

GOVERNMENT LEARNING: An Overview

by

Lloyd S. Etheredge

[Originally published in Samuel L. Long (Ed.), The Handbook of Political Behavior, vol. 2. (New York: Plenum Press, 1981, pp. 73-161.)]

Does the executive branch of government learn from experience in the long run? If it does, what are the processes? If not, what are the barriers? And what can be done to make government policy more intelligent and effective?

Government learning is a new interdisciplinary field of social science inquiry. With only three books addressing the problem generally (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Schon, 1971; Wilensky, 1967); and a handful of related conceptual discussions (Deutsch, 1963; Dror, 1971; Lasswell, 1971; March, 1965), much of this chapter will be primarily an original overview of how the field looks to one practitioner. While there are important comparative dimensions, I will take as my illustrative focus the American executive branch.

Introduction

The concern to promote intelligent government invites attention for reasons beyond simple efficiency or effective governance in a changing world. The modern, high-technology state gives political leaders the capability to destroy most human life with ease; it also gives them the resources (and often puts them under pressure) for legitimate, extensive intervention in and even management or regulatory control of society to effect resolutions of problems as defined by different groups (Lowi, 1978; J. Q. Wilson, 1975). In poorer countries, simple humanitarian concerns (15 million annual deaths from starvation, mean life expectancies in the low 40s), as well as agendas for economic growth and political stability or reform might be better addressed by greater government intelligence. Both fear

of what governments might do wrong and hope for what governments might eventually learn to do right are incentives to analyze existing practices and to create constructive alternatives.

Beyond being a direct study and drawing on relevant concepts and theories from the behavioral sciences, the analysis of executive-branch learning processes is also a self-reflective study for the professional social scientist in three ways. First, as it is about adult learning, it poses a personal question: How do any of us, as adults, learn about ourselves, and about life? How well do we do it? To the extent that we are good at it, we may have important insights about how people in the executive branch of government can learn well. And to the extent we do not learn well, and can explain why, there may also be useful and transferable diagnostic insights.

A second question involves how competent and well organized social scientists are at the job of rapidly and efficiently answering important questions about political life (including the problem of executive-branch learning). To the extent that we are competent, individually and collectively, at our jobs as social scientists, we probably have additional important insight into how the executive branch could proceed.

Third, as professional teachers and scholars, university-based social scientists have additional personal experience from which to draw. In principle, universities and academic disciplines hold a special role and responsibility as the institutional memories of society, charged with the codification of human experience and charged as well to effectively develop skills and accumulated knowledge and wisdom in students who, in their turn, will govern and apply (if anyone does) the hopefully increasing intelligence of the human race about the conduct of its public affairs. But how adequate and successful are current curricula and teaching methods? One test for a medical faculty is whether, when they become ill, faculty members would trust their well-being to a randomly selected graduate certified by their program. A similar test for the quality of the burgeoning public policy

programs for undergraduates and graduate students in America is whether the faculty would trust the assessment of reality and selection of foreign and domestic policy to randomly selected graduates. To the extent that we have already devised or can devise effective and fully satisfactory curriculum contents and educational theories, we have a useful set of ideas about what people in government should know and how to increase the traction of their learning processes.

A Model for Theory Development: Medical Diagnosis Capability

This chapter proposes a general orchestration of issues and literatures; its aim is not to advocate one simple, general theory. Medicine is, I think, an appropriate model for theories in the social sciences, and my goal is to orchestrate intellectual frameworks and midrange theories as a first step in developing a competence at differential diagnosis, analogous to the capacity for differentiated diagnosis acquired by a skilled physician. For example, when a patient presents the general symptom of low energy, a good physician knows the evidence must be evaluated anew for each case; there could be any one (or several) of thousands of causes which produce this symptom. The good physician has available his own knowledge of the particular patient's history, his sensitivity and skill in observation, direct examination, and interviewing, and both an extensive body of well-differentiated theory and a diverse repertoire of empirical laboratory tests to use as aids in diagnosis.

Although systems with strong norms can simplify and reduce the variance of behavior, there seems little reason, in principle, to expect that processes of individual and collective behavior are simpler than those of a single human body or as simple as the first generation of public-policy case studies would have us believe (see Ross, 1977). In the case of a malfunction in executive-branch learning, the ideal would be for well-trained social scientists to be able to approach each case with personal sensitivity and skill, a knowledge of the relevant history, background training in a field providing a rich body of well-researched theories about alternative problem origins and effective interventions, and a repertoire of empirical diagnostic tests. For example, one case of failure in organizational learning might

arise because of failures in leadership and motivation, perhaps the absence of anyone articulating a persuasive vision to integrate an image of a better world with a long-range research and learning agenda for the agency. Another program's difficulty might arise from an excess of ideological motivation, for example, a strong activist, emotional commitment that blocks heterodoxy or self-critical reflection (Etheredge, 1979c). In a third case, a program might be so bureaucratized by red tape that gifted personnel have left and the remaining staff are so demoralized they have become only burned-out time servers. At another agency, at another time and place, the problem might be a simple absence of people whose formal jobs give them time, resources, and responsibility to learn. A fifth case could be explained by the absence of any pressure or incentive for learning from the political environment, while at the agency down the block the problem may involve so much political pressure for performance that no one can risk self-critical evaluations that might turn up problems. A seventh agency might have acquired or produced timid bureaucrats who are afraid to get off the reservation (i.e., who have individuation anxiety) and think boldly and independently. And of course, all of these problems, and many more, could be present within a single agency - or indeed, in different ways, within the same individual (Etheredge, 1976a, pp. 29 - 30).

Overview and a Preliminary Caution

There is a lot that will be discussed in the following pages. I feel obliged to caution the reader that we are not yet at a stage where it can be said how everything fits together. There have been enough searchlights lit by researchers to see key problems, but not enough to see the full landscape clearly. Moreover, at the present state of knowledge, the vocabularies of applicable research traditions differ (the familiar paradigm incomensurability problem). The reader who prefers bold and authoritative theses and tightly integrated arguments will be disturbed - hopefully constructively (see p. ~) - and is invited to join the search.

In the sections that follow I will first define a conception of learning and then address briefly normative issues and the descriptive problem of assessing trends. I will then review issues of causation as they interpenetrate across the contexts of individuals, organizations, the Washington political environment, and society and the world. Next, I will address the problem of learning rates as a function of problem types, and finally, I will propose a brief review of diagnostic alternatives and offer some concluding reflections.