Learning across borders: 
Labour market and 
social policies

The International Social Security Association (ISSA) has always had as one of its missions the exchange of information between member organizations in order to assist them to learn about common challenges and efforts taken to meet them. The International Social Security Review has long been one of the vehicles by which such information has been distributed. It has provided a forum where policy-makers can articulate and explain in a thoughtful fashion their initiatives and their concerns and where academics can raise new issues and throw a critical light upon efforts to meet existing and perceived needs that have already been undertaken. By definition, the content of the Review provides opportunities for comparison and, on many occasions, specific contributions have a comparative component. Because it is directed to a practitioner audience as much as an academic one, contributors feel obliged to make recommendations and, indeed, are encouraged to do so. Moreover, academics working in the area of policy analysis recognize that they are not merely commentators; they are also expected to use their analysis to make suggestions about what needs to be changed and about what more, or what instead, needs to be done.

In this special issue of the Review, the intention is not to generate more information about specific policies, or to compare, assess or criticize these. Rather, it is to look at how information about problems and programmes is acquired and used and how the acquisition of such information contributes to policy-making within countries. Accordingly, this is the first, explicit attempt to use the Review to analyse how and whether learning occurs. The method chosen is the presentation of a number of case studies in specific policy areas that, in some countries, lie beyond the conventional, but far from uniform, frontiers of what may be referred.
to as “social security” — namely, cost-management in hospitals, the integration of disabled people into work, the financing of long-term care for the frail elderly, and the provision of social pensions. The choice of “policy learning and social protection” as the title for this special issue is, therefore, intentional — it being selected to convey the breadth of the selected case studies. A deliberate decision was made to exclude “old-age pensions” as such from this list — this despite the fact that pension policy has been a matter with which the ISSA has been heavily engaged. Also excluded is active labour market policy in general, even if labour market policies for the disabled are handled in one of the specific contributions. The leaving out of these two subjects is justified on the grounds that policy learning and policy transfer have been studied quite intensively with respect to each one of them. However, precisely because much of the learning about learning involves pensions and labour market policy, both feature extensively in this introductory article.

This introduction is divided into three parts. Part 1 provides an overview of the genesis of policy learning, much of it dealing with the late nineteenth century that saw, inter alia, the establishment of the Permanent International Committee on Social Insurance (Comité permanent international des assurances sociales — CPIAS), a forerunner of the ISSA. Part 2 offers a more substantial discussion of what policy learning does or might involve. Here the role of ideas is explored, their importance and how they are disseminated. This, in turn, leads to a closer examination of the motives of teachers and of learners. Part 3 looks at the limitations of the learning process and concludes by asking, and trying to answer, the question of what successful learning might involve.

Policy learning — its heritage

Academic books and articles that either contained the term “policy learning” in their title or were primarily concerned with such learning first became widely current at the start of the 1990s (Bennet, 1991; Bennet and Howlett, 1992; Rose, 1991, 1993). These studies attempted to conceptualize what such learning meant, where it was occurring and why. Many were, simultaneously, concerned with the related issue of policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000). Frequently, the implication was that, if an example was available, and if it appeared to satisfy policy needs, it could be replicated elsewhere, either more or less in its entirety or, more often, with appropriate modifications.

The interest in learning grew out of, and was intimately related to, a much older academic interest in comparative studies. Social scientists in any one country had long been interested in what was being done elsewhere and many had developed particular relationships with another country, or group of countries, and thus were able to contrast approaches (Wilensky et al., 1985). Moreover, they
were seldom shy of making judgments and prescriptions — usually in their “con-
cluding comments”. The presumption of comparative research was very much that
there was something to be learnt form others. There was also the presumption
that some elements of the approach of others could be taken over. In other words,
comparative social research was rarely, if ever, conducted in a vacuum. And, on
this basis, it is also fair to suggest that many analysts had been participating in the
policy learning process long before it had been recognized and named as such.
Here, one is reminded of Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who, when his phi-
losophy lesson degenerates into a basic lesson on language, is both surprised
and delighted to learn that he has been speaking prose all his life without knowing
it:

Par ma foi! Il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j’en susse rien (Act
2, Scene 4).

However, one can go back well over a lifetime to find cases of political scientists
engaging in drawing lessons from elsewhere in an attempt to suggest what might be
done in their own jurisdictions. Aristotle was doing it over two thousand years ago
when, in his *Politics*, he looked at the governing systems of Sparta, Crete and
Carthage for examples of “excellence” from which his native Athens might learn
(*Politics* — Book II). Perhaps better known was the modernization exercise of Meiji
Japan. In an effort to bring their country into a position where it was able to
compete militarily and economically with Europe and the United States, Japan’s
rulers sent out expeditions to look for “what works” and tried to transfer or adapt
this to build up equivalent institutions and practices at home (Westney, 1987). Not
only were they interested in how to organize an army (Germany), a navy (the United
Kingdom) or a postal service (the United States), they modelled elements of civic
codes and social assistance provision from what they had seen in Germany and
France (Campbell, 1992).

By the later part of the nineteenth century, when policy-makers became con-
cerned with “the social problem”, and thus “social policy” began to exist in its
own right, the question of how different countries were dealing with the poor
became an object of attention. The poor and “the labouring classes” were often
inseparable, and the social problem was thus intimately linked with unemploy-
ment, labour unrest and wage regulation. In the final years of the nineteen
century and the early years of the twentieth century, the United Kingdom (UK)
government initiated a series of inquiries — notably the Royal Commission on
Labour (1890-92), the Report on Agencies and Methods for Dealing with the
Unemployed (1893) and the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws (1906-09).
These included reports from embassy staff abroad, special correspondents and
even study trips by members of their secretariats on practices and policies
in Europe, north America and Australasia, and, on occasion, even further afield.
In 1907, the UK Board of Trade sent out a staff member to examine minimum
wage setting in Australia (Harris, 1972; Ritter, 1986; Hennock, 1987; Whiteside, 1993).\(^1\)

The British trend was hardly unique. Early experiments with voluntary unemployment insurance in the Swiss cantons of Berne and St Gall were successfully adapted in the Belgian cities of Ghent and Liege and in some 15 German cities by the early twentieth century, and the French and Danish national governments subsidized such systems from 1905 and 1908, respectively (Whiteside 1993). The social policy reforms in Germany were widely discussed throughout Europe and influenced policy-makers and policy actors in contiguous countries such as the Netherlands and Austria as well as in Scandinavia and Hungary (Kuhnle, 1978, 1981). Italian sickness insurance legislation was constructed in the early twentieth century as a synthesis out of earlier French and Belgian laws. The German government repaid British interest in its social insurance reforms and closely monitored the National Insurance system that was set up in the UK in the years immediately prior to the First World War (Ritter, 1986; Hennock, 1987).

In the years after the Second World War, many civil services established links with their counterparts across the world. Sometimes these contacts were based upon colonial heritage — in the case of the UK with many of its “dominions” — or as part of a reconciliation process — between France and Germany, and between Japan and the United States. Such links involved secondments and exchanges of documentation and enabled a passing-on of experiences, on a more or less regular and formal basis, that fed into the policy-making process. The building up of what is now the European Union (EU) contributed to this process of secondment and exchange by bringing civil servants in Member States into regular contact with one another. Although social policy competencies remained with national governments, opportunities were created to facilitate mutual learning (Casey, 2005a, 2009).

Under the terms of the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, and with respect to labour market policy, such learning was codified for the Member States of the EU, and a reporting process on policy developments was made mandatory. The so-called “Luxembourg process”, which was established by that treaty, was followed by a series of further procedures covering various elements of social protection, notably pensions, health and long-term care, and poverty reduction/promotion of social inclusion. Although participation in these further procedures — known as the “Lisbon process” after the European Council at which it was agreed — differs from participation in the “Luxembourg process” in that it is not treaty-based and so, strictly speaking, is voluntary, the activities under, and outputs from, both processes are similar. Predating the initiatives of the EU, although providing a

\(^1\) Also of note are visits to Australia by reformers like Beatrice and Sydney Webb and to Germany by the young William Beveridge (of the 1942 Beveridge Report) and by Lloyd George (the finance minister who introduced age pensions into the UK in 1908).
template for some of them, were the activities of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). That organization, too, served as an information clearing-house, bringing, primarily, civil servants together to discuss common concerns and issuing reports and standardized statistics that allowed those wishing to see what others were doing to have easy access to basic facts. The EU’s “open method of coordination”, which brings together the Luxembourg and Lisbon “processes” and facilitates study visits, and the OECD’s reviews in matters of employment as well as social policy, are designed to assist national policymakers to profit from participation in a wider community. Exposure to a wide palette of experiences is intended to assist them in the formulation of strategies and responses (Casey and Gold, 2005).

Thinking about policy learning

Simultaneous with an interest in comparing (social) policies and in drawing lessons from these comparisons has been an interest in how policies have been diffused. Much of this interest originated in the United States and dates back at least to the late-1960s (Walker, 1969). Analysts were initially concerned with between-country rather than within-country dissemination, although this made sense in a nation that consisted of a large number of federal states, each with considerably autonomy. Questions were asked about the conditions that favoured the diffusion of particular approaches, structures and practices and about the mechanisms by which the understanding of these were spread. Although initial studies referred to policies other than those that were “social”, by the mid-1970s social security policies — when they were established or expanded by individual countries — had, themselves, become the subject of attention (Collier and Messick, 1975; Orenstein, 2008).

The first attempts to develop a broader conceptual framework of the influence that experiences in one jurisdiction could have on policy in another came in the early 1990s when a succession of social scientists formally asked such questions as what is policy learning?, what convergence is and why does it occur? and who learns what from whom? A veritable research industry developed.2

Standing back both from the experiences of history and from the plethora of literature that has emerged in the last forty years or so, it becomes clear that there is a need to concentrate on three specific subjects — namely, ideas, teaching and

2. One example was a programme promoted by the UK Economic and Social Research Council under the title “future governance”, in which the author was involved. This initiative, which ran in the early years of the current decade, was predicated on recognition that “Governments increasingly seek to adapt ideas and practices developed outside their jurisdictions to address domestic public policy problems” and sought to “examine how lessons can be drawn, and have been drawn, from cross-national experience”. It supported some 30 projects across areas as diverse as taxation, housing, social insurance, employment, prisons policy, fisheries management, environmental protection, education, public health, and telecommunications regulation. See www.futuregovernance.ac.uk.
learning. With respect to each of these issues, it is necessary to examine actors, motives and mechanisms. Only then is it possible to ask questions about what “learning” can contribute to policy-making and about how, and when, exposure to external experience can add value either to the formulation of responses to situations already experienced or to the development of superior approaches to challenges that are foreseen.

The diffusion of ideas

When explaining how policies are learnt about and how they are emulated, a number of themes are brought into the discussion. It is commonly agreed that policy learning is encouraged if policy-makers face similar challenges. If they recognize they are not alone, they tend to look at others in the same or a similar predicament for ideas. It is also often argued that policy-makers look for ideas to jurisdictions with which they feel some commonalities — often in terms of the level of economic or political development, but also in terms of normative structures. Some commentators point to geographical contiguity as relevant — suggesting that one might more readily turn to immediate neighbours as a source of ideas. Yet others point to the size of a jurisdiction as important. Larger, well-resourced jurisdictions have the opportunity to experiment, whilst smaller, less well-resourced jurisdictions can profit from their efforts. Lastly, the status of a country is seen as relevant. Some countries are seen by others as exemplars that, almost by definition, are able to offer solutions. Many of these explanations for when and why learning occurs are overlapping. Few, if any, are ever proposed as determinant on their own. Nevertheless, almost all explanations contain elements that encompass a notion of hierarchy. This hierarchy might involve the definition of the challenge itself. It might also encompass the notion of “core” and “periphery”, or of “developed” and “developing”. When it does, the suggestion is that it is the ideas of the core, or the developed, that are picked up by the periphery, or the developing (Jones-Finer, 2005).

Whatever the validity of this thesis, it also has to be recognized that the reverse holds. Attempts to propagate reforms to pension systems that appeal to the example of the Chilean pension reform of 1981 have been referred to as promoting “technology transfer in reverse” (Casey, 2005a), whereby a policy that was put into practice in an emerging market economy was advocated as a model for fully-developed countries. Similarly, a considerable body of social policy reformers in developed countries have been suggesting that, as far as care of the frail elderly is concerned, there are valuable lessons to be learnt from the countries of south-east Asia where the family takes on a substantial role and, thus, the state is not burdened excessively (most recently, WEF, 2009). Poly-clinics, once associated with Eastern Europe, are back in favour in Western Europe (Imison, Naylor and
Maybin, 2008). Recently, micro-finance institutions from Bangladesh have been seen as offering examples of how the poor in New York or Glasgow might have access to basic finance (Pimlott, 2008; Daily Star, 2009). And to underline how the phenomenon of the core looking to the periphery is not new, the case of Britain looking for possible lessons from the labour relations practices of its Australian colonies at the end of the nineteenth century should not be forgotten.

If the discussion is conducted in terms of hierarchies, it is also important to recognize that the diffuser of ideas might be not countries but institutions. In the eyes of some analysts, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are “the new colonial powers”. In this respect, the role of the World Bank in propagating particular forms of pension reform — particularly those involving mandatory individual accounts — has been much commented upon. The International Labour Organization (ILO), often in tandem with the ISSA, has also played an important role, although that role has tended to be more defensive and has emphasized basic entitlements and principles of income replacement. In the area of labour market policy, a leading position was established by the OECD, whose “Jobs Strategy” expounded the value of labour market deregulation in the early 1990s and provided an impetus to the EU’s “Employment Strategy” later in the decade (Casey, 2004, 2009). The latter strategy contained elements of a counterweight to the former, in so far as it gave a greater role to active labour market policies and, subsequently, tried to show how flexibility might be complemented with security, something it did by endorsing and actively marketing the concept of “flexicurity”.

It is not only the IFIs or intergovernmental organizations that have sought to express views about what policies are needed and how policies should be reformed. Major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and bodies representing organized labour or business interests are also active in this way. They, too, serve as information clearing-houses for their membership and keep them up-to-date with what is happening across their worlds. Think-tanks are also seen as potentially influential. Analysts of these have often talked of “policy entrepreneurs” — individuals who seize upon particular initiatives and sell these hard to potential clients (Kingdon, 1984; Stone, Maxwell and Keating, 2001). Such entrepreneurs might well work in conjunction with IFIs and intergovernmental bodies, for whom they are attractive as purveyors of concrete experience who can help convince others to follow their lead.3 Discussion of policy entrepreneurs often goes hand in hand with discussion of “epistemic communities” (Haas, 1992). The members of these “hold a common set of causal beliefs and share notions of validity based on internally defined criteria for evaluation, common policy

3. Examples can be found in the field of pension reform — José Piñera (former Chilean Secretary of Labour and Social Affairs) — and the improvement of “workability” — Juhani Ilmarinen (formerly of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health).
projects, and shared normative commitments”, and, through their activities, they help policy-makers define their interests, formulate policies and see the implications of a particular set of actions and of alternatives to these.

The internet has greatly enhanced the ability to distribute information about policy initiatives, and international organizations have made extensive use of it. Thus, the European Union makes freely available the National Action Plans on employment, the National Strategy Reports on pensions and the Actions Plans on social inclusion that have been produced by its Member States, together with the regular updates to these. Equally, the World Bank produces a Primer on pension reform. The ISSA has reoriented itself to stress the way it can make the experiences of countries in which it has members more accessible. However, if technology has changed the way in which ideas are disseminated, forums for dissemination have a long history. The precursor of ISSA — the Permanent International Committee on Social Insurance — grew out of an International Congress on Industrial Accidents held on the occasion of the Paris Exhibition of 1889 (ISSA, 1986). From this conference the Permanent Committee started publishing a regular Bulletin that contained details of legislative proposals. International exhibitions provided opportunities for meetings and also for making publicity for particular approaches.

**The teaching of policies**

Policy entrepreneurs are teachers. They are also, by their nature, confident teachers. However, the term “teaching” can be contrasted with the term “educating”. The former suggests instilling ideas into, and directing the progress of, recipients. The latter implies drawing something out of recipients and recognizing the contribution that they can make. “Teaching” implies a relationship of hierarchy; “education” more a relationship of equals.

The existence of a hierarchical relationship implies that the teacher determines the content of the process. Teachers have as their objective that a specific lesson be learnt. With respect to policy, teachers might well be interested in showing why a particular measure or programme is likely to prove effective. They might also be interested in showing that a particular way of thinking about how societies and actors within it operate offers the most credible framework for analysis and evaluation. A study of one of the major elements of the learning component of the EU’s

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4. This definition is taken from Edward Cunningham of MIT.
5. The author of *A Guide to worker insurance in the German Empire*, a Dr. Zacher, that was produced in English and French as well as German for the 1893 World Exhibition in Chicago, and a British civil servant, William H. Dawson, who in 1890 had written a report *Bismarck and state socialism: An exposition of Social and Economic Legislation in Germany since 1870*, arguing for learning from what Germany had done, might rank as early examples of “policy entrepreneurs”.
Employment Strategy showed how, for at least some Member States, their participation — either as a “host” with a programme that was put on display, or as a “guest” supposedly viewing that programme — was merely a means to show that they had adopted what they were convinced was the “best” practice (Casey and Gold, 2005).

Whilst those who adopt a teaching role are not necessarily concerned with advocating a policy transfer, and so are not always trying to encourage those they are teaching to copy directly a particular programme, most have in mind at least a “model”. To the extent that they have the authority, either through status or access to resources, they are able to encourage adoption of their approach. Where this occurs, it is possible to talk of “coercive learning”. To understand how such learning can occur, it is helpful to think in terms of “carrots” (rewards) and “sticks” (punishments) that teachers might have at their disposal. In most cases, teachers prefer to dispense carrots rather than wield sticks, and so the former are addressed first.

An important reward is technical assistance. Such assistance takes a number of forms. It can involve access to specialist advice and consultancy. It can also involve help with capacity building, whereby capacity encompasses organizational and delivery structures, and it can include staff training and the purchase and set-up of IT systems. It can even involve assistance in explaining reform programmes to a wider audience, be this key political actors or the public in general. The World Bank, as part of its pension reform programme, has been an important disburser of such assistance. Both the World Bank and the ILO have their own training institutes where courses laying out broad approaches to perceived challenges are held. The European Union provided extensive assistance to accession countries of Eastern Europe in the later 1990s and the early part of the 2000s via its PHARE programme, with the emphasis being on helping them reorganize and restructure labour market administrations and the delivery of social assistance. ISSA provides extensive training primarily via technical meetings, sometimes in conjunction with the ILO, whilst the latter offers its own consultancy services.

Much technical assistance is provided free or on a cost-recovery basis. Where capital investments are required, a contribution from the country concerned is expected. The World Bank is also able to disburse loans, often under the general heading of facilitating administrative reform. Pension reforms of the sort advocated by the Bank can often involve substantial “transition costs”, but meeting such costs — via a loan — has not been an activity in which it has been explicitly involved (see Andrews, 2006). On the other hand, it has to be recognized that the use made of loans — whether long-term, such as provided by the Bank, or shorter-term, such as made available by the IMF — is not always easy to monitor. This is especially likely to be the case where the loans are not tied to “hard” projects, such as the improvement of the physical infrastructure, but rather to “soft” projects such as those

6. This term is an extension of the term “coercive transfer” used by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000).
dedicated to “administrative reform” or to assistance with “economic stabilization”. It also has to be recognized that being seen to make reforms in line with a more general policy direction that is favoured by the disburser, even if the particular reforms have not been recommended, allows the recipient to show its credibility (Stiglitz, 1998). Being able to show such credibility facilitates access to loans for other purposes. Moreover, being seen to be making reforms in the right direction brings access to more than mere financial resources. For example, adaptation and modernization of employment and social protection systems was part of the progress eastern European countries were expected to make in order to gain admittance to the European Union. Being accepted as a “member of the club”, or being recognized for “making progress”, can be an important reward in its own right.7

Rewarding, through “naming”, can be contrasted with penalizing, through “shaming”. Here, a jurisdiction is singled out for not having met expectations or targets. Shaming is used less frequently by teachers. Reports on progress under the European Employment Strategy tend to pick out cases of countries that have achieved progress in some particular area, even if it is apparent that the same countries have achieved much less progress in others. However, the IMF tends to be more critical of countries’ performances in its reviews, whilst the macroeconomic coordination process of the EU not only encourages criticism but also permits sanctions to be imposed on Member States whose performance is judged to be particularly deficient — even if, in practice, this seldom happens.8 Reviews produced by the OECD can contain criticism, but such criticism is a “negotiated process” insofar as reports have to be cleared with the member governments concerned before publication.

Influenced by developments in “new public management”, “benchmarking” of performance has become increasingly important. The OECD, the European Commission and the United Nations excel in being able to present “standardized”, or more or less standardized, data on a wide number of social and employment indicators, as well as on the more widely quoted macro-economic indicators. At one level, benchmarking is neutral. It merely permits actors to compare their position relative to others. Nonetheless, implicitly, benchmarking provides rewards by showing a high position and punishes by showing a low one. Moreover, the construction of indexes is not always a neutral exercise, and the constructors can use them to help steer those being rated in particular directions. Developing countries

7. For an example of a pension reform that was made, at least partly, in order to emphasize “respectability”, see Casey and Dostal (2008).

8. The “Maastricht process” set up under the Stability and Growth Pact of 1997 was revised, and effectively relaxed, in 2005 after certain large Member States were clearly seen to be breaching the limits it set on the size of fiscal deficits. Before that, a number of smaller Member States had been issued with a formal warning of being in breach, but the sanctions on them that the Pact permitted had never actually been applied.
have recently complained of benchmarking, or “complementary multilateral methods”, being used “oppressively” by the developed countries during the World Trade Organization’s services negotiations (Khor, 2005).

Learning about policies

If teachers have motives, so, too, do learners. Policy-makers are continually confronted with challenges and with problems, and they search for solutions to these. One source of a solution is to find out what others facing similar challenges or problems have done. Here policy-makers can rely upon ad hoc contacts and relationships, or they can set up more formal networks. Learning from others might be learning within one country — and this might be especially relevant where programmes are the responsibility of sub-national governments, as is often the case with social assistance. Participation in, or membership of, international bodies brings access to wider experience and international bodies see as one of their tasks the facilitation, indeed the encouragement, of information exchange that assists learning.

In developing solutions, policy-makers want to know what works. In addition, they often want to be able to justify the proposal they are making by showing that others have done something similar and done it with some success. Many policy-makers talk of the importance of being able to make “evidence-based” judgements about what to do or what not to do. However, gaining evidence about the effectiveness of social and employment programmes is inherently difficult. Programmes can be evaluated, but whilst some evaluation can be made as the programme is being rolled out, much evaluation is made at a relatively late stage. By then, it is too late to change the programme (Rose, 2005). Experiments, “demonstration projects” and pilots have a relatively long tradition in the United States, especially with respect to labour market and welfare reform measures, but such experimentation is much newer in Europe. Moreover, the impact of some programmes might take a very long time to be seen. Examination of the experiences of others can be thought of as a substitute for experimentation. Indeed, policy learning has been described as a form of “prospective evaluation” (Rose, 2005). And as should now be clear, such prospective evaluation is not new. In the words of one commentator, “by the end of the nineteenth century, Australia and New Zealand had come to be seen as laboratories of social reform” (Whiteside, 1998).

Learning might involve gaining information about what sort of measures to initiate in order to respond to a particular problem or challenge, or about how to adapt existing measures to make them work better. The various “mutual learning” programmes established in the European Union serve, in the first instance, this purpose. Learning might also involve gaining access to wholly new ideas. In developing countries and countries experiencing transition, there often exists relatively
little domestic capacity for the generation and development of specific measures, let alone for thinking about longer-term challenges and new approaches to these and to existing problems. Participation in networks, in conferences and in training courses that involve outsiders with “expertise” and “wider experience” enhances domestic capability. It also provides arguments that policy-makers can use to justify the propositions that they make (Rose, 2005; Orenstein, 2008).

Learning might, however, also be undertaken for more opportunistic reasons. It might be undertaken to gain support for preconceived approaches. Examples from which to “learn” are chosen selectively. Many newly appointed social ministers and politicians taking on a social policy brief have made trips to the state of Wisconsin in the United States to study the welfare (social assistance) programmes. They do this to provide credibility for their own arguments to reduce benefits and/or impose conditionality. Closely related to such “learning” is the wish to use what has been learnt to justify proposals that are recognized as unpopular. Policy-makers can hide behind the example of others, showing that, distasteful as a measure might be, others are pursuing it too. Being tutored is part of a blame-avoidance strategy (Rose, 2005; Orenstein, 2008). Last, being seen to be willing to participate in a learning process might be recognized as part of the price of belonging to a club, membership of which is valued. Some of those who attended reviews of other countries’ measures arranged under the Luxembourg or Lisbon processes seem to have been doing so primarily for this reason and not because they had any great interest in the measures being presented (Casey and Gold, 2005).

Limitations and possibilities for learning

Learning from others is presented as being beneficial to the policy-making process. Those who study and/or advocate learning are often keen to try to show what the conditions are for successful learning to take place. Their question could, however, be answered by turning it around and asking why it is that successful learning seldom takes place.

A close examination of an institutionalized learning process — that organized under the European Employment Strategy — revealed a long list of shortcomings that limited anything being learnt by anybody or, if something had been learnt, the impact this had on domestic policy-making (Casey and Gold, 2005). One of the striking findings was how limited participation in the learning programmes actually was. It has been argued that policy learning should involve a wide range of learners — from senior policy administrators to politicians, to deliverers, to experts, to

9. An example is the visit of the newly-appointed Social Minister of the state of Hessen, whose first act on her appointment was such a visit (see Harms, 2001). The government of which she was a part claimed its subsequent reform of the social assistance legislation was based upon the Wisconsin model (Hessicher Landtag, 2004).
critics and even to recipients/clients. However, the process examined excluded all of these groups but two — relatively senior administrators and experts. The “social partners” — who often have an important role in implementation at workplace level — are not allowed to take part. The European anti-poverty learning programme is similarly limited with respect to who can be learners — except here it is NGO representatives who are not allowed to take part (Casey, 2005b). Those people who are allowed to participate are expected to report back to their national organizations, supplementing the summary report and any background information distributed in advance with any comments and observations they might have. In fact, formal reporting back seems to be limited. In many cases, the relevant documents are merely filed.

It might be reasonable to argue that too many learners participating in any one learning event also makes the experience cumbersome. However, the European programmes are subject to financial constraints that limit the number of events as well as the number of participants per event. On top of this, national administrations are often reluctant to spare relevant staff for more than a minimum period, whilst overworked staff might have little opportunity to engage in follow-up work and efforts to communicate their experiences to others, however convinced they might be. Here, it is to be borne in mind that the resource intensity of learning is the same regardless of the size of the learning country. The European Union consists of countries with populations of vastly different size and vastly different per capita income (Casey, 2005a, 2009).

As frustrating to learning as a lack of resources is the attitude to learning that participants in the process sometimes have. It has already been suggested that teaching and learning might be undertaken for motives that are questionable. Furthermore, it is clear that, in some countries and at some times, policy-makers and policy actors are reluctant to be seen to be learning because to be seen to be taking lessons from others indicates a deficiency of their own and their country’s capacity. At worst, it might also appear as a surrender of sovereignty. The provision of welfare to its citizens is a source of legitimacy for the nation state that is given up unwillingly (Ferrera, 2005). The fact that policy-makers and policy actors are reluctant to admit to the influence of foreign lessons also makes it difficult to trace whether learning did take place, even if there were opportunities for this to have occurred. Policy-makers have an interest in declaring ideas and solutions to be their own. At best, they might point to what is going on elsewhere as confirming the rightness of their own approach.

On top of this, some policy-makers or actors do not think that they actually have anything to learn at all. It has already been pointed out that some learners participate in such a process in order to teach. Many more are not convinced that they can learn. The arguments they use are those that reinforce suggestions that the welfare states of most countries are “path dependent” — each has grown up with its own
momentum and gradually developed institutions and norms that are specific to it. Each country is sui generis. In so far as it is, indeed, sui generis, the ability of policy-makers or actors to draw lessons and to try to apply them is problematic. Once again, the question of “transferability” raises its head.

Transferability requires that context be examined. Here, “context” refers to institutions and practices into which a new initiative is required to fit. These institutions and practices can be relatively specific, but they can also be quite general. For example, attempts to draw lessons form the German apprenticeship system require not only an understanding of complementary structures, such as vocational schools and chambers of commerce, in which that system is embedded, but also of cultural attitudes and attitudes to how young people should equip themselves for the world of work (Rose, 2005). Equally, attempts to draw lessons on how to provide care for frail elderly people that place emphasis on the family, and that see south east Asian practices as offering an example, assume value structures that are not only potentially alien to the societies for which they are being advocated but are also becoming increasingly unsustainable in some of the countries where they are supposedly found (Casey, 2008).

That context counts was recognized by Aristotle. In the words of one commentator (Clayton, 2005), he makes it clear that

when considering whether a particular piece of legislation is good or not, it must be compared not only to the best possible set of arrangements but also [to] the set of arrangements that actually prevails in the city. If a law does not fit well with the principles of the regime, although it may be an excellent law in the abstract, the people will not believe in it or support it and as a result it will be ineffective or actually harmful.10

Understanding context also explains why, however keen policy entrepreneurs were back in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many of the grander notions that they brought back from Australasia or Germany were not adopted in their home countries. The social insurance systems of Germany, with compulsory contributions, fitted neither with the voluntary institutions that had grown up in Britain or Denmark or Sweden, nor with the intermediate organizations that had grown up in the Netherlands, nor with the principles of subsidiarity that were being developed in Catholic Europe.

10. Here, the reference is not only to Book II but also to Book IV. In the latter (1289a1), we find:

Any change of government which has to be introduced should be one which men, starting from their existing conditions, will be both willing and able to adopt, since there is quite as much trouble in the reformation of an old constitution as in the establishment of a new one, just as to unlearn is as difficult to learn.
The ingredients of successful learning

To understand how learning might be successful, it is useful to go back to the distinction between teaching and education. For learning to contribute to the policy formulation process, those in the teaching role have to be able to assist in developing understanding of the examples under study and, as importantly, of their context. At the same time, they have to respect the knowledge of those who are learning. The relationship has to be one of equals, whereby mutual — and the term “mutual” is to be stressed — learning is facilitated. Such learning is more likely to occur when the process is voluntary. It is important to avoid that learning becomes over-institutionalized or potentially coercive. The motives for participation in learning by all involved parties should be clear.

Voluntary learning that involves a mutual exchange is more likely to involve a willingness to discuss mistakes and failures as well as successes. It is almost a banality to say that as much can be learnt from the former as from the latter, but it is also noticeable that the former never enter the agenda of the sort of institutionalized learning processes that abound in Europe. There, in particular, the abundance of “good practice” is overwhelming. However, good learners must be willing to ask about problems and failures, and they must be persistent in their questioning. At the same time, good teachers must be prepared to answer these questions. They must also be willing to present the failures of their own initiatives.

Yet more importantly, learning should be an adventure. Although it is often difficult to transfer programmes or approaches, neither learners nor teachers should become paralysed by the existence of “path dependency”. There are breakpoints and there are opportunities for radical transformation. Good teaching and good learning is about identifying these opportunities. Indeed, this is the role of real entrepreneurs. They see what might be, as well as what is. Showing what might be, as well as what is, is what good teachers do. Equally, seeing what might be, as well as what is, is also the moment when learners obtain the greatest satisfaction.

As much as consisting of acquaintance with and the dissemination of particular measures, programmes or approaches, policy learning should involve the transmission and exchange of ideas. Successful learning procedures are those that create the space where ideas can be introduced, examined and challenged.

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