

11.800, Knowledge in the Public Arena: The Uses and Abuses of Research  
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**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.