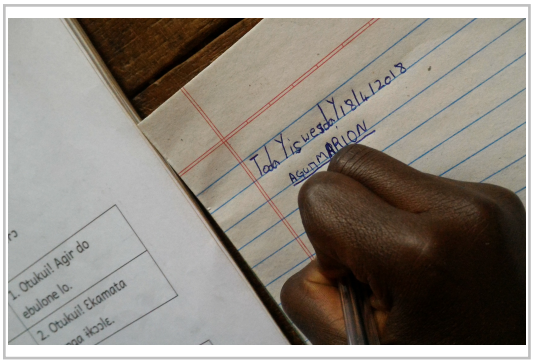
2018 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Reimagining the Learning Agenda to Increase Reading Achievement in Uganda



Literacy Research in Kumi District, Uganda. Credit: USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program.

Name: T. Brunette, R. Nabacwa, R.Jordan & P. Muyingo

Organization: Research Triangle Institute, Inc.

Summary:

The USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program (SHRP), the Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA) along with the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), made significant, steady impact on early grade reading throughout Uganda, but we believe it could be greater. Despite the pervasive learning orientation from the onset, teams did not always take action to adapt to challenges uncovered in monitoring and evaluative efforts. We, jokingly, coined the phrase "lessons not learned" as challenges persisted without commensurate action.

With CLA institutionalized and in regular use (including after action debriefs and deliberate pause and reflect moments), this year it was the learning agenda that came to the forefront to push learning and adaptation even further. As learning agenda discussions progressed, we saw what a powerful tool it could be. First, to bring partners and technical teams into research and learning (to increase ownership and use of results), and also as a communication and coordination tool. Partners combine ideas, energy and resources to identify and solve challenges through research and learning. It also incorporates and track MoES research needs and priorities.

Initial results are positive as technical teams are putting forth learning activities for the agenda and pairing with M and E teams to undertake the research. Just this month, we jointly designed action research to compare large scale residential teacher training to smaller, local training which will guide future MoES training efforts. We believe this is a model that can be used by programs or institutions who are looking to increase learning to action.

1. Which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Framework are reflected *most* in your case (select up to 5 subcomponents)?

- [x] Internal Collaboration
- [x] External Collaboration
- [ ] Technical Evidence Base
- [ ] Theories of Change
- [ ] Scenario Planning
- [ ] M&E for Learning
- [ ] Pause & Reflect
- [x] Adaptive Management
- [ ] Openness
- [x] Relationships & Networks
- [x] Continuous Learning & Improvement
- [ ] Knowledge Management
- [ ] Institutional Memory
- [ ] Decision-Making
- [ ] Mission Resources
- [ ] CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

2. What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

SHRP and LARA along with the MoES-implemented Uganda Teacher and School Effectiveness Project, support early grade reading in 80% of government schools in Uganda. Using similar teaching and learning materials and training methods, children in program schools are reading more than those in control schools, but many children are still not fluent readers. Both SHRP and LARA had robust research and learning components from the outset -- the M and E teams ensure that technical teams are working and learning together towards common program outcomes.

Despite this learning focus, the MoES, other programs working in the same development space, even program technical teams, often did not take action to adapt to challenges uncovered through monitoring and evaluative -- or tackled them in a "checking the box" manner, that would not lead to systematic change. An example of this was the finding that, one month into the school year, teachers were already several weeks behind in the curriculum. It seemed clear -- we need to guide teachers who had fallen behind (should they skip lessons? double up?) as well as make modifications to the teacher training and perhaps the materials themselves (trimming down content to reflect the reality). As the next round of teacher training approached, it appeared to be business as usual, with little attention to the issue. We knew we could do better to support teachers in the classroom to teach children how to read.

In the past, the learning agenda was developed by the M and E team and research activities carried out mainly by M and E staff. We wanted to involve relevant stakeholders, but we didn't want to overwhelm or make more work (careful to avoid the "M and E as mosquito in the ear" scenario). How could we increase ownership of the learning process in order to increase ownership of results leading to programmatic and systemic changes? We knew that the key to adapting was to be more collaborative on the learning front. "Who else can we include?" in discussions, research and learning became one of our mantras. The learning agenda now bridges the gap between learning and action.

3. Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

In the past, we have used various CLA tools with the thinking that if there was a better, more effective way of doing things, we wanted to be doing it. CLA helped us frame learning in a more inclusive and intentional manner. USAID/Uganda has always been receptive to and encouraged programmatic changes to work plans and strategy based on evidence and learning. M and E has always been at the center of both SHRP and LARA - leading work planning, reviewing performance and bringing together technical teams for continual dialogue on progress and action. CLA has helped us to make the learning more deliberate and to bring people together to identify challenges and look for solutions using research based evidence.

Using CLA thinking and principles, we have reimagined our learning agenda to help us to increase the communication and coordination towards programmatic learning and adaptation because it is now a working document across projects and MOES, designed so that all parties can:

- provide their inputs and updates as we learn more and as new questions arise,
- add their interests to promote a coordinated effort in researching the issues
- collaborate across projects and MOES so that learning and adapting doesn't happen in isolation within individuals or individual projects

CLA, and, more specifically, the learning agenda is key to addressing major barriers to getting more children reading in Uganda.

4. Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

Reading reform in Uganda has benefited from learning and adaptive management approaches though out. CLA has led to more sustainable support to teachers in the classroom and more relevant teaching and learning materials to carry out the MoES vision of mother tongue instruction. As we reflected on future learning, we started with a routine update of the learning agenda along with annual work planning. It was only once we started the revision process, that we realized the potential of the agenda to fill many CLA gaps including: internal and external collaboration (within the program and between the program and the MoES and partners) and solidifying relationships and networks working towards continuous learning and improvement.

With the idea in the back of our minds that we needed to increase participation in learning as a way to increase action and adaptation, we started to review the agenda from the perspective of our technical teams, MoES, and our partners. What was important to them? What were the learning questions that could support the work as they've identified it? We started reviewing the annual work plans, which reflected the technical team's priorities. The agenda developed as we worked with technical teams to add learning elements.

An example of this was an activity set out by the teacher training teams to do training differently based on past experiences as well as programmatic and international research. Instead of large, residential trainings taking place at teacher training colleges, they wanted to try a more local level, smaller, non-residential training. A research element was added to the learning agenda -- to compare the cost and effectiveness of the two different approaches. After studying the difference in cost of the 2 models and finding that non-residential training would be half the cost, the M and E team worked with the teacher training team to develop research protocol and instruments to compare teacher attendance and participation, content coverage and learning (through a pre- and post-test) as well as participant and trainer perceptions of the models. In May, the research was conducted in both SHRP and LARA residential and non-residential training sites by technical and M and E staff as they are out supporting the training. As this research was identified, planned and carried out by the teacher training team, the technical teams are waiting for the results to inform future planning.

There was no big stakeholders learning agenda meeting -- research and learning activities emerged organically. We listened to issues/pain points that came out in regular discussions and meetings with MoES colleagues -- and we brought these into the work plan. An example of this is the work that we have done with the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) who recently presented data from their own Early Grade Reading Assessment (which the program developed capacity for). One of their final recommendations was to "find out more about system factors which support Early Grade Reading". That is now part of our program learning agenda, to support UNEB efforts to learn more about these factors, starting where the MoES is and building from there.

The agenda is also a knowledge management tool as it incorporates our best thinking on technical issues and can serve as a discussion log to coordinate technical discussions and keep them moving forward. An example of this is the MoES interest in the development of reading benchmarks to gauge national reading achievement and progress. The issue of setting benchmarks has come up in several MoES fora, and we needed a way to gather and organize information on what the MoES is thinking in this area (different program staff members may hear about this in various formal and informal discussions) as well as formulate our joint thinking and position about how we, as external programs, can best support MoES efforts in this area.

The learning agenda includes research questions and the purpose of the research to support adaptive management, technical and M and E staff responsible for leading the learning efforts, what has been done to date, next steps and time line for completion of research to action. We are working on rolling the agenda out in an on line format with the vision that stakeholders can provide real time updates. When funds recently became available for a partner to conduct research on an upper primary school issue, we were able to direct the use of the funds to focus on the transition from learning in mother tongue to English, a recently recognized gap in reading reform efforts.

5. Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

CLA has helped transformed M and E efforts and is also transforming technical teams -- we have used CLA tools and thinking to improve implementation and increase our systems focus -- and we believe our learning agenda will elevate these efforts. We are encouraged by the teams' energy and spirit during learning agenda discussions. After presenting the agenda to technical teams (with their technical priorities at the fore) team members have come forward with their own additions for activities they would like to see included on the agenda. Our teacher training team recently initiated a partnership with an NGO focusing on teacher networks and peer to peer support. They asked to have an item added to the learning agenda to help better understand if these networks were, in fact, improving support to teachers.

When we form a team for a research effort, we have no problem getting volunteers from technical teams -- most are keen to increase their skills in this area. Structured tools are developed that are relatively easy to administer. In this early stage, we often pair M and E and technical staff to conduct site visits. We also develop "whatsapp" groups to provide ongoing guidance to the research teams in the field. We have conducted two major pieces of field research which are still underway. In the meantime, the technical staff are already using the knowledge gleaned from the field visits to inform their work -- because they were the ones collecting the information and seeing the situation first hand while conducting the interviews and schools visits.

The ultimate goal of this collaborative research and learning is to be more responsive to making changes to improve programs and get more children reading in Uganda.

6. Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Though our reimagined learning agenda is just getting started, we are confident that our fresh take on it will support a higher level of implementation fidelity (programs doing what they planned to do) and promote collaboration and communication along the way (which will feed back into and support even greater program performance). In the past, CLA has helped the program ensure that: the programs reached the right teachers with training and support and that the teachers were more likely to stay in the classroom and use their new skills; we produced and delivered the right number of books to the right schools and that the books were being used appropriately in the classroom; and that learners were more likely to be reading.

With continued input from partners and collaboration, future outcomes of the current learning agenda will include:

- a "right sized" teacher training program that increases teacher attendance, participation, content coverage and learning, and reduces costs of training, which will increase the ability of the MoES to sustain the training.

- more strategic support to the MoES in the areas of expansion and sustainability of early grade reading efforts, benchmarking of success, national assessment, remapping of support to teachers, and materials development which will better support MoES efforts to sustain reading reform in Uganda.

7. What factors affected the success or shortcomings of your collaborating, learning and adapting approach? What were the main enablers or obstacles?

CLA is a culture, a way of doing business that needs to permeate throughout programs and processes. SHRP and LARA were fortunate to have very supportive USAID counterparts, USAID/Uganda is a leader in CLA for the Agency and we benefited from CLA training and discussions in country. The program also benefited from supportive Chiefs of Party and program staff who believed that M and E was central to successful programming and that a high priority should be placed on planning and strategy.

In almost all cases, research was folded into other program work (during teacher training, for example) so funding was not an issue. When special research activities were required, funds were always made available. Program field assistants regularly visit schools and if a research questions arises, it is easy for us to include that into the field assistant data collection tools. For example, last school term the field assistants were able to collect data on trained teacher presence in the classrooms -- to monitor the extent to which teachers previously trained by the program were still teaching the classes they were trained to teach. In the upcoming term, they will look at the extent to which learning games are being incorporated into the reading lessons as part of their routine school visits.

Another enabling factor is strong M and E staff who see themselves as program “animators” and who recognize the M and E function as supportive, yes, but also strategic and catalytic – helping find those learning moments and finding time for reflection.

An initial barrier was the belief that actions to be undertaken to address a challenge were obvious when not spelled out explicitly and that, even when change was spelled out, how exactly to go about implementing the change was unclear to those who would lead it. More intentionally including program technical staff and the MoES in not only defining the research agenda but undertaking the research, will help people better understand what adaptations are necessary and the steps to make this changes happen.

8. Based on your experience and lessons learned, what advice would you share with colleagues about using a collaborating, learning and adapting approach?

Collaboration is key. Hearing from a wide circle of voices when planning and implementing improves the chances that appropriate changes can be envisioned and carried out. Though "adapting" may seem to be at the end of the process, it needs to be considered throughout. Ensure that whoever will ultimately be responsible for adapting is part of the collaborating and learning. Few people (including dedicated passionate professionals) want to have learning handed to them with the intention that they do something with it.

Data gathered to envision the changes needs to be specific enough to lead to a specific change. General data and information can only lead to general actions. A crucial step is to do enough research to really understand the problem. Less helpful statement: “teachers are not following the reading methodology”. More helpful statement (gleaned through more in depth lesson observation): “teachers are not allowing for individual reading practice during the reading lesson “. This led to a focus on individual reading during the lesson rather than simply memorizing and repeating after the teacher as she pointed to words on the black board.

Actions for change need to be spelled out very clearly. What may look like lack of motivation or interest in making a change can actually stem from a lack of clarity on how exactly to enact the change . Actions are not always obvious. Teams need to sit down and discuss possible remedies for an identified challenge (the challenge having been identified collaboratively), agree on the way forward and discuss what the change would look like in practice. To continue the learning cycle, teams would also come up with a plan to see if the programmatic change led to better outcomes, always with an eye towards more children reading and sustained systems.