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### The normative practitioner

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Learning our way out

In Uganda, the promise of lifelong learning is yet to be fulfilled for many. Looking at educational research in Uganda, structural inequalities and mismatches are evident, showing that especially girls and people from rural areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds remain excluded from meaningful lifelong learning opportunities. There is a persistent bias towards university education and white-collar jobs, steering many away from other educational pathways such as vocational education and training (Blaak, Openjuru, & Zeelen, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016; Zeelen, Van der Linden, Nampota, & Ngabirano, 2010). This broken promise denies a majority of people from accessing and creating opportunities for livelihood development, meaningful civic participation and pursuing other life projects. Authors have associated these gaps with the effects of colonialism, neoliberal underpinnings of educational policies and funding mechanisms, as well as the youth bulge that is constraining the education system (Asiimwe, 2018; National Population Council, 2017; Tukundane, 2014; Tukundane & Blaak, 2010; Tumuheki, 2017). Organisations facilitating lifelong learning interventions are confronted with a complex task in a resource-constrained context where learning needs are vast, diverse and emergent, and there exists a tension between the different rationales for education (McGrath, 2018; Van der Linden, 2016). It is against this background that contemporary development approaches emphasise the need to be adaptive, responsive and flexible in order to solve the complex problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Chambers, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013, 2014; Ramalingam, Laric, & Primrose, 2014). This adaptive development perspective points to the organisational lens as a promising angle towards improving lifelong learning and other development interventions. In this light, organisations are urged to find the 'best fit' rather than 'best practice', putting them to task to fine-tune and tailor solutions to local contexts and emerging developments (Ramalingam et al., 2014). Thus, to overcome barriers hindering large groups of Ugandans from accessing lifelong learning opportunities, organisations must generate knowledge about the complex realities, test innovations and tailor

activities to local conditions – and do so continuously and critically of underlying (power) structures.

The assumption that organisations should actively generate knowledge and respond to a changing environment is not new, it was a major argument contributing to the popularity of the concepts of the learning organisation and organisational learning popular in the 1990s (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2012). Despite its popularity, the idea of the learning organisation does not seem to have fulfilled its promise in the corporate sector, nor in the development sector (Edwards, 1997; Pedler & Hsu, 2019). Trends that have inhibited learning in other sectors have also affected development organisations. Research suggests that NGOs tend to act risk-averse due to competitive funding mechanisms that promote short-term targets and limited overheads (Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). Rather than a transformational force, organisational learning has become a tool for accountability, putting local knowledge at the periphery and reinforcing blind spots as critical insights about the complexity of development do not 'travel up' (Chambers, 2010; Ebrahim, 2005; Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). Therefore, if organisational learning is to become a means towards meaningful lifelong learning interventions, we must explore the paradigms underlying organisational learning practices critically to ensure they do not make organisations better at doing the wrong thing. To make a contribution to opening and improving lifelong learning interventions in Uganda, this research uses an organisational learning lens to explore how education NGOs could contextualise their interventions in a responsive and adaptive, yet critical manner. In particular, the potential of double-loop learning is explored as a critical learning project (Argyris, 1999; Bokeno, 2003). This concept was introduced by Argyris (1982) to differentiate whether organisational learning is more or less transformative. He stated that single-loop learning results in changes to action strategies and double-loop learning leads to change in underlying beliefs, assumptions or goals (Argyris, 1982, 1999, 2002, 2010). This research is further embedded in a critical analysis of the epistemology of practice shaping the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. Field theory is utilised as a theoretical framework to examine the relational nature of social reality and the connection between agency and structure (Friedman, 2011; Friedman & Sykes, 2014; Lapidot-Lefler et al., 2015).

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR), I collaborated with several education NGOs based in Uganda to investigate their organisational learning practices. Our focus

was on how they could open up the space for adaptive programme delivery involving community actors. Specific objectives were:

- Analyse internal and external factors and actors shaping organisational learning in Ugandan education NGOs
- Contribute to a contextual theory on double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda
- Identify and test possible solutions to promote organisational learning in Ugandan education NGOs
- Facilitate a community of inquiry through a Participatory Action Research approach

The research questions were formulated collaboratively based on a participatory diagnosis of organisational learning issues in these organisations. In the first stage of this PAR, members critiqued their own learning practice for not being fully critical, it did not allow them to establish the actual needs and levers for change benefiting their learners and communities. Participants further problematised that those learning spaces occurring in the border area, where the NGO meets the target communities, do not always lead to authentic interaction as they noted several power dynamics and socially desirable narratives as well as limitations within their organisations to enact new insights. The main research question was formulated as: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors towards meaningful lifelong learning<sup>1</sup> for development interventions? Sub-questions were:

- a) Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently applied in education NGOs in Uganda?
- b) What are enabling and limiting factors for double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda?
- c) Who are the community actors involved and affected by the work of education NGOs?

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<sup>1</sup> In the co-creation session, the use of lifelong learning vis a vis non-formal education was debated. I originally took up 'non-formal education' but later rephrased this closer to the participants' preference for 'lifelong learning' in this thesis.

#### 4 The Normative Practitioner

- d) What spaces are currently created for double-loop learning involving community actors and how does this influence lifelong learning programmes?
- e) How can education NGOs in Uganda widen the space for double-loop learning to increase the relevance of lifelong learning programmes?

Three main assumptions underlie the work presented in this thesis:

- a) Lifelong learning interventions need to be flexible and tailored to their complex realities.
- b) Organisational learning has the potential to help NGOs design and deliver relevant lifelong learning initiatives in a contextualised manner.
- c) The practice and actions of NGO practitioners, and thus how they learn, is influenced by micro, meso and macro level dynamics (across time and place), largely dependent on the field of international development cooperation.

As such, this research can be positioned at the intersection between the fields of lifelong learning for human development, international development cooperation and organisational learning. Chapter 2 presents a more detailed portrait of the field of lifelong learning for development at this intersection and what this requires of organisational learning practices.

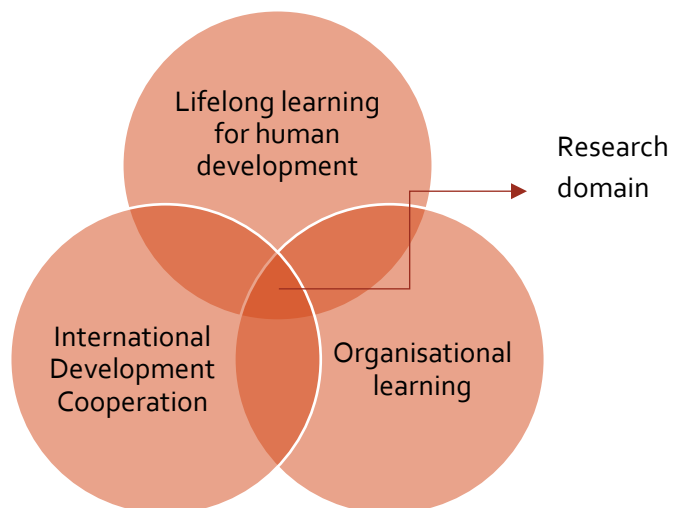


Figure 1 Positioning the research domain

## 1.2 Research approach

The phenomenon being studied - organisational learning - is a social and political process. Therefore, PAR was chosen to ensure epistemological consistency with the research topic. It offered an approach to develop a practical form of knowledge that does not only help solve problems but also identifies what is 'good' in a given situation (*phronesis*) (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Eikeland, 2008). In PAR, those affected by the problem engage in cycles of action and reflection to investigate their realities and create more sustainable, just and productive futures (Boog, Preece, Slagter, & Zeelen, 2008; Boog, Slagter, Jacobs-Moonen, & Meijering, 2005; McTaggart, Nixon, & Kemmis, 2017). Especially critical forms of PAR can help people investigate problematic power dynamics and oppressive practices, for example, Carr and Kemmis (2005) suggest that: "critical rationality [...] still offers a way for people to think themselves out of their presuppositions, taken-for-granted assumptions, habits of mind and existing expectations about how the world is and should be ordered." (p. 354). In this sense, PAR corresponds with the aspirations of double-loop learning: making explicit the implicit and reframing our perception of reality to enable more just and effective practices.

The overall PAR process consisted of five stages (see table 1). First, the orientation stage engaged NGO practitioners in informal conversations and dialogue to open the communicative space and establish an issue of legitimate concern. This resulted in the idea to run a multiple-case study to investigate current organisational learning practices which was executed in stage 2. Of the many challenges uncovered, participants felt a study on double-loop learning could lead to a better alignment of their education programming to the needs of their learners<sup>2</sup>. To facilitate a deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations, we identified one of the seven NGOs that were profiled in the diagnosis stage as a rich case study. Stages 3 to 5 were executed with this NGO, of which members became co-researchers in the process. After an orientation stage, a programme team was selected for a series of PAR cycles. This process was co-

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I refer to the participants of lifelong learning interventions as 'learners', those participating in organisational learning will not be referred to as 'learners' but 'practitioners' or 'organisational members'.

designed during monthly PAR meetings, in which we set goals and inquiry questions, chose methodology, discussed findings, and brainstormed innovations. The research was closed in 2019 with team and management workshops.

Table 1 The research stages

<b>Phase</b>	<b>1. Orientation</b>	<b>2. Problem diagnosis</b>	<b>3. Case study entry</b>	<b>4. Learning and innovation tracks</b>	<b>5. Closing</b>
<b>Time period</b>	<b>April-December 2015</b>	<b>January-September 2016</b>	<b>October 2016 - September 2017</b>	<b>October 2017-December 2018</b>	<b>January – May 2019</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Investigate practitioners' perceptions of meaningful organisational learning and broker connections towards a community of practice.	Identifying examples of and barriers to meaningful organisational learning, identify research direction.	Map organisational field and opportunities for mutual learning.	Deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations.	Synthesise and disseminate findings.

### 1.3 Outline of the thesis

The thesis consists of a combination of chapters, (published) papers and intermezzos. This introduction framed the overall research and positioned it at the intersection of lifelong learning, development cooperation and human development. Chapter 2, a theoretical chapter, portrays the lifelong learning for development sector as a technically and normatively complex field and explores which epistemology of practice would be fitting to guide organisations and practitioners in navigating this field. Rooted in these epistemological premises, the theory and practice of organisational learning in development organisations are discussed as well as the gaps therein and the conceptual frameworks that guided our investigation. In particular, field theory is proposed as a framework to resolve blind spots in the mainstream organisational learning literature. Chapter 3 presents the methodology; it details the research stages and methods and

illustrates how adopting field theoretical lenses to study double-loop learning introduced layers-of-depth and layers-of-width to this PAR. These layers added a phronetic angle to this research – leading not only to the identification of practical solutions, but also a critical understanding of the value- and power-laden context of lifelong learning for development and how underlying structures shape agency in education NGOs. Intermezzo 1 presents an account of the lead co-researcher from the case study NGO, detailing her experiences during this collaborative research process.

The next four chapters and intermezzos present the findings of the research. Chapter 4 presents a mapping of organisational learning practices in seven education NGOs in Uganda. The findings illustrate the broad variety of organisational learning mechanisms and present the voices of NGO practitioners regarding the influence of organisational culture, leadership, policy and structure. Intermezzo 2 presents a map of the actor ecosystem surrounding the case study NGO and a self-assessment of their collective learning activities that engage these actors. Chapter 5, written as a journal article, illustrates a move from the internal perspective to the external. It presents experiences and findings of a participatory study of community perceptions of NGOs and their collective learning efforts. A detailed account of the interaction between community members, NGOs and local government is presented in the light of field theory to illustrate the role of positionality, power and emergence. Intermezzo 3 is written by a volunteer of the case study programme, describing the tricky position he was in ‘on the edges’ of partners – creating a sense of feeling stuck between the community actors and the organisation. Chapter 6, also written as a journal article, illustrates how the double-loop learning methodology helped the team of NGO staff and volunteers to overcome dilemmas faced in delivering sexual reproductive health and rights education. Chapter 7 presents a high-level reflection on the value of double-loop learning in education NGOs. Reconstructing two learning trajectories that occurred in this PAR – one that led to double-loop learning and one that did not – this chapter presents ingredients and conditions to ensure double-loop learning ‘sticks’ in education NGOs. Considering the meaning generated by practitioners in this PAR I reflect on the viability of double-loop learning as a critical learning practice, and its potential to achieve sustainable lifelong learning goals. Finally, chapter 8 presents the conclusion and discussion, harvesting the main theoretical and practical contributions of this research as well as putting forth new questions and issues uncovered in the process.



