The Nature of Innovation Labs

A Short Briefing

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Rebecca Malby, Professor

Tel: 07973777309
Email: malbyb@lsbu.ac.uk
www.lsbu.ac.uk/hwi

Brief Overview

Health Labs are synonymous with innovation. Understanding the different types and theoretical foundations can help in choosing both the name and the way you approach your innovation, but also the community you are connecting too.

Labs

Laboratories are places where we experiment. We take hypothesis and we test them. This is critical to the notion of labs in the health space. You have to experiment. There is no place for projects and linear change here. The two key features of Labs are:

1. A hypothesis you are testing to see if it works.
2. Rigorous experiments to test the hypothesis out and develop interventions through prototypes.

This means developing clarity of ideas about cause and effect, protecting space to conduct experiments, and not seeking short cuts.

In social and innovation Labs the main difference to other change work is the focus on participation, creative problem solving and prototyping.

Prototyping

Working hard together, teams get clear on what they want to achieve, and agree on the ideas they want to try out. Using models and mock-ups, the new ideas are worked up by the team, to a point where they can be tried in practice. Putting the model solutions into practice is done through a rapid cycle of trying it out, seeing if it works, and improving the design until its doing the job you wanted it to, or ditching it and trying a different approach. Prototyping helps you 'de-risk' your ideas by trying them out. The quote most often used is 'fail early, succeed sooner' (attributed to David Kelley, founder of IDEO)

Innovation

Innovation is a process that is 'new to here' (a novelty), and better than what previously existed here (an improvement) (Phills et al 2008).

Innovation Labs

Innovation Labs create a neutral space for creativity and collaboration (Cartesen & Bason 2012). They use diversity of participation (usually cross sector and including end user) to generate new ideas, and (product) design thinking to design solutions. They tend to be 'located' i.e. they have a physical presence.

The assumption is that the 'old way' of doing things and the environment in which that happens won't grow innovation, it needs its own space virtual, social and physical.

The archetype of these is the Dutch MindLAb, which has the following architecture

1. A physical workshop (inspiring environment) space for creative thinking and bringing diverse views together, exposing people to new perspectives and ideas. The space is designed to be foster creativity, sustainable development, efficiency, innovation.
2. They rely on co-creation – i.e. diverse stakeholders including 'end users' coming together in co-design
3. They develop skills in innovation
4. They provide tools for innovation
5. They learn fast, and iterate solutions

For this Lab the key is that there is a 'home' where there is disciplined and rigorous attention to innovation. Note that MindLAb was designed for policy and service innovation but there are multiple Labs across the Globe that have spaces that foster new relationships for long standing problems.

For these Labs the key features are:

1. A space protected from any other use except innovation
2. A set of tools that can be used and skills that can be learnt
3. Diverse partnerships and participation (business, Government, social, citizen, academics, technology)

These labs tend to be focused on

1. Service design
2. Governmental policy
3. Tech/ digital solutions

NESTA has mapped a large number of these types of labs (Price 2015). Note NESTA's Health Lab does seem to be more a network and series of projects / social movement than an Innovation or Social Lab.

OECD is taking a lead particularly in the government role in future public services. (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation)

Social Labs

Social Labs have many of the features of the Innovation Lab but focus on the social change issues related to the big questions in our world. They operate through social networks of people trying to solve these complex social challenges and according to Hassan (2014) they have the following three characteristics

• Social
• Experimental
• Systemic

Social labs' work is underpinned by complexity theory (in terms of the model of change they use) and versions of the Theory U model (Sharmer 2008) for the process of change within the Lab. As with Innovation Labs they securing diverse perspectives, connecting communities of interest, but in these Social Labs the membership is determined by the nature of the questions they are working on paying specific attention to ensuring membership from across the whole system including frontline, strategists, managers, citizens, partners and stakeholders.

Social labs process starts with understanding the context for the issue they are working on; going on to

• learning to see the issue differently (by using the diverse perspectives invited into the Lab);
• expanding their sense of the possible through visits and exposure to the skills and resources in their community;
• generating and then prototyping emergent solutions.

Social Labs tend to be in it for the long haul – they are looking to achieve social change that sticks. They do not rely on a physical home, but instead use relationships to foster creativity, and find spaces that suit their issue.

Some use language such as "Change Labs' for these future focused networks of people generating systems change.

The main principle here is that these Lab members are working together to generate a solution to a social and systemic problem. They are a network that learns and does (rapidly) together.

The U process

The U-process was co-developed by Jaworski and Scharmer, based on interviews with over 150 innovators, scientists, artists, and entrepreneurs. In applying it, an individual or team undertakes three activities or movements:

1. Sensing the current reality of the system of which one is a part, carefully and in depth, by suspending judgment, fear and cynicism, and redirecting one's view point to that of the whole system rather than the part;

2. Presencing by letting go of past expectations and agendas, and reflecting to access one's "inner knowing" about what is going on and what one has to do; and

3. Realising, acting swiftly to bring forth a new reality, through prototyping, piloting and institutionalising new behaviours, activities, or initiatives.

The U-Process is an archetypal change process that can be applied at an individual or collective level.

The U Lab

This is a virtual community, pivoting around a MOOC, to generate a global movement using Theory U (Scharmer 2008) process to co-create an 'emerging future'. Participants where possible collect together in Hubs (places) to learn and lead social change together. The MOOC, takes participants through the steps of Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges; developing the skills that underpin many of the innovation lab models above, but creating a real focus on the nature of the relationships and understanding needed for new solutions to emerge

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Contact

Rebecca Malby, Professor
School of Health and Social Care /
Research, Enterprise & Innovation

London South Bank University
6 St George's Circus,
London SE1 6FE

Tel: 07973777309
Email: malbyb@lsbu.ac.uk
www.lsbu.ac.uk/hwi