

*Taking Stock of Learning in
Environmental Governance:
Opportunities for Translating
Theory to Practice*

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JEPP@21 Workshop, Berlin September 9 -10, 2019

What is
learning and
what do we
know about it
in
environmental
governance?

Learning in environmental governance recognized as critical for improving processes and outcomes

A growing body of scholarship focusing on learning

- For instance, two special issues recently in *JEPP*

Diverse theoretical frameworks and approaches guiding scholars

- Policy learning; social learning; learning for adaptive governance

Learning is a process of acquiring, translating and disseminating new information, as well as outcomes such as changes in beliefs, policies, or programs

- Can involve multiple “types”
- Can be shaped by various factors
- May or may not lead to improved outcomes

Why distill the
practical
lessons from
the scholarship
on learning in
environmental
governance?

Various attempts to synthesize, apply, and compare the insights

- Feindt, 2010; Heikkila and Gerlak, 2013; Newig et al., 2016, and many, many others

Few or no attempts to synthesize practical insights, but these insights can be valuable in various ways

- Decades of evidence from real world experiments, venues, and processes
- Many environmental governance challenges are so severe, or complex, that they demand learning
- Can provide lessons for how we design institutions and manage governance processes
- Environmental governance practitioners are the agents of learning in environmental governance

Who can benefit from these lessons?

Policymakers, regulators and natural resource managers who implement environmental policies programs

Staff or leaders who devise or coordinate cross-jurisdictional programs

Various governance actors outside of government – ranging from non-profits to think-tanks to donors and funders

Certain practitioners might have more capacity than others to implement these types of ideas

Lessons on institutionalizing learning in environmental governance

Three areas of focus, drawn from review of the scholarship

- (1) Importance of face-to-face dialogue that is open and ongoing;
- (2) The need for cross-scale linkages that support learning; and
- (3) Investments in institutional rules, norms and shared strategies for intentional learning

#1 Face-to-face dialogue that is open and ongoing

Foundational to the idea of social learning

Helps facilitate facilitates more interactions and collaboration, which improves capacity for acquisition and dissemination of information

Provides opportunities for re-framing, where participants can question their assumptions and build on frames of reference of others

Requires a process of dialogue that is procedurally fair, or one that disrupts unequal power relationships, and allows for investments in trust-building over the long-term

Strategies for practitioners for building dialogue

Face-to-face dialogue

- Workshops or committees
- Interactive processes
- Site visits or field trips
- Scenario building, or scenario-based modeling
- Participatory modeling and cognitive mapping

Open dialogue

- Draw in a wide variety of stakeholders
- More top-down or closed structures can stifle learning
- Openness is also about transparency and knowledge diversity

Ongoing dialogue

- Continuous interaction, deliberation and reframing embedded
- Time to effectively engage participants

#2 Cross-scale linkages that foster learning

Learning can emerge at multiple geographic and spatial scales, and interactions, which is both a challenge and opportunity

People also learn from the individual to collective and the interrelationships between individual and collective levels are important

People engage in multi-level networks, both informal and formal in environmental governance

Strategies for practitioners for enhancing cross-scale linkages

Building strong networks

- Networks improve interplay between different levels
- Polycentric network structures allow for diverse connections through shared goals, rules, or actors
- Communication pathways that allow for feedback loops

Informal connections

- Informal activities can help improve participants understandings of each other and find ways to share ideas

Cross-organizational peer groups and exchanges

- Multi-functional learning platforms
- Peer evaluation and exchange of good practices

#3 Formalized venues, rules and shared routines that foster intentional learning

Need to go beyond “single-loop” learning, or simply changing a particular management strategy to deeper forms of learning (e.g., double-loop and triple-loop learning)

Need to develop systems, rules and processes that facilitate learning how to learn, and even changing fundamental assumptions and world

Deeper forms of learning align with the idea of transformative learning, where learning is institutionalized within a governance process

Strategies for practitioners for institutionalizing learning

Venues matter

- Collaborative venues facilitate open dialogue
- Task forces, special committees, or other organizational forms can be bridging organizations

Check your rules of the game

- Institutional rules can create and mitigate power structures and differentials building boundary objects may improve learning

Build collective memory

- To store knowledge or access information
- Avoid loss of organisational memory
- Develop shared routines, collective “memory” or shared knowledge

Mitigating limitations and harnessing learning opportunities

Limitations to learning

- Individual cognitive constraints, existing policy beliefs, organizational capacity, and power differentials
- Not all people learn in environmental governance
- Learning does not necessarily result in improved environmental governance outcomes

Harnessing learning opportunities

- Institutionalizing learning processes that may help, long-term, build capacity for deeper learning
- Strengthen networks
- Refocusing the power dynamics
- Structured facilitation

Next steps for the scholarship

Go beyond synthesizing the lessons

Study the perspectives of practitioners

- What are their differing demands?
- How do they perceive learning?

Analyze the governance constellations

- Who is learning what and how?
- What is blocking learning?

Do more engaged scholarship with practitioners and
build co-learning communities