Interpretative analysis of decentralised policy with the use of an online Delphi

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Abstract :

Public administration now faces the process of constructing policies and action strategies while refering to a plural reality: how do we come to a shared view on the situation is we consider our knowledge as the result of a social construction and that a shared consciousnesses of relevant actors could provide a common ground for identifying and defining the nature of a particular problem (Jun 2006). How is it possible to organise the conditions leading the participants to share their thoughts and experiences through processes of deliberation, and discourse, and argumentation grounded in social practices (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003).

The article will present a new methodology used in several occasions for the evaluation of the quality of implementation of decentralised local social or cultural policies : this methodology is based on the principles of the Delphi method (see François et al., 2012; www.mesydel.com). The Delphi technique is an iterative and anonymous participatory method used for gathering "expert" knowledge with an efficient, inclusive, and structured approach, with reduced social pressures among respondents (Mukherjee et al, 2015). It can achieve a communication process wich minimizes hierarchical relationships, and promotes intersubjective understanding between the decentralized units and with the centralized management. The evaluation processes lead to the unexpected emergence of new forms of collaborative gouvernance and the sharing of socially distributed and fragmented knowledge, fostering innovative ways to adapt public administration. The article starts from a very concrete experience on the evaluation of the recent reforms in public lecturing in Belgium to present the responsiveness of the online Delphi method and the possibilities offered by such tools to develop new perspectives where the central administration is invited to integrate the visions from the decentralised offices and their practitioners for a critical synthesis.

Introduction

With decentered & pluralistic policy environment How to organise PA ?

- (Matland): policy domains where outcomes depend heavily on the resources and actors present in the microimplementing environment:. "contextual conditions dominate the process" "The constellation of actors participating, the pressures on the actors, the perceptions of what the policy is, the available resources, vary widely across policy settings".

Evaluations are mainly commissioned by central agencies, responding to their needs and values. Evaluating central policies from a local perspective requires to adopt the operators' viewpoint as a guiding principle."
In these cases, since uniformity is to be discouraged, the central effort should not be targeted to development of compliance and monitoring mechanisms are of limited relevance. **It is more useful to consider the different sites and implementations as experiments within a learning process** : it is possible to learn from the different results if evaluation is oriented to feedback and learning rather than to compliance.

- (Hajer and Wagenaar) ➔ deliberative policy analysis built on the three pillars of interpretation, practice-orientation and deliberation.

interactive evaluation (see the 4th generation evaluation – Guba & Lincoln 1989) propose that evaluator collaborate with the participants (operators, stakeholders, etc) learning from each other on the policy implementation and effects. Such collaborative observational fieldwork gets details of actions and context (below the surface of administrative rules) and provides information with situated stories and personal meaning "looking into the engine of public administration".

The method need to develop intensive fieldwork to ensure 'situational analysis', embrassing the actors perspectives seriously by focusing on both activities and meanings and narratives.

Is it possible to design a bottom up formative IPA embrassing diversity of the local implementation of a centrally defined policy, while respecting the limited budgets and time schedule of the research ?
Can the framework of IPA support it ? how is it possible to translate in methodological practices

We had the chance to organise such a process in different cases of policy analysis and evaluation in French Speaking Belgium.
No always easy because :
- Questions and frames are centrally defined
- Time is short
- How to work with local operators in an area were there are tensions resulting from bureaucratic hierarchy, professional ethos, importance of technical rationality …

Case study : the evaluation of the 2009 policy reforms in local public libraries

Public libraries
<= local authorities (premises, equipments and also human resources)
<= central authority (Communauté française de Belgique) defines the mission, the conditions in terms of activities, human ressources and equipment for applying to subsidies, and organises the networking between the operators.

The central law was modified in 2009[1] :
- redefined on one side the missions imposed to the public librarians: they are encouraged to extend and diversify the publics; to extend the type of "mediation" practices.
- new ways of managing their local activities : project – based strategic management with a 5 year planification process; continuous evaluation procedure; organization of partnerships

The law had imposed to evaluate the impact of the reforms within the five years of entry in force, and it specified that **the local operators had to be associated to the process**.

But the governement had defined first the dimensions to be adressed in the evaluation process, with a very top-down formulation:

« l'évaluation fait l'objet d'une collecte de données auprès des opérateurs. Ces données sont basées sur des **indicateurs visant à mesurer le développement des pratiques de lecture induit par le décret tant d'un point de vue quantitatif que qualitatif.** Ces indicateurs porteront notamment sur l'évolution induite par l'application du décret en matière de :
1° diversification de la population touchée par l'action des opérateurs directs;
2° définition des stratégies de développement de la lecture;
3° augmentation des pratiques de médiation avec les usagers individuels et collectifs;
etc

We translated these imposed dimensions to be evaluated as thematics to be addressed with the operators. We knew that we had, according to our mandate, to address some specific thematics :
- New management practices : Strategic management; Evaluation methods
- New partnerships with other local organisations and their impact on the publics
- New practices of "cultural mediation" and their impact on the publics

With enough freedom to the participants to rise issues important to their views at the time of the survey.

The research methodology was defined by the researchers and accepted by the following committee:

A. 20 interviews with persons associated with the reform (central administration and local operators, NGO, policymakers)
B. 8 case studies to analyse the strategies and practices developed by operators who had been engaged in the new practices for 4 years (document analysis, local observation and interviews, participation to activities);
C. On line DELPHI enquiry (Mesydel) with all the operators (190 operators invited)
D. Feedback of the Delphi enquiry through 5 focus groups with local operators;
E. Feedback of the results to the following committee and the cabinet, and publications of the main conclusions.

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[1] Décret du 30 avril 2009 relatif au développement des pratiques de lecture organisé par le réseau public de la lecture et les bibliothèques publiques

What is DELPHI ?

The Delphi technique is an <u>iterative</u> and <u>anonymous</u> <u>participatory technique</u>

- Who participate ? "experts"
- Why iterative ? to organise a form of "dialogue"
- Why anonymous ?   to avoid domination and bandwagon effects; less social pressure

4 steps :

1. Understand the domain; identify the "experts"
2. Define the questions for the 1st round and leave room for surprises.
3. The information gathered is fedback to the participants with the 2d round of questions ((*controlled feedback process*): the participants can react and modify / adjust their personal position or ask for some clarification.
4. When all the gathered information has been analysed, the final evaluation should be fed back for consideration to all respondants (final round)

The Delphi technique is relatively little used sor far for IPA and formative evaluation. We consider nevertheless that this is a very interesting technique for bottom up evaluation in an IAP, contributing to the quality of the three pillars.

Deliberation :the conditions for the debate are there, and there is a form of dialogical relationship.

Practice orientation : respondants in their "natural" settings. Questions are "action oriented" and answers should be " practice based"

Analysis and interpretation : the categories to be addressed should not be defined by the researchers which is supposed to act as mediator in the process of knowledge production. The process must also ensure that the information provided by the respondants is adequately integrated in the research report.

It is very important to underline that the DELPHI-survey was organised by the team of researcher after the initial fieldwork, and discussed with the following committee. The Mesydel DELPHI enquiry was organised in 2 rounds. The experts invited were the local operators, and more specifically "persons engaged with local activities and the public". The response rate reached 59% (111 respondants out of 190 invitations) with a very law attrition rate (104 respondants on the 2d tour). The content of the survey was 25 questions (most of the questions were open); on the 2d round, questions were either testing consensus or tackling antagonisms expressed in the 1st round. The answer where quite long (300 pages for 2 tours) ➔ it worked !!!

The definition of the survey is always a very demanding step :

get immerged in the field, to understand the polilcy contexte at central / local levels

get good relationship with the sponsor (central administration) and the "respondants".

<u>Exemple of question</u> : did you have to change your practices according to the 2009 law?
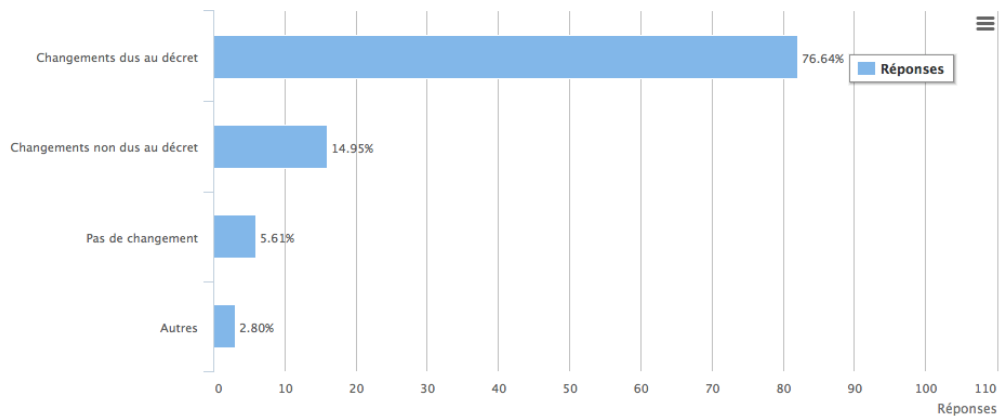
activites hors les murs catalogue collectif **evaluation** evaluation ponctuelle formalisation **logique de projet** logique de reseau mayday mutualisation **nostalgique** **nouveaux publics** nouvelle image **nouvelle reconnaissance** **nouvelles activites** **partenariat asbl** reorganisation interne ressources **taches administratives**

When the survey presents such a closed question, there is most of the time a request to complement that answer with a personal experiences in order to ensure that the person answers with his experience in mind: as examples of recent changes, their answers refer mainly to : Evaluation; project managmeent; partnerships; administration load.

Analysing the answers & reporting : two examples of thematics

- For a large majority of the operators, the survey was a space to freely present their problems and to question the ongoing reforms (in terms of evaluatin processes and new priorities for ressource distribution). A huge amount of information was produced in this survey: the raw data is produced by the operators in written format, with no mediation, and must be analysed by the researchers.

- Interpretation requests a team – based approach (like often in ethnography analysis) to avoid being trapped in one vision of the policy. Minimum is a group of 3 persons who are used to conduct such interpretative analysis of policy survey (either through focus groups or through Delphi). Most of the tagging is organised on a pair basis (to validate the interpretation of the information) and is discussed with the group of researchers.

- Feedback to the following committee is an important step : these data are presented as field based information (not information produced directly by the research team). When the committee members are very active in the policy making process, this can be conflictual. It was the case here, as several members had actively taken part into the framing of the reform, either as civil servants in the central administration or as members of NGO's active in supporting local operators : these persons were disappointed at first to have an external university research group in charge of the evaluation of "their" policy domain. The external evaluation was imposed by the cabinet. And they were first skeptical when facing the surprises arising from the first round of the survey, such as eg.:

Example of answers that were a surprised :

- An absence of consensus on the central concept of the reform : "cultural mediation". When the question is asked openly (what is for you "mediation"?) the answers are very diverse… The concept, although central, is not yet appropriated by the local operators.
- A strong dissensus on the interest of the "local committee for reading activities" : this local group must be organised according to the reform and it does not work for most operators while a minority view this as a very interesting space for innovation and discussion.
- A consensus on the need for partnerships.
- At the end of the 1st round 33% of the respondents asked to adress also other domains of concern : financial resources and the increasing administrative workload

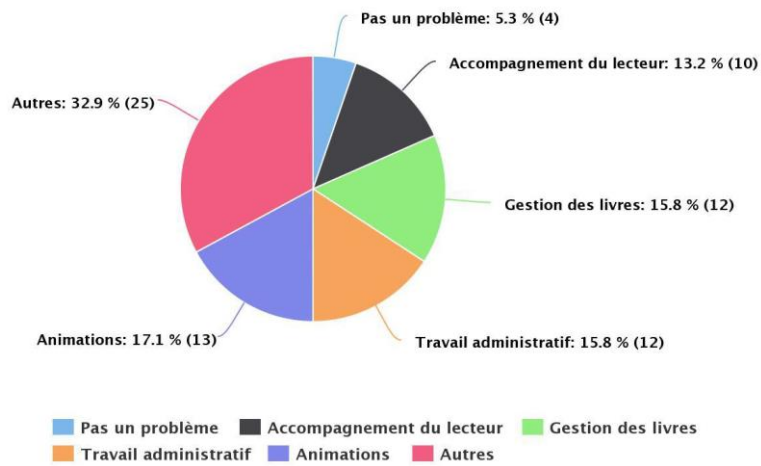cdl structure **charge de travail** collections **crise budgetaire** diagnostic mayday
evaluation **financement** heterogeneite equipes **heures douverture** livre au centre
logique de projet **manque de formation** manque soutien politique mediation **partenariat asbl role**
encyclopedique role operateur dappui role slp **ruralurbain taches administratives**

2d round :

Pas un problème: 5.3 % (4)
Accompagnement du lecteur: 13.2 % (10)
Autres: 32.9 % (25)
Gestion des livres: 15.8 % (12)
Animations: 17.1 % (13)
Travail administratif: 15.8 % (12)

■ Pas un problème ■ Accompagnement du lecteur ■ Gestion des livres
■ Travail administratif ■ Animations ■ Autres

désarroi _{evaluation} **formalisation** **frustration** _{heures d'ouverture} _{mayday} **réassurance**

DELPHI as a place for the production of "counter narratives" in IPA

These examples shows that the central sponsor responsible for organising the policy evaluation had no control on the process, and particularly during the survey. Some of the issues or concepts which were very important in their views were marginalised on the local level. On the contrary questions which were not presented as problematic in the specification of the evaluation at start had to be intergrated in the survey and became central stage in the final report.

The case study presents the opportunity to underline the capacity of the research methods to give enough margin of manoeuvre to "powerless" actors, in this case the local operators and put them in a position to refute top-down issue framings or scenarizations and to propose alternative or counter-scenarisation

Citton (2010) translates this definition in narrative terms: "any relation of power can be boiled down to a capacity to scenarize someone's action. ...And the main issue at stake for any agent involved in a relation of power could be phrased as: 'Who is telling my story?', 'Whose story am I caught in?' In this view, counter-stories are reflexive, self-conscious attempts at empower oneself. (in the terms of Claisse & Delvenne (2017:263).

On the contrary, the operators, when they fill their on line questionnaires, feel free to present their local vision of these dimensions.

- They present at length the type of problems they are confronted with when touching other publics.
- They write stories from their recent experiences about innovative practices made possible thanks to new partnerships.
- And they ask to listen to their concerns: they feel bad to not have enough time to welcome the users who visit their place because the workload has increased so much.

When writing, they take the time to present at length their own vision of their work, their activities, their personal concerns about their missions and status. These texts are often long testimonies of concrete activities and of long hidden feelings. When writing – anonymously – they do not care for the reception of their personal writing, as it will be treated with the stories sent by the other respondants… They only expect that the researchers respect their commitment: to transmit their "message" upstream and to write "their story" about the on going reforms. The Delphi process appears to provide the individual operator with the greatest degree of individuality or freedom from restrictions on his expressions.

These very long texts written by the operators are then interpreted by the researchers who must discuss the content of the answers, and reflect on the multiple examples provided on line. And provide interpretations which are strong enough to integrate all the contradictions presented through this mosaiq of stories.

The Delphi survey can then be reviewed in terms of credibility and dependability (Rowe et al 2011). The questions to be addressed are: "are the findings credible" and "Could they be repeated … notwithstanding changes in policy context ?"

prolonged engagement of the researcher in the field and data triangulation

organised controlled feedback to the participants : the reports are not only presented to the sponsor of the evaluation but also to all the participants : this is a major feedback dynamics which gives the possibility for the operators to discuss the in large the plurality of positions within their professions in the context of the policy reform. This is the formative dynamic of the evaluation process, oriented towards empowerment and learning rather than control and authority.