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From "Best Practice" to "Relevant Practice" in International City-to-City Learning

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Abstract

This chapter sets out five reasons why there is no such thing as "best practice" when it comes to international city-to-city learning and dialogue. The chapter then widens the conversation to consider the nature of international exchange and distinguishes three overlapping levels of analysis: 1) ideological and political forces; 2) ideas in good currency; and 3) the agency exercised by place-based leaders. It will be suggested that much international comparative research has concentrated on national policies and practices and, as a result, is in danger of failing to recognise the very rapid rise of influential patterns of international, place-to-place exchange now taking place **below** the level of the nation state. The concept of city-to-city lesson drawing is then introduced, and it is suggested that this may offer a promising way forward for comparative action/research, provided that lesson drawing focuses on "relevant practice" and not on "best practice". A framework for understanding the various dimensions of international lesson drawing is presented, and it is hoped that this framework might be helpful to those interested in designing and developing cross-national policy exchanges in the future. The claim is then made that universities could be playing a more active role in developing international city-to-city learning and exchange. The chapter concludes with some suggestions on how to improve international city-to-city learning.

Key words: best practice; international exchange; public innovation; city leadership; lesson drawing; universities

1) Introduction

Innovative local authorities across the world are now paying serious attention to cross-national lesson drawing. Progressive city leaders see international exchange as important, not just as a way of inspiring fresh thinking relating to how to address current societal challenges given the limitations of nation states, but also as a spur to the creation of practical place-based initiatives and experiments (Barber 2013).[i] In many situations, local universities are actively engaged in supporting and facilitating these international collaborations, and this is encouraging. However, a substantial obstacle lies in the path of those wishing to accelerate really effective city-to-city

exchange and purposeful learning: this obstacle is the notion of "best practice" in local governance and public policymaking.

This chapter will argue that those involved in international exchange relating to local policy-making and practice should discard the term "best practice" completely. It will be argued that wise approaches to city-to-city, or place-to-place, dialogue should focus on "relevant practice" – that is, insights and approaches that can help particular cities, or localities, become more effective in achieving their distinct objectives.

2) A critique of the "best practice" concept

Management consultants, policy advisers, professional experts, and, sad to say, even some academic researchers, suggest that they have identified "best practice" when they report on policies and practices they have examined. In speeches and interviews with the media, Government ministers will sometimes assert that they have identified "best practice" that all should attempt to emulate. Indeed, some private consulting firms specialise in "best practice" and claim to be able to offer ready-made templates to organise procedures, approaches to benchmarking, and so on to achieve so-called "best practice". If you Google "best practice" on the Internet, you will get over 1.7 billion results in less than a second. In 2019, we can be sure that there is, for good or ill, a massive "best practice" industry now operating on a global basis.

In my view, the use of the phrase "best practice" is almost certainly unhelpful in any area of policymaking, and it has no place in intelligent approaches to urban network learning. Before we get to this critique, we should first consider what the advocates of "best practice" mean and, if we can, try to establish where the notion has come from. There are numerous definitions of "best practice", some more managerial than others. The Merriam Webster definition can, perhaps, provide us with a useful starting-point. This dictionary defines "best practice" as:

> A procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results, and that it is established, or proposed, as a standard suitable for widespread adoption (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2018).

It is not entirely clear when the phrase "best practice" began to feature in public policy debates. However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the phrase entered the managerial lexicon in the early 1980s, and that the notion then found its way into the realm of public policy. It is certainly the case that various influential American managerial books extolled the virtues of identifying examples of "excellent" practice, the influential *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) providing a noteworthy example. Suffice it to say that modern use of the phrase "best practice" has managerial origins. It has grown in popularity in the last thirty years and, in some circles, now appears to be a concept that goes unquestioned.

It is, of course, possible for particular industries or professions to develop guides to action that, in specific technical areas, could be described as "good practice" or, even, "required practice". Engineering guidance on sound bridge

construction, for example, probably qualifies as an area where the profession is able, on an international basis, to agree on "good practice". Even here, however, I take the view that the use of the phrase "best practice" would be unwise. This is because it promotes convergent thinking – the idea that there is a single "best" solution. If engineers had stuck to copying "best practice" in the past, the suspension bridge would never have been invented.[ii]

There are five main reasons why "best practice" should be discarded from the lexicon of urban network learning for public policy.[iii]

i) Best practice is past practice

First, as Snowden and Boone (2007) explain, "best practice" is, by definition, past practice. It is practice that already exists. This is a serious problem because we know that the world is changing fairly rapidly, and this is one of the main reasons why public innovation is so important. In such a world it can be argued that hindsight no longer leads to foresight (Schon 1971). It follows that emulating what worked in the past may not be shrewd. Fruitful innovation arises when inspirational leaders seek to break new ground. The list of established practices holding back societies is a long one. A classic example is bloodletting, meaning the withdrawal of blood from patients to prevent or cure illness and disease. Surgeons followed this harmful practice for more than 2,000 years. No doubt it was seen as "best practice" at the time.

ii) Best practice is insensitive to culture and context

Second, it is a denial of the richness and diversity of modern life to claim that a practice can be described as the "best" in all cases. Recall that "best" is the superlative of "good": it means matchless, unequalled. Because its origins are managerial, the concept is, not surprisingly, insensitive to the spatial and socio-cultural context. To say that a particular practice is "best" regardless of context betrays a serious lack of cultural awareness. There is, for example, no reason to believe that the "best" British practice in, say, city leadership – were such a thing to exist – would be viewed as the "best" in Brazil, China, or Denmark.

iii) Best practice for whom?

Third, and this is a development of the second point, decisions in public policy have distributional consequences. In my recent book, for example, I set out a utopian vision of an inclusive city: a values-based statement of what I think cities should strive to be (Hambleton 2015). The presentation in my book stresses the importance of human flourishing, local democracy, justice, and caring for the natural environment on which we all depend. People holding other values are likely to disagree with my suggestions on how to improve place-based leadership. They may, for example, prefer to see the quality of life in cities shaped by uncontrolled market forces. What these people think is "best" for their city or locality will differ from my view of what is "best". In public policymaking, different people will, and **should**, have

differing views about what is the most desirable way forward. It is these differences in opinion that can spur innovation and societal advance.

It should be self-evident that legitimate political differences mean that there can be no such thing as the "best" way to run a city or deliver particular policy outcomes. Those advocating "best practice" disregard the "best for whom?" question. There is a broader point here. The language of "best practice" can, at times, signal an attempt to bring about a managerialisation of politics, one that seeks to disguise conflicts in society. "Best practice" can, at times, be used as a subtle instrument of domination by powerful vested interests (Lukes 2005).

In this context, it is helpful to refer to the Overton Window or what some might describe as the window of acceptable public discourse. Joseph P. Overton, the late vice-president of the American right-wing think tank, the Mackinac Centre for Public Policy, suggested that an idea's political viability depends on whether it falls within the window or not. It follows that those wishing to bring about a substantial change in public policy need to shift the location of the window to reflect the values they wish to promote. Owen Jones (2014) showed how, over the last forty years or so, right-wing think tanks have published many outlandish policy proposals. He argues that these "outriders" were able to help established politicians shift the location of the Overton Window to the political right:

> … the Window is not static. Ideas that were once seen as beyond the pale can become political common sense, and ideas that were once taken for granted by the political elite can end up being written off as "mad" … the strategy always depended on the constant repetition of coherent messages … (Jones 2014 pp. 295-296).

The privatisation of the UK National Health Service provides an example. Even Margaret Thatcher, the right-wing UK Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, did not dare to propose such a move. However, because the Overton Window was shifted to the right in the following twenty years, the UK Coalition Government, elected in 2010, was able to progress this idea. Given that the Overton Window can be moved, it follows that advocates of progressive policymaking can, in theory at least, shift the window in a new direction. Clearly, present discussions of "best practice" lie within the present location of the Overton Window. It follows that the notion of "best practice" is unlikely to generate breakthrough thinking in the sense of shifting the location of the window.

iv) Best practice disregards the nature of local social discovery

A fourth problem with the use of the phrase "best practice" – and it is a fundamental one – is that in a complex world, a world that is unpredictable and in flux, it is misguided to believe that a "best" course of action can be identified in advance and then followed:

> Most situations and decisions in organisations are complex … That is why, instead of attempting to impose a course of action, leaders must patiently allow

the path forward to reveal itself. They need to probe first, then sense, and then respond (Snowden and Boone 2007 p. 5).

It follows that the role of wise civic leadership is to create the conditions within which new discoveries can take place, one in which bold innovation is valued and encouraged (Evans et al. 2016). By drawing insights from jazz music, Barrett (2012) highlighted the value of improvisation in public policy – the art of adjusting, flexibly adapting, learning through trial-and-error initiatives, and inventing ad hoc responses. In a similar vein, the analysis of public innovation presented in my recent book suggests that success arises as a result of a process of local social discovery, not a search for some kind of mythical "best practice" (Hambleton, 2015).

v) Best practice is wedded to convergent thinking

My fifth concern about the use of the phrase "best practice" is that it pushes intellectual effort in the wrong direction. It creates the false impression that the "best" answer is out there – someone else has already discovered it for us. Convergent thinking uses reasoning to converge on the "right" answers. Divergent thinking uses reasoning to think fluently and tangentially. This distinction is well established in psychological research on human intelligence (Hudson 1967; De Bono 1971). Both forms of reasoning, convergent and divergent, are vital to achieve societal advances. In times of rapid social and economic change and uncertainty, however, the ability to use divergent, or lateral, thinking becomes absolutely critical.
　　We will now step away from this critique of so-called "best practice" to examine the nature of international public policy exchange.

3) International learning and exchange: three levels of analysis

International learning relating to city government is nothing new: "Aristotle dispatched his assistants to collect the constitutions of over one hundred city-states, which he then compared to derive general political principles" (Heidenheimer et al. 1990 p. 7). In recent years, however, the practice of international city-to-city learning and exchange has gathered pace. As Campbell (2012) explained, forward-looking city leaders are keen to acquire new knowledge from cities in other countries, and the international transmission of ideas, and the values behind them, is now an inextricable part of effective public innovation. The rapid expansion of the Internet has, of course, enabled cities to share information about practices and initiatives on an international basis in a way that would have been impossible only a few years ago.
　　We should step back for a moment and situate this discussion of international lesson drawing relating to urban policy and practice in a broader context. As a first step we should distinguish between coercive policy transfer and voluntary transfer (Dolowitz et al. 2000; Evans 2004). Some policy transfer arises as a result of specific mechanisms of harmonisation, such as international or supranational agreements, deliberately formed by the parties in multilateral negotiations. Such arrangements, following international negotiation, impose, or coerce, change in the countries that have agreed to participate. Policy transfer in

Europe, for example, has been strongly influenced by the European Union for more than sixty years, so that it is now possible to study and discuss the "Europeanisation of public policies" (Saurugger and Radaelli 2008). Voluntary transfer, on the other hand, stems from a process that parties (nations, states, cities, local authorities, etc.) enter into of their own free will. There is no higher-level protocol requiring policy modification. Our focus in this chapter is on **voluntary** policy exchange.

Linda Hantrais (2009) provided a good introduction to international comparative research. She discusses the nature of "international" or "cross-national" research and explains how these different words, and others, such as "transnational", imply different academic approaches. At one level, most social scientists agree that international comparative studies involve comparison of specific issues or phenomena in two or more countries, societies, or cultures. There is much less consensus, however, about what it is that should be compared, whether nation states provide a sensible unit for comparison, the degree to which contextual variables should figure in analysis, and so on.

It is helpful to distinguish between three levels of analysis as follows: 1) Ideological and political forces; 2) Ideas in good currency; and 3) Agency exercised by place-based leaders.

i) Ideological and political forces

First, there is an ideological level. Without embarking on a wide-ranging review, we can note that ideological frames of reference shape patterns of thinking and generate a prevailing view that often goes unquestioned. Lukes (2005), for example, drew attention to the way powerful interests manipulate group values and edge alternative perspectives out of the public discourse. The so-called Washington Consensus provides a good example of such a frame of reference. This neo-liberal perspective asserts that world development will be advanced by downscaling the role of government, by deregulation, and by privatisation. As Will Hutton (2006) reminded us, this is only one perspective. He outlines the contours of the so-called Beijing Consensus – an approach to development that embraces technological innovation, stresses equity and sustainability, and promotes values-led experimentation (Hutton 2006 pp. 206-207). Much international policy exchange – and the international management consultants and place branding companies can be criticised in this context – fails to critique the neo-liberal ideological cargo that is often being shipped as part of the policy transfer process.

This ideological framing is often deeply embedded in political and professional practice with the result that flawed "ways of seeing and doing" flow across frontiers in a way that almost goes unnoticed. Take city planning. We are witnessing a rapid urbanisation of the planet, and it is clear that there will be a massive expansion of urban growth in developing countries in the coming years. In many of the countries that will be affected by this seismic population shift, the urban planning systems are unsuited to the challenge. Vanessa Watson elaborated this point in an analysis derived from the experience of the global South:

> … the planning systems in place have been either inherited from previous colonial governments or have been adopted from Northern contexts to suit

particular local political and ideological ends. The need for planning systems to be pro-poor and inclusive has therefore not been given much consideration (Watson 2009 p. 2260).

She explains how there is now a fundamental tension between the logic of governing and the logic of survival. She urges scholars working in the fields of urban planning and development studies to expose the "conflict of rationalities" now arising between, on the one hand, current managerial and marketised systems of government administration and, on the other, marginalised and impoverished populations surviving largely under conditions of informality.

ii) Ideas in good currency

Second, we can drop down from ideology to the level of ideas in good currency. This is a notion developed and deployed by Donald Schon (1971). He explained how governments learn and adapt to changing events, focusing in particular on the role of ideas. The ideologies, just discussed, shape the discourse about which ideas receive attention and which are neglected. Ideas in good currency rise and fall. From the point of view of wanting to see the creation of more inclusive cities, some of these ideas will be welcome.

However, some ideas that attract international attention may actually be thoroughly bad ideas. *New Public Management*, for example, became an idea in good currency in many countries in the 1990s. This belief system, stemming from private sector thinking, has done great damage to the public service ethos (Mintzberg 1996) because these ideas have helped market, or quasi-market, models and ways of thinking to penetrate into areas of life where they have no place (Sandel 2012). Fortunately, however, *New Public Management* is now being widely questioned. New understandings relating to how the state can co-create solutions with actors in civil society are, instead, on the rise.

The point I wish to stress here is that ideologies, and ideas in good currency, are just ways of thinking. They may be backed by evidence, but they may not be. They are certainly not fixed and immutable. It follows that scholars adopting a critical approach to urban studies and city governance can play an invaluable role in helping us understand the nature of these ideas and, more specifically, can highlight whose interests are being served by their deployment (Brenner et al. 2012; Imbroscio 2010). Enlightened civic leaders pay attention to critical scholars, even if the arguments they present can be very challenging.

iii) Agency exercised by place-based leaders

Third, if we move down one more level, we arrive at individuals, city leaders, concerned professionals, small groups, social movements, local activists, artists, radicals, and entrepreneurs. Here we find free spirits who take action believing it to be right regardless of dominant patterns of thinking. The environmental movement provides many examples of lively activists who think for themselves and have the courage to take action; these are the "positive deviants" celebrated by Sara Parkin (2010). The evidence is accumulating that such activists, simply by getting on and

doing things differently in particular places, are changing attitudes more broadly (Hopkins 2013; Jackson 2009; Parkin 2010). Bringing independent, socially informed thinking to the table is, perhaps, one of the most important functions of progressive, place-based leaders. Imaginative civic leaders, those who are open-minded about new possibilities, are in the vanguard when it comes to city-to-city learning and exchange.

4) City-to-city international lesson drawing

Having distinguished different levels of analysis within the field of international comparative studies, we now drill down to examine the nitty-gritty of international lesson drawing for policy and practice. Richard Rose (2005) offered some helpful advice on how to go about what he called instrumental learning from other countries. By building on and extending the presentation provided by Rose, I identify five main reasons why forward-looking city leaders recognise that it is important to engage in international exchange.

- First, as Rose (2005) observes, learning can focus on actual accomplishments in another setting. This, he argues, can provide a better basis for policy innovation than merely making up ideas and speculating about what might happen if they were adopted.

- Second, in a rapidly globalising world, citizens expect professionals to be up to date with the latest developments – wherever they take place. Information, skilled people, and money now flow almost effortlessly across national frontiers in the worlds of science, business, the arts, and culture. Why should public policy be walled into national enclaves?

- Third, city leaders, public service managers, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operate in an increasingly multi-cultural world. Examining experience in other countries can enhance the cultural competence of both politicians and professionals by exposing individuals to different ways of doing things.

- A fourth reason for studying experience in other countries is that common problems do **not** produce an identical response. It is the **differences** in the responses that governments make to common problems that can offer powerful and compelling insights for both theory and practice.

- Fifth, cities can build connections with other cities through international exchange, leading to all kinds of relationship benefits. Such relations can be binary pairing (as in sister-city links), or clusters focusing on a particular theme (for example, the C40 group of cities concerned to tackle climate change), or more extended networks (for example, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the global network of cities and local and regional governments).

Rose (2005) suggested that policymakers do not seek fresh ideas from other countries for their own sake but to promote political satisfaction. This lays down a significant challenge for academics. Comparative research on public policy, including comparative research on urban governance and city planning, is an expanding field (Carroll and Common 2013; Dolowitz et al. 2000; Evans 2004). However, if this work is limited to advancing understanding – the traditional focus of scholarship – it falls short of instrumental learning.

Cross-national lesson drawing requires investigators to go beyond description and analysis and offer evidence-based advice to policymakers. We can make a connection here to the notion of engaged scholarship (Boyer 1990). Elsewhere I have defined engaged scholarship as "the co-creation of new knowledge by scholars and practitioners working together in a shared process of discovery" (Hambleton 2015 p. 28). Later chapters in this volume provide many fine examples of this approach to scholarship. A popular variant of this idea is the "living lab"; indeed, there is now an established European Network of Living Labs. While practice varies, it is usually the case that living labs centre their activities on the co-creation of new knowledge by integrating research and innovation processes in specific community settings. The Amsterdam living labs, or field labs, provide inspiring examples of this approach (Majoor et al. 2017). Notwithstanding these positive efforts, it can be argued that engaged scholarship could play a much more prominent role in urban policymaking in general, and in international city-to-city lesson drawing in particular. We will return to this theme in the final section of this chapter.

In 1991, Marilyn Taylor and I worked with the UK Harkness Fellowships programme in an attempt to co-create improvements in transatlantic urban policy transfer (Hambleton and Taylor 1993). A key finding to emerge from this relatively early study of cross-national policy transfer, one that has been reinforced by more recent research, was the importance of taking account of the policy setting. We concluded that it is important for visitors seeking new insights from another country to focus not just on the policy (or practice), and whether it was successful or not (as viewed from different vantage points), but also to examine what aspects of the policy setting appeared to be crucial to policy success or failure.

There are pitfalls to avoid in cross-national learning and, again, Rose (2005) provided a helpful outline of the main danger zones. First, with local cultures and contexts varying, mindless copying of an innovation is a classic error. It follows that policies that may perform well in one location may be a disaster if transplanted across frontiers without adaptation. Sensitivity to local history, traditions, and power structures is critical – sensitivity to place, if you will. Second, it follows that a search for so-called "best practice" is a misguided enterprise: we need processes that lead to the discovery of "relevant practice". Third, so-called "successful" policies may not actually be "successful". With most cities now practising some form of place marketing, if not outright civic boosterism, it is essential that policies being considered for transfer require some kind of evaluation before they are placed in the "for export" shopping cart. Fourth, and this is a point not given adequate consideration by Rose, there is an ideological dimension to policy exchange that we neglect at our peril. As mentioned earlier, the ideological context shapes any conversation about international policy transfer, and those involved in international exchange need to be alert to this dimension.

Put simply, international lesson drawing is a form of knowledge exchange. This, in itself, does not take us very far. How is this knowledge acquired and used? Rich (1997) made a helpful contribution by distinguishing three kinds of knowledge utilisation: information pick-up; information processing; and information application. These are all important in the international lesson drawing process.

- *Information pick up* refers to how users receive information. This can range from scanning the Internet, searching databases, contacting relevant authorities, holding webinars, and phoning up the local university to organised field visits to other countries and city-to-city exchanges.

- *Information processing* can be described as interpretation or sense-making. Newly discovered knowledge needs to be tested for validity and compatibility with existing knowledge and values. This stage is central to the learning process. If leaders are open to new ideas and experiment, they will foster a culture of innovation. This will mean that new ideas from another country can be expected to receive a fair hearing and could well stimulate the creation of fresh solutions. If the organisational culture is cautious and defensive, the information processing stage will be used to dilute or kill off challenging insights.

- *Information application* refers to using information in decision-making. Rich (1997) distinguished four elements to application: use, utility, influence, and impact. "Use" only refers to receiving and reading the information, which is not, in itself, significant. "Utility" is rather more important and involves users making a judgement about the **relevance** of the information and formulating proposals for action. "Influence" and "impact" arise when knowledge contributes to a decision and a consequential result.

Note that it is at the third stage – information application – that judgements are made about whether the experience being examined is going to be helpful to the "recipient" locality. This is the key stage in the lesson-drawing process. The focus of attention here needs to be on discovering "**relevant practice**", not on whether or not the practice under consideration can be described, somehow or other, as "best practice".

Who takes the lead in international lesson drawing? Here we find a striking difference in approaches between central and local governments. Ettelt et al. (2012) studied international policy learning in relation to health policymaking in the UK central government. They concluded that the process, for a central government department at least, is more difficult than might at first appear. This is partly because of the hierarchical forms of management that shape behaviour in Whitehall departments. Typically, the international learning is "delegated to junior policy colleagues or analysts" (Ettelt et al. 2012 p. 497).

Here, then, is a fundamental problem with a large amount of academic comparative policy analysis: it focuses on central governments, not on local governments. As we shall see shortly, city-to-city knowledge exchange networks are far more hands-on, vibrant, and effective than lumbering state-to-state exchanges. It

is often the Mayor of the city, not some junior official, who takes the lead on an international exchange initiative. When it comes to effective international lesson-drawing, city halls are not disabled by the long chains of command that hamper the efforts of their colleagues in central governments. As noted by Barber (2013), this gives innovative cities a major advantage, particularly when it is recognised that a key challenge for modern public policy is to discover relevant practice quickly, be creative, experiment with new approaches, and learn from experience.

5) A framework for international lesson drawing

In **Figure 1**, I set out a framework for understanding international lesson drawing for public policy.[iv] The framework distinguishes two kinds of policy transfer: informal and formal.

Informal policy transfer

Informal policy transfer arises when individuals take notice of experience in another country and use the insights they have gained to influence their practice. A well-known example of informal urban policy transfer is provided by the waterside, or marina, approach to urban renewal. In the 1960s and the 1970s, city leaders and urban planners in many countries tended to neglect the decaying harbours and canals located in the industrial areas of their cities. These "eyesores" were seen as relics of a bygone era and, surprising to say nowadays, new urban development often turned its back on the water.

Donald Schaefer, when he was Mayor of Baltimore from 1971 to 1986, deserves credit for seeing the hidden potential of the run-down docks as a focus for urban regeneration. The successful reinvention of the Inner Harbour, under Mayor Schaefer and, subsequently, Mayor Kurt Schmoke, as a major leisure and tourist destination is now something of an urban planning legend (Levine 2015 pp. 8-9). The Baltimore experience had a major impact not just on planning practice in other US cities, but also in the UK and elsewhere. Indeed, waterside renewal became an international idea in good currency. The creative and successful redevelopment of both the Bristol Floating Harbour and Cardiff Bay, for example, owe much to informal lesson drawing from Baltimore. High-quality urban design, attention to the shaping of public spaces, ensuring access to the waterfront, mixing uses within buildings, bringing public and private stakeholders together, renovating important old buildings in a creative way – all features of the approach adopted in Baltimore – are concepts that have been exported to many cities in other countries.

Formal policy transfer

Formal policy transfer is more systematic than the informal approach. It involves an entity explicitly setting out to examine experience in one or more countries in order to generate specific lessons that the organisation can act on. The entity could be a government (national, state, or local), an international organisation, an NGO, a university (or group of universities), a private sector company, and so on. In some cases, different kinds of entities might combine their efforts. In Europe, for example,

the European Commission regularly funds comparative research projects, usually carried out by universities, research institutes, and consultants, on public policy topics of pressing interest to member states.

Informal and formal, then, are the two layers of policy transfer shown in **Figure 1**. There are overlaps between them, and this is why the cells are marked out with dotted lines. These categories are, to some extent, porous. Across the top of **Figure 1**, I distinguish three categories of transfer: technical measures; policy and practice; and governance change.[v] Again, the dotted lines signal permeability.

Figure 1: A framework for understanding international lesson drawing
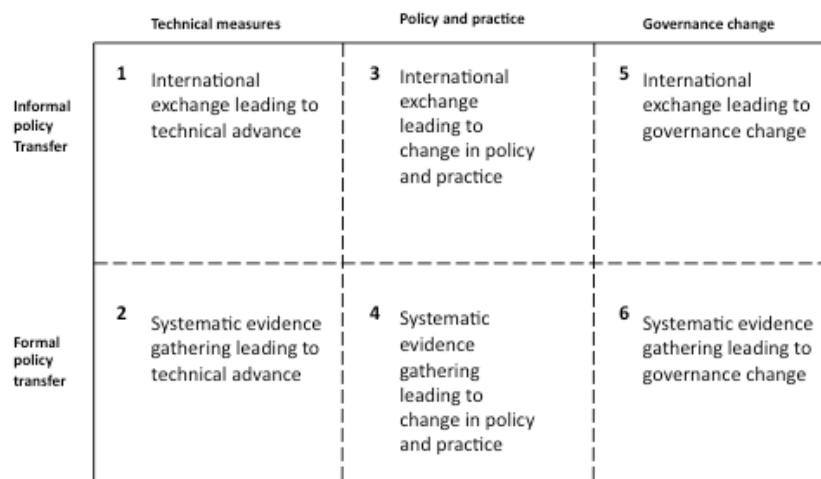
Source: Hambleton (2015) p. 321

International technical exchange

If we turn to the first column, we can see that, in its simplest form, international lesson drawing may focus on technical measures. Exchange on nitty-gritty issues of this kind may not hit the headlines, but it can lead to significant improvements in governmental effectiveness. Cell 1 in the diagram relates to informal policy transfer relating to technical matters. An enormous amount of international technical exchange is taking place all the time. Commercial companies facilitate this process by putting on international trade shows and conferences to showcase new technical advances that public authorities might want to purchase. In addition, professionals working in public services are constantly on the look-out for new technologies that might improve their performance, and there are many professional associations facilitating technical learning on an international basis. A good example is the International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA), which shares ideas on fire-fighting techniques.

Initiatives falling in Cell 2 of **Figure 1** involve systematic evidence gathering to advance international knowledge relating to new techniques. Again, commercial companies play a valuable role, as do networks of local authorities and universities. In addition, a large number of international organisations now seek to draw insights from scientific advances and translate research findings into technical guidance for practice. Set up in 1948, the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a specialised agency of the United Nations provides a well-known example. The WHO exists to promote the highest possible levels of public health and, as part of its work, it provides international guidance on topics such as nutrition, polio eradication, and a wide range of health topics.[vi]

International exchange relating to policy and practice

Transferring ideas relating to policy and practice – the second column in **Figure 1** – is more difficult than exchanging technical measures because established core values about what is appropriate are more likely to be questioned. As a result, there are more obstacles in the path of effective knowledge utilisation. Nevertheless, city-to-city international exchange relating to policy and practice is on the rise (Campbell 2012; McCann and Ward 2011). Initiatives in Cell 3 involve informal policy transfer. There is now an extensive literature covering European and transatlantic city-to-city policy exchange, and the European Urban Research Association (EURA) has played a part in facilitating some of these exchanges.[vii] This kind of transfer is now a global phenomenon. Guangzhou in Southern China, for example, now has the largest Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in Asia as a result of informal international policy transfer. In this case, Mayor Zhang Guangning and his colleagues visited Bogota, Colombia, and were inspired by the achievements of the TransMilenio (Hambleton 2015 pp. 224-228).

Cell 4 of **Figure 1** refers to systematic evidence gathering leading to change in policy and practice. As with initiatives in Cell 3, activity of this kind is expanding rapidly, particularly in Europe as a result of the excellent support provide by the European Union. However, individual cities may choose to gather evidence from other countries in a systematic way by bringing in outside help. Melbourne, now regarded as one of the most liveable cities in the world, provides a striking example. Here civic leaders wanted to learn about imaginative approaches to urban design in other countries. In order to ensure that their remaking of the city centre would be on the cutting edge, they turned to the Copenhagen architect and urban designer Jan Gehl for advice and support. Gehl's team drew on a range of international experiences to offer excellent guidance to the city (Hambleton 2015 pp. 251-255).

International exchange relating to governance

On the right side of **Figure 1**, we encounter the most demanding kind of transfer – that relating to governance change. Here policymakers ask whether the design of the institutional arrangements they have in place to govern society need to be reconsidered. Thus, for example, leaders may ask: "How are cities and metropolitan regions planned and governed in other countries? Can we learn lessons for the

institutional design of urban and regional government in our own country by examining foreign experience?"

A good example of informal policy transfer relating to governance (Cell 5) is the introduction of directly elected mayors into British local government.[viii] In the period since 1999, the British government has introduced various statutes enabling localities to adopt a mayoral form of governance, if they so wished (Sweeting 2017).

Finally, in the bottom right-hand corner (Cell 6) of **Figure 1** we find formal policy transfer relating to governance change. The Royal Commission on Auckland Governance (2009) provides an excellent example of this approach. The Royal Commission commissioned an analysis of urban governance models in other countries as part of its research, and the recommendations it made to the New Zealand Government drew on this analysis. In due course, the government decided to transform the governance of the city, and the new system, notably the introduction of a metropolitan mayor for the new "super-city", was influenced by international research and analysis (Hambleton 2017 pp. 9-12).

International dialogue and exchange in all six cells of **Figure 1** is increasing. Perhaps this is not surprising given that we now live in a rapidly globalising world. My hope is that this framework can be helpful to both researchers and policymakers as they consider alternative strategies for improving their approach to international city-to-city, or place-to-place, learning and exchange. My concern is that, in each one of the cells in **Figure 1**, it is probably the case that actors and commentators are still using the phrase "best practice", despite the critique mentioned earlier.

6) Replacing "best practice" with "relevant practice"

In this section, I outline some suggestions on how to improve international city-to-city, or place-to-place, policy learning and exchange. My first recommendation is that the phrase "best practice" should be banned from all discussions. This may seem a little harsh. But the evidence suggests that just using the phrase "best practice" is positively harmful to imaginative forward thinking. This chapter has set out five reasons why there is no such thing as "best practice" when it comes to policy exchange relating to cities, urban governance and community development. So, let's ditch it. This means recognising that anyone using the phrase "best practice" is immediately suspect. Have they really thought carefully about what they are saying?

What should we replace it with? In this chapter, I have argued that a central task is not just to critique the notion of "best practice", but also to explore whether the notion of "relevant practice" could be developed into an alternative – and far more attractive – way of thinking about how to improve international exchange relating to public policymaking for cities and localities.

At one level, this may appear to be an alluring, even compelling suggestion. At another level, however, it is clear that making such a shift raises important conceptual, political, and practical challenges. For example, what, exactly, is relevant practice? And, in any event, who is to decide what is relevant? What criteria should be used to determine relevance? How do we measure relevance? Moreover, we can also ask: relevance for whom? These questions remind us that international lesson drawing is, at root, a political process. Just as "best practice" is a flawed concept, so

too is the idea that international exchange is a technical, or value-free, process. Effective cross-national exchange requires the exercise of judgement. It follows that the process can be improved by focusing on how to help the various actors involved exercise wise judgements.

It is possible that universities can play a useful role in improving the quality of judgement deployed in international policy exchange. By drawing on the concept of engaged scholarship, introduced earlier, we can identify three avenues for societal discovery in relation to international city-to-city learning and exchange. **Figure 2** illustrates how practice and academe are brought together in engaged scholarship. The three arenas within which stakeholders can explore "relevance" are shown in the diagram: 1) on the left is the world of practice; 2) on the right is the world of academe; and 3) in the centre is the area of overlap between practice and academe. We will now consider each of these arenas in turn.

Figure 2: Engaged scholarship
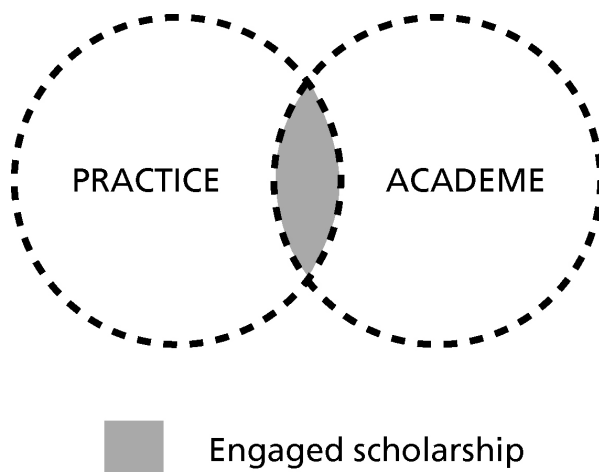
Source: Hambleton (2015) p. 29

i) "Relevant" international exchange in the world of practice

If we take the world of practice on the left of **Figure 2** first, it is clear that cities and localities wanting to improve their performance are becoming increasingly active in creating new international city-to-city networks focusing on specific policy topics. Often referred to as "communities of practice", these networks usually depend heavily on the Internet to exchange ideas, policies, and practices. The explosion of these international exchange networks in recent years is spectacular, and new networks intended to assist these exchanges are spiralling.[ix]

In this context, it is important to mention the emergence of the Global Parliament of Mayors in the last few years. This new international network is breaking new ground in promoting fast-moving city-to-city dialogue on how to invent new, inclusive policies and practices for cities. The key challenge for

practitioner networks like this is for them to recognise that there is no such thing as "best practice". It is essential for place-based civic leaders to engage in international city-to-city learning that is **relevant to their city or locality** – and not to embark on a fruitless search for so-called "best practice".

ii) "Relevant" critique in the world of academe

We now turn to the right-hand side of **Figure 2** – the world of academe. Academic analysis of international policy exchange is growing, and this is encouraging. Earlier in this chapter, however, it was noted that the vast bulk of comparative policy analysis concentrates on the comparison of the policies and practices of nation states.[x] This is an important area for scholarship, but it seems clear that, if comparative policy analysis is to remain relevant in changing times, academic study of international experiences needs to focus much more attention on sub-national policy and practice comparisons. New and dynamic international city-to-city networks are receiving some attention (Campbell 2012). But, nowhere near enough.

An important strength of good scholarship is that academics can bring a fresh eye – a critical eye – to the table. Scholars are independent and can play an important role in challenging assumptions and questioning established patterns of thinking. In particular, by drawing on a variety of disciplines, they can advance understanding by going beyond the "surface" appearances of policies and practices to reveal the "deeper" forces that may be at work in developing and sharing public policy ideas. Earlier in this chapter, it was suggested that it is helpful to distinguish three levels of analysis in the cross-national transfer process: 1) ideological and political forces; 2) ideas in good currency; and 3) agency exercised by place-based leaders. Good scholarly work can be done at each of these levels. In addition, and this is particularly challenging, sound scholarship recognises that these levels interact. One of the biggest challenges facing scholars interested in examining international policy exchange is to unravel the interactions between these different levels (Hantrais 2009).

iii) "Relevant" co-creation in the world of engaged scholarship

Finally, we turn to the area of overlap between practice and academe, the area of engaged scholarship shown in **Figure 2.** Earlier in this chapter, I defined engaged scholarship as the co-creation of new knowledge by scholars and practitioners working together in a shared process of discovery. This, it seems to me, is an area in which research funding bodies and universities should be investing substantial resources. To be fair, international organisations, such as the European Commission, the OECD, the UN, and the World Bank, have attempted to unite scholars and practitioners in a variety of international efforts to gather evidence on a systematic cross-national basis to enhance understanding of urban and regional governance systems, particular public policy initiatives and particular innovative practices. In many of these projects, however, there remains a serious disconnection between research and practice. This is, in essence, because much of this comparative research involves studies "of" cities and communities, not collaboration "with" cities and communities.

Each of the six cells of international lesson drawing shown in **Figure 1** provides opportunities for the co-creation of new understandings and, potentially, the generation of innovative solutions to current public policy challenges. To make significant progress in this area, however, a number of key players, inside and outside academe, will need to be more energetic and purposeful.

7) Conclusions and reflections

This chapter has set out five reasons why there is no such thing as "best practice" when it comes to international city-to-city learning and dialogue. To talk of "best practice" is to engage in sloppy thinking, and the use of the phrase is holding back innovative thinking and action. The chapter has attempted to widen the conversation by considering the nature of international exchange, and it has distinguished three overlapping levels of analysis: 1) ideological and political forces; 2) ideas in good currency; and 3) the agency exercised by place-based leaders.

It has been argued that much international comparative research has concentrated on national policies and practices and that, as a result, research is in danger of failing to recognise the very rapid rise of influential patterns of international, place-to-place networking now taking place **below** the level of the nation state. The concept of city-to-city lesson drawing was introduced and, it was suggested that, provided lesson drawing focuses on "relevant practice", not on "best practice", it offers a promising way forward for comparative action/research. A framework for understanding the various dimensions of international lesson drawing has been outlined. Lastly, the claim has been made that universities could be playing a much more active role in developing international city-to-city learning and exchange provided they understand the value of engaged scholarship.

In concluding this chapter, I offer some pointers on how to improve international city-to-city, or place-to-place, lesson drawing. In making these suggestions, I am drawing on my experience of working with civic actors in a variety of cities in different countries who are already doing these things.

First, elected city leaders should consider whether they could be much more active in reaching out to the institutions of higher education in their city, or locality, to foster new and more adventurous approaches to international policy learning and collaboration. In many countries, universities appear to be a neglected resource when it comes to advancing the collective intelligence of the cities and regions where they are located (Hambleton 2018).

Second, university leaders should consider whether they could be more energetic in taking steps to lift the profile of their institution, and higher education in general, by becoming much more active in collaborative, place-based problem solving. A recent report on how to improve the performance of British universities speaks to this agenda (Civic University Commission 2019). The Commission provides many practical suggestions – for example, the creation of "Civic University Agreements" – designed to promote collaboration between universities and non-campus actors in the area where the university is located.

Third, research-funding bodies, within nation states but also including the international research funding institutions, should expand their financial support for place-based collaborative action/research projects. Some research funders are, of

course, moving in this direction, not least because they recognise that collaborative action/research can have a direct impact on the local quality of life as well as advance knowledge and understanding in general.

Fourth, scholars interested in tackling urban and regional challenges should make common cause with actors in their city, or locality, to co-create action/research projects that can contribute to enhancing international understanding of how to address current and emerging public policy challenges.

Promoting and developing engaged scholarship is not a panacea either for cities or for universities. Pushing hard to build the practice of engaged scholarship, however, holds out the possibility of strengthening the innovative capacity of particular cities and communities, as well as increasing the chance of delivering world-class urban and regional research. In relation to international city-to-city dialogue and exchange, the evidence suggests that universities remain a relatively untapped resource in many countries.

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Endnotes

i It should be noted that various international organisations are now taking steps to promote more effective international city-to-city cooperation. In early 2019, for example, the European Union launched an International Urban Cooperation (IUC) programme, which aims to foster collaboration between EU cities and cities in other continents to enable local leaders to gain new perspectives on pressing sustainable development issues. More information: http://www.iuc.eu/city-pairings/join-the-iuc/.

ii There is widespread agreement that the Tibetan saint, Thangtong Gyalpo, invented the suspension bridge in the 15th century, and that he built many such bridges in Tibet and Bhutan. It was not, however, until the 19th century that Western engineers picked up on the idea that hanging the deck of a bridge from suspension cables opened up entirely new possibilities for bridge design.

iii These arguments are set out at greater length in Hambleton (2015).

iv **Figure 1** is based on my own experience of international lesson drawing in relation to urban policy and practice over the last thirty years or so, including the work of my company *Urban Answers.* More available at: http://urbananswers.co.uk.

v I should note that I am using the word "policy" in two different ways in this diagram. In the vertical axis on the left, I am using the word in a generic way to embrace technical measures, policies, practices, and governance change; I am using it as an over-arching term to cover what governments do. In the horizontal axis, I am trying to be more specific about the meaning of policy. Here it is distinguished from measures, which are more specific than policy and may relate to quite technical matters, and governance change, which is a broader concept than policy.

vi The WHO does much more than facilitate the international transfer of technical measures. Much of its work is, in practice, focused on international exchange relating to policy and practice. One of its strengths, however, is the technical know-how it brings to global public health challenges.

vii Founded in 1997, the European Urban Research Association (EURA) has, from the outset, been committed to stimulating and encouraging interdisciplinary, cross-national urban research. More: www.eura.org.

viii The author was an Academic Adviser to Ministers in the UK Department of Communities and Local Government (1997-02) and assisted Ministers in their examination of mayoral models of urban governance in other countries.

ix In my recent book, I list twenty-two international city-to-city networks (Hambleton 2015 pp. 347-350). The list is already out of date as new international networks have emerged, notably the Global Parliament of Mayors: www.globalparliamentofmayors.org.

x See, for example, the articles published in the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis.*