

Who is 'we'?

Devising an explicit learning agenda

Peter Laugharn

The Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) has long thought of itself as an organization that draws insights from its field experience and shares them with a wide audience. Thus for years we have combined grantmaking and publishing, with an implicit learning bridge between them. In our current Strategic Plan, 2002–06, we have sought both to make this commitment to learning more explicit and to get greater leverage from it.



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BvLF's projects are all focused on early childhood development (ECD). We therefore need to be conversant with particular bodies of knowledge, and since this knowledge is continually evolving, we need to learn in order to keep up to date. We also try to be reflective about the application of ideas in practice and their effectiveness. Among the characteristics we seek to cultivate as a learning organization are:

- ▶ curiosity (admitting that there are many things one does not know);
- ▶ analysis rather than simple description;
- ▶ an explicit 'learning agenda', and an ability to work with partners we fund without our learning agenda becoming directive;
- ▶ clarity about the degree of certainty we feel we have about questions (and answers) which concern us.

BvLF's learning agenda

In the current Strategic Plan, we define BvLF's 'learning agenda' as:

'the term we give to our plans for delineating what we need to learn, and what activities will allow us to enhance the creation of knowledge in ECD. It is consciously defined with partners, within the Foundation itself, with peer organisations and with others we wish to influence.'

The learning agenda draws on the Foundation's past, current and future interventions, as well as others' experience. It involves more conscious examination of our field-based programming, studying existing knowledge and practice, and engaging in reflection, comparison and synthesis. It involves deriving lessons from the specific themes, strategies, hypotheses and information that BvLF and its partners have decided to pursue. For example, during the past four years the Foundation has focused specific attention on the well-being of young children affected by AIDS, and on how young children develop identity, empathy and pro-social behaviour.

Reasons for wanting to learn (and degrees of interest in learning) can vary within an organization, which presents challenges for those explicitly seeking to be learning organizations. From my perspective as director, our fundamental motivation for learning is to be more effective. Learning makes us better funders, better partners, and better allies with peer organizations in advocacy efforts. From an individual perspective, learning is refreshing and offers possibilities of growth and renewal (though we should not forget that some of the most effective learning is through difficulty, and it can occasionally be exhausting as well as renewing!).

Certainty and grantmaking

BvLF has a long tradition of funding different kinds of project, from those based on solid research and experience to those that are experimental, innovative, and even embryonic in their conception. Because of this diversity, we have found it helpful to create a terminology to reflect the fact that there are different degrees of certainty in our programme development, which require different actions and strategies.

Relative certainty

On some issues, we are convinced of the validity and stability of our reasoning and experience, for instance:

- ▶ learning begins at birth;
- ▶ parents are the child's first teachers;
- ▶ all cultures have important resources and heritages to pass on to their children;
- ▶ there is no single model of ECD provision that works in all settings.

THE BERNARD VAN LEER FOUNDATION

Established in 1949 by Dutch industrialist and philanthropist Bernard van Leer (1883–1958), the Netherlands-based Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) is a private trust with a mandate to improve opportunities for children aged 0–8 who live in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage. They do this in two ways: funding and supporting early childhood development projects across the world (BvLF works in 21 countries in five continents); sharing knowledge with the aim of informing and influencing practice and policy.

See www.bernardvanleer.org

Our relative certainty about these beliefs does not stop us from seeking further evidence to support them, nor blind us to evidence to the contrary. None the less, on topics in this category, our task is to get our ideas and messages out to the wider community. The grants we make are most likely to involve replication, dissemination and advocacy. This includes introducing tested ideas to new contexts or partners and/or working on making the intervention more sustainable once our financial contributions cease.

Working hypotheses

On some issues we are working at the level of the hypothesis, the educated guess (ie, we are willing to take a risk). These are cases where we, or our partner organizations, have partial evidence or strong convictions that a certain course of action will produce positive results. Here, our learning agenda will focus on the first and second circuits of learning (see below), with an emphasis on creating a stronger formulation of basic issues, questions and hypotheses. Our grantmaking at this level is innovative: we are seeking creative solutions to long-standing problems.

Areas outside our learning agenda

Although we are willing to take risks and pursue innovative ideas, we recognize that there is a level of certainty necessary, and a knowledge base that must be explored, before we invest in field-based projects. Where questions are too vaguely formulated to give rise to a project, we need to study what others have done, search the literature, explore questions with professional contacts, and provide learning space for staff before funding projects in these areas. Similarly, there are areas where work is better carried out by others, because of the specialization required, such as projects in brain development research. In these cases, it makes more sense for us to build on others' work than to fund projects ourselves.

How are we doing?

We are now in our fifth year of this conscious effort to strengthen ourselves as a learning organization, and we have found it challenging but rewarding. I think we were naive in our assumption that if we declared that we were all for learning, it would naturally occur within our organization and our partnerships, promi-

nently and explicitly. Our experience has been that there are many issues to be worked through.

It also appears that our initial reflections were rather 'partner-centric', as though the knowledge of the organizations we funded was intrinsically more valuable than knowledge from other sources; we have now tried to balance this. We've also learned that it is easier to say you want a learning agenda than to specify that agenda (especially the good working hypothesis), since doing so means getting a lot of articulate and opinionated knowledge workers to agree to more harmonization of thinking than they are used to.

Biases, power and boundaries

BvLF has always sought to combine being a sensitive, respectful and listening funder with having a strong early childhood agenda. We try to ensure that this agenda does not make us directive, stubborn or blind to problems and possibilities, but we are up-front about having an agenda. To my mind, the resolution of this dilemma is to identify potential partners that are just as passionate as we are about the potential of young children and design approaches together (this is why we speak of partners rather than 'grantees').

Who is 'we'? – three circuits of learning

We also saw a few years ago that we had to be careful about what we meant by the word 'we'. For us, there are three different sets of 'we's. The 'first circuit of learning' includes a programme staffer and the set of partner organizations they fund and work with; a 'second circuit of learning' is our whole programme staff together within our office in The Hague; and a 'third circuit' includes our staff and the wider community interested in early childhood. The first circuit is mostly about learning from field-based projects, the second is our in-house community of learning, the third is linked by the exchange of published ideas or grey literature. A large part of our knowledge work is ensuring that insights circulate between the circuits.

In terms of accountabilities and mutual expectations within the first circuit, while we are interested in knowing how well projects have done, BvLF has never been a bean-counting foundation whose primary concern is that outcomes conform perfectly to plans ('you said you would establish 200 preschools; please explain why only 197 were established . . .'). Thus I don't think that partners have been motivated to hide the blemishes.

But perhaps we have not sufficiently emphasized the fact that we have a strong interest in knowing why

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there are blemishes, or why a working hypothesis turned out to be partially or largely incorrect. We have perhaps underestimated the extent to which the accountability mode, rather than the learning mode, predominates in reporting to donors. Similarly, we are currently trying to get partners to think and report more analytically – not just 'what my NGO did last summer' but the problems they encountered, how they resolved them, and insights that have helped them. In this way, the reporting is of greater relevance to a wider audience, and forms a more solid basis for comparative learning.

Tough boundary issues

In BvLF's case, I believe the toughest boundary issues have occurred not so much between partners and the Foundation, as within BvLF itself, between a knowledgeable and experienced programme staff who have in the past come up with individual strategies for their portfolios, and the Executive Director and management team, who have been trying to make the overall foundation programme more coherent and higher-leverage. These issues have been complex and at times frustrating. We have not worked them all out yet, but it has been very important to tackle them forthrightly.

How open-ended can learning be?

One of the ongoing debates that we have had is about how 'open-ended' learning can and should be. Some colleagues feel that the best learning is exploratory, less planned, and characterized by relative autonomy. Others are concerned that open learning can be inefficient or, worse, self-indulgent; our mandate and stewardship responsibility, they argue, push us toward more pre-specified, results-oriented learning. My own feeling is that these two propositions are different ends of a continuum. But I also feel that since, by their nature, endowed foundations are more likely to be on the unstructured side of learning – since we are not accountable to markets, electorates or other external forces – we should continually ask ourselves whether our learning is generating enough external benefit. Evaluations can help here.

Learning and practice

In terms of putting learning into practice, we are doing a number of things. We are trying to be clearer about what it is we are seeking to learn, otherwise

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reflections on experience cover a very wide field. At the same time, we need to be mindful of things we've learned that we didn't expect. We are also strengthening our monitoring and evaluation system. We'd been putting more effort into initial assessment of grants and less into finding out what had actually happened. We're trying to right this balance. We're asking programme staff to write a 'summation memo' that reviews what was learned in a partnership, and we're looking at instituting quarterly 'learning cycle' meetings that review what has been learned in BvLF as a whole.

A number of organizational issues are still being worked out. We are clarifying the reflective task of programme staff who were previously mainly involved in prospecting, establishing and guiding partnerships. How much and what kind of reflection is required and by what criteria do we assess this reflection? We are establishing what sort of evidence we want different partnerships to be able to produce. This may vary from the engaging anecdote to rigorous analysis of specially collected data. This of course depends on whom we want to approach with the evidence, and what we want to convince them about. It is also related to asking partners to make the move from primarily descriptive reporting to a more analytical approach.

Finally, programmes, publishing and advocacy have very different timescales. Field partnerships may grow slowly for years, publications may be on an 18-month timeline, and advocacy opportunities may come and go within a month or a week. Meshing these activities means being able to work at these different speeds simultaneously. It is important to guide the flow of knowledge internally, to define new mutual accountabilities between programmes and advocacy. When it comes to advocacy, concrete learning is not simply nice to have, but indispensable.

Unless our organizations learn, and apply what they learn, we will only be charities. We will be funnelling our funds into efforts that will do good, but we will not be able to improve the quality of those efforts nor will we be able to use our experience to effect greater change. Ultimately, BvLF is based on a hypothesis: that investment in early childhood gives a much higher payoff, individually and on a societal level, than investment in later age groups. The value of hypotheses is that they can be tested and refined. But this can happen only if there is learning, reflection and adaptation. This is what learning is about for us, and we expect to be at it as long as we exist as a foundation. @