

Financial governance: accounting for social learning in a regional network in Africa

Beverly Wenger-Trayner

Introduction

In my experience members and conveners of communities of practice often struggle to show the value created by their community. A common scenario in the field of international development is one of community members who are enthusiastic about sharing and creating knowledge in interactive ways; funders who are asking for data, such as numbers of participants, documents created, or downloads; and evaluators who report that while there is a lot of activity and assumed value, there is scant evidence of impact. Many funding contracts include a framework of indicators, often called a logframe. It is meant to guide the collection of data by evaluators or a Secretariat, but is rarely seen as an integral part of the learning agenda of the community.

In this paper, I describe how a value-creation framework that was developed for social learning in networks and communities of practice (Wenger, Trayner, deLaat 2011) was used to articulate the value of a regional “learning network” of members of parliament in Africaⁱ.

The development literature includes numerous comprehensive frameworks for evaluation of development projects (BetterEvaluation 2017). There is also a trend to see the whole process as “monitoring, evaluation, and learning” (commonly known as MEL). In line with this trend, the framework I describe here was used primarily to support the learning of the network and secondarily as an evaluation tool.

I start the paper with the background of the project and describe how our value-creation framework, referenced above, was introduced as a learning device before becoming a central evaluation tool. I also show how the framework itself developed significantly in response to the emerging circumstances of the projectⁱⁱ. I will present the framework progressively, introducing its various components as they became part of the project. Then in the discussion section, I explore further the nature of the framework: its data requirements, some challenges in its use, its underlying assumptions, and the model of social learning it embodies.

I hope that a specific example helps bring the framework to life and reveals some of the messiness of using the model. Frameworks tend to be written about as something clean and precise if properly implemented, but the truth of social interventions is that tools and methods evolve as you adapt and use them in new ways, as opportunities emerge, and as challenges arise. While I do not want to let the complexity of a project cloud a clear understanding of the framework, neither do I want the complexity to disappear. I use the story of the project to discuss the evolution of the framework and then reflect on its use as a way of doing justice to this tension.

A learning network across Southern and Eastern Africa

Public Accounts Committees (PACs) are parliamentary committees through which members of parliaments oversee the use of public funds by the executive. Based on reports from the Auditor General, they conduct hearings in which they question ministers. In Southern Africa, the members of these committees and their clerks from different countries had formed a well-organized regional network. Their peers in Eastern Africa were aspiring to do the same. The Southern African network held annual conferences. These tended to be formal events consisting in a stream of lengthy presentations given by invited speakers and preceded by the pomp and circumstance of speeches from local dignitaries and honored guests. Network members paid dues to support a Secretariat based in the Supreme Audit Institution of Tanzania. The network had developed a best practice guide for PACs in the region. The loose network in Eastern Africa did not have regular meetings or a Secretariat, but members realized the benefits of becoming more intentional about their sporadic activities.

The PAC project I was involved with was sponsored by the World Bank and GIZ (formerly InWEnt) in partnership with the leaders of the two networks. Its goal was to bring these two networks together into a genuine *learning network* with the aim of learning to get better at financial oversight of government ministers. It was an invitation to PAC members and their clerks to learn from and with each other across the two regions, to help induct new members of these committees to good practices, and to invite relevant stakeholders or other guests who could inspire or talk to the practice of Public Accounts Committees in these two regions of Africa. Over the four years of the project (2010 – 2014), regular meetings took place in different member countries and a separate clerk community was formed. Attendance at some annual meetings reached up to one hundred people.

Learning activities and learning loops

I was brought in at the time of the second network meeting as a learning consultant. My role was to develop a new learning strategy based on a community of practice approach, make events more interactive, help with facilitation, and coach the Secretariat in this approach. Visiting experts still sometimes contributed to meetings and to specific training events, when members felt they needed additional support about an issue, e.g., procurement. But these more formal sessions were no longer the main attraction. New learning activities included case clinics for members who wanted help with specific problems, role plays, peer reviews, comparisons of different national approaches to specific issues, and showcase sessions from member countries leading the field, for example, in value-for-money audits.

Around that time, we were writing our first paper on our value-creation framework (Wenger et al. 2011). Using the framework in this project was an evolving process. It was not part of the initial project thinking, but when it became part of the project, the project became a driver in the development of the framework. One of the most important developments that arose from the project was that of *learning loops*.

A typical assumption by members at the beginning of the project was that the learning of the network took place during the meetings. This assumption lies behind most events and conferences – that the value of attending lies in hearing interesting speakers and in going home with information, inspiration, ideas, tips, tools, and contacts. A community of practice, in contrast, is concerned with what people do with those goodies *after* their return home. How did fellow members adapt, adopt, or transform something they took from the meeting as

they put it into practice in their own context? And what was the effect? Did it work? What happened as a result? The value of belonging to a learning network rather than attending a one-off event is that you have ongoing access to stories about what fellow practitioners have tried and how it worked out for them. Even with some turnover of members, the learning partnership has enough continuity for these stories about what worked or didn't work to be brought back to the meetings. Over time, these learning loops help members get smarter about ways to improve their practice.

The development of learning loops in the network grew out of a network activity which involved preparing resolutions and action plans at the end of each meeting. Over time network members grew curious about what others had done in between meetings with respect to these resolutions and we introduced a reporting session. The reporting, however, tended to be perfunctory or an opportunity to make grand political statements. So I used questions from our framework to create a story-telling structure about specific actions taken in response to the resolutions and action plans. With a few exceptions (habits die hard), this new structure made these sessions quite absorbing for members. What was planned as a one-hour feedback session could not be stopped: it stretched over two hours as members who reported back were quizzed on the details of what had happened in different members' contexts. These learning loops as a learning resource have now become central to the framework.

Introducing the genre of value-creation stories

In a later session, I introduced the framework itself to network members so they could make more systematic use of it in telling their stories. Central to our framework is the structure of a value-creation story (see figure 1).

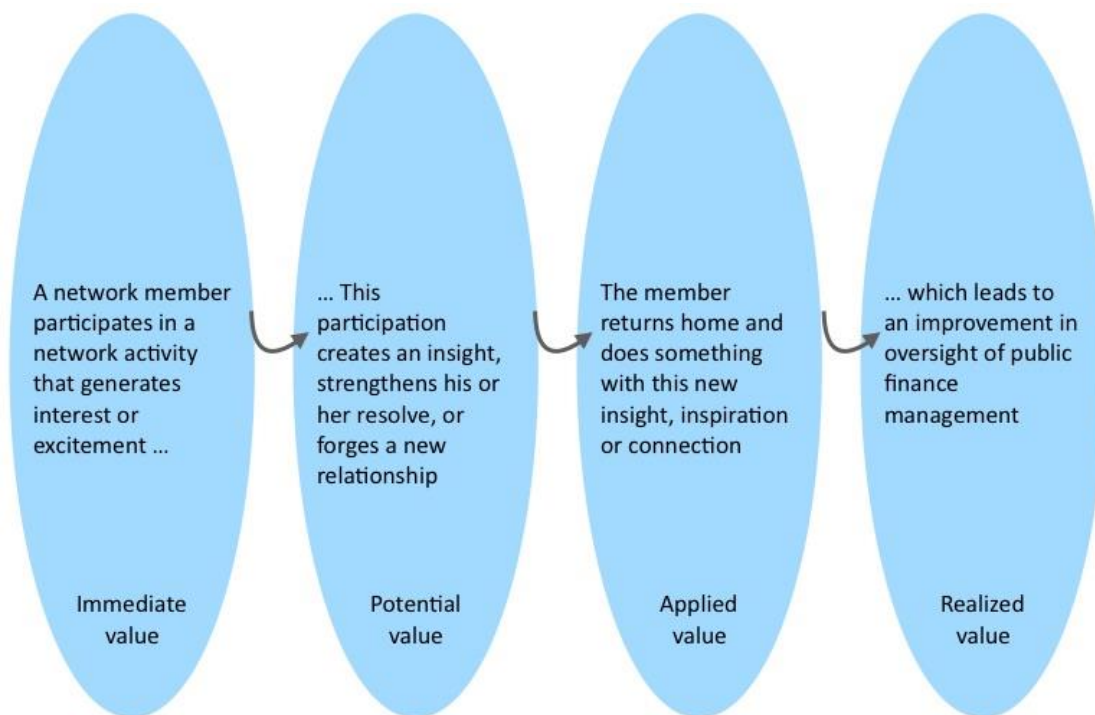


Figure 1. The steps in a basic value-creation story

A simple value-creation story goes through at least these four steps. It starts with the immediate value a member gets from participating in a network activity and ends with the value of an improvement in the oversight of public finance management. A value-creation story articulates the different types of value created by each step in the process. For instance, in the PAC network:

- Network members enjoy engaging in activities such as conferences, peer reviews, workshops, training, and social events with other people who share similar concerns (immediate value)
- They produce insights, resolutions, action plans, new relationships, and resources, which are potentially helpful to them and others in the future (potential value)
- These resolutions, plans, relationship and insights inspire, inform or motivate members to change the way they do things in their work as Public Accounts Committees (applied value)
- And the public is better served by increased accountability in management of public funds (realized value)

I had used this story structure to frame questions in the feedback session, but now I wanted members to learn the genre of value-creation stories explicitly. As I told the members at the time, feeding stories back to fellow-members of the network is important for two main reasons: first, putting a new idea or insight into practice is not simply a matter of faithful application; it is a creative act that often requires small and large social innovations. Secondly, some things “work” when you put them into practice and some things “go wrong”; both instances offer opportunities for learning as long as the information is looped back into the community.

There is another reason for members to become familiar with the genre of a value-creation story. It is a structure that enables them to articulate the effect of the network in their countries: how the value of an activity in their network led to changes in their practice and then, one hopes, to improvements in government oversight. Teaching the genre was a first step toward the goal of systematically collecting stories in the service of demonstrating the value of the project to current and future funders. As this became the formal evaluation approach, the World Bank also brought in a professional evaluator to work with me on story collection. She came to meetings, interviewed members, and followed up over time to see what came of the stories. Below are two examples of value-creation stories told by network members.

Immediate value	Potential value	Applied value	Realized value
I enjoyed the clerk workshop in Kampala (2013) where clerks were able to exchange our experiences	I was interested in the way that some PACs in other countries call independent experts to the PAC hearings	<p>I recommended this to my own PAC Chair and we have adopted the practice ourselves.</p> <p>For example, during the hearing on the audit of the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs the PAC discussed the purchase of office furniture which, according to the documents, included elephant skin ornaments. The Auditor General's report stated that the furniture was less expensive than that claimed by the Ministry and did not include elephant skin.</p> <p>So we brought an international animal hide expert from Egypt who confirmed that the purchased furniture was different from was was claimed and did not include any elephant skin ornaments.</p>	The Ministry was obliged to pay the difference between the actual and claimed cost of the furniture to the consolidated fund.



Nonhlanhla Shabangu
 PAC Clerk, Swaziland

Immediate value	Potential value	Applied value	Realized value
<p>In November 2013, we participated in an interesting SADCOPAC/EAAPAC workshop on “The Role of Parliament in Procurement Oversight” in Nairobi. It was an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with MPs and parliamentary staff from Uganda and Kenya on good practices in public procurement and the relationship between the PAC, Procurement Oversight Authority and Supreme Audit Institutions.</p>	<p>I learned from the other delegations that one of the good practices is to emphasize the role of Supreme Audit Institutions in scrutinizing the procurement process pre-completion in order to identify any funds mismanagement.</p>	<p>When I returned to Tanzania, I received information that the National Electoral Commission had procured election registration equipment, however the procurement rules were not followed. A company which was awarded the tender was the same company that prepared the tender documentation.</p> <p>After receiving that information and supporting evidence, I contacted the Auditor General asking him to intervene referring to the Nairobi training on procurement. I explained examples of good practice which should be followed and insisted he carry out a pre-procurement audit to identify if all the procedures were followed.</p> <p>I also shared the story to the media who reported on the issue putting pressure on the Auditor General Office. Therefore, the AG took action and wrote to the Procurement Authority and National Electoral Commission.</p>	<p>Within one month the tender valued at US 126 million was cancelled and readvertised.</p>




Hon. Zitto Kabwe
 PAC Chair, Tanzania

Figure 2. Two value-creation stories told by members

Transformative value

A few of the stories we collected went beyond the basic structure I have described so far. They referred to transformations that go beyond the practice of members. The story told in figure 3 is a good example.

Immediate	Potential	Applied	Realized	Transformative
I have participated in a number of SADCOPAC activities, implemented by WBI and partners between 2012 and 2014	I was struck by the good practice shared by the Tanzanian PAC in which the PAC proceedings are televised to the public promoting transparency and accountability of government responses.	In 2013, I contacted the main media houses in Zambia in order to arrange live broadcasting of the PAC hearings, which began February 17th, 2014	<p>The live broadcasting resulted in major exposé of blatant abuses of public funds by the government officials at all levels of government. The parliamentary sessions were originally aired to educate and inform the public about the use of public resources arising from revelations in the Auditor General's report. However it alerted the public about the scale of public funds mismanagement.</p> <p>Even though the programme was extremely popular among the public, it was stopped before the series even ended. The excuse given to the public by the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) was that it was a pilot programme.</p>	Interestingly, when the programme was ended there was a significant increase in the number of whistle blowers we started to hear from. The live broadcasting had woken people up to the role of our Committee and what we could do to expose this mismanagement of funds.



Hon. Vincent Mwale,
 PAC Chair, Zambia

Figure 3. A story that leads to transformative value

Hon. Mwale's story illustrates more than the improvement of his practice in holding hearings; something was happening to the culture in which this was taking place. Instead of resigning themselves to corruption, more citizens in Zambia started whistle-blowing to the PAC. The culture surrounding the PAC had changed. Capturing this type of effect in the broader culture called for a fifth value cycle: "transformative value"ⁱⁱⁱ. Not all communities do, or even aspire to, achieve transformative value, so it is not an essential ending of a value-creation

story. But when it happens, transformative value can be a very significant effect of social learning so it is important that it be part of the framework.

Value-creation stories as a strategic resource

At the end of the first phase of the project, which had lasted four years, I was asked to write a report in preparation for a strategic review meeting, which I was to facilitate. By then, we had collected over a hundred stories. They constituted an invaluable resource for this transition to phase 2. I decided to use the framework to structure both the report and the meeting. However, to understand the full picture, it is necessary to contextualize this work in the politics of the project, which made the whole process a lot more problematic than my account so far.

The introduction by funders of new ways of working always brings challenges given the power dynamics at play. In the development world in particular, members have become cautious of using models or frameworks as a condition for funding. Sometimes they use frameworks to comply with the funding requirements and end up finding them useful. More often frameworks just become one more hoop to jump through. In the case of this PAC network, while our approach allowed many members to appropriate the framework as part of the learning process, it also contributed to some tensions. Using the value-creation framework entailed a shift in thinking about learning that was uncomfortable for some. It required a change in skill set for the Secretariat who had developed a good routine for organizing formal meetings: inviting members, preparing protocols and agendas with series of presentations and questions, and sub-contracting training. The value of these traditional meetings for participants mostly included travel, a *per diem*, handouts, stories told over beer at the bar, or connections made during the coffee breaks and dinner. Thinking of learning as creating value for practice introduced a new level of complexity. It certainly seemed easier to continue with traditional meetings and hire a local evaluator to carry out a traditional evaluation that would comply with funding requirements than it was to use a framework that disrupted business as usual. There were also more traditional members whose view of learning was something that happens as a result of training. They wanted conferences to have a strict protocol. Anything else was labeled “Not how we do it in Africa”. This resistance became quite disruptive for younger and more agile members of the community and for the functioning of the network as a whole. It also led to a near breakdown in communication between the Secretariat and the World Bank.

These politics gave rise to some key insights that we had not emphasized in our original introduction of the framework in 2011. Value-creation is not neutral. Different stakeholders have different claims to what counts as value. Articulating and negotiating these different perspectives on value and its production is critical to enabling the learning of a community and to building a robust case for the value of its activities. These insights led to three extensions of the framework that became central to the report and the design of the review meeting.

Aspirations and conditions

The first insight was that the value-creation cycles provide a language for articulating the aspirations of different stakeholders and agreeing (or not) on what matters.

- **Aspirations** can be negotiated for each cycle. Network members and relevant stakeholders work together to come up with shared aspirations and potential indicators of progress. Aspirations at each cycle are specific statements about what community members and stakeholders would like to see happening. For example, an aspiration of immediate value may be to have well-attended, dynamic meetings with representatives from many countries.

When an aspiration is negotiated, it is a good discipline to consider and agree on the condition(s) that need to be in place to reach that aspiration:

- What are the **conditions** necessary for an aspiration to be achieved? What processes and resources need to be in place, and who is responsible for putting these conditions in place? The conditions for the aspirations for immediate value above may be an attractive venue, invitations in advance, and resources to support members who do not have a travel budget.

In the transition between phase one and two of the project, articulating aspirations and conditions for each cycle by different stakeholders made them both transparent and negotiable.

Strategic value

Secondly, the politics of the project suggested a further consideration. While negotiating aspirations and conditions is an important step in planning for the new phase, it is part of a broader learning process. Aspirations and circumstances change, people come and go, new challenges emerge. Learning to have these strategic conversations among stakeholders in response to emerging data is itself a way to create value. Paying attention to the quality of these conversations *over time* produces strategic value, which is key to the effectiveness and sustainability of the network. This was how strategic value was introduced in the report:

- **Strategic value** refers to the clarity of the strategic context in which the network is operating and the ability of the network to engage in strategic conversations about the value it creates with key stakeholders. This is crucial because knowledge and learning are often seen as operational challenges when in fact they are primarily strategic issues and therefore strategic conversations can make or break the learning process.

Strategic value needed to be part of the framework. Facilitating the learning of the network required some explicit reflections on the quality of its strategic conversations.

Enabling value

The politics of the project were getting in the way of the learning of the network in another way. I could see that the Secretariat was starting to put certain conditions in place, mostly to fulfill their requirements from the Bank and GIZ – a more interactive agenda, use of the wiki, certain logistics. There was, however, little reflection on the flow or connections across these conditions, such as how a well-designed agenda (condition for immediate) included enough time for people to meaningfully use the wiki during the meeting (condition for potential) which could be used collaboratively to create better, more actionable resolutions that might be used by members to refer to in their implementation (condition for applied), and that this might contribute towards a more effective public hearing (realized). Thinking through this flow across cycles would help the Secretariat and network leaders become better at fine-

tuning those conditions and get better at generating “enabling value” for the network. This was how I described enabling value in the report:

- **Enabling value** refers to the support processes that make the network’s life possible. It includes internal leadership as well as external support, such as a dynamic support team, logistics, and technology. It is important because it is a sign of sustainable value creation for the network.

Again, enabling value needed to become an explicit part of the framework to ensure that members and stakeholders pay attention to the learning involved in sustaining a community of practice over time.

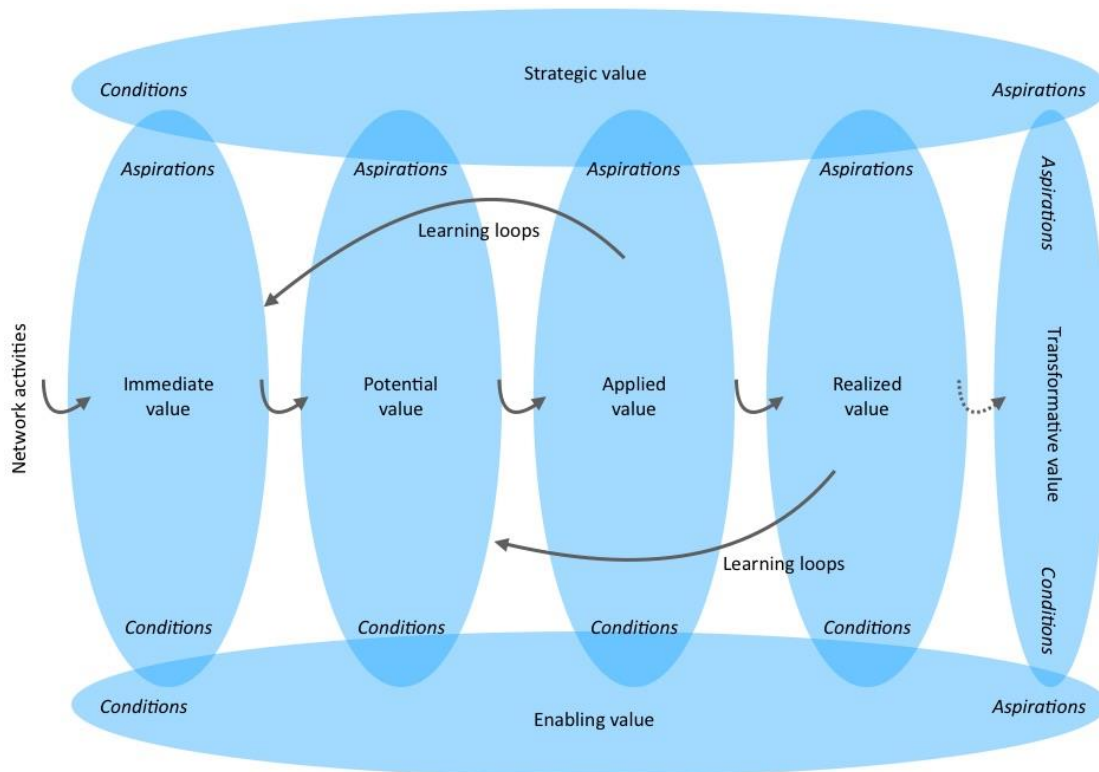


Figure 4. Seven cycles of value creation in the full framework

Using the framework to structure a strategic review

Figure 4 provides a graphical representation of the extended framework. Now that the framework included aspirations and conditions as well as strategic and enabling value, I felt ready to prepare a report that would act as a basis for a constructive meeting about the next phase of a politically charged situation.

While the framework had not been used to shape the initial formulation of the project and its definition of success, I was able to review all the documentation in the original project proposal, including indicators required by the World Bank and GIZ, and to reframe those indicators as aspirations in one of the value cycles of the project. Through indicators that had

been tracked by the evaluators and through additional observations I was able to report on what had been achieved at each cycle.

The project report addressed three questions for each of the seven value-cycles in the framework:

- What did the project aspire to in the initial proposal?
- What was achieved in the intervening four years?
- What could the project aspire to in the next phase, and what were some of the necessary conditions?

The report included tables assessing these three questions for each value cycle. As an example, Appendix 1 shows the table for the cycle of applied value. All the tables for different value cycles can be seen in the appendix of the full report (Wenger-Trayner, 2014). A selection of twenty value-creation stories was included after the tables to show concretely how the network had contributed to what had been achieved.

At the meeting, the analysis of the three questions formed the basis for discussing the next phase of the project. The introduction of aspirations and conditions, and strategic and enabling value cycles in the report proved to be an important contribution to the delicate politics of the strategic review meeting. They provided a language for reflecting on the aspirations and achievements of the network, and the role of the Secretariat and network leaders, in a way that was focused on learning as value-creation. The discussions concentrated on opportunities for creating value, rather than who had or had not done what. The report served as shared background and the framework was used prospectively to create a vision and plan future activities. Big sheets of paper hung on the walls (one for each cycle plus one for learning loops) and filling them with aspirations, indicators, and conditions guided the conversation. In the complicated political context of the project, the framework provided a neutral language for a healthy conversation about its next phase^{iv}. The report had mapped onto the framework the indicators and expectations of different stakeholders in a way that made sense to the members. It is this intuitive appeal that allows the framework to provide a common language and act as a boundary object between members and stakeholders with different perspectives and often different expectations (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2017).

The framework for evaluation: tracking two complementary types of data

Underpinning the value-creation framework are certain assumptions for evaluating complex projects, such as the PAC learning network:

- Monitoring the value of these projects is messy, unpredictable, and imprecise. The most we can hope for is a plausible account of the contribution of the community's activities to changes in the world. It is, however, possible to take a rigorous approach to creating such a plausible account.
- Community members are available to give an account of the value of their participation in the community, how it has contributed to a change in their practice, and its consequent effect on what matters to stakeholders. The value-creation story is an easy-to-learn genre that structures this type of account.

To deal with such complexity, where the control of variables cannot be used to claim causality, the framework combines two types of data (see Wenger-Trayner et al. 2017):

- **Effect data.** Indicators, such as the ones in the table in Appendix 1, provide data at each cycle about the effects of the network. For instance, the PAC project kept track of immediate value via meeting feedback forms, of potential value by collating, counting, and categorizing resolutions, and of applied value via report sessions. For realized value, the evaluator even scoured newspapers in members' respective countries for articles referring to the work of their Public Accounts Committee and what it was achieving.
- **Contribution data.** In complex situations like the PAC project, multiple factors contribute to observable effects. Effect data therefore do not make a sufficient case for the contribution of the network activities to the changes that matter to its stakeholders. This is where value-creation stories make plausible claims for the contribution of the network by following its value as members take it into their practice.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected for indicators of different types of value are more convincing if they are integrated with qualitative data that describes a causal link between community activities, changes in practice, and the difference this makes.

In practice, these two types of data need to be dynamically integrated over the course of a project. A salient indicator suggests that some stories need to be collected. For instance, if there were many resolutions about a specific theme (such as developing good relationships with the Supreme Audit Institution), then collecting some stories about this theme made sense. The number of times a theme arose in the resolutions pointed to the need to collect some stories that were shaped by one of those resolutions. This way the effect data for potential value (number of times a resolution was made about a theme of significance to improving PAC performance) and the contribution data (a value-creation story) reinforced each other. Whenever the project evaluator found a newspaper article on the results of a successful PAC hearing into misuse of public funds, she would follow up with members from that country to see if she could trace the story back to what had been produced at network events. Here again an indicator of realized value pointed to the need for a story to find out the potential contribution of the network. Having stories refer to monitored indicators corroborates them and amplifies their scope by suggesting that a story is not an isolated anecdote.

Similarly, a story can suggest an indicator that may need to be monitored. For example, a story by a clerk referred to an insight he got at a clerk session on report writing – a long report is not necessarily a good report. In fact, the best reports are short, written in straightforward language and actionable. His story tells of how the 110 page reports they submitted (and which few people read) came down to 30 more simplified pages. While we never did use this as an indicator in the project, in retrospect we should have done. This story suggests that an indicator for applied value could have been the change in length of reports submitted by clerks, and perhaps the number of actionable recommendations made in them.

It is the integration of the contribution data (stories) and the effect data (monitored indicators at each cycle) that make a robust case for the value of the learning in the network and the difference it has made to practice.

The practice of story-collection

Collecting good value-creation stories is a challenge. Practitioners are not accustomed to seeing small, specific changes in their practice as part of the learning. Neither do they expect funders to be interested in such details. It takes some probing to get to the right level of specificity. In addition to referring as much as possible to monitored indicators, the most convincing value-creation stories include the following characteristics:

- **A clear protagonist.** A good story is told by the person who experiences the value from the activity into practice. In other words, a story about Vincent's experience told through someone else's voice is not as persuasive as his own experience of value.
- **A specific case.** The more specific the story the more credible it is. A story that refers to a specific insight or conversation that happened at a specific event and changed a specific action – however small – carries more weight than an enthusiastic story about generalities, such as “I attended several network events and got lots of good ideas that have been of great help to me and my committee”.
- **No magic leaps.** Missing a step in the genre weakens the claim that the value travels from the activity to realized value. In addition, each part of the narrative about value must link clearly to the previous and next part. For example “... we understood that our committee should be more proactive in curbing irregularities and the government has now resolved to ...” is missing a step which would show how this new understanding had led to the new government resolve.
- **Convincing to someone who knows the context.** A story that sounds convincing to an outsider is not necessarily convincing to someone else in the same context. Maybe the story-teller was exaggerating or some additional information is necessary. For instance, if someone with knowledge of the context said, “I'm not convinced that Hannah would have been able to do that with the kind of government regulations we have in our country...”, it would warrant some follow-up questions to find out more.

In the project, it was rare to get a good story in the first telling. There is usually a time delay between getting something from a community activity (e.g., a specific insight), putting it into practice, and observing the effect. This means that stories need to be followed up. How long do you wait before following up? Not so soon that nothing has happened, but not so long that people forget the sequence of events. Someone had to take notes or record members as they told stories and then follow up individually to fill the gaps, get more detail, or find out what had transpired. On a practical level, we kept partial stories in an Excel sheet, with the value-creation cycles represented by different columns. This made it easier to follow up a story with a member because you could point to the missing sections of their story on the excel sheet. As members became more familiar with the framework and the cycles, this proved to be a useful prompt to get them to fill in the gaps of their story. Of the more than one hundred stories we collected, sixty were published, in different stages of completeness, on the network's wiki with an invitation for members to edit the stories and add to them if anything further had happened (PAC Network stories 2017). Many of these stories did not fulfill all the criteria of a good story, but it was important to have representative stories from the different member countries. Of those sixty, only twenty were considered good enough to be included in the final report.

There is also a challenge in handling a lot of relevant data and of reporting it. The evaluator in the PAC network was expert in manipulating all the data in Excel to represent it in

different categories and for different stakeholders. She turned these into charts and tables for a separate report on the indicators, which were used to help inform the collection of stories. The Excel file with stories was a large file and quite clumsy to visualize on a normal computer screen. The best stories were extracted for the report with a photo and title of the person who told them. This worked well at the strategic meeting to bring the stories to life and learning to the table. But what if the project had collected one hundred good stories? How could they be presented in a synthesized manner without losing their richness? Alternatively, how would one select a few to present? Questions like these arise when a project consistently collects value-creation stories.

The effort required to collect good stories calls for a moment of reflection. Is it worth it? There are several reasons why it is. From a manager's or sponsor's perspective it takes few stories to bring the activities and value of those activities to life, provided the stories make a plausible case that the network activities have led to producing an indicator of value that is important to the sponsor (such as reduced costs, improved service to the public). From a learning perspective, the art of telling a good value-creation story is a key component of social learning. While some learning theories emphasize memory or implementation with fidelity as essential components of learning, the emphasis in social learning is the flow of value across the cycles and looping the information back. In addition, learning to articulate good stories becomes easier over time and has a multiplier effect once members have experienced how it accelerates the learning process.

Designing and facilitating for learning loops

The addition of learning loops to the framework has implications for facilitators, whose role now extends to becoming experts in designing and creating learning loops across community events. It is these loops that will help develop agile communities, able to learn on the go from successes and failures, and better prepared for taking advantage of the unpredictable. A facilitator's skill in designing activities and creating the conditions for loops becomes a key part of their repertoire for facilitating that learning. For example, building time in the agenda for participants to listen to each other's stories about what they took from a previous meeting, the details of how they put it into practice and with what results, is a fundamental part of the learning process. The kinds of skills and artistry a facilitator working with learning loops needs to develop include:

- **Imagination** in the design of activities for eliciting stories, in thinking of ways to record the stories (or not), and in effectively integrating different technologies in the process.
- **Trust-building** to ensure that members feel secure enough to tell stories that detail the messy business of practice, where things sometimes work and sometimes don't. Building trust includes having a good sense of who to invite into the community so that the stories of practice are relevant to the people who are there.
- **Legitimacy** or support from someone with the legitimacy to probe stories for more information or clearer causal links.
- **Systematic approach** to integrate learning loops into a community's routines.
- **Politicking** to align this approach with the learning theory that members and their sponsors may have so that it does not become an exercise in reporting, nor a time-filler competing with the "real" learning from a presentation by an expert or someone who "knows".

A model of social learning

The framework has proved quite versatile. It is a method for translating people's experience into data by framing accounts of how value has traveled from community activities and into the world. It is applicable for any intervention whose success depends on people recognizing and acting on its value. It can be used lightly or more intensively depending on the context, resources, and requirements. Some communities simply use it to collect effective stories for learning and for increasing the value of their activities. Others use it for planning as well as monitoring the value created by the learning of their community. Professional evaluators also use it for official project evaluation, either by itself or in conjunction with other evaluation methods.

At the same time, there is a growing consensus in the field of development that learning is an important aspect of monitoring and evaluation, but the question of *what learning is* remains largely unexamined. Our value-creation framework works well as an evaluation tool for social learning projects like the PAC network precisely because it is a model of social learning:

- It does not assume that the environment is stable, but rather that it is complex and unpredictable
- It does not present learning as a uni-directional transmission model but as a collective process of improving practice
- It does not stop at potential value, as many models do, i.e., it does not assume that learning has happened because you have acquired the knowledge, and the rest is unproblematic application
- Moving into practice produces applied value because adapting an idea or method to a context is problematic and creative
- Social learning is a flow of value across value-creation cycles in iterative loops that focus on making a difference

Looping back data about what is creating value— or not - on an ongoing basis is a way to provide inspiration and to make more informed decisions about how to proceed. The framework can be used for evaluating the activities of a community or network; it is also used for planning and visualizing a community's activities and their impact. In its DNA, however, it is an operationalization of a learning theory that views learning as an iterative flow of value-creation from community activities to ways in which those activities make a difference in the world.

The question of learning to make a difference is of particular significance to me. I have a long history of theorizing and supporting learning in communities of practice and networks for development. Learning is not just a mental process, it is about how we become who we are as social beings. It is the ongoing changes in our identity and experience of meaningfulness in what we do (or not). Learning to make a difference has the potential to transform individuals, communities, and societies. Today's challenges are complex and things are changing fast. We need models that help us accelerate learning so that we can keep up and stay ahead, collectively as well as individually. I believe, now more than ever, that we should be developing our social learning capabilities to take on these challenges.

References

Better Evaluation: description and supporting resources for different frameworks
<http://www.betterevaluation.org>. Accessed April 2017.

PAC Network. Value creation stories: <http://sadcopac.pac-networks.org/Value+creation+stories>. Accessed April 2017.

Wenger, E., Trayner, B., & deLaat, M. (2011). Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks. Rapport 18. Heerlen: Open University of the Netherlands, Ruud de Moor Centrum.

Wenger-Trayner, B. (2014) Learning partnerships in the program for capacity building to strengthen good financial governance in Southern and Eastern Africa. Available at <http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/14-11-21-WB-report-SADCOPAC-EAAPAC.pdf>. Also available at <http://sadcopac.pac-networks.org/file/view/14-11-21+WB+report+SADCOPAC+EAAPAC.pdf>. Accessed July 2017.

Wenger-Trayner, B., Wenger-Trayner, E., Eryigit-Madzwamuse, S., Cameron, J., and Hart, A. (2017) Boundaries and boundary objects: an evaluation framework for mixed methods research. Accepted for publication by the Journal of Mixed-Methods Research.

Abstract

The value created by learning in communities of practice or networks is not always easy to articulate in ways that make sense to participants, sponsors, and stakeholders. Yet it is something that needs to be done, not only for monitoring and evaluation, but also for optimizing the learning of the community. To this end, with two colleagues, we developed a framework for promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks (Wenger, Trayner, deLaat, 2011). The framework helped communities structure convincing accounts of the value of social learning by following value creation from their activities and across four cycles of value that culminated in a relevant change in the world. The framework integrated quantitative and qualitative data and since its publication it has been used by professional evaluators as well as community and network members. In this paper I demonstrate the use of the framework in a project supported by the World Bank in Southern and Eastern Africa where it was used both for evaluation and for strategic renewal of a regional network of members of parliament and their clerks. I also discuss how the framework, in turn, developed in response to the needs of the project.

About the author

Beverly Wenger-Trayner is a social learning theorist and consultant to organizations developing social learning through communities of practice, peer-to-peer learning, or networks. She is known for her work designing learning architectures and facilitating communities of practice in international contexts, including cross-boundary processes and the use of new technologies. Her ambition is to develop and publish theoretical and practical resources to address the complex learning challenges facing public and private organizations today.

Beverly Wenger-Trayner, 426 West Main St., Grass Valley, CA95945, U.S.A. E-mail: bev@wenger-trayner.com

ⁱ This paper is a developed version of a report I prepared for The World Bank about the PAC learning network (Wenger-Trayner, 2014)

ⁱⁱ This is a theory development process that is a form of action research, where theoretical insights are generated from what happens in practice

ⁱⁱⁱ In the original framework we had a fifth cycle called “Reframing value”. This was closer to what we now call a learning loop, so it has been replaced by Transformative value.

^{iv} Even though the meeting ended on a very positive note with a vision that excited different project partners, the project did not continue for a series of other reasons. This reinforced for me the importance of developing strategic value in projects such as these.