



Organizational political capacity as learning

Claire A. Dunlop*

University of Exeter, Department of Politics, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ, Devon, UK

Abstract

In this article, we examine how agencies build organizational political capacities (OPC) for reputation management, where capacity building is treated as a challenge underpinned by the learning relationships that exist between key governance actors. This challenge requires the development of four types of OPC: absorptive capacity (ACAP); administrative capacity (ADCAP); analytical capacity (ANCAP) and communicative capacity (COMCAP). Analytically, we link each of these capacities to one particular type of policy learning – reflexive learning – which characterises politicised situations where an agencies reputation is under threat and citizens are the main governance partners. Empirically, we demonstrate how agencies learn to develop these OPCs with governance partners using the case of the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) which increasingly aims to engage citizens in a dialogue to combat the negative images attached to health and safety regulation. We conclude asking what a learning approach tells us about how agencies can develop OPC.

© 2015 Policy and Society Associates (APSS). Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In this article we examine how agencies build organizational capacities to manage their reputations. The literature on organizational capacities does not treat them as simply static skills or resources. Rather, capacity building challenges – i.e. what capacities are required and whether or not they are successful in policy delivery – are mediated by a range of contextual factors. In particular, capacities are held in the relationships between different governance actors. Given the array of different organizational capacities and governance relationships that can exist, this article focusses on organizational political capacity (OPC) construction (see this volume's introduction – Wu, Howlett, & Ramesh, 2015). We treat capacity as held in dynamic learning relationships that exist between policy-makers and citizens. We relate OPC to one type of policy learning – reflexive learning. This is learning in the realm of 'wicked issues' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) where agencies' control over policy definition and implementation is uncertain. Here problems are incomplete, and 'right' and 'wrong' solutions are replaced by a multiplicity of policy options offered by citizens that claim expertise. Such cases are often complicated further by the amplification role played by the media. These politicised conditions are ripe for policy failure and the politics of blame (Hood, 2011) where government agencies become the focus of dissent. In such circumstances, the challenge for reputation-sensitive agencies is to find ways to engage society, and explore the variety of interpretations attached to the issue at hand. Critically,

* Tel.: +44 1392 724690.

E-mail address: c.a.dunlop@ex.ac.uk.

policy-makers must recognise that in such reflexive settings their control over problem definition and policy solutions may be weak. Here, the agency's OPC is critical both for future policy success and the agency's reputation.

But just as policy learning is not monolithic, nor is OPC. Therefore our article addresses the following question. What particular OPCs are required in reflexive learning environments? We construct an analytical framework that outlines the four main learning relationships found in the policy world and use this typology to differentiate between the types of OPC that matter and when. Why take a learning approach to organizational capacity? We know a good deal about the ideational dimension of policy learning, but scholars have largely neglected the organizational dimension (Borrás, 2011). Yet, it is only by making these connections that we can hope to illuminate the relationship between governance and learning (Schout, 2009). Examining capacity building through the policy learning lens acknowledges it as a fundamentally dynamic exchange – where different learning environments enable new capacities to be acquired, and capacity in turn enables policy learning and change.

Empirically, the article examines this in relation to an innovative UK health and safety communications initiative: the 'Myth-Busters Challenge Panel' (MBCP). Launched in 2012, by regulator the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the MBCP is a high profile campaign that aims to engage citizens in a dialogue about the negative images that have become attached to health and safety regulation in the UK. Indeed, in the last decade, public scepticism is such that the expression 'health and safety gone mad' has entered common parlance to express exasperation about almost any rule – real or fictitious – that businesses, local authorities and citizens think an unnecessary intrusion. Three key drivers of this recent negative branding have been identified (Dunlop, 2015). Health and safety regulations are erroneously cited by businesses and local authorities due to: uncertainty of the law and fear of compensation claims; the desire to reduce costs and prevent citizens from accessing good and services; and finally, poor communications skills and the desire to avoid an argument by giving a genuine explanation.

In an effort to rebuild the public image of health and safety regulation, and the reputation of the agency itself, the MBCP aims to connect with citizens, businesses, the media and local authorities by inviting them to submit examples where health and safety has been used to justify action or inaction which they view unreasonable or suspect. These cases are then referred to a dedicated panel of experts who investigate the case, gather additional evidence and adjudicate. Where health and safety 'myths' are identified, the agency uses the cases – many of which are absurd and on occasion hilarious – as part of its wider communications strategy. In some circumstances, the agency also works with the parties involved to generate mutual learning and develop a corrective strategy. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to enhance the health and safety policy regime and defend the agency by building a social consensus around what protective, desirable and high public value health and safety looks like.

After three years of operation and the identification of nearly four hundred 'myths', the agency is now exploring the logic of its communication with the public, how its impact can be assessed and how the strategy should be developed. This article marks the first academic assessment of the initiative, and draws on ethnographic research and elite interviews with the MBCP's policy, analytical and communication officers¹ conducted by the author from September 2013 to September 2015. Why should we care about this case? While concerted public communications strategies by agencies are common in some countries – especially the United States (US) – it is rare for a UK regulator to engage citizens in a direct dialogue. It is rarer still for a researcher to have a front row seat to witness this 'live' episode capacity building. The importance of this access to the HSE team is pivotal for our analytical approach. Treating OPC building as a function of learning relationships demands that we understand the views of elite policy-makers and how they interpret their context.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 defines the capacity challenges faced by the HSE as a function of learning in governance relationships. Section 2 outlines a policy learning typology and specifically the reflexive form which characterises wicked issues where agencies must learn how to engage citizens (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013; Dunlop, 2014). Section 3 puts the spotlight on reflexive learning, using typological analysis to expand the concept to identify four specific different ways in which government agencies interact with society. Section 4 then links these to different capacity challenges. Specifically, reflexive settings require that agencies learn how to: *listen* what is going on in society; *offer their own interpretations*; *understand* how social interpretations relate to the agency's policy goals, and, most challenging of all, *engage in dialogue* with society to construct a consensus. In short, they must learn how to deploy and develop four types of OPC – absorptive, administrative, analytical and communicative. Our empirical

¹ All 13 of the agency officials involved in the MBCP initiative have been interviewed for this research.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1061484>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1061484>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)