

Making sense together: the Ripples editshop

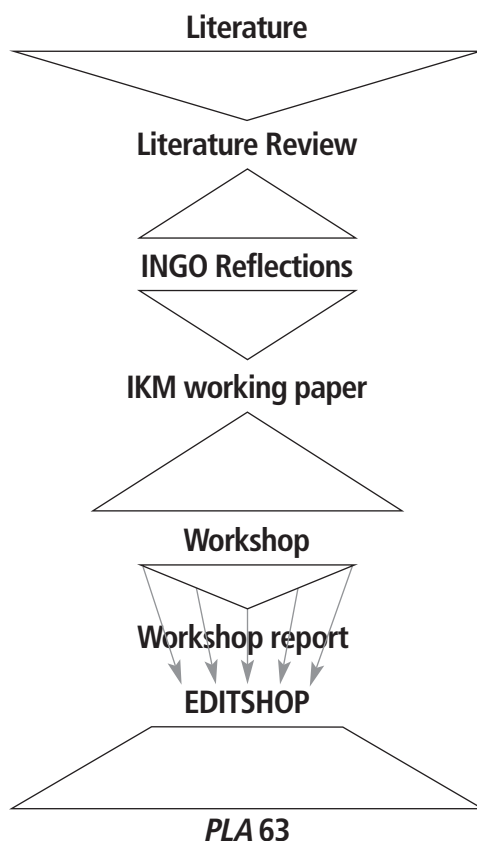
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by HANNAH BEARDON and KATE NEWMAN

Introduction

This issue of *PLA* is the result of various stages of reflection, research and analysis by a range of people in different combinations. At the same time as we have been identifying tensions and dynamics in the co-construction of knowledge, we have been dealing with them – albeit in a fairly small and homogeneous group. As such, the evolution of this work, our thinking and the group dynamics and relationships provides an interesting case study in itself.

As noted in the overview article to this special issue, Kate and I (the guest editors and facilitators of the process) started by conducting a literature review. We identified key issues and questions for reflection. We opened the process out for people working in northern offices of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to undertake such reflection. We then drew it back in to consolidate and construct a narrative from those different reflections. Based on this report we held a workshop in



London, March 2010.¹ Here we began to sketch out different areas or themes, such as organisational learning and development, participatory communications, aggregation of qualitative data and (organisational and personal) change. We identified different tensions present – between personal and organisational change, for example, or between shifting power down and information up. And we developed ideas for articles for the *PLA* issue. We produced a workshop report and at the same time worked with individuals to develop clearer ideas about their articles. Once the draft articles were all written we held a writeshop – which in the end was more of an editshop – at the IIED offices in London, September 2010.

The Ripples writeshop – or editshop

It was a great opportunity to consolidate learning and aggregate perspectives into the bigger themes.

Soledad Muñiz

When we started planning our writeshop, we really didn't know what it was supposed to be. Neither of us had ever been to one, let alone organised one before. But we were confident that the two days together would be useful for the authors and editors. So we developed an agenda which enabled people to get back in touch with the wider issues, and feedback on each others' work.

Rather than put aside much time for writing and rewriting we prioritised giving and internalising feedback – and linking the articles to each other and to the wider themes. Although of course, in the end, the themes evolved as much as the individual articles. Feedback from the authors showed that, although they had expected to come away with a more finished version of their articles, they had valued the time to connect with others and receive feedback,

and that this was a good use of the time and space available. Alice Klein said:

I expected to come away with a clearer structure or a new draft of my article, but I prefer working alone so it was more useful to have the discussion and analysis, focus on the bigger stuff you can't do at home, and take those notes away.

Jonathan Dudding felt that:

I am in a position to go away and come up with something which makes more sense.

One of the main aims was to allow a wider group to be involved in giving feedback to authors, to include more visions than just our two of the focus and themes of articles. To do this, we began by revisiting the themes coming out of the previous workshop, and constructing a list of critical questions to use when reading each others' work. These included:

- Is it reflective/practical/engaging/analytical enough?
- What is the focus?
- What does it tell us about the wider issues?
- How does it link to other articles in the group?
- What structural changes would you suggest?

We had already grouped articles into four different themes. Within those themes, the authors worked in pairs to read and discuss each others' articles, and then in the wider sub-group to think about how they fitted together. Authors were all happy with the process and found the feedback valuable:

It is so useful to see how my words are understood.

Daniel Guijarro

¹ The process began with a literature review, reflections or case studies on relevant work with five international NGOs and a resulting working paper (available at <http://tinyurl.com/rippleswp>). The follow-up workshop included about 30 people who have been trying to promote bottom-up information flows. The report is available here: <http://tinyurl.com/ripples-workshop>.

I had found it difficult to see how my article could fit. The feedback was invaluable; I am clearer what I need to do.

Jo Lyon

It made a big difference to interpret my analysis in relation to others.

Soledad Muñiz

As well as enabling people to get individual feedback, the writeshop also gave us an opportunity to reinterpret the wider themes: to think about how we wanted to categorise the articles, as well as the wider vision we are presenting, and who we are speaking with through the journal. We could not have anticipated the value of the space for this. Before we started, Kate and I had a good idea of the wider message or theme, and could judge the extent to which each article spoke to that. At the writeshop not only did we share our vision more clearly with the authors, but they made their own contributions and we reinterpreted and clarified together. As Ashley Raeside explained:

Kate and Hannah work together and on these themes a lot, so it is good to shake that up a bit.

So in the end I don't think we did run a very good writeshop. People had no time to write, and many said they think that a longer time should be given to do that. What we ran instead was a very good editshop! And an example in practice of participatory editing and sense-making. We discussed our common themes and message – the bigger points we are trying to make or vision we are trying to set out. We critically read and discussed each others' work and developed shared meaning, categories and narratives which could make sense of them in a wider context. And as well as helping us in our work as editors, and creating a richer journal, it was a useful space in itself, as Daniel Guijarro explained:

These spaces create reflection... it is a shame they can't be more routine – spaces for us to make sense together of ideas in development and how they relate to us.

The editing process

Not only you have interpreted very well my thoughts but you also have helped me to better understand the context.

Daniel Guijarro

It was an incredibly useful process – really appreciated.

Tessa Lewin

After the editshop the authors prepared new drafts of their articles, and sent them to us to edit. We were now all on more of a wavelength about the bigger issues and themes that the articles were speaking to, and this was reflected in the quality and focus of the new versions. We each proceeded to edit the articles in our sections, cutting and streamlining and asking for further information and clarification as necessary. But despite the themes of this issue of *PLA*, and the reflections on accountability and interpretation in particular, we easily strayed into directive and interventionist ways of editing. When people are working so hard to produce something which is quite personal, it is difficult to know whether you are being constructive or risk upsetting or undermining the author.

In the end, it was our communication with each other and the authors which carried us through: some authors were happy for us to direct them and their work. Others were keen to keep control of their articles and challenged some of our suggestions or interventions. We changed some articles for length or focus in traditional editing style. Other articles transformed in ways that neither the author nor editors could have anticipated.

We found that the trust relationships and shared understanding of the issues

that we had developed through the Ripples process helped the editing process significantly, whereas work with authors new to the process required more time and joint effort to communicate well our ideas to each other. It was a process sometimes frustrating, but always productive. People valued the chance to reflect on their experiences, and often found our comments useful not only to their articles but to the work itself. Describing the editing process, Nathan Horst (who did not participate in any of the Ripples process) wrote:

The feedback has really helped me focus

my thoughts and get more clarity on what it is I really want to say about my experience... I feel a renewed sense of urgency about attending to process issues, after having focused a good bit of my energy on developing this tool in 2010... It takes a good editor to inspire action through critique!

In the end, the editing process has confirmed for us the message of the articles and reflections contained here: that participatory or collective processes of reflection, interpretation and sense-making can produce rich and unexpected learning.

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