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AN INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM FOR LEARNING AND INNOVATION IN THE FIELD OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT¹

Abstract

The business and industrial sectors have been known for using learning-driven knowledge management and innovation as a way to remain competitive and succeed even in difficult environments.

While it may seem intuitive and logical to transfer industrial and business models – informed by the legacy of Positivism and experimental science – to the field and practice of international development, evidence shows that poverty is a complex and multidimensional reality that may in many significant social realms require a different paradigm and approach than those used in business (Easterly, Herda, Escobar, Sen – for example). Despite its pervasive influence, the positivist form of thinking – that was the progenitor of industrialization – cannot be applied to all aspects of social reality.

International development – with its cultural and economic implications – can be understood more accurately within an interpretive paradigm that acknowledges the meanings that are at the basis of social reality. This paradigm offers a vantage point that is historically situated and provides an understanding of human rationality and action that is sensitive to the tacit dimension of human judgment and imagination. It is in this very paradigm that innovation and learning hold fundamental.

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This paper argues that innovation and learning play a crucial role in the field of international development, a role that is inseparable from the very nature of development and critical to its sustainable practices. The nature of development work requires practitioners, researchers and local communities to engage in an ongoing process of collaborative understanding and interpretation of the structural, historical, social and natural factors underlying the complexity and multidimensionality of poverty. Accordingly, practices of learning and innovation in development – while concerned with internal process efficiencies and knowledge management systems – need principally to address issues within a social context, including but not limited to a collective understanding of a shared history, imagination and reconfiguration of a common future, expressed by civic awareness and participation.

When communities and practitioners together participate in analyzing and interpreting development challenges, a shared understanding and meaning of the events emerge. What is revealed is an intimate connection between actions – represented by lived events – and ideas – informing the process of understanding and the generation of meaning. This connection is only possible within an interpretive paradigm because it counters the prevailing positivist tendency to reduce meaning to behavior and to empty human action and rationality of intentionality.

Within a development setting, a community that is capable of making sense of a current state of events, through the imagination of future possibilities – that is, in light of what it could become – engages in the very essence of learning and innovation. The engagement of learning and innovation within the medium of imagination is a critically important moment in the complex process of development and provides the foundation for its sustainability.

Accordingly, if, within an interpretive domain, learning and innovation are human faculties, they become integral parts of who we are as individuals and communities. This means that learning and innovation cannot be separated from our faculty to act. Moreover, this is why learning and innovation, in a development setting, cannot be seen as add-on practices or extra activities to implement. Rather they become the core of our action, a *modus operandi*.

In order for learning and innovation to come into play through the medium of imagination and, in turn, for understanding to undergird cooperative action, a development paradigm grounded in the interpretive science may be worthy of consideration. Hence, this paper draws from the work of Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Jürgen Habermas to establish its foundation in critical hermeneutics. Such a foundation, it is argued, supports a paradigmatic shift in development discourse and practices that necessitates imagination, understanding, learning, and innovation to become integral faculties to human existence through which the possibilities and potentials of a person and a community are both disclosed and acted upon.