

Embedded Reflection on Public Policy Innovation

This PhD-thesis examines the impacts of reflection on the practice of conceiving and organizing public policy innovation for water management and the processes of knowledge transfer. The reflection is provided for a specific community of practitioners, the professionals involved in the WaterINNOvation program (WINN) of the Dutch ministry of Public Works and Water Management. The professionals involved in the WINN-program anticipated that reaching the program's objective would be no easy task. It was expected that the network dynamics in the domain of water management as well as the transitory institutional requirements from the ministry would put much strain on their efforts. They agreed that regular reflection was needed to learn from their experiences. Learning could guide them in changing, and if possible, improving their innovation practice and knowledge transfer.

Through an action science approach (cf. Argyris et al., 1985) I assumed the role of embedded researcher in the WINN program. Together with the professionals I formed a community of inquiry for collaboratively identifying their needs for reflection and translating them into a learning course. In this learning course reflection was provided through master classes and reflective sessions, such as intervision and case consultation. The impacts of the learning course were evaluated through in-depth interviews with the participating professionals. The findings of these evaluations were used to adjust the learning course to the evolving needs for reflection.

The community of practitioners and the evolving practice(s) are grounded in the specific institutional context of the ministry. The practitioner's and practice perspective as well as the contextual emphasis frame this study in the pragmatic tradition (cf. James, 1907; Dewey, 1903; Elkjaer, 1999). It is therefore that the impacts of reflection on the practice of innovation and knowledge transfer are interpreted through the pragmatic concepts of learning-in-practice (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991) and boundary spanning (cf. Tushman & Scanlan, 1981).

The reflection provided seems to have an important impact on the development of the individual innovation practice of the professionals involved. Through reflection the individual professionals entered into a zone of proximal development (cf. Vygotsky, 1978), by which their existing way of conduct was gradually evolving in alternative practices. The impact on the development of a communal and shared innovation practice is limited. With one exception, that is the collaborative development of a storyline about enhancing the legitimacy of the efforts in the WINN program. The story served as a guideline for readjusting the objective and subsequent activities in WINN and represents the professionals' efforts in making sense of what was going on around them.

Reflection tends to enhance the transfer of (new) knowledge among the WINN-professionals. Equally the learning course enhances the acquisition of external knowledge by the professionals involved. In contrast, reflection seems to have only limited impact on the transfer of knowledge from the WINN program to its organizational and network context. Interpreting the impacts of reflection through the aforementioned pragmatic concepts it is clear that reflection stimulates learning-in-practice because it helps to identify the possibilities for change and improvement and guides their actual and targeted implementation in practice. Reflection equally helps to identify the orientedness of knowledge transfer in the innovation program, and dissect it into knowledge objects, knowledge workers and knowledge producing activities that span across organizational boundaries.

The added value of this study for public administration is situated in its methodological and contextual dimensions that emerged in its progress.

The methodological dimension of this study is captured by my proposition that embedded research can be described as 'the science of being there'. The embedded researcher must be

capable of being part of the community of practitioners, and in turn, this community must allow and make effective use of the embedded researcher's 'being there'. It is obvious that mutual trust is an important precondition for this type of research. Next to this, I argue that embedded research is well suitable for developing (some form of) reflective practice (cf. Schön, 1983) in the implementation of complex policy programs and projects. Reflective practice can support policy professionals to keep their program or project in tune with the contextual dynamics.

The contextual dimension of this study is captured in the legitimacy issue that is attached to a program of public policy innovation. The case study shows that legitimacy of public policy innovation is largely dependent on the support of other actors for the renewal of policy objectives or measures and/or the debate about renewing them. Legitimacy of public policy innovation can be reached through practice on both rhetorical and action frames (cf. Schön & Rein, 1994). The contextual dimension of the study draws attention to the diverging competences that are needed for dealing with the problems of context, and thus being capable of practicing public policy innovation. The competences required are 1) being able work in the fragmented domain of science, policy and practice (cf. Laws, 2007), 2) possessing productive skills of connectivity (cf. Williams, 2002) and 3) being capable of collaboratively constructing and conveying new meanings (cf. Weick et al., 2005). These are vital competences for a professional of public policy innovation and can perhaps be united in the idea of agility (cf. Sheppard & Young, 2006). Agile professionals are capable and ready to balance interests, knowledge and resources for public policy innovation with 'enlightened opportunism' as basic attitude.

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