Smart Urban Intermediaries

Connecting people.
Changing communities.

Trans-national learning

22 October 2018

About the project

Smart Urban Intermediaries (SmartUrbI) is a collaborative research programme (2017-2019) co-led by Tilburg University, University of Edinburgh, University of Birmingham and Roskilde University. It is funded by JPI Urban Europe (P/693443) through NWO, Innovation Fund Denmark, and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ES/R002991/1).

SmartUrbI works with a wide range of public, third and community sector partners across the four countries. The purpose is to improve understanding and support for people who make a difference in urban neighbourhood (aka 'smart urban intermediaries'). The project entails collaboration across 'local labs' in Birmingham, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Glasgow. The labs are sites for co-inquiry between researchers and practitioners exploring barriers and enablers to smart urban development and social innovation. The project will also entail study visits to Portugal and Poland, and a final conference in Denmark in September 2019.

About this working paper

This working paper was co-written by the SmartUrbI team to inform the development of the research, and it's part of a series of papers that reflect on-going thinking rather than final project findings. Questions or comments can be sent to: smarturbi@gmail.com

About the research team

For more information about the project please see our website, where you can also subscribe to the newsletter: http://smart-urban-intermediaries.com/. Follow us on Twitter: @Smart_Urb_I

Rationale

The SmartUrbI project is trans-European in scope and reach: its underlying rationale, funding, research design and anticipated impact and dissemination are all premised on working across local and national contexts. Further, our engagement to date with co-operation partners and wider stakeholders, the emphasis on SmartUrbI providing a learning experience and generating learning that is relevant and practical in their everyday work is a central motivation. As such, our ability to deliver insights and recommendations that resonate across contexts will be a key measure of our successful delivery of this project.

Yet, ensuring useful and relevant learning across these contexts is a highly ambitious goal. Theories of learning across contexts, whether inter-organisationally or trans-nationally, are fragmented and substantively limited. Existing literature struggles to describe, analyse, predict or explain how and why learning takes place or to meaningfully engage with the debates and challenges emerging from policy and practice (Brannan 2010). Furthermore, whilst the challenges in learning across contexts are noted and emphasised, strategies to pre-empt and mitigate such challenges are lacking. Policy and academic debates on learning are therefore, 'either stifled or polarised between unquestioning acceptance and outright rejection of the notion of learning from others, with little theoretical or empirical analysis to stimulate discussion' (Brannan 2010).

This paper will seek to position SmartUrbI within these debates; proposing an alignment with interpretive or social theories of learning, as appropriate to the research objectives and design of the project.

Topic overview

The SmartUrbI project draws upon an interpretive epistemology emphasising the socially constructed and situated agency and practice of smart urban intermediaries. This positioning has a collorary in theories of learning, aligning SmartUrbI with social or interpretive theories of learning. This alignment facilitates a link to be made with broader debates on the nature of knowledge, emphasising the significance of tacit as well as explicit knowledge. Freeman's work on 'epistemological bricolage' (2007) may be useful not only in understanding how learning may occur within SmartUrbI but in understanding how smart urban intermediaries develop their practice over time. Social or interpretive theories of learning understanding learning as fundamentally collective and situated within practice (Yanow 1999). This emphasis on a collective 'learning culture' draws heavily on Wenger's communities of practice.

This section will introduce different conceptions of learning, including linking to Polyani's typology of knowledge (1967) and Freeman's more recent work on policy learning (2007). Before moving onto the related idea of a learning culture and communities of practice.

Conceptions of learning

Distinctions may be drawn between three theories or conceptions of learning: rational; cognitive or institutional; and social or interpretive:

- Rational or technical theories conceive of learning as fundamentally about information processing in a systematic search for and adoption of the best solutions (e.g. Argyris and Schon, 1978; Huber, 1991; Levitt and March, 1988). Learning therefore entails the acquisition and application of new knowledge as a means to improve practices and outcomes. The manner in which such knowledge is acquired, selected, and incorporated is presumed to be straightforward and in direct response to the needs of the individual or organisation. It is not affected by beliefs and values, ideology and politics, or environmental circumstances;
- Cognitive theories recognise that learning is mediated by both individual learning processes and the structures and practices of organisations (e.g. Heclo, 1974; Simon, 1991; Gioia et al, 1996; Harris, 1996; Levitt and March, 1988; Hall, 1993);
- Finally, social or interpretive theories of learning view knowledge as something which is socially constructed through practice and interaction (e.g. Fischer, 2003; Brown and Duguid, 2001; Weick, 1995; Elkjaer, 1999; Araujo, 1998), closely related to Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice' (1998). Learning is therefore an essentially collective process of creating meaning and one which is contextually situated (Freeman, 2007), arguably precluding transfer elsewhere (Rashman et al, 2008). This conception of learning assumes that knowledge is subjective and that various interpretations exist. As such, "Learning proceeds through sharing interpretations of events and through reflection on these interpretations, which leads to adjustments in operation or changes in policies or procedures," (Mahler, 1997; p523).

Learning and the nature of knowledge

The nature of learning may also be determined by the nature of knowledge. According to Polyani's typology (1967), knowledge can be defined as either 'explicit' or 'tacit'. The focus of learning has tended to be on "[e]xplicit 'know-what' knowledge [that] can be articulated, codified and communicated," (Rashman et al, 2008). Such knowledge is considered to be easy to "de-embed" (Thomas et al, 2001) from its context, develop into a generic model, and transfer to different contexts. However, several authors (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2001), drawing on Polyani, have cited the importance of the 'tacit dimension' or 'know-how' knowledge which cannot be easily expressed, removed from its context, or shared. This reflects the fact that such knowledge is partly located within the values, beliefs, and cultures of individuals and organisations and is developed through shared practice and knowledge (Brown and Duguid, 2001). Emphasis on the role of tacit knowledge is often closely associated with social theories of learning which emphasise interaction, shared understanding, and collective knowledge creation. Acknowledging the importance of tacit elements of knowledge suggests that learning or transfer will be more complex than

rational theories allow for, with potential implications for the manner and means by which knowledge is shared and the extent to which it can be shared.

Learning as 'epistemological bricolage"[i]

Freeman (2007) proffers an alternative means of understanding the processes of learning which largely dispenses with the notion of 'stages' emphasised in rational or cognitive accounts. His empirical research found that learning was more ad hoc and difficult to identify than traditional organisational learning theory allows. Instead, learning is described as "epistemological bricolage": a process of piecing together, in which tools (knowledge, skills, and ideas) are assembled along the way from various sources and retained until some future point where they may prove useful. Learning is thereby construed as something which takes place over time and involves drawing upon and combining ideas and information in creative and innovative ways. It is often then applied on an opportunistic basis and in selective ways as particular situations arise. Freeman locates this powerful metaphor for learning within wider theories of policy making, specifically Cohen et al's 'garbage can' model of organisational change (1972) and Kingdon's 'policy streams' theory of policy making (1995). Such processes may appear chaotic and certainly complicate attempts at documenting or tracing learning. They may also question the assumed intentionality of learning and attest to the often informal nature of learning or where learning is a by-product of other forms of interaction or everyday activities.

Learning culture

Culture refers to norms, values, and ways of thinking which pervade and persist on an individual and organisational level. Particular focus has been given in cognitive and interpretive theories of learning to organisational culture and the way in which this "common frame of reference" (Mahler, 1997; p527) influences how actors make sense of or interpret information, and therefore what they learn from it. Indeed, Yanow (1999) asserts that a cultural approach conceives of learning as fundamentally collective and situated within practice. Of particular relevance here is Freeman's (2007) ideational institutional model and its 'habits of attention' which determine how information is perceived and applied. Sims (1999) describes organisational learning in terms of changes in 'organisational memory' as represented by stories and myths. Organisational culture, akin to structure, is often portrayed as an impediment to learning and change, based on premises about resistance to change or inability to accommodate new ideas. Accordingly, Argyris and Schon (1978) assert that it is the effects of organisational culture which often lead to limited, 'single-loop' learning at the expense of more radical forms. However, aspects of culture can also stimulate, facilitate, or support learning. Organisational culture can provide stability and a point of reference in the context of change (Weick, 1996). A 'learning culture' in which there is a climate of trust, acceptance of risk-taking, and openness to new ideas, is argued to be paramount to 'successful' learning.

Community of Practice

This emphasis on a collective 'learning culture' draws heavily on ideas 'communities of practice' (CoPs). This nuanced and divergently understood idea may be summarised as 'communities created for sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, with a membership committed to sharing knowledge and co-learning' (Hart et al 2013, p 2): Wenger and Snyder's description of CoPs as 'groups of people informally bounded together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (2000, p. 139–140) emphasises their voluntary origins; people in CoPs want to work together in a way that enables them to 'share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems'(Wenger,McDermot and Snyder, 2002, p. 5). De Jong and Edelenbos described a learning network in terms of a 'Community of Practice': 'a safe haven where people can not only express their opinions but also revise them. The result is a group or community with its own identity, its own rules, its own modalities and its own language. The members learn from one another's experience and gradually develop a common frame of reference, enabling them to speed up the learning process' (2007, p. 691).

Challenges in learning across contexts

The vast and varied literature on learning across contexts refers, often in passing, to the importance of considering differences in contexts and conditions, but few go beyond these references and there is little detail – either theoretical or empirical – of how such a process takes place. Similarly, there is an absence of neat, theoretically informed yet empirically verified good practices for learning across contexts. Instead, what is offered is a mixture of general principles and conditions for effective learning, derived mostly from theory and assumption; and a small number of very specific, empirical examples of such learning.

Wenger (1998) describes the core features of a community of practice (CoP) as: 'mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise'. This understanding has informed theorising on CoPs that assumes mono-professional contexts (Hart et al 2013, p. 2). Hart et al (2013) highlight the need to give greater consideration to the specific issues raised by working across multiple and disparate contexts in relation to knowledge production and the development of democratic learning spaces. These challenges include:

1. Lack of consideration of differences in contexts and conditions
   Tendency to over-simplify to facilitate explanation and aid knowledge-sharing, which risks failing to capture important contextual factors.

2. Cross-disciplinary interaction;
   Within the research team as well as between researchers and practitioners. The conflicting objectives and different agendas, goals, discourse and practices that this suggests.

3. Power imbalances and inequities;
Notably between researchers and practitioners, but may be manifested in different ways as well. Hart et al's example of a community-university partnership highlights how 'the power/authority dynamics that might act across a community university boundary generate a relationship between "othering" and knowledge' (Hart et al 2013, p 3).

4. Lack of trust and reciprocity;

5. Resistance to discarding old ways of thinking and problem-solving.

Good practice for learning across contexts

This section again reviews the literature to identify good practice for learning across contexts. The table provides a means for grouping suggested good practices and identifying if they may assist in addressing the identified challenges.

Good practice	**1.**[ii]	**2.**	**3.**	**4.**	**5.**
Explicit value given to learning within the project Commitment/ investment Learning across contexts takes time, resources, commitment and skills Commitment to being a collaborative learning network Building in times to reflect upon and evaluate learning			x	x	x
Mobilisation Mobilising the 'right' partners from the beginning to secure participation and 'buy in' from wider communities	x	x			
Actors' orientations Motivated (expectation of benefits, alignment with objectives, invested interest) Culture of curiousity Openness to new ideas/ conscious interest in gaining different perspectives Mutual willingness to adapt and attempt to translate	x	x	x	x	x

	Respect for a diversity of views Commitment to exploring tensions Tolerance of mutual criticism Able and willing to learn as individuals, join in mutual learning Mix of competitive and cooperative action orientations					
	Active leadership and facilitation Planning, coordination and management of the learning process Commitment from leadership to learning	x	x	x	x	x
	Knowledge/ network/ boundary brokers Mediation skills Understanding of different domains and ability to translate across them	x	x	x	x	x
	Common vision/ unifying purpose Initial efforts/ strong participation in the early phases to create a common and shared vision Sense of community and network identity Building a consensus around a view that transcends individual organisations		x	x	x	x
	Attention to difference Explore similarity and difference Be explicit about differences, explore those differences, create a dialogue about difference	x	x	x	x	
	Informality Informal networks emerging from existing relationships Informality with lack of formal rules and hierarchical structure to promote equality of opportunity and participation Informal opportunities to connect		x	x	x	
	Collaborative learning relationships Safe space to effectively listen to each other, share knowledge and skils, explore new ideas, learn, adapt and apply the knowledge they gain Relationships based in trust,	x	x	x	x	x

communication, openness, equality, partnership and reciprocity Frequent, regular, intensive, sustained, face-to-face interaction and dialogue to enable a mutual understanding of practices and contexts Challenge, share experiences, surface assumptions, mutual learning, openness Interaction between the interpretive frameworks and practices of participants/ surfacing and testing mental models Intensive discussion of single issues/ emphasis on process not exemplars					
'Many sided' learning Participants learn from each other's knowledge and experience Locus of learning is the network itself: new knowledge is created in the process of interaction between the participants resulting in changes to the network: shared meanings, changes in interpretation, frameworks or in how the network operates	x	x	x	x	x
Language and symbols Effective, preferably co-constructed mediating tools or artefacts Use of unifying concepts with generic appeal but flexible in interpretation	x	x		x	
Wider learning Should be carefully designed as part of the research process with inputs from all stakeholders and clarity about intended outcomes.				x	x

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Endnotes

[i] NB: Freeman's concept of 'epistemological bricolage' (2007) has clear resonance with existing characterisations of practices that are relevant to SmartUrbI, for example Lowndes' 'institutional entrepreneur' and the associated strategies of 'remembering', 'borrowing' and 'sharing'. It also has the potential to offer a more fine-grained understanding of how the practice of smart urban intermediaries is developed over-time and to bring the notion of learning to the fore in our analysis. This feels like an under-developed aspect of existing research and clearly relates to our RQ1 and 2]

[ii] See numbering in previous section

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