

Policy Making and Implementation: Two Strategic Phases for the Uptake of ODL

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Abstract

The article suggests two strategies for enhancing the development of ODL: improving policy makers expertise and improving the implementation processes of ODL. The uptake of ODL is often hindered by the lack of knowledge, personal experience, familiarity and awareness of policy makers. In this regard the author suggests some actions to be undertaken: to support the creation of "second hand experiences" by facilitating contacts with people who have personal experience with ODL or with the use of new technologies; to equip policy makers with technologies and to encourage their use; to set up expert groups consulting policy makers; to help policy makers to elaborate commonly agreed functional models for ODL; to put ODL in a general telematics framework. The implementation processes of ODL are strictly bound to the actors involved, to their perceptions and reactions towards innovation and change. The author introduces the concept of potential "winners" and "losers" with respect to ODL development and highlights the importance of understanding their motivational structures, lowering their level of fear, supporting winners' coalitions and presenting credible chances for losers in order to enhance the implementation processes.

Keywords

Improving policy makers expertise
Improving implementation processes
Potential winners and losers

Improving Policy Makers Expertise

Personal experiences missing

With a few exceptions policy-makers of all levels have no personal experience with Open Learning or Distance Learning. Their experience in education and qualification has its origin in traditional classroom teaching, with the role of a "teacher", combining many different functionalities from organisation to content expertise and the role of the student as the "subject" of the process. Based on this experience, the frequently quoted shift "from a teaching to a learning paradigm" can only be imagined intellectually without anchoring it in one's own experience.

Up to now experiences with ODL are limited to some few niches (e.g. persons with alternative educational careers), personal experience with more advanced forms of telematics-based education and training cannot exist broadly, because those forms are still limited to few experimental settings. The problem is reinforced, because many policy-makers are lagging behind the general development concerning their personal use of key components of telematics. Ministries do not yet use e-mail or tele-cooperative work intensively on a daily basis. It is not only a few companies and institutions where the executive level is the last to use advanced technologies personally.

Missing familiarity with prerequisites, processes, benefits, limitations

Based on the lack of personal experience described, many policy-makers take an isolated view towards ODL decisions disregarding the full and complex embedding in prerequisites, general and specific processes, the scale of different types and shades of benefits as well as the limitations. Such a lack of embedding lowers the potential to transfer experience with decision processes from other areas, these policy-makers are highly professional. This "lack of embedding" or "lack of contextualization" is a key issue to be addressed.

Supporting "Second hand experiences"

Many policy-makers active in and supportive for ODL have access to "second hand experience". Their wives, children, children's friends have personal ODL experience and/or experience with the use of key telematics components. Politicians arguing for the importance of the "Informations Society" in Europe more as a rule than as an exception refer to their children's experiences.

One strategy could be to approach specifically those policy-makers with obvious "second hand experience" in ODL and its key components, another strategy to facilitate the contact with persons within their credible and existing social network having this type of experience (a secretary in the ministry having successfully returned to work with the help of an Open Learning course etc.).

Supporting personal experience with "ODL key components"

As a rule policy makers of all levels and from different institutions should with priority become equipped with state of the art telematics hard- and software and supported and encouraged for intensive use. One cannot expect a differentiated and realistic position of a policy body in the absence of any experience with key technological components under discussion.

Organising contacts to credible persons with ODL experience

If no "second hand experience" within the usual social contacts of a policy-maker is available, contacts with other "ODL experienced" persons can be established. Those contacts might be more punctual, less differentiated, less credible. Nevertheless even relatively short, but direct contacts with personalised experience from a user's point of view will help policy-makers substantially to turn "user orientation" from a mere phrase into an internalised attitude.

Setting up expert groups for recommendations

The lack of knowledge and awareness about differentiated options implementing ODL can partly be compensated by expert groups set up to consult one policy-maker or a specific group of them. To use this tool adequately, it is crucial to formulate the questions to answer by the policy-makers themselves and to select only experts policy makers are already convinced about their credibility. Secondly one has to define a working mission strictly oriented towards concrete recommendations for actions which have to analyse the whole embedding including the availability of resources needed.

Expert hearings

Organising a hearing with experts offers a chance of an interactive dialogue between policy makers and experts, being able to confront different experts opinions immediately, asking for clarification, sophisticating the embedding conditions within such a discussion.

Making expert groups and expert hearings fruitful needs either a high level of independence of experts from interest groups in the field of ODL. This usually is not possible in practice, because this type of expertise grows normally within the work for a specific group of interest (an Open University, a dual mode institution, traditional teaching institutions, etc.). Therefore the realistic option is only to balance carefully the different interests, to make these interests obvious, to allow and encourage a discussion about interests and to create a specific forum, where equal chances for the different types of interest groups are ensured, e.g. by a really independent chairman, by a balanced chairing committee or else.

Continuous consulting relations

The most intensive and promising external support of expertise is a continuous consulting relation of one policy maker or a small group of them with one individual or again a small group of consulting experts. In such a case the independence of the consultant from the problems in question - especially a total independence from the outcomes of respective decision processes - is of key importance. For this reason consulting persons normally should be external to the own organisation or body. Such an independence is very difficult. One solution are experts from other regions or countries or from totally different sectors. Those will lack a certain familiarity with regional, national or sectoral specifics, which as a rule is more than balanced by the guaranteed absence of personal interests.

Disseminating a generally agreed functional model

Usually policy makers have to develop independently a personal model about the relations of ODL aspects with other elements of more general policy field (resources needed, groups and interests involved, etc.). This need to individually construct such a model quite naturally produces different ones and by communicating on the basis of those different models will cause frequent misunderstanding.

The "ODL-community" in Europe has come up with a relatively common view on its subject over the last decade. This expert's consensus is mostly an implicit one usually not openly presented in papers, memoranda, recommendations, specifically not in those addressing policy makers, because such a rather "theoretical" discourse usually is the first part of a report skipped out from the level of executive summaries, in order to make outcomes more instantly digestible.

Therefore a proper space has to be created to allow at least the key policy makers to elaborate such a commonly agreed model in a more intensive process.

Putting ODL in a general telematics framework

The field of education and training is characterised by its many fold segmentation, nationally and in many cases and increasingly regionally, sectorally, into very different levels in education as well as to training. The integrative nature of the use of telematics as a very general technology not only unveils similarities

and partly total identical structures and problems across the segmented fields of education and training. By de-institutionalising learning processes they also show more common areas of interest, problems, interrelations between learning and other human activities than seen before. In general learning becomes a subset of tele-cooperative work in general, with only partly special characteristics.

Accepting this, policy makers in the field of education and training find themselves suddenly more closely neighboured to policy makers in areas they did not feel linked with their work earlier. Analysing these more general embedding in detail will allow policy makers in ODL to position their function in a broader frame, allowing new and more general coalitions, identifying overlaps and controversies etc.

Improving Implementation Processes

Implementing ODL offers two relatively different types of scenarios. In one case solutions have to be identified and implemented for qualification problems not yet solved. In the other scenario existing solutions should be replaced or supplemented by ODL.

New solutions for new/not identified/not yet solvable problems

In some cases a learning or qualification demand arises newly. In other areas a learning or qualification need was existing, but up to now was not identified as a problem to solve. In the third case learning demand has been identified, but no way could be seen to realise it under the conditions given, with resources available. In all of these three types the situation is relatively favourable for ODL, because it competes with other solutions possible under rather equal conditions. In all cases new structures have to be set up, new actors come in to the game from other areas (e.g. multimedia authoring specialists from video- or graphic design or from newly graduated people). Under those "equal" starting conditions, ODL in most cases is the solution chosen with a good chance to be implemented quickly and without big problems.

Such a totally new "problem" in its pure form is not very frequent. Even if the problem itself is new, on a higher level there are other interests or existing institutions, which will be influenced by those new developments (if e.g. money for ODL solutions will be withdrawn from their budget). Nevertheless, most successful implementations of ODL are those for new problems. As a consequence, the question for "comparative results" of conventional education and training and ODL in most cases cannot be answered, because "comparative" traditional solutions to ODL do not exist.

Alternatives for existing solutions

The field of education and training differs in its degree of organisation and sophistication, from country to country, sometimes between regions, between sectors. The more elaborated and differentiated education and training systems are, the more "occupied" most areas are by existing organisational structures and the people behind. In consequence chances for easy implementation of ODL decrease with the "development level" of existing educational and training institutions and increase with the degree of absence of such prestructured environment. This explains partly remarkable differences between different states and application areas in Europe.

Identifying all actors influencing the process

It is legitimate for all institutions and persons to have own interests and to act to promote and to save those interests. To get a complete view on such a grid on interests as a basis for any prediction of the actions, institutions and persons will take confronted with a new situation, it is necessary in a first step to identify systematically at the beginning all actors influenced in one way or another. Methods and tools to do so can be elaborated and communicated in a learning process. At the moment systematic training offers for policy makers in that field are still lacking. Implementation handbooks in many cases state the respective facts, but do not offer real tools to handle the problem.

Winners and losers

Every innovative implementation will have winners as well as losers. Looking only "at the bright side of progress" will neglect or underestimate automatically resistances and difficulties. Accepting the defence own interests as legitimate will result in a higher degree of acceptance of motivation of those persons and groups resisting. Such an acceptance of the motives of the "losers" will give them more space to express their real concern instead of hiding their true motives behind other argumentations, which deny "egoistic interests".

Innovations planned will influence winners and losers in a quite different way. Potential losers are relatively sure they will be influenced by every decision taken. Traditional trainers in companies are sure, their role will be influenced anyway by any changes in the companies training system under discussion. Potential winners are not always in the same way aware of their chance to win, because frequently the groups benefiting from ODL implementation are not clear at the beginning of the discussion.

Asymmetrical motivation

Not only the awareness and in consequence the level of activation is asymmetrical between winners and losers. The same is true for their motivational structures. Losers are characterised by their relatively homogeneous view of the problem. They feel they are sure about the profile of their losses and about the

way to avoid those consequences: simply by avoiding changes and therefore the implementation process in general.

The winners' motivation is usually more heterogeneous. Some expect to be the "key winners", for whom the success of the implementation is felt to create substantial benefits such as re-shaping their own position, maybe taking a positive influence on their whole career. This is the small group of potential winners usually initiating and pushing forward implementation processes. With no respect to their very high personal commitment and motivation, their number in every process is limited. In most cases the product of intensity and number remains lower than the product of an average low investment of the losers, but multiplied by a high number.

Increasing the commitment and motivation of those key "proposers" only in rare cases is a solution. Most case studies of a successfully ODL implementation show, the key success criterion is the potential to activate broader groups of potential benefiting "winners" from the very beginning. As - what is rather the rule than the exception in ODL - potential winners have no personal experiences with the benefits of ODL, one needs a not simple process to make them primarily aware of the benefits waiting for them. In some cases such a process is difficult, because potential winners are not yet organised in their interests, while existing consolidated groups more often are represented by well set up representatives.

Suffering and fear

Motivational incentives remain relatively ineffective if they do not exceed a certain critical threshold at every individual concerned. Normal "inconveniences" and even serious deficits of existing solutions will not lead to any action before a relatively high level of "pain pressure" is reached. In the past it was a total exception within the whole education and training system if such a level of "pain pressure" was reached in the key actors. If motivation reaches a degree of "action relevance", fear and hope in an asymmetrical way come into the game.

Having a relatively good idea about the things "one already has" on the one hand and being highly uncertain about the things "that one may possibly obtain" on the other dominate, even if such fears do not always become evident due to social desirability. Depending on their level of fear, persons tend to prefer a conservation of existing solutions or even more a restauration of structures remembered in the past as "better" than to face the challenge of an uncertain future. As fear is always a very limiting factor for innovation, lowering the general level of fear in the decision field is a key task for a proper implementation strategy.

Control - loss or increase?

One of the most important aspects for persons estimating a situation, feeling comfortable or not and becoming active or remaining passive in their personal view on the "locus of control". If they have the impression that the control over the process is and will under all circumstances remain in other persons' or institutions' responsibility, their attitude will be passive or even resisting. If they are in fear, their existing control over processes and persons will be diminished by an innovation; this will create the strongest motivational opposition we can image. If their perspective is a positive increase of control over the innovation process and as a result of the innovative development, this is the strongest motivation for continuous support. The impression of one's own potential to control processes (or to get controlled) is highly individual. The real extent of control only partially correlates with that subjective view.

The key task in implementation strategies therefore is not only to design the process itself and its possible results in a way it maximises the potential of personal control but also to take care of the subjective view, means to convince those who will increase their control (as is enormously typical of the learner in ODL).

Why not to trust argumentations?

Since Siegmund FREUD at least we know that argumentations expressed not always directly reflect a person's motivation. Especially if emotions are rather general, with only a rough feeling of what a person does not want, argumentations will be selected to which extent they support the result of the emotion. Within those dynamics, emotions are not resulting out of arguments, but arguments are created or selected afterwards to support a special emotional situation.

People who anticipate a strong influence on their life by any intervention start with emotions generating appropriate argumentations later. Therefore it is of limited use to try to change the argumentation by a logical debate. Because such a change will only result in a search for another argumentation to support the still unchanged underlying emotion. To be able to influence those really basic emotional conditions we have to create appropriate hypotheses about the still hidden emotional status of the key actors.

The types of emotions we find there are relatively simple: As already described sometimes a very general fear with the hope to keep or to restore an existing situation, fears and hopes about a loss or increase of one's own control. A fear of not being able to successfully master a process of change (will I be able to learn how to handle such a computer?). The fear of losing social influence (e.g. will my authority get damaged if some of my students are able to master technology obviously better than me?).

Emotional assumptions of that type can be modified by own experience including experience that other persons in my direct range of observation will make in my place. Successful implementation processes in ODL therefore usually require model persons for all types of key actors who have to be made as visible as

possible for the majority of the relevant group in their successful process of mastering change.

The masquerade of "social desirability"

Education and training are fields where cultural and society's values rank high. Arguing within such an "idealistic" field automatically creates different classes of arguments: Those in line with high values which are allowed and deduce their power from those social values they refer to and other types of arguments devaluated by their reference to "morally lower" values. To save money or to earn more money for oneself is a typical example of that "low-value" category.

Improving citizens' responsibility or community spirit is an argumentation which is typical of the "high values" class. Being well aware of these effects of social desirability, all actors in the field of education and training are used to masking all the "low-value" argument with no respect to their relevance as "high-value" argumentations. Again, because the level of the argumentational discourse itself is not the real level of reasons, convincing others becomes hard or even impossible. Dialogues tend to become constant repetitions of arguments not changeable by their origin.

The way-out is a sometimes painful process to influence the classifications of "social values". Only if all types of major arguments are at least lifted above a critical threshold of "social acceptance", a real discourse can work. During the last few years, under the economic crisis in Europe, we have experienced a certain shift in the social acceptance of economic arguments within the education and training sector. It is necessary to continue that process continuously.

Understanding the dynamics of actors' interest

Actors usually are experienced enough to know that their interests will only become relevant in a complex decision process if they find a sufficient number of allies or if they are able to set up coalitions with a core of interests that the different groups have in common. Exactly these subtle processes of joining groups and forming coalitions can be influenced in their dynamics and direction when planning an implementation process properly. To do so one has to be completely informed about all groups of actors and their specific profile of interests to predict which coalitions will be easy for them and which ones difficult or rather impossible.

Policy-makers in many cases have developed a very implicit understanding of these dynamics of group interest within fields where they are familiar over a longer period familiar with the actors and their profile of interest. Usually they have not developed an abstracted methodology to analyse those processes within an environment of actors that they are not very familiar with. This is important for the field of ODL because here new combinations of actors usually come into the play. Consequently decision-makers find themselves in a situation where they are rather familiar with the dynamics within one group of actors concerned and not familiar with another. Explicit training in a methodology for that type of analysis would enable them to transfer many of their experiences into new groupings of actors.

Mapping and discussing structures of interest/motivation

One tool to progress is an explicit mapping of the interests and motivations of all groups of actors concerned. Such an explicit handling of the problem immediately allows to communicate and compare the information input of different policy-makers. Based on such a concrete map one may easily detect where assumptions are in accordance and at which specific elements the different policy-makers disagree. This way discussions can lead to a coherent view on the situation and therefore create consensus about the actions to be taken.

Hidden winners

As said before the energy and enthusiasm of the potential winners usually is high enough. To increase those factors, only in rare cases this will lead to success. Increasing the number of winners is much more promising. The moose promising reservoir for such a strategy are the "hidden winners" i.e. those groups of actors who are not yet aware of the benefits they will get out of the implementation of ODL. First those groups have to be identified, secondly they have to be addressed in a suitable way to turn them into active supporters.

Supporting winners' coalitions

The groups of losers in an implementation process in many cases are in good contact e.g. the trainers in a company, the people responsible for the training department, the member of the board responsible for human resources. Therefore it is easy for them to form coalitions.

Winners in quite a number of cases can be found in very different fields (maybe the member of the board responsible for quality management, line managers interested in learning nearer to the workplace, maintenance staff bored by long stays abroad for training purposes). To set up processes of communication and an exchange of interests and motivation between these groups of potential winners in many success stories of ODL implementation can be identified as the key element of success.

Credible chances for the losers

Losing in a changing environment for a person usually is not the whole perspective. In most cases on the

other side of the coin new chances are visible, mostly linked to a successful process of change, be it by re-qualification, be it by changing one's own role, be it adapting successfully to a new environment. Out of experience people know about the potential of every change to be adopted positively.

If the perception of probable losses and an open discussion about those dangers is suppressed, one automatically suppresses any discussion about chances and positive outcomes. Of course it is ideal when a realistic option can be presented to the losers so that as a consequence of their own decisions and activities they come over to join the winners' side.

This will not be the truth in some cases. Especially in those cases it is vital for success to present to the losers a realistic perspective about their chances of actively influencing the process into a direction at least partly positive for them. Visible, concrete symbols of these rather abstract dynamics are helpful, e.g. again credible model persons who already mastered changes and exploited their personal opportunities.