Info-sheet:

Unpacking practice-based learning for practitioners and activists preventing violence against women and children

Practice-based learning centers the experience and expertise of practitioners and activists in the day-to-day work of preventing violence in our communities. It lays the foundation for experimentation and innovation in our programming. Prioritizing practice-based learning reminds us to keep our eyes and ears on the ground so we can quickly recognize successes and challenges, strengthening our programming at every step. It is the lifeblood of activism for violence prevention and catalyzes strong organizations and vibrant movements. Valuing practice-based learning alongside other forms of evidence is essential in creating a comprehensive, contextualized knowledge base—and mitigates the current trend of privileging knowledge generated in academia or by monitoring & evaluation experts.
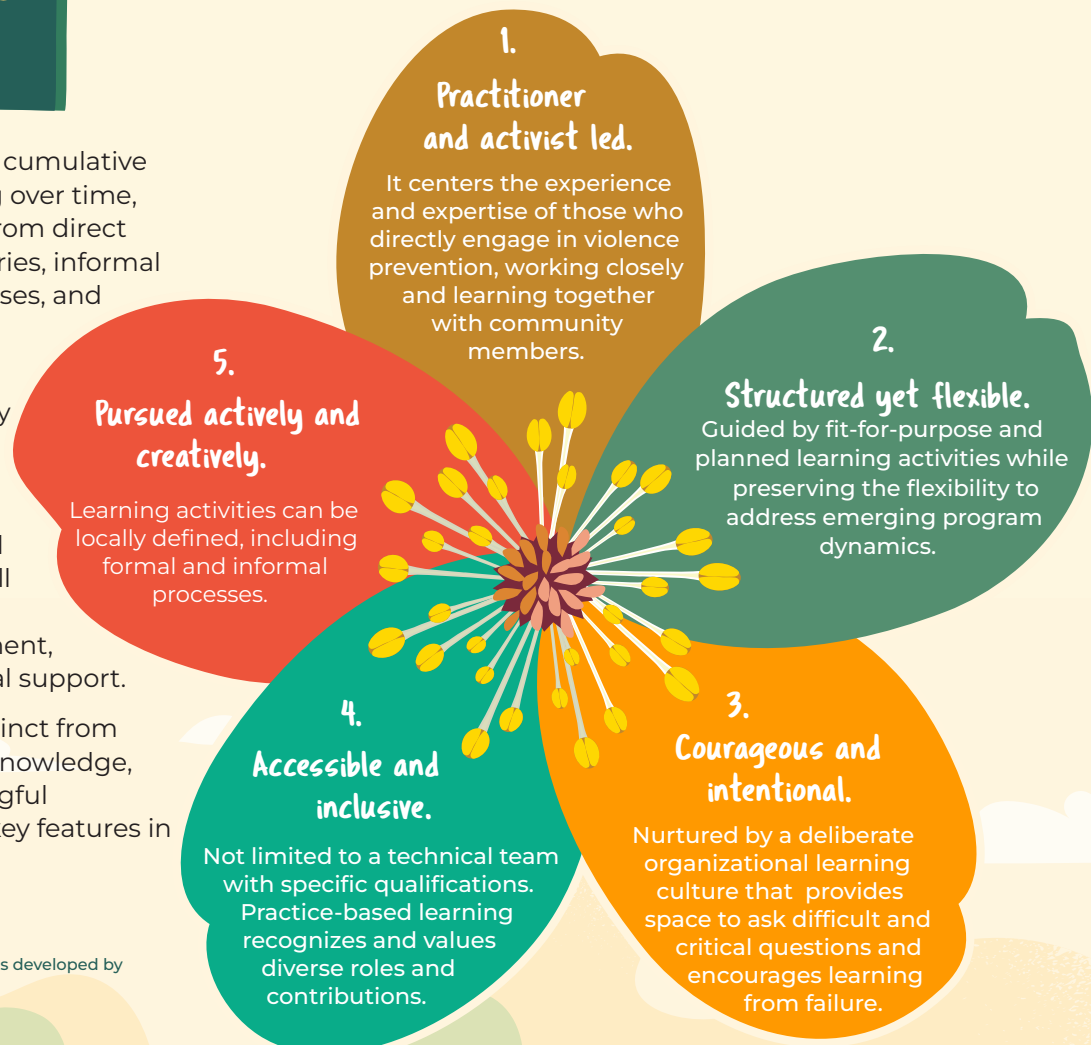
What is practice-based learning?

Practice-based learning is the cumulative journey of intentional learning over time, informed by insights gained from direct experiences, observations, stories, informal reflections, monitoring processes, and more.[1]

We use **'practice'** to describe engagement in the day-to-day work of violence prevention, including community-based programming, advocacy, communications, training and more. Practice is inclusive of all stages of programming, from ideas generation, to development, implementation, and technical support.

Practice-based learning is distinct from other forms of evidence and knowledge, making a unique and meaningful contribution to the field (see key features in the image to the right).

1 This definition of practice-based learning was developed by Raising Voices in 2016, and updated in 2022

5 key features of practice-based learning

1. Practitioner and activist led.
It centers the experience and expertise of those who directly engage in violence prevention, working closely and learning together with community members.

2. Structured yet flexible.
Guided by fit-for-purpose and planned learning activities while preserving the flexibility to address emerging program dynamics.

3. Courageous and intentional.
Nurtured by a deliberate organizational learning culture that provides space to ask difficult and critical questions and encourages learning from failure.

4. Accessible and inclusive.
Not limited to a technical team with specific qualifications. Practice-based learning recognizes and values diverse roles and contributions.

5. Pursued actively and creatively.
Learning activities can be locally defined, including formal and informal processes.

Ways to nurture practice-based learning

We use the language of 'learning' rather than 'knowledge,' emphasizing the process over product. Learning is an active and generative process, distinct from practice-based knowledge that emerges as a result.

There are many ways to integrate practice-based learning in everyday work, including through brainstorming, problem solving, and action planning in response to new learning. Organizations can find their unique ways to do so throughout the program cycle. Some examples include:

- **During program design or adaptation**: Structured and organic observations during community visits and dialogues with those directly facilitating or involved in activities. Internally led learning initiatives, including reflective spaces with staff and community members to answer key questions around relevance, feasibility and acceptability of the program to inform refinements.

- **During program implementation**: Paying keen attention to community's response to the program activities. Using accessible monitoring tools and strategies for practitioners and activists involved in the program, with considerations for community members' time and interests. Ensuring the program team members play a key role in defining and owning monitoring frameworks, with flexibility to adapt/redefine progress indicators if necessary. Organizing regular feedback sessions with staff to interpret emerging trends in the data, and collectively plan next steps.

- **During organizational processes:** Recurring team reflections to pause and take stock of learning, successes, challenges and other considerations. Creating open spaces where team members are encouraged to be curious and openly share their honest views and questions, including critiques of what did not work and why. Prioritizing the synthesis, dissemination and application of key lessons (internally and externally).

- **During documentation and knowledge sharing:** Investing in the development of practice-based knowledge products in diverse formats, for example case studies, program briefs, best practice synthesis, zines, social media content, videos and others. Creating content that is energizing and aspirational – mobilizing others to act. Tailoring resources to diverse audiences, especially for community members who contributed to the learning.

Rigor and responsibility

To generate rich and useful knowledge, practice-based learning must involve a rigorous process of collectively analyzing and interrogating emerging insights, while remaining grounded in direct programming experiences. This kind of rigor is distinct from that applied to academic research and other methodologies, however no less essential. Here are some ways to deepen rigor and responsibility in practice-based learning:

- **Creating organizational and community processes to vet insights.** When learning is upheld by various experiences and perspectives over time, it brings rigor and credibility. This is further strengthened when organizational leaders promote a questioning mindset and invest in deepening skills such as active listening, observation, and critical thinking.

- **Sharing practice-based learning responsibly.** This includes inviting technical reviews from external colleagues before sharing widely. Being clear about how certain conclusions were drawn and limitations of the learning. Choosing the appropriate format for sharing, for example, written, audio or video. And once finalized, prioritizing uptake among practitioners, activists and community members.

- **Actively learning from others and situating practice-based learning within the broader knowledge base on violence prevention.** Staying tuned into the discourse by creating spaces to engage with others' work, which can also nurture collective advocacy and action.

Addressing common misconceptions

*Myth: Practice-based learning is informal, quick and/or easy.

Fact: Engaging in meaningful practice-based learning requires intention, collective effort and structure.

*Myth: Practice-based learning is anecdotal and less valuable than knowledge generated through academic enquiry.

Fact: When pursued rigorously and responsibly, practice-based learning makes critical, high-quality contributions to the global knowledge base and substantially improves programming in real-time. It is equally valuable to knowledge generated through other methods and can meaningfully complement findings from research studies.

*Myth: Practice-based learning is another way to describe monitoring & evaluation (M&E).

Fact: While practice-based learning can include learning from M&E, it is far more expansive. It encompasses the practical know-how that comes from experience as well as a wide range of learning opportunities – through consultation, observations, reflection, feedback mechanisms, dialogue and more.

*Myth: Practice-based learning is a reliable way to evaluate program impacts.

Fact: Practice-based learning is best suited to provide a nuanced understanding of the *whats, hows* and *whys* underlying program, organizational and/or community dynamics. Other knowledge building approaches are more adept to measure outcomes and impacts.

*Myth: Practice-based learning requires a dedicated team and/or specific skill set.

Fact: While pursuing practice-based learning involves investment and resources, everyone has a role to play. As such, it democratizes learning—the only core 'skill' required is a learning mindset (e.g., to be open, curious, and reflective!).

Take-home message

Elevating practice-based learning is a political stance that challenges the hierarchy of 'what counts' as evidence. As practitioners and activists, visibilizing our learning is empowering—it nurtures confidence in our thought-leadership, inspires creativity and innovation, and ensures our insights contribute to the broader discourse. Prioritizing practiced-based learning is also part of our broader commitment to ethical and accountable programming. It keeps us grounded in community realities and helps to identify any unintended consequences so we can quickly pivot and adapt our work. As such, elevating practice-based learning is essential for safe and impactful programming to prevent violence.

To learn more about Raising Voices journey with practice-based learning, visit:

https://raisingvoices.org/resources/nurturing-elevating-practice-based-learning/

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