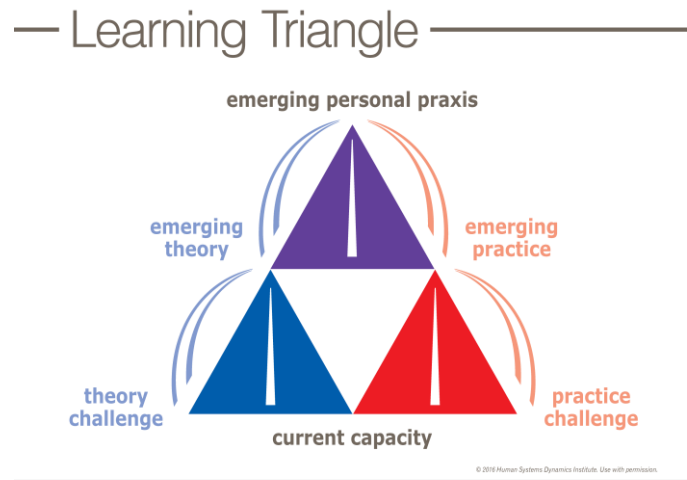**HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE**

# Learning Triangle

## Description of Learning Triangle

The Learning Triangle, as a model, represents the interplay and interdependence of what you "know" and what you "do." It describes the relationship between using theory to inform experience and action, and using what you learn from experience and action to inform theory. That relationship, and how it plays itself out, is the definition of praxis. As a method, the Learning Triangle provides insights that can inform your action as you manage your own emerging praxis or create a more engaging and productive learning ecology for others to build theirs.



Learning Triangle

emerging personal praxis

emerging theory

emerging practice

theory challenge

practice challenge

current capacity

## What?

The Learning Triangle represents the self-organizing process that occurs when individuals bring together their theoretical knowledge and challenges with their practical knowledge and challenges to produce new learning. It is the process of building praxis.

At each level, new learning feeds back into practice, resulting in further learning. These iterative cycles continue to build new theory and practice as the individual continues to enrich the theory base and hone skills.

## So What?

Using the Learning Triangle, you can consider how praxis emerges from the interplay between theory and practice. You can consider how to balance the two sides of the triangle in a number of situations.

Nothing is intractable.

As a trainer or teacher, you can use the Learning Triangle as a way to consider the balance between theory and action as you present new material. Giving learners time to understand the theory.

► Stand in inquiry, watching for gaps and opportunities in instructional design.

► Assess an individual's current performance and learning to determine next steps.

As an individual, you can rely on the Learning Triangle to get unstuck from many of your biggest challenges. If your habits of action do not work, then turn to theory for new options for action. If your habits of thought are not serving well, then turn to practice to find new ways to understand and engage with challenges.

## Now What?

Use the Learning Triangle in your next sticky issue to:

► See the relationships between theory and practice in your sticky issue to identify possible sources of tension you see.

► Understand the source of the imbalance between theory and practice that is generating that tension.

► Take wise action to create a more creative, generative level of tension across your system.

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# Learning Triangle

## What is the Purpose of the Learning Triangle?

The Learning Triangle is a picture that represents the interplay between theory and practice in the overall cycle of learning that we call praxis.

It shows the flow of system tension as new learning emerges. Consider a toddler learning to walk. He has sat and crawled and pulled up to stand. He has even held to the fingers of a caregiver, walking along with that support. He has learned all this from watching the actions of others in his world. He has received powerful positive feedback about each stage of growth from the smiles and delight he sees in those who take care of him. He still feels the tension of knowing that there is something more he can do to move around and explore his world.
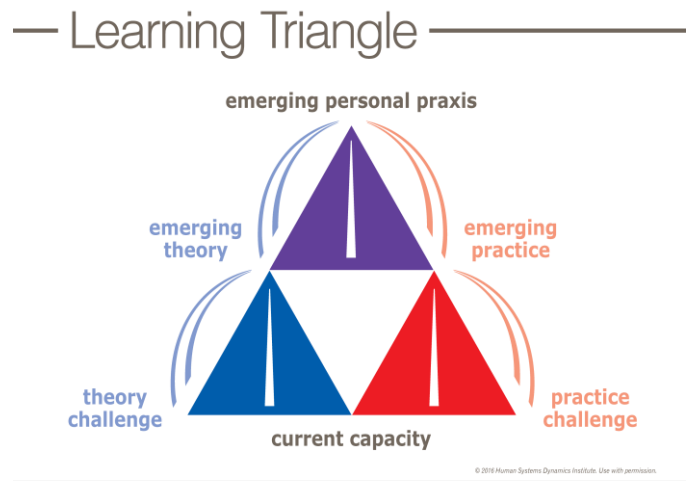
His next "practice challenge" is to turn loose and walk alone, as he has seen those around him do. He has a "theory" that moving his feet in a particular pattern will help him walk. So he turns loose and tries to take a step, promptly falling back to a sitting position. So now, it's a theory challenge—"It must take more than just moving my feet. Maybe I have to shift my weight so I can stand on one foot at a time." So he takes that theory challenge and turns it into a practice challenge, trying another step or two. At each next fall, he considers what might work better next time (building emerging theory) and trying it out to see if it will work (emerging practice). Over a surprisingly short period of time, he has an emerging personal praxis of what it is to navigate his world on foot, and he continues to refine that praxis, even as he looks to the next source of tension that is constraining his mobility.

Of course this scenario is oversimplified, and no toddler can actually articulate his theory so clearly. On the other hand, this is a representation to help you understand the kind of theory formulation and testing of that theory that takes anyone further along the continuum of learning that is a lifetime praxis. The Learning Triangle helps you see learning as an ongoing process of Adaptive Action testing theory against experience to

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improve both.

In the world of philanthropy, many donors require "theories of change" or "logic models" from their grantees. They have learned over the years, that service organizations depend on a history of intuition and practice. They are great at solving practice challenges on the fly. That can serve them well for a time, but the theory side of the triangle is required to sustain efforts or taking them to scale. So, donors ask for a theory of change to encourage a balance of emerging institutional praxis.

## So What Can the Learning Triangle Mean to You?

The Learning Triangle, helps you consider how praxis emerges from the interplay between theory and practice. As a leader, you can use it to consider skill development and learning needs of those you supervise. As a facilitator you can use it to support decision making and processing of new information. As a trainer or educator you can use it to inform your own instructional design. As a leader of a non-profit, you can use it to build adaptive capacity for your organization.

As a supervisor, you carry a particular responsibility to ensure that the people you employ have the skills and understanding to do the work they are tasked to do. If you think of yourself as a coach to your staff, when you have employees who are not performing to expectations, you can use the Learning Triangle to choose a path for support. If you can discern whether their shortcomings are due to lack of understanding the theory or just poor execution of information they have, you increase your chances of finding a more workable path. In planning for the support such an employee needs, consider whether that person is experiencing a "theory challenge" or a "practice challenge" and take steps to provide the support that fits.

As a facilitator of others' processes, you carry a responsibility to help them frame information in such a way that they can make decisions and take meaningful action. It is your job to set conditions for the group to step into this iterative cycle of learning new information (theory challenge), making sense of it and using it to inform further decision making (practice challenge), and then returning to the theory to see if it can be enhanced or informed by what they learned from the action (emergent theory). And so on it goes as the group builds momentum and skill at using what they know to take more powerful action and then learning from their action to improve what they know. Good facilitators know the value of such reflection and make sure to build in the time for participants to engage in continued learning from their work.

Instructional design is a balancing act that calls for careful consideration between new information, learner engagement in consideration of those concepts, guided application and practice with those concepts, and further reflection on how the action can influence the learning. Ultimately you want the learners to recognize how the new information (theory) informed their experience, and how their own experience helped to shape or give meaning to the theory. It's this final reflection and meaning making that weaves

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the new learning into the tapestry of the individual's praxis and makes it their own. Unfortunately, it's also the stage that is reduced or eliminated in the interest of moving on or saving time for other learning.

These and other examples of using the Learning Triangle rely on two foundational concepts of HSD. First using the Learning Triangle requires that you engage in Adaptive Action. Whatever your role as learner or support for someone else's learning, iterative cycles of gathering data and information, making sense of that information, taking informed action, and reassessing your position feed the Learning Triangle as you move toward personal praxis.

- ▶ What's happening now, and what do I know?
- ▶ So what does that mean to me in this time and place?
- ▶ Now what action can I take, based on what I have learned?
- ▶ And again: What's happening now, and what do I know?

Constant iterations of this cycle help to feed and nurture a lifelong process of building personal praxis.

The second concept that strengthens the intentional use of the Learning Triangle to build personal praxis is taking a stance of inquiry about the world around you. Inquiry is not about using a checklist of questions. Nor is it about saving your questions to the end of some class or process. Inquiry is an ongoing, permanent questioning that you can choose each moment. In HSD we have a specific definition of inquiry, as it invites you to:

- ▶ Turn judgment into curiosity.
- ▶ Turn disagreement into shared exploration.
- ▶ Turn defensiveness into self-reflection.
- ▶ Turn assumptions into questions.

When you stand in inquiry, you respect the power of theory and practice. At the same time, you hold lightly what you know and what you do, remaining open to new observations and learning.

## Now What Can You Do to Use the Learning Triangle to Build Your Personal Praxis?

Whatever your role in supporting others' learning, you are first a learner yourself. Use the Learning Triangle to explore your own praxis, even as you support others who are building theirs.

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► Pay attention to the world around you. What do you know? What do you see? What grounded theory informs your action? Where are your gaps in understanding that could fuel a more powerful praxis?

► Make sense of that world. How does what you know from experience match or refute what you now know from theory? What is your current practice telling you? What does new theory say about your practice? What is your next wise action?

► Take that action and then begin to look around again, testing theory against practice to continue learning and growing.

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