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Leadership and policy learning communities: promoting knowledge animation

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Over the last decade my research attention and development energy have been devoted to the issue of creating capacity for learning to support educational improvement. By capacity, I mean the power to engage in and sustain learning of people at all levels of the educational system for the collective purpose of enhancing pupils' learning[1]. This includes policy learning. In this piece, I explore the potential that learning communities offer for capacity building, illustrating this with three examples, then examine the processes involved, and conclude by considering implications for leadership.

Learning communities

Creating, developing and sustaining learning communities lies at the heart of capacity building[2]. Relationships are critical to social learning. The quality of social learning is greater when social capital is high[3]. My initial interest was in how school leaders create and develop professional learning communities – inclusive, reflective, mutually supportive and collaborative groups of people who find ways, inside and outside their immediate community to investigate and learn more about their practice in order to improve all pupils' learning[4]. But learning communities don't have to be confined to individual schools or organisations. Broadening membership of learning communities facilitates the extension of the available knowledge bases. So, involving agencies from other public sectors brings different professional knowledge that can support improvement[5], while parental involvement adds intimate knowledge of individual children. Connecting with colleagues in other schools through participating in learning networks adds to the existing pool of professional educational knowledge and builds wider commitments as colleagues learn not only with and from each other but on behalf of others[6]. Such collaboration across schools and districts has been described as lateral capacity building[7]. If these colleagues' schools are located in different countries, this brings opportunities for intercultural knowledge.

Core to the concept is the notion of community. The focus isn't just on individuals learning but the notion of learning within a collaborative community context. Appreciation of diversity is particularly relevant, being recognised as essential for new learning and development. Diversity pushes people to contemplate new ideas and possibilities and challenges them to stretch their repertoire beyond usual, habitual, or comfortable ways of acting. It often provides the dissonance necessary for learning.

How does the idea of learning communities apply to policy learning? Let's look at three illustrative examples.

Example 1: The Rotterdam Programme on Educational Underachievement (ROAP)

Local policy makers engaged a team of international experts to make twice yearly formative evaluation visits from 2002-2006 related to the city of Rotterdam's Programme on Education Underachievement. As members of an international team with diverse, carefully selected research and policy experience, we had knowledge of educational reform in a number of countries, had been teachers, and were engaged in applied research, working with policy makers and practitioners. Some of us were also change facilitators. Our role was to act as critical friends[8], asking provocative questions, feeding in ideas from research and our other experience at appropriate points, examining the situation through different lenses, while taking time to understand the context of Rotterdam's work and the outcomes policy makers were seeking. Two policy leaders participated in all sessions, with other policy colleagues, politicians and practitioners involved in various meetings. The stance was 'evaluation for learning'; maintaining an external, independent and unbiased orientation, sometimes validating, at other times challenging models of working, but always with the intention of supporting the Education Department in designing the most effective strategies for enhancing achievement and the leadership and implementation of change. The collaborative process involved dialogue and inquiry as we explored intentions, actions and impact; offered feedback and sought suggestions from their experience; engaged in mutual problem solving; provided input into their processes to monitor developments; and, together, generated new knowledge. This was a two-way process; we, too, had to be open to learning.

Example 2: The OECD Improving School Leadership activity and development of a related toolkit

The Improving School Leadership activity was ranked third out of 29 activities for the OECD Education Directorate's Programme of Work in 2006-07, and 22 countries decided to participate in this project. The purpose was to provide policy-makers with information and analysis to assist them in formulating and implementing school leadership policies leading to improved teaching and learning[9]. In common with many OECD activities, the objectives were to: synthesise research on related issues; identify innovative and successful policy initiatives and practices; facilitate exchanges of lessons and policy options among countries; and identify policy options for governments to consider. Conferences provided a forum where policy makers shared and reflected on their experiences, also engaging in dialogue about key topics stimulated by presentations from experts. Connections were formed and some policy makers made visits to colleagues in other countries to learn more.

As with other activities, conventional 'outputs' were the country reports, final report, case studies (drawn together in a further publication highlighting a common theme of system leadership) and executive summary. Final conference dialogue in April 2008 suggested that action had been, or was being, undertaken or planned in several countries. Nonetheless, the issue remains of how countries go about designing, promoting and implementing reform based on a set of recommendations in a large report. Discussions with policy makers about their normal response to such policy reports highlighted that securing engagement of policy colleagues and practitioners with findings of such reports frequently proves a challenge. This was the basis for my proposal to the OECD to develop a learning resource[10] to aid the process of engagement, enable policy makers and practitioners to explore reactions and responses to the findings in ways that connect with their own experience, practice and context; debate implications of the findings, prioritising amongst them for their own policy formulation and/or practice development; and identify possible steps for action.

Development is underway of what is currently known as a 'toolkit', although this term suggests simple, mechanical action whereas the collaborative learning processes involved are intended to be significantly deeper, involving frameworks for analysing and contextualising report's findings, questions promoting reflection and discussion, activities to explore implications, and writing and thinking frames for planning future development. The emphasis is on understanding and analysis, self diagnosis and auditing, prioritising and taking action, and communicating and connecting. One country, for example, is

planning a conference in which key stakeholders from across the policy and practice spectrum will work together using the toolkit survey and other materials in an iterative learning process leading them towards consensus on policy, procedural and practice-oriented priorities.

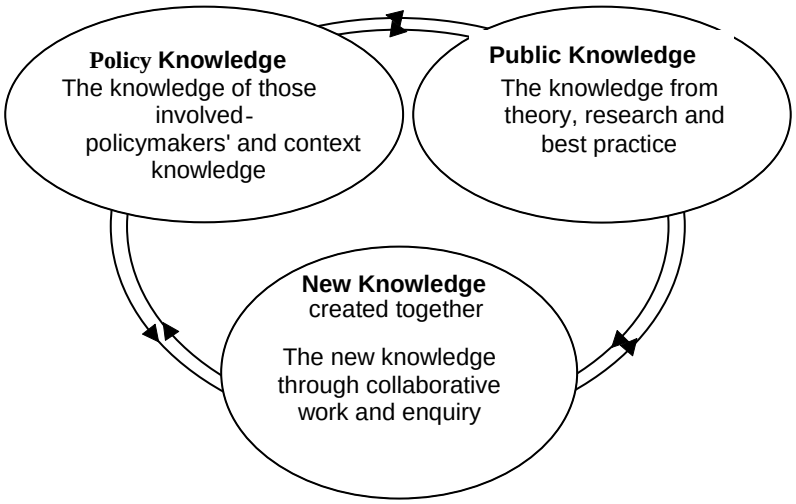
Example 3: The Austrian Leadership Academy

An example of innovative practice in leadership development that was one of the Improving School Leadership activity case studies was the Austrian Leadership Academy[11]. In 2004 the Austrian Minister of Education, Science, and Culture founded the Academy, in association with the Universities of Innsbruck and Zurich[12]. Its initial intent was to prepare school heads – who possessed newly acquired autonomy but had little experience in operating outside a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure – with the capacity to act more independently, take greater initiative, and manage their schools though changes entailed by a stream of government reforms. Quickly, the benefits of involving a wider group of participants became apparent, and the Leadership Academy (LEA) began including district inspectors, staff of teacher training institutes, and executives from the Ministry of Education and provincial education authorities. These participants learn together in four forums, where they are introduced through a range of creative pedagogical techniques to research on leadership for learning, school development and personal capacity, which they are invited to reflect on and explore. They also select and work with a learning partner and a collegial coaching team (CTC – 3 pairs of learning partners) in and between the forums, focusing on a development problem that each brings to the group. The change in relationships, attitudes, and orientation to leadership for the vast majority of LEA participants has produced a groundswell at the various levels of the system where people have been involved – schools, districts, regions, teacher training institutes, and parts of the Ministry. Ministry leaders who have participated for the most part find the programme and experience as powerful as their peers and some particularly value the CTC connections they make with school and inspector colleagues. Involvement of the head of one Ministry Directorate had a particularly powerful effect on the system when he followed up his participation by replicating LEA learning processes with all of his Directorate staff.

Knowledge animation at the heart of policy learning communities

In the examples, policy learning occurs through a community-based approach. The community also extends beyond the policy makers concerned. This is important. Learning occurs as a result of engaging with external ideas and people from different contexts.

Many of the ideas in the examples are research-based but they are generally not 'delivered' through the usual channels of a heavy report or a keynote speech. Policy makers often get frustrated when research doesn't appear relevant to their governments' concerns. Even when it is relevant, it can be presented in such a way that learning from it is difficult, inhibiting implementation of potentially valuable findings. Research is usually 'disseminated' – the term often used is knowledge transfer, suggesting a one-way flow of knowledge and a transmission style that we know doesn't make for powerful learning. We need ways of bringing knowledge to life so that policy makers can engage with research in a way that helps them locate it within their context and in relation to prior experience and learning, make meaning from it, and construct new knowledge out of it. This learning is also social as learners test the veracity of their own beliefs and knowledge by comparing them to the beliefs and knowledge of others around them and together they relate this to other external knowledge, processing it jointly and thereby creating new knowledge. A model of *three fields of knowledge* from England's National College for School Leadership's Networked Learning Communities programme[13] captures this relationship. I have adapted it here to apply to a policy learning situation.



I describe this process of connections as *knowledge animation*. The word 'animate' comes from the Latin word 'anima' which means breath, life or soul. Animate means to bring to life, put in motion. It suggests action and movement, dynamism and vibrancy, invigoration and innovation. The focus of knowledge animation is helping people to learn and use knowledge generated elsewhere and, through it to create their own valuable knowledge. Knowledge animation can be seen as ways of making knowledge accessible and mobile to help people make the necessary learning connections that enable them to put knowledge to use in their contexts.

The purpose of knowledge animation in education is improved policy and practice that will lead to enhanced pupil learning. The intermediate outcome is collaborative knowledge creation: new ideas generated that will help solve the specific problems that need addressing. To achieve this means developing a range of strategies with the aims of bringing researchers, policy makers and practitioners closer together and helping policy makers and practitioners engage with research findings and generate new ideas and strategies to improve learning in their schools and systems. Knowledge animation, as illustrated in these examples, has several interconnected features and processes:

- *Learning is the focus* which means that the process involves co-construction of knowledge and respect for the perspective and context of those who might traditionally be seen as 'receiving the knowledge'; indeed, mutual learning[14].
- *Interdependence* – realisation that without a connected approach, less can be achieved, along with a genuine desire to collaborate.
- *External knowledge*, including high quality research, best practice and new trends presented in different ways to stimulate possible areas of development.
- *Diversity of perspectives* - based on mutual respect. leading to more powerful learning as well as bridging social capital between key partners in the educational improvement endeavour.
- *Dialogue* – a process of connecting that involves the suspension of judgement, openness and flexibility.
- *Joint enquiry* – a collaborative process with questions at its core underpinned by a 'need to know' and to dig deeper for greater understanding, avoiding short-term shallow solutions.

What does this mean for leadership?

This piece's title is Leadership and Policy Learning Communities. While the three examples focused on leaders or leadership, this doesn't explain how leadership might relate to policy learning communities and the knowledge animation process. Kotter[15] distinguishes leadership from management in arguing that management is about producing order and consistency while leadership is about generating constructive change. Most definitions of leadership emphasise that it involves direction setting and the process of influence that helps lead people towards the desired direction[16]. What does existing research tell us about leadership and learning communities?

All the signs highlight that the challenges of change are too great for any one leader to handle alone[17]. This is endorsed by findings of research on professional learning communities within schools and networked learning communities between schools where both formal and distributed leadership are important[18]. Formal leaders create the conditions in which learning communities thrive. They model learning themselves and ensure that the culture and structures are supportive of collaborative learning and enquiry that embody the knowledge animation features and processes outlined previously. So, for example, time, space and resources are found to support learning community development and activity, which should include knowledge animation, and attention is paid to monitoring and evaluating the development of the learning community. Distribution of leadership ensures that those with expertise lead different aspects of the community's development, and that opportunities exist to build the leadership capacity of many individuals who influence others towards improved practice by animating their knowledge, motivating others, experimenting with new ideas and strategies and learning with others. Building leadership capacity throughout and between organisations by distributing leadership is a powerful way to ensure sustainability of learning communities. It also helps to engender the collective responsibility characteristic of learning communities, such that members are not just concerned about their own learning or piece of the puzzle. Instead, the foci become the learning of everyone and connecting all the puzzle pieces together to enhance that learning and promote systemwide improvement and transformation.

What might this mean for leadership and policy learning communities? The decision to develop policy learning communities who seek out knowledge animation opportunities is a leadership decision that can't be left to chance. It requires formal leadership that endorses, values, promotes and models collaborative learning and enquiry and knowledge animation, and that builds networks to support learning connections across different policy areas. It also depends on informal, distributed leadership that helps deepen learning in specific policy areas, underpinned by the willingness and desire not only to learn with and from others but also on behalf of others in order that wider benefits of policy learning can be achieved.

In a spirit of promoting collaborative reflection and enquiry, I conclude with questions for you to consider with colleagues:

- What examples of policy learning communities exist in your system?
- Who do they involve? Is anyone excluded?
- What conditions are facilitating their existence?

- What are the barriers that are inhibiting the development of policy learning communities in your context? How can these barriers be removed?
- Are you a leaders of policy learning communities?
- How is leadership distributed in your policy learning communities?
- What are the most powerful forms of knowledge animation you have come across? Why?
- How might you extend these to other policy areas?

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