

## 2. THE PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF PEER LEARNING

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# 2

### INTRODUCTION

In this short paper I would like to reflect on a number of peer learning events that I have been involved in over the past decade as a facilitator, and sometimes as a participant. These experiences have involved leading groups of policy makers and/or policy implementers from developing countries to observe 'best' practice either in more industrially advanced countries, or in countries at a similar stage of development as their own. In the latter case, despite sharing similar constraints, the host country showcased initiatives which were deemed by the organisers of the peer learning exercise to have been sufficiently successful as to deserve wider attention and possibly emulation. I have also led or participated in peer learning teams made up of policy staff from a number of different EU Member States where, despite somewhat different dynamics, the process and

intended outcomes were similar: policy learning.

My aim in this paper is not to describe these experiences with peer learning events in any great detail, but rather to examine some of the promises and pitfalls associated with them and to question some of their underpinning assumptions. Several of the issues raised in this chapter reinforce points made in Chapter 4 in Section 1 of this volume, where some aspects of peer learning are mapped out in more detail. My main argument here is that while much learning may take place during such events, the outcomes should not be taken for granted. There are pitfalls that should be avoided. Examples from my involvement in peer learning events will be used to illustrate such pitfalls, as well as other general points I would like to make. Peer learning has many forms – some of them may be different to those described here.

## PEER LEARNING AND THE BROADER DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

It is important to situate peer learning strategies in their broader context. The earlier model of supporting policy development in less developed countries through the direct transfer of knowledge and expertise came into crisis in the mid-seventies (UNCTAD, 1999). By then, many international aid and donor agencies had learnt that policies cannot be uprooted from one context and transplanted into another since each environment is shaped by a complex array of variables, each of which can interact with others in ways that significantly transform policy intentions when attempts are made to implement them. The politics underpinning development had also changed, from a rather brash assumption that industrially developed countries could show the rest of the world the path to prosperity, to a more circumspect and prudent approach which recognised that those most familiar with a particular context were best placed to act upon it in 'ecologically' sound ways. The role of donor and aid agencies increasingly became re-articulated in terms of offering support to the process of development through capacity building, and through establishing North-South, and eventually South-South knowledge networks that – at least in principle – left the beneficiaries in the driving seat. In the best of cases, the new model also challenged the notion of one-way knowledge transfer, suggesting that all those involved could in fact learn from each other.

Peer learning and knowledge networks are two of the better known offspring of this newer approach to supporting policy development. The latter has had an impact not only on countries in the economic 'South', but has also been adopted as a key plank in the EU strategy to enhance policy learning and achieve a greater degree of policy harmonisation in its Member States. Indeed, the so-called 'Open Method of Coordination' relies heavily on peer learning activities to ensure that so-called 'best practice' is shared between Member States (Dale, 2004).

### Peer learning: promises and pitfalls

Most peer learning events are structured in quite similar ways and, despite some variations, are underpinned by a shared understanding of how people learn. In some cases, the pedagogical elements of the peer learning events are articulated in a more overt or theoretically sophisticated manner. However, even when the assumptions remain tacit, a careful analysis of the peer learning experiences reveals a set of approaches to learning that are interesting, but also worth unpacking. What I will do in the next sections is to outline briefly some of the features of a peer learning event, taking care to problematise the different elements with a view to facilitating a deeper understanding of the processes and dynamics involved. I will organise these different elements into three sections: the preparatory phase, the peer learning visit, and the post-visit phase.

### Preparing for the peer learning event

In the preparatory phase a number of choices are made that can have a major impact on the peer learning event itself. Four choices seem to be particularly important: (a) the choice of thematic focus, (b) the selection of participants, (c) the choice of countries and sites to visit and (d) the choice of cases of 'good practice' to focus on for policy learning purposes. In all four cases, the organiser's intention to create a powerful, experiential learning environment for the participants can easily be jeopardised if certain considerations are not taken into account.

Let us first look at the *choice of theme* to be focused on by those taking part in the peer learning visit. Education development literature is replete with examples of how donor and aid agencies have thematic and policy priorities that fail to resonate with the target country. Such priorities may be chosen for reasons that have little to do with what recipient countries want, or what they feel they need at a given moment in time. Indeed, such priorities may reflect values, concerns, existing expertise, strategic niche and even economic or political interests of the donor/aid agency. A case in point is the recent policy interest

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in career guidance in the World Bank, ETF and the ILO – a focus that was triggered off by a high-profile OECD review of the field that started in 2000 (OECD, 2004). Policy and research networks, together with policy entrepreneurs came together to influence donor and aid agency investment in the field, even though several of the countries that were targeted had labour market, socio-economic, political and cultural peculiarities that limit the relevance of career guidance. If policy leaders from these countries do not see the theme as relevant or as a priority, they may still opt to play along with the promoting agency. They may want to maintain good relations to ensure that they can benefit from other, more appealing projects that may come along in the future. They may also see it as an opportunity for capacity building or for infrastructural resource acquisition, which they quietly transfer to areas and services that are considered to be true priorities. Such dynamics and processes are easy to understand, and suggest that it is critical that decisions about learning targets and priorities are made by both the peer learning organisers and participants together.

Linked to this is the *choice of participants*. This goes beyond ensuring a suitable mix which furthers the learning goals of the peer learning exercise. If, for instance, the intended outcome is increased sensitivity to the dynamics of the policy implementation process, it can make a lot of sense to have teams made up of policymakers and policy implementers at the different levels of the school system, possibly from both the state and non-state sectors. Problems arise, however, when the agency organising the peer learning event depends on ministries to select participants. I have been quite surprised at times by the profile of partners joining peer learning visits, as well as their motivation for doing so. In one case, for instance, it became obvious that a senior staff member from a minister's policy unit was using his privileged position to ensure that he was first in line for several study visits abroad. In another case, it was clear that ministers were using study visits to reward loyal or favoured civil servants, irrespective of whether or not the latter had formal

responsibilities in the thematic area or an interest or expertise in it. Donor and aid agencies are of course not unaware of such dynamics, and some have developed diplomatic but firm ways of ensuring that those who join peer learning events have an appropriate profile. At other times, however, such control or discretion cannot be exercised, seriously jeopardising the learning outcomes envisaged.

The *choice of country or countries* to visit to encourage peer learning and emulation is also far from being a straightforward one, and the wrong selection can severely limit the effectiveness of the whole exercise. If peers consider that the resource gap between their countries and the host context is too wide, they may very easily conclude that success can be explained away by the access that the showcased initiative has to funds, staff, technology, and so on. They may fail to dig deeper to understand why others who have similar or even more resources have nevertheless failed to achieve the same results. They may also remain unconvinced that institutional cultures and work protocols impact on motivation in ways that shape outcomes, and may therefore be unwilling to see what lessons they can learn from the visit. A less often mentioned obstacle to policy learning during peer visits occurs when participants are invited to consider the achievements of countries (or regions in their own country) that they consider to be at the same or even lower levels of economic development than themselves. South-South learning partnerships may thus suffer from a misguided sense of pride.

Finally, there are a number of issues to consider when *choosing the practice* that will be focused on during the peer learning visit. The trend is to showcase those policies and practices which key stakeholders consider to have been successful. Clearly, one can also learn a great deal from practices and policies that have been less successful—though many ministries will understandably be reluctant to be used as an example of what *not* to do. Some countries or agencies are particularly aggressive in marketing their policy 'products', often presenting an

excessively positive picture of 'best practice' in the hope that visitors might 'buy' the product and the services that go along with it. What constitutes 'best practice' is also problematic, and indeed in such a complex field as education, where the appropriateness of action is determined by context, it is probably incorrect to refer to 'best' or 'good' practice (King, 2007). What is successful and laudable in one context may very well be inappropriate, dysfunctional or even damaging in another. In my view, policy *learning* (i.e. not policy *borrowing*) is enhanced if the focus is on the *process* rather than the *product*. The effort of participants to compare and contrast what they see in another context with what they are accustomed to helps them to imagine and consider policy alternatives, provides them with yardsticks by which to evaluate their own systems, describes what might be the consequences of certain courses of policy decisions, and lays bare the complex dynamics that shape education systems. In short, it strengthens the basis for intelligent problem solving. The goal of building up such skills might be easier to achieve in a 'foreign' context because the peer visitors are not personally implicated in the change forces and power structures that shape this context. When such an exercise is ably supported by facilitators, who help tacit assumptions come to the surface, and who connect context-specific observations to broader frameworks that deepen the understanding of educational phenomena, then policy learning is much enhanced. It is also a good antidote to the depoliticising and disempowering effect that the notion of 'best practice' can encourage: when policy options are presented as 'best', irrespective of context, the underlying message is that local implementers are exonerated from making difficult choices from among the alternatives that are present, or that have to be creatively – and not infrequently painfully – imagined. Why should they do this if international 'experts' have concluded that a particular course of action is 'best'?

### **The peer learning visit**

There are many issues that can be raised in relation to the peer learning event itself.

In some cases, participants have been 'primed' for the visit through set reading tasks. They may have been asked to analyse policy documents or articles that provide a useful theoretical framework. They may also have had a say in the organisation of the programme of events or been given a template that helps them structure their observations, thus keeping them on task and on target throughout the different activities. The best peer learning visits make sure that the learning and observations are articulated in ways that render them subject to individual and group discussion and debate, so that the deeper meaning of a particular policy, and the implications this has for practice, are made sense of and co-constructed between peers. Various methods are used, including the keeping of reflective journals, and debriefing sessions at the end of each day.

A major challenge and pitfall here is the struggle to ensure that participants are nudged from their epistemological, ideological and cognitive comfort zones. As cognitive and constructivist learning theory approaches have emphasised, we tend to approach new phenomena through the lens of our prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences (Coburn and Stein, 2006). We 'read' what we see in ways that sift out the cognitively unfamiliar and challenging. Indeed, we actively transform the context in front of us to make it more congruent with our prior practices, routines and convictions. We tend to do this by focusing on surface manifestations rather than deeper pedagogical and educational principles. This is why it is not uncommon for participants to claim, when confronted with what is clearly innovative practice that contrasts with what takes place in their own context: "But we are already doing this!" The ability of peer learning events to create powerful environments that shift participants from previously held views depends on several elements, not least the skill of the facilitators leading the group discussion. Other contributing factors include the knowledge that participants have of educational issues: as mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for policy staff to be political appointees who have little technical mastery of the field.

### Post-peer learning phase

One important aspect of the post-peer learning phase is the evaluation that is carried out both by the participants, and by the hosts. Usually, such evaluations seem to be most effective and useful when they are built into the group reflection and feedback at the end of each day. This reflection not only enhances learning, it also encourages ownership of the peer learning experience, which in some cases can be flexibly shaped to respond to emerging needs. Articulating perceptions of both the outcomes and the processes that led to them can also develop important insights among both guests and hosts.

Earlier we noted that both peer learning and knowledge networks are strategic responses to advances in the politics of development. Indeed, peer learning events that bring together policy staff from the same or different countries often have a secondary aim: that of creating a group that gets to know each other personally and professionally, developing a shared vocabulary and understanding in relation to specific policy issues. The intense interaction during peer learning events can lead to the establishment of 'epistemic communities' and 'policy communities' where participants commit to the continuation of the learning and sharing experience *after* the structured peer learning event is formally over. The organising agency may support such interaction in various ways. It may, for instance, provide a communications infrastructure, or it may employ an expert to animate a virtual community by adding value to the deliberations of the policy consultation network. Some networks manage to remain functional over time, and organise virtual or face-to-face meetings on a regular basis to ensure effective dissemination of ideas, to share policy experience, and to enhance mutual capacity-building.

In my experience, such staying power is rare: the attention and energy of policy staff are generally absorbed by the daily demands of office, where immediacy and

crisis management determine priorities. Resolutions made during relatively peaceful peer learning visits often fail to survive into the hectic daily routines of life back in the office. In most cases, the agency that invested in the peer learning event pays little attention to ensuring continuity, other than to perhaps making sure that the same people are involved in other, related peer learning events. I have seen little evaluative research that strives to find out what *remains* after the peer learning experience, and the extent to which new insights are indeed integrated in policy and practice. As a consequence, our understanding of the way good practice is recognised, understood, and adapted in other contexts remains somewhat weak and superficial.

### CONCLUSION

Peer learning events hold much promise in creating powerful, experiential learning environments that help educators deepen their understanding of the complexity of the policy-making process, and of the ways in which they can intervene in order to bring about positive and meaningful change. However, awareness of the pitfalls and challenges involved in peer learning is critical for ensuring that learning targets are attained and for maximising the benefit from peer learning. In the pre-peer learning visit stage a series of appropriate choices must be made in relation to the thematic focus, the selection of participants, the choice of countries and sites to visit, and the choice of cases of 'good practice' to consider. Other challenges arise during the peer learning visit itself, with the likelihood of nudging participants from their epistemological, ideological and cognitive comfort zones being enhanced if they have been properly prepared for the event, and if a range of strategies are used to intensify and structure the reflective process. Such learning can be extended beyond the visits themselves if these lead to the development of 'epistemic communities' and 'policy communities' that nurture and organisationally sustain the powerful notion of learning from peers.

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