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► **To cite this version:**

Corinne Rochette. Evaluation: the cornerstone of public learning organisations. *Gestion et management public* [2012-..], 2022, Volume 10 / N° 3 (3), pp.6-9. 10.3917/gmp.103.0006 . hal-03988239

HAL Id: hal-03988239

<https://hal.science/hal-03988239>

Submitted on 14 Feb 2023

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Evaluation: the cornerstone of public learning organisations

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"Learning means having plans and projecting yourself into a different future." Philippe Meirieu

Borrowed from educational sciences, "learning" is a concept that resonates greatly throughout management studies. Recent years have witnessed growing debate about the usefulness of public sector bodies being depicted as learning organisations (Senge, 1991). Research in this domain has generally presented organisational learning - itself proximate to the construct of a learning organisation - as a lever (or even a model) for reforming public organisations (Jorgensen, 2004). The idea here has been to rethink public policy-making and action in a way that places greater emphasis on practice, practitioners and participatory approaches.

Educational sciences view evaluation as being inseparable from learning processes, notwithstanding ongoing arguments about the modalities thereof. Public organisations do try to adapt to rapid changes in their environment but only succeed by consolidating the role attributed to evaluations, which may elucidate actors' ability to adapt (or not to adapt) but whose transformative powers have yet to be fully understood. The increasingly complex and unpredictable environments within which public organisations evolve have given them cause to engage in true organisational learning, in the sense that Cyert and March give to this term (1963). Several major challenges lie ahead, however, obstacles (or at the very least, impediments) including hierarchical relationships that remain embedded in bureaucratic modus operandi; an evaluation culture that has yet to be fully fleshed out; and the relatively widespread compartmentalisation that continues to apply in those contexts where a culture of dialogue has yet to be embedded – all issues that must be overcome before a learning organisation-based transformation model can take root.

A first step towards this goal is to create a climate conducive to learning and new ways of thinking. This requires a more open, participatory and collaborative approach (Anton et al, 2021), in the way that public policy is constructed and public action deployed and assessed. It is a demonstration that has already been made in a number of GMP articles, including El Bahri (2020), which shows how parents and students' help in defining indicators relating to the management and evaluation of a local state school has promoted co-education, fueled exchanges and enriched shared meaning, notwithstanding staff members' reluctance to join in the process.

An organisation's capacity for learning largely reflects members' ability to question the particular Theory of Action (c.f. Argyris and Schön) that they are applying and allowing others to examine. The assumption here is that individuals are capable of evaluating things on-the-spot, irrespective of how much experience they have managing a particular situation. It is a view that depicts evaluation as an enabling factor that both nurtures dialogue and scrutinises current practice, thereby contributing to the collective production of new organisational knowledge (Nonaka 1994). With the three-tiered analytical grid that derives from their Theory of Action, Argyris and Schön (1978) have played a very important role in building knowledge about organisational learning – work demonstrating the as yet limited scope of the adaptation processes that tend to be used today to bring about changes in practice. Indeed, many of the transformation-related challenges facing the public sector relate to a need to develop new thought patterns but also to modify rules of learning – and not just to transform

practice. In other words, cognitive transformation is a precondition for behavioural change. For this reason, a crucial phase in the learning process is when evaluation reveals a gap between the intentions behind a policy or action and its actual consequences. One early response often sees people trying to change behaviour without altering the frame of reference. In an evolving and unpredictable world, however, things generally need to be thought about differently, with actions' underlying rationale being questioned in light of their net effect. This is demonstrated in a Cazin, Kletz and Sardas article (2022) that GMP has also published, noting the contrast between certain hospital system reorganisations' unremarkable outcomes and France's *Groupements Hospitaliers de Territoires* (or Local Hospital Trusts) programme, which achieved success in granting actors greater freedom to explore new modes of geographic organisation and create new collective learning dynamics.

Aubert, Kletz and Sardas's article looks at the effects of a new practice's implementation on both the materiality of policy and the transformation of the State. The focus here is on the extent to which evaluation representations are predetermined by the regime of governmentality, which itself expresses the logic of action (and ultimately, the evaluation) that is being invoked. The authors offer a longitudinal analysis of healthcare-related public policy, identifying the new doctrines that are driving regime change as well as the new instruments responsible for spawning four regimes of governmentality – each of which is associated with specific (regulatory) instruments and planning or regulation-related tools. Overlaps between these regimes have led to an inconsistent deployment of public policy and to a problematic operationalisation of new regimes. In turn, this reflects the mismatch between new frames of reference and practices carried over from earlier regimes. Reproducing the approach that they had previously taken in their meta-analyses of the main texts to be published in this field over the past 20 years, Aubert, Kletz and Sardas portray the new "pathways" as a potential source for a new healthcare doctrine. They equate the development of a particular e-patient pathway platform to a decompartmentalisation regime and use this example to highlight the kinds of professional appropriation problems that can arise due to people's divergent representations (of the patient pathway, in this instance); because competition erupts between new entities and their predecessors; due to technical obstacles; and reflecting actors' desire to retain agency when deciding pathway organisations. Lastly, the articles also notes that above and beyond any paradigmatic changes, the transitions identified here can also become a cause of inconsistency, with the intimation here being that policies are deployed with little if any evaluation. The end result is that even where government accords actors sufficient room to manoeuvre, it can still struggle to generate, broadcast and sustain locally-produced knowledge – indicating in turn that insufficient attention is being paid to the persons actually driving public action and the ways in which they devise their main policy orientations. Given the lack of clarity regarding transformations at a micro level, there is real utility in studying such phenomena and thereby enriching the analysis of current governmentality regimes.

Borel and Cenard's study provides a useful complement to the issue's first article, focusing on changes in local care coordination mechanisms and ultimately on how an integration (i.e. a governmentality) regime can be sustained by gradual (or even radical) transformation within a given geographic system. The healthcare and medico-social sectors have experienced a proliferation of structures and entities over the past 20 years, translating into patient care becoming highly fragmented; competition between various actors in this field; a dispersion of resources; and a lack of clarity regarding actors' (and actions') scope of competency. New bodies and structures seem to have been deployed without any precise assessment of their forerunners. Hence a number of new "healthcare pathway" guidelines intended to both correct existing overlaps and prioritise the principles of coordination and decompartmentalisation. Over time, this would lead to the reorganisation of existing mechanisms and structures, with some being abolished and others reborn. Of course, the whole process has been anything but seamless. Borel and Cenard address one of the main challenges, namely the difficulty of reconciling divergent organisational cultures when grouping mechanisms and/or structures that are themselves rooted in different logics. The new mechanisms and structures' capacity for achieving their goals largely depends on actors' ability to collaborate; share skills; and ultimately create a common

organisational culture. In other words, understanding organisational culture makes it easier to perform ex ante assessments of public policy implementation. The challenge is creating the conditions where it becomes possible to learn about another type of "game" - in the sense that Crozier (1994) gives to this concept. Hence Borel and Cenard's study of the formation of coordination support mechanisms (referred to in the article as CSMs) born out of two mechanisms that were themselves pursuing very different logics – being an analytical approach that combines Johnson et al's Cultural Fabric concept (2017) with Argyris and Schön's Theory of Action (2002). What Borel and Cenard discover is that organisational culture can impede the emergence of a common culture given the difficulty of reconciling the top-down orientation characterising so-called Integrated Independent Domiciliary Care Action Methods (referred to in the article as IIDCAMs) with the more professionally-driven kind of initiative that typifies Health Networks. A number of significant divergences are identified between the two structures/entities, relating to seminal myths; rites and routines; symbols; power; and control systems. The authors conclude by formulating two very antagonistic organisational paradigms – and by calling for the development of a kind of organisational culture that, because it is open to learning, might be able to overcome the aforementioned hurdles.

Goter and Khenniche's contribution also deals with healthcare but from another perspective, with evaluations being apprehended here as tools enabling the production of knowledge and thereby enhancing the overall visibility of collective local public action. To overcome the problematic articulation of public policy evaluations with public action management and performance – as noted in the preceding articles – the authors suggest "evaluation in action", in the way that this is defined by Chanut and Bournois (2012). The idea here is that management systems (like urban healthcare workshops) can be evaluated wholesale through the production of new indicators capable of measuring the externalities that entities of this nature might generate. It is an original approach that carries out a successful "micro-level" evaluation of the effects of running said urban healthcare workshops in a municipal environment, based on a detailed analysis of local economic impacts showing both how public sector actors were able to capture the resources they needed, as well as the costs they avoided in so doing. The paper transcends customary evaluations of institutional actors' "macro-level" impacts and replaces them with a local impact assessment approach. Not only is there value in this new orientation but it also offers avenues for further reflection regarding different ways of highlighting the contributions of those local protagonists who take part in public action and the production of public services. On top of this, the evaluation approach employed here reveals ways of generating the organisational knowledge that certain actors can then develop and appropriate.

Brakrim and Huron dive into another field – community-driven local economic development – to examine a public performance management system' design and implementation processes. Performance management is a highly contextualised activity requiring robust understanding both of the performance regime with which it is associated and of the nature of the particular intergovernmental relations involved. This harks back in turn to the governmentality register construct that the issue's first article had already presented. In a context where municipal authorities are not under any obligation to develop performance measurements, they might still decide to specify strategic and operational objectives that will then structure performance measurement via a management-by-indicators approach. It is a delicate exercise but also a useful one given how complicated it can be to measure the impact of an economic development policy that is being implemented by a multitude of different actors. The real challenge is isolating local public policy effects. It is in the definition of objectives and performance indicators that the actual local performance management system becomes grounded. Such systems will then be both strategic and operational in nature, while complementing and nurturing broader public policy evaluations. It is a situation where the learning organisation operates at several different levels. These include a learning-by-mimicry process replicating current regional practices; the responsibility of local elected officials so they can re-adjust their policy choices; and greater accountability for the parties driving public action. Lastly,

dialogue can also be enhanced by implementing a public performance management system – which might also both reveal how evaluations evolve over time and increase scrutiny of their practice.

One thing that all these contributions have in common is the questions they raise regarding the tensions that can arise between reference frameworks and practice. They invite readers to come up with other ways of looking at public sector organisations, ones more geared towards the latter's learning culture; and towards the learning practices and situations where evaluations have a role to play.

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