



CLEA: Community Learning for Environmental Action

Peer learning and mentoring across community environment groups



Strategies for peer learning CLEA Discussion Paper, January 2015

CLEA (Community Learning for Environmental Action) is a 3 year Victorian Landcare Council (VLC) project, funded by the Natural Resources Conservation League, that supports peer learning and mentoring between community environmental groups. As part of the VLC's commitment to build capacity in grassroots landcare, CLEA aims to:

- develop a suite of peer learning and mentoring processes that are low cost and easy to use
- test these processes within the Landcare community
- create web-based mechanisms to facilitate peer learning and provide links to Landcare knowledge.

CLEA's focus is what it takes to organise community action, collaborate with partners, and influence decision makers.

Organising is about the way you, and your group or network:

Invite people to participate. Appreciate their contributions. Plan and review your plans. Know your funding options. Set up systems to manage projects, staff and money. Manage working relationships around projects. Facilitate meetings. Monitor and report to funders and community management.

Collaborating is about the way you, and your group or network:

Use and build networks. Keep track of who's who in agencies, and policy, and funding. Understand others' goals and the demands on them. Build trust. Find the fit with partners' goals and capacities. Negotiate roles around possible joint projects. Jointly design projects, test & redesign. Give and receive feedback. Deal with differences in expectations as soon as these emerge.

Influencing is about the way you, and your group or network:

Tap into networks in communities and agencies. Build trust with community and agency leaders. Communicate with different types of landholder, one-to-one and in groups. Connect to agencies, at manager and staff levels. Promote environmental work, using diverse media, and targeting new audiences. Translate specialist NRM jargon into ordinary language.

What are the best ways to support peer learning and mentoring in these areas within the Landcare movement? This Discussion Paper describes what currently supports and constraints peer learning in Landcare, and looks at other peer learning and mentoring schemes. It then proposes two central concepts for CLEA, and three strategies. *In brief:*

People need places and tools where they can talk with their peers about what they are doing and struggling with. Purposeful reflection articulates the thinking behind actions and suggests what is needed next. CLEA needs to use existing social networks and forums to support this, and only add new forums where there's a big gap in what's

available. A website is needed that provides a way for people to connect to others with knowledge and skills around the questions they are asking, and connect to the resources those people use.

You're invited to challenge or add to the thinking here. Use the Focus Questions (below) as one starting point. Contact Ross Colliver, CLEA Project Facilitator, 0411 226519, ross.colliver@bigpond.com

1. Supports and constraints for peer learning in the Landcare community

The main features of the current situation are set out, and some questions raised.

1.1 There is a strong ethic in Landcare of learning through action.

Landcare members join a group to take action, on their own properties and on public land. Staff are employed to facilitate this action. Landcare puts a high value on working things out through taking action, using the lessons learned to shape the next stage of the plan. The strong focus on land management and landscape repair means that what is learned about organising, collaborating and influencing is incidental to the main game. If people asked *What's working well here? What needs to work better?*, they would strengthen projects, groups and Networks.

Focus Question: How can critical reflection on action be worked into the culture of Landcare at the level of projects and committees of management?

1.2 Learning doesn't spread easily between localities.

Facilitators meet within a region, and chairs of networks meet in many regions, but the focus is on funding and project administration, not what is being learnt about organising, collaborating and influencing. Travel costs time and money. Pressure to deliver on projects gets in the way of time to think, reflect and discuss with colleagues beyond one's locality.

Focus Question: How can existing regional meetings be harnessed for discussion of organising, collaborating and influencing, and what new forums are needed?

1.3 There are many stories of success, but these target funders, not other groups.

Community environmental organisations like Landcare are skilled at telling funders what projects have achieved. There are stories and photographs of outputs delivered, but there is not much critique of *how* a project influenced people, the difficulties it encountered, and other approaches it could have taken. Formal reporting goes to the funder, and disappears, rather than being shared with others in the Landcare and community environmental movement.

Focus Question: How can project reporting become a moment to articulate what has been learned about organising, collaborating and influencing, and then shared with others in Landcare?

1.4 Landcare Networks and conservation alliances are nodes for learning.

Landcare Networks (voluntary federations of 5-15 local landcare groups) allow for sharing of learning across localities, through a committee of management made up of people from each group, through paid facilitators that move learning from one

group to another, and through learning from larger scale projects across several local groups. Biolink partnerships and Conservation Management Networks working across private and public land managers are another nodal point for learning around organising, collaborating and influencing.

Focus Question: How do Landcare Networks and conservation alliances capture peer learning around organising, collaborating and influencing, and feed this back into on-going work?

1.5 *Knowledge around organising within the NRM system can disappear when staff leave.*

Community committees typically have highly skilled, articulate and dedicated members, who have local social knowledge and skills in collaborating and influencing locally, but not much familiarity with the institutional arrangements of Natural Resource Management (NRM).

Staff become the interface with NRM admin, keeping track of funding criteria and application processes, annual cycles of funding and reporting, organisational mandates and policy rationales. This knowledge doesn't easily soak down from staff to committee level, and when facilitators leave, their institutional knowledge leaves with them.

Focus Question: How do committees of management hold onto knowledge about NRM institutional arrangements?

1.6 *CMAs organise, but they don't facilitate learning.*

Catchment Management Authorities in the 10 NRM regions in Victoria provide a major (though not the only) link between Landcare and government policy, funding and administration. CMAs house Regional Landcare Coordinators and Regional Landcare Facilitators, funded by State and Federal governments respectively. CMAs have support plans for Landcare in their region, developed in collaboration with regional Landcare communities. They administer State and Federal funding directed at community groups. Many have an annual "report card" of Landcare achievements, and host regular meetings of Landcare coordinators and Chairs of Landcare Networks. However, CMAs are not experienced by most Landcare members less as a facilitator of learning and more as an administrator. They capture the big picture of achievements and maintain Landcare's credibility with government, but they don't articulate the fine detail of practices for organising, collaborating and influencing.

Focus Question: How can CMAs use their existing forums, plans and reporting to support peer learning between Landcare members and staff?

1.7 *There are limited resources at State level to support on-going learning.* There is a small Landcare team at State level. A biannual forum and training for Landcare staff has recently been opened up to volunteers. The [Landcare Gateway](#) functions as a noticeboard for government programs and Landcare groups/networks, and as repository for information to support administration of Landcare groups/networks. Redevelopment of the Gateway had been waiting in the wings for several years, pending funding. In the past, there have been state-wide projects to support learning in Landcare. The approach for the last few years, with contracting budgets,

has been to offer training for facilitators and community leaders in Landcare. Since the design at the start of the Local Landcare Facilitator Initiative of the previous Coalition government, the wider learning network has had little dedicated attention.

Focus Question: What role can the State Landcare team play in facilitating peer learning within the Landcare community?

1.8 *Most rural community members are not digital natives.*

Many are aged 50+. They use email, smart phones, run software for managing their farming enterprise, and google to get information, but they don't *interact* online. They prefer face to face interaction. In peri-urban areas around Melbourne and regional centres, lifestyle settlers often don't want to join formal groups, but they do want access to knowledge, and they are comfortable with the online environment. Landcare staff are younger, more digitally literate, but most don't think aloud in digital forums. The few voices in Landcare addressing how Landcare is organised and its place in communities and government policy have no single forum that holds their ideas.

Focus Question: What digital facilities will support the face-to-face conversations that articulate and critique practices of organising, collaborating and influencing?

1.9 *Digital channels are choked with information.*

Every government program has a website and publishes an email newsletter. Every community organisation has the same, ditto for associations formed around specific interest areas (endangered species/river health/dairying/use of native grasses in grazing—you name it). Everyone produces reports and promotional literature in digital format. The flow of digital information is overwhelming. Paid Landcare staff operate as gatekeepers, filtering out the less relevant and sending on the most relevant to local members.

Focus Question: What digital facilities will lighten the load?

2. What can CLEA learn from other mentoring schemes?

CLEA has discussed approaches to peer learning and mentoring with the National Rabbit Strategy Facilitator and the Otways AgroForestry Network (OAN). Each of these targets an issue with high *recognition* in rural communities. Each combines *training* to raise expertise amongst those who may go on to become mentors, with a *planning* process (community strategy for rabbit control or plan for trees on a farm) for people who want to deal with the issue systematically, using current best practice.

Each then provides *mentoring* as people implement their plan. Mentoring in OAN emerged organically from those who wanted to combine the productive use of trees on farms with better landscape management; the mentoring in the National Rabbit Strategy is still being designed.

This mix of recognition, training, planning and mentoring is instructive. CLEA's content area of organising, collaborating and influencing in community environmental groups does not yet have recognition as an issue of significance in rural communities that rabbit

control or trees on farms have. There is more awareness in Landcare than there was a decade ago that the way you organise, collaborate and influence will influence the impact you can have on your landscape, but that awareness has to be brought to the point of recognition that this is an area of knowledge that needs to be more systematically organised.

We're a long way from a comprehensive training program in organising, collaborating and influencing. Imagine an extended training process for Landcare Mentors, as recognised as the Master Tree Growers training. As a stepping stone, we need to articulate the relevant practices and assemble them into a body of theory and skills. Part of that needs to be explicit planning for the organising, collaborating and influencing of a group or network. Landcare is not just about planning for landscapes.

These two mentoring schemes have implications for the CLEA project.

<i>Recognition</i>	To increase recognition, gather and publicise the opinions of Landcare leaders about organising in Landcare. Document and publicise examples of new ways of collaborating and influencing, and the group and Network planning that underpins this.
<i>Training</i>	Support discussion between peers (both volunteers and staff) about organising, collaborating and influencing, and document practices as these are articulated, so we develop a working language for Landcare practice. Document working examples of the application of those practices in the situations Landcare groups and networks typically face.
<i>Planning</i>	Develop tools that enable people to plan at two levels: a) developing their own skills and knowledge, and b) planning in groups and networks for better targeted organising, collaborating and influencing.
<i>Mentoring</i>	Find people with long experience in Landcare, the ability to articulate what they do and why they do it, and interest in mentoring others in Landcare. Find the forms of support they already provide and build on this. Find the support they need for their mentoring.

3. Two central concepts for CLEA

CLEA supports tacit knowledge becoming explicit knowledge, in a community of practice.

Landcare lives and prospers on what its members initiate, locality by locality. It is a non-hierarchical system of *distributed* intelligence, where understandings emerge that are particular to the landscapes and social relationships in which each group and network operates. This locality-based knowledge creation is also one of Landcare's limitations. People just do what they do, and that is understood by those around them. They talk locally, and not so much beyond their localities.

From tacit to explicit knowledge. Members and staff in Landcare know a lot about organising, collaborating and influencing, but it is tacit knowledge, buried in their action. They mostly just do what they think is necessary. It's when they get into a *certain kind of discussion* with their peers that their reasons for action can be challenged or confirmed.

When knowledge becomes explicit, it can be communicated, tested and used more widely.

Ikujiro Nonaka approaches knowledge as dynamic, created in social interactions amongst individuals and organisations, and context-specific—it depends on a particular time and space to have meaning for human action. He proposes that knowledge shifts from tacit to explicit through four steps:

1. *Socialisation* is the process of acquiring tacit knowledge through shared experience, as in a traditional apprenticeship where apprentices learn through hands-on experience, rather than from written manuals or textbooks. Think about how a new Landcare member learns what Landcare is, or how a new CoM member learns how a Landcare group works—they learn by being around it. Through *empathising*, they absorb tacit knowledge.

The SECI model (Nonaka and Takeuchi)



2. *Externalisation* is the process of articulating tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. In manufacturing, a quality control circle enables employees to improve processes by articulating, as first step to problem-solving, the tacit knowledge accumulated on the shop floor over years on the job.
3. *Combination* is the process of converting explicit knowledge into more complex sets of explicit knowledge, so that it can be shared more widely, and its implications drawn out in many different localities. Guidelines for planning by Landcare groups and networks do this, by presenting sequences of activities for strategic planning, or action planning, and making this available to networks and groups which want to improve their planning.
4. In *internalisation*, explicit knowledge is converted back into tacit knowledge. It becomes a stable, normal part of individual's practice, and part of the culture of an organisation or network.

Where Landcare needs better processes, at least in relation to its knowledge about organising, collaborating and influencing, is the second step of articulating what is known. Nonaka says to move from tacit to explicit knowledge, "a close physical interaction is important in sharing the context and forming a common language among participants". A strong place for interaction provides a "platform of knowledge creation

by collecting the applied knowledge of the area into a certain time and space and integrating it."¹

From tacit to explicit knowledge in a community of practice. Some knowledge develops within a community of practice. Etienne Wenger says there are three elements: people who share a commitment to a particular endeavour (a joint enterprise); between whom significant relationships form over time (mutual engagement); where critique and innovation continually expanding the practice (shared repertoire).²

Communities of practice simultaneously give substance to our personal identities (as parent, facilitator, farmer or surfer), and support social competence in specific activities. They organise themselves, and are wary of being owned by anyone but themselves. This is a challenge for formal organisations, which depend on communities of practice for knowledge creation and transmission but want to use command-and-control to make them contribute to outputs. Communities of practice care about outcomes, but their focus is on what constitutes good practice, a question that has to be asked again and again as contexts and dynamics change.

What communities of practice need are facilities that support their interaction as peers and the knowledge that they hold. Wenger suggests three kinds of "facility" (and he's not thinking just of physical facilities):

- facilities of engagement—physical and virtual spaces that allow people to discuss practice, and to work on challenges where they are accountable to each other;
- facilities of imagination—support for reflecting, conceptualising and imagining what you are doing in the context of longer time frames and wider concerns than immediate work tasks;
- facilities of alignment—ways to decide as a community on priorities, standards and policies.

Our ability to learn, says Wenger:

"depends on opportunities to contribute actively to the practices of communities that we value and that value us, to integrate their enterprises into our understanding of the world, and to make creative use of their respective repertoires."³

¹ Nonaka, I, et. al., 2000. SECI, BA and Leadership: a unified model of dynamic knowledge creation, *Journal of Long Range Planning*, 33, 5-34.

² Wenger, E., 1998. *Communities of Practice*.

³ *ibid*, p 227.

4. CLEA Strategies

Strategy 1. Talk with people who are thinking about the future of Landcare

CLEA will find those who are thinking out beyond Landcare's current situation, and ask them what they think is next for Landcare, and what supports for peer learning need to be cultivated. Their strategic thinking will inform what CLEA does, testing the ideas set out in this Discussion Paper. Getting their ideas documented and in wider circulation will cultivate a wider-than-local conversation about how to support peer learning in Landcare.⁴

Discussion here will also give CLEA intelligence on innovations emerging in the way Landcare organises, collaborates and influences, and point CLEA to those in Landcare who have the interest and capacity to step into mentoring and into organising peer learning.

Strategy 2. Use existing forums and introduce tools for peer learning

The forums and tools that support peer learning in Landcare needs strengthening. The **70:20:10 principle** highlights the fact that most learning happens on the job.⁵

- 70%** of learning comes through experience on the job to integrate, practise and master new skills, knowledge or changes in behaviour, supported by on-the-job encouragement and stimulation such as delegation and job rotation.
- 20%** of learning comes from daily contact with colleagues and management, face-to-face, in social networking, performance conversations, work shadowing, communities of practice and social activities.
- 10%** of learning comes from formal methods such as e-learning, the classroom, external courses.

Learning is always experiential and always social. It takes place in the flow of interaction with others, where we use what has worked in the past, or test a new response. Outside these coalface interactions, we talk with our peers about the way we are handling things, take note of their reactions and ideas, listen to their stories of similar situation. We negotiate a shared understanding of good practice.

CLEA needs to work first with the forums already operating within the Landcare workplace. It should add new forums judiciously. No-one in Landcare has much spare time to take on new activity—what we need is more effective learning discussions in the forums that everyone already uses. These include Landcare group and Network committees of management meetings, and regional meetings of Landcare coordinators and Network Chairs.

⁴ There is a stream of thinking going on in Landcare about its next steps as a movement that gets crowded out by the busy work of running projects. One of CLEA's challenges is to give that thinking a public platform, and help these communicators connect to each other across their region and across the State.

⁵ Kajewski, K. and Madsen, V., 2012, *Demystifying 70:20:10*, DeakinPrime, Deakin University.

In CLEA's first proposals, we suggested setting up discussion between clusters of Landcare Networks on recent learning, followed by "Practice Edge" forums at regional scale on themes identified across clusters. These might still be relevant, but need to develop from within existing forums. How do established meetings want to give more explicit attention to knowledge and skills for organising, collaborating and influencing?

Using what is already there also applies to tools for supporting peer learning. There are few established processes for Networks, groups or individuals to assess what aspects of their organising, collaborating and influencing need to be improved. Tools CLEA is developing or considering are:

- *Set Your Learning Focus/Call on Your Network*. If people start talking more with others, knowledge will move around more. CLEA has developed worksheets and a workshop process for individuals, groups and networks to decide on the one skill that want to concentrate on now, and to find who in their own networks they can help them.
- *Questions Without Easy Answers* is a tool to open and hold inquiry, and share learning around similar questions across groups and networks. Working out your Question Without Easy Answers lets an individual, group or network gather and test answers as they go, and hold onto important questions over time.
- *Lessons Learned* is a way for a project team, group or network to think about what they have learned recently, and put this on the record. Lessons Learned are backed by a *Story* that shows where the lessons have come from.
- *The Winds of Innovation* uses an interview with people doing new things in Landcare, to document their story and get the news out to other groups and networks. Landcare is innovating all the time, but when time is short, communicating about that often gets left till later.
- *I Need Help*. CLEA wants to work out how a group or network facing a challenge can connect to a group or network already dealing with that challenge. We figure that if we get stories moving around, it will be easier to find landcare people with expertise.
- *Access All Areas* is a way for groups and networks to talk up the line to regional, State and Federal level about the way the NRM system affects what they can do locally, and what would improve support for local initiative.

Strategy 3. Design a website

A website is a way to keep in touch with conversations happening across the State. A draft architecture for a website is being developed, guided by the following principles:

Support networking. Assume many points of expertise that form a network of people willing to share their insights and resources. Don't try to accumulate information in one place—it's impossible to maintain its currency. Instead, give people a place to say what they think, and hear what others are thinking in Landcare. Give them the facilities to profile their interests and experience, then allow others to connect with them as they choose.

Build around questions, not just answers. People still expect single right solutions, rather than divergent and partial answers, but this doesn't work with environmental problems

requiring many and evolving responses to complex situations. So don't headline the answers, headline the Questions Without Easy Answers (QWEA).

Find people who want to communicate and give them a platform. Most Landcare members and staff have their heads down creating and delivering projects. They talk with others in their locality, but don't go beyond this. They are good at face-to-face, and email, but not expansive communicators online or in documents. CLEA doesn't have the resources to get those stories, but there are passionate communicators with things to say. Give them a platform.

Integrate face-to-face events with the web platform. Learning in Landcare is mostly done face-to-face, and alongside others working on projects. So use the web as part of learning events, as a provocation to inquiry, a way to access resources and a way to share with others the lessons learned from current projects.

Support production. There is a large gap between articulating questions, stories and lessons learned, and *publishing* these. It's one thing to talk through what you've learned, another to turn that into compelling text or video in a form that lets other access a bit of what you know at a distance. But what time and expertise is needed for this production? To find out, begin by putting production on the agenda when existing or new forums consider learning.

Stay low-tech. Build around the digital habits of the majority, but make available less familiar formats—higher bandwidth audio or video, and online interaction—for those comfortable with these.

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