



**Copenhagen
Business School**
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

International Center
For Business and Politics

Steen Blichers Vej 22
DK-2000 Frederiksberg
Tel. +45 3815 3585
Fax. +45 3815 3555
e-mail cbp@cbs.dk

The Analysis of Mutual Learning Processes in the European Employment Strategy: A Social Constructivist Approach

Peter Nedergaard

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Editor: Lars Bo Kaspersen

International Center for Business and Politics
Copenhagen Business School
Steen Blichers Vej 22
DK-2000 Frederiksberg
Phone: +45 3815 3583
E-mail: cbp@cbp.cbs
www.cbs.dk/cbp

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The Analysis of Mutual Learning Processes in the European Employment Strategy: A Social Constructivist Approach¹

To the CARMA anthology: Thomas Bredgaard & Flemming Larsen (2005) (ed.'s), Employment policy from different angles, Aalborg University Press.

1. Introduction: Mutual Learning in the European Employment Strategy?

The roots of the European Employment Strategy (EES) go back to the so-called Luxembourg process which was adopted at the meeting of the European Council in Luxembourg in 1997. The process had been introduced in the Amsterdam Treaty, but was inspired by the idea in the 1993 Maastricht Treaty about macro-economic co-ordination.

As was stated by the Portuguese Presidency in its conclusions from the European Council in 2000, the *raison d'être* of the European Employment Strategy, as well as other policies under the Open Method of Coordination, is “mutual learning”:

- “Fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long term;
- establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practises;
- translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences;
- periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organized as mutual learning processes.”²

The last sentence above defines how the European Employment Strategy can and should have an effect on national employment policies, namely through mutual learning processes. Hence, understanding *the approach to analyzing “mutual learning”* becomes very important.

In general, analyzing learning processes of the EES is extremely challenging for a number of reasons: the relative novelty of the EES process, its organisational complexity, and the methodological difficulties of assessing learning effects of an iterative policy-making process without legally binding sanctions (Zeitlin, 2004). As a consequence, much of the research on the EES suffers from a “methodological deficit”³ and “under-theorising.” The aim of this paper is to outline a theoretical approach for analyzing learning processes under the EES and a workable methodology within this approach.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 summarizes the recent debate in the political science literature on analytical approaches to learning, which has gradually developed in a direction of being less and less individualistic. Section 3 follows up on this development and introduces a social constructivist approach to learning that redefines learning as changes in language-constituted relations to others. In section 4 this argument is elaborated into a model for mutual learning. Section 5 contains a qualitative analysis of the organisation of the EES in practice with regard to the possibilities of policy diffusion of the EES learning processes as predicted in the model in section 4. Section 6 deals with the conflictual views on the size and character of the learning processes of the EES in recent studies and proposes a new methodological path to investigate the mutual learning processes based upon a social constructivist approach. Section 7 is the conclusion of the article which sums up the examination of the both the various approaches to learning analysed in the paper and the evaluation of the possibilities of policy diffusion resulting from the learning processes.

2. What Is Policy Learning?

In much of the political science literature on learning processes there is a lack of attention to which approaches to learning different analyses have implied. Often the process of learning is more or less taken for granted during the implied deliberative processes. However, both the interpretation of learning processes and the learning processes in practice depend very much on the approach to learning that one uses. For many years, discourses on learning in the various psychological, pedagogical and philosophical theories have been dominated by approaches that either understands learning as internally mental or endogeneous (or “mind” centred) events or as external (or “world” centred) events. The endogeneous approach is connected to the rationalist philosophical tradition from Descartes to the Artificial Intelligence movement, whereas the exogenous approach is connected to the empirist tradition from Locke to logical positivism and behaviourism (Gergen, 2001: 118). However, both traditions locate learning in the minds of single individuals or as mental processes, and both traditions, perhaps, therefore, mirror a dominant ideology of self-contained individualism. This assumption was exactly what Ludwig Wittgenstein warned against: “Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all.” (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 154).

In recent years, there has been a growing international relations literature on socialization and social learning or mutual learning. However, as it has been pointed out by several scholars (e.g. Levy, 1994 and Flockhart, 2004), the field is a minefield of conceptual and methodological problems, as

learning is difficult to define, isolate, measure and apply empirically. However, and naturally, the political science literature has reflected the dominant approaches to learning.

Traditionally, scholars of international relations had an approach to learning which can, perhaps, be characterized as a naive individualistic concept of learning. Joseph Nye (1987: 379), for example, claimed the following about learning: “The extent and accuracy of learning depends upon the strength of the prior beliefs and the quantity and quality of new information.” Nye distinguishes (1987: 380) between simple learning (= the use of information merely to adapt to change) and complex learning (= which involves recognition of conflicts among means and goals in causally complicated situations). However, according to both approaches to learning, learning seems to be based upon individual beliefs and the (often rather complicated) process of gathering new information.

In his 1990 book, “When Knowledge Is Power”, Ernst B. Haas has a chapter on learning in international organizations which, due to more detailed analysis, is much more varied than the analysis by Nye. Ernst B. Haas (1990: 23) defines learning as follows: “By “learning” I mean the process by which consensual knowledge is used to specify causal relationships in new ways so that the result affects the content of public policy.” He also succinctly says (1990: 24) that “learning implies the sharing of larger meanings among those who learn.” The basis of learning according to Ernst B. Haas is “consensual knowledge”, and he also breaks away from the purely individualistic approach to learning through the concept of “sharing of larger meanings”.

Peter Haas’ famous article from 1992 on epistemic communities can be said to be a follow-up on Ernst B. Haas’ book. Peter Haas argues that epistemic communities are crucial channels through which new ideas circulate from societies to governments as well as from country to country and defines epistemic communities 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” (1992: 3). Peter Haas hereby recognizes that learning takes place in communities and networks and not on an individual basis, but he is less explicit about the medium of learning.

Jeffrey T. Checkel (1999) in his article about social construction and integration explicitly uses a constructivist vocabulary to characterize social learning (i.e. mutual learning). He defines social learning as “a process whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms and discursive structures), acquire new interests and preferences.” Compared to Peter Haas, Jeffrey Checkel is more explicit about the medium of learning, namely through “norms” and “discursive structures” where norms are shared collective understandings that make behavioural claims on actors. Still, however, it is not very clear what to look for and analyse as far as learning is concerned with the independent variables being the often vague concepts norms and discursive structures.

Trine Flockhart (2004) in her analyses of social learning or mutual learning in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly builds upon the work of Checkel. Flockhart defines social learning as a “change of beliefs at the individual level, either in relation to values, norms, procedures or new routines. She also claims that “learning may be stored but not utilized in actual behaviour.” In other words, learning can be passive and remain unutilized. Hence, within her own framework it becomes difficult to determine when learning has actually taken place: “How do we know that learning has taken place, as on the one hand learning may have taken place without resulting in a policy change, or on the other hand that policy change may have taken place, not as a result of learning, but as a result of “strategic social construction” or “rhetorical action” (Flockhart, 2004). As can be seen, Flockhart still operates with a separation between language and learning which is often seen in conventional social psychology that still treats learning as mental processes.

3. A Social Constructivist Approach to Policy Learning⁴

What is offered in this paper is an analysis that continues the scientific development of the approach within political science to learning that has taken place in the last 10-15 years. It is an approach⁵ like various other approaches i.e. post structuralism, discourse analysis and post modernist study. Recently social constructivism has also contributed to the analysis of learning. Among others, psychologists like Gergen (1998, 2001)⁶ and Shotter (1995) have contributed to a more clearly social constructivist understanding of learning.

At a more fundamental level, a social constructivist understanding of learning is rooted in the mid 20th century British language philosophy of which Ludwig Wittgenstein, was a leading

representative. In short, Wittgenstein (1953) suggested that language doesn't receive its meaning from its mental or subjective underpinnings, but from its use in action (called "language games" by Wittgenstein).

According to a social constructivist approach, knowledge is a socio-culturally conditioned process. Hence, learning arises from communicative processes between human beings. This is in contrast to conventional approaches to learning, which emphasise knowledge as gathering of information or are based on cognitive necessities and characteristics. At the same time, according to a social constructivist approach, language is the framework for the understanding of which parts of the social world that has gained legitimacy and has come to be seen as the truth. Basically, our understanding of the world is a continued social process of reproduction and negotiation which is *embedded in the language*, that is, language receives its meaning from organized forms of interaction.⁷ Wittgenstein (1953, § 329) wrote it clearly: "When we think in language, there aren't "meanings" going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought." Or as it could also be phrased in the Wittgensteinian tradition, learning arises by putting words in new relations to other words so that they are situated in a new context, in which sense is made of them (Norval, 2004). Therefore, learning isn't brought about by simple cognitive acquisitions and accumulation of facts but by shifts in perspectives.⁸

Instead, in the social constructivist approach to learning, learning is, basically, when people in their interactions with others give meaning to the world as a social reality *through linguistic categories and concepts*, cf. Wittgenstein (1953, § 169): "Language is an instrument. Its concepts are instruments." In this sense language doesn't reflect the world but constitutes it. Or, again, in the words of Wittgenstein (1953, §570): "Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest." This means that learning cannot be perceived independently of specific practices. This was also expressed by Wittgenstein himself (1953, §385): "Ask yourself: Would it be imaginable for someone to learn to do sums in his head without ever doing written or oral ones? – "Learning it" will mean: being able to do it." Such an interpretation of learning is in opposition to traditional approaches where learning is conceptualized as analogous to filling an empty can or as a distinct piece of knowledge that can be transferred from one person to another. Instead, according to social constructivism, learning is a way of being in the world and not a way of coming to know about it.

Moreover, in the social constructivist approach, power is not something that somebody has. Power must be grasped as *power relations*, that is, the power to establish a joint epistemic community in the Peter Haasian sense. This is also in line with the tradition of Foucault who characterizes power relations, as a “mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others” (1982: 220) which are rooted deep in the social structure. Hence, according to the social constructivist approach, interaction among people is characterised by a struggle in order to define the situation. The prevailing discourse on, for example, the employment policy of the European Union is, therefore, the discourse that all actors must utilize in order for their announcements to be intelligible and make sense (that is, the policy problems and possible solutions) where both key decision-makers as well as the broad spectrum of bureaucrats and social partners are involved.

At the same time, even though learning is situated in a concrete practice, learning always transcends the individual practices when an individual takes up a new practice. This happens through what has been labelled “*trajectories of participation*” (Lave, 1999) which covers the continued movement of actors in time and space through various communities of practice. Consequently, in a social constructivist approach learning becomes a “shift in our language-constituted relation with others” (Gergen, 2001: 135) which is diffused from one “practice area” to another “practice area”. When we learn, we develop new linguistic categories and concepts in interaction with other people on, for example, successful experiences with national employment policy solutions in other countries which we afterwards use and exploit on the domestic employment policy scene. At the same time, however, as power relations are inherent in all other relations, learning processes function better when the implicated power relations are based on professional knowledge rather than political pressure from outside. The putting together of novelty and tradition, of simultaneous contextualization and de-contextualization is exactly what makes this concept of learning neither too historicist or too voluntarist (cf. Norval, 2004). Therefore, as far as scientific progress is concerned, “we are not moving ineluctable ‘forward’ on the road to truth; we are – as many would say – replacing one way of putting things with another.” (Gergen, 2001: 158).

In the above social constructivist approach, learning is considered as *a shift or change in the language-constituted relations* to one another by decision-makers in the epistemic community which is relevant for the employment policy. Hence, learning effects can be said to have taken place

when these shifts or changes in the language-constituted relations can be identified in the employment field. As pointed out by Trine Flockhart (2004) a change in the language-constituted relations could also be a result of “strategic social construction” where the shift does not reflect learning but only a pro forma change in the vocabulary. This might seem as a weakness in the social constructivist approach to learning that rely so much on the changes in language. Of course, this weakness must be dealt with and controlled in practical research. However, the problems are probably smaller than they seem to be.⁹

Firstly, the social constructivist approach to learning operates with no division between learning in itself and the language through which this learning is formulated. (Or as Wittgenstein probably would have said: “There is no private language where learning can take place.”) In case of strategic social construction, the line of argument, the concepts used, the verbal expressions etc. must continuously be used as a strategic social construction even though they were not signs of learning. This would demand an almost schizophrenic personality because learning is not only change in language but also change in language-constituted relations to one another.

Secondly, there is the question of policy diffusion, where shifts in the language-constituted relations to one another in an epistemic community are not in themselves a guarantee for change in the policies of the participating Member States. This is not, however, because of “strategic social construction”, but because the actual learning that has taken place is not efficiently diffused among the participating Member States due to the lack of the necessary trajectories of participation. This last question will be dealt with in the sections below on the basis of the social constructivist approach to learning.

4. A Model for Mutual Learning

If the social constructivist definition of learning in section 3 above is accepted, there are several factors that influence the potential for learning.

A pre-condition for learning is contact with other people in some way or another. Contact may be in the form of formal or informal meetings or communication via phone, the Internet, letters etc. At the same time, the frequency of contacts is an important precondition for learning processes to take place. In case the object of research is the working of an organization like a committee, a proxy for

learning might be that the committee meets on a regular basis and that the members participate in these meetings.

Moreover, factors that influence the potential for learning understood as harmonization of linguistic categories or acceptance of common concepts can be organized along two different dimensions for analytical purposes, that is, as factors that are working inside and factors that are working outside of an organization.

Processes outside an organization (i.e. a committee) can create conditions that facilitate either fragmentation or harmonization of linguistic categories and concepts and thus either support or limit the potential for learning. First of all, actors in the external environment may restrict or expand the room for manoeuvre available to the members of a committee. If the external environment constrains the scope for manoeuvring for members of the organization (i.e. by imposing narrow political mandates), fragmented positions within the organization are sustained, professional knowledge consisting of new concepts and new linguistic categories is not diffused, and, hence, the potential for learning is impaired. In contrast, if actors in the external environment leave a larger scope for independent navigation, learning processes can be facilitated (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953: § 143). Workable measures for the room for manoeuvre in a committee is the distance between the political level and the committee in which potential learning processes take place and the degree of interest expressed by political actors in work carried out by the committee.

As explained by organizational theory another condition that **can** facilitate learning, is the degree of uncertainty surrounding a committee (Mintzberg, 1979). If the level of uncertainty is great (i.e. when members are facing political failure) learning can be expected to be facilitated as actors in the committee will be less confident in their previous standard operating procedures and more susceptible to new solutions to their problems (cf. Simon in Nedergaard, 2001: 62). Conversely, if the level of uncertainty is low (i.e. when members are facing political success) learning processes will be impaired as members will be satisfied with their already existing knowledge. A proxy for the level of uncertainty is the existence or absence of political failure, for example, in this particular case, the European Employment Strategy, the (perception of the) success with job creation and the present employment rate. In other words, learning is more likely when facing a high unemployment.

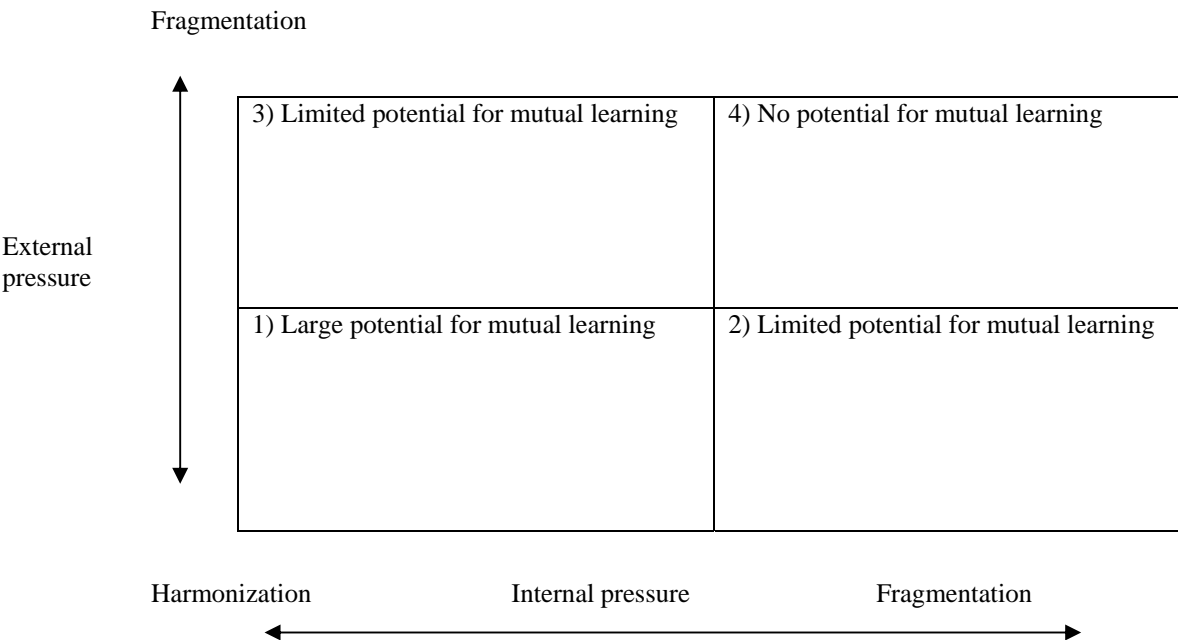
Processes inside an organization may support or impair learning processes as well.¹⁰ For example, the existence of common set of accepted cognitive or linguistic categories and concepts among the members of the committee means that members will be able to relate each others knowledge to already existing categories and concepts. Of course, convergences of linguistic categories or concepts only involve learning if and when the convergence is a result of open and free “argumentative competition” and not of political pressure. In real life, most of the argumentation in committees is a combination of both. A proxy for the existence of convergence (or lack thereof) between the cognitive or linguistic categories and concepts might be the common professional (or lack of) background of the members of an organization.

Another possible condition facilitating learning inside the committee is the presence of members who are ascribed authority by others. Authority based on professional knowledge and a refined and broadly accepted set of concepts and linguistic categories might support learning as other members will be more susceptible to the linguistic categories and the concepts in arguments made by actors with authority. A proxy for the degree of authority a member of an organization may have is the length of his/her membership of the committee or other extraordinary social or professional attributes of a member.

The figure below presents a model for potential learning as determined by processes outside and inside of the organization. In the model learning is conceptualized as harmonization of linguistic categories or concepts, whereas the opposite is conceptualized as a fragmentation of the same.

It is important not to mix the internal and external analytical perspectives on what facilitates or constrains learning, as each may serve as a constraining factor on the overall learning in a committee. For instance, the extent of learning in a committee with an authoritative persuader and members with a common professional background may still be very limited in case factors like narrow mandates and strong political interest are also at play. Consequently, the analytical division between internal and external factors is essential for making correct prescriptions on what may maximize learning procedures in organizations.

Figure: Model for analyzing the potential for learning



The model outlines the dynamics of mutual learning as a result of internal and external pressures for harmonization or fragmentation of linguistic categories or concepts. In short, internal pressures facilitating learning are participants with common professional background, having one persuader in the group, and a high frequency of meetings. External pressures facilitating learning are insulation from the political level and the perception of political failure. In the model above, square 1 represents a large learning potential (i.e. the potential for harmonization of linguistic categories and concepts), whereas square 2 and 3 represents a limited potentials for learning, and square 4 indicates that learning is impossible. Of course, the movements between the four squares in the model have to be interpreted as a continuum.

In conclusion, five hypotheses concerning the learning processes of the European Employment Strategy can be derived from the model. These five hypotheses are the following:

- 1) Learning is more likely where a group meets repeatedly.
- 2) Learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure.
- 3) Learning is more likely where the group is faced with clear evidence of political failure.

- 4) Learning is more likely in groups where individuals share common professional background.
- 5) Learning is more like when an authoritative member is persuader.

This paper analyses these five hypotheses based on qualitative data. As far as the collection of these data is concerned, I refer to Nedergaard (2005a, 2005b). However, nothing in social constructivism argues against the possibility of using empirical technologies for the purpose of analyzing the five hypotheses about learning (cf. Gergen, 2001: 160). So, the qualitative analysis in this study is backed by quantitative data in another paper (Nedergaard, 2005c).

5. The EES in Practice

Basically, the EES follows the sequence: Guidelines – indicators – national plans – evaluation – peer reviews. At the end of “the EES year,” the Commission and the Council conclude, which problems, Member States are not addressing and make *recommendations* for policy change. The cornerstone of the organisation of the European Employment Strategy of the European Union is the Employment Committee (EMCO). This is the organization which co-ordinates and discusses all elements of the EES.

Ad 1) Learning is more likely where a group meets repeatedly:

The EMCO meets repeatedly and normally four times a year for a one day meeting in Brussels. The pre-condition for learning, namely that the group meets repeatedly, is, therefore, fulfilled. Under the EMCO an Indicator Group and a so-called Ad Hoc Committee are set up. The works of these groups, however, are closely connected to the work in the EMCO and their tasks are to support and prepare the work of the EMCO. None of these committees have their own budget, but, of course, they can ask the Commission or the EMCO Support Team to prepare notes, documents etc.

Ad 2) Learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure:

The EMCO meetings are closely linked to the preparation of the meetings in the Council of Ministers and are, therefore, held about a fortnight before these meetings. In other words, the agenda of the EMCO is governed by the political agenda of the ministers.

All points on the agenda of the ministers of employment dealing with questions under the OMC are discussed by the EMCO which normally also sends notes to ministers with its opinions that are, generally, endorsed by the Council of Ministers. However, the endorsement by the ministers should be unsurprising since they are most often briefed before the Council meetings by the very same civil servants who have participated in the EMCO meetings. In addition, most members of the EMCO either negotiate on the basis of a “soft mandate” (= the member negotiates in the “spirit” of the minister) or on the basis of a “hard” mandate (= the member negotiates on the basis of an instruction accepted by the minister). The documents discussed at the EMCO meetings are normally produced by the so-called support team of the EMCO which is in fact the secretariat of the EMCO. The support team consists of officials from the Commission.

The Commission also participates directly in the EMCO meetings¹¹ where they play a *situation-defining role* even though the presidency is always held by an elected representative from one of the Member States. Normally, the representative from the Commission (which is the general secretary or deputy general secretary of General Directorate for Employment and Social Affairs) presents his or her own view on the agenda as the first speaker. This means that the debates in the EMCO are also often based on a verbal presentation by the Commission. Even though the Commission plays the situation-defining role, it does not have the status of being an actor with professional authority. Most members of the EMCO regard the Commission as a political player among others in the EMCO. Very often, the following discussions at the EMCO meetings are also like a political dogfight from word to word and from sentence to sentence concerning the recommendations that are sent as cover notes to the ministers about the various reports from the Commission.

The Commission not only plays the situation-defining role in the EMCO, but also in the organisation of the peer reviews concerning the various aspects of the EES and the national employment policies.¹² A peer review is a kind of seminar with one Member State being examined whereas two or three Member States are examiners. Most aspects of the Member State’s implementation of the EES are reviewed, i.e. the efficiency of the Public Employment Services, the early activation schemes, the question of integration of immigrants on the labour market, promotion of gender equality etc. Normally, members of the EMCO or persons involved in the preparation of EMCO meetings are strongly involved in the actual peer reviews.

Ad 3) Learning is more likely where the group is faced with clear evidence of political failure:

The fundamental concepts of the EMCO meetings are the twin concepts of flexibility and security with regard to rules on notice, maximum working hours, part time work etc. Normally, the debate in EMCO is fragmented into Member States stressing flexibility and security respectively. According to the group of states stressing flexibility, increasing flexibility of labour markets is necessary in order to unlock dynamics of employment creation, whereas job security regulations should be modernized with regard to an increased focus on improving employability. However, this group sees the Commission as a prime defender of “pure” security regulations on the labour market with, among others, France, Luxembourg, Spain, Greece and Belgium. In practice, decisions in the EMCO are taken unanimously which is a force behind harmonization of the point of view around the fundamental concepts. Therefore, normally, the final decisions of EMCO are a delicate political balance between flexibility and security on the labour markets.

The main challengers of the situation-defining role of the Commission have, increasingly, been the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland and sometimes Germany (especially since the Harz reform process of the German labour market began). In general, the Member State representatives seem to be more receptive to the flexibility arguments when they are facing a national employment policy failure (i.e. high unemployment) than otherwise or if flexibility is conceived to be to a large extent responsible for decreasing unemployment and relatively high labour supply.

Ad 4) Learning is more likely in groups where individuals share common professional background:

The various presidencies also organize an informal two-tree day meeting twice a year in which the presidency has included an element of socializing. Often the agenda is broader with exchange of policy information and with academic presentations reflecting the fact, that most members of the EMCO have a longstanding professional background working with European employment policy. The aim is to lift the level of professionalism.

At the same time, the participants of the EMCO are forced to “sell” the common opinions of the EMCO to their own minister when they are briefing him or her before the meeting in the Council of

Ministers. In this way the common knowledge of the EMCO is often transformed into a national stock of knowledge about employment policy, however, often only at the political level. As far as the EES is concerned, in other words, the policy diffusion is, basically highly politicized, which means that there are *fewer shifts in the language-situated relations* to other decision-makers. A fact pulling in the same direction is that many of the participants of the EMCO are senior officials from the ministries' international or European relations department, which often only has limited contact to the domestic policy departments of the ministries. Hence, the ability of the EES to create *trajectories of participation* is somewhat limited.

Ad 5) Learning is more likely when an authoritative member is persuader:

All in all, the organisation of the EES is a highly centralised political "*compromise machine*". Due to the tensions in the EMCO and the fight over sentences and concepts, the outcome is normally balanced and a result of the argumentative "survival of the fittest," however, with the Commission playing the *situation-defining role*.

However, at the same time, Member States with a successful employment policy are, normally, able to act as authoritative members of EMCO. They are, sometimes, able to play a persuasive role vis-à-vis the Commission and other Member States. Obviously, domestic policy success increases your authority within the EMCO – and vice versa. This will, of course, increase the potential learning effects of participating in EMCO meetings. At the same time, there are clear limits to how much certain Member States (no matter how successful they are) can go against the prevailing story-line and argumentative logic within the EMCO as defined by the Commission and the supportive Member States.

6. EES's Learning Effects

After the qualitative analysis of the five hypotheses concerning the learning processes of the EES based upon the proposed social constructivist theoretical model for analyzing the potential for learning, it becomes important to see whether or not actual analyses of the EES's learning effects live up to the suggested theory.

In 2002, the Commission conducted a comprehensive review of the first five years the EES had been in operation. The report was positive. It concluded that “there had been significant changes in national employment policies” and that “the Strategy has brought a shift in national policy formulation and focus – away from managing unemployment, towards managing employment growth.” (Commission, 2002). Among students of the EES, Kerstin Jacobsson (2003) has also pointed to some positive effects. She concludes that the most important effect so far has been the fostering of “a cognitive consensus” around common challenges, objectives, and policy approaches. At a more general level, Borrás & Jacobsson (2004) have argued in relation to “policy learning” that “the development of common discourses, establishing certain key concepts as well as policy principles and understanding of causal linkages, has been instrumental in the development of the new policy co-ordination processes.”

However, other scholars have been much more critical to this evaluation of the EES and it seems that “there is no academic consensus yet either on whether the strategy works or – if it does - how it brings about change” (Trubek & Trubek, 2003: 13). Without being based on thorough empirical investigations, but on the fact that no precise sanctions are involved in the EES process, some scholars are rather sceptical about the EES’s impact on actual employment policies. For example, Alesina & Perotti (2004) conclude rather sarcastically that “this exercise is not just a questionable use of time and money. No government today takes guidelines on employment policies as an even remotely binding constraint; and we know of no country where the National Action Plan have any role in guiding policy. Governments seem to participate because, after all the enthusiasm and the media attention on the “Lisbon process”, they are caught in a bad Nash equilibrium in which a withdrawal would qualify them as Euro-villains.” However, other examples of the scepticism of the learning effects of the EES are based on empirical evidence. For example, Casey & Gold (2004) conclude that “whilst a learning process has been established, its impact has been limited.”¹³ At the same time, however, they have only studied one component - namely the peer reviews of the EES – and their methodology is based on interviews with government officials, social partners and independent peer review experts.

Casey & Gold (2004) argues that, to date, “the peer review programme has tended to be exclusive, involving a narrow “epistemic community” and has scarcely any impact upon either the Commission or the government officials of the Member States.” They recognise that learning might

have taken place, “but it is ad hoc and often outside the formal, systematic process that the EES sought to establish.” At the same time, they call the positive evaluation of the peer reviews made by the Commission in 2001 as a basis for the 2002 report mentioned above for “something of an overstatement.”

Casey & Gold have based their analysis on an approach to learning proposed by Stone (1999: 51) who defines learning as follows: “The terms “learning” and “transfer” are taken to refer to a dynamic whereby knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements or institutions is used across time or space in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions elsewhere.” In other words, in the definition of learning by Stone there is no reference to the medium of learning or the context of learning (individual or non-individual). However, an implicit behaviourist approach to learning could easily be applied to Stone’s definition.

When applying Stone’s definition of learning as used by Casey & Gold, knowledge about policies like employment policies becomes something that can be applied elsewhere without specifying how this knowledge is actually transferred. Hence, their approach to learning implies that you can get to know whether or not a learning process has taken place simply by interviewing the involved persons that might potentially have brought knowledge from point A to point B as an indication of learning. This is also exactly what Casey & Gold (2004) did when they analysed the learning processes of the peer reviews: they interviewed the persons involved in the peer reviews of the EES about its impact on the national policy-making. Of course, the question then is whether or not this is the right way to conceptualise learning processes.

According to the social constructivist approach presented above, learning takes place through the linguistic categories or concepts of the language used. The individuals using these concepts, however, are very often unaware of the origin of the concepts they use. Especially, if they have been “seduced into using a super-expression” (Wittgenstein, 1953: §192) through the language and concepts used into arguing in favour of certain solutions to problems they might have learned quite a lot of new concepts and linguistic categories without knowing it when interviewed. The mutual learning processes have, so to speak, happened behind the backs of the involved persons. Hence, it can be regarded as a kind of individualistic fallacy to base evaluations of the effects of the EES on interviews with the involved participants. This does not mean that interviews cannot be used to

identify learning processes and policy diffusion, but they can never stand alone and conclusions on learning processes and policy diffusions must also be based on other methodologies.

Another empirical analysis has been based on a questionnaire sent to all members of the EMCO about the learning effects of the EES (Ørnsholt & Vestergaard, 2003). The members – and social partners – were asked about learning effects at the national level of the EES. In general, the conclusion was that the learning effects are relatively moderate. For Denmark and the Netherlands the learning effects were judged to be non-existent. For Belgium, the UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Germany and Austria the members of the EMCO had experienced moderate learning effects. A third group of Member States were France, Finland and Sweden where the EMCO members had experienced relatively high learning effects according to the responses of the questionnaire.

Again, however, this methodology might underestimate the potential learning effects stemming from the EES because it is based on a conventional approach about learning which emphasises knowledge as based on individual memory. Instead, a methodology based on a social constructivist approach to learning would have analysed the dominant concepts, linguistic categories or discourses in the employment field in the various Member States inside and outside of the organisation which is the object of research (Hajer, 1995).

The most important examples of the appearance of *new discourses* and *new dominant concepts and categories* in the national labour market policies of the Member States are the shifts in discourses from “fighting unemployment” to “increasing labour supply”, from the idea of the labour market as a market with a fixed number of employees (meaning, for example, that shorter working hours could reduce unemployment) to labour market as a function of the general competitiveness of the European economy, from unemployment benefits as an instrument of safeguarding individual welfare to unemployment benefits as an instrument of early activation, from long term notices for wage earners as instruments of job security to long term notices for wage earners as limitations on labour market flexibility, from labour market organisations as pure wage negotiators to labour market organisations as partners in the employment policy implementation, from exclusive labour market policy to inclusive labour market policy, and from a one-dimensional labour market policy (more jobs or a decent life on the dole) to a multi-dimensional labour market policy (including

equal treatment, integration of immigrants on the labour market, increasing competitiveness, safeguarding social coherence, increasing corporate social responsibility etc.).

No doubt, a thorough analysis will show that there *has* been a shift and change in the dominant and most powerful labour market policy discourses, linguistic categories and hegemonic concepts which are all, probably, to a greater or lesser extent, expressions of the shift in the ways the employment policy is tackled in the Member States as a result of the EES. At the same time, however, such an analysis will probably show that there could have been much more effects of the EES which is due to the disadvantages (in a normative perspective) of the present organisation of the EMCO in the employment field. In short, the disadvantages of the present organisation are that it is too politicized, with the Commission playing a too dominant role, and with too few linkages to officials handling domestic employment issues (Nedergaard, 2005c).

7. Conclusion

The *raison d'être* of the European Employment Strategy was defined by the Portuguese Presidency in its conclusions from the European Council in 2000 as a method involving, among other things, “periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review organized as mutual learning processes.” Here it was claimed how the EES can and should have an effect on national employment policies, namely through mutual learning processes.

In general, the proposed approach to learning is based on social constructivist theoretical framework, that is, as a shift or change in the language-constituted relations to one another by decision-makers in the epistemic community which is relevant for the employment policy. Hence, learning effects can be said to have taken place when these shifts or changes in the language-constituted relations can be identified in the employment field.

In the European Union, the EMCO is the primary forum for learning processes of the EES at the European level. However, the present organization of the EES has advantages as well as disadvantages for the diffusion of mutual learning processes. Among the advantages of the learning processes of the EES is the common professional background as civil servants, the clear evidence of political failure of national employment policies in a number of Member States, and that the group meets repeatedly. Among its disadvantages is the lack of a persuader with a professional authority,

the politization in the fact that members bring “hard” and “soft” mandates from their Member States to the meetings, and that Members come from international departments close to the political decision-making process without close links to domestic policy departments.

The traditional approach to learning, which is normally used when analysing the effects of the learning processes of the EES, implies that you can get to know whether or not a learning process has taken place simply by interviewing participants in the EES process or sending a questionnaire to the involved persons that might potentially have brought knowledge from point A (EES) to point B (national policy-making). The question, of course, then is whether or not this is the right way to conceptualise learning processes.

Basically, according to the social constructivist approach, learning takes place through the concepts of the language used. The individuals using these concepts, however, are very often unaware of the origin of the concepts they use. Especially, if they have been “seduced” into arguing in favour of certain solutions to problems they might have learned quite a lot of concepts without consciously knowing it. The mutual learning processes have, so to speak, happened behind the backs of the involved individuals. Hence, it can be regarded as a kind of individualistic fallacy to base evaluations of the effects of the EES solely on interviews or questionnaires.

Instead, a methodology based on a social constructivist approach to learning will analyze the main discourses in the employment field in the various Member States, and the rise in and hegemony of new concepts in the policy debate, etc. Such a methodology can analyse the appearance and prevalence of a number of the dominant and powerful discourses. The most important examples of the appearance of new discourses in the national labour market policies of the Member States are the shifts in discourses from “fighting unemployment” to “increasing labour supply”, from the idea of the labour market as a market with a fixed number of employees to a labour market as a function of the competitiveness of the European economy, from unemployment benefits as an instrument of safeguarding individual welfare to unemployment benefits as an instrument of early activation, from long term notices for wage earners as instruments of job security to long term notices for wage earners as limitations on the labour market flexibility, from labour market organisations as pure wage negotiators to labour market organisations as partners in the employment policy implementation, from exclusive labour market policy to inclusive labour market policy, and from

one-dimensional labour market policy to the multi-dimensional labour market policy. These shifts in the conceptualisation of various aspects of the employment policy – which have taken place in many Member States of the European Union – are more or less a result of the EES which can be seen from the fact they have happened, to a large extent, in a parallel fashion in all Member States.

A methodology for analysing these shifts in the language concerning the employment policy is proposed in the article in order to find out – supported by interviews and/or questionnaires – which are the dominant discourses in the various Member States, what impact have they had on national employment policy etc.

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² § 37 in the Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23-24 March 2000.

³ Cf. also Deken (2003) and Barbier (2004).

⁴ Originally, I was inspired to apply a social constructivist approach to learning by reading a Master's Thesis in Social Psychology by Bertelsen & Haxø (2001). Here I have found a thorough overview and analysis of recent literature on the subject.

⁵ Social constructivism is not a theoretical school. According to Gergen (1985) it is rather a shared consciousness than a movement or – as it is called in this political science based article – “an approach”.

⁶ Kenneth Gergen, however, insists to call his approach “social constructionism” as – in his view – constructivism still remains tied to a dualist epistemology. At the same, in their concern with “the relational character of the learning process, constructionists and social constructivists are quite allied.” (Gergen, 2001: 124).

⁷ There seems to be an affinity between the social constructivist approach to social reality and the approach of the so-called Copenhagen School in nuclear physics to the physical reality. Of course, the most prominent member of the Copenhagen School was the nuclear physicist Niels Bohr (Bohr, 1964).

⁸ Wittgenstein characterizes (1958, § 144) the change that leads to learning in the following way: “I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of picture. I have changed his *way of looking at things*.”

⁹ On the other hand, a historical institutionalist argument can also be applied to this problem, because even though actors may only pay strategic lip-service to new linguistic categories at first, these categories can create an unintended linguistic trajectory, that may constrain actors more than first realised in the long run. That is, actors may experience a discursive drift in a manner similar to the supranational bureaucratic drift facing national governments in the EU. From this perspective it's unimportant whether or not actors are merely paying lip-service to changing linguistic categories, as they will have to abide by them in the end.

¹⁰ The internal processes that facilitate learning processes conceptualized as the harmonization of linguistic categories might be initiated from the outside, but they nonetheless function internally and are thus categorized as such.

¹¹ Also the secretariat of the Council of Ministers is represented at the EMCO meetings, but normally stays very quiet

¹² Cf. www.peerreview-employment.org/en

¹³ Another sceptic about the possibility of creating an effective learning community of Member State politicians and officials is Deken (2003).