

Title:

How do public leaders learn from society? A reflexive analysis of action learners

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**Abstract**

This paper uses action learning as a basis for producing research data that help explore the relationship between learning and listening in public organizations. The regional government of Gipuzkoa in northern Spain is engaged in a sustained effort to change the way it interacts with and interprets the future needs of society. Based on grounded theory and on a review of key concepts about critical action learning, a reflexive analysis of the implementation of the methodology of action learning with policy makers was conducted. The paper explores the learning journey participants undertake when implementing a governmental programme of citizen engagement, and shows that a space for criticality resulted in participants learning to listen to each other, and consequently to society, in ways which had previously been beyond reach. The paper concludes by discussing the learning implications for listening to society.

Key words: organizational learning, listening, social listening, critical action learning, collaborative governance

## **Introduction: Action learning as the bridge between learning and listening**

Engaging people in change towards more collaborative forms of governance challenges policy makers to interact with the public in new ways. Public leaders are required to work across the boundaries and silos of their own institutions, work collaboratively with a widening range of external stakeholders and interact with and learn about the interests and needs of citizens (Bryson et al., 2014; Crosby, 2010; Ospina & Foldy, 2015). At the same time governments face important democratic challenges: widespread lack of trust (Edelman, 2019) evidences gaps between public sector organizations and citizens that challenge public administrations to search for innovative ways to modify their communication approach to better attune with citizens' needs (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Faced with intractable or 'wicked' problems which defy technical solutions (Grint, 2005), and with a democratic deficit exacerbated by lack of trust in public institutions and their leaders, governments increasingly need to develop new ways of approaching their policy-making processes (Sanders & Canel, 2013).

This paper shows that action learning has demonstrated to be a useful tool to help policy makers in addressing these challenges; but more importantly, it shows that the interaction developed in action learning set meetings can be the basis for the production of data with which researchers can explore better the connection between the concepts of learning and of listening. The research was possible because the political body of a regional government assumed that a learning process based on experience and practice of being open to listen to society was needed in order to better implement a governmental engagement program. Twelve people, all of them top policy makers from the Gipuzkoa regional government, agreed to take part in an action learning intervention (five set meetings) with the explicit purpose of "learning to listen to society"<sup>1</sup>.

Listening is a concept that, in communication literature, has been largely theorized but very little analyzed in practice (Macnamara, 2015). There is ample consensus that listening is fundamental to ethical public communication (Dhanesh, 2017; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Macnamara, 2016; Borner & Zerfass, 2018), but whereas literature is rich in normative assessments, little attention has been given to what listening organizations involve and entail (Macnamara, 2015; Sanders & Gutiérrez, in press).

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<sup>1</sup> We are aware the term 'society' has different meanings depending on the cultural context. 'Society' was the term frequently used by policy makers participating in this research, and it refers to societal organizations (including companies, citizen associations and NGOs) and end-users of public policies.

We have explored elsewhere what the learning process brought in terms of improving public sector communication: when open to listening, policy makers increase their knowledge about both sides of a public organization-society relationship; change their approach to and performance of communication; become more sensitive about the required conditions for intangible value development; and subsequently, increase their disposition for self-transformation (Canel et al., 2019). Thus, action learning has shown to be of great help for public leaders in their learning that 'building citizen engagement as an asset that provides intangible value to society implies bridging communication gaps via a public sector communication that is oriented to an ongoing interaction between public authorities and stakeholders' (Canel et al. 2019). In this paper we focus on how this learning process occurred, and more specifically, on how action learning enabled participants to develop a space for criticality in which the potential for learning from society was acknowledged.

From an organizational learning perspective, an individual and collective willingness to engage in critical reflection underpins personal and organization development designed to question taken for granted aspects of managing and organizing - and if need be, to challenge them (See Reynolds, 2011 for an overview of the ideas of reflection and critical reflection in the theory and practice of learning.) Action learning is well suited as a vehicle for collective and contextually specific processes of critical inquiry into organizational problems (Railin, 2018; Trehan & Pedler, 2011; Vince, 2004; Willmot, 1994). This paper makes the assumption that this critical reflection is needed to implement collaborative forms of governance with which governments are trying to address the challenge of closing gaps between them and citizens. Are policy makers ready for such a fundamental shift in attitudes, practice and power relations? What challenges do they face? How well equipped are they to meet these challenges? These are the questions we address in this paper. It is structured as follows: As our data comprise post-set reflective commentaries on learning outcomes from action learning designed to bridge listening and learning in *Etorkizuna Eraikitx*, we first place the study in context by describing the programme of collaborative governance around which the research was designed. We then lay out our methodology, approach to data and our research questions and go on to categorise the central problem for which action learning was used in our project. Next we provide examples of problems, interactions with publics, and actions that participants agreed to implement. This is followed by an overview of scholarly work on critical action learning relevant to our study and this frames our thematic analysis of the data. In the final section of the paper we discuss the interpretations we have made from the research and reflect on any implications for learning.

## **The context: learning to listen to society in order to implement the governmental programme of engagement *Etorkizuna Eraikiz***

The provincial government of Gipuzkoa (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa) in the Basque Country (North West Spain, capital San Sebastian) is trying to build citizen engagement through the programme, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*<sup>2</sup>, which comprises different projects in which public authorities and citizens co-participate. Policy makers attempt to define the agenda of the region in collaboration with society, to counter the distance and disaffection of citizens towards politics and to require that political leaders motivate and mobilize citizens to become more involved in projects (Benson, 2019; Layman, 2016; Martí, 2017). At the time the research upon which this paper is based began, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* was in its second year (one year prior to the election), it included 40 projects of different kinds involved more than 160 organizations.

The model aims to encourage collaboration at three levels: 1) Involving citizens in public deliberation which goes beyond the system of representation; 2) Establishing effective public-private collaboration which connects key agents to the system of governance; 3) Connecting key regional agents through the involvement of knowledge networks. Previous research based on in depth interviews with architects of the programme identified the way it is viewed by them: *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* tries to build collaborative governance (different stakeholders are asked to share their views about priorities and solutions), to develop proactive future focused action plans (the agenda of “the future” [2026] is defined), to engage in design-led experimentation (actions are implemented and assessed) and to systematize efforts (processes and protocols are being established to align different stakeholders under common goals) (Canel, 2018). The collaborative governance model that this program attempts to build might imply important changes to the actual structures and procedures of governance (Canel, Luoma-aho, & Barandiarán, in press), and this paper focuses on the learning process developed by participants in action learning when reflecting about the implementation of the program.

### **Method, approach to data and research question**

Action learning provided a means of collecting data to answer our research question, specifically providing a warrant which offers a model of praxeology (Revans 1971: 28-70) in which a person's own learning about themselves, about the actions of others and about the wider world are framed as a systemic unity (Coghlan, 2013: 54-55). Three additional reasons underlie our choice. First action learning provides participants with a way of working with each other on equal terms. Managers learning from reflecting on their action and its consequences are challenged by their peers to think

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation for the expression in Euskera is 'Building the Future Together'

deeply about the consequences of these actions and what they want to *do* about this as a result. Second, action learning is grounded in a deliberate way on learning from each other both within the set and in the context of listening to and interacting with society. And third, the emphasis on listening carefully to each other might strengthen resolve and develop skills for listening to society. The symbiosis of listening, learning and action encouraged set members to take concrete steps in their efforts to listen to society and to learn from the process of doing so.

For this paper, methodology is based first on reviews of relevant literatures of organizational learning focusing on key concepts such as critical reflection and unlearning. Second, a reflexive analysis was conducted of the implementation of the methodology of action learning. We take as our starting point the classical model of action learning contained in Revans' proposal for working with managers as they tackle intractable problems of organizing. There were two clear objectives. First, a learning objective which was subject to a strict confidentiality agreement among participants; and second, research objectives for which informed consent was given. Two authors of this paper were set advisors and one was a participant. The discipline and confidentiality of classical action learning was followed during the set meetings. At the end of each meeting time was set aside for participants to reflect in writing on a series of questions and to discuss their thoughts first in pairs and threes before sharing insights in the group as a whole. The questions posed were framed in terms of reviewing and recording different aspects of learning (Pedler & Abbott, 2013 pp. 79-80). Written answers were given to the question of what each participant was learning about themselves and their problem or issue; about the group and any commonly held problems or issues; about *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* and any problems about putting this new model of governance into practice including listening to society. The organisational learning implications are examined from the point of view of 'classical' action learning (Pedler et al., 2005; Revans, 1971, 1982, 2011) and informed also by more recent theorising from a critical action learning perspective (Brook et al., 2016; Pedler & Hsu, 2014; Trehan et al. 2018; Vince, 2004, 2008).

The data set is made up of two elements: first a typed-up version of the individual written reflections represented in different coloured font for each of the different set meetings in order to develop working hypotheses about the development of a listening trajectory; and second, hand written research notes taken during the group deliberation on the small group discussions<sup>3</sup> where individual thoughts were shared and developed. For the qualitative analysis of data we relied on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), and followed Lansisalmi et al. in using it within an approach that

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<sup>3</sup> The individual reflections and group deliberation were in Spanish, a language spoken by all three members of the research team. The reflections in pairs or threes took place in Basque, which is spoken by all the action learners and one member of the research team.

is both context-based as also one that applies *a priori* concepts (Lansisalmi, Peiró, & Kivimaki, 2004). We agree with these authors in that “grounded theory gives room for the interpretation of lived experiences of the participants and also provides a systematic means to efficiently analyze large quantities of unstructured qualitative data” (p. 253). We followed an abductive procedure of analysis which in practice means going back and forth between the data, the literature and the researchers’ interpretations. Therefore: a) data was thematically analyzed applying grounded theory as a means to describe characteristics and generate hypotheses; b) categories, themes and sub-themes were defined following the literature review on the concepts of (critical) action learning.

Following Braun and Clarke’s criteria for good thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and illustrated by concrete examples of the application of grounded theory such as that of Fay’s work (Fay, 2011), we took the following steps. First, the data were read and reread several times in order to conduct open coding to the responses delivered by participants to the questions posed to them. A total of 302 units were open-coded. Recurrence and repetition were used to help identify themes. The next step involved integrating categories using axial coding (for example, Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) to make connections between them, and collapsing categories with overlapping conceptual domains. After close reading and comparative analysis of codes, emerging categories of the experience were identified.

Working with these reflexive data from three disciplinary perspectives (sociology, public sector communication, and organizational learning), the research team wanted to understand public leaders’ interpretations of the relationship between listening, learning and society. To this end, the following research question was posed:

RQ: What critical learning emerges for public leaders when they engage in action learning in order to listen to society?

### **Categorizing the wicked problem for action learning**

The social and political goal of *Etorkizuna Eraikitza* calls for an approach to learning which respects and strengthens its dialogic aspirations. Traditional, formal approaches to educating or training managers and leaders, while contemplating criticality in content tend not to challenge the established supremacy of expert knowledge (Reynolds, 2011). This leaves a structural power imbalance between the knowledgeable expert and the unknowing learner. ‘Not knowing’ is cast as a deficit to be fixed. Falling back on such pedagogies to address the desire to learn by listening to society, could by virtue of its reliance on hierarchical learning relationships, unwittingly undermine its own objectives by framing ‘not knowing’ as subject to technical, expert solution (usually coming from outside) rather than as an essential starting place for learning. Implementing *Etorkizuna Eraikitza* entails

a model of working and learning relationships capable of challenging these established power structures.

In terms of defining the wicked problem, the action learning set coalesced around the single question facing the Gipuzkoa public authorities of how to address the widening gulf of trust between political leaders and the society they serve by learning how to listen better. The question served primarily to guide individual action and learning. However, over time discussions during the set meetings and post-meeting written reflections revealed deeper connections between the actions participants were taking and the learning that was taking place as a result. Consequently, the manner in which the government itself was learning and listening came more into focus as the project progressed.

Therefore, participants brought the “problem” of implementing projects of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* to the group, and the action learning methodology provided them with a structure for sharing their experiences, examples, and interpretations of the data they collected in their interactions with stakeholders (such as societal and business organizations and research centres) as well as with other policy makers and civil servants within the organization.

Since the interaction developed among participants in the meetings focused on the process of listening, part of what became the focus of analysis was on what had actually been heard. The type of actions that participants implemented throughout the process includes developing new ways of reaching out citizens, identifying existing data and producing new one, as also conducting analysis and interacting with their teams to make sense of the “signals of society”. Table 1 shows several examples of the problems, interactions and implemented actions along the learning process (this has been elaborated with the permission of participants to overcome confidentiality of the meetings).

Table 1 about here

Table 1. Action Learning set meetings: examples of problems, interactions and implemented actions		
Wicked problems brought to the AL group	Interactions in the AL group	Actions participants agreed to implement out of group reflection

<p>How to reach out citizens better?</p> <p>How shall I involve civil servants more?</p> <p>What can I do to align different departments with the goals of <i>Etorkizuna Eraikiz</i>?</p> <p>How can I show I am authentically willing to count on my stakeholders?</p> <p>How can I increase the transforming capacity of my department's policies?</p> <p>How shall I allocate functions and tasks to make my department ready for change?</p>	<p>What do citizens think about this project and how do you know?</p> <p>What do you think matters for citizens?</p> <p>Why do you think the DFG is not attracting good talent?</p> <p>Is it sincere your willingness to involve civil servants?</p> <p>What are you exactly meaning by "listening to society"?</p> <p>Are you ready to hear criticism from citizens?</p> <p>Do you believe we really want to share power with citizens?</p>	<p>Involve the leader (<i>Diputado General</i>) in cross departmental meetings</p> <p>Make changes to formats of public encounters with citizens</p> <p>Invite new and different people to public encounters</p> <p>Collect data about petitions people are making through participatory budgeting and reflect about our readiness to adequately respond</p> <p>Arrange a meeting with a hospital with listening good practices and reflect on how to extend them to other departments</p> <p>Explore the list of volunteering organizations to analyse better how society is evolving in their engagement with volunteer work</p>
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Source: own elaboration

As well as bringing their own problem issues to work on with the help of others in the set, participants also had the opportunity to reflect together on the data they had been gathering. Here participants were asked: What conclusions do you draw from these data? What do you now know about society in Gipuzkoa that you didn't know before? Do you share your sense making of these data with anyone? Having made sense of these data, what do you feel able to do now that you wouldn't have done before? On the final meeting, after the period of individual reflection, groups of three or four were invited to share and further consider the individual and collective progress there were making as a group and as a management team towards the overall goal of learning from listening to society.

### **Critical action learning**

By drawing on critical social theory and deepening critical questioning of 'daily realities', Critical Action Learning (CAL) aspires to understand and to challenge the effects of organisational power relations on action and learning (Trehan, 2011 p. 164, cited in Brook et al., 2016 p. 164). The perspective draws attention to broader social, political and cultural processes, including their often hidden patterns and dynamics of power.

Three contributions from the critical action learning literature are especially relevant to our study. First, Russ Vince's concept of 'organizing insight' (2004 p. 75) emphasises the importance of reflecting on and learning from organising as well as learning from experience. Secondly, Pedler and Hsu's (2014) concept of 'unlearning' questions the ubiquitous positivity attached to learning and proposes an alternative frame of reference (p. 298). Finally, proposals for 'stopping doing those things which are not getting us to where we want to be' (Brooks et al., 2016 p. 369) draw attention

to four kinds of ‘unlearning’ which are considered particularly useful in the face of ‘wicked problems’. We briefly consider each of these contributions in the following paragraphs before moving on to data analysis.

Vince’s research shifts the focus from discussions about the impact of action learning on organizations, to a consideration of the impact of organizing on action learning. Drawn from action research-based studies in a local government organization and in a publicly limited company, Vince describes the negative cycle of organizational dynamics born of the commonplace emotional reactions of caution and self-protection. Individuals’ fear of getting things wrong leads to caution which manifests as blame of the ‘other’. This blame undermines the willingness to reflect and triggers routines around being too busy, and a belief that the collective cannot be trusted. Lack of collective reflection stymies communication between different groups, and in turn leads to further caution and self-protection (Vince, 2004, p. 70). Vince goes on to speculate that an ability to reflect ‘out loud’ on the politics and emotions that drive real (and imagined) relations between people enables them to move beyond competition so they are able to embed knowledge in different parts of their organizational system. The resulting idea of ‘organizing insight’ highlights the importance of reflecting on and learning from the process of organizing itself. This raises an additional less welcome possibility that action learning set members engage in ‘learning-in-action’ whilst also colluding to avoid action for the sake of political expediency, or engaging in ‘learning inaction’ (Vince, 2008, p. 99–100).

Pedler and Hsu develop the ideas of non-action and unlearning to encourage managers' reflexivity of their own part in (re)constructing the systems and processes they inhabit and seek to change. In effect, managers are invited to recognise their own power in shaping organisational realities. For these authors, critical action learning ‘seeks to reveal the effect of power and power relations’ (Pedler & Hsu, 2014 p. 305). This opens a number of conceptual opportunities to develop Revans’ proposal. First, as learning has unpredictable elements which are contingent on the effects of power, the unlearning concept can challenge the assumption that learning is universally positive (see also Contu et al., 2003). To ‘unlearn’ from this perspective, seeks to valorize knowledge that is currently invisible or silenced, implying awareness of the effects of one’s own expert or hierarchical power. Secondly, the ‘wicked’ problems at the centre of most action learning are unpredictable, ambiguous and impossible to define from a unitary point of view. Stepping back from the unattainable belief in once-and-for-all solutions involves unlearning habitual patterns of response. Thirdly, taking a post-structuralist perspective on power-knowledge relations, action learners should ‘unlearn’ the impulse to engage in power struggles but instead bring seemingly self-evident truths into a more provisional and democratic space where dominant discourses might be questioned.

Brook et al. (2016) identify four orientations towards ‘unlearning’ in their empirical data and explore their relevance in the context of the wicked problems of social work. The first, ‘unlearning as discarding’ (ibid. p.377) recognises the experience of seeing things afresh when existing knowledge or behaviours are challenged in an action learning set. Unlearning is not seen as a wholesale discarding of knowledge and practice, but as a part of a widened repertoire. Second, unlearning can be experienced as a deep, and sometimes unsettling process accompanied by confusion and struggle. Any challenge to current operating assumptions can trigger individual and organisational defensive routines (Hedberg, 1981) and be experienced as profoundly demanding both intellectually and emotionally. Third, critical unlearning picks up the theme of critical reflection on power relations. With a focus on the institutional context of problem situations, critical reflection practised in this way promotes ‘unlearning by bringing to light alternative perspectives, sometimes from knowledge that has been forgotten or become submerged in current operating systems’ (Brook et al., 2016 p. 380). Fourth, the possibility of deliberate non-action is introduced as a considered position which eschews immediate action in favour of remaining open to the emergency of other possibilities - a choice which is at the same time both passive and powerful.

## **Analysis**

Our primary research interest in this paper is in identifying what critical learning emerges for public leaders when they engage in action learning in order to listen to society. For these participants action learning framed a different kind of critical space for shared reflection on action. We therefore drew upon the CAL literature in order to examine the nature and development of this criticality. Key ideas from the literature reviewed earlier in this article were used as an analytic lens to identify evidence of critical reflection in our data. Our proposition was that the explicit objective of transforming governance structures and relationships might trigger critical reflection as defined in the literature. Thus our primary research question was further specified in the following research sub-questions:

1. What kind of organisational learning do participants imagine?
2. Are there signs of critical reflexivity?
3. Is there evidence of unlearning occurring?

A selection offering analytic insight into the learning experience is shown in table below (Table 2) after which we go on to interpret the data from a perspective of (un)learning and (in)action.

Table 2 about here

Table 2: Signs of critical learning

Concepts from the CAL literature	Examples from the reflective data
<p>1 Caution and organization (Vince, 2004)</p>	<p><i>Our customs and culture make it hard for us to adapt to this way of working</i></p> <p><i>It's complicated, I should build it into my daily routine but so far I haven't succeeded</i></p>
<p>Participants recognise their own caution, and their tendency to look outside of themselves for a reason why implementing their strategy was harder than they imagined. They refer, for example to the 'serious problem' they have in convincing their civil servants to put their weight behind the initiative. They also voice the lack of time available for reflecting together. It is often stressed that the 'learning from listening to society' project is a conscious attempt by the political leadership to break down the widespread habit of passing responsibility for failure to other groups. That these issues may be systemically connected to each other is not named directly but there is nonetheless a high level of honesty about the need to improve not only in the interpretation of what society is telling them, but also in their collective capacity for reflection and critical questioning of their own behaviours and processes.</p>	
<p>2 Organizing insight (Vince, 2004)</p>	<p><i>It is a reality that is changing the political culture of policy makers and as a result, their way of doing politics.</i></p> <p><i>I have to share my reflections more and have faith in greater group collaboration</i></p>
<p>There is ample evidence in the reflective accounts of the dawning realisation that their starting point (i.e. thinking that different groups would benefit if they were only to listen to their political messages) was, in fact, misconceived. They recognise that this misconception is created by their own hierarchical frame of reference which distances 'society' from the established governance mechanisms, and that it is the frame itself that they must address.</p>	
<p>3 Learning-in-action (Vince, 2008)</p>	<p><i>I am putting the process of learning and listening to society as a number one priority for developing our political function</i></p> <p><i>Learning means: being willing to learn, to listen, to interact, to take ideas into action</i></p>
<p>This is by far the largest category in the data. Participants are increasingly aware of the progress they are making with their problem situations through action and disciplined collective reflection on the results of this action. For the participants, this is a fresh way of understanding the relationship between learning and action. In the accounts participants draw attention to the collective nature of reflection and learning, stressing a marked contrast with reflecting in isolation.</p>	
<p>4 Learning inaction (Vince, 2008)</p>	<p><i>Society sees us as a long way away. It's going to be difficult</i></p> <p><i>Etorkizuna Eraikiz will be at risk if it doesn't become part of the way the Regional Government does things; a part of the daily routine of the civil servants. I don't think it's going to be easy.</i></p>
<p>Although it is widely agreed that questioning should never be abandoned, the reflections bear witness to shared awareness that it can also lead to paralysis. Participants point out the size of the barriers they face and ponder how these can (and perhaps will lead) to inaction. There is a powerful political will behind the initiative and this pushes back against complacency. From our data it is not possible to identify collusion.</p>	

Table 2: Signs of critical learning

Concepts from the CAL literature		Examples from the reflective data
5	Effects of one's own power (Pedler & Hsu, 2014)	<i>Society is willing to listen and to participate. Are we, as an organization, willing to share leadership and decisions? As an organization we have to take the path the citizens are already taking.</i>
<p>Participants are acutely aware that the relationship between elected officials and the electorate is changing, and that they also need to change the way they view this. Critical awareness of one's own constitutive relationship with organisational and political realities (in a post-structural sense) is not voiced. This is, however, a thread in the reflections which questions whether as a political class they are 'really ready to share power'.</p>		
6	Letting go of the idea of 'a single truth' (Pedler & Hsu, 2014)	<i>The listening process is allowing me to learn to reflect and rethink many things about politics and public policies. It has allowed me to question things.</i>
<p>The reflective accounts show there is a strong belief in technical solutions and the value of expertise. At the same time, participants discuss the existence of competing moral, cultural, historical and political realities both in the past and projected into the future. There is no explicit mention of 'multiple realities' in the ontological sense discussed by Pedler &amp; Hsu.</p>		
7	Questioning of dominant discourses (Pedler & Hsu 2014) (Brook et al 2016)	<i>Society seems to be open to collaboration. We must manage expectations and not sell things we don't have</i>  <i>We have a lot to change to make listening effective; we need to go beyond cosmetics and marketing.</i>
<p>The group recognises its position as reflective of a dominant political discourse with its attendant assumptions about democratic legitimacy of the electoral system. At the same time, their reflections show just how acutely aware they are of opposing discourses which question their motives and cast genuine attempts to get closer to society as 'simply marketing'. In doing so, and in proposing <i>Etorkezuna Eraikiz</i>, they also question their own legitimacy for the future. They see this as a positive response to an inevitable shift in the socio-political landscape.</p>		
8	Unlearning as discarding (Brook et al. 2016)	<i>We have basically developed the critical spirit, core concepts for active listening</i>  <i>After this process I am more aware that I can act differently. It has helped me to "coalesce" in a different way with the group.</i>
<p>Participants share a view that by engaging in action learning they have developed a new way of being together as a more cohesive group which is more able to be individually and collectively open to challenge. This new way of being is synonymous with actively listening to each other and to the people they meet in the course of their political duties. This represents a broader repertoire of interactive behaviours which complement rather than supersede their current practices.</p>		
9	Deep unlearning (Brook et al. 2016)	<i>How can I stop and reflect more often and more frequently?</i>  <i>Society is more open and tolerant than I expected, less prejudiced</i>  <i>It is not enough to measure it. The fundamental value is in the relationship that can be generated</i>
<p>Some of the questions participants ask of themselves in their written reflections suggest that the experience of learning in this way has uncovered some fundamental challenges to the way they previously saw themselves in relation to their role. A striking example is the insight that their own preconceptions about 'society' are a major factor in their perceived distance from it. While perhaps not quite the existential struggles described in the Brook et al. paper, this is nonetheless a serious re-examination of prior positions.</p>		

Table 2: Signs of critical learning		
	Concepts from the CAL literature	Examples from the reflective data
10	Unlearning as deliberate non-action (Brook et al. 2016)	<p><i>I have to assess the situation, whatever it is, before I act - without pre-judging the outcome of this assessment</i></p> <p><i>But it is also true that I need to stop before looking for solutions so quickly.</i></p> <p><i>It is necessary to stop, it is necessary to listen because we do not know how to do it.</i></p>
<p>Participants recognise the need to stop doing the next thing, simply because it is the next thing on their list. Stopping to make sense of what they are hearing is crucial because they do not at present really know what comes next.</p>		

Source: own elaboration

## Discussion

Analysis of the reflective accounts delivered by participants show a meaningful evolution of policy makers' perceptions about both the society with which they attempt to engage, as well about themselves. Both carry implications for learning. During the early meetings negative perceptions predominated: participants see citizens very far away from the government and categorized them as politically disaffected, unwilling to get involved, too heterogeneous, too demanding and complex, and in constant change. As awareness grows and is shared, they shift the focus of such action away from blaming or not trusting others and back onto themselves. In comparing themselves to citizens, politicians also begin by categorizing themselves negatively: they see themselves as too attached to old frameworks and structures, unable to reach out or to attune with citizens' needs and expectations. This criticality is not limited only to their assessment of their relationship with citizens. Participants also realize that they need to rethink not only the motivations of citizens, but also the way they interpret the motivations of their civil servants. In fact, the imagined motivations of others are re-examined from a more critical perspective. Participants are furthermore increasingly able to take a critical perspective when raising and discussing key issues. They become more aware, for example, of their relationship with time and continuity, and even their relationship with power. They begin to ask how it is possible to say that they want a learning culture and yet not make time to learn or to reflect together. Why, they asked themselves, are they too busy? And how, they wonder, can they continue to reflect 'out loud'?

As the learning process advances, and participants begin to report their learning from encounters with different groups and stakeholders of the Etorikizuna project to the group, they deliver more critically reflective accounts which show awareness of an evolving society: "Society is changing

much more than we are aware of”; “Society might be undertaking a journey which is more relevant than we are aware of”. Second, judgments become more positive, and this is so both about themselves (the group is seen as more compact, reflective, and cohesive) as also about society (“This society deserves our trust”; “This is a society we can work with”; “This society is more open and tolerant and less prejudicial than I expected it to be”). These positive assessments also go hand in hand with a positive judgment about the will, availability and disposition of society to get engaged in public policies: “It seems society is open to collaboration”; “If we provide projects in which we give a say, citizens will be prone to participate”. Gaps become more tangible and therefore bridgeable.

Elsewhere we explored how the learning process helped bridging the communication gaps: “physical” gaps between participants and civil servants as also between them and citizens; gaps between behaviours and messages; and gaps between the theory and the practice of listening (Canel et al., 2019). Here we have explored how the space for criticality helped that learning. This is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

Bridged gaps	From the ‘they-versus-us’ to the ‘us-together’	From a ‘speaking culture’ to a ‘listening culture’	From ‘take the bus’ to ‘acting together’
What changes?	Policy makers’ knowledge about themselves and about society	Communication performance	An increased determination for self-transformation
What do public leaders learn?	To identify gaps	To interact	That bridging gaps enables sharing power
To what extent does the space of criticality enable this learning?	By helping critically interrogate the results of each other’s actions/interactions, policy makers ‘unlearn’ previously entrenched and unfounded views about ‘the other’	By sharing questions about how they habitually engage with publics, policy makers give voice to previously hidden patterns of interaction	By identifying and describing barriers created by current arrangements, policy makers recognize their own part both in sustaining and transforming these arrangements

Source: own elaboration

At the start of the process ‘listening to society’ and ‘sharing power’ are unproblematic political aspirations with technical but not critical issues of understanding and implementation. As the action learning evolves, and the participants become more confident action learners, they begin to examine their part in creating the problems they experience. They each learn from their own actions and reflect on the results of these actions, but also, and as a group, they begin to identify the organizing

processes which militate their efforts, and critically, the ways in which their own responses contribute to this process. 'Listening', 'society' and the 'sharing of power' become subject to critical reflection, a criticality which, framed by the action learning process, emerges from within the group itself.

The political aim in Gipuzkoa is to meet regional challenges by renewing local identity and common culture, and by actively and jointly tackling economic and social challenges. From a learning perspective, the success of the project rests not only on interaction, exchange and communication between agents but also on the willingness of public leaders to be open to challenging themselves and each other by reflecting openly and critically on their aspirations and experiments in action.

## **Conclusion**

The dichotomy between deeds and messages conceptualized as gaps in communication can be productively re-imagined as *listening* which seeks a better understanding of the source of these gaps and ways of addressing them, and as *learning* which aims to critically reflect on the results of action. Consequently, this paper frames action learning not only as a useful tool to help policy makers tackle wicked problems, but also as a basis for producing data for researchers to examine connections between the task of learning and of listening. In the paper we examine how action learning created a space where participants were able to develop a shared criticality in which the potential for learning from society was acknowledged. Specifically, by sharing questions about how they habitually engage with different publics, policy makers were able to articulate previously hidden patterns of interaction which had led to communication gaps; and by engaging in actions which increased their knowledge of themselves and of society, these gaps could be identified. Furthermore, by bringing critical questioning to the results of each other's actions, policy makers began to 'unlearn' previously entrenched and unfounded views about the motivations of 'the other'; and by interacting differently, began to focus on listening instead of speaking. Finally, by identifying and describing the barriers created by current organizational arrangements, policy makers came to recognize their own part not only in sustaining, but also in transforming such arrangements; and by actively working on their own learning, they were also bridging the gaps that enable power to be shared.

Some questions have been raised which this research did not address. First, can the confidence and reflection practices gained during the process transcend the perceived barriers between different groups enough for public reflection to encompass a wider circle of stakeholders? A further, longitudinal study would be required to address this question. Second, the effectiveness of the initiatives

articulated during the action learning process cannot be tested in practice without a longitudinal study which would furthermore need to address the tension between confidentiality, action learning and wider social benefits. And third, it is not clear from whence criticality came. Although not introduced explicitly as a concept for consideration, our data show that public leaders held onto a critical space within their set meetings, in part, we infer, due to the action learning process itself. In addition, further work is required to test how the context where action learning occurs (in this case in a widening gulf of trust between public leaders and citizens) shapes the very need to see things differently and prompts a collective re-thinking from which criticality can emerge.

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