

Introducing Conversations for AET Institutional Transformation

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It's great to see you all here. I will be the last 'talking head' for the workshop. During the past few months I've had the pleasure of extended discussions with the Conversation Co-Leaders who will be animating our conversations on agricultural education and training (AET) institutional transformation over the next three days. This 'brain trust' will guide the core of our program. What I want to do at this time is to set the tone and framework to launch those conversations.

I asked each Conversation Co-Leader to tell a little bit about themselves during the introductions. Here's my story. Back in the 1980s, I was hired to teach sociology in a new institution of higher education in Malaysia. The objective of the program was to provide an AA degree (in English) to Bumiputra who would then go on to complete the last 2 years of a 4-year degree at a US university. It was a wonderful experience in institution building, one financed and consequently governed by the Malaysians. Accountability should be ringing in your ears, but that's not where I'm going with this particular story.

On the wall in the ITM/MUCIA administration building, shaped in the form of a vase, a Chinese proverb was posted:

A wise man adapts himself to circumstances as
water shapes itself to the vessel that contains it.

I appreciated and respect the message. However, in the particular context, I felt it represented an administration apologia, which ultimately constrained the preparation of students for study in the US. One day I added my own posting:

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the
unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world
to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the
unreasonable man. ([Shaw, 1903](#))

I suspect that some of you that know me might recognize me in this story. OK, let's have fun and share experiences in order to make something of them. I'm going to be posing some challenges for you. There won't be any wrong answers, but there are some ineffective pathways we may want to avoid. I'm asking you, literally, to blaze a new trail, one that will lead us to some "unreasonable" next steps at the end of this workshop.

The objective of the workshop is:

To elicit and document tacit knowledge for improved interventions in agricultural education and training in order to improve interventions for the sustained local production of highly qualified and motivated agricultural professionals and entrepreneurs.

To do so, we are going to embark on a set of conversations. I emphasize conversations, this is a concept you'll be hearing more about from Dave Kraybill. The idea is that conversations are an informal way to explore new possibilities in a non-binding fashion. I'm hoping, nevertheless, that these conversations will ultimately matter. But first, I'm going to quickly remind us of the challenges we face and will explain WHY we are discussing these challenges in terms of institutional transformation. This will involve introducing the concepts of adaptive management in complex adaptive systems, the need for long-term perspectives, learning for entrepreneurship and innovation; and highlighting some of what we already know about project design. And then, I'll discuss HOW we are going to address these issues through design thinking. We'll conclude with a quick overview of the program.

The Educational Challenge

The InnovATE Project has conducted a number of studies and reviewed others over the past few years that indicate a considerable challenge before us (see Table 1). The findings suggest that although experiential learning is valued and emphasized by faculty and administrators, the tradition of memorization is profoundly ingrained. Scientific methods of observation and hypothesis testing are largely ignored. Problem-solving and critical thinking are absent.

Table 1: The Educational Challenge

Instructional quality is characterized by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professor reading from the notes he took as a student• Science taught as the memorization of facts• A lack of employable skills and relevance• A lack of coherence between learning objectives, pedagogical practices, and student assessment

Undervaluing agricultural education leads to low morale and rent-seeking behaviors of talented faculty members. There is a lack of incentives for quality (student-oriented) teaching suggesting that even minimal rewards may help to re-focus efforts. My quick fix or silver bullet would be to institute 'Teacher of the Year' Awards. But decades of quick fixes haven't worked, unless they were framed in an institutional context.

Institutional Transformation for Sustainable Development

Why institutional transformation? In order to develop capacity to function in a globalized economy and society and to foster the independence of the targeted populations and societies, we need to change the way teaching and learning are conducted. AET institutions are central to the

effort to populate local systems with competent entrepreneurs and employees with initiative on a sustained basis. To do so, we will need to take better account of the cultural, structural, and political context of educational institutions; that is, multiple relationships. It's not that we haven't been aware of these circumstances, but that we haven't effectively accounted for them in our interventions.

In preparing this presentation I came across a new word to describe the results targeted by these interventions: independence. We're supposed to use it in telling the story of development impact. I like it. Sustainability is independence. But, how do we measure that? We are also going to need theory-based approaches accounting for context. Let me set the stage.

Theoretical science made critical advances at the beginning of the 20th Century. The key breakthrough can be summarized in the phrase: we are participants in the universe along with our observations. It is only now that the implications for the applied sciences are becoming apparent. The transition to complex adaptive systems requires knowledge and skills for adaptive management and changes in our underlying paradigms. Consider the recent evolution in our paradigms from: Farming systems research and extension (FSR/E), where researchers learned to collaborate across disciplines in farmers' fields; and agricultural knowledge and information systems (AKIS), where transferring knowledge locally began to make sense; to agricultural innovation systems (AIS), where users became active participants in knowledge creation (Annor-Frempong and Jones, 2014). Learning is not something we do apart from the world we live in.

This is a dramatic shift – from research to learning – the full engagement of users in the knowledge creation/learning process. We need to think about this in terms of what it means for AET. How much of this transition is reflected in our current AET systems?

Complex Adaptive Management

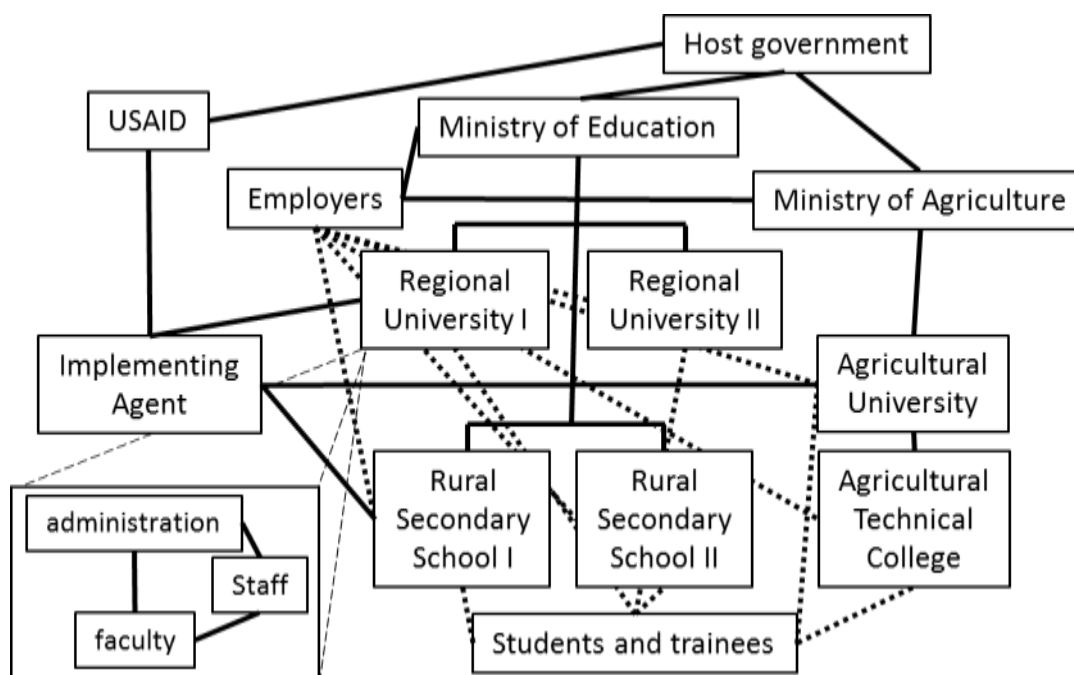
I think we've all seen models of adaptive management before. And in one way or another we'd like to imagine ourselves in these models. Unfortunately, our bureaucracies, disciplines, and careers often get in the way.

What I want to draw your attention to here is that learning by doing, adaptive management, is an **iterative** process. It involves multiple learning cycles for processes with different temporal characteristics. It is also a collective effort. Through iteration, little by little, progress can be made in each successive cycle. Social learning for adaptive management is characterized by: negotiation, resistance, and accommodation. We need to emphasize the notion of negotiation as central to these processes and the social relationships that structure them.

Successful negotiation requires building mutual respect and trust across boundaries. Listening is the most important skill and practice. However, to provide leadership we must also express ourselves. Influencing stakeholder decision-making requires that communications be: credible, providing scientific adequacy for technical evidence and arguments; salient, that is relevant to local decision-maker assessment of needs; and legitimate, afford the perception that information has been respectful of stakeholders' divergent values & beliefs ([Cash, et al., 2002](#)). We have traditionally favored credibility in science; but is the message salient/relevant? Is it legitimate or fair? Serious negotiation activities involve: translation; social construction; simultaneous communication with multiple audiences; and power struggles.

Institutional transformation involves negotiating new relationships among multiple stakeholders. I should point out that institutional transformation is an integral component of [USAID’s Local Systems Approach for Local Solutions](#). We need to be thinking about how we can better integrate our practices with that language and discourse, and perhaps, how we can go beyond the 30 percent aspirational budgetary target to higher levels of investment. Systems and institutions are intimately interlinked. There are multiple actors and multiple levels of organization involved in complex and nested relationships (see Figure 1). The devil is in the details. Negotiation occurs across levels as well as within them.

Figure 1: Relationship Building in the AET Stakeholder Networks



Growing Awareness of the Need for Long-term Perspectives

There has been considerable recognition of our collective need to foster institutional change. A CDI-ICRA-KIT 2013 Writeshop on capacity development projects for tertiary agricultural education organizations found that “as they are currently carried out [projects] are not able to successfully achieve the sustained changes required” ([Salm et al., 2014](#)). Our current project logic isn’t up to the task.

Four concrete necessary conditions for institutional change were identified, which need to be accounted for in intervention design frameworks. Namely that: (1) Team building based on trust and good communication is essential to change processes; (2) Continuity is necessary to keep up the momentum for change; (3) Flexible administrative procedures are crucial for changes to take root; and most importantly, (4) Institutional change is a process that takes a long time.

USAID has also been reviewing their institutional change portfolio ([Annor-Frempong, 2015](#)) and recognized the need for change in the way they do business. With respect to institutional strengthening, the [FtF HICD Strategy Review \(Dichter et al., 2015\)](#) notes that: “the nature of the demands in USAID result in compromising [the principles of institutional strengthening]” (p. 4). The core message of the Strategic Review was: Slow down. Deepen and broaden staff understanding of HICD/ICD. Do more up-front contextual analysis. Undertake fewer HICD interventions with more focus and attention to critical mass.

They concluded that: the chief challenge is the “**pressure for results**”. Improved tweaking of institutional development techniques will do (and has done) little in the long run to promote sustained institutional transformation and development. If we don’t change the way we structure the delivery of such programs we won’t achieve sustainable results.

Capacity for Innovation: The Accountability and Attribution Challenge

Budgetary allocations to M&E (once pegged at about 10%) have been increasing and even more has been allocated for communications in order to transmit those results and successes to decision-makers and other stakeholders. The challenge of accountability has become overwhelming. Yet, accountability and attribution continue to befuddle us. Einstein said: ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.’ I guess the critical point was made by a Zimbabwean scholar cited by Michael Edwards (1989):

“The natural consequence of a concern for technical interpretations of reality is that knowledge, and the power to control it, become concentrated in the hands of those with the technical skills necessary to understand the language and methods being used. . . . The logical corollary of a world-view which sees development as a series of technical transfers mediated by experts is that, given a sufficient number of situations, or projects, in which these transfers are made, ‘development’ will occur. But, as Sithembiso Nyoni has pointed out, no country in the world has ever developed itself through projects; development results from a long process of experiment and innovation through which people build up skills, knowledge and self-confidence necessary to shape their environment in ways which foster progress towards goals such as economic growth, equity in income distribution, and political freedom.”

Success in a globalized economy doesn’t result from the introduction of a single innovation. The complex adaptive systems of our modern economies depend on the continuous flow of innovations (Rycroft & Kash, 1999). Learning how to adapt is the key to independence and is a collective effort requiring problem-solving orientations, specialized skills, and entrepreneurs throughout the community (Leeuwis, 2004; Davis et al., 2007; [Brown & Martin, 2015](#)).

Unfortunately, our standard indicator-driven results frameworks are insufficient to measure change in complex adaptive systems. We need to develop methods to effectively communicate iterative feedback in order to demonstrate accountability. Attribution may still elude us since it is difficult to identify where ideas come from in complex incremental innovation (Rycroft & Kash, 1994). Furthermore, accountability needs to be maintained with respect to all partners, particularly local decision-makers. In this regard we are consistent with the Local Systems approach: in-depth knowledge of context is the key to linking program implementation with local assessment.

Knowledge for Capacity Strengthening

I found this list of capacity strengthening suggestions buried in the 2015 HICD Strategic Review (see Table 2). It reflects the type of themes our Conversation Co-Leaders have been talking about in their exchanges over the past few months (see [the blogs](#)). Given that we are still discussing these issues a decade and a half after this list was drafted, it suggests that we have the collective knowledge about ‘what’ to do, but haven’t yet figured out ‘how’ to do it. That is the task for us this week.

Table 2: Horton’s lessons for capacity strengthening

Nine lessons on management of a capacity strengthening program (Horton 1999)
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Project design is much more than a technical process; it is essentially one of negotiation.2. In capacity-building projects, design activities cannot end when implementation begins.3. Capacity-building efforts should prepare managers to deal with complexity, uncertainty and change.4. In capacity-building efforts, it is essential to collaborate rather than patronize.5. Organizational assessment is a complex social process, intertwined with organizational politics.6. In designing capacity-building projects, it is essential to involve managers and staff members in assessing needs and opportunities.7. Action-learning strategies offer great potential for capacity building.8. In the context of strategic management and organizational learning, PM&E take on new meanings.9. Training is most effective when it is designed to serve a purpose within an organizational change process.

from: Posthumus et al., 2013:40

Design Thinking: A New Approach for Designing Interventions

We will approach our task using design thinking ([Brown & Martin, 2015](#)). Project design is composed of two elements: (1) the design of the **end-product** itself (the desired outcome); and (2) the design of the **process** by which a valued product is achieved. Standard project design tends to focus on the end-product, shaping its characteristics (improving the model for ‘what’). In this workshop, we will focus on **the processes through which a valued product emerges** (improving the model for ‘how’). Designing for a specific problem involves considerable understanding of the local context and the elaboration of theory-based approaches. Consequently, universalistic single hypothesis theories will not be appropriate, locally grounded explanations and hi-‘stories’ will be involved.

The fundamental issue undergirding design practice is the relationship between determinacy and **indeterminacy**. Indeterminacy implies that there are no definitive conditions or limits to design problems (i.e., they are ‘wicked problems’). Although “the subject matter of design is potentially **universal** in scope . . . in the process of application the designer must discover or invent a **particular** subject out of the problems and issues of specific circumstances” (Buchanan, 1992). Consequently, viable solutions are achieved through **iterative interaction** with decision-makers

and stakeholders in their local context. Those stakeholders include all the different partners, the donors, the implementers, and the people on the ground in their various system structures and roles. As Buchanan (1992) points out, “intervention is a multi-step process consisting of many small steps, not a few big ones.” Interaction with users weeds out bad designs and builds confidence in good ones.

I hope you’ve had a chance to read our [Conversation Co-Leader blogs](#). They reflect the in-depth discussions our Conversation Co-Leaders have been holding over the past few months. Those conversations covered not only ‘what’ went right and wrong in their attempts at institutional transformation, but also ‘how’ to improve the management and implementation of such projects and programs. There is a rich set of ideas incorporated in their blogs.

Their conversations started in response to questions concerning the critical challenges they faced in the process of institutional transformation. This led to consideration of theories of change and accountability. Although no definitive answers for institutional transformation were found, recurrent issues were identified and consensus achieved on a few principles. Interwoven throughout these conversations was the theme of relationship building and the role of trust in viable working relationships. Relationship management involved the time needed to establish working relationships, build confidence, and adjust to new practices, as well as the need for transparency and flexibility.

Understanding of local contexts was addressed repeatedly. The ‘how’ themes of budgeting and contracting associated with relationship building were raised focusing on issues of trust, power, and accountability. All Conversation Co-Leaders stressed the importance of leaders and the critical role of champions (within various institutions and partners) in stimulating and cajoling transformation processes. This was linked to the ultimate role of governance systems that could initiate change, block it, or assure the policy changes needed for sustained transformation.

Workshop Conversations

This is where this workshop begins, building on the insights of our predecessors and the groundwork of our Conversation Co-Leaders. You are here because you have expertise on AET institutional transformation processes. I am impressed with the thousand years of collective experience in this room. We seek to elicit and document that tacit knowledge you’ve been keeping to yourself all those years and to collaborate in reflective thinking about potential next steps for designing interventions. We need to articulate our collective wisdom clearly for the next generation of AET thought leaders and implementers in order to ensure that those who follow us are not repeating all of our mistakes or missteps.

Ultimately, we are seeking to identify the next steps for achieving institutional transformation outcomes. Among those next steps are the creation of organizational space for innovations and experiments, improved mechanisms for contextual accountability, and other next steps that we collectively identify. We have a post-it board or parking lot for ideas over here to make sure that we keep on the right paths and don’t lose track of alternative paths that we could be perusing.

The workshop will be very open and participatory. To facilitate this, we have Moderators and Conversation Co-Leaders to animate our discussions. Essentially informal, a couple of rules will need to be followed: respectful listening, structured conversations, all interventions will be brief and to the point, and turn off your cell phones.

Today, we will begin with brief personal introductions by the Conversation Co-Leaders (both US project implementers and host institution representatives). This will be followed over the course of the next two days by thematic conversations on: (1) trust and partnerships; (2) national AET system transformation; (3) curriculum development and pedagogical reform; (4) budgeting and contracting relationships; and (5) governance and leadership. The Moderator will introduce each conversation session, followed by brief focus remarks by the designated Conversation Co-Leaders. The core of each session will involve open discussion facilitated by the Moderator. A World Café will provide opportunities for some design brainstorming and we will end the workshop with a session identifying our next steps.

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