Learning theory reconsidered: EU integration theories and learning

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces this special issue by contextualising learning theory within European integration studies. There are important empirical and theoretical gaps in the study of European integration which necessitate a greater attention to learning theory. This article deploys a number of conceptual distinctions about learning and non-learning processes, drawing from political science, international relations, public administration and sociological/organisational studies. It traces 'learning' in its political science context and how learning has been inserted into EU integration studies. In relating this evolution, the article examines the conditions that define the type and likelihood of learning and surveys the special issue. The article argues that studying learning in the EU is difficult, but integration requires an understanding of the micro policy processes that learning seeks to address.

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous macro approaches within European integration studies, including some based on intergovernmental negotiations and power relations (Moravcsik, 1993) or convergence in policies (Knill and Lenschow 2005). We assert that such undoubtedly important 'macro' integration approaches will miss the ubiquitous, important EU micro changes. Although the highest political level will address, for instance, carbon dioxide reduction, behind this policy-making are a myriad of 'micro' processes of civil servants and politicians interacting concerning problems, hopes, norms, symbols, instruments, *et cetera*. Understanding European integration requires focusing at the micro level of the individuals and their social interactions. Over time, these exchanges generate changes in information, goals, values, behaviours, structures, policies and outcomes.

These micro processes are the realm of learning theory. Learning in policy analysis can be defined as a process of exercising a judgment based on an experience or some other kind of input that leads actors to select a different view of how things happen ('learning that') and what courses of action should be taken ('learning how' - see May, 1992; Breslauer and Tetlock, 1991). Learning theories vary on what exactly is being learnt: some focus on complex belief change while others on more simple instrumental changes. Learning emphasises change at the level of individuals, but also within the intersubjective process whereby human interaction leads to group/organisation understanding.

This special issue takes stock of learning theories in the EU integration literature and assesses what insights 'learning' has added to our understanding of the integration processes. Political science learning approaches originated from the United States (USA), but seem to have largely halted conceptual development before 1995. Some of these concepts have entered the EU academic discussion, but not in a sustained or

systematic matter. Nevertheless, given the European integration dynamics around 2000 (including enlargement and the governance 'turn' of exploring new instruments), learning and learning-related theories have gained major EU significance. But now, a decade later, have learning approaches resulted in anything more than confusion over terminology?

Addressing learning is not easy because of the widely varying approaches in which it features. Concepts of learning overlap, and there are difficulties in specifying whether or not learning has occurred given the many possible intervening variables and alternative explanations (James and Lodge, 2003; Bomberg, 2007). But there are further difficulties with learning, particularly relating to its foundations: why do actors learn and what conditions prevent or facilitate learning? If crisis and dissatisfaction mostly drive learning, should one expect learning to exist in the many EU policy preparations and decisions occurring away from the public eye (Rose, 1991)?

Although doubts surround 'learning', the main conceptual advantage of learning is its explicit emphasis on change. It underlines that negotiations between states are not merely about redistributing power (zero sum games) but potentially also positive sum games by changing the context and perceptions (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; Schout, this volume). With this interest in evolutionary processes, learning contrasts with rational policy theories in which optimal policy conclusions are derived from static analysis.

The special issue assumes that there are core dynamics that integration studies must examine. This is more important now than ever before. The EU has invested heavily in 'learning' both internally (within the EU) and externally (in relation between the EU and other regional blocks). In 2000, the EU faced several difficulties. The fall of the Santer Commission marked a Commission organisational crisis, a wider EU

legitimacy crisis regarding policies and instruments, and a communication crisis in terms of public involvement. New structures, instruments and organisations – including a reformed Commission, agencies and networks - were needed. The 2004/7 accession's near doubling of EU membership demanded a shift from the traditional - legal - instrument of integration towards learning-oriented instruments such as the open method of coordination (OMC). The turn towards networked-based governance marks a paradigm shift in thinking from networks as second-best options in policy areas where EU competencies failed (Hancher, 1996) towards becoming first-order instruments.

Reviewing the past ten years, the EU has been surprisingly resilient (Schout and Van den Berge, 2009). Although 'macro' reforms faltered or failed with the Lisbon Treaty placed on hold (depriving the EU of institutional innovations) and the referenda failures, new instruments (particularly OMC) have been used *en masse* (Zito *et al.* 2003), and the Commission has been reformed (Kassim, 2008). Whilst the debates about the endurance and precise effects of the reforms continue, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the EU, its organisation and its instruments have not halted (Heidenreich and Zeitlin, 2009; Peterson, 2007; Schout and Van Den Berge, 2009). Different forms of learning have occurred, although academia finds it hard to recognize and conceptualize these developments (particularly OMC, see Scharpf, 2001; Lodge, 2007; Citi and Rhodes, 2007). Exploring the relevance of learning concepts may illuminate the integration process and offer insights into learning in (the EU's) multi-level context. Without this concept, there remains an unsatisfying puzzle about how the EU process has rebounded from its many challenges.

This resilience reflects a number of factors, including leadership, institutional path dependency, protracted global problems that make integration a more attractive

alternative. This issue addresses the less noticed micro level patterns of behavioural change that deserve more visibility in the EU's theoretical toolbox. This volume focuses on the conditions under which EU actors in various decision-making processes learn or do not learn. In asking this question it raises questions about the EU's nature. Most importantly, how well do the EU's positive conditions nurture learning as opposed to the hindrances of the negative conditions? Is the EU system too complex for learning processes to have some tangible, isolatable impact? Moreover, what do the findings say about learning theories more generally - whether, for example, learning in the EU differs from learning in the USA? To assess the degree that the EU system and its member states learn, the authors selected for this issue are all explicitly comparative in their approach, and have been encouraged to look at differences across political systems.

The following section traces the evolution of the political science approaches. The third section examines how learning has been incorporated into European integration theory. The fourth section systematises the questions and the propositions about learning that have been developed in the previous section. Finally the fifth section draws conclusions on the current state of learning literature and gives the issue overview.

LEARNING THEORY STRANDS

A great variety of learning theories has enriched the study of politics. This article focuses on four core threads that are a product of a post-1945 interdisciplinary development, centred heavily but not exclusively in the United States. The first prominent notion of 'learning' came arguably from Deutsch (1963), who incorporated it in his relatively rationalist decision making theory. Learning theories moved into

psychological and sociological processes and motivations largely grounded in the 'behaviouralist turn', which this issue largely follows. This section traces through the threads from the founding US theories to define the basic concepts.

This special issue does acknowledge the growing importance of constructivist approaches in the last decade. They emphasise the change in language and intersubjective communication rather than changes in cognition and accumulation of facts. Thus learning occurs when words are situated in a new and different relationship to one another, giving rise to a new context for understanding (Nedergaard, 2006, 314).

Organisational Learning

Scholars working at the intersection of organisation studies, psychology, political science and public administration and sociology, initiated the pioneering work in political studies' learning theory. Most notably, Herbert Simon harnessed his psychology background to investigate the behavioural patterns of organisations. Emphasising the limits of rationality, the incompleteness of knowledge and the organisation practices imposed on individuals, Simon explored how organisations move beyond individuals' limitations by building structures that guide behaviour. This learning dynamic harnessed knowledge of organisational technology and a greater understanding of the social sciences (Simon, 1961, 246).

Building on Simon's work, various scholars elaborated notions of organisational learning. Cyert and March, together and separately, tackled how organisations learn. Their notable book on firms emphasises short-term adaptation by organisations, the parameters that organisations set to assess their environment, and changes in the rules governing how they search for information (Cyert and March, 1992). Argyris and

Schön (1996) discuss in more detail the learning process where organisations seek to improve their learning capability. Borrowing from Ross Ashby's theories for designing a brain, they break organisational learning into three types: (1) 'organisational inquiry', an instrumental learning that leads to improved task performance, (2) organisational exploration to redefine performance standards and (3) an organisation's ability to enhance its capability for 'single-loop' and 'double-loop' learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996, 20-1). Single-loop learning stresses learning that is instrumental without changing the fundamental organisational values whilst double-loop learning conceptualises that feedback triggers a value change transforming organisation behaviour.

The interaction between the individual and the organisation has remained a critical strand in organisational learning theories. Crossan *et al.* (1999) detail how the transmission process moves from the individual to groups and organisations. While individuals (as opposed to organisations) shape insight and innovative ideas, ideas have to be shared, given intersubjective meaning and then adopted for action, with the ultimate aim of being embedded in the organisation and made routine. Learning involves multi-level interaction between individuals, groups and organisations, but it is important to accept the wider innovation process that occurs for networks beyond one individual organisation. Accordingly individuals intuit patterns based on their personal experience but then must interpret and explain it to others in a way that triggers integrated thinking (i.e. a shared understanding within the group). This learning then is institutionalised within the organisation (Crossan *et al.,* 1999, 524-30).

This communication, integration and routinisation must then happen at the level of the wider network (Knight, 2002, 446-7). This is not a unidirectional, bottom-up process:

organisations do not passively accept learning – they influence the learning of their members and retain layers of past learning (Hedberg, 1981, 6). These insights into organisational learning and network learning are closely linked to EU research on OMC and uploading (Padgett, 2003), but this line of inquiry has not yet been fully developed in terms of organisational learning.

Policy Learning

Building on Deutsch's work, Heclo (1974, 307) raised the concept of 'political learning' in relation to policy changes. In this concept he differentiated between group learning, where organisations internally learn from their experiences, and social learning (encompassing the transformation of ideas). Rather than assuming self-organisation in learning, Heclo emphasises that the injecting of these ideas into a society and its policy-making process requires a 'network of policy middlemen' (311). Heclo also raised the importance of 'non-learning' by acknowledging that policy-makers and institutions may be unwilling or unable to adapt to new information (312). The idea of networks - which appears in most theories either in a more or less explicit fashion - carrying and inserting ideas is an extremely critical dimension to the learning process.

Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework takes Heclo as its starting point, elaborating on the ideational dimension and the policy community dimension (Sabatier, 1988, 130). Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework (ACF) refashions the notion of policy community to argue that, within any given policy subsystem, there are advocacy coalitions, comprising actors with similar core beliefs or values. The ACF separates beliefs according to how fundamental they are to an individual's basic philosophy (Sabatier, 1988, 148-9). The more core the beliefs are to the individual, the more they

are resistant to change. Hall (1993) constructs a similar differentiation of core ideas and instruments.

Diffusion

Moving deeper into the processes of change across space and time, comparative studies have emerged on how ideas and knowledge have diffused across organisations and political systems. Diffusion studies portray the agents of transfer within broader political structures while the knowledge transferred may relate more to social learning (e.g.. paradigms) or lesson drawing (e.g. instruments). The actual process may be rational and voluntary or more coercive (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). Diffusion studies have however mainly treated change as a rational process and have been concerned with the objects of change (whether – not how - objectives, instruments or value change) rather than the process (Bomberg, 2007).

Rural sociologist Everett Rogers's 1962 book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, gave a huge impetus to this study. Rogers defined this diffusion process as one by 'which (1) an innovation (2) is communicated through certain channels (3) over time (4) among the members of a social system' (Rogers, 1983, 10). Most significant for this special issue has been the American scholarship on how individual states have acted as policy innovation laboratories (Walker, 1969; Volden, 2006). Diffusion studies have a long, fruitful history in explaining variation in policy innovation adoption across political systems through examination of the political systems' characteristics and the different diffusion processes (Berry and Berry, 1999; Volden, 2006, 310).

One of the main issues for diffusion theory was specifying the causal forces that led to convergence around particular innovations. Bennett (1991, 220-9) suggested several different explanations for convergence. These processes include convergence through

voluntary emulation or borrowing from other political systems, through interaction, through external actors imposing innovation, and through the entrepreneurship of expert networks (see also Busch and Jörgens, 2005). Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) and others have elaborated this stream of work, emphasising policy transfer and lesson drawing.

International Relations Networks

Cybernetics and cognitive psychology has informed international relations approaches to decision-making for decades: including Steinbrunner's 1974 examination of the decision-making process and Jervis's 1976 study of how perception and misperception influence actors. Ernst Haas' original, path-breaking formulation of neofunctionalism builds on a social learning argument in international relations (E. Haas, 1968, 13). Over time, the focus of the population's loyalty shifts towards the supranational level. The political elite (particularly those in supranational institutions) and transnational interest groups (an implicit network) instigate this shift. Haas' second major statement explores a learning process through which power-oriented states re-orientate their values towards policies that benefit the welfare of groups within and across states (E. Haas, 1964, 47-8); this would now be labelled 'political learning'. The learning and shifts in loyalty originate from changes in ideas about what issues are possible and beneficial, about international co-operation. It involves changes in 'consensual knowledge' in addition to perceptions of self-interest (Cornett and Caporaso, 1992, 238-40). That recognition leads to the scope of integration to expand from one policy area to other related issue areas that could benefit from integration, a process called 'spillover'.

When Haas abandoned neofunctionalism, he focused more on explaining how learning shapes politics and how problems are 'nested' – interconnected with institutions, processes, value systems and other policies (E. Haas, 1991: 84). Central to this argument was the generation of 'consensual knowledge' through communities. This argument takes heavily from the organisational approach of Simon, March and others (Haas, 1990). Haas' most definitive statement on collective learning differentiates adaptation from learning (Haas, 1991, 72-4). Adaptation reflects how organisations change behaviour and adopt new purposes without changing their underlying theories, values and belief systems; learning involves organisations having to behavioural changes that reflect a question of the core theories and values.

Peter Haas (1990) elaborated the epistemic community concept, defining it as a network of professionals/experts that participate in a common set of beliefs about how causal relationships work in any given political area. The later work of Haas and Haas (1995) more explicitly embraces a more constructivist view of how learning and communication works.

Tying the Threads

Learning theory seemed to have reached a plateau before 1995. Several eminent overviews, drawing together the threads in the learning literature, acknowledged both the strengths and the limitations of learning (particularly Bennett and Howlett, 1992, 278-88; see also Argyris and Schön, 1996). Frustrated by the wealth of concepts, they synthesised the learning literature by asking: what is learned, by whom and to what effect? Who learns and who promotes learning is discussed in the next section which outlines conditions for learning.

Table 1 reflects a number of learning overviews circa the early 1990s; it underlines that learning can be double as well as single loop, but also political (leading to maximisation of support), or even non-existent or merely symbolic (mainly related to the 'spinning' of the argument). With this, one can explain the behaviour of decision takers as a combination of social conflict, rational analysis, institutional incentives and symbols (Levitt and March, 1981). This interplay of dimensions makes learning both powerful in producing change and hard to decompose (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; James and Lodge, 2003).

Table 1 differentiates organisational, political and instrumental learning, all of which Ernst Haas would label 'adaptation'. Organisational learning focuses on changes in understanding of the administrative process with resulting organisational change. Lesson drawing encapsulates instrumental/adaptational learning. A different form of single loop learning may involve political actions (trying to please specific audiences with changes in political strategy in order to advance a political idea (Heclo, 1974; May, 1992, 336) and highly symbolic efforts to legitimise actions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The special issue articles are influenced by many of the theoretical threads described above. In order to give the authors some frame of reference, the editor offered Table 1 as a starting point.

The review should not stop at the discussion of learning. A key element of all learning is 'un-learning', where actors subtract particular knowledge which they deem false and/or obsolescent (Argyris and Schön, 1996, 3). 'Unlearning' old lessons and moving away from past successes requires time and effort (Hedberg, 1981, 9). Similarly, all Table 1 categories may reflect flawed/bad learning (e.g. 'competency traps' - see Levitt and March, 1988, 322-3). Learning can enslave and harm (Hedberg,

1981, 4). Hence, learning does not necessarily involve an improved understanding of knowledge and a commensurate improvement in policy.

'Blocked learning' acknowledges that individual learning is not enough. It must permeate the thinking of key decision-makers of the group or organisation to reflect on the group; busy policy-makers tend to stick to routine (Rose, 1991, 11-2). Hence, as some of the articles show, there is a time dimension in learning. Learning may also taper off, but equally learning may take time to build. Judgements about blocked learning therefore need careful consideration.

The reviews also underline that learning is contingent on the conditions so that policy processes reveal different forms of learning and non-learning (Table 1). There must be both a cognitive change of actor understanding, as well as a behavioural adaptation to this new knowledge. Hedberg (1981, 12-3) notes how both relatively unchanged environments and rapidly changing environments with information overload create poor conditions for learning. Where cognitive and behavioural processes fail due to misperception or too comfortable (or too hostile) conditions, no learning is transmitted (Jervis, 1976, 117-216). Rose (1991, 10-3) has stated elegantly that people do not want to learn when they are satisfied. Actors are expected to have limited time, information and other resources; there is no expectation of systematic preference formation and evaluation. Hence, Table 1 summarises types of learning as well as the outcomes.

Table 1 Learning Modes (partly adapted from Bennett and Howlett, 1992)

Learning types		Literature Thread/Authors	Learns What	To What Effect
'Learning'	**Organisational**	Organisational	Process-	Organisational

	Learning	Learning: Simon, Cyert, March	related behaviour and strategy	Change and Political Positioning
	Lesson Drawing (Instrumental Learning)	Policy Learning and Diffusion: Rose, Bennett and Rogers	Instruments	Programme Change
	Social Learning	Policy Learning and International Networks: Heclo, Sabatier, Haas, Hall	Ideas, worldviews	Core Paradigm, Value Shift
	Political Learning; also symbolic learning	May, Heclo; DiMaggio and Powell	Understand preferences of others; sell the argument	Win elections (politicians) or maximise budgets (bureaucrats); to gain legitimacy
	Un-learning	Implicit in most threads but especially organisational learning: Argyris and Schön	Abandonment of particular ideas	Actors seek to substitute with new ideas perceived to be better

'Non learning'	'No' learning	Organisational and Policy Learning: Simon, Rose	No change in cognition and behaviour	Actors in process are satisfied with status quo
	Blocked Learning	Organisational Learning: Crossan, Hedberg	Cognitive change occurs but structures, interests and current worldviews block behavioural change	Learning remains at individual or group level, and is not embedded into organisation and network routines

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION THEORIES AND LEARNING

'Learning' has been a much less specific research topic in EU integration theory. Notable exceptions include Eising (2002), Padgett (2003), Bomberg (2007), Kerber and Eckhardt (2007) and Bulmer *et al.* (2007). This list shows that the explicit attention for learning is fairly new and seems to be increasing (Egan, 2009). Due to developments such as enlargement and the search for new instruments, scholarly attention has been shifting from interest in the EU institutions towards the impact on the Member States (Bauer, Knill and Pitschel, 2007). This, however, does not mean that earlier EU studies have been unrelated to 'learning'. Without striving for

completeness, some of the connections between integration theories and learning are explored below.

Neofunctionalism and learning

Ernst Haas' work, discussed above, is relevant to international organisations generally but the importance of nested issues has particular relevance to the EU and to require management of spill-over effects. The lessons learnt from the financial crisis have led to reinvigorated discussions over the need to interconnect integration in the financial market and the internal market (Larosière Report, 2009). Nested issues create incentives for transnational actors seeking solutions for cross-border problems. Haas' work points to the EU's institutionalised actors who drive change processes forward. He highlights integration networks of elites, drawing crucially from supranational institutions that garner support and credibility from managing spillover processes. Bomberg (2007) similarly views the Commission as being highly skilled 'teachers'.

Elaborating on this idea of institutionalised actors, there are more drivers for change, particularly the rotating presidency that has been a source of 'semi-supranational' leadership alongside the Commission (Schout 2008), as well as the interconnected nongovernmental organisational (ngo) networks (see governance discussion below). The EU's leadership is open and shared across the Commission, Council and EP which implies not only an open system with many points of access but also a great leadership capacity at multiple levels (Haywood 2008).

Some EU scholars have explicitly adopted the epistemic community explanations whilst others have adopted the parallel ACF framework. Verdun (1999, 320-22) emphasises the importance of divergent national interests driving the Delors Committee, and leading to a blueprint for EMU. Zito (2001) studied the behaviour of

epistemic communities in changing EU acid rain policy. Such examples support the argument that epistemic communities shape the EU discourse and form consensual ideas when conditions for a particular issue are complex and full of ambiguous choices. The openness of the EU arena with its multiple member states and institutions does present strong advantages for the agenda setting to reflect learning. Dudley and Richardson (1999) find that the combination of repeated interaction within advocacy coalitions has driven change (see also Parrish, 2003). Particularly important in their study of EU steel policy was the presence of policy problems, the ideas that could be potential solutions, and the presence of multiple leadership roles which introduced and brokered these ideas. Moving beyond these EU characteristics, a discussion emerged whether the EU as a 'laboratory' with its continued and increasing effort to develop co-ordination processes provides an environment to induce adaptive behaviour among administrations based on imported information and insights (Radaelli, 2000).

Diffusion studies

Neofunctionalism highlights the role of EU actors involved in learning either as learners or teachers. 'Diffusion' has centred around a discussion on whether its specific conditions make the EU particularly suitable to policy transfer and diffusion. Arguably the EU, like other complex federal systems, is relatively well suited to the development of new learning ideas (Kerber and Eckardt 2007). Nevertheless, the EU's conditions also create layers of veto points of which oppositional groups can take advantage. Morgan (1997) for example suggests that member state central governments can act as significant constraints to such learning processes. Also Marier (2009) underlines that lessons learned from other countries have proven hard to

implement when major national interests are at stake as seen in pension reform. It is one thing to set the agenda in one stage of the EU decision-making chain, but how one sustains learning and change across a number of levels is a fundamental EU challenge due to interdependencies between policy reforms and administrative reform, and between EU and national reforms (Schout, 2009).

More subtle are the Kerber and Eckardt's (2007) qualifications of the EU's learning capacities. They compare 'laboratory federalism' and the EU's OMC instrument. Laboratory federalism based on competition seemingly has substantial advantages over the EU's OMC centralised system of providing best practice. 'Benchmarks' are a type of optimal policies displaying an implicit preference for convergence while limiting the incentives for states to experiment and compete.

Moving from the broad discussion on the EU's learning conditions, enlargement and the increasing use of OMCs has more or less forced detailed attention for conditions for diffusion. The new Member States having to adapt to the EU's *acquis* and related institutions and the investments in OMC processes have delivered a stream of insights into the favourable conditions for diffusion. First, these studies are focussing more or less explicitly on whether convergence takes place – rather than on learning which is more mutually adaptive (Bomberg 2007). The causalities stimulating diffusion include whether financial support is given in relation to adaptation, the EU capacities to monitor actual implementation, political sensitivities concerning integration, whether pre-existing systems exist (if not, then adaptation is easier) and the type of governance mode (compliance, competition or communication) (Bauer, Knill and Pitschel, 2007).

In terms of isolating conditions, Radaelli (2000) finds evidence for national convergence and policy transfer under conditions where national models provide a

source for transfer but also where EU institutions, particularly the Commission, can manufacture solutions and exercise entrepreneurship. Bulmer *et al.* (2007) studied three EU regulatory regimes in the utilities sector and conclude that policy transfer has been pivotal in the evolution of Europe's utilities in these sectors. Institutional dynamics are particularly significant, with the most hierarchical and institutionalised regime (air transport) providing the most evidence for emulation.

Moreover, the EU diffusion-related theories have generated considerable attention for the importance of the 'shadow of the hierarchy'. The extent to which new Member States incorporate the *acquis* depends partly on the EU capacities to enforce legislation (Bauer *et al.* 2007). Moreover, OMC processes and voluntary cooperation tend to misfire if they are not either strongly guided by Commission leadership (Schout and Jordan 2005) or threat of imposing legislation of soft coordination fails (Héritier and Lehmkuhl, 2008). This raises the question centring on to what extent diffusion theories are about learning or squarely about coercion (Radaelli, 2009).

To understand the true extent of EU policy transfer, Padgett (2003, 228-9) argues that it is insufficient to study how policies are transferred from the member states to the EU ('uploading' of a policy). One must analyse the 'downloading' which is dependent on how well the policy idea fits with domestic institutions and interests and the configuration of the national institutions. Padgett's (2003, pp. 242-3) empirical findings suggest that the EU leads to weaker forms of hybrid transfer. Uploaded policies must first survive the bargaining process and then subsequently be downloaded and adapted to the national level.

This underlines the strengths and the weaknesses of the EU's capacity to diffuse. Policy transfer is more likely to involve labels rather than beliefs. This is in addition to the difficulty of getting policy ideas through the complex 'veto' points of the EU

multi-institutional system. In this process, the adaptation pressures triggered by the European-level policy ideas may redistribute resources and affect the political balance within the domestic constituency; furthermore, the interaction of the national representatives with the EU process may cause the national actors to redefine how they view a problem (Padgett, 2003). This underlines conditions where strong domestic coalitions perceive gains from a policy shift and where the national representatives have more continuous interaction. The EU's system of continuous interaction where the same actors often meet in multiple arenas indicates that the system may be geared towards uploading but face inherent difficulties with downloading.

If one extends the policy transfer analysis to EU influence on other regions, this dynamic may be even more limited. Grugel (2007) studied the impact of EU efforts to export notions of social citizenship to the MERCOSUR region. The actual learning was extremely limited as the South American elites shared very little in the way of social norms (Grugel, 2007, 56-61). Farrell's arguments suggest similar limits in extending diffusion processes to Africa (Farrell, 2009). This confronts the EU with some difficulties as the international UN-based regulatory fora (e.g. for aviation safety) are country based whereas the EU prefers promoting 'regional blocks', but this will only succeed if more blocks such as the EU appear (Schout, 2008). The EU's place at international negotiation tables is therefore conditioned on the prior diffusion of integration experience with its inherent difficulties.

Current EU literature is highly critical towards concepts of policy transfer and convergence (e.g. Chiti and Rhodes, 2007; Lodge, 2007, and Scharpf, 2001, have labelled the learning-based OMC turn in the EU as 'mere talk'). Others see more significant dynamics as the above examples have shown. Yet, if one brings in the time

dimension, we can see major mutual adaptation processes in areas such as consumer policy or competition policy (e.g. Kassim and Wright, 2009). Eising (2002) pointed out that consensus building norms and consensual knowledge lead to policy learning and change may be possible in the latter stages of the EU policy process. In the highly sensitive area of energy liberalisation, routine interaction in the EU's multilevel system has triggered policy learning. The incremental nature of the Council proceedings forced member states to aggregate their preferences and build solutions in a sequential manner while increasing the knowledge of member state representatives about the questions at hand and the consequences of policy change (Eising, 2002, 109-13). Nevertheless, the ambitious Lisbon process seems to have been a failure for a decade, and the 'Cardiff' learning process has simply conflated (Jordan and Schout 2006). In other words, there are successes and failures to report, suggesting that scholars avoid jumping to conclusions.

Governance and learning

Although originating from a different thread, 'EU governance' is closely related to the notion of epistemic communities. The success of the internal market programme and the enlargement from 15 to 27 Member States triggered a profound examination of EU governance. Much of the 'governance turn' from hierarchical steering (legislation) towards particular networks (or communication-based instruments more generally) centres on networks such as OMC and agencies (or 'networked-governance', see Kohler-Koch, 2002, Jordan and Schout 2006). Moving beyond legislation, network-based instruments depict problem-recognition and problem-solving as core elements of policy-making. Networked-governance crosses sub-

national, national, European and international levels and involves a multitude of stakeholders across these levels (Eising and Kohler-Koch, 1999, 5-6).

The EU, with its diffused structure and party structures, is geared to consensus-building governed by persuasion (Kohler-Koch, 2002, 88-89) with the hope that, through knowledge transfer, convergence to the benchmark emerges (Bomberg 2007). However, others are much less concerned with a static form of convergence but see the EU institutions and other actors co-operating and competing in a process of collective learning as they seek support from society. Eberlein and Kerwer (2004) posit that governance, framed in terms of 'democratic experimentalism', can address policy stalemates as actors become exposed to ideas from outside and transform their understanding of their own interests.

Essentially, governance is about *process* – bringing actors together assuming this leads to action but the drivers and conditions for success have garnered little attention. Schout and Jordan (2005) discuss the implicit assumption in governance that networks are self-organising on the basis that actors learn almost automatically because they recognise their interdependence and the value added of mutual adaptation. Ostrom (1986) deducts a list of preconditions for successful self-organisation including small size, a tradition of cooperation and a common culture. This would emphasise the limits of network learning in an increasingly differentiated EU and help to explain why the OMC-type learning has mixed results. It also emphasises the need to start taking the management of networked-governance seriously.

CONCLUSIONS AND SPECIAL ISSUE OVERVIEW

The first conclusion of this review is that the extension of policy analysis into learning theories started in the US and seemed to have reached a plateau in the early 1990s: major reviews of learning theories emerged, concluding that learning has to be decomposed in questions around who learns, what is learnt and under what conditions. As such, learning theories had not become a serious component in European integration studies. However, with the initiation of the governance 'turn' around 2000, integration theories shifted from macro theories towards analysing the micro processes in EU decision-making. Pragmatic considerations following enlargement and a change in preferences ('a paradigm shift', see Schout, 2009) in favour of networks and related learning-driven instruments – mainly OMC – has made learning a major theme on the EU academic and political agendas. The increased differentiation in the EU and swing towards ´new´ governance made it even more important to understand whether and how Member States learn to operate in the more competitive internal market and whether and how they adapt to policies elsewhere in the EU. With this renewed interest in learning theories, the attention increased for conditions for learning and diffusion.

Secondly, there seems to be a mismatch between the extent to which learning instruments are now applied in the EU and our understanding of learning in complex multi-level systems. At the political level, networked-governance banks strongly on the capacities of member states to learn rapidly whilst academic literature is strongly divided over the extent to which member states learn. OMC has been warmly perceived by those claiming that its communication-based instruments are the new preferred instruments. Others suggest these institutions amount to little more than just talk. This special issue however has shown that scholarly literature is trying hard to become more precise regarding conditions for learning and questions about whether

the time dimension of learning has been underestimated – allowing for more time, the EU's abilities to learn may be a source of its resilience.

Thirdly, networks have always played a major role in learning theories. In the EU, however, networks were first less the focus of attention and even seen as a second best option compared to more community approaches to integration in the pre-subsidiarity days. However, with the governance 'turn', networks developed into the top league. With this, learning-related governance theory was equated with self-organisation. Hence, the EU literature had a different emphasis compared to the earlier learning theories that were more concerned with organisational learning and leadership.

Fourthly, although still in an early phase, conditions that influence learning in the EU are becoming clearer. Characteristics of the EU that foster learning include its diversity of Member States locked in repeated interactions and its multiple and multilevel leadership which makes the EU open to new ideas. The EU's operational basis organised in networks (including advocacy coalitions or epistemic communities) offers multiple possibilities to exchange ideas and knowledge. Yet, with its diversity of actors, layers and phases (including uploading, downloading and implementation) the EU also offers multiple obstacles to learning and the implementation. This implies an inherent tension between institutional innovation and path dependence.

In sum, there are those that are equivocal about whether learning is a relevant subject or whether the EU system has substantial advantages for learning over individual states and sub-national regions. Some scholars view diffusion of power across EU institutions and levels as enhancing the possibility for learning as states are forced to consensus whilst other scholars see this diversity as multiplying veto points that block learning and the implementation of lessons learned. Yet, rather than having left it as

debate between the EU as facilitating or frustrating learning, the literature has been identifying the contingencies involved in learning and singling out the leadership provided by the (formal and informal) EU institutions including the 'shadow of the hierarchy'.

Reconsidering learning and taking stock of the current trends, learning now combines longer term perspectives for understanding changes and specification of learning contingencies with clearer distinctions between types of learning. With the differences in nuances between learning, diffusion, governance and lesson drawing, and with the multitude of intervening variables, learning is not developing into an elegant, parsimonious theory. Fortunately, elegance is not a requirement for relevant theories. Understanding European integration beyond crude institutional theories requires working with more differentiated concepts such as 'learning'. What the discussions above and in this special issue however show is that the body of EU learning literature is growing and opening up the change patterns.

Issue Overview

To highlight the insights in learning conditions and the specificities of learning in the EU, the editor explicitly selected authors working with inter- and intra-EU comparisons. The special issue starts with two empirical papers examining the consequences of the EU's key administrative feature, i.e. its multi-level nature and emphasising the difficulty of instrumental learning. *Schout's* article isolates two sets of interdependencies. First, learning at the EU and the national levels are interdependent. In the EU's multi-layered administration, administrative changes at the international level are dependent on the match between learning at EU and at national levels. Secondly, the EU's 'governance learning' is interdependent on its

'instrument learning' and 'organisational learning'. These conceptual and administrative interdependencies underline that in a multilevel system learning needs to develop in parallel at the EU and the national administrative levels, as seen in the implementation failure at the EU level.

Radaelli (2009) examines the nature of learning itself by asking whether analytic approaches to policy formulation, specifically regulatory impact assessment (RIA), enable complex organizations to learn. He distinguishes between types of learning, their micro-foundations, and the implications for knowledge utilization. The article assesses four countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK), controlling for both domestic and multi-level effects. He concludes that, in the case of RIA systems, mutual learning has a high level of symbolic learning due to emulation (to gain legitimacy by trying to appear more like the benchmark countries) and political learning (improved policy salesmanship rather than substantially learning about policies through RIA).

The next two papers gauge how the EU system compares with external systems. *Farrell* (2009) examines the extent to which the European model has been exported to other regional integration projects. The article incorporates a historical institutionalist approach with the policy learning framework. Like Schout and Radaelli, Farrell points to limitations in relation to instrumental learning. Farrell's explanation is largely based on internal and external stabilising power conditions. However, she also points to changes emerging overtime as new actors, particularly NGOs, appear on the scene.

Montpetit (2009) questions whether EU policy processes are particularly conducive to policy learning. His statistical analysis rests on a survey of actors in Europe and North America. Despite claims that the EU involves more learning than the US and that the EU has specific policy styles, Montpetit does not find such differences. Differences in

learning seem to be between policy fields, not between geographical areas. This also speaks to those who are concerned with a legitimacy gap particularly in the EU due to learning-based instruments.

Demonstrating that key learning processes may happen within the EU but without large EU input, *Marier's* (2009) article reveals that, in the area of pension reforms, where the EU member states have retained control, instrumental learning has been highly path dependent. Although European governments have created special public inquiries (such as commissions) to provide an in-depth analysis of pensions policy problems and learning from abroad, substantive learning from abroad has remained very limited.

Picking up the theme of the EU's learning abilities, *Zito's* (2009) article investigates the evolution of two environmental agencies (the European Environment Agency and the England and Wales Environment Agency) that have distinct roles of improving EU environmental performance. Traditional agency theories are based on principal-agent models and examine the ability of agencies to shirk. Zito however looks more at the micro level changes by examining two dimensions of the EU learning process: organisational learning and policy learning. The article provides insights in the subtleties of how both agencies have been able to reformulate their roles by using among others budget reforms and outcomes of evaluations. In line with Montpetit's findings, the EU level does not seemingly offer more learning abilities than the national level.

Egan (2009) discusses the special issue pieces by asking under what conditions does the need for solutions to political and societal problems lead to the transferral of a policy designed for another political system and/or ideas taken from other contexts. She interrogates the use of terminology in the special issue and compares the value

added of the learning approach to other plausible mechanisms for policy diffusion. This discussion piece assesses the extent to which this issue can provide analytic leverage and historical narratives about policy change given the several complementary, yet distinct, notions of policy learning found in this emerging area.

The authors all point to the enormous ambitions of even contemplating the possibility of cross border learning and to the major difficulties and interdependencies involved. Yet they also show that time is an underestimated factor in learning studies which should warn scholars to jump to conclusions about refuting or embracing learning theories. Moreover, they underline that, depending on the areas, changes *are* taking place influenced by shifts in perceptions of problems and solutions. By decomposing the many forces at work, slowly but surely our insights into what drives change in the complex EU integration process increases. Finally, and counter to intuitive and counter claims elsewhere, the EU does not seem particularly better at learning than other administrative systems – although it seems to be relying on the expectation more.

BIOGRAPHY

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