Dynamic Learning Agenda.

A manual

Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914): Illustration to the Norwegian folktale «Soria Moria»

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 774088

Content

Introduction

A "Dynamic Learning Agenda" (DLA) is a method for reflection and learning in action. It is particularly relevant for organizations seeking to facilitate complex and difficult change processes. It focusses on challenges arising in such processes, and suggests how the organization may work with them through a systems analysis identifying barriers and resources. Central in the DLA method stands the formulation of learning questions, and the continuous reflection on and revision of such questions, giving DLA its dynamic character. Adding to this dynamic character is the constant forming of new questions, while others may recede more into the background. Essential is also the embracing of an active agent perspective and the ambition to "make a difference".

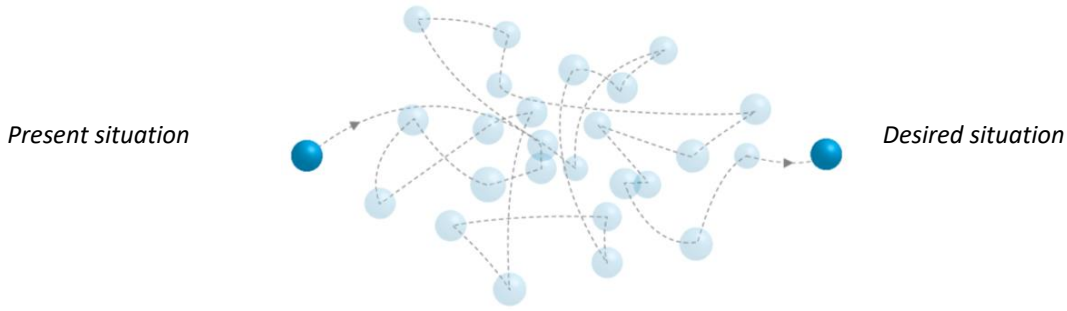

Figure 1. Graphic representation of a DLA-process

The DLA-method is especially appropriate when development follows no linear pathway, has no central steering, requires an emergent design, has multiple stakeholders, involves changes at multiple levels, and includes co-innovation.

In FIT4FOOD2030, the DLA method is recommended as a tool for learning in the Policy Labs and the City Labs who are contributing to the transformation of research and innovation (R&I) around Food and Nutrition Security (FNS). The Lab coordinators facilitate the DLA in their respective labs. Additionally, the Lab coordinators form a community of practice (CoP), a community formed around a shared domain of interest to generate innovative, creative solutions and practices. Activities in this CoP involve common learning sessions and group counselling sessions, facilitated by one or more members of the FIT4FOOD2030 consortium. Among other things, these sessions will be used to support the labs' DLA-practice, both by focusing on the method, and the labs' experience in using it, along with the labs' learning questions and their development. To the extent that the CoP-members identify common learning questions, they are also encouraged to use the DLA-method in a common reflection of these questions.

This document has the form of a manual giving a brief presentation of the DLA method to Policy and City Lab coordinators. It will be used as a resource in the training and counselling sessions that will be offered to CoP-members (Lab coordinators) within the project. It should be noted that gaining the full value of the manual presupposes participation in these training and counselling sessions. In the remainder of this deliverable, we specifically address the Lab coordinators as our primary audience.

Background

According to the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, 1905-1980, being human means to set aims for oneself and what one wants to achieve. A condition for doing this is the capacity for imagining that which does not yet exist, but that we want to exist. The contents of these imaginations are what we may call 'visions'.

Groups– like the Policy Labs or the City Labs of FIT4FOOD2030 – may also have visions, typically co-created in collaboration between lab members. The design of such visions lies outside the focus of the DLA, however, further information on vision design may be found in FIT4FOOD2030 deliverable 1.1. We assume that you have set up visions for your lab before you start the DLA-process. However, during the DLA-process, it may well happen that you find that you need to revise or change part of these visions. In this sense, your DLA-process may also have relevance for your lab's visions.

Be specific about your aims

A DLA process focusses not at visions as such, but on more specific aims derived from these visions. Assume you set up this as your vision: "We aspire to a future with reduced waste in the food chain." A more specific aim derived from this vision is: "To engage our local municipal government to work for reduced waste in the food chain."

Please notice how important it is – within DLAs – to avoid aims that are too general. The aims you set up as the starting point of a DLA-process should be specific in the sense that they indicate *where* and in relation to *whom* you may direct your energy in attempting to realize them. In this respect, the above aim is a good example. It identifies with a high degree of specificity *who* you want to engage in the change that you want to achieve, and *what* the change should involve. Being able to specify the "who" and the "what" as in this example, is a good indication that you have been successful in setting up an aim that will produce an interesting and useful DLA-process.

Systems analysis I: searching for barriers

Assume now, that you try to realize your aim without success. Or, perhaps even before starting to act, you feel hesitant, as the upcoming task feels too challenging. This may be frustrating. Instead of just giving up however, you decide to try to understand the nature of the challenge, and to find a way to overcome it.

In trying to understand the nature of such a challenge, a systems analysis is valuable. So that is what you do next. Performing a systems analysis involves, initially, to observe and to analyze one's environment, or the "system" forming the context of one's actions, looking for the barriers preventing goal attainment. Questions relevant for identifying barriers are:

- Why are we unable to reach this aim?
- What specific factors are preventing us?
- Why has this aim not been realized already?

In answering these questions, it may be useful, first, to have an open brainstorm on what the barriers that hinder progress may be. If at this point you involve your lab members in a DLA workshop: Ask the participants to write their propositions on Post-it notes, one barrier on each note (all the barrier notes should then have the same colour).

To ensure that you do not become too narrow-sighted in identifying barriers, you may then use the following checklist to see whether significant barriers may have been left out unintentionally. Ask: Are there any barriers at any of the following levels that are relevant to your challenge?

Barriers can be structured according to the following categories:

- *The knowledge infrastructure:* facilitates or obstructs access to and development of research and knowledge.
- *The physical infrastructure:* facilitates or obstructs physical or virtual accessibility and the way actors operate.

- *Legislation and regulation:* refers to the formal rules that can promote or hinder goal attainment, such as technical standards, employment legislation or the legal framework.
- *Values, norms and symbols:* refers to the political and economic climate and the culture of a country, region or sector, and to social norms and values.
- *Interactions:* can be too intensive, meaning that the actors' relationships become so tightly intertwined that nobody can take the first step, and their view of reality will be distorted; it can also be too loose and too narrow in scope, so that people are unaware of each other's visions.
- *The market structure:* refers to the system barriers and opportunities that arise due to a range of market phenomena such as monopoly, oligopoly, supply and demand.

The list may be extended with other areas that may be of particular significance to your specific aims and the challenges arising in trying to realize them.

If the list of barriers emerging from this first step of the systems analysis gets very long, it may be useful to try to identify the more significant of them, and to give these priority in the further process. The criterion for significance is here that the barrier is *basic* in the sense that, if you manage to overcome it, you will be significantly closer to realizing your aim. An additional criterion is *pragmatic*; that it is in your power to influence the barrier and to achieve a positive outcome.

This requires that the barriers that you give priority to, should be formulated (again) with a certain specificity, concerning the «where», «who» or "what" of the barrier. Where is the barrier situated in the system, who is involved (specific persons, organizations or institutions), and what is the nature of the barrier?

For instance, to point at "the current economic crisis" as a barrier, is not very helpful, both because the notion of a crisis is here very general, and because it is not very probable that the actions of a City or Policy Lab may help to overcome the crisis.

If you formulate as a barrier, however, that "our municipal government lacks knowledge of how to reduce waste in the food chain", then you have found a barrier that, probably, you have a chance of overcoming. Therefore, this is the type of barriers that should have prominence in your work.

Learning questions

Learning questions form a significant part of a DLA. A typical learning question in a DLA addresses how one may design actions to realize a specific aim, conceived on the background of the barriers identified during the systems analysis, while retaining a strong sense of agency. At a general level, such a learning question has the following form:

> "(1) What can we do to achieve (2) this aim while (3) this barrier exists?"

The question may be analyzed into three parts, each associated with the methodological steps described above: (1) is based on the agent perspective that needs to permeate the whole process, (2) is based on the specific aim chosen as the starting point for a particular DLA-process, while (3) refers to a barrier identified in the systems analysis.

Let us formulate a learning question from the example suggested above. Here, we defined as our aim "to engage our local municipal government to work for reduced waste in the food chain," and we suggested that a significant barrier for achieving this, was that "our municipal government lacks knowledge of this". The ensuing learning question then could be formulated:

(1) What can we do (2) to engage our local municipal government to work for reduced waste in the food chain, while (3) our municipal government lacks knowledge of this?

If you have identified several significant barriers that are likely to prevent the realization of *one aim*, you should *for this aim* design as many learning questions as there are barriers, i.e., one for each barrier. In a DLA, thus, one aim may generate a number of different learning questions.

Systems analysis II: searching for opportunities/resources

After having formulated your learning questions, it is time to begin the process of answering them. The relevant step is to do a new systems analysis, but now with an emphasis on the resources or opportunities that exist within the system, which may help overcome the barriers that the learning questions have pointed at.

Take one learning question (and one barrier) at a time and seek for the resources or opportunities that may contribute to overcoming the barrier. Again, you may begin with an open brainstorming process, and then continue by examining the areas mentioned in the above checklist searching for further resources or opportunities for each of the areas involved.

If you do this in a DLA workshop, you may ask the participants to write each potential resource or opportunity on a Post-it note (now with a different colour for all the propositions), and then at a later point, match the resource-Post-its with their related barrier-Post-its.

The change begins with you

Notice, that merely finding resources and opportunities in the system that may help overcome a barrier, does not alone answer a learning question. In order to arrive at a more complete or final answer, you need also to answer the first part of the question; "What can *we* do to…." After having identified and assessed the relevant barriers and resources/opportunities, you need to *start designing a plan* for how *you* may initiate a process where the resources/opportunities are mobilized to overcome the barriers, so that the aim that served as the starting point, may be realized.

To achieve this, it is essential that you define yourself as an actor who is willing and able to "make a difference", and to contribute to real change. This does not mean that you must solve all challenges yourself. Probably, most of the barriers and challenges that you will focus on in the DLA will have to be addressed in collaboration with others. However, it is still essential that you look at yourself as an active initiator or agent in this process. In this sense, a DLA is not just a method; it is just as much a mind-set or an attitude.

The dynamic aspect of a DLA

When you formulate a learning question, and start the process of answering it, the systems analysis carried out to assist your endeavour, is not necessarily done once and for all. It may be that – while working with the system to achieve your goals – you discover more about it, both its barriers and resources, which necessitates a revision of your original learning question. Moreover, after some time, as your initial aims are realized and new aims gain priority, new learning questions will emerge to replace earlier ones. However, it may also happen that certain learning questions persist. In that case, they may need to be addressed with increased energy. Alternatively, such long-lived learning questions, that you work with without success, may indicate that the aim that lies at its basis, should be given up or revised, or at least, this may be discussed as an option.

In all these cases, however, you should from time to time take stock of your learning questions, make some notes on how work with each question has developed, what insights working with them has produced, and whether they have been revised (see figure 2).

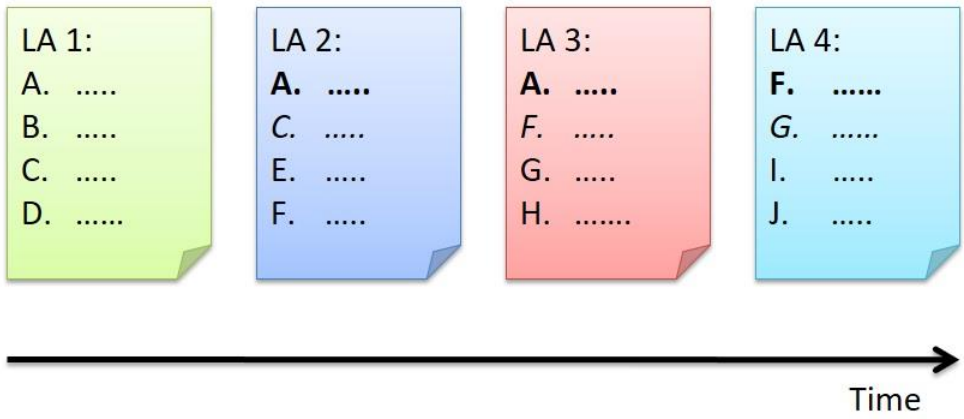

Figure 2. Representation of a Dynamic Learning Agenda
While working with DLA (LA1-LA4 here represents different points in time) some learning questions (A-D here represent learning questions) stay with you briefly, while other may be of interest over a longer period of time. In the course of the process, moreover, new learning questions arise.

The DLA-log

In order to keep track of these changes, a template for a DLA-log has been developed, see Appendix 1. Use one template sheet for one learning question. The different sections of the sheet allow you to register the outcome of the systems analysis and other essentials in dealing with this specific question. The sheet should be regarded a "living document", meaning that you may use it to keep track of revisions or new insights that you gain in the process of working with the learning question. The DLA-log is constituted by all the individual log sheets that you set up throughout the project. This log will also enable others to keep track of your learning process, and to learn from it. In the FIT4FOOD2030 project, it will also be used to monitor the learning processes taking place within the City and Policy Labs. For this reason, Work Package 8 will have access to the log at certain points. The learning questions will also form the basis for joint learning sessions between the Lab coordinators.

As a Lab coordinator, you are responsible for continuously updating the DLA-log. In facilitating the DLA-process, you have the choice of carrying most of it out in workshops where all lab members are invited to join, or only parts of the process. For instance, you may decide to take responsibility for formulating learning questions and keeping track of them yourself, and only involve the others in the systems analyses. How you do this, more specifically, and the degree to which others are involved in parts of – or the whole of – the process, will also be a topic of the counselling sessions offered in the CoP.

The Golden Rule

Finally, in order for the DLA to work, participants must avoid over-confidence, and be willing to admit both to themselves and others that challenges exist, and that they don't yet know enough to handle

them. Developing a culture where this is not merely tolerated, but actually celebrated, as the obvious starting point for all learning, is here essential. Thus, the golden rule of DLAs:

Admitting what you don't know or cannot handle yet is a strength!

Monitoring and reporting

One of the work packages in FIT4FOOD2030 999(WP8) is dedicated to monitoring how the development of the City labs proceeds, and to summarize this into a report by the end of the project. The DLA log sheets, as well as the DLA sessions, will give useful input to this monitoring. Lab coordinators are therefore asked to use the Log sheets to document the emergence of new learning questions, as well as how they develop (whether/how they are solved).

There are no fixed rules as to how many log sheets you should establish. This should be adapted to the number of challenges that become salient in your Lab coordinator work, however, somewhere between 5 and 20 open log sheets at any time could be an indication.

Read more

You may read more about DLA in the manual *Reflexive Monitoring in Action - A guide for monitoring system innovation projects*, by Barbara van Mierlo, Barbara Regeer, Mariëtte van Amstel et al. (Publisher: Athena Institute, VU). The manual may be downloaded from:
https://transitiepraktijk.nl/files/RMAengDEFcor.pdf
The present document has borrowed content and elements from this original manual.

Appendix – DLA log sheet

Dynamic Learning Agenda – Log sheet

Please, use one sheet per learning question.

State the aim that you find it difficult to achieve:	
Date for first setting up this aim:	
Notice that one aim may generate several learning questions, each corresponding to <u>one</u> significant barrier. Thus, the aim just stated may serve as the starting point for setting up several logg sheets, each corresponding to a separate barrier.	
Mention *one* significant barrier making it difficult to achieve the above aim:	
State the learning question following from this:	
How can the barrier be overcome? Which resources exist for this in the system?	
How can you contribute to a positive outcome? Please, set up points for an action plan:	
Date when aim was realized:	
Please use the backside of the log sheet to make notes on what you are doing in following up the learning question and its associated action plan, and what you learn on the way. What worked, what didn't work, why, etc.? Also, if relevant, report any revisioins of the learning question or of the systems analysis that is taking place.	