Policy Learning After Crises
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Abstract
Remarkable similarities exist across the causes of crises and the issues that hamper government responses to them. These recursive issues suggest an inability on behalf of governments to learn from past failures. This inability appears to indict the dominant mode of learning about crises, which is institutionalised through the post-crisis inquiry. However, a strand of crisis management literature suggests the opposite; that governments can learn about crises and that inquiries may have a role to play in that. This uncertainty is compounded by a lack of robust conceptualisation about inquiries and a lack of systematically generated evidence about the strengths and weaknesses of the inquiry in terms of policy learning. This paper deals with the first issue in preparation for the second. It presents four ways in which we can re-boot our understanding of the post-crisis inquiry so that it can be analysed in ways which are cognizant of contemporary governance and public policy research.

Introduction: Failing to Learn? The State and the Academy
Official efforts to learn about crises and disasters often appear futile in the face of our propensity to repeat the mistakes of the past. The patterns of causality that lie beneath the production of crises and the patterns of mismanagement that we see when crises do arrive appear to reflect this propensity. How we might ask, is it that our policymakers cannot learn to prevent or moderate crises when they often appear to be caused by generic factors? And why do political and bureaucratic crisis responses continually reflect long-standing problems that we have seen before, despite ‘lesson-learning’ efforts? Such questions tend to encourage pessimistic answers about the ability of governments to acquire and absorb policy knowledge – to learn effectively - about crises in ways which can keep us safe in the future (see, for example, Boin et al. 2008: 13; Elliott and Macpherson 2010: 574; Drennan et al. 2015: 193).

Social science literature about crises can certainly fuel this pessimism. Disaster management specialists continue to trace the vulnerability of the marginalised back to economic, social and political structures despite long-standing evidence about their tendency to produce crises (Middleton and O'Keefe 1998; Bankoff 2001; Wisner et al. 2004; Collins 2009). Organisational scholars point to remarkable similarities in dynamics that cause and incubate crises (Turner and Pidgeon 1997; Smith and Elliott 2007) and public administration scholars and disaster sociologists have been cataloguing well-known problems in government responses to crises across decades (Rosenthal et al. 1991; Steffen 2001; Stark and Taylor 2014). All of these patterns, which are both historical and multi-jurisdictional, suggest that we are not learning effectively from the past.

If the picture of intransigence that has been sketched out above is correct, then the dominant format for learning about crises – the post-crisis inquiry – needs to be indicted as an obsolete policymaking institution. There are certainly no shortage of academics who appear to be willing to present charges in this regard. Inquiries are regularly degraded as ineffectual when it comes to lesson learning (Salter 1989: 195; Parker and Dekker 2008: 255; Elliott 2009: 157; Brown 2004: 105-106). It would seem from these works that the inquiry is, as Elliott and McGuiness
speculate, a nineteenth century instrument that is struggling in a twenty-first century world. According to others, however, inquiries are more than capable of producing detrimental side effects, such as the legitimation of problematic status quo's (Ashforth 1990; Brown 2004; Gephart 2007) or the exacerbation of unhelpful blaming dynamics (Borodzicz 2006; Boin et al. 2008). These allegations suggest that in actual fact inquiries may produce multiple outcomes but that lesson learning may not be one of them. If this is the case, then we need to urgently consider alternative modes of post-crisis learning.

However, there are reasons why we might push back against this pessimism. First, we can say that government agencies can learn to be less crisis prone. For example, there is a small but robust literature on specific agencies which are said to have learned how to be ‘highly reliable’ in terms of the detection and avoidance of potential risks (La Porte and Consolini 1992). Certain crisis management scholars have also shown how authorities have managed to make meaningful policy changes after catastrophic events (Birkland 2004; 2007; 2009) and created effective crisis response frameworks, such as the Incident Command System in the US (Moynihan 2008; 2009a). International success stories reinforce these more optimistic views (Col and Chu 2001; Dekker and Hansén 2004).

These works emphasise that government agencies can and have learned about crisis management. A second reason for optimism is that there are, albeit rare, instances in which academics have attributed successful post-crisis lesson-learning to the work of inquiries. For example, the 9/11 Commission was said to have earned a ‘unique status’ by making a ‘rare political impact’ due to ‘its success in capturing the public’s imagination’ (Parker and Dekker 2008: 279). The Woolf Inquiry into prison riots in the UK has been defined by Resodihardjo (2006: 199) as a catalyst for a form of ideational ‘social learning’ (Hall 1993) which changed the criminal justice policy paradigm for the better. The Anderson Inquiry into the 2001 Foot-and-Mouth epidemic has been characterised as an important propellant of beneficial policy change within the bureaucracy of the European Union (Connolly 2014: 218) and the O’Connor Inquiry was defined by the ‘dramatic effect’ it had on Canadian regulatory reform at the turn of the century (Snider 2004: 282).

Thus we cannot easily write the inquiry off as an obsolete component in the state’s learning machinery nor can we unequivocally validate it as something that is beyond reproach. The scorecard appears to be mixed and there is a degree of ambiguity about whether, and how, the state can learn through the post-crisis inquiry. Part of the problem in this regard relates to the fact that the academy has failed to sufficiently learn about post-crisis inquiries. Two issues are particularly pertinent: 1) inquiry research suffers from a lack of robust conceptualisation and; 2) there is a lack of substantive evidence surrounding many of the claims that characterise the literature.

The conceptual problem is significant. Broadly speaking, scholars interested in inquiries either define learning failures through problems of knowledge acquisition (the inquiry itself) or problems of knowledge assimilation (organisational resistance to inquiry recommendations within government). They then study one or the other problem exclusively. As a consequence, a basic two-stage view of lesson-learning blights the literature; inquiries acquire knowledge and this is accepted or rejected by governments. This view downplays the complex and crowded reality of policy learning in the modern state. One problematic outcome of this partial view, for
example, is that functions which are crucial to inquiry success, relating to knowledge transfer and the institutionalisation of lessons into organisational memory for example, are largely neglected in the inquiry literature (Elliott 2009). A second is that other influential actors and concepts, widely cited as important in the policy learning literature, such as epistemic communities (Haas 1992), advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and international lesson drawing channels (Rose 1991) are also neglected from the analysis, despite their potential importance. There is therefore a need to broaden out the concept of the inquiry so that a range of potentially pertinent components, actors and organisations can be examined.

The second problem is that there is a lack of generalizable evidence supporting many of the claims that characterise the extant literature. Systematic social science methodology is generally eschewed in favour of general commentary in the inquiry literature (for example, Howe 1999). Notwithstanding one or two rare examples (Althaus 1994; Inwood and Johns 2014), there is an absence of comparison in the field. Large swathes of analysis are descriptive, a-theoretical and focus upon the minutia of inquiry format and constitution (for example, Stevens 1994). And many of the significant claims in the literature, such as the well-cited argument that governments engage in ‘single loop’ rather than ‘double loop’ learning, merely exist at the level of supposition (for example, Moynihan 2009b).

What this means is that the failure to determine whether or not the state learns through inquiries is a consequence of the academy’s failure to learn about inquiries in ways which are authoritative. This brings us directly to the purpose of this paper.

The paper deals with the first issue identified above. The aim is to improve the ways in which we conceptualise the inquiry as a post-crisis learning mechanism. This requires recognition of the inquiry as a complex policy learning process in the modern state, which involves much more than has been considered thus far in the literature. Broadening out our understanding of inquiries in this way is an essential precursor to any empiricism simply because any evaluation will be incomplete if we merely conceptualise an inquiry as a two-step process in which a committee of inquiry produces knowledge and a central ministry accepts or rejects that knowledge. A two-dimensional view of this nature is inhibitive and, like the traditional inquiry format itself, a rather nineteenth century view of how policymaking operates in today’s state. We need to get beyond this and examine the complex and polycentric reality of post-crisis learning. Understanding this broader sphere of action, and how the various pieces of the learning jigsaw fit (or do not fit) together is essential to improving learning after crises.

Re-Boot Public Inquiry Research: Typologies, Processes, Agents and Rationalities

There are a number of limitations in the extant research about post-crisis inquiries, which relate to how they are conceptualised and subsequently studied. In short, inquiries are often defined as linear, sequential processes with one or two stages and a limited n of actors. Moreover, they are often analysed as standalone entities divorced from wider political, economic and social contexts. These rudimentary views of the inquiry persist despite a widely acknowledged appreciation in the literature of the complexity of government learning generally and the complexity of learning through inquiries specifically (for a representative sample of this theme see March and Olsen 1983; Huber 1991; Prasser 1994; Olsen and Peters 1996; Elliott and Macpherson 2010).
If we are to drag our understanding of the inquiry into the twenty-first century we need to get to grips with this complexity. This paper presents four ways in which we can do this. First, we can apply definitions and typologies of policy learning to the inquiry. This will lead to a fine-grained understanding of the various ways in which a successful post-crisis inquiry might affect the cognitive and behavioural capacities of inquiry-related individuals and organisations. In the sections below we achieve this by applying a synthesised typology of individual, organisational and policy learning to the inquiry.

The second way in which we can engage with complexity is by adding nuance to our understanding of the inquiry learning process. While an official inquiry may look like a limited affair formatted through well-known procedural templates, we know enough about organisational and policy learning to suggest, a priori, that this appearance may be the mere tip of a larger and more intricate iceberg. Thus we need to widen, or even disassemble, our current understanding of the post-crisis inquiry process. Widening the concept means incorporating more into it; more stages, more functions, more temporality or more levels of governance, for example. Disassembling means questioning the inquiry’s essence; its linearity, its positivist rationality and its primary function as a lesson learner, for example.

The third way in which we can better revise the concept of the inquiry is to engage with the large collage of agency involved in an inquiry episode and the varying interpretations, ideas and inter-subjective meanings that they bring into a learning process. Governance in the twenty-first century is a crowded affair and we know little about relevant inquiry actors beyond ‘the usual suspects’ (the inquiry committee and the central bureaucracy) who may have a real influence on policy outcomes. And we cannot assume that these different actors will have complimentary interpretations of the learning process and their roles within it. Thus we need to determine the full mix of agency in an inquiry episode, the different goals that actors bring to the inquiry table and how they complement or collide with each other. Below we expand the definition of the inquiry by discussing a range of actors that are centre stage in policy learning theories (policy entrepreneurs, epistemic community experts and street-level bureaucrats for example) yet remain completely ignored in inquiry research. This polycentrism brings us to the fourth and final discussion.

Different actors bring different rationalities in and around a post-crisis inquiry. One clear rationality is to be found, for example, in the simple assumption that lessons can be developed and implemented effectively via foundational knowledge, apolitical evaluations and the rational purposiveness of actors who are incentivised to improve the status quo. No one should be surprised, however, by the fact that this rational ideal of lesson learning sits in competition with other logics. Lesson learning can be derailed by a range of issues and these alert us to a series of alternative rationalities which can materialise in an inquiry, yet have little to do with lesson learning. Below we explore three alternatives through research about politics, legality and the interpretative nature of knowledge acquisition. Exploring these three areas not only shows us what can prejudice the rational-instrumental dimensions of lesson learning but also reveals alternative conceptualisations of what an inquiry is and what it does.

Before we turn to these four sections, a brief word on the learning literature. It is eclectic, disparate and constellated ‘across all of the major theoretical and meta-theoretical cleavages in the social sciences’ (Stern 1997:
However, the four most relevant fields of study in terms of understanding the relationship between post-crisis inquiries and policy learning are: political science, which has a rich history of scholars studying the constitution of inquiries and the place of inquiries within constitutions (Clokie and Robinson 1937; Herbert 1961; Chapman 1973; Heclo 1974; Bulmer 1980; Weller 1994); crisis management, which is an interdisciplinary field in which organisational, international relations and public administration scholars have had much to say about the dynamics of learning, accountability and blame post-crisis (Stern 1997; Hansén and Dekker 2004; Resodihardjo 2006; Boin et al. 2008; Elliott 2009; Drennan et al. 2015); organisational studies, where the vast majority of knowledge about institutional learning resides (Argyris 1981; Senge 1990; Huber 1991; Gephart 2007); and the field of policy learning, which is germane to post-crisis periods but, somewhat inexplicably, has not given any attention to inquiries as a means of learning (Rose 1991; Haas 1992; May 1992; Hall 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Bringing these fields together here and applying them to the study of inquiries opens up the institution to a larger analytical universe. It will also take us to new conceptual ground.

**Types of Learning and Post-Crisis Inquiries**

This section of the paper presents a simple typology of policy learning and then applies that typology to a basic ideal-type of the post-crisis inquiry. The application of different learning types to the inquiry injects multiple dimensions into the traditional two-stage model (of acquisition and assimilation) by allowing us to stratify the stages and the actors involved across different types of learning. This can produce a more fine-grained analysis of the inquiry which is cognizant of the fact that different elements of an inquiry process can learn different things in different ways.

Although certainly sophisticated, the fields of organisational and policy learning contain a dizzying array of definitions, foci and theory, all under the rubric of ‘learning’ yet orientated towards rather different concerns. Where there is consensus, it tends to be found in claims that the field is conceptually ambiguous, in need of greater integration and altogether a bit too complex for its own good (Huber 1991: 89; Levy 1994: 280; Birkland 2004: 344; Schofield 2004: 291; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013: 600). Nevertheless, we must cut a path through this morass to get to our typology. We can achieve this by focusing on points of agreement within the field.

The one meaningful consensus across the policy and organisational learning literature in terms of definition is that learning, in essence, begins with cognitive change at the individual level (Rose 1991: 7; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 123; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013: 600). This at least gives us an agreed-upon departure point. Learning means a change in an actor’s beliefs, insight or understanding (Levy 1994: 287), which can result as part of a conscious choice (Friedlander 1983: 194) or an unintentional process (Huber 1991: 89). Moreover, the vast majority of the learning literature tell us that these changes will usually, but not always, be drawn from experiential inference (see, for an alternative to experiential learning, Argyris and Schön (1978: 42) and Stern’s (1997: 72) discussion of the dialectical learning perspective).

More often than not, cognitive development will lead to a change in behaviour. We need to be careful here, however, because matching behavioural change to actual instances of learning is difficult. The problem relates to how we isolate learning as the independent variable because people can change their behaviour for all
kinds of reasons, not just because they have learned something in a meaningful sense (see Levy 1994: 289-290 for examples). Thus, following Levy (1994: 291), we caution against using changed behaviour as a sole indicator of policy learning. Instead we follow Levy’s simple two-step model that tells us that we need to show a causal connection between cognitive change and behavioural change in order to evidence policy learning from behaviour. At this individual level, however, it is also generally agreed that learning can take place without propelling a change in behaviour (Rose 1991: 7; May 1992: 336; Levy 1994: 282). It may, for example, simply lead to a ‘change in one’s cognitive maps or understandings’ (Friedlander’s 1983: 194), ‘growths in intelligence’ (Etheredge and Short 1983: 42-43) or an increased awareness of the range of potential behaviours that one might adopt (Huber 1991: 89). We can also suggest therefore that changes in the cognitive capacities of key individuals represent evidence of ‘individual’ policy learning.

As we move towards more specific definitions of policy learning, our emphasis on observable behaviour must become sharper, simply because policies and government organisations are action-orientated. However, a great deal of the organisational literature has been drawn to the view, first developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schöén (1978: 9-11), that there is something rather ‘metaphorical’ about the idea of organisational learning (see also, Birkland 2006: 12). This is said because it is individuals rather than organisations that are animated with the DNA of learning. Thus reifying individual attributes onto an organisation is said to be misleading. This can be disputed. There are those, such as Cook and Yanow (1996) for example, who suggest that individuals cannot perform organisational functions as these are, by definition, collective actions. Thus the argument is that only organisations can perform organisational learning and when a ‘group acquires the knowledge associated with its ability to carry out its collective activities that constitutes organisational learning’ (Cook and Yanow 1996: 438). This resonates with Etheredge and Short’s (1983: 48) claim that government learning can be seen in a ‘collective institutional coherence’ that can exist beyond its individual members and in Barbara Levitt and James March’s (1988) work on institutional memory, through which:

organizations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour. … The experiential lessons of history are captured in a way that makes the lessons, but not the history, accessible to organizations and organizational members who have not experienced that history. … They are recorded in a collective memory that is often coherent but is sometimes jumbled, that often endures but is sometimes lost (Levitt and March 1988: 320)

This is a very popular view (Levy 1994: 288; Mahler 1997: 524-525; Dekker and Hansén 2004: 219) and it suggests, as it was intended to, that the organisation is something more than an aggregation of individual learners. What this literature gives us, therefore, is detail about organisational behavioural changes that can follow cognitive modifications at the individual level. This allows us to emphasise that once key individuals and groups develop new understandings, these may then inform changes to institutional memory and/or changes to organisational routines which improve collective activities. In this paper, these types of change, if they are a consequence of cognitive differentiation, are considered to be a form of ‘organisational’ policy learning.

However, just as individual learning can be purely cognitive, so can organisational learning be distinct from organisational change. Here again, we have to be cautious as it seems to be theoretically possible for groups
to enjoy growths in intelligence without these necessarily impacting on the ‘hard’ components of an organisation. Cultural issues, traditions, notions of appropriateness and such like for example can develop through collective belief changes in an organisation but they may not be easily identifiable in its structure, processes or outcomes. Therefore what we are calling here ‘organisational’ policy learning can also encapsulate belief change within and across groups that cannot be evidenced in organisational change.

As Birkland (2006: 8) notes, political science researchers concerned with policy learning have predominantly focused on beliefs and ideas as the key units of analysis. Underneath this broad commonality, the lack of integration that bedevils the field as a whole can also be felt in the political science literature. Scholars appear to orientate to similar concerns – technocracy, social dynamics, and policy network politics, for example – without ever acknowledging the need to better coordinate the field (important exceptions to this rule are Bennett and Howlett 1992 and Dunlop and Radaelli 2013).

Peter May’s (1992: 336) typology of policy learning, however, has an integrative capacity and a proven track-record of structuring the search for policy learning evidence (see Birkland 2004; 2006). Moreover, it is also expansive enough to act as an organising schema through which we can discuss other important literatures. May’s typology categorises what Dunlop and Radaelli (2013: 200) call the ‘products’ of policy learning into three types: instrumental policy learning, social policy learning and political learning. One of the strengths of this typology is that May spends some time setting out the evidence base needed to show the existence of each type. Importantly, these indicators also span cognitive, behavioural and organisational dimensions. His framework therefore allows us to flesh out our definitions of policy learning further through three types.

Instrumental policy learning ‘entails new understandings about the viability of policy interventions or implementation designs’ (May 1992: 335). This is the learning of policy evaluation, design and implementation and the intention is self-evident: to identify issues and improve the performance of policy instruments. The primary learners here are policy officials and the underpinning logic is rational-analytic (see Mahler 1997). In order to evidence this type of policy learning, the cognitive change (individual or collective) would consist of an ‘increased understanding of policy instruments or implementation’ and behavioural change (individual or collective) would be seen in ‘policy redesign entailing change in instruments’ (May 1992: 336).

Social policy learning ‘entails a new or reaffirmed social construction of a policy by the policy elites of a given policy domain’ (May 1992: 337). In this type, May emphasises the rethinking of the fundamentals of a policy: the nature of the problem, causal beliefs, and the goals and target groups, for example. This is a much more ideationally centred form of policy learning. It’s about the big stuff and the underpinning logic is obviously constructivist. This category is one reflection of a larger lineage of works, which have developed the concept of social learning more broadly (Heclo 1974; Lindblom 1990; Hall 1988; 1993). At the cognitive level we are told that the indicators of social learning are ‘change in dominant causal beliefs within the relevant policy domain’ and at the organisational level ‘policy redefinition entailing change in policy goals or scope’ (May 1992: 336).

May’s final type is focused upon the interface between politics and policy. Political learning ‘entails policy advocates learning about strategies for advocating policy ideas or drawing attention to policy problems’ (May 1992: 339). This type draws upon Paul Sabatier’s Advocacy Coalition Approach (ACF). The ACF defines
policy learning within these coalitions as either incremental, involving the slow gradual change of beliefs in response to new information, or dramatic, as when sudden exogenous shocks dramatically alter mind sets (see Weible and Sabatier 2007). However, what May defines as political learning are instances in which coalition members improve their advocacy tactics; the ways in which, for example, they challenge the validity of data, counter opposing causal arguments, mobilise support for their cause and enlarge their coalition (May 1992: 339). The cognitive indicator for this type of learning is a change to the ‘awareness of relationship between political strategy and political feasibility within a given advocacy coalition’ while at the behavioural level, political learning is evidenced in policy advocates changing their political strategies (May 1992: 336).

If we bring all these strands together we can present a basic typology of policy learning that combines notions of cognitive and behavioural change, individual and organisational change, instrumental and social policy learning and political learning. This is presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 Here]

We can now apply these types to the post-crisis inquiry. This can be done by applying the typologies to an ideal-type definition of the post-crisis inquiry. The ideal-type will not take long to present. It reflects the basic two-stage model, which we can use as a departure point, and it recognises the common argument in the literature that all inquiry formats share certain essential features (Chapman 1973: 175; Bulmer 1980: 1; Salter 1989: 174-175; Prasser 1994: 4; Elliott and McGuiness 2002: 15; Toft and Reynolds 2005: 42). If we focus on these features and emphasise the basics of form and function we can present a definition of a post-crisis inquiry as:

An independent and ad-hoc body set up by central government to examine the causes and responses to a crisis, which will gather and analyse evidence from a range of groups and make public lessons that, if learned, can prevent the reoccurrence of similar problems in the future.

This definition now allows us to hypothesise about who should be learning what during a post-crisis inquiry process in terms of our types of policy learning. In it we can see our two stages of acquisition and assimilation and three sets of actors: the acquirers of knowledge, the assimilators of knowledge and those try to influence both acquisition and assimilation. Discussing the potential learning of these groups in terms of the types of learning discussed above is instructive.

We can begin with those who are meant to be acquiring new knowledge about the crisis (the researchers, the inquiry secretariat and of course the inquiry committee). These actors are not necessarily going to be measured in terms of behavioural change. However, we would expect to record significant levels of cognitive change amongst them, both individually and as an organisation in their own right. We might also expect to see some political learning here too as inquiry committees often have to advocate their lessons specifically to those they will affect and more widely to an interested public audience.

There are also those who need to reject or assimilate that knowledge in government (policy elites and policy officials at multiple levels across government). Amongst these actors we might expect to see a full range
of policy learning types with, perhaps, the exception of political learning. In government, cognitive and behavioural change is likely to be evident at the individual level and at the organisational level and we might expect changes to collective activity, institutional memory and policy (re)design. Depending on the gravity of the crisis and the public response, we might also expect to see social learning as policy goals and paradigmatic ideas are reformed. In this regard, the inquiry would itself be an indicator of a changing social environment and an impending ideational revision.

As we have already noted, there will also be a crowd of other actors around these core players. They will be focused upon giving evidence and communicating their own knowledge. As such, ‘the crowd’ is not necessarily interested in learning. There may little stimuli amongst these actors to change thinking or behaviour. Indeed, many of the faces in this crowd will come from groups who are principally interested in advocacy. They are far more likely to want to persuade others about what they know already, rather than learn anything new themselves. If anything, therefore, these agents will be engaged in political learning.

In inquiry literature, the notion of learning is one-dimensional and conflated with the immediate implementation of inquiry recommendations. The application of types of learning to this basic view reveals a much more complex mosaic of learning that need to be considered in our conceptualisations of the post-crisis inquiry.

**Adding Stages and Questioning Process**

This section of the paper discusses how we might add in ‘stages’ to improve understanding of the inquiry process or, alternatively, reject the notion of process altogether on the basis that it limits our understanding.

The over-emphasis on knowledge acquisition and assimilation noted above gives the impression that those two stages are *the* determinants of an inquiry’s effectiveness. This affects evaluation as it leads towards a conclusion that if learning is not taking place post-crisis it is either because knowledge has not been developed properly or because thinking and behaviour has not changed within government. But there are many more possibilities than this and a basic, two-stage view of lesson-learning limits our understanding of those possibilities.

If we accept that there can be more to an inquiry than one organisation acquiring knowledge and another accepting or rejecting it, then a logical next step is to search for more stages so that we might better reflect that reality. This argument has been made repeatedly by Dominic Elliott in relation to *knowledge transfer*, a stage of the learning process which, Elliott argues, ought to connect acquisition and assimilation phases (Elliott and Smith 1999; Elliott and McGuiness 2002; Elliott 2008; Elliott 2009). Despite his arguments, knowledge transfer has been given very little analytical attention in the inquiry literature. Yet transfer must be included in any realistic conceptualisation of the post-crisis inquiry because it is in essence a stage that directs us towards understanding *communication* between different actors. When seen in these broad terms, knowledge transfer is not just a concept that draws our attention to the relationship between inquiry recommendations and assimilating bureaucrats nor is it merely about the means through which technical lessons are facilitated. Knowledge transfer is also a concept which can open up insights into the framing and broadcasting of policy lessons across jurisdictions. Thus knowledge transfer can be seen as an intrinsically *political* process. Indeed, if we consider that an inquiry’s findings
are often transferred through political communications, which are often about contestation, legitimacy and zero-sum politics, we can see a close association with May's typification of political learning (May 1992: 339). This is another example of how we can better conceptualise the post-crisis inquiry. By simply adding in an extra stage to the conventional understanding of knowledge acquisition and assimilation, we have introduced complexity into our understanding. More importantly, the inclusion of knowledge transfer also allows us to better reflect the reality of the modern inquiry through the recognition of communicatory politics.

Elliott is not alone when it comes to adding stages into the learning process. Dekker and Hansén (2004: 216), also adopt a stagist approach when conceptualising organisational learning. They promote a phase heuristic for the purpose of conceptualisation, which is similar to that presented by Elliott. Here, however, four stages are present rather than Elliott's three: ‘acquisition’ of knowledge is joined by ‘interpretation’ of knowledge. While acquisition and interpretation are the cognitive stages of learning, the two remaining stages, ‘dissemination’ (effectively knowledge transfer) and ‘institutionalisation’ (assimilation), are considered to be the registers of behavioural change (Dekker and Hansén 2004: 218). The inclusion of interpretation is important as it emphasises how inquiries translate raw information into ‘concrete lessons’ inferring causality and constructing narrative along the way (Dekker and Hansén 2004: 218). Thus adding interpretation to the mix gives us a more fine-grained and constructivist understanding of the knowledge acquisition process.

In an influential paper published in *Organization Science*, Huber (1991) also outlined four ‘constructs’ of organisational learning. These are three quarters familiar as they are comprised of ‘acquisition’, ‘information distribution’ and ‘interpretation’. However, the fourth construct is not assimilation but ‘memory’, reflecting the work of other organisational theorists on institutionalisation (Levitt and March 1988). The addition of this stage, in which agents are required to create memory and institutionalise lessons over the longer-term, also represents a more nuanced step ‘beyond’ assimilation.

We can now see how a range of very different actors with different roles can populate the various stages of a learning episode. There are those charged with conducting the inquiry, those with a part to play in its interpretation and dissemination in different venues, those who have to accept or reject its lessons and subsequently incorporate them into institutional formats and those who may be concerned with keeping lessons alive across the longer term. Thus connecting knowledge transfer and the institutionalisation of memory to the more familiar stages of acquisition and assimilation broadens out our conceptualisation of the inquiry making it at once more realistic, more political, more polycentric and, consequentially, more complex.

Adding inquiry stages to our understanding of post-crisis learning is a simple and effective means of building a more realistic picture of the inquiry process. However, we need to be cautious about adopting a stagist approach to policy learning. Using well-rehearsed and well-repeated arguments, policy scholars have a tendency to call for the abandonment of a stagist model of policymaking while also, in the same breath, reclaiming the stages as a valuable heuristic (see, for example, Birkland 1997: 5). Similar cautions exist in relation to policy learning literature (Dekker and Hansén 2004: 219). It would seem therefore that increasing the number of stages represents a start towards a better conceptualisation rather than an end.
Given the above, there is merit in discussing whether a processional view of learning should be completely eschewed. In doing so, we are no longer exploring how to widen the conceptual lens to include more in it but moving into territory in which we can explore the possibilities of disassembling the conventional understanding of the inquiry as a linear process.

One way of questioning process is to challenge the ostensibly rational and linear character of the learning stages themselves. This can lead to an argument that the stages are rather more incoherent internally than they may appear from the outside. For example, insider accounts from those who have staffed or chaired inquiries show that the acquisition of knowledge can be more ad-hoc and rudderless than rational and linear. Shonfield’s (1980) discussion of one British inquiry into overseas trade representation is indicative. Blighted by a lack of funding, staffing and expertise, the members of this inquiry, despite their best intentions, lacked insight. In a refreshing account of what he called ‘the pragmatic fallacy’, Shonfield documented the inquiry’s less than linear process:

Here, at the tail-end of our investigation – when we had no time left to pursue the matter in detail – we simply bumped head-on into this major piece of theory about the structure of government. Clearly we should have started with it. With this kind of key at one’s disposal, one would be able to decipher many of the underlying structures of government. … But we were once again the victims of the pragmatic fallacy: just plunge into your subject; collect as many facts as you can; think about them hard as you go along; and, at the end, use your common sense, and above all your feel for the practicable, to select a few good proposals … This method, it seems to me, derives from a view of public affairs which puts the functions of an investigator on essentially the same footing as those of a common-law judge. Such a person is supposed to know all about the underlying theoretical assumptions of those whose affairs he is examining. All he needs is facts. (Shonfield 1980: 59)

In a similar vein, Salter (1989: 183-184) discusses the private deliberations of the inquiry processes she was involved with, identifying a range of problems with the acquisition process. First, time pressures mean ‘that no one involved has time to absorb, let alone integrate, the vast body of information and the significance of seemingly insignificant revisions from one draft of the final report to the next’. Second, the process of knowledge construction between inquiry members was inherently political, involving ‘horsetrading’ not only between inquiry members but also with ‘a silent partner’ not in the room - the government - who will decide whether to accept or reject the recommendations. Salter (1989: 184) suggests that ‘as a result of these negotiations, the final report of inquiries often contains seemingly contradictory recommendations’. Thus in one of her experiences, an inquiry declared that a particular pesticide was not dangerous but insisted that farms using it had to publicly post health warnings. Third, and most importantly in terms of our challenge to linearity, Salter suggests that:

in these negotiations, something happens to the public submissions and research that is neither intended nor particularly desired. Because so few people in fact write the report and because deliberations occur under extreme time pressures and in closed-door situations, material from the submissions, and often from the research studies as well, is lifted out of context and used strategically to advance particular arguments. Words or phrases from the submissions become disconnected from the analysis in which they are generated. They are disassociated from the submission as a whole … and used simply to support positions. (Salter 1989: 183)
Thus if we wish to challenge the stagist view of inquiry learning we might stress that it is not the case that actors smoothly acquire a full understanding of the costs and benefits of action and inaction when generating inquiry knowledge and that it is not the case that lessons travel on to un-problematically mould the assumptions and behaviour of organisations. Rather acquisition and assimilation stages (and any other we might choose to add) may be seen, in themselves, as non-linear and messy events, which nevertheless enjoy a veneer of rational linearity.

Another way to question linearity is to look across the stages and examine the way in which they hang together as a whole. Elliott and Macpherson (2010: 573) make the case that the ‘institutionalized process of public inquiry might contribute to the failure to learn the types of lessons necessary to create the capacity for cognitive action’. In their view, this is primarily because the stagist model runs against the needs of practice-orientated learning, which has to build an adaptive capacity amongst agents who have to handle future crises. If it is adaptive practice at the agency level that is required, they argue, then the whole process of institutionalised lesson learning may be inappropriate and misguided. As a consequence, Elliott and Macpherson propose a re-conceptualisation of learning which promotes the connections between institutions and social practice in the real world. There are three elements within their re-conceptualisation that are pertinent here. First, learning about crises takes place across interconnected yet very different levels - the macro-environmental level, the institutional level and the individual/group level. Second, acquisition, transfer and assimilation processes occur within and between these levels. And third, learning relationships between levels and components are recursive, emergent and interactive. This sophisticated conceptualisation encourages a view of the learning episode as cross-hatched rather than linear and sequential. Thus, for Elliott and Macpherson it is appropriate to conceptualise a world of ‘bricolage’ learning, in which individuals, groups and institutions shape practices by drawing on a range of sources across different contexts. This multi-dimensional view clearly runs contrary to the institutionalised neatness of the stagist inquiry.

Understanding the stages of a post-crisis inquiry is a necessary pre-requisite for getting to grips with their essence. It is also a starting point for re-conceptualising the inquiry in a more realistic way. We need to challenge the overly simplistic, two-stage understanding of the inquiry process that currently exists in the literature by acknowledging that: a) more stages can exist in an inquiry learning process; b) rational-linear characterisations of an inquiry process may not reflect the messy reality of post-crisis learning.

Not the Usual Suspects: Agents who have Escaped Analysis

If we focus on the policy literature that deals with agency new ways to broaden our understanding of the post-crisis inquiry are again revealed. At a descriptive level, we can see a range of potentially important new actors who are rarely acknowledged, much less analysed, as important parts of an inquiry process. These individuals may be apposite to knowledge acquisition, transfer, assimilation and institutional memory stages. They include the researchers and the secretariat attached to inquiries who are rarely considered in terms of knowledge acquisition (Donnison 1980), the street-level bureaucrats who actually have to implement recommendations at the policy ‘coal-face’ (Lipsky 1980), the policy entrepreneurs who transfer knowledge as they champion solutions in the political market place (Kingdon 2003), epistemic communities who shape the
creation and carriage of cause and effect explanations (Haas 1992) and advocacy coalitions which define the political turf wars and rate of cognitive change across policy groups (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

We can examine these groups in relation to each of the ‘stages’ defined above. In terms of knowledge acquisition we can see important actors who are have not been treated to a great deal of analysis. As one inquiry insider explains, ‘the [inquiry] committee does not work in a vacuum. It depends on other groups and organisations which together make up the environment in which it sinks or swims … The committee cannot work well unless it establishes the right relations with each of these at the appropriate phases of its work’ (Donnison 1980: 10). Two important members of what Bulmer (1980: 7) refers to as dramatis personae around the inquiry committee are the secretariat and the social/scientific advisors taken on by the committee. The secretary is usually provided via the secondment of a senior civil servant from a central department, aided by an office of executive and administrative officers who work in conjunction with professional advisors and assessors who are germane to the issue at stake. This coterie will be responsible for the agenda, scheduling, minutes, general organisation and production of a final report. As such, the secretariat reflects the authority of the bureaucracy more widely in that their influence is both situated, and derived from, the twin pillars of administrative neutrality and efficiency (Donnison 1980: 10-11).

Research staff are usually employed on a full or part-time basis either to conduct original research or to advise as rapporteurs or experts on particular topics (Bulmer 1980: 5-6; Donnison 1980: 11-12). The need to employ high quality researchers brings baggage, according to Donnison (1980: 11):

Research workers, if they are good enough to make a major contribution in the time available, will generally have views of their own, well-established working methods and public reputations. They will have friends and enemies, collaborators and allies. They will not be a neutral element providing a merely technical service. From time to time they find the committee’s outlook and methods irritating, and some committee members will be equally irritated by the researchers.

Obviously, the mix of actors with the potential to influence knowledge acquisition grows as we consider those who come before an inquiry. One interesting group in this regard are epistemic communities. The epistemic community gained recognition in the 1990’s as a concept that gave purchase on the genesis and transfer of ideas across international borders. Two decades later, the concept, which emerged as part of what Dunlop (2009: 291) describes as the ‘renaissance’ of academic interest in the role of policy ideas, still ‘enjoys good currency’ as a means of understanding the role of experts in decision making, particularly when related to technical issues (Dunlop 2009: 289).

Hass (1992: 3) originally defined an epistemic community as 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’. These officials are said to have shared normative beliefs which would guide the ‘social action’ of community members; shared causal beliefs about a specific policy domain; shared notions of validity in terms of the appropriateness of knowledge and how it should be judged, and; ‘a common policy enterprise’, meaning a focus in the form of practices or problems to which they apply their
efforts (Hass 1992: 3). The combination of normative and causal beliefs can make an epistemic community a formidable authority. Their knowledge of cause and effect relationships that are complex, for example, can enable them to be ‘the main producers of knowledge in an issue area giving them the potential to occupy the elevated position of what might called ‘principal teachers’ to decision makers … epistemic communities central role in information production gives them the authoritative status to occupy this position’ (Dunlop 2009: 292). The elucidation of cause and effect relationships represents the source of their legitimacy in this regard and, as Hass (1992: 15) states, the authority of these relationships and those who can espouse them clearly, intensifies following a shock or a crisis because of the uncertainty therein. When seen as authoritative speakers of truth, and particularly when the truth aligns with the dominant interests in a policy area, epistemic communities can play a range of important political roles vis-à-vis knowledge acquisition: identifying interests and shaping agenda items, framing and constructing issues for debate and also notions of appropriateness in those debates, and; controlling the menu of options that decision makers have at their disposal (Hass 1992: 2-5).

Epistemic communities can also play a role in knowledge transfer by acting as the ‘baggage handlers’ of ideas (Haas 1992: 27) advocating them across a range of audiences. The notion of the ideational baggage handler has some commonality with that of the policy entrepreneur (Kingdon 2003: 179) or the politically motivated individual learner (Dudley 2004: 406). All three of these accounts record individuals championing ideas by investing resources in their development and their marketing in various different locations of a political system. As Geoffrey Dudley notes:

> The role played by key individuals involves significant policy learning over time. It is in these learning processes that key individuals may construct and reconstruct a policy issue, by reinterpreting not only their own place in its dynamics, but also shaping an organizational response. Over time, policy learning can result in individuals moving on to influence other organizations or to create fresh organizations and coalitions. (Dudley 2007: 405)

In terms of knowledge assimilation and institutionalisation, actors who implement policies at the front-line level are another group that have been analytically neglected. There is of course a large literature on street-level bureaucracy and policy implementation but it remains largely unconnected from the concept of policy learning (Schofield 2004 and Arnold 2014 are notable exceptions) and completely unconsidered in relation to the post-crisis inquiry. Yet we know from the implementation literature that street-level agents are essential for the success of policy change, that they have enough discretion to act as barriers to reform, and that resistance or acceptance of new proposals is influenced by local, rather than central, concerns.

We need to consider street-level agents, therefore, as individual learners within the assimilation stage who exist ‘below’ the analytical plane upon which inquiries are traditionally examined. Arnold’s (2014: 6), analysis of the propensity of implementers to adopt new scientific ideas, for example, shows that ‘street-level bureaucrats must learn about policy innovations before they can adopt them, and that they are likely to learn about them from the people they encounter and activities they prosecute in their immediate professional
environments’ (see also Brehm and Gates 1997; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Indeed, given our previous discussion of non-linearity, it should not be the case that we merely look across a horizontal chain of inquiry stages and view different actors as assembly workers on the line. We need to add a vertical axis into the transfer, assimilation and institutionalization stages and look up and down different layers of governance.

Finally here, we need to once again acknowledge the ACF, which is similar to the concept of the epistemic community in that it also foregrounds the role of groups and ideas as the centrepieces of any effort to understand policy learning. The ACF is relevant to acquisition, transfer and assimilation. Coalitions may seek to use inquiries as ‘venues’ or ‘brokers’ to facilitate their interests and as a consequence they can profoundly influence knowledge acquisition. Moreover, they are also likely to be a route through which information is transferred around a policy subsystem or assimilated or rejected within it. Conversely, inquiries may be act as the propellants of change within coalitions. As manifestations of the exogenous shocks that can shake coalitions out of their cognitive straightjackets, inquiries may have a profound effect on subsystems or, more mundanely, they may represent another source of the gradual drip of information that leads to slower forms of policy learning across time. Thus, like the concept of epistemic communities, the ACF shows us that we need to map out how the ideas and recommendations of an inquiry are generated and communicated through like-minded policy coalitions. Ultimately, the ACF suggests that: a) inquiries can be influenced by the core beliefs of advocacy coalitions, which will remain intransigent; b) inquiries will influence those core beliefs and facilitate policy learning and change as a consequence.

Understanding the full range of actors involved in an inquiry is absolutely essential. This means we need to go beyond the two ‘usual suspects’ – the committee of inquiry and the central bureaucracy - and look at the agents that operate in different stages and levels of a learning episode. We can improve our conceptualisation of the inquiry if we add descriptive elements in this way but it also crucial that we attempt to trace changes in ideas as they manifest and travel through specific agents.

**Alternative Rationalities**

We can also expand our understanding of the inquiry by examining the different rationalities of actors in and around it. The term rationality is being used here in its literal sense as a shorthand label for the guiding ‘logic’ behind individual and collective action. The essence of the inquiry is its lesson-learning function. At the core of this are two rational assumptions: 1) that knowledge can be captured objectively; 2) that lessons can be learned instrumentally after this (Parker and Dekker 2008: 260; Stone 1994: 245). However, political, legal, and interpretive literatures suggest that alternative rationalities are at play in an inquiry process and that these can be just as important as the logic of lesson learning.

**Political Rationality**

The single largest claim about the politics of inquiries is that they can be used as an agenda management tool through which political elites defuse problematic issues (Clokie and Robinson 1937; Herbert 1961; Ashforth
A second related claim is that the form and functioning of inquiries can be manipulated by political elites, thus making them ‘one of the props of political theatre’ (Prasser 1994: 13). Ministers are said to steer inquiries from a distance by setting the terms of reference, the resources available and the expertise at their disposal. In this way, governments are meant to be able to control the content of an inquiry’s recommendations and the timing of their release (Stone 1994: 247). It is also said that inquiries can be crafted into existence in such a way that they steer themselves towards pedestrian issues and safe topics rather than more radical ground (Salter 1989; Ashforth 1990; Althaus 1994). Manipulation can also relate to legitimising pre-determined solutions. In this sense, inquiries smooth the way for policy implementation. One of the more interesting studies of this phenomenon was conducted by Acland (1980) who examined the validity of the research which underpinned The Plowden Committee’s investigation of education reform in the UK:

Seen from the rational point of view, policy research is understood to provide authoritative evidence that justifies one among several options. In other words, there is seen to be a close connection between specified policy alternatives, the design of the research, the research findings and the ultimate choice among the policy options. … the Plowden research does not measure up to the rational standard in several ways. The research was not designed to resolve questions about policy alternatives. The research design could not provide substantial evidence for the policy with which it was to be connected. The findings were both misused and ignored. Nevertheless, the research was important in creating the setting in which a potentially sensitive policy could be introduced. The research set the stage for a new policy. (Acland 1980: 34, emphasis added)

All of the above suggests that the logic of politics clashes with the logic of lesson learning and that we can examine the inquiry as a manifestation of elite rational choice. However, a number of political scientists have been concerned to show how inquiries can still perform important functions despite, or even because, of their political character. Thus Prasser (1994: 15) argues that the process of ‘condemning inquiries for being used by elected officials’ should be replaced with functional assessments that evaluate the inquiry ‘more in terms of their potential role in ‘reconciling interests’ than for their independent analysis’. In essence, as Degeling et al (1993: 43) emphasised, this line of thinking suggests that the policy function of an inquiry needs to be redefined because:

…the ultimate policy effectiveness of official inquiries is likely to be found not in their alleged disinterested expertise, but in their capacity for orchestrating, negotiating and bargaining between stakeholders. … Conducting an inquiry now becomes concerned with recasting the existing alignment of relations between stakeholders and with fashioning settlements which will draw the support of a significant number of erstwhile contestants.

These views have been echoed in research which has challenged the orthodox view that inquiries are merely vehicles for political manipulation. In one rare international comparison, for example, Althaus (1994) concludes that the idea that inquiries are tools to be used to deflect public criticism is a consequence of an
excessive fascination with political process at the centre of government (1994: 196). When the lens is
broadened, she argues, to include economic, environmental and social contestation in broader contexts,
inquiries ‘take on a new light’ as the crucibles of public debate. This means that the politics of inquiries are
important as they can, in certain circumstances, ‘offer the public an unlimited opportunity for experiencing
direct democracy, that is, widespread political participation in the formation of specific policies’ (Salter 1989:
174). In a similar vein, Resodihardjo (2006: 199) has argued, like Althaus and Salter, that ‘the idea that an
inquiry can be used as a tool to manage a crisis is not always correct’ and that in actual fact crisis-driven
inquiries can act as ‘catalysts’ which can have a decisive impact on policy through the introduction of a new
idea into the public debate. In keeping with the literature on social policy learning, Resohardijo (2006: 204)
suggests that catalyst inquiries can provide new ideas, which ‘break the ice’ and prompt new way of thinking
that can subsequently affect a policy sector’s paradigm. This research suggests that instrumental lesson-
learning may often wither on the vine of politics but that social policy learning might rely upon it.

These two views of political functionalism – the narrow view of inquiry manipulation and the broader
view of democratic politics and ideational discourse - both challenge aspects of conventional wisdom about
inquiries. The first suggests that the rationality of realpolitik trumps the rationality of lesson-learning and we
need to get real, politically, when it comes to conceptualising inquiries. The second view, however, challenges
that position by suggesting that post-crisis inquiries are likely to facilitate social policy learning and
democratic modes of knowledge transfer.

Legal Rationality

Most inquiries function through a legal or quasi-legal rationality that is calibrated towards inquisition so that
‘facts’ can be found and compiled (Salter 1989; Weller 1994; Schwartz 1997; Borodzicz 2006; HC 2005). If
inquiries mirror legal process, so the logic goes, an exhaustive and impartial account of events will lead to the
acquisition of sound knowledge. Thus inquiries are often modelled upon courtroom formats. The chair is
often a judge, witnesses and evidence can often be compelled, and cross-examinations and legal
representations often accompany written and oral testimony. In many ways, therefore, the legalistic
rationality that underpinned the classic 19th century inquiry model is alive and well today.

The legal format of inquiries has, however, been questioned. It has been argued, for example,
that legalistic proceedings may be an excellent tool for securing and presenting facts but that they struggle in
assessing political nuance, different professional cultures or the nature of modern public sector organisations
generally (Weller 1994: 263; Schwartz 1997: 79; HC 2005: 17-20). Moreover, it has been stressed that legal
processes are not necessarily the best means of formulating policy. As Schwartz (1997: 80) puts it,
‘adjudication is one thing, and policy-making is quite another. Adjudication looks at a heavily documented
past; policy-making involves making projections about an uncertain future’.

The most important criticism of the legal model is that its inquisitorial character can encourage the
search for blame and culpability. This can skew proceedings in ways which ensure that lesson learning is
compromised. For example, representations from those with clear pecuniary interests can be given more
weight than ordinary citizens or radical groups, government officials may be keen to give only the tersest, most formal of statements, and all concerned will be looking to avoid blame and defend their actions. Borodzicz comes closest to describing how a culture of litigation can undermine the rational-instrumental nature of an inquiry:

Public inquiries have a function to establish causality and blame; this can, however, pose a dilemma for those giving evidence. The need to tell it ‘as it is (or was) may be compromised when personal or corporate identities and liability are at stake. … The need to establish blame may also cause a problem with the quality of accounts presented to the inquiry. Giving evidence might subsequently cause one to be blamed or held personally liable and create a dangerous conflict of interests for those being asked to ‘tell it as it was’. (Borodzicz 2006: 6-7)

These effects of blaming dynamics can blight inquiry proceedings internally but also have the potential to spill out into broader socio-political theatres affecting transfer and assimilation stages. Indeed, Borodzicz (2006: 7) has argued that public inquiries are a reflection of a larger culture of blame and litigation characterised by the search for scapegoats for issues that are really the unintended result of modernity (Beck 1992).

Interpretive Rationality
According to Mahler (1997: 521), much of the diversity in the field of organisational learning is divided between those who orientate around rational-analytical learning models and those who engage with interpretive theories of learning, which place an emphasis upon ‘the inter-subjectivity of organizational knowledge and the interpretive character of the learning process itself’ (Mahler 1997: 523). Interpretive theories of learning have much to say about the ways in which classic modes of rationality can be replaced by other reasons for action. Moreover, there is a rich vein of scholarship within this field that examines post-crisis inquiries specifically (Lynch and Bogen 1996; Brown 2000; 2004; Gephart et al. 1990; Gephart 1993; 2007; Boudes and Laroche 2009). Three aspects of the literature are very relevant to this study.

First, interpretative processes are a means through which information is given meaning (Daft and Weick 1984: 294). Here we can point to a large literature on meaning making or sensemaking (Weick 2001; Brown 2004; Boin et al. 2005; Gephart 2007). The key argument within that literature as it applies to inquiries is that often the application and communication of meaning can distort the reconstruction of history or prejudice the production of meaningful lessons. This need not be a deliberate act. The literature suggests that knowledge acquisition can be tainted by misinterpretation when, in their efforts to make sense of crises, committees of inquiry acquire and process information with a bias that reflects the values of larger power structures and ideologies (Brown 2004; Gephart 2007; Boudes and Laroche 2009).

These works tend to view inquiry members as interpreters who are processing information sub-consciously in ways which reflect larger paradigms or power dynamics. However, studies of the politics of crisis also emphasise intentional forms of ‘meaning making’ through forms of crisis communication that are intended to sway opinion and generate support (‘t Hart 1993; Alink et al. 2001; Boin et al. 2005; Stark 2011).
In the post-crisis period, meaning making, or framing, can be understood as an instrumental process, enacted by political actors and groups, which typically involves the ‘the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office-holders and public policies’ (Boin et al. 2009: 83). Most commonly these efforts represent attempts to settle the question of who is to blame post-crisis. As a consequence, therefore, they can be considered examples where political rationality drives a meaning making process for specific ends.

The second way in which the interpretative literature can help us understand inquiries is by shining a light on how different rationalities structure the format of the inquiry process. This particularly relevant to the acquisition stage where a complex interplay of rationalities can co-constitute the hierarchy of goals, the role orientation of actors and the physical proceedings of a committee of inquiry. This complex interplay is compounded by the increasing number of groups that now participate in an inquiry, because ‘each distinct group or subculture at an inquiry may have its own distinct form of organization and its own interpretive scheme … or rationality’ (Gephart 2007: 141).

The third lesson from the interpretative literature comes from definitions of organisational learning which stress how inter-subjective coherency is a sign of knowledge assimilation. Huber (1991: 102), for example, defines an interpretivist mode of organisational learning in terms of the ability of a range of organisational actors to appreciate the interpretations of others. This resonates with Etheredge and Short’s (1983: 48) seminal essay, which emphasised shared ‘maps of reality’ and an organisational consciousness across individuals as a sign of governmental learning. If we conceptualise the acquirers, transferors and assimilators of knowledge as part of the same organisational system, Huber’s and Etheredge’s work take a germane shape through an argument that an inquiry will only produce lessons if there is a collective appreciation of the interpretations of others across the learning stages.

The crucial question in terms of this morass is therefore; do competing interpretations recognise and/or complement each other enough to co-constitute one, more or less, shared reality that facilitates legitimate action? If there is a collective appreciation of the interpretations of a range of actors in an inquiry process, then we can conceptualise an inquiry as an organisation that is engaged in collective policy learning at the cognitive level.

Thus we can say that politics, legal dynamics and the interpretative nature of the inquiry process may compete with the rational-instrumental lesson learning logic. Each of these three strands of literature has been concerned with different foci but central to all is a claim that inquiries are something quite different from lesson learners. Like any organisation, inquiries perform multiple functions, for multiple audiences concurrently and these are not mutually exclusive nor are they wholly positive or negative. We need to be cognizant of how different actors, functions and rationalities mingle within a single learning episode. If we can capture this complexity then our conceptualisations of the post-crisis inquiry will improve.
Conclusion

The study of the public inquiry needs to be re-booted in ways which can improve our understanding of policy learning in the wake of crises. The starting point for this endeavour is to reconceptualise the inquiry as a policy learning process in a governance context that is bound to be crowded, complex and multi-dimensional. This paper has suggested four ways that this reconceptualization can be achieved: 1) by using typologies of policy learning to stratify and fine-grain the typical stages and actors considered in current inquiry research; 2) by adding in additional stages to a typical process view of the inquiry or, more controversially, by challenging the idea of process completely; 3) by incorporating a new range of pertinent actors who have the capacity to influence the generation, transfer and assimilation of ideas across tiers of governance; 4) by considering the existence and complementarity of different strands of rationality which have little to do with hindsight lesson-learning.

Cognizance of these additional inquiry dimensions will certainly encourage more sophisticated and contemporary conceptualisations of the post-crisis inquiry. However, what is now required is evidence. Conceptual revisions need to be used as guides for the inductive generation of data which will in turn lead to more conceptual revision. In particular, we need to know whether the simple two-stage inquiry view is obsolete and if so, what stages should be privileged as important going forward. We need to know what types of learning, if any, are taking place at the individual and organisational levels within these stages as a consequence of the inquiry. And we need to know if the range of old and new actors in an inquiry process are in any way aware of each other’s roles in the gestalt of policy learning post-crisis. All of this requires a qualitative agenda in the first instance, preferably comparative in nature, so that we can drag the study of inquiries out of the twentieth century and align it with the political science knowledge of the twenty-first.

Bibliography


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<th>Behavioural</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Group</th>
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<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in the behaviour of a policy actor if it is caused by altered cognition</td>
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<td>Policy learning occurs through changes in organisational routine that improve collective activities and through changes in institutional memory if they are caused by altered cognition</td>
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