

LEARNING CASE STUDIES: DEFINITIONS AND APPLICATIONS

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This essay is part of a series of papers commissioned by The Partnering Initiative through its Case Study Project to develop insights into the process of researching/writing partnership case studies as tools for change.

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Defining learning case studies

Learning case studies present learners with problems and challenges based on real life situations and drive them to make difficult decisions based on the evidence given. They are designed to raise questions and to present just enough data to stimulate/engage learners to find their own answers. By doing so, learning case studies - unlike most other learning methodologies - put the responsibility of learning squarely on the shoulders of the learners.

What distinguishes learning cases from other case studies? A learning case study is:

- **Questioning:** The primary purpose of a learning case study is to raise questions. Learning case studies challenge the learner to think deeply about the issues presented, to question the underlying assumptions, to explore innovative ways of addressing the challenges presented and to consider the consequences of the choices made.
- **Open-ended:** Learning case studies are designed to reveal rather than define. They present no answers instead they encourage learners to use their own knowledge and experience to examine the evidence presented and make their own deductions. Although learning case studies may offer no 'right answers' they are designed to encourage learners to understand the importance of asking the right questions. Thus they may not be the most efficient way of *conveying* knowledge but they do present a valuable means for *broadening* knowledge.
- **Decision forcing:** Learning case studies are structured to drive learners to make difficult decisions based on incomplete or contested information with uncertain consequences. In this way they closely reflect the uncertainty and ambiguity of real life.
- **Engaging:** Learning case studies offer a means of actively engaging learners to grapple with the challenge presented and to draw on their knowledge and experience to address the questions raised.

In addition, a learning case study is designed to:

- **Encourage collaboration:** Most learning case studies encourage collaboration, as learners work together to address the challenge at hand, learning from each other in the process.
- **Promote reflective practice:** Learning case studies offer learners not only an opportunity to think and act, but also to critically reflect on their process of thinking and action and its consequences.
- **Build imaginative responses:** A well written learning case study stimulates creativity and innovative thinking.

The value of partnership learning case studies

Case studies as a learning methodology pack more experience into every hour of learning than any other instructional approach.¹ Partnership learning case studies offer practitioners a chance to examine a true to life partnering challenge, to make critical decisions, consider the consequences of decisions made and question their approach to partnering issues raised.

Partnership learning case studies can be engineered to provide practitioners with an unthreatening opportunity to develop a wide range of skills including:

¹ Harvard Business School website:

http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b01/en/academic/edu_casemethod.jhtml

- Decision making abilities
- Evaluation and Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Reflective practice
- Listening capacity
- Empathy
- Time management
- Creativity/Innovation
- Communication
- Interpersonal
- Synthesising and presenting

Many of which may be valuable in enhancing their partnering abilities.

Furthermore the most powerful and interesting learning cases are those that allow for several assessments of the same situation, leading to several equally plausible and compelling conclusions each with different implications for action. Such learning case studies not only sharpen learners' critical thinking skills and creativity but also help them develop the ability to put themselves in the shoes of another to understand and empathise with another (partner's) perspective - a critical partnering skill.

Learning case studies are designed to help partnership practitioners reflect on the costs and benefits of partnering, test their understanding of partnering as an approach and make them more confident of their reason for engaging in a partnership. In this way they play a critical role in building the case for partnerships.

They can also help promote greater insight into the "how" of partnering by enabling learners to reflect on the partnering process as both an 'art' and a 'science', by helping them to examine the

effectiveness of different partnership structures, approaches and methodologies and by allowing learners to critically reflect on their own partnering style and its consequences.

In this increasing globalised world, the ability to partner across cultures (whether this be through partnerships across sectors or across countries) is a valuable asset. Learning case studies can be a cost-effective way of helping partnership practitioners understand the challenges of working across cultures and developing their skills in addressing these challenges. Furthermore learning case studies can provide an invaluable bridge between practice and policy by providing both practitioners and policy makers with the opportunity to think through the practical implications of policies and understand the practical Constraints.

Finally, and perhaps of greatest importance, is the fact that learning case studies can play an important part in promoting change – whether such change is at the level of individual professional practice or at organizational or sectoral level – it is this characteristic of learning case studies which makes them such powerful learning tools for partnership practitioners.

A Good Learning Case Study:

- Matches the learners needs
- Fits the objective for which it has been created
- Offers true to life situations/challenges
- Puts the learners in the shoes of the decision maker
- Builds three-dimensional characters that learners can understand and relate to
- Creates useful controversy/debate
- Offers learning which can be applied in other contexts

How are learning case studies tools for change?

Lasting behavioural change is more likely to follow the reinterpretation of past experiences than the acquisition of fresh knowledge... (it can be achieved) by resolving a work focused project, and reflecting on that action – and on oneself – in the company of others similarly engaged.

Revans, R (1983)

How do people learn? What kind of learning methodology is more likely to bring about changes in behaviour and thinking? How can we best use case studies as a learning methodology for changing people's approach to partnering? These are just some of the questions confronting case study writers expecting to develop partnering case studies as tools for change.

Different people learn in different ways. Some learners are more likely to respond to participative learning methodologies while others prefer a more formal instructional approach. It is recognized that practitioners learn best in an atmosphere of active involvement and participation (Rogers 1989), similar to the way they learn on the job.

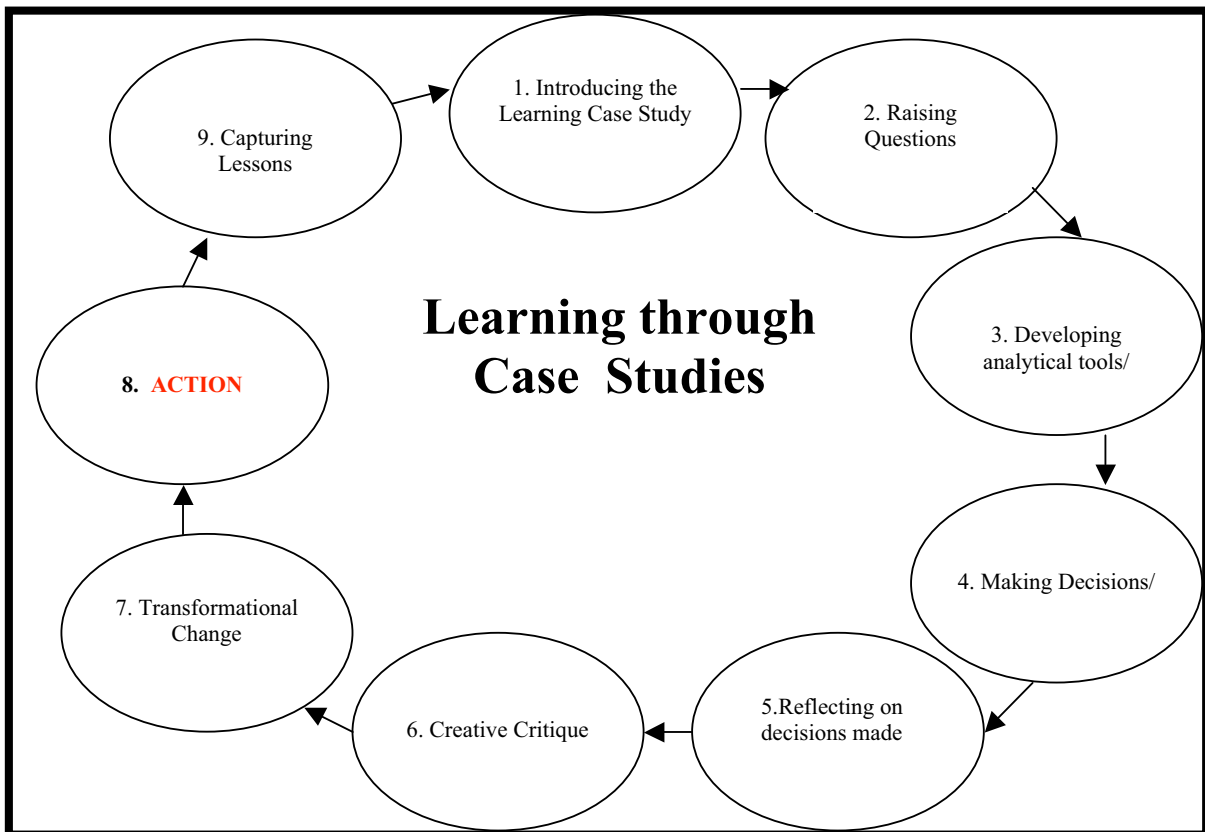
In their daily lives, when practitioners are confronted with a challenge they intuitively draw on their previous experiences to generate and test a number of possible solutions until they have resolved the problem (Schon 1983). In his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Schon refers to this process of problem solving as 'reflection in action' a more intuitive means of learning which negates the textbook approach to professional education. He argues that this form of learning through experience can be enhanced by evaluating this process afterwards through 'reflection on action'.

Traditionally case studies have been used in lecture based learning, to illustrate or underpin theoretical concepts. In such instances, students learn theory first and are then exposed to its practical implications through the presentation of a case. While this use of case studies might be helpful in explaining the theory of partnering, building the case for partnerships and demonstrating what has been achieved through partnering, it does not effectively address the question of 'how to partner', a question which is more relevant for partnership practitioners.

Thus to be effective as tools for change, learning case studies have to offer practitioners insights into the partnering process and a chance to challenge, reflect on and build their own partnering skills. Learning case studies achieve this by placing the learners in a position of responsibility and driving them to use their experience and intuition to make difficult decisions to address the problems posed (reflection **in** action) and to then consider the consequences of their decisions and approach (reflection **on** action).

In this way not only do learning case studies add to the practitioner's repertoire of experiences - from which they can draw for the future – but also offer them an opportunity to critically reflect on their partnering approach and to consider what they would do differently (change).

The diagram below captures this learning process and how it engenders change:



This learning process puts learners in charge of creating the change they desire:

“As [inquirers] frame the problem of the situation, they determine the features to which they will attend, the order they will attempt to impose on the situation, the directions in which they will try to change it. In this process, they identify both the ends to be sought and the means to be employed. (Schön 1983: 165)

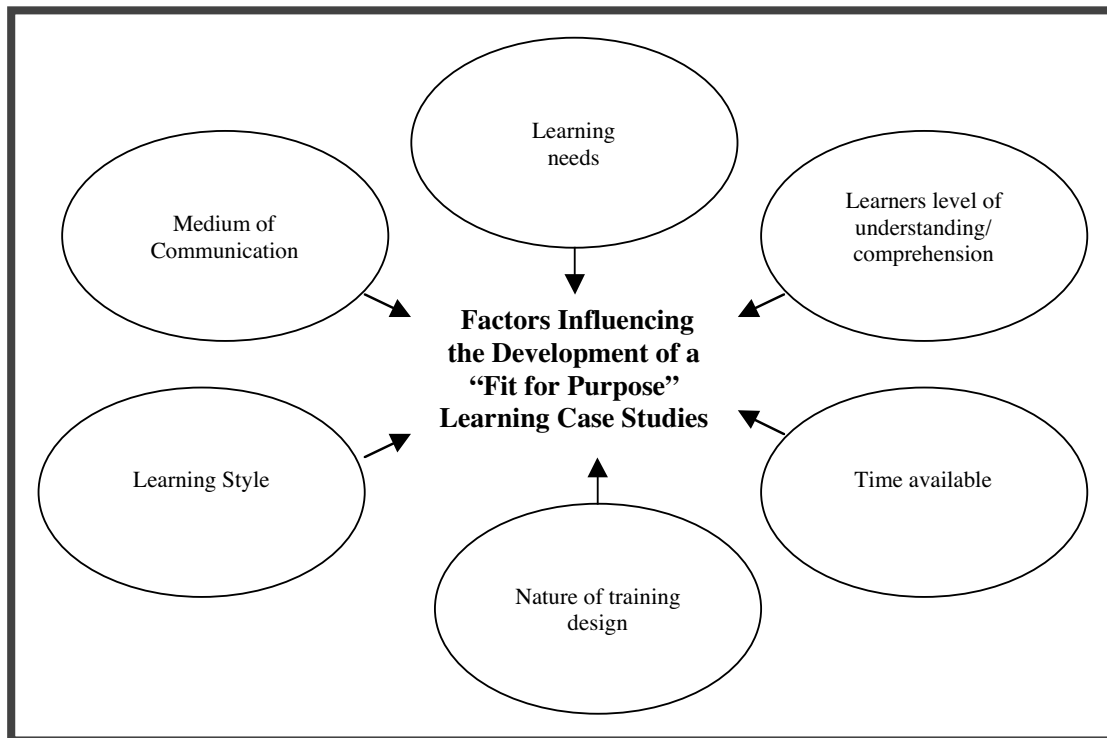
By allowing them to choose the direction they want to take the learning methodology builds the learners' confidence and experience of creating change. But with this freedom comes responsibility and during the case study discussion learners are challenged to consider the consequences of the choices made, to reflect on the effectiveness of the means employed and to critically evaluate and possibly transform their partnering approach. Thus when used effectively partnership based learning case studies have the potential to transform practitioners' approach to partnering.

However, in order to do so, a learning case study must be engaging, tailored to match the needs and contexts of the learners and relevant to the learning intervention and the learning style adopted. In short it must be 'fit for purpose'.

Developing a 'fit for purpose' learning case study

A 'fit for purpose'² learning case study is one which has been developed to address some specific learning need or to match the learning objectives of a specific group of learners.

There are a number of factors, which influence the development of a fit for purpose learning case studies, these are illustrated in the diagram below:



In developing a fit for purpose learning case study, case study writers must consider:

- **Learning needs/challenges identified:** To gauge the learning needs the case study writer may choose to survey the learners, arrange interviews with a representative sample of learners and/or consult the commissioners of the learning case study to understand the most pressing learning needs/challenges. These learning needs will be central to the development of the learning case study, however not all of the learning challenges identified can be addressed through a single case study. Thus the case study writer may have to prioritise the key learning needs and focus the learning case study on addressing these. If a case study is being developed without a specific group of learners in mind it is important that the case study writer identify the learning needs that are addressed by the case study (in the teaching note) so it is used in - or adapted for – the right context.
- **Learners' level of comprehension:** Experienced practitioners have different needs to entry-level learners³. The level of complexity of the learning case study, the language used, the kinds of problems raised will all depend on the learners' level of understanding/comprehension of the issues to be addressed through the case study. Sometimes the case study writer may not know who the case study

³ Lynn, L E., *Teaching and learning with cases A Guidebook*, Chatham House Publishers New York, London, 1998

- will be used for. In such cases, the case study writer must qualify the level of understanding assumed in developing the learning case study in the learning facilitator's note which accompanies each learning case study.
- **Time available:** The time available for learners to study and work on the case study has a strong influence on the length of the case study, the number of learning needs addressed and the type of case study chosen (see below for a discussion of different types of case studies).
 - **Design of learning intervention:** A case study developed for a classroom will be different from one developed for a workshop because the structure, timing and context of the learning situation define the training design. When developing a learning case study it is important to keep in mind all these factors and ensure that the learning case study is developed/adapted to fit the tone and flow of the training design in question.
 - **Learning style:** Learning case studies are also influenced by the context in which they are used. For example, a student driven case study discussion vs. a facilitator led case study will differ in terms of the level of instruction vs. discussion they offer.
 - **Medium of Communication:** The means by which the learning case study is communicated/presented to the learners influences its focus and design. For example a learning case study developed for online use will be constructed differently from one used in a classroom with a learning facilitator present. Both of these will not only differ in terms of design but also will require different types of learning instructions/interventions (learners instructions vs. teaching note).

When developing a "fit for purpose" learning case study, the case study writer might begin by locating a true to life partnering challenge that is familiar to the learners, and addresses the learning needs identified. The next step may be to craft a case study which allows the learners to live and experience the complexity of the problem in light of the time available, the chosen training design, the preferred learning style and the medium of communication.

In the learning facilitator notes accompanying a learning case study the case study writer can capture all the factors/circumstances which this learning case study has been developed to 'fit'. This allows future users to adapt the case study to match any changing circumstances.

What's in a Learning Facilitator's Note?

A learning facilitator's brief may include:

- A synopsis of the case study
- Description of the learning needs identified and addressed by the case study
- Intended learning outcomes and how these have been embedded in the case study design and material
- Profile of learners targeted (actual and intended)
- Recommended training design and style, which may include a list of discussion questions, assignments and instructions on time required, additional materials needed, instructions for learners and the learning facilitator.
- Analysis of the issues addressed by the case study
- Previous learners' and teachers' experience of using the case study, highlighting how the case study was received and in what ways it was most effective.
- Case study writers impressions of researching/writing the case study
- Additional reading/reference.

Matching the case study format to the learning objectives and context

Any case study can be made “fit for purpose” by paying attention to the factors listed above. However there are some types of case studies, which may be more fit for certain learning objectives.

The table below lists different ways in which case studies, can be developed and delivered in written form; face-to-face or electronically (with the possible exception of role play). This table was developed by the case study practitioner’s workshop organized by The Partnering Initiative. It categorizes case studies by the learning objective they are most likely to be used for and the kind of learning intervention/mediation they require:

LEARNING TOOL	PURPOSE	MEDIATION
STORY TELLING: A learning case study which describes an experience	Most likely to be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Confidence building (<i>‘it’s been done before’</i>) – Explicating (<i>‘It can be done like this’</i>) – Drawing out imaginative responses (<i>‘How would you do it?’</i>) 	Could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative thread • Instructions / task
ROLE PLAYS: paint a scenario presenting a challenge, offer a list of characters involved in the situation and allows learners to act out the scene	Most likely to be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Getting inside the skin/shoes of others – Exploring relationship and relationship-building issues 	Could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role briefs • Facilitator briefs
STOP:START SCENARIOS: Present the story in episodes, allowing learners to stop between sections to make suggestions/decisions and predict the consequences before proceeding	Most likely to be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Exploring choices / options – Studying issues of cause and effect 	Could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching note/Learning Facilitators brief • Options / choices
JIGSAW CASES: Allow learner(s) to work on part of the problem presented and then pass their recommendations to other learners who will address the emerging situation before passing it on further. Thus the final case is an amalgamation of many peoples work	Most likely to be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Understanding issues of cause and effect – Learning to predict and influence others behaviour 	Could Include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators notes • Rules • Options / choices
GAMES: Offer a number of options for the challenge(s) presented with different consequences for each choice	Most likely to be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Decision-making – Strategic planning 	Could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructions • Rules • Levels

LEARNING TOOL	PURPOSE	MEDIATION
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: may include site visits, performances, managed dialogues	Most likely to be used for: – Gaining insight into challenges the partnership seeks to address – Promoting original / imaginative responses	Could include: • Facilitated learning events • Opportunities for creative engagement
LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS: partnerships specifically established as vehicles for learning	Most likely to be used for: – Transforming experience into knowledge – Finding common ground across sectoral / hierarchical / cultural boundaries	Could include: • Tasks / stages • Timetable for delivery • Ground rules
PRESS / MEDIA RELEASES: may include material for different kinds of publications; newspapers, magazines, websites, e-bulletins etc.	Most likely to be used for: – Awareness raising for general public – Generating further general engagement / investment	Could include: • Working with communications teams / journalists • Researching media options
ADVOCACY MATERIALS: flyers, magazine articles, journals, posters etc.	Most likely to be used for: – Sector-specific awareness raising – Sector-specific engagement	Could include: • Range of imaginative dissemination options • Creating opportunities for 'external selling'

Whilst all learning case studies should be based on reality, the first five types of case studies listed above may benefit from being 'fictionalised' versions of real life events and people.

Revealing the truth? The role of 'fictionalised' learning case studies

"Fiction reveals truth reality obscures"

Emerson

Often the really good stories never get told - at least not on the record - because they may be too controversial, contested or confidential. However the complex and controversial nature of these stories is what makes them so engaging and useful for learning purposes.

To overcome this, case study writers may chose to 'fictionalize' these cases, to obscure all identifiable features, characters and events. These fictionalized cases allow the case study writer to address issues which are important but may be too controversial to discuss on the record.

Although fictionalised case studies may not be perceived to have the credibility and authenticity of real life cases, unlike the latter they can – at times - be more effective for learning purposes. For example, when presented with a learning case study based on a real life situation that they are familiar with, learners may become engrossed with debating the issues as they remember them instead of how they are presented, and lose sight of the larger picture as they argue over the details. Fictionalised case studies can offer learners an apolitical means for analyzing the situation and drawing lessons for the future.

Nevertheless fictionalized cases do run the risk of being dismissed as unreal or disingenuous unless they are carefully crafted to:

- **Parallel Reality:** Although case study writers developing fictionalized case studies have poetic license to '*enhance reality*' they have to work within the realms of reality. An effective learning case study must be based on plausible situations, develop familiar characters grappling with challenges and concerns recognizable to the learners.
- **Be apolitical:** One of the advantages of fictionalized case studies is that they offer learners an apolitical reference point for discussing the issues presented and allow them to examine the situation without being overwhelmed by the personalities and politics involved.
- **Connect with the training needs and design:** When developing a fictionalized case study the case study writer may chose to weave together different stories which – plausibly – address the learning needs in the time available. For example when developing a case study to illustrate the kinds of partnering challenges faced at different stages of partnership (from the scoping/ partnership building stage to the managing and review stages) the case study writer may chose to draw on the experiences of more than one real-life partnership in-order to include the most significant learning experiences from each partnering stage in the case study.
- **Be consistent:** To be plausible and credible, fictionalized learning case studies must be consistent. Not only in terms of reflecting reality but also in developing the situations and characters involved in the case study. Although in real life situations and people can be quite peculiar, the situations and characters depicted in fictionalized cases must be believable, or learners will dismiss the case study's credibility and relevance to them.
- **Be innovative** Writing fictionalised case studies does not involve merely changing names and circumstances and obscuring identities, rather fictionalized cases give the case study writer a chance to build a truly memorable learning experience, create unforgettable characters and situations which are designed to match the learners' needs and comprehension, while challenging them to address complex problems in a safe and collaborative environment.

Role of the learning facilitator

"Cases even with commentaries do not, teach themselves"

J.Shulman (1996, p.155)

While they may be very effective as a learning methodology, case studies are not an easy teaching tool. They require a lot of preparation and willingness on the part of the learning facilitators to not only lead the discussion but also be open to learning from it. Generally, learning case studies tend to suit learning facilitators who believe that knowledge is

constructed by the learner, who favour knowledge application, don't require single correct answers and feel okay about not getting closure on difficult questions (Wasserman 1994).

The primary role of the learning facilitator is to create a supportive learning environment, where learners feel comfortable to ask questions and share ideas and experiences. to encourage learners to think for themselves, to help them uncover their biases and assumption, drive them to build their arguments on evidence and to connect their ideas and experiences within a useful conceptual framework. The text box above captures the different responsibilities of the learning facilitator.

Although the primary purpose of the learning facilitator is to facilitate learning and exchange among the learners, they will at times have to take more control in leading the discussion, to ensure for example that it does not stray from the learning objectives, it remains engaging and relevant to all learners etc. The balance between 'learning facilitator' and 'teacher' depends on the facilitator's preferred learning style.

Task of the Learning Facilitator

The task of the learning facilitator is to

- Define the educational objectives
- Select the right case study
- Analyse the case data through before the discussion
- Plan the case study discussion
- Create a supportive learning environment
- Prepare an opening question for the discussion
- Manage student contributions
- Probe student comments to uncover assumptions
- Keep the discussion focused on central themes
- Manage the debate around central issues
- Capture the discussion through the use of blackboards /flipcharts
- Summarise the discussion
- Draw linkages with other cases
- Draw out conceptual frameworks and generalizations
- Assess learning

Conclusion

Some of the most valuable lessons cannot be taught but can only be learnt through practice and experience. Since partnering skills are largely grounded in experience it is no surprise that an effective learning methodology for partnership practitioners would be an experiential one. A learning methodology, which offers real world challenges and drives learners to draw on their own knowledge and experience of partnering to address the problems posed.

Learning case studies offer a means for doing just that.

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Sehr is currently working for The Partnering Initiative - developing learning case studies for the Initiative's commissioned work- and with the ENGAGE Campaign to capture and support the development of business-led employee engagement activities around the world. Previously, Sehr worked primarily for capacity building programmes and focused on researching and writing teaching case studies on cross-sector partnerships. She has been invited to present her research at conferences in Europe, Asia and America and has published her work in related academic journals and books.

