

Doing, knowing, learning: systematization of experiences based on the knowledge management of HORIZONT3000

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This case study presents systematization of experiences as an innovative, creative and context-sensitive approach to reflect on experiences and to learn together and from each other. The protagonists of a systematization process are the people that actually lived the experience in question. However, the authors argue that facilitation is crucial for the success of this learning process. Drawing on the experience of the knowledge management program of HORIZONT3000, an Austrian non-governmental organization, the case study deals with the opportunities a systematization process offers as a participatory and emancipatory learning process. Depending on the composition of the facilitation team, the outcomes of a systematization vary considerably. In a successful systematization process, the traditional ideas of facilitation are overcome. The facilitators not only serve as moderators, who support others to achieve their goals, but the facilitators are part of the team, they have decision-making authority and they lead the process. The facilitators' central task is to create an environment of trust, respect and tolerance. The participants need to feel secure and confident to share their perspectives, feelings and interpretations without fear or shame in order to make learning and understanding possible.

Keywords: knowledge management; systematization; facilitation; non-governmental organizations; capacity development; Austria

Introduction

Knowledge management has become a very important development and learning tool in groups and organizations. However, many of these attempts do not reach beyond the mere gathering of information; they fail to be learning processes and to improve practice. In this case study, we corroborate our hypothesis that an approach involving all stakeholders actively and equally in the knowledge generating process is apt to overcome this shortfall. We argue that a group of people that lived a certain common

experience can understand its experience through self-reflection and self-awareness. The insights obtained in such a way increase the disposition to change and improve practice. To unleash the full potential of this process we believe that facilitation is of crucial importance. We therefore try to analyse with this case study what differences can be found between external facilitation of a systematization process and facilitation by a team of people from the organization/team that has lived the experience to be systematized.

We base our arguments on a certain knowledge generating method: systematization of experiences¹ (Luger 2003). Contrary to the technical sound of its name, systematization of experiences is a thoroughly practical approach. It originates in Latin America and draws on ideas of the pedagogy of liberation of Paulo Freire (1973; 2004). Following Paulo Freire's principles, in a systematization process we assume that everybody is the expert of his/her own living conditions, of his/her own life, of his/her own experiences. Systematization focuses on the views, perspectives and interpretations of the group of people that lived a certain common experience. Through interaction and exchange, it is possible to put the pieces together and to generate a common understanding of the world we live in. Systematization considers the inner dynamic, the particular social, cultural, economic, historical and political context. It is an individual and collective learning process performed and facilitated by the stakeholders of the experience themselves.

In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, we find the following definition of *facilitating*: to make (something) easier; to help cause (something); to help (something) run more smoothly and effectively.² In recent years, facilitation has become a renowned approach for accompanying group processes. According to Roger Schwarz:

Group facilitation is a process in which a person whose selection is acceptable to all members of the group, who is substantively neutral, and who has no decision-making authority, diagnoses and intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decision, to increase the group's effectiveness. (Schwarz, 2005: 3)

In the present case study, we argue that key elements for the success of any systematization process are the ability and sensibility as well as the composition and role of the facilitators. Systematization demands facilitators with distinct soft skills and leadership qualities in a working environment where very personal issues tend to come up. They need to have an intuitive awareness for power structures and subliminal conflicts. Above all, the quality of the whole process changes depending on the facilitators being stakeholders or not, as we will demonstrate below.

The case study draws on evidence of HORIZONT3000 knowledge management program, which we describe in the first part of the paper. In the following part, we outline the main features of a systematization process. Subsequently, to verify our arguments we compare two cases of systematization processes focusing on the role of the facilitators. The first case describes an experience where the project management team chose an external facilitator who did not participate in the experience. The second case describes a systematization process with a facilitation team that actually formed part of the project. Additionally, an expert in systematization supported the facilitation team. We base our conclusions on a desk study of reports and documentation provided by HORIZONT3000. Furthermore, we interviewed experienced facilitators of systematization processes and drew on our own experiences as a co-facilitator of systematization processes (Elisabeth Schmid) and as a team member of a systematization facilitation team (Petra Herout)

HORIZONT3000 Knowledge Management

HORIZONT3000 is an Austrian development non-governmental organization (NGO) with eight Catholic member organizations³. HORIZONT3000 is mainly funded by the Austrian Government (Austrian Development Cooperation), the European Union, contributions of its member organizations, Liechtensteinischer Entwicklungsdienst (LED), as well as the Medicor Foundation.

HORIZONT3000's core business is capacity development for local partner organizations. It is specialized in the monitoring and implementation of projects and in expert-sending to developing countries. HORIZONT3000 works closely with grass-roots organizations and its staff have profound knowledge of local circumstances in its partner countries all over the world. Its expertise is expressed by high-quality monitoring and project cycle management. HORIZONT3000 has wide experience with co-financing, open and active dialogue with the government and contributing to official development policies.⁴

Since the year 2010, HORIZONT3000 developed its knowledge management program KNOW-HOW3000, consisting of identification, capitalization, sharing and application of relevant experiences, good practices and success stories. HORIZONT3000 aims at fostering learning processes within its organization, its partner organizations and its network to support capacity development. Continuously reviewing actions within projects and programs and systematically capitalizing relevant experiences are important steps for internal learning processes and build the base for sharing experiences with others (HORIZONT3000, 2014). HORIZONT3000 attaches great importance to a participatory way of experience capitalization meaning

that representatives of most or all stakeholders involved in an action/experience are integrated in the capitalization process.

One method used by HORIZONT3000 and its partner organizations to capitalize experiences in a participatory way is systemization of experiences. Over 20 experiences/good practices have been systematized since 2010. Impressed by the insights reported by the partner organizations, the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 decided to carry out a systematization on the process of design, implementation and steering of the KNOW-HOW3000 program itself. Petra Herout participated in this systematization process as a team member of the facilitation team.

Systematization of experiences: a participatory method of knowledge generation

How to perform a systematization

In a systematization process, we are looking at a common experience, a definable and delimited practice, usually a project. Not the extent or the success of the project are key but its *significance*, its potential to provide relevant information to learn from the practice. A preliminary condition of every systematization process is that the protagonists of the systematization must have participated in the experience in some way. This approach is often very contrary to the learning experiences in the educational establishment following Western traditions.

Many different actors developed, applied and adapted the method of systematization. Thus, there are slightly different ways to perform a systematization. In its knowledge management program, HORIZONT3000 refers to the method as described in the manual by Luger and Cisneros (Luger 2003) which consist of the following steps:

Preparation

A systematization often challenges people's expectation about learning and working as a team. To avoid frustration the organization and the participants have to be aware of what they are getting into. The formal kick-off of a systematization process usually is a meeting or a workshop where the method and the process are explained thoroughly.

Step 1: The framework

A systematization of experiences starts with the definition of its boundaries. In the framework, three questions are answered:

- What is the objective of the systematization?

- Which parts of the experience will be taken into account in the systematization process?
- What are the central questions? Under which perspectives do we want to look at the experience?

Depending on the issues emphasized in the framework, the composition of the group conducting the systematization will vary. Usually the group consists of the facilitation team and people who participated in the project at various stages and organizational levels. The more diversity in the group, the more perspectives may emerge and enrich the process.

Step 2: The context(s)

The second step consists in identifying and describing the various relevant contexts. Although this step often devolves to a desk study and writing exercise, one should not forget to incorporate participants' opinions and views.

Step 3: The history of the experience; the actual course of the project

The next phase involves biography work, telling and writing down the history/process. The group focusses on what happened and not on what was supposed to happen or what was planned to happen. The objective is to describe the experience from all stakeholders' points of view, not to interpret and even less to judge or to evaluate.

Step 4: The critical analysis

At this stage, the participants question, analyse and reflect on the experience. Why have we done what we have done? It is crucial to include a wide range of opinions and perspectives to identify key elements and to find turning points in the experience. These insights are the basis to derive valuable lessons learned.

Step 5: Sharing experiences

An important step of the process is to share the findings and to seek dialogue and feedback. There are many different ways to do so – in print, electronically via Internet or by using audio-visual media, etc. At best, the information in the book, video or website is a starting point for a better common practice.

Facilitating a systematization process

What distinguishes systematization from other approaches is –[í] its intention to disrupt the matrix of dichotomies that opposes subject and object that extends to opposites like: nature and culture; reason and emotion; academic knowledge and popular knowledge; handwork and headwork (Fonseca Falkembach 2014: 13). Consequently, systematization as learning process tries to overcome the hierarchy

between teacher and student, between analyser and provider of information. The point is to learn from each other. As mentioned above, the facilitators are stakeholders who were involved in the project to be systematized, they are equal among equals. However, it is the facilitator's task to unleash the energy and the know-how of the group.

In this participatory process, one single person might provide facilitation. Usually, however, out of all participants, a group of three to five persons is selected to facilitate the systematization process. Although in most cases, an external consultant who knows the method and has experience in working with diverse and potentially conflicting groups supports the facilitator(s), we do not analyse his/her contribution. In our case study, we focus on the role of the facilitation team (or single facilitator) and the value added to the process whether this team formed part of the project to be systematized or not.

Two cases of facilitating systematization processes at HORIZONT3000

At HORIZONT3000, the facilitation of systematization processes has varied significantly within the last ten years. We found systematization processes that were highly participative in their facilitation and others that were facilitated solely by an external consultant. The following two cases will demonstrate how group facilitation with the facilitators being stakeholders of the experience differs from a mainly external facilitation of a systematization process.

External facilitator

Step 1: The framework

The project managers elaborated the systematization framework (topic, key aspects, etc.), prepared terms of references for the facilitation of the systematization process and searched for a facilitator. The external consultant proposed a methodology for the process.

Step 2: The context(s)

The external facilitator retrieved and described the context of the project/experience.

Step 3: The history of the experience; the course of the project

The external consultant revised existing project documentation, prepared and facilitated group discussions with different project stakeholders to retrieve the history/process and conducted individual interviews. She elaborated time-lines of the experience/project based on information retrieved.

Step 4: The critical analysis

The external facilitator prepared and facilitated group discussions to analyse the findings. Based on this analysis, she elaborated recommendations and conclusions and documented them.

Step 5: Sharing experiences

As a last step, the external facilitator compiled the systematization report and presented it to the project team and management of the organization. The organization was discussing the findings with the facilitator and internally. No major sharing of recommendations took place.

The **advantage** of this form of facilitation is that representatives of the project team and stakeholders need relatively few resources for conducting the systematization process as they only participate in workshops, give interviews and give feedback on conclusion and findings.

The **disadvantage** is that the project team and stakeholders still act as "source of information" and not as "collector" and "main analysts." Even though the project team and representatives of the project stakeholders retrieved and analysed the process themselves in workshops, the organization did not perceive the ownership of the systematization process, as the external facilitator chose the methods, questions and group constellations and bestrode the structure and format of the final systematization report. Consequently, the project team and the management did not take up all conclusions and recommendations and hardly shared the lessons learned that were gathered.

Facilitation team of the organization, with guidance from external facilitator

Preparation

The project team searched for a facilitator for a systematization process and presented the scope of the experience to be systematized to him. Guided by the external facilitator, a facilitation team with representatives of different organisational units (including management) was built. The external facilitator was part of the facilitation team for the systematization process.

Step 1: The framework

Guided by the external facilitator, the facilitation team decided on the experience they wanted to systematize. Together they elaborated the systematization framework and chose which stakeholders needed to be involved in the process. The external facilitator proposed a structure for the systematization report, which was arranged to be a living document fed by all facilitation team members.

Step 2: The context(s)

The facilitation team divided the task of retrieving and describing the different contexts of the experience according to their role within the project. Each facilitation team-member contributed his/her description of contexts to the living document of the systematization report.

Step3: The history of the experience; the course of the project

The external facilitator guided the facilitation team in finding and defining the appropriate questions for retrieving the history of the project. The team then decided to use workshops, individual interviews and document revision as methods for this step. The facilitation team divided the work for document revision, conducting interviews and planning workshops. The external facilitator co-moderated the workshops so that the other facilitation team-members could participate in the discussion while also facilitating the workshop. The facilitation team compiled the outcomes and documented the history guided by the external facilitator who helped to find a structure for the history. The systematization framework was slightly adjusted by the team.

Step 4: The critical analysis

Similar to step 3, the team planned and prepared various workshops for critical analysis with representatives of different project stakeholders. The documented history of the project was presented to the workshop participants and served as base for the analysis. The external facilitator guided the facilitation team in determining questions and methods for workshops and moderated the workshops. The facilitation team compiled and documented the outcomes of the critical analysis. Based on outcomes of the workshops, the facilitation team elaborated conclusions and recommendations. The external facilitator guided them regarding the structure of the documentation.

Step 5: Sharing experiences

The facilitation team presented the conclusions and recommendations to the project team and stakeholders as well as to representatives of other organisations having made similar experiences. After a thorough discussion, the facilitation team elaborated the final systematization report and presented outcomes to the project team and organization. A sharing document (summary of systematization) was produced

and disseminated to interested people. Most of recommendations that arose from the systematization were integrated into project work and the organization even before the final systematization report was produced.

The **advantage** of this form of facilitation is that the project team itself can act as collector and analyst of information increasing the chance that recommendations ó elaborated by the team ó are taken on by the organization. The facilitation team gets to know and understands the organization/project in depth and from another perspective as it gathers, hence listens to, stories/comments directly.

The **disadvantage** of this type of facilitation clearly is that the facilitation team needs a considerable amount of time and resources for the systematization. Further, the fact that the facilitation team wears two hats ó facilitating and partly participating in the systematization process ó can influence or even bias the discussions.

Conclusions

Systematization is simple, but it is not easy. As a participatory method, it depends on the people. It depends on the participantsø willingness to share experiences, feelings, views and on their ability to question and to explore. Since systematization does not end with the analysis but aims at improving the practice, it is equally important that the participants have the need to learn and are willing to learn and are able to introduce changes.

In the cases described above it becomes obvious that the facilitators influence decisively the possible benefit from the participantsø expertise and the potential of knowledge generation and learning. Based on our analysis of the HORIZONT3000 knowledge management program, the following lessons learned on how to facilitate a systematization process can be drawn:

Creating an atmosphere of openness and tolerance

Systematization is subject to the quality of the inputs and analysis of the participants. A systematization process implies nothing less than a reflection about oneø s identity, or at least about some aspects of it. In such a setting circumstances can become very personal and even intimate. Only if the facilitation team achieves to create a secure space the participants will be able to express themselves truly. We believe that an atmosphere of openness and tolerance is the core condition for every systematization process. The participants need to know or rather they need to feel that their experiences are taken seriously, that their views are valued and that their perspectives are respected.

According to HORIZONT3000's experience, the soft skills of the facilitator team are crucial for a successful systematization process. An apt facilitator shows professionalism, empathy, authenticity and integrity. He or she cares about people and their opinions. Rather than distributing tasks, he or she allows time for relationship building.

One might correctly argue that the above-mentioned characteristics are true for any facilitator in any process. In HORIZONT3000 knowledge management program however, we noticed that a systematization process is virtually pointless if these conditions are not given or cannot be achieved. Without trust and mutual respect, the participants will not disclose the process accurately and there will be no meaningful reflection and analysis of the learning experience.

Generating commitment and empowerment

In a systematization process, the facilitators' very distinct social skills are essential but not sufficient. In some of the systematizations in the HORIZONT3000 knowledge management program – one of them being the case described above – a key condition for a systematization process was neglected. With the dubious argument of buying time, the respective project team engaged an external facilitator to guide the systematization. Even though the facilitator might have had all soft skills necessary, she had one irresolvable shortcoming: she had not lived the experience.

Naturally, even a facilitator who has not participated in the experience can draw conclusions and make more or less valid suggestions for improvement. The difference does not lie in the ability to formulate lessons learned but in the quality of these findings and the acceptance by the people concerned. In the HORIZONT3000 knowledge management program, we noticed a significant difference if the facilitators were part of the experience or not when it came to improving the practice.

Following Paulo Freire's arguments, learning is the process of awareness raising of one's own history, of one's own experiences, rather than absorbing ready-made, definitive answers. As learning and knowledge generation and ultimately improving practice in the spirit of Paulo Freire are the goals of a systematization, it becomes clear why the facilitators are not supposed to stand outside and above any other participant. They are part of the whole, only they perform the additional task of *leading* the process.

In the case described above where the facilitation team consisted of different stakeholders, it was much easier to create commitment of the participants to change and to improve practice. In an effective and truly successful systematization process

the power of the facilitators leads to the empowerment of the participants. Power is the precondition to make things happen and having the willingness and competence to act is the core qualification to improve our lives.

Composition of the facilitation team

Therefore, it is worthwhile to spend some thought on who shall form part of the facilitation team. Besides having strong social skills and having participated in the experience, the ideal facilitator team comprises 3-4 people of the organization/project, representing the different stakeholders of the experience/project to be systematized. Experience has shown at HORIZONT3000 that members of the facilitation team need to be given time to take on this task.

In practice, it is useful to integrate the management of the organization performing the systematization into the facilitation team. When management is part of the facilitation team, recommendations are more easily integrated into an organization's work. If time constraints of management do not allow for being represented in the facilitation team, it is crucial to integrate management in the development of the framework and the critical analysis stage. When the management together with the other participants analyse the experience, there is no need to convince each other about changes.

Know-how of the facilitation team

Everyone regardless of his or her education or social position can participate in facilitating systematization. However, there is special know-how required. Above all, the disposition of the participants to learn and to improve is essential. All other skills can be acquired in the process, or the respective tasks can be distributed to members who have the competences.

A facilitation team should bring along knowledge in process facilitation, leadership qualities, and writing skills. It is important that the facilitation team has a basic understanding of the method and that at least one person comprehends the method thoroughly. That person can dedicate him- or herself to focusing on the application of the method and being an authority on it. How does a systematization work? Why do we perform a systematization (rather than an evaluation, for instance)? What kinds of results can a systematization deliver? What is expected from the participants? What are the limitations of the method? This knowledge is important for the elaboration of the framework, as well as to adjust the expectations of the participants. If this know-how does not exist within the organization, an external facilitator taking on the role on guiding on the method should complement the team as in the case described above. It would even be good to have conflict management/resolution skills within the team in order to allow for an atmosphere of trust if old conflicts arise during the retrieving

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the history and analysis step. However, nobody of the facilitator team should have been part of any conflict that existed in the experience to be systematized.

Additionally some of the participants need to have knowledge in interviewing, data collection and organization/documentation. The amount of information gathered in a systematization process is considerable, and the accurate procession of the information helps to reach the objective of the systematization efficiently. It is the responsibility of the facilitators to distribute the tasks taking advantage of the skills and the knowledge of the participants.

The merit and the achievement of a systematization always depend on the people. We conclude that a successful and wisely decided facilitation team can add great value to knowledge generation and learning within an organization or a project and lead to a higher chance of taking on recommendations and lessons learnt.

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¹ There are at least two possibilities to refer to *systematization*: systematization of data and information or systematization of experiences. In this text, when talking about systematization we refer to *systematization of experiences*.

² Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d., *facilitate*
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/facilitating?show=0&t=1415464075> [2015/02/28]

³ DKA, Austrian Catholic Men Movement - KMBÖ, Austrian Catholic Women Movement ó kfb, Bruder und Schwester in Not ó Diocese Innsbruck, Bruder und Schwester in Not - Katholische Aktion Kärnten, Caritas Austria, Welthaus of the Diocese Graz-Seckau, as well as Referat Mission und Entwicklung of the Archdiocese of Vienna

⁴ <http://www.horizont3000.at/> [2015/02/28]