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TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL-CHANGE NETWORK LEARNING

Introduction: Shared Responsibility, Collective Reflection

Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network

Donna Haig Friedman

Having just landed in Boston’s Logan airport early in the morning of July 13, 2006, I looked up at a public TV. The breaking CNN news story of the day — and for weeks to come — featured an outbreak of war between Israel and Lebanon. Bombs were dropping in Haifa, in the very neighborhoods I had visited during the previous seven days. My visit had been focused on recruitment and selection of nongovernmental organization (NGO) research partners for the Fulbright fellowship research to take place a few months hence, February through May 2007, when I was to be in residence in Haifa. During the previous week, Jennifer Cohen and I had jointly led focus groups with leaders of social change NGOs whose communities were in the poorest parts of Haifa, coincidentally many of the same neighborhoods being bombed. In a flash, the defenses I had constructed to ward off the pain of what happens on the other side of the world gave way. Knowing and caring about my new colleagues and friends in Haifa, as well as the communities they are committed to, pushed against the internal cognitive/emotional protections I had built for myself.

Since that day in July 2006, I have come to understand and cherish — in my bones — the reality of being a world citizen with a connection to and shared responsibility with

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all other men and women, near and far, to create a world that offers safety, opportunity, human dignity, and kindness for everyone. Through my research and planning role in the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange, I have come to learn that transnational learning networks among nonprofit leaders can have significance for advancing such local and global social-change efforts. This second of six sections of the journal explores the core elements of such transformational learning networks, as experienced by three participating leaders from Boston, Massachusetts, and Haifa, Israel.

Local social and economic problems are not simply local. Human well-being in one part of the world is inextricably linked with global economic and political forces, as well as social and economic realities, in other parts of the world. How the decisions made by multinational corporations or political bodies impact humans and human communities far from us affects us all. Increasingly, immigration flows across the world contribute to a rich mix of multicultural world views of countries' residents. Whether we recognize this reality, our futures as world dwellers are intertwined with each other.

New technologies that allow for instantaneous, multiparty communications serve to unite social-change agents in different parts of the world through enabling a vivid, close to real-time, sharing of lived experiences and a rich exchange of ideas. New communication tools are making visible and strengthening the interconnectedness of communities across the world. The potential exists for transnational networks of organizational social-change agents to use these twenty-first-century tools, as well as more traditional in-person exchanges, to forge strong connections with each other for the purpose of generating new knowledge and fortifying local and transnational social change efforts.

The experiences of others demonstrate that as peer-learning networks evolve they shift from being informal in the early stages to developing more formalized coordination structures in the later stages.¹ Depending upon their origins and purposes, they may take many shapes as they evolve, from a centralized *hub-spoke* model to more distributed approaches, such as a *dense cluster* in which all participants have connections with all others, or a *many channels* option that uses a variety of connections among participants, or a *branching* structure in which a series of clusters are connected through several spokes.² Effective network structures, however informal or formal, function to facilitate smooth coordination and continuity of activities, as well as the management of challenges, such as pressures from external stakeholders, resource allocation processes, and facilitation and preservation of learnings.^{3,4} Governance issues, how decisions are made, are of central importance; how formal and informal power is shared among participating partners has a deep impact on trust-building and members' investment in contributing to the learning network's endeavors and future.⁵

Transnational network building, like all meaningful interorganizational

collaboration, is a paradoxical endeavor.⁶ Participants are called upon to rise above their personal and organizational self-interests to contribute to a collective enterprise. For maximum impact, participants invest their time and resources without certainty regarding the outcomes for the collective endeavor and/or for the individuals or the organizations they represent.

Creating “relational learning spaces” has been found to be essential for the success of transnational peer learning and production networks.⁷ Bradbury and others identified six dimensions of “relational space, a high quality ecology of relationships” that were positively associated with effective collaborations among transnational business representatives working together as a network:

- **Aspirational trust**, a shared, prosocial vision that allows participants to rise above individual self-interest and to invest in the collective objectives;
- **Reflective learning**, building and preserving knowledge, an iterative, ongoing process, tied to direct experience, of checking assumptions, making meaning, and developing new ways of thinking, through mutual exchanges;⁸
- **Peer connections**, a mutuality dynamic among participants that disregards rank and enables all members to have equal footing in contributing to the network’s evolution and work; such mutuality requires an intentional balance in participation, membership, and decision making, as well as expert facilitation to counteract competitive dynamics that may emerge;
- **Helping**, providing emotional support to each other;
- **Commitment to process**, dedicated energy and time for investment in the relationships among members of the network;
- Lastly, **whole-self presence**, a level of investment in which sharing among members occurs at both personal and professional levels.

“Relational learning spaces,” with the features described above, have the potential to enable participants to experience transformational growth through reciprocal relationships with each other — persons who, by design, bring diverse economic, social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and political life experiences and perspectives to the exchanges.

Sustained transnational exchanges, while energizing and stimulating, are anything but easy. In fact, confusion and ambiguity are essential factors in such multicultural exchanges for enabling participants to develop new ways of thinking about practice, policy, coalition building, and other dimensions of social-change work.^{9,10} Seeing our own cultural norms, beliefs, and practices reflected in the other’s eyes unsettles our fixed mental models that, while providing an inner security, limit our perspectives regarding ways of being in the world and ways of solving social problems.¹¹ Openness to others’ experiences and perspectives, an acknowledgment

of ambiguity, and resistance to clear answers are preconditions, in the context of multicultural exchanges, for enhancing creativity, inventiveness, and the development and adoption of new mental models.¹²

The Case of the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network (LEN)

This LEN project has emerged as both experiential and active. The in-person learning exchange seminars, which since the project's inception have been taking place once a year in Haifa, Israel, and once a year in Boston, Massachusetts, were planned and facilitated jointly by the NGO partners as well as by outside trainers. Dedicated staff time and collaborative, generous attitudes on the part of planners in both cities have been essential for power sharing, efficiency, and thoroughness in the planning processes. Preparation has been extensive, requiring the core planning team, a Haifa–Boston mix, to use conference calls and e-mail communications, months ahead of time, for developing the substantive content for the in-person seminars and for coordinating the logistics, resources, recruitment, travel, and a myriad of other practical and substantive dimensions of these encounters. Especially for Bostonians visiting Israel and Haifa for the first time, an immersion in the complex cultural, religious, social, economic, historical, and political contexts of the country has proven to be of great significance. Bostonian learning exchange cohorts experience such an Israeli immersion through a multiday guided tour of the country prior to meeting their learning partners in Haifa. A less intensive tour/immersion takes place for Haifa partners when they come to Boston.

Use of communication technologies. Video conferencing among participants has taken place prior to and after the in-person seminars with mixed success. For the most part, rotating pairs of Haifa–Boston participants plan and facilitate the 1- to 1½-hour conversations. Oftentimes, participants read an article ahead of time and/or ponder their responses to a set of questions, drawing from their NGO leadership experiences, which become the basis for the video conference conversation. For example, following contextualizing introductions, participants have responded to questions, such as: How do we as NGO leaders define and implement social justice — as individuals, organizations, in society? or, What is the role of social change NGOs during elections? or, How have you tapped into the power of what you have learned through this learning exchange in your NGO leadership work?

Video conferencing as a means for connection and communication has worked best once the transnational partners have developed trust through the intensive in-person connections. On the one hand, the long distance reconnection after an in-person experience feels like a “home-coming,” a reuniting of friends. Picking up on themes and topics that were a central part of the in-person exchanges allows for a deepening of the discussion and a hindsight reflection of the experiences participants

had when they were together. On the other hand, when video conferencing has been used *prior to* participants meeting each other in-person, introductions of “self” have been awkward and a pressure to impress appears to hold sway.

Additional challenges have been the constraints of the video conferencing technology itself; communication during video conferences has to be very controlled — one person talking at a time and orderly turn-taking. Such constraints are culturally difficult for both Haifa and Bostonians and are made more onerous when the technology fails to work as planned, more often than not. For the present and foreseeable future, carefully planned video conferencing will take place sparingly for very particular purposes. Other communication technologies, such as e-mail and free/low-cost Internet phone communications, are most commonly used by the cross-city planners or by participants who have become close friends. Most recently, social media tools are emerging as viable and important avenues for connection.

Challenging linguistic realities. Linguistic barriers add to the challenges of transnational communication. English has been the predominant written and spoken language used by learning exchange participants. Many Haifa participants are somewhat fluent in English; only a sprinkling of Bostonian participants is fluent in Hebrew or Arabic, the languages most commonly spoken in Haifa. Translation options and resources have been extremely important, given the linguistic imbalance described above. In most in-person exchanges, simultaneous translation is offered by strategically placing bilingual members next to those needing English, Hebrew, or Arabic translation or through providing simultaneous translation, which requires a translator who speaks to participants through headphones. The first Learning Exchange report¹³ was written in three languages: English, Hebrew, and Arabic. The March 2008 Haifa conference — the report’s release event hosted by the University of Haifa’s Center for the Study of Society and its Jewish Arab Center — included simultaneous translation in the three languages. The translation service allowed coauthors of the report, which included the Haifa NGO leaders who took part in the project in 2007, to speak at the conference in the language of their choice. And they did. Some spoke in Hebrew and one spoke in Arabic, to the consternation of some in the audience who were not accustomed to using headphones for translation of Arabic. Essays authored by Haifa leaders for this journal issue were written in the author’s language of choice. Collaborating partners contributed funds to enable the Hebrew and Arabic texts to be professionally translated into English.

Evolving Network Infrastructure and Functions

A Branching Infrastructure Model, a series of clusters connected through several spokes, best represents the formal coordination structure of the LEN.¹⁴ Informally within and across each city, learning exchange members utilize a many channels model¹⁵ in their relationships, regularly connecting with each other on both personal

and professional levels. With respect to the more formal branching infrastructure, the Jewish Community Relations Council has staffed the Boston spoke and taken responsibility for coordination of communications and planning, as well as decision making, with Boston and Haifa-based partners; in turn, the Council of Volunteer Organizations (CVO) in Haifa, Israel, has staffed the Haifa spoke and taken the lead in coordinating the same planning and decision making functions with its Haifa and Boston partners. The CVO also hosts Lead Haifa, an outgrowth of the LEN, a newly launched leadership development initiative for leaders from nonprofit, business, and government sectors in Haifa. The LEN planning group members in each city have remained relatively stable over the project's four to five years.

REFLECTIONS OF JENNA TOPLIN, THE BOSTON COORDINATOR. As an American Jew with a strong connection to Israel and as an individual committed to and passionate about global social-change and cross-cultural understanding, the opportunity to work on a project such as this was truly a dream come true. Coordinating this project between 2006 and 2009, I both experienced and observed the challenges and opportunities that cross-cultural learning exchanges can offer. While at times the planning and communication across distance, time zones, and languages was frustrating, it enhanced my own professional and personal growth tremendously. Meeting people where they are, communicating directly and consistently, asking questions, and being truly patient are skills that I practiced on a regular basis and that allowed me to develop dear friends as colleagues.

Participating in the planning, execution, and reflection phase of each component of this exchange introduced me to incredible leaders. Each LEN member had a story that I was fortunate to tap into, even just slightly, as we talked through workshop or video conference planning, visioning the future of this network and our communities, and reflecting on challenging and emotional conversations. As planners, we paid close attention to creating space where all perspectives might be voiced in rich conversation. But planning could only go so far. Throughout this journey, I was never on my own — I was part of something bigger than myself, and I felt valued for all that I brought. I found myself immersed in a plethora of experience and knowledge of individuals who themselves were yearning to learn and understand more about “the other” and about themselves. This exchange and the LEN members encouraged me to learn more about myself as a leader and the dimensions of leadership. It inspired me to commit myself to being a lifelong learner through experience and conversation, and for that I will be forever grateful.

Relational Spaces for Transformational Learning.

To build trusting, reciprocal relationships and shared understanding, in-person sessions have included a mix of active learning methodologies, that is, formal, informal, large, small group and one-on-one, as well as organizational visits,

site seeing, and home hospitality. Facilitation of large and small group in-person sessions has been carried out by rotating Haifa–Boston pairs who customarily begin the seminars with nonthreatening, playful ice breakers. Over time, as trust deepens, participants have taken greater risks in sharing their ideas, experiences, and vulnerabilities.

A STORY OF ASPIRATIONAL TRUST-BUILDING. An important conversation took place in March 2007 in a meeting with the leaders of the five Haifa NGOs, Jennifer Cohen, and myself. The makeup of this all-female group was as follows: Israeli Arab/Christian; Israeli Jewish/German; Israeli Jewish/Russian immigrant; Israeli Jewish/Ethiopian immigrant; Israeli Jewish/U.S. Jewish; U.S. secular. We were discussing plans for a particular evening in March when leaders of the Boston NGOs were to be in Haifa for the next person-to-person learning exchange. Preliminary plans had been made to have a festive event one evening in a location that is now being used by the Ethiopian community in a very beautiful town a bit south of Haifa where many artists live. The Arab leader in our group told a story of the history of this place: an entire Arab village was evicted from this quarter and relocated only a few hundred meters away. The evicted households can see their former homes being used by others now. Only recently was the relocated village made “official” and recognized as worthy of being included on maps. Very quickly the conversation moved into thinking of other locations for the evening event. This greatly offended our Ethiopian group member who felt that her community’s experience and culture were being cancelled out and sacrificed in an attempt to pacify the Arab group member’s discomfort and what she perceived as the group’s willingness to rush to seem “politically correct” (and especially tolerant of the Arab minority) at her expense. This hard conversation exposed difficult divides, the kind that had often prevented close collaborations among NGOs in Haifa prior to this point. But the respectful listening and courageous sharing among these women laid the foundation for strong bonds that have allowed them to work together closely on their shared social change missions in Israel.

A central component of the project since 2006 has been documentation and collective reflection. The essays in this journal are grounded in and informed by the core insights that have emerged from these reflections and from analyses of the extensive, multiyear documentation products. Indeed, this coauthored journal issue is one way in which the LEN is building and preserving knowledge; writing is thinking and collective writing is collective thinking. Using a mutual feedback process, essay authors, all of whom have been involved in the learning exchange, engaged in reviewing and building on each other’s essays from start to completion.

A STORY OF THE VALUE OF REFLECTIVE LEARNING. A Haifa leader reported as part of the project evaluation that she appreciated the “widest way of thinking,” in a global way, and learning about the potent value of reflection. She had come to

understand that reflection could deepen her organization's capacity to learn from its practice and ultimately to grow. "Our success would be getting to the places where the organization is capable of changing."

Peer connections. Creating a learning environment in which all participants are on equal footing has been a priority for LEN planners from the start. Such a balance is not easy to strike because much of the funding for the enterprise is Boston-based; money speaks unless a conscious effort is made to counteract its impact in processes of mutual engagement. In addition, the Anglophone-oriented reality of the learning exchange presents more challenges for Haifaim than for Bostonians, as Haifaim are constantly challenged to move out of their linguistic comfort zones. This linguistic challenge has very likely had a negative impact on the power balance in the network; in effect, those with English facility have an easier time in making their arguments and putting forth their points of view. For all of these reasons, ensuring equal investment and joint engagement in planning and decision making have been challenging at times. Nonetheless, deep personal connections have emerged among the learning partners.

A STORY OF PEER CONNECTIONS AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT. The focus of an in-person session in Haifa in March 2008 was *Working in Times of Crisis*. The Haifa leaders came prepared to share their experiences of the 2006 summer war with Lebanon when many of the poorest Haifa neighborhoods (in which these organizations work) were being bombed. "The war broke out while we were running summer camps for 700 kids at [the community center]," said a Haifa leader. "We had to find the balance between our work (responsibility toward the kids, parents, and bosses) and our own safety and that of our own families' . . . How to bring workers into work . . . given the mixed messages from the media about whether they have to come or not? Do we have to force them? Also, it was hard not to judge the people who left, who did/didn't do their work." "It kept me sane to go to work, but I was eight months pregnant," said another Haifa leader. "I got early contractions and my husband was very angry at me for going to work." "I lost a friend on the first day of the war," said another who was very choked up while speaking. "Our center changed its regular work and went on to hold special meetings and to call the women. We also did some post-stress work including running a focus group with the women after the war, to hear about their experiences. We helped 150 women."

Boston leaders listened in stunned silence as more stories emerged of Haifa participants' personal traumas with their own children/families and the conundrums they faced as to how their organizations should respond in the midst of the crisis. Then a Boston leader said: "We can't understand your loss and trauma. In another way, we're losing close to 100 kids a year in Boston to street violence and we're trying to figure out what to do with that violence. I appreciate

your sharing your stories of moral courage in staying in this work when you are in harm's way. You give me hope and inspiration to stay in the middle and negotiate.”

In terms of commitment to the LEN, participants have busy and demanding work lives; their attention goes to the priorities close at hand. The twice-yearly, intensive, multiday in-person experiences have therefore been the most powerful mode of connection for Haifa–Boston Learning Exchange participants. Those Boston and Haifa participants who have invested in the learning exchange have developed meaningful and significant personal and professional connections with each other.

A STORY OF COMMITMENT TO PROCESS. “I entered this experience without really knowing what to expect,” said a Haifa leader. “But in retrospect, I think I must have expected an experience that would be largely academic and intellectual since I was taken aback by the intimate way in which we connected almost from the start. I was surprised by the depth of the engagement we managed to achieve, given the short time period. Whether it was the frame of mind with which we all entered this (and the video conference the previous week), the fact that we were all women, or the fact that we shared such deeply held values, it felt as though we were able to communicate in an authentic way right from the start. We established a remarkable level of trust fairly quickly, which was reflected in our sharing our challenges along with our successes right from the start.”

A STORY OF “WHOLE SELF PRESENCE.” “Talking about the learning exchange experience in Boston, a Haifa leader referred to two levels of emotions: “personal intimate friendship between us (very direct) and the peer learning that I really enjoy.” Other than enjoying being able to share issues of directing, she found exploring the workings of organizations very helpful. “Although we have very different [organizational sizes], the basic issues are very much alike” and “being able to see [another’s] work and my organization’s work through the international perspective was very helpful. . . . Understanding the American part, seeing the office of [a Boston organization] looking worse than ours was comforting, that there is something common, our struggles are common.” In addition, the Haifa leader reported learning a great deal from her Boston partner that “gave me perspective, seeing more easily the processes and that one has to wait, be patient, not thinking that five years is too long, . . . having realistic expectations.”

Open Multicultural Exchanges

LEN planners have been intentional in ensuring that all of the joint activities have been open-ended and designed to allow for ambiguity and for a disruption of our fixed ways of thinking. In fact, “living in the in-between” has been a theme of the immersion experiences for Bostonians in Israel. The tenuous nature of life in Israel, a cultural norm of vigorous debate and the complexities of the country’s historical, religious, political, economic, and social contexts ensure that there are no clear answers to any

of the questions learning exchange partners ponder with each other. As a result, all committed LEN participants have come to see themselves, their organizations, and their countries with fresh eyes.

A STORY OF SEEING ONE'S HISTORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH NEW EYES. A session in Boston, hosted at Project Hope, focused on learning organizations. Thinking about her own organization's learning practices, one Boston leader reflected, "There are a lot of ways in which we are engaged in this type of work throughout the agency . . . but the visit from our sisters from Haifa brought it forward in a vivid way for me. . . . It is most important," she said, "that we listen to each other and broaden ourselves and our understanding [of social justice work] through our talking to each other."

She saw her own organization's history anew as a result of a conversation with her learning partner. "When I listened to Rula speak about how her organization began, I realized that we have some strong similarities in our own history. Kayan was started as somewhat of a cooperative or collective. A group of five women came together to design and implement a program that would engage with and respond to the needs of the community. We were started by a group of religious women who came together to do the very same thing because of their connections in the community. Then we grew and found a need for enhanced structure. The fabric of our collective and mutual beginning is present throughout. We are perhaps in a different phase of our development and it was good to remember our beginnings through the eyes of an outsider. The conversation raised some questions around the challenges of maintaining strong inclusiveness and "mutuality" while becoming a larger organization. . . . These human connections and the realization that you are so very different and so very alike — a duality to live in — is valuable and rich and gives tremendous hope."

Closing Reflections

The words of the Boston leader above aptly illustrate the self-reflection and new questions that emerge through positive transnational connections. Similarly, the essays to follow are powerful first-person testimonies to the transformational impact of such connections, developed within conducive, relational learning environments. Sr. Margaret, Alex, and Fannette each tell stories of the ways in which their lives have been impacted and their work strengthened through the relationships they have built through this and other transnational experiences. Some of their experiences were surprising; for example, Haifa's Fannette and Alex developing a connection during their Boston sojourns. Other experiences they reflect upon illustrate the evolution of their understandings of nonprofit social change work, coalition building, and organizational effectiveness. You will clearly see from their essays that each of these

persons has entered into the Learning Exchange with the qualities and stances that lead to deeply satisfying learning: a sense of curiosity, openness to the other, mutuality — both giving and receiving — a comfort with ambiguity, and considerable generosity.



Notes

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15. Ibid.