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≡ The Oxford Handbook of
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and Duguid 2000).¹³ To know *that* depends on the accumulation and assimilation of information; knowing *how* comes through practice. Simply, we learn by doing as much as by reading, thinking, or being told. What this implies is what Scott describes as an epistemological *metis* (Scott 1998, ch. 9), local, vernacular, practical. It has something in common with Lindblom and Cohen's (1979) "ordinary" knowledge. Yet we know surprisingly little about what bureaucrats and administrators do when they are doing their job, let alone about the ways they think and learn. We necessarily have recourse to theory and to other studies of workplace learning. These suggest two things: first that learning in practice is ad hoc, in the sense of being context or problem specific, and second that it is collaborative.¹⁴

It is ad hoc, not least because policy makers and administrators are continually confronted by problems and policies that appear to be new and different from those they have known before. And this newness presents not only in agenda-setting and decision-making stages of the policy process, but in implementation, too. We might think of implementation as a process of learning rather than carrying out instructions (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; Schofield 2004): in the process of implementation, administrators and professionals alike discover not only how to put policy into practice but what a policy really means or entails. Their learning is reactive but ingenious.¹⁵

4.1 Communities of Practice

Improvisation of this kind is ordinarily collaborative (Brown and Duguid 2000, 103 ff.). Collaboration and improvisation in turn are carried on by telling stories, by exchanging ideas, suggestions, theories, by developing a common sense of the nature and origins of as well as possible solutions to a problem. In public policy as much as anywhere else, solving problems is an embedded, social process as much as a

¹³ The distinction is Ryle's (1949, ch. 2). In their study of government learning, Etheredge and Short (1983) similarly distinguish between intelligence and effectiveness.

¹⁴ Wagenaar and Cook review ideas about practice in public policy: "Practice . . . is an important and distinct dimension of politics, with its own logic (pragmatic, purposeful), its own standards of knowing (interpretative, holistic, more know how than know that), its own orientation towards the world (interactive, moral, emotional), and its own image of society (as a constellation of interdependent communities)" (Wagenaar and Cook 2003, 141). "Situated learning" is a theory of knowledge acquisition which emphasizes learning in context and through interaction and collaboration: on workplace learning, see Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998, Brown and Duguid 2000; and for an interesting discussion of global change in similar terms, Tenkasi and Mohrman 1999. On the productive efficiency of learning by doing, see Arrow 1962.

¹⁵ Policy makers and administrators have much in common with Lévi Strauss's *bricoleur* (Lévi Strauss 1966, 16–22). The *bricoleur*, in contrast to the scientist or engineer, picks up objects (tools and materials or, here, policies, programs, and instruments) as he goes, keeping them until he recognizes an opportunity to use them. The way they are used and the effects they have are in part determined by the way they have been used before, but they rarely work in the same way twice. Not only are the properties of the policy object uncovered in use, but the opportunity to use them is itself invariably made to fit.

rational, scientific one. We learn with others as much as from others.¹⁶ Geoffrey Vickers, for example, thinks his way into a seat at the table around which the members of a Royal Commission are discussing their views and findings (1965, ch. 3).¹⁷ Part of their judgement, of course, is shaped by what they know and by the moral and intellectual positions they have already established individually. But these norms are revised and refined in the process of applying them to the specific problem, and in the course of discussion and debate, that is “by the impact, attrition and stimulus of each commissioner on the others” (Vickers 1965, 64).

Brown and Duguid (2000, 141 ff.) go on to describe what they call “networks of practice,” which are something like occupational groups: people who do similar things, who are linked to each other in some way (by their training, or through the associations to which they belong) but do not necessarily know each other. Beyond that, working together on the same task establishes more intense “communities of practice” (Wenger and Snyder 2000). Networks and communities have complementary qualities. Networks have reach but little reciprocity; they are good at sharing knowledge, but less good at producing (or applying) it. Communities are inevitably limited in their scope or reach, but collaboration and reciprocity are tightened, meaning that new knowledge is quickly propagated.

Key individuals, or “brokers,” are often critical to communication and learning between communities, occupying ambivalent positions both central and marginal to the communities and contexts within which they work. A broker depends on the trust or complicity of others—“at just that point, the intercommunal boundary, where trust can be hardest to win” (Brown and Duguid 2001, 60). Importantly, trust is earned or realized in practice, in carrying negotiation back and forth. Nevertheless, in many respects he or she will operate in the margins, his or her status uncertain and often threatening. For the broker is to some degree a stranger, relativizing and calling into question what is locally taken to be common sense (Schütz 1964). The stranger may be a source of contagion as well as valuable new resources.

Almost by definition, community makes for a greater degree of equity or reciprocity in learning, but it also makes for a different order of communication. To begin with, partners to a conversation or dialog (in effect, a relationship) talk about each other, about the things they have brought separately to that situation. Over time, they come to talk increasingly about things they have thought of through their talking; the dialog becomes self-generating. Participants in a dialog are not only learning from each other, but also learning something new. There are good reasons, therefore, to think we might learn best from friends (Forester 1999, 31–8).¹⁸ Friends

¹⁶ It is also the case that much learning may be done vicariously (McKendree et al. 1998). We learn often by observing or fringing on dialogues and exchanges conducted by others.

¹⁷ Vickers is the more interesting to this discussion because he writes as an experienced practitioner: he was a soldier and officer, solicitor, senior civil servant, and company director, and a member of the London Passenger Transport Board, the National Coal Board, and the Medical Research Council.

¹⁸ This sort of affinity is one of the reasons Dolowitz, Greenwold, and Marsh (1999) give for Britain’s predominant reference to the USA as a source of transfer and learning.

relate appropriate information and experience, knowing what is appropriate to us because they know us. They help us to see ourselves in context, to understand not how things are, but how we are. They recognize complexity, instead of proffering simple solutions. They help us to deliberate, to mull over, to wonder about alternatives. They recognize the emotions, feelings, and values which inform our decisions. “The type of friendship from which we should consider learning is not the friendship of long affection and intimacy, but the friendship of mutual concern, of care and respect for the other’s practice of citizenship, their full participation in the political world. This is the friendship of appreciation of the hopes and political possibilities of the other, the friendship recognizing, too, the vulnerabilities of those hopes and possibilities” (Forester 1999, 36).

5. THE ELEMENTS OF LEARNING

Implicit in the different literatures reviewed here are two different ways of thinking about learning, one largely positivist and the other constructionist. They might be described as mechanistic and organic in turn.¹⁹ The first model, the positivist or mechanistic, assumes that a thing exists in time and space, and is picked up and carried over—transferred—and used in another time and/or place. What matter are the vectors, levers, couplings, and communications by which this is achieved. Transfer, whether of knowledge, technology, or public policy, is an act of engineering. To the extent that it acknowledges that rationality is bounded, that action is constrained by institutions, and that as a result policies adopted from elsewhere are also invariably adapted, it may be called a qualified mechanism. The second model, constructionist or organic, treats policy as emergent. Policy does not exist somewhere else in finished form, ready to be looked at and learned from, but is finished or produced in the act of looking and learning. Learning is the output of a series of communications, not its input; in this sense it is generated rather than disseminated. The difference between the two models is that between a sense of learning being complicated, and its being complex.

These models are worth exploring in part because they point to a possible tension between policy makers’ espoused theory of learning and their theory in use.²⁰ The difference between them is between the rational, legal, and scientific discourse in which policy makers and administrators are often trained, and the social, managerial, and political ways of knowing which are the currency of their daily practice. Sometimes,

¹⁹ I have taken this terminology from Burns and Stalker (1961), though its more general use in social science originates in Durkheim. There is something of the same idea in James March’s distinction between “exploitative” and “exploratory” learning (March 1991).

²⁰ The distinction is Argyris and Schön’s (1978).

policy is designed on the basis of evidence from experience or elsewhere. Usually, too, conflicting evidence and argument makes some compromise necessary. Often, however, policy makers collaborate, exchanging information about problems and policies which are similar in essential respects, but different enough to provoke reflection and creative thinking (or “collective puzzling”).²¹ An interesting implication of this is that the concept of learning does not necessarily entail its habitual corollary, that of teaching. Standard images of cross-national “policy borrowing,” “import,” and “export” risk obscuring much of the mutualism of learning processes.

To the extent that studying learning begs familiar questions about the ways in which ideas are manifested in behavior (Majone and Wildavsky 1979), the distinction drawn here has its methodological corollary, too, which is that learning will be interpreted as much as explained. Vickers (1965, 187) posits a “point of acceptance,” when what is known is realized, when insight comes to be supported by commitment, when the assimilation of information turns into the reformulation of belief, when a “potential fact” becomes a “potential act.” As he acknowledges, this psychological change is both “theoretically obscure” and “one of the most familiar facts of experience.” Hecló, similarly, notes that learning will be “easier to illustrate than to prove conclusively” (Hecló 1974, 321).

5.1 Agency and Interaction

The study of learning makes certain assumptions about agency, that learning is an active process. But who learns? There is some agreement in the literature that learning is something that individuals and only individuals do. But it is also something they do in the course of interaction with others, in groups, networks, communities, and organizations: learning is a social process (Bandura 1977).²²

This conception is the more valuable because it highlights the difficulty and fragility of learning. Learning is difficult precisely because it is interactive, “because so many men must do it together” (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984, 125). By the

²¹ Vickers’s distinction between compromise and “integrative” decision making is significant here. An integrative solution to a problem is one which wholly satisfies the different claims of parties to it. This is possible to the extent that their different ways of seeing the problem are changed, which in turn “enlarges the possibilities of solution beyond those which existed when the debate began” (Vickers 1965, 208).

²² “Thus judgment and decision, though mental activities of individuals, are also part of a social process. They are taken within and depend on a net of communication, which is meaningful only through a vast, partly organized accumulation of largely shared assumptions and expectations, a structure constantly being developed and changed by the activities which it mediates. The individual decider can no more be studied in isolation than the individual decision. The mental activity and the social process are indissoluble” (Vickers 1965, 15). The social process of thinking and the way it threatens common assumptions about the individual, rational self is Mary Douglas’s theme in *How Institutions Think* (Douglas 1986).

same token, some situations and contexts are more conducive to learning than others, and a powerful claim can be made that social entities such as groups, organizations, and states which cultivate learning have more prospect of success than others.²³

The notion of agency implicit in action and interaction means little without some associated concept of autonomy. On this basis, John Forester (1985) sets out the kinds of interaction that might constitute learning from those which don't. What is at issue for him is the relative legitimacy of different interactions. The conditions for learning ("some enhanced competence for action and self-understanding;" 1985, 265) are essentially the same as those for Habermas's "ideal speech situation," namely that the validity of a statement may be assessed without coercion or threat.²⁴ The significance of this is that we might come to think of learning as a function of a particular kind of relationship, rather than simply of the capacity of different parties to it.

Learning ordinarily takes place in conditions of complex interdependence, in which the thoughts and actions of any given agent change the context or environment in which others must think and act. "(A) communicated prediction changes the situation," as Vickers puts it (1965, 84), simply because others assess our predictions and adjust their actions according not only to the likely accuracy of our predictions, but also according to their own, different predictions of our behaviour. It is this awareness of complex interdependence which informs contemporary ideas of governance as steering, and which is expressed for example in the European Union's "open method of coordination."²⁵ It is also the logic of policy or program development and management by benchmarking. Benchmarking—"learning by monitoring" (Sabel 1994)—emerged in fast-developing areas of industry and commerce where no objective standards of evaluation exist, or where those standards change quickly. It works not by the imposition of standards but by the construction and subsequent discussion and interpretation of norms: "(G)uidance is neither precise nor persuasive enough to determine action. Individuals must interpret the general rules and expectations to bring them to bear on their actual situation. These reinterpretations proceed through argumentative encounters in which the individual attempts to establish an equilibrium between his or her views and social standards by recasting them both" (Sabel 1994, 156).

²³ This proposition is the basis of what has become an extensive literature on organizational learning: for introductions, see Weick and Westley 1996; Levitt and March 1998.

²⁴ By the same token, learning does not mean life without conflict. Learning takes place in the pursuit of different preferences and purposes: where conservatives will want to learn how to do better with existing programs, reformers will want to learn about new programs, or how to change or expand existing ones for somewhat different ends (Browne and Wildavsky 1983, 245).

²⁵ On governance, see Rhodes 1996 and Kooiman 2003; on the open method of coordination, a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11 (2), 2004.

5.2 Cognition and Communication

Learning begins in uncertainty: if there were no uncertainty, there would be no need for puzzling. This uncertainty is in part a function of inadequate information. Policy makers are ordinarily bound to act in circumstances in which their information, their imagination, and their resources are inevitably incomplete. As a result, their rationality is limited, contingent, or in Simon's phrase, "bounded."²⁶

The issue is more subtle and more fundamental than just not knowing enough. Following Hecló (above), what we are able to do is in part determined by what we have done before. Our prior decisions shape the domain in which future ones will be taken. We learn from the past and from our experience, not least because the past is in some degree the source of our problems. But what is important here is that this is a mental as much as a material or empirical process, or what we might call a "path dependence of the mind." For what we learn is in part determined by what we have learned before. Learning is a process of making sense of the world around us, and we tend to do so in terms with which we are already familiar. What we learn is a function of what we know already.

Vickers calls this an "appreciative system:" "a set of readinesses to distinguish some aspects of the situation rather than others and to classify and value these in this way rather than that" (1965, 67). It has equivalents in Hecló's "internal set," in what Schön and Rein (1994) call a "frame" and Young (1977) an "assumptive world;" it is close to Schotter's conception of institutions as "machines for thinking" (Schotter 1981; Douglas 1986). What is important for students of learning is that these various "readinesses," which themselves have to be learned, are "limiting, as well as enabling" (Vickers 1965, 68). For they shape and determine what we don't see as well as what we do.²⁷

This implies that learning is not simply an interpretative act, a process of registering and taking account of the world; it is, in a fundamental way, about creating the world. It is an active process of *making* sense (Weick 1995). Similarly, just as we shop in order to discover what we want (and we might think of some kinds of political learning as "policy shopping"), so we read in order to discover what we think, not just what any given author thinks (Brown and Duguid 2000). What emerges is a conception of learning as an act of imagination, invention, and persuasion as much as (or as well as) comprehension, deduction, and assimilation.

Wildavsky, similarly, thinks of implementation as exploration, or hypothesis testing (Browne and Wildavsky 1983, 254). We make predictions and act accordingly, adjusting our actions according to whether or not our predictions appear in fact to have been true. The problem is that the hypothesis alters the basis on which it will be

²⁶ In her study of employment policy in the USA from the New Deal to the 1970s, Margaret Weir (1992) describes the institutional processing of new ideas as one of "bounded innovation."

²⁷ See also March's account of "model bias in social action" (March 1972). Analytically, non learning is as interesting as learning. For instances in public policy, think of the way in which decision making is often constrained (and distorted) by the need to conform to and reproduce the established norms and assumptions of a deliberating group. This is what Janis has described as "groupthink" (Janis 1982).

subsequently revised. This means that public policies and the environments in which they operate are engaged in a process of mutual adaptation over time, which means in turn that "(I)mplementation is shaken from its safe cognitive anchorage in prior objectives and future consequences" (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984, xvii). Implementation is "not about getting what you once wanted but . . . about what you have since learned to prefer" (Browne and Wildavsky 1983, 234).

Cognition or "appreciation," meanwhile, is as much a product of communication as of perception. "(A)ll perception and all response, all behaviour and all classes of behaviour, all learning and all genetics . . . all organization and all evolution—one entire subject matter—must be regarded as communicational in nature" (Bateson 1973, 253). Attention to communication is important only to the extent that it does not imply the exact reproduction of a message intended by a speaker in the mind of a listener: what is understood by the listener is always and inevitably the result of a process of interpretation. The reproduction of the message is always to some degree imperfect: as the sociologists of science put it, "information is transformation" (Callon and Latour 1981, 300); what we think of as transfer is invariably an act of translation.

The central issue can be simply stated. We communicate by means of signs (words and pictures, sounds and images). The relationship between the sign and what it signifies is neither determined nor mechanical. What things mean is a matter of convention (a social construct) and it is invariably inexact. Meaning may be shared, but it is not identical. This fundamental epistemological uncertainty, this requirement that every utterance be accompanied by some hermeneutic move on the part of the reader or listener, is a source of innovation and creativity as well as error and failure. Translation—the processing of what you say into terms that I understand—is ubiquitous and imperfect.

The elements of learning distinguished here are intended as no more than a heuristic, a formal separation of concepts which are practically and essentially interconnected. Beyond them, it is worth drawing attention to two background themes, not only because they are important here but also because they are sometimes neglected in other accounts of policy making. First, there is much in the treatment of policy learning as it has unfolded over three or more decades which calls on systems theory. Heclo's concept of learning is derived from stimulus-response theory, and both he and Schön draw on Deutsch's cybernetic model of government (Deutsch 1963). Heclo, for example, cites Polanyi's " 'spontaneous order,' an order attained by allowing each part to interact on its own initiative" (Heclo 1974, 320). Vickers acknowledges making use of "concepts and ways of thought which, though common today in a wide variety of sciences, have so far penetrated only patchily into the thought of laymen—concepts which can perhaps be comprehended with least danger of misconception under the name of general system theory" (Vickers 1965, 16). Wenger (2000) offers a more explicit articulation of the community of practice in terms of systems theory, focusing on the learning which takes place at and across boundaries between communities.

Second, there is a further reach back to phenomenology and the roots of American pragmatism, as developed by James, Peirce, and perhaps most interested in problems

of learning, John Dewey. It is this that leads Hecló to assert that “Apart from the policy process there were no ‘problems’, only conditions” (Hecló 1974, 288) and Schön to suggest that “diagnosis comes about through intervention” (Schön 1973, 199). It is the dominant strain in Weick’s (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*, and Brown and Duguid’s (2000) *Social Life of Information*. Weick builds on Graham Wallas’s classic citation of a child’s remark: “How can I know what I think till I see what I say?” (Wallas 1926; Weick 1995, 12), explaining that what he calls sense making is about “the ways people generate what they interpret ... the invention that precedes interpretation” (Weick 1995, 13–14).

6. LEARNING BY COMPARISON

This chapter began by noting the ordinary experience of learning from others and from the past. It concludes here with reflections on the way in which learning, in both time and space, turns on comparison. For we learn from (and with) others with whom we identify in some way: because they are like us, or perhaps because we would like to be like them, or because their problems seem to be like ours. By the same token, we find it difficult to learn from those we think (or would like to think) are very different.

This is a different way of thinking about comparison from that which is usual in studies of public policy. More formally, comparison may be a source of explanation, of accounting for why things happen in one country and not in others, or why they happen in different ways. Used like this, to distinguish some causal variables from others, it is the closest the policy sciences come to experimental logic. At the same time, comparison may serve as a means of evaluation, a way of judging policy or practice and asking how it might be improved.

In practice, of course, such lessons are difficult to draw and difficult to apply. The contexts in which policy is made and implemented are complex, such that the relationship between policy cause and outcome or effect is often unclear. However compelling they may be, explanations and evaluations remain understandings of what has happened before, elsewhere. Where they work, where we can marshal enough evidence to be confident that they have general validity, and where they are flexible enough to be portable from one place to another, we might go with them. But often we can’t. Comparative analysis as classically conceived is a rich, valuable, but in itself insufficient guide to policy.

But much of the learning considered here is based on a different order of comparison, one which is prior to the other two. For comparison is predicated on description and redescription, cognition and recognition, categorization and classification, and understanding its implications is necessarily an interpretative process. To compare something with something else entails the logically prior recognition or assumption that they are comparable. It is to use the juxtaposition of things to make sense of them, both separately and together.

Comparison entails the use or production of categories to describe cases, which is something we usually do no more than half-consciously. Cross-national talk, for example, requires a more creative, slightly more abstract grammar and vocabulary than the ones we might ordinarily use to discuss situations we know and are familiar with with those who also inhabit them. Comparison is realized in what might be described as a “third code,” or a language of translation. This is partly why it often seems difficult, alien, disorienting, as well as exhilarating.

Vickers (1965) describes the formidable challenge presented by the Robbins Report on higher education in the UK. What it did was to review the position of an array of institutions of “higher education,” in the process defining and constructing this new, tertiary sector. What was at issue was the function and purpose of different teacher training and other technical colleges as well as the relations between them. Defining this set of organizations involved “a mental adjustment of a peculiarly difficult and complex kind,” which was in essence one of recategorization. It meant taking parts of the state system of education out of that category and grouping them with universities, which had always insisted on a separate, special identity. Inventing or constructing higher or tertiary education in turn implied some more explicit relationship to schools, the secondary tier. As throughout his work, Vickers connects the administrative problem to a psychological insight: “(I)n reorganizing institutions, it is easiest to subdivide, more difficult to combine and most difficult to carve up and regroup the constituents in a going concern. The difficulty illustrates and is perhaps related to the more basic psychological difficulties attending the growth of the categories which underlie our judgments of reality . . . The report . . . is not merely a plan for a reorganization of our institutions. It is also a plea for the reorganization of our thought” (Vickers 1965, 59–60).

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