

Understanding innovation, policy transfer and policy borrowing: implications for LIS in Africa

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Introduction

Library development in Africa has involved large-scale processes of policy transfer, also referred to as policy borrowing or policy learning. A good deal of theory has been developed in various disciplines to study policy transfer and related processes. This has not been applied in LIS to any significant extent, but it can help us to gain understanding of:

- Why attempts to transfer new ideas fail
- How to select the ideas we want to transfer
- How to improve the chances of successful transfer

In this lecture I try to address the question: what can we learn from the theory of policy transfer and related processes (to which I shall refer collectively as policy transfer) that we can apply in LIS in Africa?

Some personal recollections

We live in a time when the introduction of new technologies, systems, and ideas from one society into another is going on all around us at a dizzying pace. But we may not always be aware of the cause of our dizziness. Change is a constant and a lot of it is taking place without our being aware of it.

In library and information services we have our fair share of change. Much of what today's library and information workers see all around them and take for granted in their daily work, was not yet invented when I was in library school in the mid-1960s. In my university library at the University of Stellenbosch there were no computers my time in library school, a photocopying facility was introduced. You brought the item of which you wanted a copy to a desk in the library, filled in an application form, handed it in and came back the next day to receive a brownish copy on curled up Xerox paper, for which, of course, you had to pay a fee.

A few years later, in my first job, I worked in the CSIR Library. There it was decided to start library computerization in the periodicals department to replace the Kardex periodicals check-in system. This was a miscalculation. We had not reckoned with the different periodicities of serials titles, the special issues, the missing issues, the combined issues, the annual indexes, irregular serials, all the exceptions, and the many things that can happen

during the life cycle of a periodical. All the information about them had to be punched onto 80 column IBM cards, trays of which were carried endlessly back and forth between the library and the computer centre. The computer, an IBM mainframe, which I imagine was almost as powerful as a smart-phone today, consisted of a number of fridge-sized units set up in a large, air-conditioned room, which was a bit like a neonatal ward. We had to be careful not to transmit dust or germs to the computer, because it might develop bugs. This was First Generation library automation. It was ground-breaking work.

Diffusion of innovations

I could go on like this for a long time. But this is merely to illustrate that we were at the sharp end of what is called the adoption or diffusion of innovations. A lot of innovation is concerned with quite concrete and visible things: products, media, hardware and systems. The more complex technologies include, in addition to concrete and visible stuff, a lot of stuff which is not visible. And then, there is innovation which is even less concrete, and has to do with ideas, philosophies and values.

I would like to illustrate this by referring to a photograph, which was taken in December 2011 in the library of Springvale Primary School in Gauteng, South Africa. You will agree that there is nothing particularly striking about this picture (Figure A).



FIGURE A: Children selecting books in the school library, Springvale Primary School, Gauteng, South Africa (Photo with permission of Springvale Primary School)

Can you spot the innovations? It is not so easy to spot the innovations because we take most of what we see here for granted. But here there are at least three instances of the spread of ideas in LIS. In order of obtrusiveness:

- The Dewey Decimal Classification – an American invention – is used for the shelf arrangement, here and in many other types of libraries in many countries.
- The students are allowed to select books at the shelves ‘with their own grubby little hands’. Open access to the stacks was an innovation that was hotly debated in American and British libraries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Black, 2009), from where it spread to other countries, such as Denmark (Dahlkild 2006; 2009).
- The school library – the idea that there should be a library in every school – is part of an American school library model (cf. Knuth, 1999) that spread to South Africa from the United States together with some competing British influence.

More fundamentally, the image also illustrates some ideas of schooling which are probably due to American or British influence:

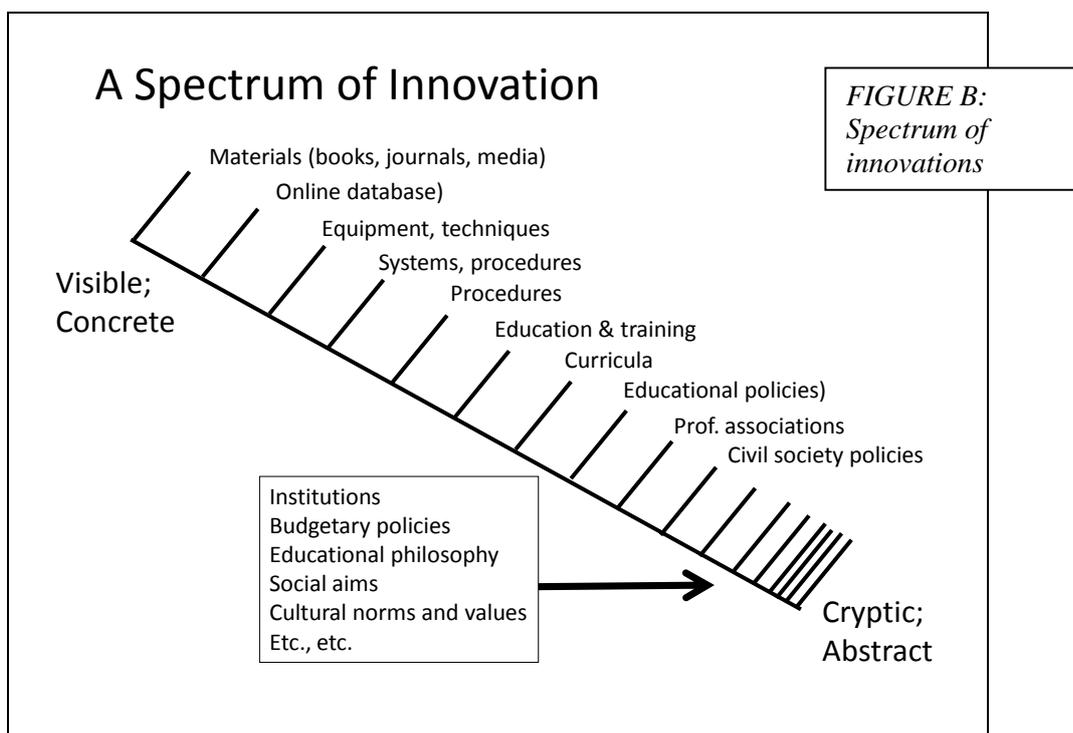
- Co-education (boys and girls in the same school) – US influence
- School uniforms – British influence

Most fundamentally, the photograph illustrates a major societal innovation (at least for South Africa):

- Non-racial education

A spectrum of innovations

Innovation can take place at various levels of concreteness and visibility, as depicted in the following diagram (Figure B):



This diagram suggests that library innovations can be placed on a spectrum from concrete and highly visible objects such as the picture books on the shelves, through equipment (such as a new photocopying machine) and systems (e.g. RFID or Wi-Fi in the library) to less visible and more abstract innovations such as policies (for examples policies on school libraries and co-educational, non-racial schools). Although these more complex innovations may be very visible, they usually also have many cultural, political and ideological ramifications some of which are not immediately visible to the innovators. In the literature such innovations are often considered as instances of policy transfer. For the purposes of this paper I consider policy transfer to be a special case of the diffusion of innovations. This distinction, which is a rough one, is depicted in Figure C.

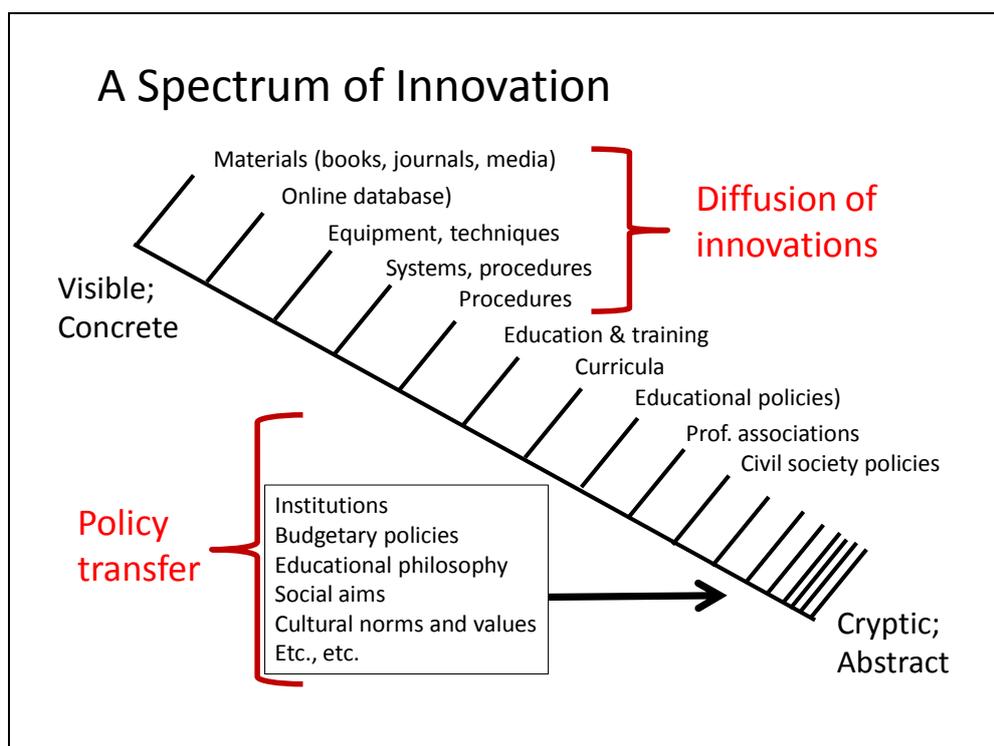


FIGURE C: Diffusion of innovations and policy transfer

In Sub-Saharan Africa a very striking example of an innovation of this more complex nature has been the introduction of Western-style public libraries. A library is an institution (or an agency, depending on your sociology), which is not easily transplanted. (Note the horticultural metaphor, which embodies one of many ways of thinking about policy transfer.) There is a huge literature on the introduction and the failure of Western library models in Africa, going back to Amadi (1981), Mchombu (1982), Ochai (1984) Sturges and Neill (1990, 1998), Sène (1992), Rosenberg (1993), and Raseroka (1994), to mention just a few in approximate chronological order.

I note in passing that, to judge by the literature that I have been able to find, the flood of criticism of the Western model is primarily a Sub-Saharan African phenomenon. I have not found nearly the same volume of critical literature in Latin America and the Caribbean, in the Middle East and North Africa, or in Asia and the Pacific – not that there is no such literature. In South-East Asia Wijasuriya, Lim and Nadarajah (1975) wrote a well-known book, *The*

barefoot librarian: library development in Southeast Asia with special reference to Malaysia. In Latin America, Briquet de Lemos (1981) and Gassol de Horowitz (1988) stand out as authors who have analysed the Western library model and found it wanting. But the literature from the rest of the developing world is less critical. Following the end of the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution in 1977, China again turned to the West, especially the USA, and since then American librarianship and information science concepts and techniques have been eagerly studied and introduced on a large scale (Cheng 2001). The South Koreans, Singaporeans and Malaysians also do not appear to have major reservations about adopting Western library models. Why Western models have apparently been received so much more critically in Africa than in other developing regions is a question worthy of comparative research.

Diffusion theory

How and why new ideas and innovations are adopted and what the outcomes are of adoption, is the subject matter of a large body of literature, which can be broadly classified as diffusion theory. Diffusion theory according to Perry (2011) encompasses cultural diffusion, diffusion of innovations, and collective behaviour (as in crowd behaviour, fads and fashions). The landmark work about the diffusion of innovations (the spread of ideas) was written by Everett Rogers, who, as a rural sociologist had studied the diffusion of agricultural innovations in the American Midwest. In 1962 the first edition of his influential book, *Diffusion of innovations*, was published. In it he brought together diffusion research findings from nine “major research traditions” in diffusion research, including anthropology (the oldest tradition), rural sociology, education, medical sociology, and marketing, and created the first version of his well-known generalized diffusion model.

Rogers (2003:5) defined diffusion as “...the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system”. This definition implies the “four main elements in the diffusion of innovations”:

- the innovation
- communication channels
- time, and
- the social system (p.11).

These elements are depicted in the diagram provided in Rogers (2003:170) (Figure D)

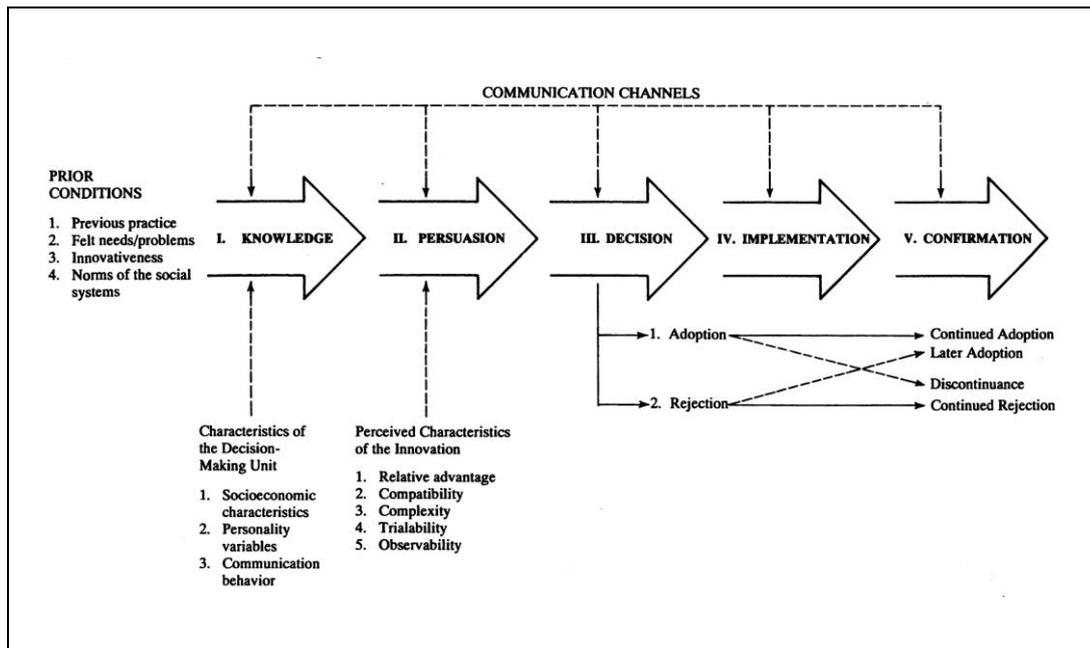


FIGURE D: The Rogers model, reproduced from Rogers (2003:170)

The Rogers model itself and other models derived from it have been quite widely used in studies focusing on information technology and information systems (e.g. Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1989; Wildemuth, 1992; Mbatha, Ocholla and Le Roux (2011); Totolo, 2011; Gonçalves, Laguna and Iglesias, 2012; Liu and Rousseau, 2012; and Toole, Cha and González, 2012). A review of this literature by Shayo (2010) used a conceptual framework derived from the Rogers model. It has also been applied in studies of adoption in LIS in the narrower sense. Maack (1986) applied the stages of the Rogers model to a study of US influence on the philosophy and practice of public librarianship in France from 1900 to 1950. In a study of the diffusion of ICTs in the communication of agricultural information in Kenya, Minishi-Majanja and Kiplang'at (2004) cited a number of such studies in LIS and ICT. In spite of some shortcomings, they found that the Rogers model provided a suitable framework for their research. More recently Neo and Calvert (2012) applied the Rogers model in a study of the adoption of Facebook by New Zealand public libraries. Xia (2012) adopted a diffusionist and epidemiological perspective in a study of the world-wide diffusion of open access. In a discussion of freedom of information legislation Darch and Underwood (2010) critically discussed the Rogers model but warned against naïve diffusionist notions.

Although widely used, the Rogers model is not without critics. Rogers (2003:105-135) has himself identified several shortcomings. Much research on diffusion is funded by agencies which have a vested interest in the successful adoption of the innovation they are promoting. This is called “pro-innovation bias”. Another form of bias is “individual-blame bias”. When a diffusion process is unsuccessful there is a tendency to blame the individuals who fail to adopt the innovation, rather than the system. For example, in developing countries we may blame “lazy” students for not using the library, when in fact a system of instruction that is based entirely on text-books and professors’ lecture notes may constitute a powerful disincentive. A reading of Rogers further suggests that much of the work to which he referred as examples of diffusion research has been concerned with the adoption of innovations of a technological or practical nature (e.g. introduction of hybrid maize, prescription of new drugs, and boiling drinking water), often by individuals within

circumscribed groups or communities (e.g. Iowa farmers, physicians in Illinois, and Peruvian villagers) where empirical studies of manageable scope and with clearly identifiable independent and dependent variables can be conducted.

When we start looking at policy transfer, we are looking at a phenomenon which is much more complex and unfolds on a larger scale. An example is the introduction of outcomes-based education (as Curriculum 2005) in South Africa. Sadly, this innovation, which has been thoughtfully analysed by Chisholm (2005), features in the international literature of comparative education as an interesting problem, if not an example of failed policy borrowing (e.g. Jansen 2004; Spreen, 2004; Maodzwa-Taruvunga and Cross, 2012; Archer and Brown, 2013). There has been much analysis of the causes, not to mention apportionment of blame. Another example is the introduction of e-government in developing countries, where many failures have occurred (Heeks 2003; Dada 2006).

Theories of policy transfer

In a number of disciplines, considerable attention has been paid to building models and developing theory to account for such cases. This has happened in fields such as comparative politics (Hall, 1993), comparative social policy (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000; Stone, 2001) and social work (Lightfoot, 2003), public administration (Pollitt, 2003; Weyland 2005), business management (Djelic, 1998; Neumeyer and Perkins, 2005), comparative law (Twining, 2004, 2005), and in comparative education, to which, given the constraints of this lecture, I shall limit myself. In comparative education there is a large literature, going back to the 19th century, on policy transfer and policy borrowing. In fact this was the central problem of comparative education, expressed in the frequently cited question posed by one of the pioneers of comparative education, Sir Michael Sadler, “How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education?” (Sadler [1900] 1964, pp.307).

The central problem of educational policy borrowing, as studied in comparative education, hinges on the relationship between context, “the local, social embeddedness of educational phenomena” and transfer, “the movement of educational ideas, policies and practices from one place to another, normally across a national boundary” (Cowen, 2006:561). Both have been dealt with in the body of theory developed by Phillips and Ochs (Phillips and Ochs, 2003; Ochs and Phillips, 2004; Phillips 2004 and 2006). The overarching framework proposed by Phillips and Ochs (2003) is that of four ‘principal stages of borrowing’:

1. Cross-national attraction
2. Decision
3. Implementation
4. Internalization/indigenization (Phillips and Ochs, 2003:451-452)

The basic framework is depicted in Figure E.

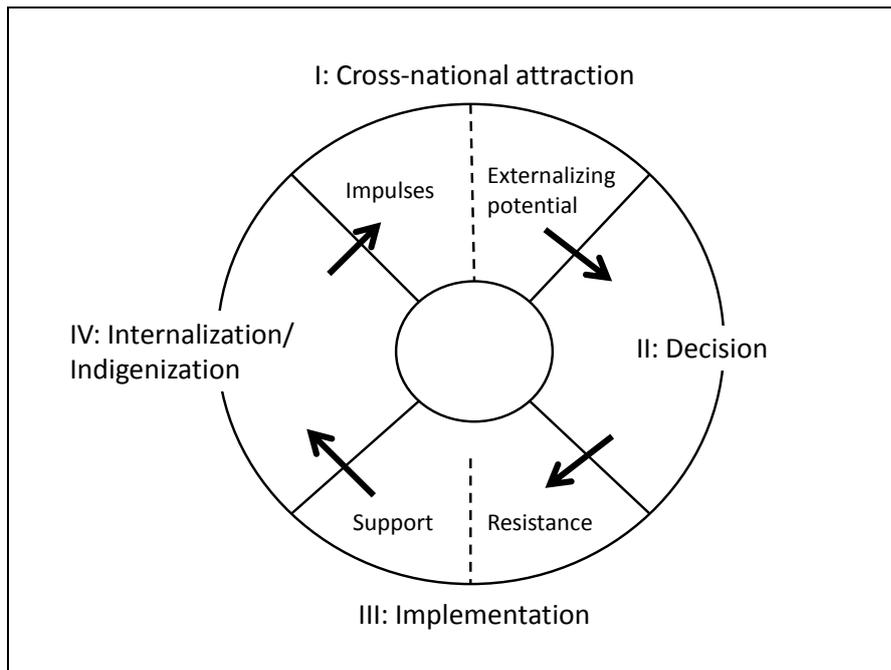


FIGURE E: Simplified diagram of the four principal stages of educational policy borrowing, following Phillips and Ochs (2003:452)

Here I will focus on the first stage, *cross-national attraction*. It encompasses two elements: “impulses” and “externalising potential”. *Impulses* are the conditions that predispose to borrowing by the borrowing country, such as internal dissatisfaction, systemic collapse, poor results in international comparisons, research findings, political and economic change, motives of political leaders, and globalization. These impulses may give rise to a search for foreign models. Many models of diffusion or policy transfer see the process as being initiated by the originating party, but in this model it is initiated by the recipient. At this stage the recipient is open to considering a range of aspects for borrowing: the guiding philosophy or ideology of the educational system of the other country, its ambitions or goals, strategies, enabling structures, processes or techniques. These are referred to as the “six foci of attraction” and they constitute the *externalizing potential* of the “target country”, i.e. the country from which borrowing is being considered. (This is the stage at which, in South Africa, various political players started looking at foreign models that could be adopted for a post-apartheid educational system.)

To move on briefly to the fourth stage, *internalization/indigenization*, Phillips and Ochs see this as a series of four steps: impact of the imported model on the existing system and way of doing things, absorption of external features of the imported model, synthesis (the process through which the imported model becomes part of the overall strategy of the borrowing country), and evaluation, which feeds back into the first stage in the form of impulses for further change. Thus the four stages are linked in a policy cycle that can be depicted in the circular diagram of Figure E.

Phillips and Ochs (2003) also dealt with context, identifying five “forces of context” that affect borrowing, and relating them to the stages of the policy cycle. Attention is paid to contextual forces that affect the motives behind cross-national attraction and those that act as a catalyst for cross-national inquiry as well as to contextual interactions between the “target” and “home” (borrower) countries. For example, in the fourth stage of

internalization/indigenization, the similarities and differences between the two and the potential effect of the target country on the internalization of educational policies and practices in the home country need to be considered. If the context from which the borrowed policy or practice is taken is very different from the context in which it is to be adopted and if this is not taken into account, borrowing may ultimately fail. (This is cited as one of the reasons for the failure of OBE in South Africa.)

If we think of the way public libraries were introduced in sub-Saharan Africa, this model does not quite fit. We know that public libraries were introduced by colonial officials and colonists, often for their exclusive use. At a later stage, after independence, various players such as foreign aid agencies, the British Council, the United States Information Service (USIS), book aid charities and other NGOs, UNESCO and IFLA, all came to disseminate or push their ideas about libraries in Africa. Thus much of the initiative was coming from the originating countries rather than the recipient country. Source-pushed policy transfer also occurs in education. This aspect was addressed by Ochs and Phillips (2004) by the addition of the concept of the “continuum of educational transfer”. This continuum reflects the extent to which the transfer is forced or voluntary. This can range from cases where policies are imposed through authoritarian rule or on territories governed by colonial powers, to entirely voluntary transfer. The continuum is depicted in Figure F.

Imposed	Required under constraint	Negotiated under constraint	Borrowed purposefully	Introduced through influence
Totalitarian/ authoritarian rule (e.g. colonies)	Defeated/ Occupied countries (e.g. Germany post-WW2)	Required by bilateral & multilateral agreements (e.g. Bologna process in EU)	Intentional copying of policy etc. observed elsewhere	General influence of educational ideas/ methods

FIGURE F: Continuum of educational transfer, adapted from Ochs and Phillips (2004:9)

The distinctions made here are useful, since they enable us to use the framework for transfer of policies and practices to developing countries in colonial and postcolonial settings, as well as for transfer under the pervasive influences resulting from globalization, which cannot necessarily be attributed to a single country.

Outcomes of transfer have received much attention, not least because transfer may fail or have unanticipated and unwelcome effects. Ochs and Phillips (2004:16-17) have tried to explain this by postulating “a series of ‘filters’ (or ‘lenses’) through which perceptions of practice pass and are transferred. Such filters involve processes of interpretation, transmission, reception and implementation involving different sets of individuals and agencies at each filter. Once a policy has passed through all these filters, the resulting local practices may be very different from those in the country of origin. In this connection Cowen

(2006) distinguished between transfer, translation and transformation. Simply stated, *transfer* is the movement of an idea across borders at a “space-gate moment”; *translation* is the “shape-shifting of educational institutions or the re-interpretation of educational ideas”, which Cowen (2006:566) likens to a “chameleon process”; and *transformation* refers to the much more radical changes that take place through social and economic forces in the recipient society, which can lead to the indigenization of the new ideas or policies or to their disappearance. This is schematically depicted in Figure G.

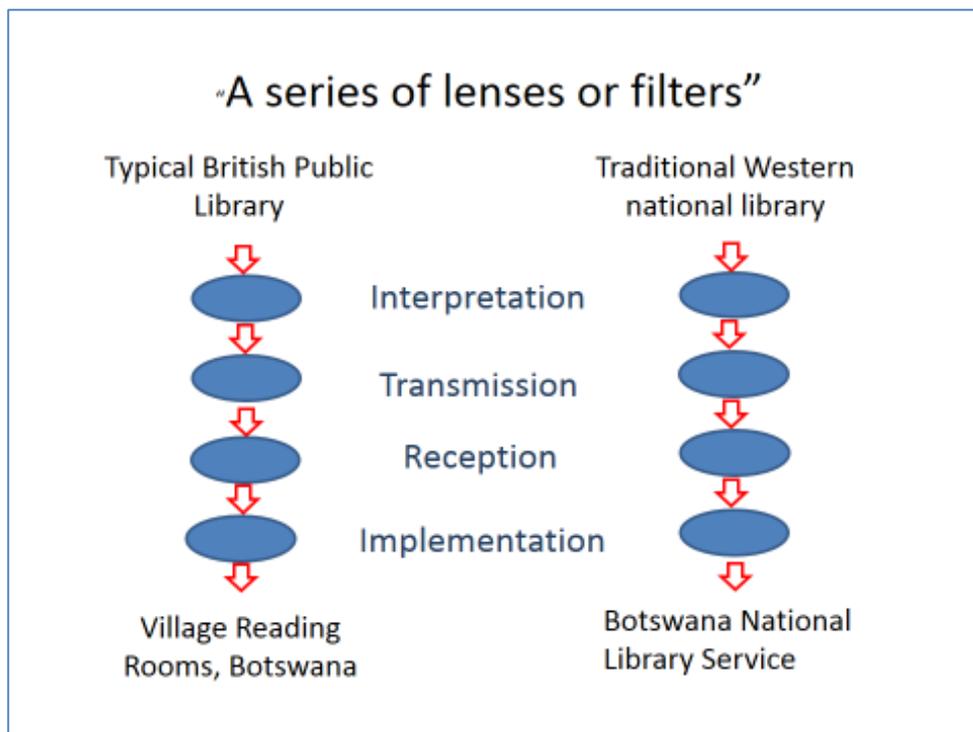


Figure G: Processes of interpretation, transmission, reception and implementation

In Figure G the assumption is made that both the village reading rooms and the national library service that we find in Botswana derive ultimately from (mainly) British models. The results of the processes of borrowing can be quite different from the starting point.

Cowen’s reference to a ‘space-gate’ moment (reminiscent of space travel in science fiction) suggests a brief period during which circumstances are propitious for transfer. This underlines the importance of the time dimension: transfer is facilitated when a particular policy or practice is available and visible in country A at a time when circumstances in country B make it receptive to innovation in respect of a similar policy or practice. But this is just the beginning of a long process.

Application to LIS

In this final section I bring together some features from various models to form a simple framework that we can apply to policy transfer in LIS, identifying where possible lessons that we can learn from the literature:

Source countries
Intermediaries
Recipient countries
Relations between countries
Modalities of transfer
Agents
Motivations
The innovation
Beneficiaries
Context
Timing
Process
Outcomes

Source countries

Which is the source (lending, transferring) country? Is more than one source country involved? Continental Europeans often refer to “Anglo-Saxon” influences, referring to US and British influences – which is mostly more American than British. Instead of a country, is the source of the innovation more generalized (as in ideas which have become common currency regionally or worldwide)? A great deal of what we consider universal or international is imbued with Western values and neoliberal capitalism and managerialism.

LESSON 1: Be aware of the source of the innovation and of its possible ideological implications.

Intermediaries

There may be a multi-stage process, for example, when British and American library ideas are transferred to other African countries via South Africa or Botswana. International bodies, both intergovernmental organizations (such as UNESCO) and international non-governmental organizations (such as IFLA) have been criticized for disseminating Western library concepts globally, for example through IFLA/UNESCO guidelines and standards (cf. Neri, 2009). Pilerot and Lindberg (2011) have written a critique of information literacy advocacy and policy-making by UNESCO and IFLA, alleging that the emphasis of these two organizations on textual sources and technology borders on an imperialistic project.

LESSON 2: The policy offerings of even trusted international bodies should be scrutinized critically.

Recipient countries

Which is the recipient (borrowing, receiving) country? Is more than one recipient country involved? Where are the recipients located? What is their development status? This leads to the next element.

Relations between countries

Ideas can spread between neighbouring countries as a result of proximity or they may spread to distant countries due to trade links, historical, cultural, linguistic and other affinities and relationships that exist between them. What relationships of political and economic power exist between them that may play a role (e.g. equality, dominance, conquest, colonization, or shared membership of an association or alliance of nations)? In West Africa we see that as far as library development is concerned the relationship of Francophone countries to their former colonial power seems to be stronger than their relationship with their immediate Anglophone

neighbours. It will be interesting to see how this changes over time and how library development proceeds in countries such as Mozambique, which has a long Portuguese colonial history but has joined the (British Commonwealth. Colonial history is a major determinant of library development.

Conquest or political dominance can be a determinant too. Following the Second World War American attempts to root out the vestiges of Nazism in Germany and militarism in Japan led to drastic interventions in the educational systems of these two countries (Pepin and Clark, 2004; Shibata, 2004; Tanaka, 2005). As part of a programme to ‘re-educate’ the German population, reading rooms, soon renamed U.S. Information Centers, and later *Amerikahäuser* (“America houses”) were set up in the American zone of occupied Germany to combat Nazism and militarism and to promote democracy and mutual understanding between the USA and Germany (Fickel, 1999; Kreis, 2012). This was the most successful of the three “waves” of US influence on German libraries over a period of more than a century (Chaplan, 1971). By contrast in Japan, despite mandatory legislation passed as part of post-war reforms, an attempt to transplant American school library concepts did not succeed. Due to cultural differences, the nature of the Japanese educational system, and an ineffective law, Japanese school libraries took on a different shape (Knuth, 1995).

LESSON 3: Be aware of the power relationships between source and recipient countries.

Modalities of transfer

This leads to a consideration of the modalities of transfer. On whose initiative does transfer occur? (Phillips and Ochs, 2003) refer to the source country as the “target country”, implying that it is the recipient country that initiates a search for an innovation. But where the source country takes the initiative, particularly in cases of coercive transfer, it seems rather that the recipient country is the “target”.) Is transfer imposed (as under colonialism) or voluntary? One is tempted to say here, “voluntary after decolonization, but in conditions of political economic hegemony this cannot be taken for granted. Is the transfer process in one direction only, or is there mutual influence and learning?

LESSON 4: Understand whose initiative sets the transfer process in motion. It is generally better if the recipient country takes the initiative.

Agents

Diffusion of innovation and policy transfer can be seen in primarily structural terms, as inevitable movements between influential and less influential entities, or between more and less highly developed societies, which is the questionable assumption of diffusionism. But the role of individuals with foresight, energy and strong convictions must not be underestimated. Here we think of Andrew Carnegie, whose posthumous influence in the old Commonwealth dominions (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa) did not extend merely to his funding of the erection of library buildings, but also had a major impact on the education and professionalization of library workers along American lines – leading in some cases to a clash of British traditions and new American ideas (Carroll et al, 2013). In West and East Africa the influence, for better or for worse, of British expatriates has been well documented (e.g. Olden 1995).

In countries where major transfers of LIS philosophy have taken place, one can usually find one or more individuals who have served as change agents or midwives to facilitate the adoption of the new ideas, e.g. Eugène Morel in France (Maack, 1986) Today it is recognized that networking among professional leaders, particularly in transnational networks and advocacy coalitions (Pons and Van Zanten, 2007), may be an important factor. It would be interesting to study the influence of the relatively small group of African library

leaders that have studied in the USA as Fulbright scholars, or were graduates of Aberystwyth, Sheffield, Loughborough and Pittsburgh, to mention just a few major LIS schools which attracted many students from Anglophone developing countries. Other potentially influential groups are those who are privileged to attend IFLA and other international conferences regularly ALA and those who during their careers worked in British Council or USIS libraries.

LESSON 5: Identify and understand the key individuals and networks that promote policy transfer both in the source and the recipient countries, and the links between them.

Motivations

When considering transfer and influence from a political and economic perspective at the level of counties, questions arise about the government strategies or policies that motivate transfer: What are the motives that can be imputed to the source country or to the agents or institutions involved? In Anglophone Africa and beyond, the library influence of the British Council and the USIS (United States Information Service, later incorporated in the State Department) has been profound. Neither of these agencies is funded by its government for entirely altruistic reasons. They are there to conduct “soft diplomacy”, promoting political and economic interest through art, culture and education (Kraske, 1985; Maack, 2001, Robbins, 2001).

In any study of the diffusion of Anglo-American library ideas worldwide the influence of professional education stands out. Wherever we look, whether in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa or Asia and the Oceania, library education has been profoundly influenced by expatriate teachers, especially from the USA and the UK. Almost immediately afterwards, this influence has been reinforced by librarians who returned to their countries after graduating in the USA or the UK to set up library schools, devise curricula, and teach. Thus for the donor countries granting Fulbright and other scholarships has been a very worthwhile investment in cultural diplomacy.

The parallel question is, what are the motives that can be imputed to the recipient country or to the agents or institutions involved? A president or cabinet minister may return from a foreign trip with ideas for “quick fixes” to the educational system that may help win votes in the next election. Phillips and Ochs (2003:455) refer to such initiatives as “phoney”. Or a Western government may seek to extend its influence by donating a new university library building in the President’s local power base. Such motivations may overrule any rational planning process. A previous South African Minister of Arts and Culture came back after a visit to a country in Asia with the idea of a large scale exchange of books between the national libraries of South Africa and the Asian country. But how would we organize several thousand books in that language and script known by only a handful of South Africans? And, given that South Africans are reluctant to read anything in foreign languages, even French and Portuguese, widely spoken in our SADC neighbours, who would read them?

LESSON 6: Scrutinize and understand the motives of those that promote policy transfer both in the source and the recipient countries, bearing in mind that positive consequences can flow from activities that are motivated by self-serving concerns, and vice versa.

LESSON 7: Seek to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of what is offered.

The innovation

A central question concerns *what* is transferred. What are the *characteristics* of the innovation? The characteristics distinguished by Rogers (2003) are relevant here: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability; although one may argue

that some of these are perceptions of potential adopters rather than characteristic of the innovation. Secondly, what is the nature of what is transferred? As suggested by the “six foci of attraction” of Phillips and Ochs (2003), and transposing their categories to LIS, this can range from quite concrete and technical things such as library materials, databases, equipment and computer systems, through readily documented and taught procedures and techniques, to more complex phenomena such as the LIS education and training system, the establishment of professional training, to policies on funding and governance, all of which are ultimately grounded in the institutional and national educational and cultural philosophies, values and social aims.

The literature suggests that ‘hard’ (concrete, technical) innovations can be adopted more readily than ‘soft innovations’, those involving goals, values and philosophies. The latter are more context-dependent and will encounter greater resistance in the receiving country, as hypothesized in Figure H, which is based on Figure B. It is suggestive only. It does not set out an absolute hierarchy of innovations.

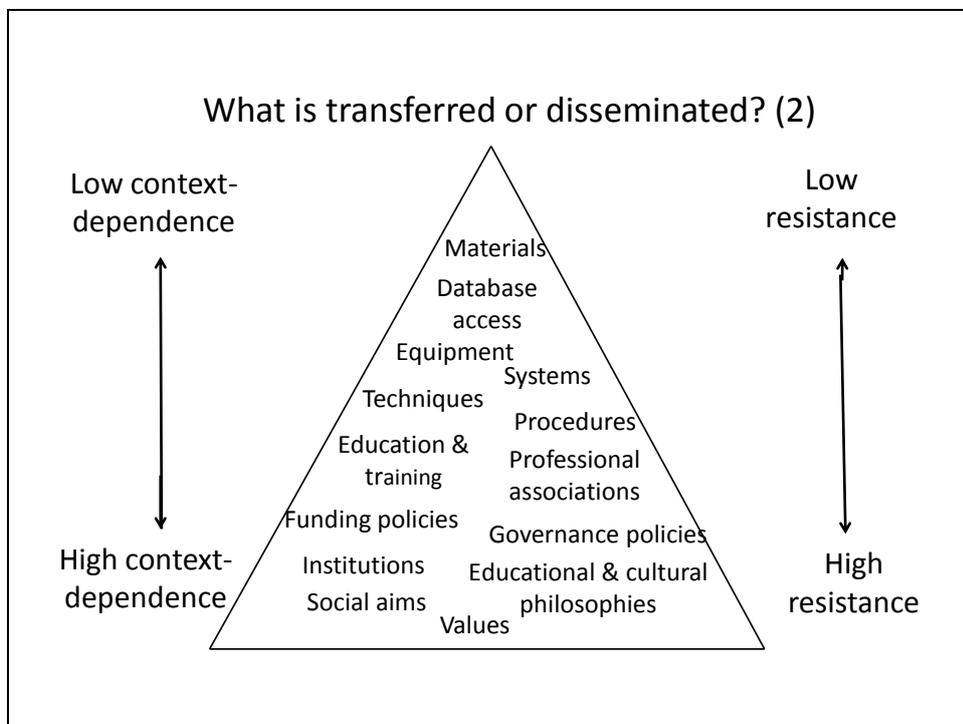


FIGURE H: Hypothesized relationship between context dependence and degree of resistance to an innovation

I hypothesize that there will be higher context dependence and higher resistance to innovation nearer the base of the pyramid because these elements are more fundamental, more embedded in history and tradition and more constrained by politics and economics. Furthermore the elements are all interconnected. It is more difficult to remove a brick near the bottom of a wall than one from the top. At the same time, elements at the top of the pyramid require support from those below and the introduction of quite concrete innovations, which are readily adopted in widely different societies can have enormous repercussions much lower down in the ‘pyramid’. In the case of the mobile phone, for example, the age-old African courtesies associated with starting a conversation are brutally abridged in text messages.

For example, in South Africa any group of people can get together and form an association to promote their shared interests. However, in many countries civil society is

looked on with suspicion. Founding an association requires permission from a cabinet minister or other senior functionary, and this may be long in coming. Thus governance policies may constrain the development of professional associations and impede the development of the library profession. Funding policies on what types and levels of higher education are funded by government may determine what kinds of LIS qualifications can be offered. And if, as in some countries, financial regulations hold librarians personally liable for missing library books, inter-library lending will be inhibited.

Some donors have horror stories to tell of returning to recipient libraries to find book donations that are still in the boxes in which they arrived a year or two earlier. This could be due to the lack of trained cataloguers or because the library ran out of tape for the spine-labelling machine. This also illustrates the dependence of library operations on a professional ethos and raises the question whether we have an excessive fixation on Western library procedures. Do you really need a catalogue if the library has only five hundred books?

LESSON 8: Carefully analyse the nature of the innovation that is proposed, bearing in mind that any innovation entails changes in entities both above and below it in the hierarchy. Nothing is ever as simple as it seems.

Beneficiaries

Who are the beneficiaries of the innovation or new policy? In Africa libraries were initially established for the use of colonial officials and colonists. Whom are African public libraries intended to serve today? Whose welfare is served – that of a small, literate urban elite? Another example: a well-endowed research library in a wealthy country offers to assist in setting up a programme to digitize the struggle archives of a developing country. Who are the primary beneficiaries of the digitized materials – professors and PhD students in the wealthy country? In that case, could the limited human resources of the recipient country not be better utilized in some other way? I am reminded here of the critical questions that Al Kagan (2007) has asked about the value of American corners, collections donated by the US State Department to be accommodated and cared for by the recipients. Given the limited space and the limited professional staff available in the recipient institution, is it justifiable to set space and staff aside for these collections? These resources could conceivably have been better utilized for other purposes.

LESSON 9: Identify the ultimate beneficiaries and ask whether they are the ones who most deserve the benefits of the proposed innovation.

Context

Policy transfer requires that there should be some congruence between the source and recipient contexts. ‘Context’ refers on the one hand to the institutional or administrative frameworks in which the innovation is sourced and introduced, and on the other hand to the broader societal milieu or circumstances in the source and recipient countries at the time of transfer: From which sector, institution or organization in the source country and from what context (cultural, social, economic, political, etc.) does the innovation come? Into which sector, institution or organization in the recipient country and into what context (cultural, social, economic, political, etc.) in the recipient country is the innovation introduced?

Until WW2 the introduction of American-style public libraries in Germany failed. In the 19th century progressive librarians and educationalists who had visited the USA and been impressed by American public libraries, wanted to set up similar public libraries in Germany. But it did not seem to decision-makers sensible that working class people should want or need to read the same materials as the more highly educated and affluent higher classes. Some influential library leaders bitterly fought this idea of American-style public libraries. This controversy about the direction that public libraries should take became known in

Germany as the *Richtungstreit* (Chaplan, 1971). Essentially the innovators wanted to transplant an institution from a democratic and egalitarian society into an authoritarian and stratified society.

In many African countries public libraries failed to thrive in the decades following independence because the public libraries had been set up according to a British model, which was not appropriate to countries where the majority of people were poor, rural and illiterate (Mchombu, 1982).

In the literature of information system design for developing countries, much emphasis is placed on what are called “design-reality gaps”, of which three “archetypes” were identified by Heeks (2003: 5):

- Hard-soft gaps: the gap between the technology (hard) and the social context (people, culture, politics, etc. – soft)
- Private-public gaps: systems that work in the private sector will not necessarily work in the public sector.
- Country context gaps: a system designed for a developed country will not necessarily work in a developing country, which has different circumstances and constraints.

LESSON 10: Analyse the context of the proposed innovation both in the source and in the recipient country. The better the match between them, the better the prognosis. Pay attention to the gaps. If the gaps are significant, the match is poor and the will be uncertain. Pay particular attention to the needs and characteristics of intended beneficiaries, the skills base, the infrastructure, and cultural, social and political factors.

Timing

The contexts of the source and the recipient countries change from time to time, giving rise to Cowen’s (2006) “space-gate moment”, when the availability of a model in a source country or its prominence in the media coincides with a need in a recipient country and when the preconditions for “large-scale, cross-national structural transfer” identified by Djelic (1998) are in place.

In South Africa many librarians thought we had a “space-gate moment” in the early 1990s as we prepared for the ANC to come to power. In light of the Freedom Charter we expected a more socialist-inclined government. Generally, socialist or left-wing governments are thought to be more library-friendly than right-wing governments. We had high hopes for a unified, democratic, non-racial library and information dispensation that would serve the whole population, inspired in part by the example of socialist countries. (Ironically, at this very time in most of the socialist countries the highly elaborate library systems were being savagely cut back under the influence of neoliberal economic policies.) We invested a great deal of time and energy participating in a number of policy development processes: the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), Implementation Proposals for Education and Training (IPET) and the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG). The results were disappointing as the ANC-led government swung towards neoliberal policies and essentially abandoned the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). However, it turned out later that our efforts had not been wasted. In 2005 the South African Government announced that an investment of R1 billion would be made in upgrading and expansion of public library services (Witbooi, 2007). I like to think that the awareness that was raised in government through our participation in the policy development processes of the 1990s helped to create a favourable climate. This time the space-gate moment was created by the Government’s willingness to invest in infrastructure. It is no coincidence that this was also the time when

funds were released for the construction of new premises for the National Library of South Africa in Pretoria.

LESSON 11: Seize the “space-gate” moment but be aware that the future is uncertain and present circumstances in the recipient country may change quickly.

LESSON 12: Beware of introducing innovations that are already passé or questioned in the originating country.

Process

There are many ways of looking at the transfer process. The “principal stages of borrowing” in the Phillips and Ochs (2003) model provide a useful framework for questions, of which I can give no more than a few examples:

- How does a climate conducive to seeking foreign solutions develop in the recipient country? (Which impulses stimulate a search for, or openness to, solutions from other countries? What political processes are involved?)
- How is the process of change launched?
- Are there circumstances in the source country that are favourable to the process?
- What barriers or obstacles are there to transfer? (E.g. the “gaps” identified by Heeks (2003))
- Which are the forces arrayed in support of, or resistance to, it?
- What strategies do they use?
- How does this contest play out?

LESSON 13: Know enough about the transfer (borrowing) process to be able to understand and interpret events, reactions, positions taken, and the discourse around the innovation at various points in the process. Seek to identify and evaluate the forces for and against the innovation.

Outcomes

The outcome of a transfer process is not necessarily adoption of an innovation. The effects of innovations can be direct or indirect, intended or unintended, beneficial or harmful. An innovation may be successfully indigenized, leading to the transformation of the recipient system. An innovation that is adopted may have unwelcome effects (Rogers, 2003). The literature is replete with examples of unintended consequences. These include some innovations which attracted much hype, e.g. the Indian “computer in the wall” experiment (Warschauer, 2002). An innovation may be rejected but leave behind some useful traces (Gruber, 2004). An idea which was initially rejected may be resuscitated later, when contextual factors are more favourable. We have to bear in mind that many policy transfer initiatives fail and that the cost of failure to the recipient country can be high (Heeks, 2003).

LESSON 14: Be wary, but don’t be paralyzed by indecision. Policy transfer initiatives can result in unqualified success, partial failure (the most likely outcome in policy transfer), or costly total failure. But even in cases of total failure, some learning takes place.

Conclusion

Innovation is key to the success of *Homo sapiens*, allowing us to spread all over the globe and occupy a wide range of ecological niches. There is a downside to this, as many of our innovations have negative side-effects that put the planet at risk. But we can learn from experience to minimize the risks as we maximise the benefits of the ideas that we borrow and

put to work. In LIS the risks involved in borrowing are not nearly as spectacular as they are in some other fields, but the risks are real, if only in wasted resources and lost opportunities. In Africa we have many challenges and limited resources. We need to borrow wisely.

In this lecture I have tried to derive some lessons from the quite extensive literature of innovation in various disciplines, concentrating on the insights that have been gained in comparative education. Often we can learn more from the failures than from the successes of others.

I conclude with an observation and a precept.

The observation is that, in policy transfer, things are never quite what they seem.

The precept: look the gift horse in the mouth.

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