“No time for nonsense!”: The organization of learning and its limits in evolving governance

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Abstract
This essay introduces and frames the contributions to the special issue on learning and co-evolution in governance. It develops the argument that learning, dark learning and non-learning are necessarily entwined in governance, moreover, entwined in a pattern unique to each governance configuration and path. What can be learned collectively for the common good, what kind of knowledge and learning can be strategically used and shamelessly abused, and which forms of knowledge remain invisible, intentionally and unintentionally, emerges in a history of co-evolution of actors and institutions, power and knowledge, in governance. Learning becomes possible in a particular form of management of observation, of transparency and opacity, where contingency is precariously mastered by governance systems expected to provide certainty for communities.

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Introduction
Do we know, after decades of debate and discussion, after producing piles of policy documents, what sustainability is, and how to get there? Or do we mostly know what it’s not and what not to do? Just as medieval theologists couldn’t figure out if God should be approached via action or reflection, and if he could be known through positive attributes or through negative transcendence (Carabine, 2015), policy and administration scholars are still grappling with processes of learning in governance. Can we achieve a perfect society by improving governance, and which forms of knowledge and learning do we need for that? Do we learn mostly by stumbling and hitting walls or rather by carefully observing gaps in our knowledge and rationally filling them? Furthermore, is the God of a perfect society to be found through governance, with the Devil lurking outside, in the oilfields or amidst the ignorant masses, or is the Devil the governance system itself?

The role of learning in governance has received quite a bit of attention in a variety of disciplines. This attention is not self-evident. Sometimes it appeared as if policies, ideas, plans, practices, and technologies just emerge and move around. In some literatures, they were portrayed as traveling, diffusing, and disseminating themselves without looking too much at the learning processes involved (Howlett & Rayner, 2008; Howlett, 2012; Sabatier, 2018 for critiques). In more recent work on policy mobilities, the transformation of ideas under pressure of different contexts is more clearly conceptualized (Temenos & McCann, 2013). While literature under the heading of “learning” is slowly moving away from its rosy outlook on collaborative learning in governance, and more doubtful about aspirations by experts and their bureaucrat friends to steer the learning process. Etienne Wenger, one of the founders of social learning theory, warns explicitly that it is not a political theory (Wenger, 2010).

Clearly, it makes sense to pause and bracket our aspirations. What is needed is a more reflexive outlook on the processes of learning in governance. Given the proliferation and confusion of learning perspectives, it is useful to privilege, for the moment, the analytic over the normative, and to carefully dissect assumptions, aspirations and instrumentalization. All knowledge, each form of rhetoric, and each mode and site of learning can be used and abused (see e.g., the analysis by Jackson, 2017, on the success of “learning organization” rhetoric). The unpredictable character of learning processes
and their distributed nature (in governance) over time and space, make it hard to steer and focus learning on a particular process design, on a particular site of learning, or on a certain group or perspective (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2018; Vaughan & Rafanell, 2012). Steering toward a particular outcome is even harder. Housing affordability comes to mind. Learning within the governance of housing is often at cross-purposes—processes of learning in governance certainly contributed to development of homeownership societies but also to global financial crisis in 2008 (Rolnik, 2013).

This special issue takes the position that co-evolutionary approaches to governance can elucidate useful insights about the possibilities and limits of learning in governance. If we understand governance as a product of co-evolution, however understood, then this implies a direction, and a unique set of enabling and limiting factors for learning. It brings attention to the various ways knowledge is interrelated with actors and institutions and how these interrelations influence processes of learning (Beunen et al., 2016; Van Assche et al., 2013). The forms of knowledge and expertise that are present in a governance system will put a strong mark on the development of new insights and ideas (Armitage et al., 2012; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007).

Conversely, if certain forms of knowledge are absent in the governance system, it is unlikely that they will be the basis for forms of learning that start from the concepts and modes of reasoning characterizing that knowledge (Dunlop, 2017; Newell et al., 2009). If a perspective on the future, revolving around a certain common good, is not present, then knowledge associated with that common good is not likely to be valued, except when it plays a role in the routines reproducing the system (Van Assche et al., 2016; cf Luhmann, 2018). If one actor has a very different idea regarding a particular common good, deviating from the consensus idea structuring governance, this can inspire forms of counterstrategy and counter-learning (Lemke, 2015). Or governance can embrace a non-articulation of long-term perspectives from which a productive focus on negative learning, learning by failure, can develop (Parviainen & Eriksson, 2006; Van Assche et al., 2021).

In the framing article of this special issue, Van Assche et al. (2022) present a co-evolutionary perspective on governance and develop a typology of learning forms which can take place in such framework. They consider the governance of a community as always unique and marked by a unique path (Beunen et al., 2016), in which different forms of learning relate and play out. Their perspective is mostly analytic, in the sense that they do not privilege one form of learning or one kind of outcome over another. Yet, they do emphasize the position of one form of learning—that is, dialectical learning—as ideally catalytic of decision-making in democratic societies. They appreciate the importance of comparative learning, learning from experts,
and of learning from experiments, and they present learning through self-reflection as helpful for all the others. Yet, they present dialectical learning—that is, the construction of new knowledge in and through discussion and deliberation—as a step which cannot be omitted in democratic polities (cf. Van Assche et al., 2020). For Van Assche et al. (2022), each community will be marked by a unique pattern, but also a unique interplay between these different types of learning, while co-evolution makes it hard to impose a different mode of learning or a different form of knowledge from the outside. Dialectical learning can be considered the oldest form of learning theorized (Gonzalez, 1998) yet it vanished from political and policy theory in the skirmishes between modernists and post-modernists in different guises (Pierre & Peters, 2020).

Learning takes place at different levels. People learn, organizations learn (Garvin, 2003), and governance systems learn (King & Thornhill, 2006; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007), but the learning processes at one level cannot be simply equated to processes at the others (Farnsworth et al., 2016). People can learn while their organization learns nothing (Dittrich et al., 2016). At the same time, the ongoing interactions in an evolving governance system can lead to learning (as in adaptation), or at least to more adequate responses to internal and external problems and opportunities, without this being perceived as such by the actors (Chaffin & Gunderson, 2016). This means that not all learning has an intentionality (to learn) and it means that not all learning is actually noticed by the learner—as the student who claimed “I learned nothing” while the professor is rather impressed (Fleer, 2011). It also means that processes of emergence lead to a differentiation between individuals, organizations, and governance systems, each possessing their own logic of reproduction, and hence, possibilities for learning (Luhmann, 2018; Mingers, 2003).

Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2022), in their analysis of learning and governance transformation in small-scale fisheries, take a hopeful perspective on this differentiation, and argue that learning for more than just governance outcomes is possible (cf Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989). Blue Growth initiatives, focusing on the marine environment as a bio-production system, tend to marginalize small-scale fisheries. Yet, institutional redesign cannot repair this problem, even if the dominant interest groups could be mollified. What is needed, they argue, is a slow reorientation of marine governance and fisheries regulations toward blue justice, securing a position for conservation and development, and for the activities of small-scale fisheries and, we might also add here, securing a position for other traditional uses and users invisible in the international arenas where blue growth is promoted. The analysis offers remarkable insights and striking similarities with the critical literatures on
transition, and, earlier, on development (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Newell et al., 2009).

New arenas are necessary, sites where more interactions can take place between (representatives of) diverse users, arenas in which interactive learning can take place—which in turn could lead to governance transformation. The authors present a multi-level perspective where invisible locals are not simply forced to look and talk upwards, but where also other actors are nudged to pay more attention to what is happening locally and in the margins. The concept of justice itself appears then as not only an ideal result of a particular governance system, but also as a guiding concept for its transformation across scales. Farrell (2012) observed the possibilities for this search for a balancing of objectives in transition to learn from the environmental justice movement, where, similarly, justice was conceptualized as result and as guiding concept.

Alta and Mukhtarov (2022) similarly look at the importance at learning across scales, in their article on a triangular cooperation to strengthen gender mainstreaming in Fiji. Their relational approach is radical, in the sense that relations, hence co-evolutions, shape actors’ identities, interests, and power. The triangular relation highlighted is that between the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Indonesian government, and the government of Fiji. The authors observe the diverse forms of learning at play, partly enabled by ambiguous project design, decentralized organization, and vague language and goals. David Seidl (2007) spoke of productive misunderstandings which can start at a general level, from strategy concepts, and cascade down from there. In the triangular cooperation analyzed by Alta and Mukhtarov, different actors, representing different governance systems, were able to represent the nature and hoped for outcomes of the policy in ways that made sense in the different systems, which helped to coordinate them, and possibly to engender a co-evolution toward learning for a goal subscribed to by all-gender mainstreaming in government (cf King & Thornhill, 2006).

The development aid project itself could thus be interpreted as a boundary object enabling productive fictions in the three participating systems (Nusselder, 2012), yet the productivity in practice was not truly significant, the authors observe. In Fiji, not too much happened as a result of the collaboration, and the analysis ends on a critical note regarding the value of development aid projects. One could add that the triangular collaboration form can be considered as an experiment itself, and that the balance between the productive and the merely fictional side of productive fictions and open concepts cannot be taken for granted (Clegg et al., 2006; Kooij et al., 2014). The experimental form could operate better, could manage uncertainty better by using
open concepts as couplings, yet this form of learning can displace the goal easily toward the collaboration itself.

Landry (2022), through an analysis of think tanks in Canada, shows how the character and orientation of advocacy think tanks correspond with evolutionary pressures linked to their position vis-à-vis different social fields. Using case studies of three think tanks in Canada, Landry (2022) presents a nuanced description of their role, their own learning processes, and the learning processes they might engender in the larger governance system. Landry demonstrates how the three think tanks analyzed are embedded differently in their governance contexts, relate differently to the elites backing them, and see a different relation between industry interest, their own interest, and the public interest. If an external agenda is pushed directly, then little internal and external learning is triggered, while a self-understanding as mediating between industry and the public interest, and possibly contributing to the common good through learning for win–win situations, can lead to a complex pattern of learning. Certainly, this pattern is not solely shaped by the self-understanding and intentionality of the think tank. The governance system itself can recognize the utility of the think tank in very different ways.

De Groot et al. (2022) are interested in more tightly coupled sets of organizations. Speaking of project-oriented infrastructure administrations, which are often temporary couplings of other organizations, or organizations inspiring and maintaining such couplings, the authors highlight the role of communities of practice to enhance learning, and possibly restructure the relations between different forms of learning in governance (cf Wenger, 2010). De Groot and colleagues understand their type of organizations as always precariously balanced between the needs of complex projects (involving many actors, forms of knowledge, and streams of resources), the need for flexibility and adaptation, and the need for transparency, predictability, and efficiency stemming from their functionality, political sensitivity, and large budgets.

The article explores the utility of inter-organizational communities of practice to balance these diverse goals and interests. Whereas the earlier literature on communities of practice focused more on informal networks within the organization or, alternatively, professional networks spanning organizations (Handley et al., 2006), inter-organizational communities of practice offer the promise of transcending professional, disciplinary, and organizational identities. They could offer a chance to work collectively toward truly collective goals, and enable the learning processes needed, leading to shifts in patterns of co-evolution (changing roles). There could also be a path toward continuous reflection on the application or production of knowledge in such complex projects. The balancing act can however be
moved to the community of practice itself, which does not evaporate the identities involved, nor the complexity of the relation between political, organizational, and cognitive dimensions of infrastructure decisions (cf. Roberts, 2006). Similarly, the nature of the community will have to be rather informal, in order not to compete with the entities it helps to coordinate (Cross et al., 2002), while it cannot be without identity and organization itself, in order to have an impact (Luhmann, 2018).

The articles by Landry (2022), De Groot et al. (2022), and Alta and Mukhtarov (2022) add insight into the importance of organizational forms in learning processes, as well as the ambiguities always associated with complex coordination tasks. Moreover, they point at the importance of learning about new organizational forms, which could help in re-relating actors or whole governance systems then functioning as actors in new relations (cf. Farrell, 2012). In addition, the analyzes demonstrate great acuity in their understanding of the continuously shifting landscape of relations between actors, institutions, forms of knowledge, and the types of learning which take place in that landscape. Dialectical learning does not necessarily take place because there exists a relation, or because there is a new intermediary between actors (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008, would even argue that loosely coupled episodes, where relations are bracketed, can enable strategic learning). Similarly, a focus on new solutions and an orientation toward the future can reduce the learning from the past, while a new drive toward efficiency can erode reflexivity. One could add that the articles clearly demonstrate that learning can be both the cause and effect of governance change, and both an intended and a side-effect (cf. Mintzberg & Waters, 1985 for a striking parallel at the level of organizations).

Gerrits (2022), in his enlightening narrative on the governance processes behind the appearance of a new fighter jet, dwells not so much on this last distinction as on the diversity of learning processes which can be partly decoupled from the supposed shared goal. He emphasizes the importance of interdependencies in networks of organizations and other actors in this complex procurement project and reveals the importance of organizational identity as entwined in such networks (cf. Huemer et al., 2004). Actors learn to enhance their chances of long-term survival, beyond the project horizon, while considering the need to finish the project. Survival of the organization, of the network of actors that makes up the project organization, and of the fighter jet, are entwined but still distinct. Deploying a fitness landscape perspective (Gerrits & Marks, 2017), the author concludes that the formal goals of an affordable and high performing fighter jet were displaced by other goals, ranging from mere survival to clinging to organizational identities and political ideology.
The calculations of individual actors might be hard to reconstruct, and some of the relevant sources are classified, but Gerrits makes a compelling argument about the nature of the balancing act the participating organizations have to perform in order to decide which form of learning (regarding the aircraft, regarding the form of governance) are useful to them. He underlines the importance of black-boxing and lock-ins to reinforce path dependencies, both regarding forms of expertise to develop and regarding forms of organization. In terms of Reite (2013), one can say that the actors have a particularly hard balancing act between black-boxing and unfolding, between opacity (per organization, within the network) and transparency (multiplying the potential learning paths). Both complexity and secrecy make it hard to re-envision the network of interdependencies.

Finally, Ching Leong and Michael Leong and Howlett (2022), in line with Gerrits (2022), take a close look at the diversity of learning forms in governance and link this to the performance of policy success and failure. Policy failures are often presented as unintentional, while learning is seen as positive and intentional. They criticize overly optimistic policy literature which emphasizes expert learning, comparative learning and, we might add, dialectical learning, as inherently positive and as expected to contribute to policy success. They also present a picture, related to the one presented in the framing article (Van Assche et al., 2022), where relating diverse forms of knowledge and modes of learning is not a matter of clear-eyed engineering toward shared goals. Different effects can emerge, entirely unanticipated, and identities can transform, pushing learning in a new direction, possibly reshaping the pattern of co-evolution in governance, which then again can rearrange the relations between forms of learning (an insight in line with both Foucault, 2012; Luhmann, 2018). Moreover, what the authors call “dark learning” (cf also Dunlop, 2017) can occur within every institutional design and it hinges on organizational identities, incentives, on some of the ambiguities which could also play out positively, as argued by Alta and Mukhtarov (2022). Learning can be the learning to survive at all cost (cf. Gerrits, 2022), but also learning to play the game, or learning to disguise private interest as public. One can learn to push for a reinterpretation of situations and problems in such a way that one’s own expertise is always privileged (Czarniawska, 2004). Mitigating risks of policy failure requires, according to the authors, acknowledging the dark sides of governance and of learning.

While a co-evolutionary perspective sheds light on learning in governance, it can also help to understand non-learning. This has to be understood as more than ignorance, absence of knowledge, or lack of understanding that something could or should be learned. Indeed, it is true that for co-evolutionary theories of governance, the basis for learning can be the presence of a
particular sort of knowledge, the presence of certain problem definitions, methodologies of investigation, and coordination mechanisms which can bring forms of knowledge and questions in contact with each other (e.g., Kemp et al., 2007; Van Assche et al., 2013). It is the case that the patterns of co-evolution in a governance path create dependencies which delineate things which can be learned more easily, and modes of learning which can be activated more easily, leaving other areas and modes in the dark and, more to the point, represent obstacles for accessing the associated paths for creation and use of knowledge (Newell et al., 2009; Sabatier, 2018).

All this, however, still does not characterize well the variety of forms of non-learning. Following Alvesson and Spicer (2016) and their seminal analyzes of functional stupidity, we would say that not only organizations, but also governance configurations create their own forms of functional stupidity, deliberately ignoring complexity and purposefully not thinking and learning. Still following Alvesson and Spicer (2016), we would say that the balance between the functional and the dysfunctional stupid can shift and is not always clear for the actors themselves (cf Mingers, 2003). Once again, the organizational identity of actors can make a difference, can lead to a focus on a narrow domain of expert knowledge and associated methods of knowledge production, and a narrow definition of a role in governance (cf Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Czarniawska, 2004; Luhmann, 2018). This can create a form of functional stupidity which helps the smooth functioning of governance, but does not encourage reflection on purpose, meaning, context, or openness for new forms of learning. Leadership can encourage this actively, and former leadership encoded it in the design of governance structures.

Leadership, per actor and in the system, can similarly focus on smooth functioning, or on notions of efficiency within narrow parameters, forgetting the goal of the actor, or the idea that governance might pursue common goods through coordination (Hood & Peter, 2004). Leadership can moreover instill non-thinking in a variety of ways, from insisting on speed, on following orders, on relentless optimism, or on not reflecting on common goods or organizational identity. They can do this by focusing on “best practices” which are supposed to exist in a vacuum, not recognizing the unique and uniquely coupled contexts of governance and community (Flyvbjerg, 2013).

Steering and micro-managing learning can thus paradoxically blind many people, organizations, and governance systems to other forms of knowledge and other modes of learning which might be useful in the longer run. They might also be problematic in the short run, in terms of short-term goals, but also in terms of ideological and other political sensitivities, egos of leadership, and chilling distance from fashions and fads. This brings us back to the idea of reflexive learning as a basis for all the other types of learning (cf Voss
et al., 2006), and the idea of dialectical learning as the destination in governance or, at the very least, a necessary step (Van Assche et al., 2020). It also hints at a principle embraced by many before: the value of truly different perspectives in governance, and of carefully guarded mechanisms to maintain such diversity, and to let the differences be exposed and become productive in dialectical learning (Mingers, 2003; Van Assche et al., 2016; Vaughan & Rafanell, 2012).

Carlsen (2016) speaks of the “narrative unconscious” in organizational identity, in an analysis which connects well with Czarniawska’s (2004) understanding of the necessarily enabling and disabling, including and excluding character of narratives in guiding the functioning of organizations. This applies not only to identity narratives, but also to a variety of other narratives which influence the reproduction of the organization. Lacanian psychoanalysis similarly locates the unconscious not in the depths of the subject, yet in the unrealized connectivity with discursive worlds (Hook, 2017). Charles W Mills coined, in the context of white supremacy, the fruitful concept of “epistemologies of ignorance” (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007), which denotes structural conditions, in societies and their systems of governance, where not-knowing and not-learning are not merely acceptable, but silently encouraged. As certain perspectives on the world, its hierarchies, its privileged forms of learning are institutionalized and widespread in the community, and as this took root a long time ago, the result is more than functional stupidity at the level organizations. Non-racist white people, and black people themselves can be enrolled in racist discourses and institutions keeping each other in place and keeping each other invisible. In contrast with functional stupidity, epistemologies of ignorance do not necessarily get their comeuppance, alas. The likely self-correction associated with functional stupidity (the vanishing functionality becoming visible later) is much less likely to occur.

Learning, dark learning, and non-learning must be understood as intimately connected in systems of governance consisting of co-evolving configurations. The functioning of non-learning shapes what happens in terms of learning (Zizek, 1993). Non-learning can be the result of functional stupidity, of epistemologies of ignorance, of unconscious structuring of organizational and social identities and it can be caused by many other things. As we know, and as the authors in this issue demonstrate, it does not necessarily stem from an encounter with negativity. Learning can still lead to policy failure, while policy failure, failure to answer policy questions, recognition of aporia in administrative research or political discussion, and even stumbles in the delineation of domains and themes, can all have learning effects. One can resort to Hegelian schemes of dialectics here, as Zizek (1993), Zizek (2014), with antitheses leading to new syntheses, or to our medieval friends the
negative theologians, insisting that the most valuable and universal goals in society can only be known in the negative, but, for our present purposes, we might have to satisfy ourselves with the insight that learning and non-learning are produced in unique patterns in always singular governance systems.

The co-evolution of actors, institutions, power and knowledge, formal and informal institutions, forms the shifting landscape in which forms of knowledge and learning are included and excluded, privileged, and marginalized. The observation of learning and non-learning can inspire dark learning, while the observation of dark learning can trigger counterstrategies (Davies, 2014; Foucault, 2012), which can include obstacles for dark learning but which also, and distinctly, can include incentives for reflexivity, transparency, and dialectical learning. Observation, and, before that, transparency, become the condition for learning, yet, each governance system and each organization in it, transparency and opacity are themselves in a precarious and unique balance. Learning can create transparency, better decisions, yet that transparency is always an effect of distinctions which could have been different (King & Thornhill, 2006), while the effect itself can be manipulated, just as opacity, for strategic reasons.

Luhmann (1997), with his typical brilliance, would articulate the problem of learning slightly differently, and dismiss numerous conundrums of learning and governance by coolly pointing out that each and every social system needs tricks to manage its own indeterminacy and intransparency. It has to construct its own temporality, past and future, which makes it possible to operate with a semblance of self-knowledge. In the case of organizations, as social systems, this enables the building of identities which refine this temporality and associated self-understanding. The primary distinction between opacity and transparency, the initial balance between what can become visible, what can be learned, and what remains hidden, stems from this self-management of systems pulling themselves out of the swamp of indeterminacy. Whether one sides with Luhmann in this, or not, we would make the determinate claim that the contributors to this special issue, in their relentless explorations of the darker and lighter corners of governance, revealed that instrumentalist understandings of learning, still underpinning mainstream literatures in public policy, administration, planning, and environmental studies are inherently dubious, while their supposedly critical counterpart, communitarian and deliberative discourses operate on the basis of a similarly problematic set of opacities.

All of which should not bring us to tears, but rather bring to mind the early joys of learning, say, in kindergarten (cf Fleer, 2011) where imagination can be cultivated by structuring but not over-structuring narratives,
environments, and games. New narratives can lead to new experiences, which spur new investigations and the development of new skills. And vice versa in all possible permutations. While Luhmann might not be easily imagined in the setting of a kindergarten, we believe he would have wholly approved of this interpretation, which is, after all, not too far from his familiarizing of rationality and imagination, in a world of contingency (Luhmann, 1998).

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