

11.800, Knowledge in the Public Arena: The Uses and Abuses of Research
Professors Xavier de Souza, Frank Levy, and Martin Rein
Session 9

Action Learning and Practice

- I. Introduction
 - a. Diffusion of innovation: innovations are practices, not theories.
 - b. Otherwise not much discussion about practice
 - c. Highlight: theories of practice
- II. "Knowledge for Action"
 - a. Why is knowledge unlikely to become actionable?
 - i. Requirements for actionable knowledge
 1. what skills are required to produce it?
 2. what contextual conditions are necessary to maintain it?
 - ii. Example:
 1. Mayor Goode's delayed reaction to the 1985 MOVE disaster.
 2. Kurt Lewin: practitioner(?) who produces actionable knowledge
 - a. Four themes:
 - i. Integrated practical theory
 - ii. Designed research by framing the whole and then differentiating the parts
 - iii. Produced constructs that could be used to generalize and understand the individual cases
 - iv. Concern for developing a better world.
 - b. Why important to grapple with Model I and Model II learning for researcher who seeks change:
 - i. Single Loop Learning vs. Double Loop Learning
 1. Single loop corrects individual behavior
 - a. corrections have tendency to fail
 2. Double loop learning
 - ii. Model I values:
 1. Achieve purpose
 2. Maximize winnings (minimize losing)
 3. Suppress negativity
 4. Behave rationally
 - iii. Model I action strategies:
 1. Advocate position
 2. Evaluate thoughts and actions of others
 3. Attribute causes for what you are trying to understand
 - iv. Model II values:
 1. Valid information
 2. Informed choice
 3. Vigilant monitoring of implementation
 - v. Model II Action strategies:
 1. Advocate, evaluate, attribute
 2. Process more transparent to encourage inquiry and testing
 - vi. Need Model II to get to Double Loop Learning
 - c. Issues:

- i. Moving to Opportunity
 - 1. Practitioner backlash against theory: it will never work, need flexibility
 - 2. Tension around scientific need for control over experiment, experimental treatment
 - ii. Are local knowledge and theory in use the same thing? How are they related?
 - 1. How do you practice theory developed in one context in another context?
 - a. Forming connections within network that works at local context but allows translation for broader learning (Communities of Practice)
 - b. Inductive vs. deductive reasoning:
 - i. Inductive: local knowledge
 - ii. Deductive reasoning: theoretical knowledge
 - c. Is local knowledge always good?
 - i. People don't just know things, they have theories about the way the world works
 - 1. Shoulds, as well as hows and whys
 - 2. Sometimes this is problematic
 - 3. Want to learn from people's experience, but also want to challenge their assumptions
 - 4. If you always value experience, never give opportunity for learning
 - 2. What kind of knowledge can be actionable?
 - a. Why hasn't space syntax been taken up in America?
 - i. Skills: need to learn new software
 - ii. Context: land is cheaper in the U.S., degree of precision matters more in Europe, land-use economics
 - 3. Chris Argyris is a psychologist looking at organizational change at a micro level.
 - a. Planning traditions: social learning tradition at a micro-level
 - b. Leading change in organizations: more prescriptive writings with more psychological observations
 - i. *Loss and Change*: you never have change without also experiencing a loss
 - 4. Formal education vs. working in the world
 - a. *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schoen
 - b. "Teaching Smart People How to Learn," article by Argyris
 - i. Encouraging reflection and humility,
 - ii. Leaders attached to their theories, not wanting to look uninformed in front of peers.
- III. Snyder/Briggs, "Communities of Practice"
 - a. Communities of practice: action networks that cross sectors/boundaries

- i. What do they add to the concept of actionable knowledge:
 - 1. Flexible/adaptive ways of addressing complex issues that can work at the local level
 - 2. Can strengthen the ability to approach complex problems
 - 3. Can create codifiable tools for best practices, across agencies, boundaries
- ii. Limitations
 - 1. You need a lot of logistical and political support
 - 2. Ex: Boost for Kids
 - a. Children needing health insurance
 - b. How do you develop capacity?
 - c. Political support may be temporary
 - i. Politician leaves office
 - ii. Agenda might shift
 - d. Bureaucratic processes and entrenched inertia
 - i. Lack of funding
 - ii. Lack of logistical support
 - iii. Networks require maintenance
 - e. Tensions within networks
 - i. Existing ideas about problem definition, solution path held by different actors
- b. Planners in New Orleans
 - i. Insiders and Outsiders
 - 1. Planners coming into the city
 - 2. Parochial city: Us versus outsiders
 - a. A challenge for planners to work in a culture that doesn't want outside help, but needs it.
 - b. Interesting to look at Broadmoor's attempt to bring together multiple actors at different levels to come and help them.
 - i. Having a strong leader at the local level has allowed the neighborhood to do this
 - c. Under what conditions might you want to create a Community of Practice?
 - i. What do they add to our repertoire?
 - ii. For complicated social problems, this allows you to approach a problem from multiple perspectives that might produce a more complex solution?
 - 1. This is a highly structured model
 - 2. How is it different from Susskind's multi-stakeholder model:
 - a. Susskind's model is defined by a decision-outcome
 - b. A COP does not need to do that: it is to produce knowledge, especially actionable
 - i. Not a bargaining model
 - 3. Approach to developing Community of Practice:
 - a. Choose people who don't have politics with each other, people who aren't problem solving together on a day to day basis

IV. Background on Communities of Practice

- a. Bill Snyder: Researcher on Communities of Practice outside of academia
 - i. Small grant to do research on government, required collaboration with university-based academic
 - ii. Consulting engagements tied to Clinton agenda of taking back issues held by Republicans
 - 1. Created a national performance review: Government Performance and Results Act
 - a. Not much interest in sustaining after Clinton/Gore left
 - 2. Tendency to see it as an extra – mixed performance across various government agencies.