Innovating from the inside out: Practices for design for social learning in two projects for improving NRM governance in Victoria, Australia

Can episodes of innovation in environmental governance progress into permanent change in governance practices and institutional arrangements? How can people, as citizens and workers, change the governance systems in which they are embedded, so these better support their desire to care for the places where they live and work?

We describe two approaches to these questions in the natural resource management system in Victoria, Australia. In one, the Systemic Inquiry into NRM Governance, people from State, regional and local levels of natural resource management governance and across public and community sectors are brought together in a series of workshops to negotiate understanding of current constraints and opportunities, and to initiate improvements in governance through a cycle of analysis, design, testing, and redesign. In the second approach, support for peer learning is helping to articulate and share practices of organising, collaborating and influencing within the community environment sector.

We understand governance as governing, a practice continually confirmed and reinvented in interactions between participants, constrained by structuring forces but subject to the agency of actors. Both projects work from a design praxis backgrounded by the literature on governance of social-ecological systems and informed by theories and practices of social learning, communities of practice and action research. We draw in particular on a strand of social learning that understands innovation in governance as an emergent property of changes in practices and understandings enacted between people in contexts of concern.

We describe the institutional context of each project, the platforms for social learning being established to provide a holding space for discussion, decisions and action, and six practices of design for social learning:

• *proposing inquiry in action*, so that collaborative inquiry into governance establishes a locale alongside the programs of action created and managed in established institutional arrangements;

• *inviting participation* in constructive critique and redesign by declaring the limitations of current arrangements and possibilities for their redesign, and by directly inviting those with an interest in improving governing;

• *facilitating emergent knowing*, by facilitating with activist intent the interaction between contending views and differing perspectives, and by collaborating in documenting understandings as these evolve;
• **reframing situations and goals** as assumptions are revealed and challenged in iterations of inquiry and action;

• **learning to do it while you do it**, so that as participants work out what action will improve their situation, they simultaneously build the practices through which they question, guide and rework their actions;

• **designing in reflexivity** in a culture dominated by instrumental action, so that people make time and develop the skills to question what they are doing, and why; and,

• **recruiting allies**, to build institutional recognition of the value of innovators in governance, and the need for conducive institutional policies and funding.

Both projects have big ambitions and modest institutional support. The authors invite dialogue with other practitioner/researchers pursuing similar programs of support for innovators in governance.

**The Authors**

Dr Ross Colliver has been a consultant, facilitator and social researcher in the NRM field for 30 years. His PhD research used action research to work out why Landcare had been marginalised in the NRM system in Australia. He designs and facilitates projects that support innovation in governance.

Moragh Mackay is a PhD candidate with Charles Sturt University investigating systems approaches for co-inquiring into regionally-based NRM governance. She has 20 years experience supporting community environmental action and has been a driving force in development of community-based environmental stewardship in Victoria.

Dr Catherine Allan is Senior Lecturer at Charles Sturt University. Her research interests include regional scale adaptive management, and the related topics of participatory approaches and social learning. She is particularly interested in qualitative research approaches, including participatory and collaborative research which empowers communities.