

**EVALUATING POLICY PROCESSES**  
**Reconsidering Policy Evaluation and Policy Learning**

Brian Head (University of Queensland) &  
Jenny Stewart (University of Canberra)

Workshop on "Policy Evaluation & Policy Learning:  
Beyond Program Evaluation and Performance Audit"

ANU Conference on  
**GOVERNING BY LOOKING BACK:**  
How History Matters in Society, Politics and Government  
Canberra, 12 - 14 December 2007

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#### **Abstract**

Good policy outcomes are assumed to be dependent in important ways on good processes. These processes are arguably crucial for all elements of policy development and program implementation and, especially when complemented by program review, for sustaining improvement in the long-term. Yet the political and administrative spheres, in their understandable focus on achieving results, often seem to pay insufficient attention to process, except where processes impinge on attributes such as accountability.

Despite the plethora of performance information gathered concerning programs in many agencies, a fundamental issue remains as to whether we possess appropriate ways of evaluating relationships and processes in policy making and programs. What kind of bottom-up and top-down processes are needed? What are the pros and cons of utilising networks? What do we know about the effectiveness of partnership approaches? Have we created conditions under which policy improvement and policy learning can flourish?

The paper presents a series of suggestions as to how a theory for the evaluation of process might be developed, first by looking at the evaluative possibilities implied by existing models of process, and then by considering the empirical literature relating to process. We argue that much existing evaluation and audit activity is actually more about process than about content, but that a more explicit acknowledgment of process-oriented learnings is needed.

## EVALUATING POLICY PROCESSES Reconsidering Policy Evaluation and Policy Learning

*“That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach us”. – Aldous Huxley*

*“Give me a fruitful error any time, full of seeds, bursting with its own corrections. You can keep your sterile truth for yourself”. – Vilfredo Pareto*

### Introduction

Australian and New Zealand governments at all levels have embraced the measuring and monitoring of program performance. This has been one of the most significant developments in public management since the 1980s.

This trend has been driven by several related factors linked to the ‘efficiency and effectiveness’ agendas of New Public Management. Measuring and monitoring performance was consolidated by the widespread adoption of performance frameworks such as those embodying ‘managing for outcomes’ and ‘managing for results’, the use of ‘output-based’ budgeting, and comparative techniques such as benchmarking and continuous improvement.

This trend has been reinforced – especially at the national level, but also in some of the Australian State jurisdictions – by two other significant developments. Firstly, a broader role for *external audit* of public organisations has evolved for Auditors-General. Audit roles have moved beyond the traditional focus on cost-control, procedural compliance and risk frameworks towards a wider examination of the performance frameworks of agencies, and thus an increasing concern with the adequacy of performance information for use in considering the efficiency and effectiveness of program administration. Secondly, there has been a wider usage of formal *program evaluations* by agencies. These evaluations are often contracted to third-party experts whose mandate is to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of programs in relation to their stated goals, and to suggest necessary improvements.

Our argument is that, despite these generally positive developments, the full potential of policy learning is lost, because we lack tools and techniques for

evaluating the processes through which policy is made, implemented, evaluated and adjusted. This need has become greater given the increasing complexity of modern governance, which requires agencies to work together in new ways in order to achieve desired outcomes. At the same time, forms of networked and participatory governance are emerging in response to specific challenges, such as those posed by environmental degradation and climate change. As a result, policy-makers have more modes of policy formulation and implementation from which to choose, while other approaches are developing more or less spontaneously in response to changing politics and priorities.

Despite these changes, however, little is known about 'what works' in relation to processes for developing and improving policy and programs. Insofar as they are considered explicitly, processes are left to managers and service providers to figure out, using whatever techniques they can muster. Practising policy professionals undoubtedly accumulate a great deal of 'rule of thumb' wisdom over time as to what techniques are preferable, taking into account the context of political objectives. Individual practical wisdom may also be complemented by the broader lessons of agency tradition and experience.

While some aspects of implementation (such as outsourcing) are frequently evaluated, there is little available to help leaders and managers choose (for example) between a hierarchy or a networked type of policy delivery. Moreover, there is little formal evaluation to rely on concerning the 'how to' of policy formulation. Processes at the heart of government (such as the use of task forces to bring about rapid action on particular problems) are rarely subject to formal evaluation, although the adequacy of emergency-response coordination is attracting a great deal of recent attention. How does evaluation and learning occur, both within and across public agencies, and within the political executive?

The academic literature on policy processes may provide some initial guidance to managers. Policy cycle models, for example, offer a way of thinking about some of the key process elements, even if the overall theory of policy development is lacking in realism. The literature on networks and the literature relating to community consultation also provide some illumination. But little has been done to bring these learnings together in a way that encourages the development of an evaluative theory of process to underpin policy learning. The present paper attempts to fill this gap.

While evaluative techniques have blossomed, the theory of evaluation has, arguably, failed to develop sufficiently to comprehend and shape a rapidly-changing world of policy, participation and management. In addition, tools are needed for longer-term reflection on policy, and for developing the approaches and techniques needed to understand, critique and learn from past experience.

## **What do we mean by ‘process’?**

A process is a way of relating elements to form a whole. Most of us would agree that policy-making involves different kinds of activity that are brought together (or that interact) across many different groups of people. But if we think about evaluating process in the same way that we think about evaluating outcomes – i.e., if we try to compare the objectives of process with the achievements of process – it is difficult to make progress unless those who design processes can specify more clearly what kinds of benefits they expect to achieve from the use of such processes. But this simply re-states the problem of defining and operationalising process in the evaluation context.

One way around the problem is to consider how extant models of the policy process might be used to discern some useful aspects of an evaluation framework. In other words, these models potentially give us some sense of how process matters in the achievement of outcomes, or at least, which aspects of process might usefully form the basis of further investigation.

## **Models of policy process – normative implications**

The process aspects of policy that concern us are the ways in which analysis, interests and organisation are brought together in the making of policy. How are policy processes conceptualised in various policy models, and how might these concepts be developed so as to constitute a basis for evaluation? Not all models have an obvious normative orientation, of course. But all have an implicit set of norms. We are seeking to document the implied criteria for ‘good process’ in each model, and the implicit link seen between good process and good outcomes.

### **1. Policy cycle**

The policy cycle literature, originating in the ‘policy sciences’ approach of Lasswell and colleagues, assumes that a good process is one that is clearly structured and rational. It takes its lead from decision-making and strategic-planning models which envisage policy-making as comprising a number of distinctly-different activities (analysis, consultation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, etc) that are best undertaken in an orderly, cyclical process.

Thus an evaluative criterion suggested by the policy cycle approach might be:

- how well does the process bring together rational factors of policy analysis?

## 2. Policy networks

Policy networks have a long history in explanatory policy analysis – in the past twenty years, networks have been integrated with the concept of governance to underline the point that modern public administration both does (and should?) go beyond traditional or obvious organisational boundaries (see Rhodes 2006).

Networks may be less structured than the state apparatus, but may nevertheless provide alternative processes for bringing together interests, analysis and organisation for the making of policy. Interaction, communication and exchange of information are vital to this approach.

The evaluative focus from the policy networks approach might be:

- to what extent did the policy process involve key actors outside government itself? how inclusive were the communication and information flows employed in this process?

## 3. Incrementalist approaches

The incrementalist approach to policy processes, associated most notably with Lindblom, reflects a view of democratic politics as ongoing adjustments among a myriad of interests both within and outside the institutions of state. The normative implication of this model is that decision-makers should be wary of adopting grand plans and suspicious of commitments to 'comprehensive' solutions.

The evaluative approach derived from incrementalism might be:

- to what extent was the policy developed and implemented in small and manageable steps?

## 4. Stakeholder approaches

Positive models of the policy process, such as Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework, draw our attention to the development of relationships between interests in policy sub-systems (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, Sabatier 2007). Sub-systems consist of a number of 'advocacy coalitions' which can, in certain circumstances, cooperate in ways that enable policy change and policy learning to occur.

The normative implication of this kind of perspective is that policy brokers (politicians and public servants) may bring together interests with a 'stake' in the outcome (remembering that these may include other government agencies), so as to gain their input into decision-making and (more idealistically) encourage them to moderate or modify their position in the light of their participation.

The evaluative focus derived from stakeholder literature might be:

- how were stakeholders engaged and to what ends? did new approaches to policy emerge as stakeholders engaged with each other and with government?

## 5. Governance approaches

Governance (as we interpret it here) is fundamentally an institutionalist concept that brings together decision-making and its structural settings: as a policy-related perspective, it tends to encompass both policy formulation and implementation (Stewart & Jones 2003, Kjaer 2004, Head 2005a).

The normative value of this kind of approach is that it stresses the ways in which authority is exercised and held accountable in both intra- and inter-organisational contexts.

The evaluative approach derived from governance literature might be:

- how was the basis for governance achieved? how well were governance variables such as accountability, transparency, responsiveness and participation identified and pursued?

## 6. Implementation approaches

When analysts discuss implementation, they are clearly focusing on the organisational 'doing' of policy – the conversion of words into particular types of action. For much of its history, implementation research acted as a corrective to a preoccupation with policy formulation – a corrective that recurring implementation 'failures' suggest is still important (Pressman & Wildavsky 1979). Implementation approaches bring out the importance of communication between agencies (see Nakamura and Smallwood 1980), and emphasise the role of those who deliver decisions and services, the 'street-level' bureaucrats (Lipsky 1979).

A good implementation process is one that is appropriate to the type of policy that is being enacted (Sabatier 1986, Sabatier 2007). 'Top down' works well enough when the implementing chain is clear-cut, and there are few ambiguities to resolve (see Hogwood and Gunn 1984). 'Bottom up' is needed when these conditions are not met, and implementation must respond to changes 'on the ground' (Elmore 1979). More recently, managerial approaches to implementation, which stress the importance of planning, risk management and control, have gained in importance (see Parsons 1995, 473-480).

An evaluative approach from this literature (i.e., evaluating implementation as good process) might be:

- How well did the implementation process fit the type of policy challenges being addressed?

## **Using existing models: a discussion**

By drawing out the normative implications of each of these models, we give ourselves a number of process 'traits' to look for. We also become more sensitised to the values that are inherent in each model – to the presence or absence of an overall rationality, for example. As a mechanism for learning about processes, however, this approach to the literature is limited, since there is no clear basis for choosing between – or even combining – the models. Thus, although we might determine (for example) that a process is more-or-less rational according to the policy cycle model, we still have no way of knowing when or whether it makes sense to emphasise this kind of rationality, or whether we should instead be evaluating according to (say) a governance-related model, or a stakeholder-based model that gives more weight to the role of non-state actors.

An alternative approach is to deepen our understanding of the nature of process by drawing from the various kinds of evaluation-relevant literature that have been produced in academic and in public management contexts. We might then go on to draw from these assessments a sense of 'what works' when we are trying to achieve particular kinds of objectives.

## **Process in practice: what works for learning and improvement?**

To try to answer this question, we review some of the Australian and international literature that has evaluated aspects of process. Much of this literature has been produced by practitioners rather than academics, because practitioners are, understandably, directly interested in working out ways of improving what they do, while academics usually want to focus more on understanding particular processes in greater depth. We briefly consider the following literature:

- Trends in external auditing
- Better practice guides
- Performance management
- Program evaluation
- Empirical literature on networks
- Evaluating forms of consultation
- Governance as process

### *Trends in External Auditing*

The public sector in Australia and New Zealand has developed a strong reputation for building auditing and review into its standard operating systems. This has been undertaken for two reasons. The first, and more traditional, reason is to oversight and certify the legality and probity of transactions. This 'compliance' approach is often directed at processes to minimise fraud (ANAO

2004), to ensure due process in financial management, and to oversight compliance with legal obligations and administrative procedures. This traditional focus has been complemented in recent years by an emphasis on program and organisational 'effectiveness'. This second approach, largely responsible for the 'audit explosion' of recent decades (Power 2003), is aligned with the quality-assurance agenda of management improvement, and the NPM agenda of service delivery improvement.

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) has played an important role in reviewing and reporting on Commonwealth programs, and on jointly-funded national programs. It has played an important role in reshaping Commonwealth programs by insisting on clearer objectives, better performance information, and measuring outcomes rather than activities. Parliamentary oversight of national performance auditing is undertaken by the Joint Committee on Public Accounts and Audit, which conducts public hearings on many of the ANAO reports.

The more recent emphasis of the 'effectiveness' agenda in external audit has a learning orientation rather than a punitive orientation, and is thus consistent with building a system of 'meta-regulation' that enhances the 'self-regulatory' capacity of public agencies. Taking on these additional functions has led to a 'quantitative and qualitative expansion' of their work (Scott 2003). The provision of guidance material is central to this new orientation.

### Better practice guides

The ANAO, in its better practice guides, offers many suggestions about improving processes, such as regulatory enforcement (see *Administering Regulation*, 2007a), giving policy advice (see *Some Better Practice Principles for Developing Policy Advice*, 2001b), and program implementation (see *Implementation of Programme and Policy Initiatives*, 2006).

How, then, does the ANAO know what 'good' processes look like? In its 2001 audit report on Developing Policy Advice (and summarised in the better practice principles document), case studies were interpreted essentially through a quality management framework (ANAO 2001a). These better practice guides on policy and regulation were not technically audits of actual practices, but drew upon a range of policy and procedural documentation as well as secondary analytical literature – for example, Ayres and Braithwaite's model of responsive regulation is featured in the section on 'Encouraging compliance' in *Administering Regulation* (ANAO 2007a).

In the better practice guides, case studies are used to demonstrate particular aspects of good practice in nominated agencies, with the implication that the agencies concerned have achieved good outcomes by using them. However, there is no special focus on the developmental or comparative dimension. It seems that it remains the role and responsibility of agency managers (and

perhaps their consultant advisors) to know how to identify and improve upon 'bad' processes.

Nevertheless a number of constituent elements of effective processes in regulation, policy advice and policy implementation are enunciated. In each of the three publications, variations on rational planning, quality management or cyclical processes are commended, with particular activities, such as 'communication', and 'risk management', being highlighted where appropriate.

The normative or prescriptive emphasis is on identifying key activities, and specifying the outcomes that are expected from those activities. For example, in a section dealing with stakeholder relationships, the better practice guide on *Administering Regulation* features an Australian Tax Office case study stressing the importance of 'consultation and cooperation' and 'full and frank feedback'. Relationships should be 'open and responsive', while risks such as conflict of interest should be identified and dealt with.

Thus the ANAO approach is to identify, for each broad area of activity, not an overall process, but a number of sub-processes that should be attended to. Each component can then be characterised in a way that facilitates an ex ante 'checklist' for the manager. For example, the qualities of a sound complaints-handling processing facility are listed as 'accessibility, commitment, confidentiality, prioritisation, notification and improvement' (ANAO 2007a, 23).

### Performance management reviews

All public agencies undertake internal reviews of their performance as an important aspect of managing their business. However, we are more concerned here with external reviews of performance, generally undertaken by independent bodies such as Auditors-General (e.g. see QAO 2007) or by central agencies (Pollitt 2006, Pollitt & Summa 1997). Performance management reviews should provide another window into the relevance and salience of 'good process' issues. For example, process issues arise when a review considers the efficiency with which agencies use their performance information or how well they use their material and human resources.

However, the assessment of efficiency and effectiveness is most easily pursued by relating an outputs measure to an inputs measure. In the early transformative phase of NPM, it was widely held that a service system (or an implementation process) could be made more efficient by reducing the number of people engaged in the process and/or by outsourcing to a cheaper external service provider. Over time we have learned, from costly experience, that performance frameworks are very important but that the focus on measurement metrics can be misleading in terms of understanding the conditions and factors required for genuine improvement.

According to the ANAO, the contemporary role of performance audit and evaluation is to provide rigorous feedback to agencies, and suggestions for 'better practices' that can assist management's quest for 'continuous improvement' (Barrett 2004). In short, performance reviews are opportunities for learning. However, they can also influence political agendas, and may sometimes cause political embarrassment. For example, the ANAO recently released a voluminous report indicating that the federal Minister had over-ridden the formal assessment criteria reflected in departmental advice concerning the relative merit of Regional Partnership assistance grants in specific locations (ANAO 2007b).

More substantively, the ANAO recently released a report on *Whole of Government Indigenous Service Delivery Arrangements* (ANAO 2007c). The very large distance between the well-being of Indigenous and other Australians has been thoroughly documented (Productivity Commission 2007). The ANAO report on the federal government's coordinated response to these problems, found that there remain major gaps between high-level intent and actual delivery of appropriate services by government agencies. Much of this gap is attributed to the new and complex arrangements for inter-agency cooperation, which present challenges to standard modes of strategic management, budgeting and reporting.

### Program evaluation

There are many techniques and pathways in program evaluation. Public agencies facing different tasks and challenges may choose to focus on different aspects and methods, dependent on the purposes of the evaluation (Uhr 1991, Behn 2003, SSC NZ 2003). Some agencies might focus on efficient implementation of a settled suite of programs, others might explore the relative effectiveness of policy instruments and program options, and others may concentrate on collecting systematic data to inform evaluations across the sector. Central agencies are interested in the quality of evaluations across government.

Much evaluation occurs 'in-house', to support the performance management arrangements in each public agency (Newcomer & Scheirer 2001); but major program evaluations are generally contracted out to independent expert consultants. In recent years there has been a trend in evaluation studies towards recognising a 'need to form cooperative and interactive relationships with those being evaluated', in order to optimise the chances of the recommendations being 'accepted and implemented' (Pollitt & Summa 1997: 88). Where new directions, and behavioural changes, are indicated, this more inclusive approach to shared thinking seems useful and even necessary.

It is not always clear, however, that public sector managers are well placed to draw lessons about program improvement based on good processes, and

thereby to demonstrate policy learning, given their need to navigate and negotiate their institutional and political environment (Bovens et al 2006, Freeman 2006). Several reasons for apparent lack of 'follow-through' might be suggested. First, the political climate for particular directions of change may not be opportune. Secondly, the organisational culture of key agencies might be resistant to reform. Thirdly, information base for demonstrating benefits and monitoring changes may be inadequate. Fourthly, if the reform depends on inter-agency cooperation and/or sectoral cooperation between government, industry and community groups, the requisite leadership and effort for effective change management may be lacking. Fifthly, a change in government or a churning in key management personnel may undermine the continuity needed for sustainable reform.

One practical case-study of policy learning is the sequence of negotiations surrounding the program review of a major federal NRM (natural resource management) program, the Natural Heritage Trust program, around 1999-2000. This substantial review, contracted out by government agencies to several consultants and involving extensive interviewing, was instrumental in the redesign and tighter focus of the program (later known as 'NHT2') in about 2001 (see overview in Crowley 2001).

The mere existence of a critical evaluation report is not enough to spark productive remedial action. The factors that made this redesign possible included the political opportunity of tackling major NRM framework issues through the inter-government COAG process, the timely production of a discussion paper with a revised strategic approach to regional planning and community consultation (AFFA 1999), and reinforcement of the need for change by an audit report urging better performance information and closer links between spending and desired outcomes (ANAO 2001c).

### *Literature on networks, collaborations and partnerships*

Are networks better than other arrangements for tackling a wide range of problems? Some authors suggest that this may not be the best question to ask, since networks are best for 'complex, messy wicked problems that do not lend themselves to business as usual' (Keast et al 2004, 370). Moreover, networks should not be evaluated according to conventional measures of success – sometimes, it is the sense of acting or operating differently, and the experience of sharing, that is important. Much of the conventional evaluative writing on networks deals with practical issues concerning 'how to run a network'. The more systematic approaches include a decade of reflection on the Dutch experience with network-based urban planning. Interestingly, it is the learning or transformative attributes of networks that are highlighted in much of this literature (de Bruijn & ten Heuvelhof 1997, Koppenjan & Klijn 2004).

More broadly, policy and planning partnerships (e.g., in watershed management and regional development) have received more attention from academic evaluators. In one of the most thorough studies of its kind, Leach, Pelkey and Sabatier developed and applied evaluative criteria to 44 watershed partnerships in California and Washington State. These criteria included specific partnership factors such as the extent of agreement reached among the stakeholders; whether or not the partnership had improved participants' stores of human and social capital; and whether on-ground ecological improvements were emerging (Leach et al, 2002). The authors concluded that multiple measures of success were needed when partnerships were being evaluated. One of the key findings was that good outcomes were generally linked to the longevity of the partnership (both for process achievements and for measured biophysical improvements): "It takes time (typically 4 to 6 years) to educate participants, overcome distrust, reach agreements, secure funding, and begin implementation" (Leach et al, 2002: 666).

### *Evaluating consultation and engagement*

One aspect of process that has received a certain amount of evaluative attention is policy-related consultation. Consultation has become one of the prominent elements of 'better practice' approaches to policy development and provision of policy advice. What has been learned from the experience of implementing a wide range of consultation exercises in many areas of policy and program review? The first lesson is that there are fundamental value disputes between those who wish to restrict and tightly manage opportunities for individuals and groups to participate in consultation, and those who wish to open up the policy arena to new modes of engagement and deliberation. One such new channel is the experimental use of 'citizen's juries' to explore value assumptions, arguments and evidence under conditions more conducive to options analysis than the usual clash of fixed positions (see Hendriks 2002).

The second lesson is that there are many forms of consultation and engagement, and consideration must therefore be given to selecting forms that are appropriate to the task at hand. These forms range across a spectrum, from information-sharing and collecting diverse perspectives, exchanging ideas about directions and improvements, through to participating in cooperative forums, and contributing to collaborative ventures (Head 2007). Some network forums begin as voluntary networks but may evolve into more formal sources of advice to decision-makers, and receive funding to undertake agreed roles in community or environmental planning. At this point there is a risk of overload and a risk of inconsistent goals for the network – a mis-match can emerge between its role in enhancing participation and inclusion – a contribution to democratic legitimacy – and its role in conducting formal business (e.g. setting local priorities) on behalf of state agencies (Head 2005b).

### Governance as process

In *Renegotiating the Environment*, Stewart and Jones undertook a comparative study of nine cases in which varying degrees of success were achieved in producing environmental governance. Our dependant variable was 'degree of consensus achieved', with consensus being defined as 'the extent to which the outcome met with broad approval from the previously contending parties' (Stewart and Jones 2003, 98).

They identified three key processes that were required for success – political management, conflict resolution and leadership – with the constituents of each process representing responses to the type of problem defined by the process. Thus, for example, political management involved:

- analysis, influencing power and promoting accountability.

Conflict resolution involved:

- civilising conflict, building networks, and enhancing flexibility.

Leadership involved:

- articulating values, 'translating' information, selecting policy-relevant targets and nurturing relationships (Stewart and Jones 2003: ch.6).

### **Processes in practice: discussion**

The above sections illustrate the argument that much of the recent literature on the analysis of policy has been process-based. Practitioners have always understood the importance of process (see Edwards 2001; Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2007). By giving public policy a much stronger organisational context and form (for example by emphasising 'governance'), academic writers have highlighted the interactive and communication-based (as distinct from the analytical) aspects of policy-making.

It is clear that the practice of evaluation has moved to consider process, but without always explicitly acknowledging the full dimensions of a policy learning frame. The advent of 'managerialism' and the need to identify and improve performance has clearly influenced these shifts. But the managerial writing on process (that is, advice-based writing for managers) is often reliant on analytical principles rather than being empirically-based or stakeholder-based. This rational bias reproduces the curious anomaly of the policy cycle – widely-taught and widely-believed – but almost impossible to observe as a coherent sequence.

Perhaps 'process' is too broad and too elusive a concept to pin down definitively as the basis for improved policy learning. On the other hand, in the Australian context at least, there would seem to be a wide-open field for further research, comparing and contrasting the effects of different approaches to policy-making.

Such considerations would need to address the learning challenge arising for different players in the system – individuals, teams, divisional units, departments, ministerial offices, knowledge brokers, interest groups, other stakeholders, and perhaps society as a whole. These issues have been addressed to some extent in the literature on ‘policy learning’.

### **Learning from experience? the ‘policy learning’ literature**

Bennett and Howlett (1992) tried to identify the main components in the concept of policy learning, by looking at five widely discussed accounts of learning – political learning, government learning, policy-oriented learning, lesson drawing and social learning. They distil this material into three types of learning – government learning, lesson drawing, and social learning. These are addressed through three sets of issues – identifying ‘who learns’, ‘what is learned’, and finally, ‘what effects on policies emerge as a result of learning’. As shown in the table below, they conclude that what has been characterised as ‘policy learning’ can actually be seen to be three complex processes: learning about organisations, learning about programs, and learning about policies.

	Who Learns	Learns What	To What Effect
LEARNING TYPE			
Government Learning	State Officials	Process-Related	Organisational Learning
Lesson-Drawing	Policy Networks	Instruments	Program Change
Social Learning	Policy Communities	Ideas	Paradigm Shifts

(Bennett & Howlett 1992: 289)

It is clear that these may be very broad processes indeed, and need to be examined through case-studies. Importantly however, the ‘learning’ may be derived from sources external to the public agencies and their associated audit and evaluation activities. Adoption and adaptation of ideas from other jurisdictions, or indeed other societies (May 1992, Dolowitz & Marsh 1996), is increasingly common as communication and interaction become more intensified and more globalised. Moreover, the ideas and experiences that underpin learning are not limited to the codified bodies of systematic knowledge arising from research and evaluation, most prized by the advocates of ‘evidence-based policy’ (Sanderson 2002).

In the field of environmental policy and regulation, Fiorino (2001) has argued that the paradigm shifts in thinking may be understood in terms of different capacities for policy learning. The environmental problems of the 1970s were seen as requiring technical solutions and prescriptive regulations. This approach

gradually gave way to new thinking about broad goals and more holistic strategies directed towards sustainability. New policy instruments emerged, along with more inclusive policy approaches based on communication, dialogue, and closer interaction among stakeholders. Studies of natural resource partnerships have further developed these themes. Schusler et al (2003: 324) identified a number of factors that promoted social learning among participants in a collaborative planning process between a state agency and local communities. These included: open communication, diverse participation, unrestrained thinking, constructive conflict, democratic structure, multiple sources of knowledge, extended engagement, and facilitation.

These process factors may be more difficult to operationalise at a higher level or on a broader scale. Nevertheless, some of the policy models discussed earlier – based on networks, stakeholder engagement, and new governance – are strongly consistent with learning approaches generated by participation and dialogue. By contrast, the rational policy cycle model implies that learning is guaranteed by being built into the core elements of the model, but we argue that this assumed learning is at best hypothetical. The incremental model implies there will be a degree of learning through the bargaining process to effect minor adjustments around business-as-usual. However, it is difficult in this model to consider a full range of options, including the fundamental rethinking of issues required periodically to achieve a paradigm shift.

### **Prospects: understanding the processes underlying improvement**

How are knowledge and understanding about good processes converted into more effective action to improve policy and program outcomes? Do we know enough about what combinations of bottom-up and top-down processes are needed? Do we know enough about the best ways of utilising networks and partnership approaches?

Large bureaucratic organisations are difficult to lead towards a learning and innovation orientation. Such organisations have difficulty undertaking standard evaluation tasks, let alone more creative and reflexive roles. In New Zealand a recent report suggest there are three main reasons that public agencies do not excel in the conduct and application of evaluative activities:

- *variable culture of inquiry*: variable demand for high quality evaluative activity from Ministers, Parliament, central agencies and State sector managers and variable commitment to using the findings of evaluative activity to inform decisions;
- *poor coordination and prioritisation*: evaluative effort is often not well coordinated and prioritised within or between agencies; data sharing and

consistency is limited; evaluative findings are often not shared within and between agencies; and little attention to evaluating major policies that span managerial boundaries; and

- *limited capability*: limited understanding by policy and programme managers of when different types of evaluative activity offer value, and how to interpret and use the findings; and limited skills within and outside the State sector to conduct high quality evaluative activity. (SSC NZ 2003: 30)

Even if good-quality information is available, learning and uptake are not automatic. As Wildavsky noted: 'Better information alone will not matter without worthwhile incentives for organisations to use it' (Wildavsky 1979: 37). Moreover, innovative managers and policy designers in the bureaucracy may be heavily constrained by the political executive: 'Information about public policy is not utilised in a neutral or depoliticised fashion. What is "learned" and what is "remembered" must always be seen in the context of political interests and political power' (Bennett & Howlett 1992: 291).

What are the conditions under which knowledge about 'good processes' for policy improvement and policy learning can flourish? Much of the existing evaluation and audit knowledge is indeed valuable, including its attention to some procedural and structural aspects of process. However, a more explicit acknowledgment of process-oriented learnings is needed. Policy learning, based on feedback from participants and the findings of evaluators, seems to require a combination of long-term thinking and flexible but clear frameworks for continuing deliberation, information-flow and research. Such conditions do occur, but remain rare in policy-making environments that punish or cover-up mistakes rather than using them productively and, often, have only limited and stereotyped means for recognizing success.

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