Learning by Meeting

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Abstract

It has become something of a truism that organisational and political environments are internationalised, and that policy making is informed at least in part by increased understanding of what takes place in parallel domains and jurisdictions. Leaders and policy makers learn about, from and with their counterparts elsewhere. By the same token, the international meeting, workshop or seminar has become a more prominent part of professional, organisational and political routines.

This paper asks simply: what do we learn by meeting? While both learning and meeting can be readily dismissed as operations of a crude construction of power, the paper is interested in what might remain. It is notable, for example, that international encounters are often highly valued by participants, albeit in ways they find difficult to express. What do participants experience in meeting, and what do they know differently as a result?

Drawing on seminal work by Margeret Mead and others, and using ethnographic and documentary methods, the paper describes processes of introduction, presentation, recognition, confusion, socialisation, communication and reporting. Conceived as a microstudy of purportedly macrolevel activity, it is meant both as an exercise in analytic interpretation and as a resource for participants and practitioners.

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policy, learning and meeting

Policy makers have always been interested in learning from others, and policy scientists have always been interested in learning how they do so. Much of the business of policy makers is to interact with others in other domains (other departments, organizations, sectors, levels and countries), and many of those interactions have as their purpose the acquisition and exchange of knowledge. Meanwhile, opportunities for such interaction, especially across national borders, appear to have increased. What Giddens has observed of business and the academy holds for policy, too: 'With the advent of the new technologies… people go to more conferences rather than less. You still need to look into the eyes of the other' (Giddens, in Giddens and Pierson 1998, p 51).

The learning component of these interactions has been understood in different ways, conforming broadly to the established paradigms of social and political science (Freeman 2006a, 2007). A rationalist approach takes learning to be instrumental, motivated by a wish or need to do better

somehow. It posits the existence or possibility of lessons that might be learned, where the validity and authority of a lesson turns on the means by which it is produced (Rose 1993, 2005). It assumes, essentially, that policy might be taken as a specific cause with a specific effect, where the relationship between the two is transferable to other instances of a problem. Further, knowledge about a problem, and about this relationship between policy cause and policy effect, is distinct from doing something about that problem: knowledge is produced by scientific or quasi-scientific method in one domain and applied in another. 'Truth' exists somewhere, and is spoken to 'power' somewhere else. This, of course, is the basis for some of the stronger claims made for the relevance or applicability of comparative policy studies.

Institutionalist approaches note that learning is invariably limited by the availability of information and opportunity. The rationality of the policy maker is 'bounded' in significant ways (Simon 1991). New information tends to disrupt organizational routine, while part of the function of organization is control the flow of information into a system from its environment (Salaman 2001). Only certain kinds of information are either acquired or required, and are then interpreted and processed according to established practice and structures of belief (Heclo 1974, Sabatier 1988). Learning proceeds according to a logic of appropriateness as much as efficiency (March and Olsen 1984): in this way, it comes to be about the adaptation as much as the adoption of new policy.

A constructionist account of policy learning focuses on the way problems come to be understood as such, on the process of framing solutions to them and the problematization of each in the process of implementation (Schön 1973, Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). Learning is iterative, carried by exchanges in and among groups (Hall 1989, 1993; Wenger 1998, 2000). To the extent that we learn from others, we learn only according to our own understandings and interpretations of what they do: we must necessarily invent or imagine what we learn, and we import and reconstruct problems as well as policies and their consequences. Problems, policies and solutions remain uncertain, opportunities for interpretation, negotiation and coordination, both separately and together.

In all this, however, learning remains elusive. This it has in common with decision making and with policy transfer more generally (Parsons 1995, Dolowitz and Marsh 1996). We know of its inputs and outputs, much less of its processes. Learning is postulated theoretically in different ways, but difficult to observe or describe. Where, when and exactly how does it happen? What is the set of tasks policy makers engage in which both we and they redescribe as learning? The claim made here is very simple: if we want to go looking for learning, we might go to meetings. In general, of course, we learn by doing - but for many of us meetings are what we do. How does learning by meeting take place, and what does it consist of? But before we begin, we must ask what we mean by meeting.

what is a meeting?

A meeting, as described here, is a pre-arranged opportunity for purposive communication. It can be categorised on two dimensions: whether its denominator is an issue or a set of actors, and whether participation is open or closed.[1] A meeting might bring together a range of actors to address a common problem as, for example, a public hearing does. Alternatively, it might bring together a set of actors with some shared identity, such as members of a department or team, to discuss a range of issues of common concern. Meetings can be openly advertised to anyone who chooses to come, or they can be by invitation only. One way of operating this kind of closure is by restricting attendance to members of a society or defined professional group, in the manner of an annual conference. Most meetings can be placed somewhere between the two poles of each axis.

[1] This schema is adapted from Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993), pp 53ff: 'The nature of the analytical forum'.

What I have in mind here more specifically are meetings of people from different countries who have come together, often for a few days, to discuss some aspect of policy or practice. Participants, though they might not all be professionals, otherwise share the characteristics of Haas's epistemic community: 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area' (Haas 1992, p 3). Though they might not all be public officials, they are engaged in what Keohane and Nye call 'transgovernmental relations', or 'sets of direct interactions among sub-units of different governments that are not controlled or closely guided by the policies of the cabinets or chief executives of those governments' (Keohane and Nye 1974). I focus on international meetings, not least because they are what I know (see method, below). But my assumption is also that the international encounter throws ordinary or domestic problems of exchange and learning into greater relief. Finally, because my interest is in learning, I am not thinking of meetings held for the purpose of negotiation or conflict resolution nor in the first place for decision making.

Such meetings typically go under the name of conferences, seminars and workshops.[2] What Margaret Mead and Paul Byers (1968, p 5) call the 'small substantive conference' means 'a group small enough to sit around one large table, called together for a specific purpose, at a specific place, for a limited time, once, or at specified intervals in a series of designated length to consider new aspects of a specified topic. All members of such a conference are accorded participant status; the method of communication is mutual multisensory interchange with speech as the principal medium…' Each meeting is unique (and exactly why it is unique should become clear in the course of this paper), but it will also have some elements in common with other meetings. Participants gather, are introduced, and an agenda set; issues are tabled and papers presented; discussion follows, often in smaller groups; summaries are made and shared, proceedings are reported.

understanding meeting

Writing in the 1960s of experience reaching back to the 1940s and 1950s, Mead and Byers could call the small conference a 'new social invention', a 'new form of communication' (1968, p 3). They find its sources in politics and learning respectively: in the essentially political practice of collective discussion and decision making, instantiated around camp fires, in village meetings, ecclesiastical councils, parliaments and courts, and in scholarly traditions of public presentation, discussion and debate as well as ultimately Socratic teaching methods, especially as used with advanced students.

More generally, not much is made of meetings in the public policy and related literature. Seemingly mundane and certainly more 'micro' than many other disciplinary concerns, they appear to have been 'black-boxed' along with other artefacts and infrastructures of policy making such as documents, budgets and, until recently, other kinds of policy instrument. Meetings have some place in the study of international relations, mostly in respect of negotiation and conflict resolution.[3, 4] They remain important to the normative constructions of political theory, as in

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[2] On the more specific forms of scenario workshops and consensus conferences, see Andersen and Jfger (1999). In some ways, the kind of meeting I am thinking of might be described as a policy version of the Balint group (Balint 1957), in which accounts of their practice given by individual professionals are discussed with and by their peers.

[3] See, for example, Galtung (1964), who takes the nature and frequency of summit meetings as an indicator of international (East-West) relations; Jacobson (1964) on test-ban negotiations; Schlaim (1997) on the secret plotting of British, French and Israeli diplomats against Egypt in 1956. Cohen and Azar (1981) report a meeting of Egyptian and Israeli intellectuals which took place in Cairo in May 1979, and are principally concerned with the images one side had of the other. Donnelly (1988) presents a quantitative analysis of the allocation of meeting time to human rights issues in UN bodies, while Karns (1977) finds that attending interparliamentary meetings increased internationalist attitudes among US Congress members. Hanieh's 'Camp

Habermasian conceptions of deliberative democracy and communicative action, which privilege ordered, reasoned argument made in face-to-face encounters.[5] In analytic terms, nevertheless, we might think of the meeting as a group, an institution or a system.

Understandings of groups tend to deny processes of learning in pointing to the need for stability. Following Bion (1961, pp 63-64), 'The basic assumption is that people come together as a group for purposes of preserving the group… [this] conflicts very sharply with the idea of a group met together to do a creative job.' The group is maintained by overcoming conflict within it, and the point of studying it is to uncover the ways in which differences of race, gender and occupational status – among others - are erased. As Abercrombie suggests, 'The word "group" has so many connotations of "mass", "herd", "crowd", "clique", "team", that it is easy to think that any form of organized group behaviour involves the subjugation of the individual' (Abercrombie 1989, p 80).

Thinking of the meeting as an institution is to understand what goes on there as a function of the different roles of its participants and the rules by which they interact. Either may be formal and explicit, or informal and implicit. In a committee, for example, participants will be officers (chair, secretary) or members; they may proceed formally, as in voting, or informally, by turn-taking as they contribute to discussion. Lester and Piore (2004) take the cocktail party (a special kind of meeting) as a metaphor for what managers do: a good host will choose guests, get a conversation going and intervene periodically to keep it going, refreshing both conversation and guests as they need. He or she will identify initial common ground, encourage one or other partner to offer something, whether information or observation, and will be careful to counteract any initial miscommunication or misunderstanding.[6]

Systems theory, meanwhile, is that way of thinking about collective processes which prioritises information and communication.[7] In these terms, the meeting is an exercise in 'distributed cognition' (Giere and Moffatt 2003), understood as both a scientific and social process, or in 'sensemaking' (Weick 1995).[8] This is consistent with Haas's (1992) account of the role of the epistemic community, which turns on a degree of uncertainty in policy making, on the need for interpretation of inadequate or complicated and sometimes contradictory information, and on a corollary requirement to stabilise and sustain the flow of information and interpretation to policy makers.[9] Understandings of complex systems, in turn, have come to cast the process of communication as generative, and systems as in some sense creating both themselves and their environments.

this paper

David Papers' (2001) provide a first-hand account of the July 2000 meeting between representatives of the US, Palestine and Israel.

[4] In similar vein, and among few such accounts in public policy, Webber (1998) considers a council of ministers meeting in Brussels in 1993 essentially concerned with trade negotiations (the Uruguay round of the GATT).

[5] For the application of ideas about communicative action to international relations, see Risse (2000, 2004). Their particular relevance here is in defining a mode of interaction distinct from interest-based bargaining on one hand and rule-guided behaviour on the other (Risse 2000, p 1).

[6] Lester and Piore (2004), ch 3: 'Conversation, interpretation and ambiguity'.

[7] For a simple but powerful exposition of the idea of communication as an interaction process and human relationships as systems, see Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967); also Arrow, McGrath and Berdahl (2000). Medd (2002) describes meetings between representatives of different agencies concerned in different ways with a social welfare project in these terms.

[8] For an organization, meetings 'create the infrastructure which creates sense' (Weick 1995, p 144).

[9] 'The causal logic of epistemic policy coordination is simple. The major dynamics are uncertainty, interpretation, and institutionalization' (Haas 1992, p 3).

This paper in no way denies the possibility of writing a largely negative and perfectly valid account of meetings, one which attends principally to issues of power, status, and interest. But nor does it deny the possibility of learning. I am concerned here with learning as a specific aspect of meeting, one I think eternally present if often obscured. If there is learning in meetings, how does it happen?

The paper is organised as set of abstract elements, reflecting the underlying logic or hermeneutics of what goes on in meetings. This logic is also more or less a chronology, reflecting the way in which a meeting (like learning) is ordered, sequential, progressive: the communicative aspect of the meeting passes from articulation through perception, socialisation, construction and resolution.[10] That is not to say that things will invariably take place in this order, or that there isn't much that is going on simultaneously. Not all elements will be present at every meeting, and at every meeting much more goes on than I take account of here. The paper is quite deliberately a partial account, focused on what is learned in and by meeting to the exclusion of other social processes. It seeks to identify the learning aspect of meeting in order to uncover the meeting (or social and interactive) aspect of learning, and vice versa.

At the same time, too, its analytic intent allows for a normative effect. For if we are to make meetings work, we need to understand what it might mean for them to work. So this paper is for participants as much as for social and political scientists, and its purpose is to help them understand what it is they are part of. To this extent, it responds to recent calls for increased reflexivity in public administration (Cunliffe and Jun 2005). It is not meant as a manual or set of instructions - such a manual would be counter to the spirit of what follows - but as a resource for thinking.[11] To the extent that what is being developed here is an ideal type, it is one which has both analytic and pragmatic functions. Following Weber, the ideal type is not only useful in forming a scientific appreciation of the world, but is something actors use in making sense of the world they encounter and must negotiate (Hekman 1983).

The paper draws variously on a secondary literature in several fields. A number of examples of meetings are taken from published reports, and presented as vignettes in the text (indented, in italics). The paper also reflects my experience of cross-national research in health and public policy, of participation in international research programmes, and of research and consultancy in international public health. Some of that experience is recorded in field notes and is cited as such. For the rest, and like any qualitative account, this one will convince or otherwise by virtue of its authenticity, plausibility and criticality: that is, by whether the report of what respondents say and how they say it seem realistic to readers; by the face validity of the commentary and conclusions offered, and by whether they challenge the reader to think critically and anew about what might otherwise be a taken-for granted aspect of administrative experience (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993; Brower, Abolafia and Carr 2000).

1 articulation

We meet in order to talk. The first phase of meeting is of some initial articulation, a combination of introduction and presentation, of saying something about oneself and to someone else. 'Articulation', in this sense, carries meanings of both expression and connection.

Introductions are crucial because they create identities. Sometimes we know some other participants in a meeting, often rather well; many we meet for the first time. The interaction

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[10] Compare Corey and Corey (1997; cit Ettorre 2000), who identify five stages of work in groups: a *formation* stage characterised by ambivalence and uncertainty; an *initial* stage of developing trust; a *transition* stage of anxiety and some resistance; a *working* stage of communication and collaboration, and an ending stage of sadness and concern.

[11] For such a guide, see Jay (1976) and CMPS (2003), as well as Mead and Byers (1968).

between different kinds of other participant, and the reconstruction of those categories as those participants get to know each other, is the essence of meeting. 'Presentation', meanwhile, implies gift-giving, a pattern of reciprocal obligations. It begins an exchange, often a process of question-and-answer, assuming and inviting some response. Each paper or presentation, each comment made during discussion, makes a connection with others in the room, and with what they have to say.

introduction

Meetings usually begin by introducing participants to each other. Sometimes we are introduced to others by a third party, and sometimes we introduce ourselves. Either way, we hear a version of who we are, constructed in such a way as to make us relevant or meaningful to whoever we are being introduced to. The introduction establishes a connection between us; properly, it formalises and specifies the connection we have by virtue of being at the same meeting.

> *After breakfast on the first day, a quarter of an hour had been left for 'introductions'. The meeting was concerned with the relationship between research and policy, and most participants had worked in the worlds of both research and politics or public administration. They introduced themselves. They took cues from each other, connected what a previous speaker had said with some aspect of their own experience, realising how much they had done was relevant to the topic in hand (realising, in fact, who they were). In the event, the 'introductions' item took more than an hour, ending only because later speakers understood that in order to rescue the timetable they had to abbreviate what they now thought they had to say. The next two days were taken up with more formal presentations and small group discussion. But it was clear from that first hour that sufficient autobiographical material was available to sustain a perhaps different, but equally valid and valuable kind of meeting.*[12]

Introduction can seem both burdensome and liberating: who am I, actually? What do I do? What do you need to know about me in order to understand what I do and why I'm here? As a public official and former activist wondered about cross-national exchanges, 'Who are we when we go there?'.[13] An Institute Director with a wealth of experience in organising and attending international meetings and seminars says simply that 'People need to know why they've been invited'. What's interesting about this is that it stops short of defining the purpose of the meeting in any authoritative way. Instead, it finds that purpose in the identity, interests and experience of participants.

presentation

Meetings regularly begin with an introductory paper. This usually offers definitions of the issue with which the meeting is concerned, and often some variants on them. It raises questions and at the same time – implicitly or explicitly – closes off others. It represents an attempt at a 'preliminary stabilisation' of the discussion as it begins. It contains the discussion it provokes; it 'frames' the meeting; it sets the scene against which participants are to tell their own stories.

The case studies which often follow provide information, tell stories about what happened where and why. They constitute the base material for discussion. But note in passing that writing and presenting a case study is in itself a learning experience. The case is not self-evident, but has to be researched, reflected on, formulated and articulated. That is to say that we learn about our own practice in describing it to others, in constructing it in new ways for new audiences. A 'case study' makes a case or situation newly available for reflection even by those who took part in it. Description is already discovery.

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[12] field note, 24 April 2003.
[13] interview, 27 September 2002.

Articulations are multiple, successive. Even in the most straightforward instance, a report is drafted or a paper written, then adapted as it is made into a presentation, then translated again as it is spoken or delivered, then again as it is summarised and commented on, perhaps by a rapporteur and then in more fragmented ways by participants. Each shift in form or mode of communication is a translation, an occasion for reflection on and interrogation (which often means clarification and simplification) of the story which the author/presenter is trying to tell.

2 perception

Meeting both presumes and finds common ground. It is a process of seeing, identifying and sorting similarity and difference. The meeting establishes an 'axis of recognition', which is bidirectional and both political and epistemological: we recognise others' right to be present and to (re)present what they do, just as they do to us. But as they speak, we recognise unimagined aspects of their situation and unthought of dimensions and implications of our own.

But the meeting is a process not only of recognising but also of being confused: it is a source both of affirmation and of disorientation and discomfort. This is because, while information, as Bateson put it, is 'a difference which makes a difference' (1973a, p 315), learning must denote 'change of some kind' (Bateson 1973b, p 283). That change is both exciting and difficult, seductive and threatening, a source of anxiety as well as of creativity.[14]

recognition

Sometimes participants take the opportunity to say something simply because it needs to be said (and heard and recognised by others). This kind of learning, gained in the articulation of immediate, personal experience, is available only because people are meeting rather than reading papers in journals.

> *In 1999, the US Commission on Civil Rights published a report, 'The Health Care Challenge: Acknowledging Disparity, Confronting Discrimination and Ensuring Equality'. Unusually, the document 'makes extensive use of direct quotations from individuals speaking in the first-person, as well as specific anecdotes from published documents and government memoranda. Often a section of text is preceded by one of these quotations in italics. This device mimics the legal device of taking testimony from witnesses, and not incidentally, also the religious tradition of bearing witness to important life-changing events.'* [15]

To the extent that we meet to talk, listening is as essential to the process as speaking. John Forester (1989) defines listening as giving active, close, even intimate attention, distinguishing it from hearing, which is more passive, formal and distant. It is 'an everyday and deeply political form of praxis' (Forester 1989, p 113). Where the object of hearing is what is said, of listening it is the speaker or person who is saying. Listening is interpretive, questioning; most importantly it is manifest, and as such inhibits illusion and evasion on the part of the speaker:

> *'You were listening to me in such a way that I started listening to myself."*[16]

This sentence was said following her presentation by a doctor to an international group of other doctors. It comments acutely, if perhaps only half-consciously, on the sometimes revelatory nature of meeting.

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[14] See, similarly, Abercrombie (1989), ch 11: 'On suffering change'.
[15] Gamble, V N and Stone, D (2003) 'Reducing health inequities through research and action: lessons from the United States', draft paper
[16] field note, 25 September 2003.

Of course, papers, presentations and case studies are interesting in and of themselves, engaging because they seem to deal with how things really are, treating of characters, situations and stories with which we can identify. What we recognise in them are similarities with the way we think and act, as well as things which are different or new. Learning about others' work practices and organisational affairs offers us an escape from habit and routine, from the mindset that unconsciously shapes what we think and do. The experience gives a new sense of possibility, of what life might be like – for better or worse - or how things might be done differently.

> *In 2001, two of the co-founders of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective attended a meeting of groups from around the world who were engaged in translating and adapting Our Bodies, Ourselves for use in their own countries. One participant was surprised to find that the Boston group had faced censorship and religious restriction. For her part, one of the original co-authors said that, 'As I listened to their stories of truly daunting conditions – war, political opposition, lack of funds, lack of time, inadequate and unreliable technology, and dozens of other obstacles – I was strongly moved. I felt there was really no comparison between what we have gone through to produce OBOS… and what so many of them have been going through… I felt very privileged to have been there'.*[17]

Polanyi's (1966) distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge is useful here. Because, for so much of the time, knowledge is embedded in action, practice and experience, it is difficult to articulate and reflect on, to make available for exchange and transfer. Often, it simply goes unnoticed or unknown. Any contrast, any encounter with different ways of doing things, and especially the cross-national encounter, exposes tacit knowledge for what it is and makes it available for communication and learning.

confusion

Any meeting, like many of the participants at any given meeting, has its Babel moment. A meeting is a confluence of languages, including those of different disciplinary and occupational groups as well as of different countries.

> *Henry Smith reflects on a meeting of the International Psychoanalytical Association: 'First day at the Congress is like arriving in a country where you thought you knew the language, only to discover that there is no language but, rather, an endless series of tribal dialects'. He reports a colleague's remarks that 'I can't make any sense of it and I don't know why. You wonder, is it your hearing?… The translation?… The speaker?… Your own stupidity?… It is demoralising'.*[18]

Meetings suddenly become embroiled in conflicts over the definition and meaning of what were formerly for most participants the most routine, mundane, habitual terms – often up to and including whatever is the nominal topic of discussion. Cross-national communication is characterised by an insistent problematisation of its proper object, a wondering and questioning 'what it is we're talking about'. This, of course, is the premise of Schütz's classic study of the stranger: '(T)he cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations, but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master' (Schütz 1944, p 506).

However, Mead and Byers (1968, p 39) note that 'The pessimism and despair that sets in about a quarter of the way through a conference is also functional', in that it requires some effort of reflection and communication by and among participants to overcome. In this way, the concept of 'moment' ('Babel moment', above), derived from physics, is meant as a dynamic as well as a

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[17] *News from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective*, Fall/Winter 2001, p 11.
[18] Smith, H (2000) 'Towards an international dialogue. North American reflections on the Santiago Congress', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 81 307- 312; p 307.

point in time. In Weick's terms (Weick 1995), the meeting is a crucible of sensemaking, and the international meeting is such a rich source of sensemaking because it is the point at which a number of often very different languages and codes intersect and interact. Some of that sense making takes place between sessions, in essentially social interaction, as the next section explains.

3 socialisation

The meeting is a social form, an ensemble of both formal and informal encounters. Participants assume particular social roles, while others they might usually occupy are suspended. One or more individuals, usually on behalf an institution, act as hosts, for example. A host is not always fully participant, because he or she is concerned that everybody's found the hotel, can operate the powerpoint projector, collects their expenses claim form. Similarly, the guest is never quite sure what's going on, what might happen next, or where the toilets are.

In important respects, and more under some arrangements than others, the meeting has the significant effect of status levelling. Mead and Byers (1968, p 4) note the assumption of 'temporary parity' among participants, who are equal at least in their status as invitees. The professor sits beside the graduate student, the international economist with the community activist. The purpose of this section of the paper is to show that the meeting is both social and situated, and that both aspects are intrinsic to its learning function.[19]

situation

The meeting is a social *situation*. Its dynamics are expressed physically, in spatial, temporal and material terms. For the majority of participants, the international meeting takes place away from home, in a country other than their own. But the conference becomes a world of its own in which participants lose their ordinary sense of time and place. The meeting takes place somewhere in which it is no longer Thursday or November, but the afternoon session on day 2. The effect can be liberating as well as disorienting. Some participants will feel exposed in an unfamiliar environment, some will find sanctuary from the pressures and uncertainties they must deal with at home.

Compare the western educational ideal, the ancient university, in which, typically, students live apart from the world and in their own time: they live in self-contained communities or colleges, and work in weeks and terms, the names and times of which bear no relation to any other social institution (Rustin 1994). Think, too, of Dewey's (1897) concept of the school as 'simplified social life'.

And then think how the meeting is organised around, effectively identified with a table.[20] In wanting to convene a meeting, we talk about 'getting people round a table'. What is the significance of the table in this context? Hannah Arendt thought of the table as placed 'between those who have it in common'; it 'relates and separates men at the same time' (Thévenot 2002).

sociality

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[19] 'Social learning' and 'situated learning' are theories of knowledge acquisition which emphasise learning in context and through interaction and collaboration (Bandura 1977, Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998).

[20] Similarly, Foucault (1980, p 8) describes how the table constitutes the social relations of the court. Abercrombie (1971) discusses the negotiations over how the tables were to be arranged for the Vietnam peace talks.

Keohane and Nye (1974) report a comment made about INTERPOL: 'What's really important here are the meetings on a social level – the official agenda is only for show'.

The meeting is also, obviously, a *social* situation. Ordinary breaks in meetings have to do with refreshment; larger or longer conferences have full-scale social programmes. But these are not interruptions of the learning process: it is over coffee, in the bar, on the coach to the theatre - in informal, ad hoc, pairwise encounters and smaller groups - that contacts are made and reinforced, trust emerges and uncertainties are shared, judgements offered and opinions revised.[21]

Most breaks are for eating and drinking. Hirschman (1998) discusses the significance of eating together, or 'commensality'. He draws on Simmel's *Soziologie der Mahlzeit* (meal) of 1910, noting that what is in essence a physiologically primitive function performed by individuals is in practice realised in something more elevated, complex and social. 'While they are consuming food and drink, people gathering for the Mahlzeit engage in conversation and discussion, exchange information and points of view, tell stories, perform religious services and so on'. Hirschman connects the social organisation of the meal with the organisation of the Greek polis. While the ancient Greek banquet has its origins in religious sacrifice, sharing in eating comes to define a political community. 'All those who eat become citizens… The city emerges because it eats beef'.[22] As does the meeting, however many vegetarian options are taken.

And where there's eating there's sex. We should account for the erotics of meeting, too. What is international is also exotic, exciting, enticing. The cross-national meeting is a space outside time or sequence where habitual social roles are suspended and no-one quite knows what the rules are; it should be no surprise that all kinds of communion take place there.

She talks about the research she is doing in psychology, investigating learning styles. She is all correlations and hypotheses. I say I'm investigating the equivalent of learning styles in government. Her brow furrows as she wonders whether I've misunderstood or she has. Then light in her eyes as I elaborate, and she makes sense. A smile of recognition, of connection, in some way of seduction.[23]

There's more to be said, but perhaps not here. For now, note only that the experience is fed by the buzz of recognition, understanding, communication - what Barthes called 'the thrill of meaning' - which the meeting is designed to foster and support.[24]

4 construction

The meeting builds up and is built up out of myriad interactions. What we think of as learning is constructed from – consists in – sets of communications. In this way, the process of learning is expressed in the developing language of the meeting.

The Four Country Conference was an annual seminar attended by health policy makers and academic researchers from the US and Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK between 1995 and 2005. Derived in turn from an earlier series of meetings held at Ditchley House in England in the early 1990s, the Four Country Conferences expressed a need 'to continue regular debate, to organize this debate around a semipermanent cast, and to structure it around the experience of countries where comparison made intellectual sense'. Its organisers reflect on 'the build-up of understanding of the perspectives of others that went

[21] Note that the very word 'symposium' comes from the Greek, meaning 'drinking together'.
[22] Durand (1926), cited by Schmitt Pantel (1992) and then by Hirschman (1998, p 22).
[23] field note, 21 September 2003.
[24] *'le frisson du sens'* (Barthes 1977, p 97).

beyond standard international meetings. One cannot emphasise this point too much. The accumulation of factual knowledge, shared understanding of basic concepts and mutual trust (even while allowing for diverging views and perspectives) that the repeated meetings have permitted are rare features of the international trade of ideas in health care'.[25]

communication

As the meeting proceeds, presentations are made and discussed in turn. The first purpose of questions is to clarify what has been said, to deepen the effects of articulation, of recognition, and to reduce those of confusion described above. To the extent that each participant is at different times both presenter and listener, cross-national discussion becomes something like a 'mutual consultancy'. For the meeting is a kind of interview, though its structure changes as it progresses. Following a presentation, its author is typically questioned by members of the audience. In more open discussion, observations and assertions are made often without any specific addressee. The meeting is a group interview of a particularly recursive kind: it is an interview by a group of the group itself. What is going on is that the group itself is trying to determine what it thinks and knows.

As the discussion proceeds, themes begin to emerge that organise similarities and differences. Successive presentations become implicit commentaries on those they follow: discussions come to deal not only with the case at hand, but with the accumulation of evidence through a series of instances.[26] This process serves to isolate what is essential in a problem or policy from what is circumstantial (note that what is 'essential' here is not something real or pre-ordained, but something negotiated by the parties to the discussion). It involves redefining case material in generic terms, noting 'themes'. This may be by way of reducing the various elements of different cases to their lowest common denominator or it may be a process of much more creative thinking, a way of seeing things differently.

Interestingly, learning by talking may often be done vicariously. We gain much by observing or fringing on dialogues and exchanges conducted by others.[27] In this way, being at a meeting is sometimes something like a 'cognitive apprenticeship' (Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989). More direct engagement in dialogue, meanwhile, makes for a different order of communication and learning.[28] To begin with, partners to a conversation or dialogue (in effect, a relationship) talk about each other, about the things they have brought separately to that situation. Over time, they come to talk increasingly about things they have thought of through their talking; the dialogue

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[25] Marmor, T R and Okma, K G H (2000) 'Taking stock and looking forward: what have we learned from the Four Country Conferences on Health Care Policies and Health Care Reforms?', in *Four (and more) Country Conference 1999. Conference report, Sydney, Australia*, Australia: Commonwealth Department of Health, p 8, p17, emphasis in original.

[26] 'Learning in free group discussion is a process of identifying, through verbalization, the associations between schemata, so that the new information can be dissociated from those schemata with which it is automatically associated, and can be seen to be potentially relevant to many schemata, instead of to a few only' (Abercrombie 1989, pp 79-80).

[27] The faq is a good example. For more, see McKendree et al (1998), and compare Lave and Wenger's 1991) concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation'.

[28] Dialogue is a central or fundamental educational form. It was the core of the Socratic method, and forms much of the rationale of the seminar as used in contemporary higher education. A number of writers treat dialogue as something different from, more or better than other kinds of collaborative communication such as discussion or negotiation. Much contemporary theorising centres on Bakhtin, for whom 'Truth is not found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (Bakhtin, M M, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit Visser (n d). For an introduction to similar conceptions used by Freire, Gadamer, Habermas and Bohm, see Smith (2001).

becomes self-generating.[29] Participants in a dialogue are not only learning from each other, but also learning something new. In this way, the meeting is generative, constitutive not merely constative. Something is being made in the process of meeting which is more than what was brought to it.

Using a theatrical metaphor, Patricia Shaw (2002, ch 5) thinks of the way discussion emerges and evolves as a kind of ensemble improvisation. Weick (1995) refers to sensemaking as jazz, also an improvised, ensemble form. But what is it that is artful or creative about meeting and learning?

language

Learning in meetings is done in and through language, not least because different participants are members of different language communities (natural, disciplinary, professional). Here, differences of natural language (English, French, Amharic) are probably least significant. Native speakers know the difficulty of listening to those working in their second (or third or fourth) language (though they note, too, the felicitous word or phrase that only the non-native speaker might come upon). By the same token, speakers of any natural language will recognise the anaesthetic effect of powerpoint.

Meanwhile, discussion frequently involves coining new terms in which to express what has been newly recognized or identified. For it (discussion) turns on the use or production of categories to describe cases, which is something we usually do no more than half-consciously. Cross-national talk requires a creative, slightly more abstract grammar and vocabulary than the ones we might ordinarily use to talk about cases we know to those who also inhabit them. Discussion is realized in what might be described as a 'third code', or a language of translation, and this is also partly why it often seems difficult, alien, disorientating as well as exhilarating.

Bion (1961, p 187) sees the development of language in a group as evidence of high mental activity. And there is yet a third order of sophistication in the way the language of the meeting evolves. As Lester and Piore explain, initial communications are primitive, relatively clear and unambiguous, while later ones allow for increasing ambiguity: 'Language development evolves, in other words, *toward the creation of interpretive space'* (Lester and Piore 2004, p 71, emphasis in original). This is entirely consistent with the transcripts Mead and Byers worked with, which revealed 'fragmented, ambiguous, incomplete sentences', pointing to a 'special kind of communication' having taken place (Mead and Byers 1968, p 13). In learning by meeting as in language learning, the mark of improvement is the ability to distinguish between simply not understanding and understanding what is ambiguous.

5 resolution

How do meetings end? They often end with proposals to meet again (meetings make meetings) or to otherwise stay in touch, to some how fix or hold on to some powerful, elusive experience. Participants speak hopefully of newsletters and email discussion lists, webpages and databases. Meanwhile, the questions asked in and by the meeting, the issues it has raised, the prospects advanced and the uncertainties and instabilities it has generated must be resolved in some way. This is the function of the report, sometimes something as elevated as an international 'declaration', more often a summary or statement which may do no more than record (literally, document) the fact that the meeting has taken place.

[29] See Zenon Bankowski's account of the seminar becoming self-referential (Bankowski 1996, pp 66-67).

This paper has developed a conception of the meeting here as a complex system of interactions between elements, where those elements are communications, not individuals or agencies. It is a process, not a thing, event or episode; its properties are emergent, not defined *a priori*. As they close, the issue arises of how this sense of emergence might be sustained.

> *Towards the end of 1999, around 30 public health officials, researchers and representatives of interested organisations met in Gothenburg, Sweden to discuss Health Impact Assessment, then a new policy instrument being tried out in a number of different contexts around the world.*[30] *The meeting was part of a broader HIA project led by WHO's European Centre for Health Policy. 'The project is a practically oriented learning-by-doing exercise involving many partners. It is not expected to produce "guidelines" carved in stone, but to provide a flexible framework to encourage a broad exchange of information and a channel for the critical examination of experience'.*[31] *The discussion was led by a paper which described some of the different models being explored in Bielefeld, Germany; by the British Medical Association; in Merseyside, England, and by Swedish local authorities.*[32] *The paper also reviewed the health impact of the EU's Common Agriculture Policy, and looked at Social Impact Assessment in the US. It worked by comparing and contrasting different cases, abstracting from them a number of issues for discussion. On this basis what is described as a consensus paper was produced.*[33] *The consensus paper is described as a 'living document': "The approach presented here will be discussed in a number of meetings and networks and, most importantly, will be tested and evaluated in practice in a number of pilot projects. As a result it will be revised and updated in a continuous process of improvement".*[34] *The paper was subsequently widely distributed and presented at a number of international and national level meetings, and has also been translated into languages other than English.*

Reporting is the end of a process of writing as much as talking; it is writing which has made meeting possible. For meetings are realised at all only by the circulation and interrelationship of texts and documents, such as advertisements, invitations, emails, abstracts, timetables, briefing and discussion papers, flipcharts, minutes and press releases. Meetings are produced through texts, and they draw on other texts, some of which stand for other meetings. They are both generated by texts and generate new ones. These texts make sense in relation to each other, which is to say that they make sense *of* each other (Freeman 2006b).[35]

Moreover, once people no longer sit round a table (Arendt, above), it is the text which mediates between them. The report does two things: first, it tells the group what it is by what it has done (it turns the meeting into a group), and second, it opens connections with other groups. Like the papers presented in the course of the meeting, these processes are fundamentally connected. For a document is not just a conduit of knowledge and ideas, but a nexus of social practice (Brown and Duguid 1996). Documents serve to coordinate behaviour as well as communicate information. They provide groups with a common language and vocabulary, helping them express to others what it is they are trying to do. In this way, the report mirrors the function of the presentations made at an earlier stage of the meeting: to the extent that articulation is both expression and connection, the report of a meeting is its collective re-articulation.

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[30] *Health Impact Assessment: from theory to practice*. Report on the Leo Kaprio Workshop, Göteborg, 28-30 October 1999, NHV-Report 2000:9, Göteborg: Nordic School of Public Health
[31] Ritsatakis, A (2001) 'Developing an approach to Health Impact Assessment', ibid, p 3.
[32] Lehto, J and Ritsatakis, A (2001) 'Health Impact Assessment as a tool for intersectoral health policy', ibid.
[33] 'Health Impact Assessment: main concepts and suggested approach. Gothenburg consensus paper', December 1999, ibid; <url at echp>.
[34] paper version, p 91.
[35] Alison Mohr (2003) describes the way in which the first Australian consensus conference on gene technology in the food chain used a network of documents to coordinate and stabilise the myriad activity which converged on and in the meeting.

Even at the most mundane level, 'concrete human action, know-how embodied in practice, persists and is transmitted only if it becomes symbolic. To preserve its form, one must change its form – and then reconstitute it' (Weick 1995, p 125). Minutes of meetings, plans, statements, agreements and press releases are all 'symbolic encodings' which enable actions to be reproduced in time. Jerome Bruner (2000), drawing on Meyerson, writes of 'externalisation'. Meyerson's insight is that the purpose of collective activity is to produce works, *oeuvres* which achieve an existence of their own. Bruner notes that the collective engagement entailed in creating such works - a process of suggestion, negotiation and experiment - in effect creates the community which is in turn required to produce them: 'Works and works-in-progress create *shared* and *negotiable* ways of thinking in a group'. The text and the group are mutually constitutive; each is defined in terms of the other.

What this implies, following the argument of the preceding section (construction, above), is that a key purpose of the document is not to fix meaning, but to make continuing interpretation possible, to reproduce and extend the interactions it promotes. Similarly, the purpose of those interactions is to reproduce the text; not to replicate or copy it but to help it live on through adaptation and interpretation.

conclusion

How, then, should we think of learning by meeting? We might begin by returning to the different perspectives on learning outlined early in this paper.

Those who attend meetings do so for a purpose. What matters here is that the instrumentality and autonomy accorded the rational actor is a condition of learning. The rationalist perspective is valid, but provides only a partial account of what goes on in meetings of the kind I describe here. For the purpose of the meeting is to discover purposes (in the same way as we shop to discover what we want or need). What is brought to meetings are not lessons, but fragments of experience subject to interpretation by all those present, including the subjects of that experience. Lessons are collectively drawn and derived: they are opportunities for interpretation before they are guides to action.

The meeting itself is an institution. Meetings are normal things: participants almost invariably know what to do there. Meetings are fuzzy sets of variations on standard behaviours, so standard that we take them for granted.[36] The learning I have described here takes place in a particular institutional form but, importantly, one that is outside normal organizational routine. This implies, in turn, that certain kinds of meeting might be more about learning than others, and that these will be those that follow the fewest rules with the widest range of interpretations and applications. To that extent, perhaps there is no 'meeting itself'.

This suggests, in turn that the meeting is at the same time a social construct, a frame or form peculiarly generative of other social constructs. In this paper, I have tried to indicate here the construction of what is being learned as it is being learned, including the rules for meeting. And somewhere behind or within the social construct is a distinctive form of practice, a process or pattern of thought-in-action. It is fundamental to policy making because it is the means by which policy makers and practitioners 'negotiate the world' (Wagenaar and Cook 2003, p 143). In their introduction to ideas about practice in public policy, Wagenaar and Cook argue that it is '[A]n important and distinct dimension of politics, with its own logic (pragmatic, purposeful), its own standards of knowing (interpretative, holistic, more know-how than know-that), its own orientation

[36] We should think of meetings as 'normal' things, which is to allow that they may also be normative. The international meeting is culturally bounded in the same way as the international community.

towards the world (interactive, moral, emotional), and its own image of society (as a constellation of interdependent communities)' (Wagenaar and Cook 2003, p 141). This is as good an account of meeting as it is of practice, and the best invitation we could have to think of meetings in this way.

Where does this leave the practitioner or participant? Our common sense of the meeting would have it as something like a market, where knowledge goods are traded and exchanged. Some package of knowledge or experience, or both, is brought to the table by the seller, debated among potential buyers, and taken or left. This conception is ultimately mechanistic, assuming that what is or might be learned exists independently of the meeting and prior to it. But another way of thinking would have the meeting as an arena of production, more like a factory, or perhaps a garden. Policy knowledge does not exist somewhere else in finished form, ready to be transferred, but is finished or even produced in the act of transfer. The knowledge with which the meeting is concerned is the output of a series of communications, not its input. This conception is organic: the issue is one of germination, grafting, and fertilization as much as 'dissemination'. The meeting is dialogic, not monologic.

What are the implications of this second way of thinking? Ordinary assumptions about cross-national learning are largely mechanistic, though the practice of communication and exchange is often one much better described as organic.[37] This means that the theory espoused by a participant may often run counter to his or her theory-in-use. Opportunities for learning may be missed because they go unseen, because the learning which is done is difficult to understand, express and report in the terms ordinarily available for doing so.

Learning by meeting is more like language learning than learning facts, figures or tables. In essence, the argument here is that learning is done in a 'third code', or language of translation. The definition (which is a redefinition) of its subject matter is often the end-point of discussion: meetings are fundamentally concerned with the definition of the problem they are designed to address, and it is in this sense that they can be said to be performative. We construct common objects of interest through discussion: we learn *with* others as much as from others.[38]

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[37] The terminology is from Burns and Stalker (1961), who presumably have it from Durkheim.
[38] This is Joe White's phrase (White 2000).

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