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Dunlop, Claire A., Radaelli, Claudio M. & Trein, Philipp (2018) (eds.). *Learning in Public Policy. Analysis, Modes and Outcomes*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham.

Zusammenfassung

Das vorliegende Buch mit seinen 13 Kapiteln erhebt nicht den Anspruch, eine Policy Learning Theorie aufzustellen. Es geht vielmehr darum, die Auslöser, die Mechanismen und die Resultate oder Konsequenzen von Policy Learning systematisch zu beleuchten, in Zusammenhang miteinander zu setzen, und in verschiedene institutionelle Kontexte zu übertragen, soweit das möglich ist. Es werden sowohl substantielle wie auch normative Outcomes von Learning diskutiert, nicht zuletzt was die demokratische Qualität von Learning anbelangt. Es ist ein Werk, das sowohl eine Übersicht der Learning-„Schulen“ über die Zeit bietet, wie auch aufzeigt, wohin sich die Learning-Forschung in der öffentlichen Politik-Analyse entwickeln kann.

The book starts with a statement that learning is often a request but not or only partially a reality. In many if not all policy fields, learning is asked to happen, but in mechanisms, such as evidence-based policymaking, learning does not work or is not desired. This book is a unique contribution to the complex mechanisms of learning by highlighting how, when, and where can be learned and how mismatches or synergies between different dimensions (e.g. lessons learned applied to inappropriate institutional or substantive contexts) can lead to different outcomes of diverse quality. The chapter by Goyal and Howlett (2018) for example clearly shows the diversity of the learning scholarship and how different strands of the literature do not really inform each other. The aim of this book is then not to formulate a single learning theory, but to enhance the knowledge about learning in public policy and to highlight key dimensions such as triggers of learning, learning mechanisms and potential substantive and normative consequences of learning.

Among other things, this book pays attention to different sorts of potential learning outcomes: efficient and effective policymaking or policy outputs being only one of them. Also, criteria of democratic quality such as transparency and fairness come into play, related to input and output dimensions of democratic learning. Mainly the input dimension relates to the question of whom and what actors should or could learn and whom to integrate not only in policymaking processes, but also in learning procedures. How much should or could learning be a guided process? This question is for example treated by the chapter of Trein (2018) comparing social policies of eight countries and the role of pressure and urgency as potential accelerators of learning.

In the introduction, the editors review the history of the learning literature and make different claims about most recent developments. One claim is that the learning concept gets more theorized in the last years and that the interplay between the individual, the meso and macro levels of learning became more systematized. Furthermore, learning is more and more connected to different elements of the policy process such as actor constellations, specific venues or beliefs. Lastly, not only different theories of the policy process but also other heuristics and strands of literature are cross-fertilizing with learning.

There are several chapters that mostly focus on the outcomes of learning (or on learning and non-learning; Vagionaki, 2018, Trein, 2018), whereas others propose different forms or types of learning, such as epistemic and reflexive learning (Daviter, 2018), or experiential, factual, and constructive learning (Rietig, 2018; Fasois, 2018). Learning is studied in diverse theoretical contexts, such as Europeanization (for example Polman, 2018), comparative political economy (for example Bendaoud, 2018; Maggetti & Choer Moraes, 2018; Hemdag & Kuitto, 2018), public administration and network analysis (Stevens, 2018), policy process theories (Kuenzler, 2018), or policy transfer (Legrand, 2018).

The book is very rich in methods, empirical material, different case studies in terms of geographical scope but also policy sectors. It provides a fantastic “database” in how learning can be assessed, studied, compared, understood, explained and analyzed.

Why one should read this book? Because it provides a critical and multi-faceted assessment of learning in public policy. It thereby does not only emphasize learning as a process, but also learning and its consequences. Different criteria play therein a crucial role. Producing (adequate?) policies is only one of them. Learning is mostly seen as “a good thing”, and this book critically assesses this claim: learning can but does not have to lead to “better” outcomes and does not always respect democratic or sustainable principles, such as participation or transparency. In other words, good processes do not always go hand in hand with good outcomes. But this book also highlights examples of “when learning works” and how contexts can match learning lessons and thereby produce desirable outcomes.

This book is furthermore also a “must read” when interested in how learning can be conceptualized, methodologically measured and empirically operationalized. It furthermore gives insights in various public policies around the globe. It is targeted for policy scholars, but I would argue that also bureaucrats and decision-makers find important insights when involved in or wanting to trigger learning processes in public policy.

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