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Sandra Moore

St. Francis Xavier University, sledmoore@hotmail.com

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Reflections of a Capacity Builder: An Autoethnographic Perspective of Capacity Building Methods with a Youth Livelihoods Organization in Vanuatu
Réflexions d'un responsable de renforcement des capacités: Une perspective auto-ethnographique sur les méthodes de renforcement des capacités avec une organisation de jeunes sur les moyens de subsistance, à Vanuatu

Sandra Moore, St. Francis Xavier University

Abstract

This autoethnographic narrative explores the author's capacity building experiences, observances, insights, and reflections over a two year period working with a youth livelihoods nongovernmental organization in the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu. Autoethnographies explore the author's own personal insight and reflection of their own experiences, which in turn may encourage readers to reflect on their own beliefs and practices. The author will define autoethnography and capacity building, briefly outline the historical context of Vanuatu, discuss the successes and challenges of facilitating capacity building, and reflect on her own values, assumptions, and learning within the social context of an international development professional working with local staff in Vanuatu.

Résumé

Ce récit auto-ethnographique explore les expériences, observations, idées et réflexions de l'auteur en matière de renforcement de capacités, sur une période de deux ans, travaillant avec une organisation non-gouvernementale de jeunes sur les moyens de subsistance dans la nation Sud-Pacifique de Vanuatu. Les études auto-ethnographiques explorent les idées et réflexions personnelles de l'auteur sur des propres expériences, ce qui en retour peut encourager les lecteurs à réfléchir sur leurs propres croyances et pratiques. L'auteur projet de définir auto-ethnographie et renforcement des capacités, d'esquisser brièvement le contexte historique de Vanuatu, de discuter des succès et des défis en ce qui a trait à faciliter le renforcement des capacités, et de réfléchir sur ses propres valeurs, hypothèses, et apprentissage dans le contexte social d'un travail de développement professionnel international avec une équipe locale à Vanuatu.

Keywords: autoethnography, capacity building, international development, Vanuatu, youth livelihoods

Mots-clés: auto-ethnographie, renforcement des capacités, développement international, Vanuatu, moyens de subsistance des jeunes

Every day international development professionals arrive in new countries to impart their knowledge and expertise on indigenous peoples and organizations. But how often do these development professionals reflect on the work they are doing? This article is an autoethnographic exploration of my observations, thoughts, and experiences working for two years as the Country Director for a youth livelihoods organization, YLO¹, in Port Vila, Vanuatu. The purpose of this article is to critically reflect on my own personal learning experiences, through an autoethnographic method, working with the YLO staff to build up their capacity to deliver relevant and effective livelihoods programming for youth in Vanuatu. Based on my

¹ Pseudonym – names of organizations and people I worked with have been changed to respect their privacy

reflections, I will review what capacity building is and what it is not, and conclude this article with an overview of my learning experiences as a capacity builder with YLO staff.

Autoethnography

Anthropologists have used ethnography as a research method for many years to study culture and human societies (Duncan, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 2009). Originating from 19th century anthropology, ethnography was a term used for outsiders to describe primarily non-Western community or culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Merriam and Simpson (2000) define ethnography as having two distinct meanings, “Ethnography is (1) a set of methods or techniques used to collect data and (2) the written record that is the product of using ethnographic techniques” (p.104). Common ethnographic techniques that are used to uncover the meaning a setting or situation has for the people directly involved include; participant observation, in-depth interviewing, life history, documentary analysis, and investigator diaries (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). To use any of these techniques involves going into the field to immerse one’s self in the collective way of life to gain firsthand knowledge about a culture or community. Merriam and Simpson highlight that “Fieldwork involves entering the chosen setting, establishing rapport with the residents of that setting, maintaining some type of relationship with the subjects, and, finally, leaving the setting” (p.105).

Autoethnography is a method of ethnography that focuses on the researcher’s personal observations and reflections regarding the work they are doing or the research they are conducting in a particular community or culture (Reed-Danahay, 2009; Holt, 2003). Autoethnography varies from ethnography in that the researcher is no longer an objective outsider, but rather an insider in his or her own context (Duncan, 2004). Ellis (1999) explains that an autoethnography is a personal story which focuses on the author’s feelings, thoughts, and emotions’ regarding an experience the author has lived through. Ellis continues on to say that this is not an easy method for most social scientists, as it involves rigorous self-reflection and the vulnerability of revealing yourself so honestly in print.

On the other hand, the extraordinary level of personal candour in autoethnographic research could be a transformational catalyst for the author and the reader. Sharing one’s own personal experiences may help others recognize similarities in their own lives and lead to their own reflection and self-transformation (Cranton, 2006). Autoethnography can also be a beneficial tool to “integrate research and practice into increasingly diverse classroom and social settings” (Glowacki-Dudka, Treff, & Usman, 2005 p.30). Many believe that educators must respect the diversity of their students, and autoethnography may be a useful way for helping educators and students to understand one another’s background and experiences (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2005).

However, Holt (2003) asserts that the use of self as the only data source in autoethnography has been extensively questioned and viewed as self-indulgent and narcissistic. The auto in autoethnography implies self-research, which could be negatively perceived by readers as non-academic, a work of fiction, self-indulgent, or lacking in objectivity (Duncan, 2004). As such, I was concerned about how much I wanted to reveal of my own thoughts, beliefs, and values to avoid my research being viewed as self-indulgent or narcissistic.

Issues of legitimacy and representation are problematic for autoethnographic research, as with many forms of qualitative research. However, I see the potential that an autoethnographic reflection could have for myself, and others, to learn and grow both professionally and personally. My autoethnographic research is more about my learning experiences as a capacity builder, than it is about the formal aspects of capacity building techniques. As Holt (2003) points

out, qualitative research methods, like autoethnography, may free some researchers from the limitations of the dominant realist representations of empirical ethnography, where the norms of academic writing influence what they can write about.

Participant observation is the most common data collection method used for autoethnographic research; because of the value that autoethnography places on the personal experience of the researcher (Duncan, 2004). In this autoethnography, participant observation and my recollections of my personal experiences are the primary sources of data, and reflective writing will be the main data collection method I utilize. Poststructuralist theories support autoethnographic research approaches by encouraging us to recognize ourselves reflexively as someone writing from a particular position at a particular time; and by keeping us from trying to write a research paper where we are the experts on everything to everyone (Richardson, 2000). What follows is a narrative account of my capacity building experiences over a two year period working with the staff at YLO.

The origins of my international development career

International development has many different actors and agendas, from large organizations like the World Bank, to smaller grassroots international organizations, like Oxfam. Though society is inundated with media from both types of organizations regarding the positive work they are doing internationally, development cannot always be viewed in a positive, beneficial light. Kothari and Minogue (2002) declare that despite minor gains for some in social and economic development, poverty and inequality persisted after the blitz of international development projects in the early post-war years, and illustrate that from 1970 to 1995 the income inequalities between rich and poor countries drastically widened. Today, the field of development studies has become a maze of theories, counter-theories, paradigms, approaches, programs, and jargon which has led to many well-meaning, but failed, development projects.

In 2007, shortly after finishing a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Cultural Anthropology, I began working for a grassroots Canadian international development organization that provided aid to orphaned and vulnerable children in Ethiopia. I learned quickly that it is one thing to hear stories about people living in abject poverty and another thing to witness it firsthand. Sen (1999) believes that development can be seen as a process of focusing on the real freedoms that people enjoy, from economic freedoms to social freedoms which "... contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with technological advance, or with social modernization" (p. 3). Sachs (2005) sees individual empowerment and the establishment of networks of connections as one of the facets of effective, sustainable development initiatives. Both Sen (1999) and Sachs (2005) agree that in order to be effective and sustainable, development initiatives often need to be community-led initiatives at the grassroots level. I believe that many development workers from the Global North start out completely idealistic with a firm notion that they need to come in and save the individual, organization, or community in the Global South they work with. However, when one's naïve idealism is challenged by the realities of poverty, power imbalances, corruption, social injustice, gender inequality, and all the other harsh realities that accompany working in a developing country, I believe that one's idealistic views and beliefs about development work begin to change.

As I gained more knowledge about effective development practices and the importance of local solutions for local problems, I began to realize that many international development workers arrived with preplanned solutions to community issues or problems, without actively

engaging in discussions with the community. Many projects, such as schools and clinics, get completed, but how many communities are left with the confidence and knowledge on how to sustain those projects? I began to question the effectiveness and efficiency of the development organization I worked for, and international development in general, and began to explore various international development theories.

Two of the development theories that appealed to me as I pondered the effectiveness of international development were the human capital theory from an economic development perspective, and from a social development perspective, the humanist theory. Human capital theory focuses on developing humans' abilities to improve their economic conditions and quality of life. In addition to the tangible financial capital humans may possess, such as bank accounts, Bouchard (2006) asserts that humans also have vast knowledge, skills, and qualities that can also be thought of as capital. Foley (1995) explains that this theory sees people as resources; as such, it is important to improve the quality of these resources through educational initiatives to improve their productivity.

The main goal of the humanistic model is to maximize individual human potential in a holistic manner, not just solely in relation to their economic capabilities. Many academics have recognized that increasing the capacity of a community contributes not only to individual and community economic growth, but also to social development in rural communities (Merino & de los Rios Carmenado, 2012). Lange (2006) writes that humanistic philosophy originated during the Italian Renaissance in the 13th to 15th centuries and this philosophy promotes the sacredness of freedom, autonomy, and dignity for humans. "In humanism people create their own being by becoming conscious of their existence and finding their own life meanings" (Lange, p. 99).

After nearly three years of working in international development, my ideological framework for effective international development work began to incorporate human capital and humanist theories. With a strong desire to learn more about effectively building up the capacity of southern partner organizations and staff, I returned to school in 2009 to complete a Master of Adult Education degree focusing on International Community Development. Shortly afterwards, I was offered the Country Director position at YLO, with one of my main job duties being described as building up the capacity of local staff to take on increased senior management duties. I quit my job in Canada and moved my entire family to the South Pacific country of Vanuatu to work with YLO, a national youth livelihoods organization in Vanuatu's main urban center of Port Vila. I decided to focus my Master's research on organizational staff capacity building. Unsure of what research methodology to use, my professor introduced me to the research method of autoethnography and two years later my completed research project *An Autoethnographic Perspective of Capacity Building Methods With a Youth Livelihoods Organization in Vanuatu* was submitted, and later scaled down to result in this article.

From Isolation to Colonization: A Brief Overview of Vanuatu

Before I reflect on my capacity building experiences at YLO, I believe it is important to first provide readers with brief overview of Vanuatu's history and culture. Over a quarter of a million people, living on 83 different islands, call Vanuatu home. The last formal census in late 2009 recorded the population of Vanuatu at 234,023 (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, (n.d.)). Vanuatu is confronted with an increasingly high population growth rate, gender discrimination, poverty, youth unemployment, and low literacy levels. The land and the sea are Vanuatu's main sources of livelihoods for three out of four ni-Vanuatu² that live outside the two major urban

² The proper grammatical reference to indigenous people of Vanuatu is ni-Vanuatu.

areas of Port Vila and Luganville (Cox, Alatoa, Kenni, Naupa, Rawling, Soni, Vatu, Sokomani & Bulekone, 2007). Vanuatu's geographic isolation, the lack of a strong productive sector, and reliance on foreign aid has contributed to its 2011 classification by the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (2011) as a Least Developed Country (LDC).

Traditionally, Vanuatu society was made up of small widely spread-out communities. The communities were diverse in culture and language and were linked by intricate kinship and trading partnerships, but no united island leadership. During the 19th century, many countries throughout Africa, Asia, and the Pacific were colonized by foreign countries looking to expand their territory and find new resources. When Europeans arrived in the late 19th century, naming the islands the New Hebrides, there were no institutional structures above village level, and no common identity attached to the territory of contemporary Vanuatu (Cox, et. al., 2007).

The British and French colonizers ruled the country under a unique Anglo-French Condominium. Each group strove to gain the loyalty of the indigenous Ni-Vanuatu people through investments in education and the creation of Anglophone or Francophone communities. This joint ruling agreement resulted in a duplication of authorities that were seldom effective; two police forces, two hospitals, two education systems, and two prisons operated concurrently (Cox, et al., 2007). In 1980, the indigenous people of the colonized New Hebrides gained independence and renamed the country Vanuatu.

Traditional Kastom: Language, leadership, gender and youth

Describing culture in Vanuatu can be a difficult task, as there are many islands and many distinct ways of looking at life, religion, art and entertainment. Kastom is the ni-Vanuatu term used to designate "indigenous cultural forms: social, economic, political, and religious institutions, as well as language and technology" (Facey, 1988, p.6). The official language of Vanuatu is Bislama, a pidgin form of language that developed in the early days of colonialism to provide one common language among Vanuatu's numerous islands and villages. Many ni-Vanuatu speak Bislama, but also still speak their local village dialect as well as English or French. After Independence in 1980 the Government of Vanuatu heavily promoted Bislama as a common national language to be used for politics and government (Cox, et. al., 2007). However, the influence of the English and French languages remained and Vanuatu currently has three official languages: Bislama, English, and French.

As stated earlier, prior to colonization there was no social cohesion among Vanuatu's 83 islands and no centralized leadership, only local leadership. Today there exists a federal government to govern all the islands, regional governments to govern over groups of islands categorized into five provinces - Torba, Sanma, Penama, Malampa, Shefa, and Tafea – local municipal representation on Town Councils, and chiefly governance over villages and specific islands. A hierarchical relationship is accepted as the norm in Vanuatu. Status and position are very important and greatly respected. As with most Melanesian cultures, traditionally chiefs and big men are the decision makers in Vanuatu. (1963) defined big men and chiefs as distinct sociological types, with different powers, privileges, rights, duties and obligations (p.288). A big man had personal power, gained status through a demonstration of skills such as magic or bravery or through their generous distribution of wealth, and had influence over fluctuating factions. Chiefs had inherited power. National, provincial and municipal politicians are the big men of today in Vanuatu, contending with the Chiefs who oversee individual villages.

Women in Vanuatu often have limited power in the home and fewer opportunities to join the formal workforce or participate in community leadership. Throughout the Pacific women account for less than one-third of the total number of formally employed and in rural areas women often carry the greater share of the burden of providing subsistence livelihoods (Duncan & Voight-Graff, 2010). Youth in Vanuatu also have limited access to leadership and formal employment opportunities. Only 3 out of 10 youth between the ages of 13 to 18 enroll in secondary school (Republic of Vanuatu, 2006), often due to a poor education that does not prepare them to pass the Australian based exams and/or a lack of money for school fees.

My Reflections on Capacity Building at YLO: Four Guiding Beliefs

When I arrived at YLO, in late August of 2009, it was apparent to me that the capacity building needs of this organization were massive. As a small organization reliant on international donor funding it was crucial to work on the capacity of YLO to diversify funding, improve organizational and staff efficiency, create a monitoring and evaluation system, and work toward having more ni-Vanuatu take on senior management positions. In addition, as a center focusing on career, employment, business, and leadership trainings for hundreds of ni-Vanuatu youth each year, there was an immense need to ensure staff members were confident and capable in delivering trainings in these areas.

Capacity building is a vague concept both in theory and in practice (Eade, 2005), and may often be described as an elusive process or an abstract outcome which many equate with learning (Merino & de los Rios Carmenado, 2012). Cuthil and Fien (2005) believe there is no officially accepted framework that defines capacity building, for either those offering the capacity building or those receiving the capacity building. Whereas Merino and de los Rios Carmenado believe capacity building can be defined as multi-dimensional interventions which are often focused on the organizational or human resources level. Eade (2005) explains that definitions of capacity building are diverse, ranging from providing individual support and guidance to strengthening civil society organizations. Eade believes that capacity building “... implies a long-term investment in people and their organisations, and a commitment to the various processes through which they can better shape the forces that affect their lives” (p.3). Though definitions of capacity building vary, there is some consensus that there are four guiding beliefs that are not representative of capacity building (Cuthil & Fien, 2005; Eade, 2005).

1. Capacity Building Should Not Create Dependency

Capacity building initiatives should not create for individuals or organizations a sense of dependency on the facilitator (Cuthil & Fien, 2005; Eade, 2005). Oftentimes in the development world results need to be proven quickly, and development actors may resort to just doing it themselves to get it done quicker. However, this contradicts the concept of building up one's capacity and creates a mentality that international development professionals are supposed to be the experts who come in and do all the work, instead of the individual or the organization taking the initiative, even if it takes longer.

Over the years I have come to realize that there is a big difference between enabling others and empowering others. Often it may be easier to just give someone an answer or complete a task for them, but all this does is create a dependency on others or encourage people to merely reproduce what they have heard or seen (Loureiro & Cristovao, 2010). Whereas, encouraging and guiding others to develop the skills and confidence to find the answers to their questions and effectively cope with unexpected events, empowers them to become independent

problem solvers. This is the premise of the popular education movement, a collective approach to education that encourages people to develop their own critical thinking abilities by encouraging openness, creativity, critical questioning and dialogue (Vella, 1995). Developed in Latin America in the latter half of the twentieth century, this educational theory holds that people should be subjects, rather than objects, and decision makers in their own lives. It is an empowering and participatory approach to education that does not rely on traditional didactic education methods, but rather problem-posing education methods (Freire, 1983).

The staff members at YLO are all intensely motivated, dedicated, and capable young people. They have the aptitude and desire to succeed, but lack training, self-confidence, experience, and education. When I first started at YLO, all the staff were used to being micromanaged by previous expatriate Country Directors and were reluctant to offer their input at meetings or take initiative. It took only a few days for me to realize that Program Managers had merely been given the token title of manager, but in reality they were more like administrative staff who were conditioned to run all decisions past the Country Director.

A few weeks into my new position, one of the Program Managers came into my office and asked if I wanted to order blue or black pens for an upcoming training course for youth. I asked him why he was asking me this as I was not the Program Manager, he was. He replied that all decisions had to be run past the Country Director. I responded that as Program Manager it should be his decision to make, not mine. After he left my office, I realized that the task of building up the capacity of the staff to effectively manage the center and its programs was going to be a greater task that I had originally anticipated. I was overwhelmed and angry that the staff at YLO did not feel capable enough to take the initiative to decide whether or not to use blue or black pens.

How was I ever going to get them to the stage of becoming confident enough to operate the entire organization on their own without expatriate management? I recall feeling so overwhelmed that I just wanted to pack up and go home. Nobody ever wants to admit that they feel inadequate, but that night as I vented my frustrations to other colleagues who worked for different development organizations, and heard their mitigation strategies to combat their own feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed, I began to realize that I needed to facilitate the development of a team mentality at YLO. Wheatley (1999) believes “at all levels and for all activities in organizations, we need to challenge ourselves to create greater access to information and to reduce those controls functions that restrict its flow” (p.107). To bring out the best in their teams organizational leaders need to let go of the control of information and instead encourage the contributions of their teams and trust “that people can make sense of the information because they know their jobs, and they know the organizational or team purpose. Restricting information and carefully guarding it doesn’t make us good managers. It just stops good people from doing good work.”

The next day, I decided to bring the YLO staff together and ask them what needed to happen for them to be able to effectively and confidently run YLO programs, and for YLO to eventually be a locally managed organization. These were questions that overwhelmed the staff, mostly because these types of questions had never been posed to them and they assumed they would always adhere to the status quo of YLO needing an expatriate Director. I requested that they take some time to think about these questions and the following week we would be having a Staff Dream Day to discuss their thoughts on these questions.

2. Capacity Building Strengthens Not Weakens People and Organizations

Secondly, capacity building initiatives should strengthen, not weaken the community or organization (Cuthil & Fien, 2005; Eade, 2005). Projects, responsibilities and ideas cannot be forced on people without guidance, knowledge, and support. Both the capacity builder and capacity receiver need to be involved and committed to the process. Wheatley (1999) refers to this in an organizational context as *ownership*, “a term used to describe not only literal owners, but more importantly, the emotional investment of employees in their work” (p.68).

A week after the meeting we had where I asked the staff to think about what they needed to operate more effectively as Program Managers, we held a Staff Dream Day. We shut down the center and had a day long informal conversation about being a team, and a planning session discussing what the YLO staff needed to feel confident and capable in their roles as managers. Each staff member expressed what they would ideally like to see happen in their programs and we came up with some great ideas to improve and expand YLO programs. According to Wheatley (1999) the most effective way to create ownership is to have those responsible for implementation develop the plan for themselves, and to also have the opportunity to personally interact with the plan and evoke its possibilities through their own individual methods of observation.

From this group planning day, we also ended up with an extensive list of over 50 YLO staff identified training needs such as; leadership, engaging youth, time management, report writing, and presentation skills. To work on increasing each staff’s confidence and knowledge in presentation skills we decided that each staff member would choose two topics from this list that they felt confident enough to present to the rest of the group. I expressed to each staff member that they did not need to be experts in these areas, and could create presentations from our own YLO resources or by using the internet. I assisted by emailing resource links to the staff on different ways to present and on the topics they had chosen. I also put aside two full days to review and provide feedback to staff on their presentations.

The result was a two day presentation skills training session that staff reported on evaluation sheets as being both educational and entertaining. Some staff chose to do elaborate PowerPoint presentations; whereas others chose to conduct their training session in an informal discussion group. The knowledge was presented well, but their presentation skills needed further development. As such, we discussed as a team how best to improve the YLO team’s presentation skills and it was decided that the more practice they had, the better they would become at public presentations. We decided to rotate among staff and take turns preparing and presenting at each bi-weekly staff meeting a five minute presentation on the topic of one’s choice.

In hindsight, I regret not videotaping the first presentations of staff members to compare to their presentations a year later. For one staff member in particular, presenting in public was intimidating and she nervously cleared her throat throughout her presentations. She dreaded her turn to present, but was adamant on improving and requested my help. She stated that in her village women were not given the opportunity to speak in public, and as such she was very uncomfortable having to stand up and present to others, especially older male staff members. This is a cultural reality of Vanuatu; most women lack oratorical skills due to not having the opportunity or desire to hone these skills. All it took to improve her skills was time and effort on her part and on mine. I sent her videos of various presenters who exuded confidence and she practiced her presentations with me before the meetings. Within a few months the throat clearing minimized as she presented at staff meetings and gained greater self-confidence.

3. Capacity Building is a Holistic Process

Thirdly, capacity building is not a separate activity that is done instead of something else; it is a holistic, on-going process (Cuthill & Fien, 2005; Eade, 2005). For the staff at YLO, it was evident that capacity building initiatives needed to focus on more than just the technical skills required to run YLO and its programs. YLO staff also needed to focus on their own personal development, mainly building up their self-confidence levels. However, building up self-confidence levels takes time. As Eade (2005) explains, it may take years for someone to reach a point where they are successfully making use of the capacities they have been acquiring, even under the assumption that their environments are conducive to allowing them to develop their capacities.

The colonial tensions that linger in Vanuatu, combined with the traditional views on age and gender and the didactic form of primary and secondary education, do not promote and encourage self-confidence in ni-Vanuatu youth. Exhibiting self-confidence is viewed as a form of narcissism that is deeply frowned upon by ni-Vanuatu society. If the YLO staff could not develop their self-confidence, it would be difficult to build up their capacity to manage the organization, take initiative, and develop creative problem-solving skills. It was a struggle for me to alter my ethnocentric Western views of self-confidence as I looked for ways to develop the self-confidence of staff members while respecting Vanuatu culture.

Traditional *storian* was a method I used regularly to encourage YLO staff to think about what their futures could be like and develop self-confidence. Warrick (2009) defines *storian* as “an umbrella term indicating semi-structured interview, informal interview, and opportunistic discussion as part of observation” (p.83). It is a less formalized way to engage in discussion without the typical Western extractive method of interviewing. As Warrick describes, *storian* has no specific method and the ultimate output is to establish rapport with others as they discuss the reality of their lives and describe their aspirations. It is a flexible approach that is guided by the participant’s responses where the goal is not to gather facts, but to uncover possibilities. *Storian* appealed to me immensely as a way to learn about Vanuatu culture, gender inequality, traditional views, and the staff as individual people. It created a platform for me to listen to staff member’s views, perceptions and dreams and allowed them to contemplate their future and reflect on their current situations.

Kaufmann (2010) quotes Welton as stating that by listening, we can learn what the world is like through a position that is not our own; our identities are constantly shifting and multiplying shaped by various factors such as gender, race, age, and geography and can often be conflicting. *Storian* was a great way for me to use open ended questions to introduce new concepts and thoughts into conversations to encourage transformative learning without imposing my own beliefs or values. Crane (2002) encourages the use of open ended questions in coaching or mentoring relationships because, “if they are framed effectively, they empower people to think more deeply about their situations and, in so doing, to discover their own answers” (p.104).

For example, one staff member frequently sought approval because she was afraid of making bad decisions. She frequently sought my answers for problems and issues she encountered. I would respond back with open-ended questions such as, “What do you think you should do?” This frustrated her immensely; she wanted someone else to give her the right answer, and one day broke down in tears and asked me to please just give her the right answer. For me, it was frustrating to see a capable young woman so afraid of making a mistake that she was brought to tears by the idea of not having someone to give her the right answers. Our *storian* discussions acted as a form of role playing that allowed her to contemplate her decision making processes for possible future scenarios in both her personal and professional life.

4. Capacity Building is Intertwined with Extraneous Realities

Finally, capacity building is not solely about the organization or the individual (Cuthill & Fien, 2005; Eade, 2005). Effective capacity building needs to also take into consideration the realities that the organization or individual operates in such as political, social, and environmental issues. Eade (2005) declares that oftentimes behind every obvious problem lies a deeper one and it may be important to take a few steps back from the obvious entry point in order to avoid generating resistance. Hence, it is important for expatriate capacity builders to understand the cultural and political contexts of the area they are working in and recognize that it may be a different culture with a different belief system than the one they are most comfortable with.

During my first few months at YLO I felt that my status as a community and cultural outsider resulted in me being unable to create an environment of capacity building. Textbook group activities that I tried quite often felt forced and ‘unnatural’. Staff seemed hesitant to interact or engage in activities or discussions. I sensed that long time staff found the activities somewhat patronizing, and newer staff were shy and unwilling to engage in discussions. Vella (2002) claims that, “A relationship of mutual respect between teacher and learner is often cited as the most important motivator of adult learners” (p.230). Crane (2002) believes that establishing rapport is critical to the success of successful mentoring relationships. Without rapport Crane believes that feedback between two people is likely to be construed as just noise. Whereas, “with rapport - and the trust that usually accompanies it - feedback is much more likely to be appreciated, accepted and used for learning” (Crane, 2002, p.55).

The unfortunate thing about building rapport and trust is that it takes time. I do not feel that I had built up trust or rapport in my first few months. As a female, expatriate, boss the staff perceived vast power inequalities between us due to my position as the Director, my gender as a female, and my race as a white person from Canada. At times, my own perceptions on the inequalities of Vanuatu’s cultural values surrounding hierarchy, race, and gender were hard to separate from my mentoring of YLO staff and I ended up feeling ineffective and frustrated.

For instance, the staff at YLO referred to me as boss, which bothered me immensely as I associated it with the colonial repression and patronization of ni-Vanuatu people. For me being called boss also solidified my role as the outsider of the YLO team. Though I repeatedly requested for the staff to call me by my first name, and gave passionate speeches about how repressive and paternalistic the term was, the years of deeply entrenched respect for that title could not be easily broken. As one staff member explained to me, the rules of Vanuatu society are strict and if another ni-Vanuatu heard her call me by my first name they would think she was being extremely disrespectful. For many ni-Vanuatu, to be called boss is a great honour. I let my own preconceived notions on inequality in Vanuatu convince me that the term boss was derogatory, without taking the time to understand the social context in which that term was used.

Critical Reflections on My Capacity Building Experiences at YLO

Being aware of what is not effective capacity building guided me immensely in my work with YLO. With much critical reflection on my part I have come to see that many of the challenges I faced were due to differences in my cultural framework and the cultural framework of my ni-Vanuatu colleagues. Cross-cultural misunderstandings were the main source of my frustration, and at times I took these misunderstandings personally and often felt defeated, unappreciated and ineffective. Reflecting on my frustrations now, I see that much of what I was frustrated about stemmed from firmly entrenched cultural norms that differed from my own worldview. I

struggled constantly to restrain my instinctive retort and negative judgements, feeling that if I imposed my personal values and expectations on others that it would be ethnocentric. Instead, I tried to adopt a cultural relativism approach and looked at the culture in Vanuatu in terms of the values and beliefs of that culture, rather than the values and beliefs of my own Canadian culture.

As stated earlier, a hierarchical relationship is accepted as the norm in Vanuatu; titles and positions are very important and deeply respected. Therefore, a collaborative approach in the work place with equal and shared power can be difficult to achieve. As the boss I was always expected to lead the discussions and have all the answers. Staff at YLO, like many organizations in Vanuatu, were not used to interacting and discussing freely in a work environment. An expert, manager, or boss always did all the talking and people listened. Staff expected me to be an autocratic teacher and I wanted to be a motivational teacher. Staff expected me to have all the answers, and I expected them to come up with the answers on their own, which contradicted with their own cultural reality to respect hierarchy.

LaBoskey (2007) states that “equity and social justice are core values for self-study researchers” (p.819). However, it is important to honour both my own personal subjectivity and the personal subjectivity of the staff I worked with. I assumed that because I was so uncomfortable with the term boss everyone else must also be uncomfortable calling me boss. Conversely, as stated earlier, I did not take into account how much this term meant to many ni-Vanuatu. To them being called boss was the reward for all their time spent working towards a management position. Unlike my negative views on the term boss, ni-Vanuatu people thought of boss as an important title of respect and many of the staff at YLO hoped that one day they would be called boss. I realized that sometimes it is more important to be flexible than radical. Some staff began calling me by my name, but most still preferred to use boss when they addressed me, especially in public, and I came to accept this fact.

As well, I was extremely frustrated and bothered by the months that it took to build rapport and trust with the staff at YLO, and I began to take it personally. This caused me to explore what I was doing wrong and question my suitability as someone capable of building up the capacity of this team to effectively do their jobs and eventually run YLO. During this time I spent a lot of time reflecting on the type of capacity builder I thought the YLO team needed me to be, and the type of capacity builder that I wanted to become. I assumed that because it was harder than I had anticipated to build rapport and trust, I must be doing something wrong. Logically I know that rapport and trust are not instantaneous and need to be earned, but humans have an innate desire to be accepted and it was difficult for me to not take feeling unaccepted personally.

In addition, as an outsider it is was easy for me to look at something like building self-confidence and increasing team-building skills as a positive thing for YLO staff that could be carried over into their personal lives. However, I became acutely aware that there could be negative repercussions for the staff member to challenge the status quo of accepted hierarchical or gender norms in Vanuatu. Exhibiting strong communication skills at the YLO office may result in a female staff member getting a rave review on her performance evaluation. On the other hand, using these same skills at home with a partner or father may result in physical or emotional abuse. Youth engaging in debate and discussions with staff at YLO is welcomed and encouraged, but to debate with elders in their village would be socially unacceptable. As frustrating as these facts of life in Vanuatu are for me, I had to constantly keep reminding myself that to some degree these are facts all over the world and cultures evolve and change if and when local people demand change.

Evolving as an International Development Professional

When I first decided to write this autoethnography I assumed it would be a simple task. In hindsight, this was a naïve assumption on my part. Looking honestly at myself within the context of capacity building for YLO staff was more difficult than I had imagined, but it allowed me to learn about myself and the best processes I should use for effective capacity building. Though readers may not wish to emulate my methods or understand my feelings, it is my hope that this autoethnography may encourage them to critically reflect on their own practices and share this reflection with others, thus encouraging a cycle of reflection and learning in development workers.

My time in Vanuatu working with the YLO team was a transformational learning experience for me that has further shaped my commitment to the importance of capacity building. I remember being a bit intimidated when I first started at YLO, knowing that capacity building of the staff would be one of my main tasks and thinking that was an immense task. However, I now believe that capacity building is a task that many expect to be more technical than it actually is – complex situations are not always complicated. Building up someone's capacity does not necessarily mean turning them into an international expert in their field, it is more about acting as a mentor to guide them to believe in themselves and creating an environment where they are not afraid to try new things, make mistakes and evolve into their career.

Conclusion

As stated earlier in this article, capacity building is generally viewed as an abstract term. How then does one measure the effectiveness of capacity building initiatives? According to Merino and de los Rios Carmenado (2012), most literature on capacity building recommend utilizing several data collection techniques combining subjective and objective data to assess capacity building initiatives. From a subjective point of view, after two years it was evident as I observed YLO staff in their daily operations that they were becoming more confident in their ability to do their jobs. From an objective point of view, this is a change they also recognized, based on external organizational reviews and comparing internal evaluations from 2010 and 2011. Quotes from 2011 staff performance evaluations indicate:

I feel much more confident in my role as (Program Manager) than I did when I started.

I used to always think that everyone would wonder why I had this job because I didn't feel confident that I could do the job, I now feel that I have the skills and ability to be the best person for this job.

From another objective view, when my two-year contract at YLO expired in late 2011, for the first time in YLO's ten year history, a local ni-Vanuatu, a YLO Program Manager I had the honor to mentor and support, became the Executive Director of YLO. As of the end of 2013, this individual is still the YLO Executive Director.

My capacity building experiences at YLO was a transformational learning experience that solidified my passion for international development work and further strengthened my commitment to the importance of helping others to help themselves. Over a two year period, I watched many of the staff go from feeling they needed to be micro-managed by me, to becoming self-assured, confident, well respected Program Managers and the YLO Executive Director. I have learned that an effective capacity builder should not portray themselves as an expert who has all the answers. Rather, it is often far better to portray one's self as a facilitator who mentors

people in a holistic manner that builds up their confidence and helps them acquire practical experience that eventually allows them to evolve into whatever they are best suited to achieve.

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- Sandra Moore** currently lives in Medicine Hat, Alberta and is enrolled in the University of Saskatchewan Sustainability and Environmental Studies Ph.D. program focusing on cultural ecology. This article is based on her Master's Degree research in Adult Education – International Community Development – completed at St. Francis Xavier University. Sandra can be reached at sledmoore@hotmail.com