

POLICY LEARNING AS A REQUIREMENT FOR SERVICE DELIVERY IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Surprisingly little policy and cross-national policy learning seem to influence policy design and formulation in a particular jurisdiction. The article addresses the issue of policy learning and to what extent it contributes to real policy change. All policy implementation should foster policy learning. The article explores the debate surrounding and value of policy learning in various contexts. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that there are different kinds of policy learning, including instrumental, social and political learning. The basis for learning includes aspects such as how conscious learning is, its object, who learns, and the status of learning in the policy literature. Policy change is often not the result of learning, although it can occur because of learning. The trial-and-error process of policy learning often has more long-lasting effects than learning from successes. Different kinds of policy learning and especially a combination of different kinds of learning can contribute to meaningful policy change and improved service delivery. One only knows learning has occurred once policy change has taken place. What is learned is what is remembered, but how do organisations deal with policy intelligence? Organisational and intra-organisational learning could stimulate common learning in government and its various institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Policy implementation should foster policy learning. The gradual evolution of policies should also have a collective effect on policy learning. The article explores the debate surrounding policy learning and the value of such learning. It also touches upon the question whether policy learning can serve as a foundation for improving policy-making and policy implementation, which could therefore promote improved service delivery.

It is not always easy to define success in service delivery; similarly, a definition of what constitutes policy learning is also elusive. Often, an attempt is made to agree on the meaning of policy learning and then the details are left to be defined within a

particular context. However, an understanding of policy learning is critical not only for policy research, but also for the conditions under which policy is implemented. The time has come for policy learning to foster improved policy design and to inform the policy debate.

May (1992:332) discusses two ways in which policy learning can occur. The first is instrumental policy learning, which entails learning lessons about the viability of policy instruments or implementation designs. The second is social policy learning, which entails learning lessons about the social construction of policy problems, the scope of policy or policy goals. In any policy change, these two forms of policy learning are not mutually exclusive. It is therefore evident that policy learning essentially involves learning lessons about policy processes and prospects. It is worthwhile to clarify the relationship between policy failure or success and policy learning. The article attempts to highlight the nature and incidents of policy learning.

THE BASIS FOR LEARNING

The basis for understanding policy learning includes a grasp of aspects such as how conscious that learning is, the object of learning, who learns, and the status of learning in the policy literature. The role of feedback in policy learning and the subsequent changes in social policy and behaviour are critical. The ability to learn requires looking at a policy's impact in order for the policy to be redesigned (May 1992:333), but policy learning need not be directly linked to a specific policy – other policies and governments' experiences could equally be important. There seems to be a caveat in the method of drawing lessons from other situations may be imperfect. The wrong conclusions could be reached or ideas could be adopted without understanding the particular context for which the policies were originally designed and in which they were implemented.

One can say that policy experiences therefore form the basis for policy learning. Trial-and-error seems to be a common strategy in policy learning. The well-known 'muddling through' described by Lindblom (1959) in May (1999:333) already pointed out gradual evolution. Learning through systematic policy evaluation and experimentation is not the rule: Wildavsky (1979) and Lindblom (1959) in May (1999:333) both highlight the fact that policy implementation is an evolutionary process through trial-and-error. However, evolution in the process is only possible if the feasibility of a policy is subjected to recurrent testing (May 1992:333). Nevertheless, policy experience through either trial-and-error or systematic assessment does not guarantee any learning. Learning only takes place when there is an improved understanding through lessons drawn from policy problems, objectives, or interventions.

Policy learning can also be a broad concept applicable to the re-construction of policy problems and objectives. In some instances, learning refers to the assessment of political feasibility with regard to policy action and the political price to be paid for implementation.

It is also not clear exactly who learns from policy experiences. Is it the implementers of the policy or is it the public who is subject to a particular policy? In this regard, May

(1992:334) refers to 'policy agents'. Policy agents could also be the leaders of relevant organisations with a stake in the issues that comprise the policy domain.

INSTRUMENTAL POLICY LEARNING

Instrumental policy learning entails gaining new understanding and achieving new behaviours regarding the viability of policy interventions or implementation design and practices (May 1992:335). The focus is therefore on implementation designs and learning that will lead to improved designs for the purposes of attaining existing policy goals. Learning from implementation practices should result in increased intelligence about and sophistication in policy implementation design.

Unfortunately, the evidence of policy adaptation and redesign does not necessarily constitute policy learning. It could therefore be argued that true instrumental learning requires the documentation of increased understanding of policy implementation designs. Intentional instrumental learning can be stimulated by the introduction of learning tools such as evaluation, hearings and assessments of policy design and implementation (May 1992:337).

SOCIAL POLICY LEARNING

Social policy learning entails a new social construction of a policy by the policy stakeholders of a given policy domain. The focus falls on the policy problem, the scope of the policy, or policy goals. It is important to realise that policy learning in this regard does not mean that individuals and organisations are now becoming smarter. Social policy learning involves rethinking the policy domain and the fundamental aspects of policy. Social reconstruction revolves around beliefs about the cause(s) and effect(s) of desired policy outcomes, perceptions of policy targets, and beliefs about the fundamental aspects that underpin policies (May 1992:337). Social learning should not be confused with a mere change in policy – changes in a particular policy can also be ascribed to several other causes, such as budget problems or a symbolic undertaking designed to expand political constituencies (May 1992:338).

POLICY LEARNING FROM FAILURE OR SUCCESS

It is useful to consider cases of policy failure as a resource for policy learning. The organisational learning literature emphasises that dissatisfaction with programme performance can serve as a stimulus to search for alternative ways to operate. This implies that instrumental policy learning is fostered by an organisation's attempts to close performance gaps. The very same failure of instrumental policy learning can also stimulate causal reasoning about social policy learning (May 1992:341). Policy successes can also provide a strong basis for learning.

It is important to stress that the phenomenon of policy failure is neither simple nor certain. Success and failure are ambiguous concepts, often highly subjective and

reflective of an individual's goals and perceptions of need, and perhaps even the person's psychological disposition towards life (Ingram and Mann 1980:12). It is human nature to believe that failure as a stimulus for change is more relevant for policy redesign than success. Policy failure should foster policy learning, but, in practice, acknowledging failures is not that easy. Government leaders may be unwilling to acknowledge failure. This reluctance is particularly strong in ideologically dominated administrations (May 1992:341).

Empirical research suggests that people learn more from failure than from success. Policy learning can therefore be stimulated by unusual events that can be interpreted as a crisis, policy failure or imminent danger. It sometimes takes major external shocks to change core beliefs, decision-making routines, and existing distributions of resources and capabilities (Hemerijck and Visser 2008:10).

Interestingly, when one compares countries with one another, one finds that similar crises or critical developments do not necessarily start major policy reforms in all the countries. Not all policy learning results from events. In some instances, individual people can trigger learning. Leadership succession can bring different sets of beliefs to the forefront; subsequent policy changes are then related to turnover rather than learning (Hemerijck and Visser 2008:10).

WHO LEARNS IN POLICY LEARNING?

The theoretical debates about who the actors in the policy process are relates to the subjects of learning. The range of actors varies from social to state actors. In the first instance, actors learn in the state institutions where they are involved with policy processes and implementation. A second possibility for learning is the actors in societies that create the conditions to which state officials must respond. In the third instance, one finds that state officials and societal actors are in constant and life-long interaction, which includes learning (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 278). Service delivery could therefore be both the cause and the effect of policy learning. In addition, learning may also pertain to group learning and organisational learning. Learning is therefore an activity that takes place at both the individual and organisational levels.

Policy learning is only evident after the diagnosis of societal problems and the consequent build-up of intelligence. Social scientists have an impressive collective capacity to think intelligently and with some sophistication about the problems of long-term government learning, but it is not possible to know in advance whether an organisation or individual will diagnose the problem, just as a physician cannot in advance diagnose the causes of illness and problems of the next patient (Etheredge 1979:61).

THE OBJECT OF LEARNING

The concept of learning, intentional or unintentional, is difficult to grasp; and the object of learning is equally ambiguous. Most definitions of the policy process include conflict resolution. Learning and what is learned in the policy itself is inherent in

the policy process. Learning is not only about how policy is done by government, but also how it was done (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 283). A comparison between policy learning and cognitive development psychology implies that there should be intelligent growth in government (Etheredge 1981:76).

There are three objective indicators of learning: first, increased capacity for differentiation; second, increased capacity for organisational and hierarchical integration, and third, increased capacity for reflective thought. Policy learning is not a self-driven and neutral process. Policy learning depends on what universities teach, on what voters want to believe, on what interest groups say, on agendas in the media, on the views of critics, on the mood of the times (the *Zeitgeist*), and on conceptual and methodological innovations from university research (Bennett & Howlett 1992:283). Policy-oriented learning is therefore an ongoing process of (re)search and adaptation motivated by the desire to realise core policy beliefs.

THE RESULTS OF LEARNING

Policy change can occur because of learning. According to Bennett and Howlett (1992:285), two common types of policy learning can occur. There are the incremental type of policy learning and the trial-and-error process of policy innovation. The first type of learning only alters in the face of new social concerns and a solution is reached by reasoning through established policies. In the second type of learning, the actions of policy-makers are more uncertain. Past lessons are studied and then inform contemporary choices (Bennett & Howlett 1992:286). The nature of a policy problem can determine the kind of learning that takes place. Poorly defined policy problems create little opportunity for study and learning. Policy learning for the most part occurs when it is about the techniques of implementation. The core values of policy are not subject to so much change because of policy learning. Figure 1 depicts three types of learning identified and their relationship to policy change.

The term 'policy learning' can present different complex processes of learning. Figure 1 shows Bennett and Howlett's (1992:289) proposition regarding different kinds of policy learning. In fact, real policy can also be a combination of the different kinds of learning. It may be impossible to observe policy learning without policy change. Therefore, we may only know that learning has taken place because policy change is taking place. What is learned is what is remembered, but this should always be seen in a particular context of political interest and power (Bennett & Howlett 1992:291).

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND POLICY LEARNING

Organisational learning and policy learning are related, which suggests that the literature on organisational learning is also relevant to policy learning. All the experiences built up over time create recurring opportunities for individuals involved in policy learning to learn. In any organisation where individuals are pursuing a common goal, policy learning is also possible. Individuals in organisations are capable

Figure 1: Three types of learning and policy change

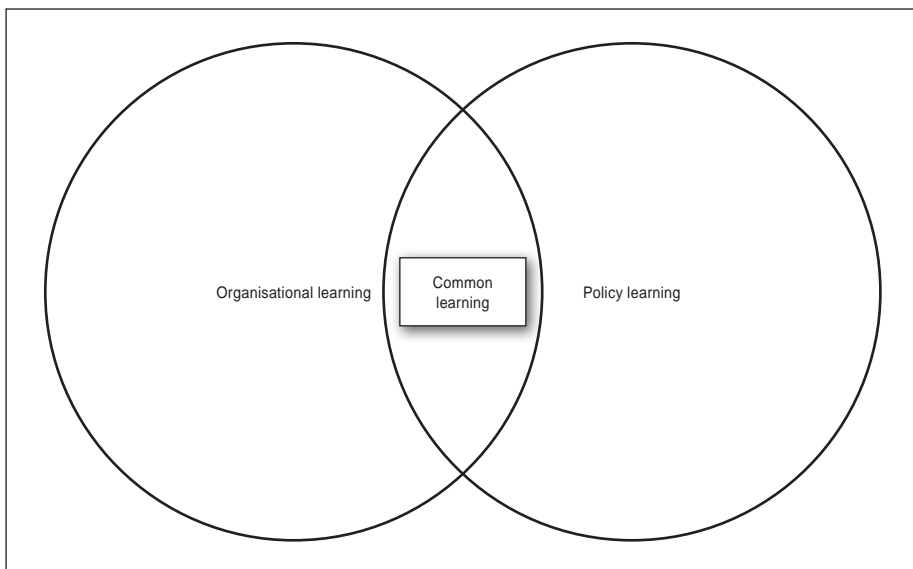
Learning type	Who learns	Learns what	To what effect
<i>Government learning</i>	State officials	Process-related	Organisational change
<i>Lesson-drawing</i>	Policy networks	Instruments	Programme change
Social learning	Policy communities	Ideas	Paradigm shift

Source: Bennett & Howlett (1992: 289)

of learning from committing errors. Figure 2 indicates the commonalities between organisational learning and policy learning.

Thus far, empirical research on institutions has failed to develop a usable model of institutional arrangements that either promote or inhibit policy learning. Interestingly, studies on organisational learning tend to focus on institutional arrangements that serve to promote (or constrain) organisational learning (Busenberg 2001:175). Organisational learning can be promoted through organisational structures (learning mechanisms) and values and customs (a learning culture) that support the learning process. According to

Figure 2: Overlap between organisational learning and policy learning

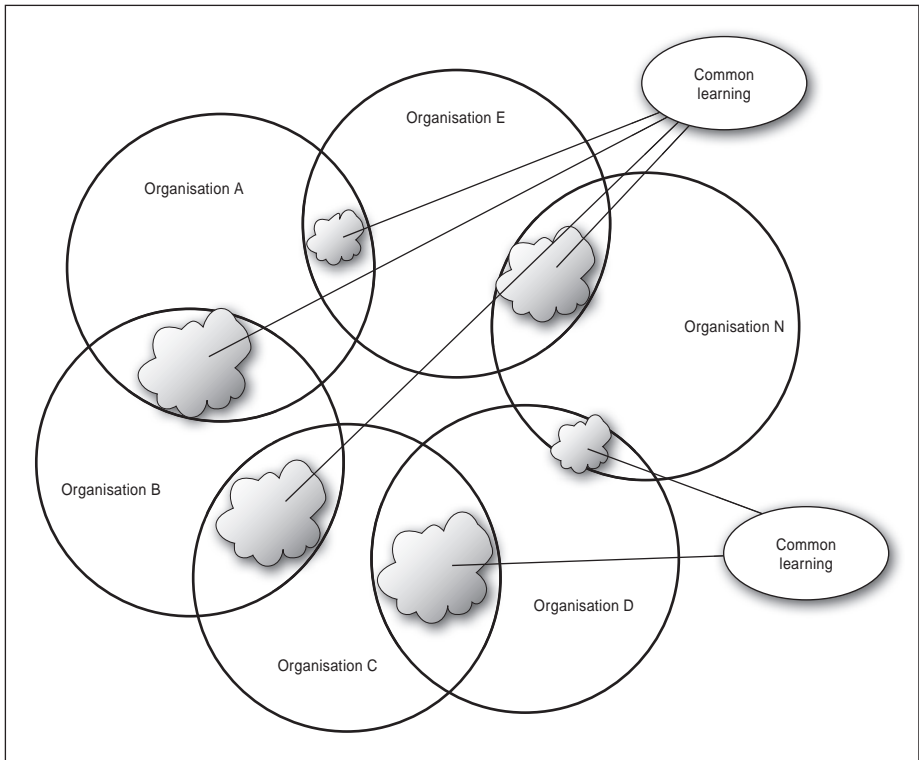


Source: Adapted from Busenberg (2001:176)

Busenberg (2001:176), the literature on policy learning also identifies policy networks, the impact of political events and policy change, and the evolution of policy over time as important factors in the process. Policy networks refer to a collection of organisations and actions across organisations. It is critical to note that policy learning normally evolves over a period of a decade or more (Busenberg 2001:716). In Figure 3, the common learning possibilities in policy networks are depicted.

Policy learning is limited by contextual boundaries. The policy literature suggests a number of variables, such as the characteristics of the issue in question, the distribution of political authority, the natural, economic and technical resources available to support policy actions, the institutional structures of governments active in the domain, and the value structures of the cultures active in the domain (Busenberg 2001:177). Policy impacts (learning opportunities for policy learning) are therefore shaped by institutional arrangements and by contextual variables that can change over time. A shift can occur, for example, when governments change and the changeover also involves new policy proposals. The changes initiated by the new South African government that was elected during 2009 are a clear example of this.

Figure 3: Policy networks and policy learning



Source: Adapted from Busenberg (2001:176)

POLICY INNOVATION AND POLICY LEARNING

Policy innovation is a separate field of study and research. Over the last few decades, policy innovation research has expanded considerably. An important driver for policy innovation is policy learning. In this section, the emphasis is therefore on the role of policy learning in policy innovation and change. According to Mytelka and Smith (2002:1468), policy theory and policy are co-evolving. This is a process of interactive learning.

In the current challenging economic climate, learning is often seen as a response to a more or less critical problem. In this particular context, learning requires time, and consists of reappraisals and modifications in an evolutionary process. We need to know what real policy knowledge is in order to be able to achieve policy learning and policy innovation. Our knowledge about optimal public policies for highly successful societies is very limited. One needs to accept that optimal policies for most of today's problems have not yet been found. If the view of policy innovation is the first application of new policies, then it can revert back to the ideas in the previous section on trial-and-error.

If the same policy is tried out in different countries simultaneously, then mutual learning takes place. By the same token, failed policies should be avoided (Kerber & Eckhardt 2007:229). The ability to exploit external knowledge is a critical component of policy innovation. One can argue that the ability to evaluate and use outside knowledge is largely a function of the level of prior related knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal 1990:128). If innovation is limited, the question arises how much can one learn from the experiences of others.

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS

It is possible that lessons learnt from the experiences of others have led to a host of new policies and regulations around the world. People often learn from failed experiments, but these failures may be coupled with successes in other countries. These kinds of learning mainly involve social learning. The results can be observed in policy outcomes, but it remains difficult to test real policy learning empirically (Mesegeur 2005:69). The challenge of empirical testing of policy learning has been partly ascribed to the difficulty in making the concept of learning operational. In the literature on policy learning, all sorts of notions for learning are suggested, but Bennett and Howlett (1992:288) claim that learning is over-theorised and under-applied. However, this criticism does not make learning as a phenomenon any less intriguing in any discussion on policy change.

Learning in every country is a voluntary act. Learning implies a change in beliefs in the light of the experiences of others (Mesegeur 2005:72). In the final instance, politicians should be persuaded by the experiences of others. Governments faced with the risk of making new policy decisions may find it relatively simple and inexpensive to gain new information by observing the results of particular policies in other countries.

The question always remains whether one can really learn from the lessons learnt in other countries. Nevertheless, it seems that it is easier to draw lessons from similar

policies between countries, than to learn from a comparison of different policies in the same country. If a lesson is positive, a policy that works can be transferred with suitable adaptations. If a lesson is negative, observers can learn what to avoid from noting the mistakes of others (Rose 1991:4). Policies are judged in relation to past performance and in anticipation of their future consequences. Borrowing from other policies should not be done blindly, or even condemned blindly. The success of a policy is, after all, affected by its particular context and the possible generic attributes of the policy (Rose 1991:4). In this regard, organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank regularly deal with the issues of 152 nations around the globe, and they make available information on this experience in the form of advice (Rose 1991:5).

Lessons are always drawn, consciously or unconsciously, from our own past or from the experience of our predecessors in a job. Everyone involved with public policy can unconsciously draw lessons across time and space. Drawing lessons is more than an evaluation of a programme in its context; it is also applying judgement about doing the same thing elsewhere. Lessons constitute what is learned (Rose 1991:7). Interestingly, the policy literature focuses more on how policymakers learn than on the lessons drawn from learning itself. Applying judgement on the transferability of a particular policy from one place to another is a special feature of drawing lessons from elsewhere. Drawing lessons from the experiences of another government should not be regarded as an innovation (which refers to a completely novel programme). Lessons drawn from the past or from other countries should be treated with a great deal of circumspection. Analogies should not assume that the problems facing policymakers are recurrent (Rose 1991:9).

The ongoing search for lessons to learn should not be a matter of idle curiosity for policymakers – they should remember the maxim ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. In their lifespan, programmes tend to reach a point where dissatisfaction disrupts routine. Ignoring the problem is normally the first reaction to deal with dissatisfaction, but dissatisfaction emphasises what not to do, so that soon the *status quo* is no longer an option (Rose 1991:10). This dissatisfaction then becomes an impetus for searching for satisfaction across time and space: the quest for lessons to learn from elsewhere begins. The decision about whether or not to draw on a particular lesson learnt elsewhere always has two features: Is it practical? Is it desirable? The issue of desirability is the domain of the elected officials; the determination of what is possible is the primary concern of career officials and experts (Rose 1991:24).

THE ABILITY OF GOVERNMENT TO DISCOVER THE TREASURE WITHIN

If it is indeed possible to learn from the experiences of others, in this age of rapid societal change, governments too should treasure the possibility of life-long policy learning. It is high time that even governments set aside time for learning, or else it may become a case of ‘the more we know, the less we use’ (Leicester 2007:173).

The citizens of a global society live in conditions of unprecedented and boundless complexity, rapid change and interconnectedness. Recent phenomena such as global

warming and the global economic meltdown are only two examples of such global issues. In this ever-changing world, we are at times strangers in our own land. The imperative for learning is therefore obvious. This also applies to policy learning and service delivery. Global changes affect local societal problems in ways that are messy and difficult to define. The problematic circumstances of uncertainty pose real challenges for policy learning and policy-makers. This may perhaps be the reason for the tendency to opt for social engineering rather than societal learning. The admission of uncertainty in today's world is an invitation for policy learning.

Policy has a life of its own and depends on societal changes that necessitate policy changes, and therefore make policy-making an unstructured process. Policy learning should therefore be a continuous process. Perhaps it is time to start identifying the enabling conditions for learning amongst policy-makers in government (Leicester 2007:178).

Reflection is an essential part of policy learning. At the moment, there is a constant demand for service delivery, increasing the pressure on all the role players. Under such conditions, one wonders if there is any time to reflect. Thus, the high demand for service delivery could constrain policy learning. In this regard, Leicester (2007:179) refers to performance anxiety within government as a barrier to learning: we normally do not learn well when we are under stress or afraid. Interestingly, policy implementation and service delivery are both parts of a linear process. By contrast, policy learning is cyclical and iterative. The linear model moves from implementation to service delivery, but then one also needs time for reflection (Leicester 2007:180).

CONCLUSION

There has been an impressive increase in intelligent discussion of issues in policy learning since the topic was first raised in the late 1950s and 1960s. Today, policy learning is advocated throughout the literature, but the term is not yet adequately conceptualised. Useful integration of the wealth of theories and models of policy learning with the practice has yet to be achieved. Service delivery can indeed benefit from policy learning, but it is still an open question whether policy learning has made a substantial contribution towards successful outcomes. It would be difficult for academics to codify government's experience and thereby create possibilities for learning. Academics have too many other responsibilities to even consider such a codifying exercise, but the key to practical applications of policy learning would be to assist government institutions with their training in order to build their own intelligence. The question also arises whether implementers are really willing to acknowledge failures in order to create an environment for policy learning.

On average, the training and induction of new political office bearers takes about two years. If there is no institution that holds the executive branch responsible for its policy learning, performance will fall short on capacity – Plato's age-old concern about who can be trusted to have good judgement on important issues is still valid.

The challenge of overload applies to researchers and practitioners alike. Researchers do not have the capacity to keep track with policy learning. Practitioners face a growing

bureaucracy or government overload. In the end, it seems that all they are concerned with is merely surviving. Ideology continues to play a significant role in policy decisions.

The development of a professional diagnostic capability for social problems will probably increase the ability of policy learning. Improved service delivery is, in part, a function of both increasingly accurate factual knowledge and the usefulness of increased intelligence and sophistication. Further research in a combination of different social science disciplines is needed to explore and generate more incisive questions (and answers) on the role of cognition, framing, crises, learning cycles, international pressure and models of best practice for modern states.

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