was very helpful to overcome their real difficulties in developing the right attitude towards new concepts as well as to empower themselves. Moreover, the case study highlights the need to sustain the learners in their following activities of putting knowledge into practice. Having the opportunity to see an expert doing facilitating functions is helpful for the trainees, who can deal with a new role under the tutor guidance and internalize new skills progressively.

The course, in addition to tracing a possible training path for facilitators, can also be seen as a driver of institutional innovation, as new methods and approaches have challenged the existing organizational rules of traditional Agricultural Knowledge System (AKS).

Moreover, trained advisors could be agents of change not only among farmers' networks but also within their organizations.

However, the evidences from the case study suggest that the repositioning of advisors in a new role of learning processes facilitators is not free from difficulties.

In this specific case, the AKS organizations to which trainees belonged were not ready to accept the change. The story shows that, in order to be able to deploy innovation broker skills, the technician had to work outside the traditional AKS, making her personal situation less easy.

More hierarchical AKS organization would represent a barrier to innovation. To be able to foster innovation processes, policies should be able to create internal dynamics within AKS or alternatively project-based funding outside the traditional AKS should be launched.

The paper also shows that the role of independent broker can be played by single advisors, being able to deal either with farmers wishing to implement farm innovation or with multi-actors networks necessitating radical innovations.

This role calls for a set of both natural abilities and operational skills, as the evolutionary path outlined in this paper allows to highlight:

- knowledge in the specific field, so as to be able to immediately recognize what the farmers' needs are;
- empathy with actors, that is essentially the capacity to respond with an appropriate emotion to the mental states of somebody else; to a certain extent this is an innate quality, but it can be also the result of the experience in the field, as well as of the skills acquired through communication techniques;
- communication skills for interfacing with different actors, generating interest in participation, animating groups, etc.;
- social skills and capacity to use participatory approach in order to facilitate cooperation among different stakeholders, foster a cooperative learning, negotiate and manage conflicts;
- embedment in the territory, so as to allow the immediate comprehension of problems and to have good connections and relationships with different actors;
- open mind: all the previous elements acquire meaning through the capacity to think 'out-of-the-box'.

On the other hand, implication in terms of organization structures, cultures and incentive mechanisms arise (Klerkx et al., 2009). The case study reveals that some critical elements related to the process of managing heterogeneous networks emerge, especially when these latter increase their size, in number, space and time:

- difficulty to make the stakeholders aware of the services provided by the broker and, as a consequence, to make the activity profitable;
- lack of confidence by new entrants, rise of strong personalities that assume the role of leader mistrusting the role of the facilitator, conflicts and so on;
- need of support of wider knowledge networks in order to have access to a lot of information and to be able to find the right actors for specific partnerships.

The independent broker creates custom projects entirely on the basis of a needs assessment, has no conflicts of interest and acts exclusively in the interests of the network.

However in complex multi-actor networks the independent broker should not be left alone: the support of ad-hoc policies, the accessibility to wider knowledge networks, and appropriate incentive schemes, could also play a fundamental role in fostering demand-driven innovation processes and institutional changes.

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