



**Copenhagen  
Business School**  
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

International Center  
For Business and Politics  
Steen Blichers Vej 22  
DK-2000 Frederiksberg  
Tel. +45 3815 3585  
Fax. +45 3815 3555  
e-mail [cbp@cbs.dk](mailto:cbp@cbs.dk)

## **Mutual Learning in the European Employment Strategy:**

**How? How much?**

*Peter Nedergaard*

**Mutual Learning in the European Employment Strategy: How? How much?**

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Working paper no. 40, 2007

6000 words

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

ISBN  
x656559712

## **Abstract**

Mutual learning among the Member States is the primary purpose of the employment policy of the European Union. The two most important questions in this regard are how learning occurs and how much learning takes place. In this article I argue that the existing analyses of the effects of learning in the European employment strategy have been either determined by the sender's interests or have underestimated how mutual learning between countries takes place. In stead the article develops a constructivist approach to learning and uses it to generate some concrete hypothesis about when learning in committees is most likely to take place. Afterwards, this constructivist approach is used to analyse the institutional framework surrounding the European employment strategy in order to evaluate whether the potential for learning is optimal. Finally, the article concludes that even though some basic premises for learning is fulfilled, the potential for mutual learning could and should be increased by implemented at range of concrete institutional reforms. Firstly, a range of professional and autonomous sub-committees which reports to the EMCO should be established. Secondly, the EMCO should be given more time to discuss the national action plans in meetings which more loosely defined agendas. Thirdly, the cooperation should be concentrated around the areas where the differences in terms of policy performances among the Member States are greatest. Fourthly, the president of the EMCO should be given a more prominent role at the expense of the Commission. Finally, the members of the EMCO should to a higher extent come from the directorates in the Member states rather than the minister's departments.

## **Mutual Learning in the European Employment Strategy: How? How much?**

### 1. Introduction

Mutual learning among the Member States is the purpose of the employment policy of the European Union. The two most important questions in this regard are how learning occurs and how much learning takes place. I wish to argue that the existing analyses of the effects of learning in the European employment strategy have been either determined by the sender's interests or have underestimated how mutual learning between countries takes place.

In the article, I outline a model for the potential for learning in a cooperation based on work in committees as in the European employment strategy. Finally, on this basis I make recommendations as to how the potential for learning in the European employment strategy can be increased relative to the present situation.

The European employment strategy has its roots in the so called Luxembourg process which was adopted at the European Council summit in Luxembourg in 1997. The Luxembourg process was introduced with the Treaty of Amsterdam and was inspired by the idea first presented in the EU Treaty concerning macroeconomic coordination between the countries.

The purpose of the European employment strategy is in the words of the Portuguese presidency in the conclusion from the European Council summit in 2002 “mutual learning”.<sup>1</sup> The method is called the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and is built on the assumption that Member States will learn each others “best practices” by exchanging experiences on the basis of benchmark-indicators which are defined jointly by the Member States. In other words the understanding of the dynamics that drive learning is essential. Unfortunately it is not an easy task to analyse the learning processes in the European employment strategy because of the facts that the employment strategy is rather new, its organisation is complex, and on account of the methodological difficulties attached to estimate learning effects in an iterative political decision making process with no formally binding sanctions. (Zeitlin, 2004). As a result, much of the research done on the European employment strategy has suffered from a methodological deficit<sup>2</sup> and lack of proper theorizing. The purpose of the article is consequently to sketch a theoretical approach to analyse learning processes in the employment strategy and an attached operationalisable methodology.

The article will on the basis of an overview of the way the concept of learning is used in recent political science literature propose a theoretically based model for conceptualising mutual learning with attached hypothesis (section 2). This model will be used to evaluate the present experiences with mutual learning in the European employment strategy (section 3). Afterwards a range of practical recommendations which are intended to increase the potential for learning will be made (section 4).

## 2. What is learning?

Even though policy transfer processes have been subject to growing interest in the political science literature (e.g. Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Dolowitz & March, 2000) some potentially effective approaches to explaining policy transfer have been largely overlooked. Sometimes learning processes are pretty much taken for granted as a part of presumed deliberative processes. However, both the understanding and estimations of the learning processes depend very much on the used conceptual apparatus.

Traditionally analysis of learning has been dominated by approaches based in various psychological, pedagogical and philosophical theories which either has explained learning as an internal mental and endogenous process or as an exogenous process (Gergen, 2001: 118). Both approaches place learning in the single person and can accordingly be claimed to reflect a dominating orientation of individualism.

In recent years there has, however, been a growing literature on mutual learning in the theories on international relations. As several researchers have pointed out (e.g. Levy, 1994; Flockhart, 2004) the field is a minefield of conceptual and methodological problems as learning is difficult to define, isolate, operationalise and accordingly to measure empirically. In the political science literature there has therefore been a natural tendency to take over the dominating approaches to learning which has been used in other disciplines.

Originally many researchers of international politics have applied an approach to learning which can be characterised as naive and individualistic, i.e. exemplified by Joseph Nye's statement (1987: 379): "*The extent and accuracy of learning depends upon the strength of the prior beliefs and the quantity and quality of new information.*" Later the typical conceptualisation of learning has moved in a less individualistic direction. Ernest B. Haas already defines knowledge as (1990: 23): "*By "learning" I mean the process by which consensual knowledge is used to specify causal relationships in new ways so that the result affects the content of public policy.*" He adds that (1990: 24) "*learning implies the sharing of larger meanings among those who learn. Hence "consensual knowledge" becomes the cornerstone in Ernest B. Haas' conceptualisation of learning, and he in this way distances himself from the purely individualistic approach by adding the concept "sharing of larger meanings".*

Peter Haas' renowned article on epistemic communities can from a learning perspective be viewed as a in line with Ernst B. Haas' book (although perhaps a bit further down the line). Peter Haas argues that

epistemic communities are the decisive channels through which ideas circulate, and defines them as (1992: 3) "*network[s] of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area*". Peter Haas thereby recognises that learning takes place in communities and networks rather than individually although he is less explicit with regard to the medium through which learning takes place.

Jeffrey T. Checkel (1999) applies a constructivist conceptual apparatus when analysing mutual learning. Who defines learning<sup>3</sup> as "*a process whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms and discursive structures), acquire new interests and preferences.*" Checkel is obviously more explicit about medium of learning, which is "*norms*" and "*discursive structures*". Norms are understood as shared collective understandings which regulate behaviour. From an analytical point of view both concepts are too vague to be worth much as independent variables.

Trine Flockhart (2004) builds on Checkel in her analysis of mutual learning in NATO's parliamentary assembly. Flockhart defines mutual learning<sup>4</sup> as "*change of beliefs at the individual level, either in relation to values, norms, procedures or new routines.*" She also claims that learning can occur even if it is not reflected in actual behaviour, a phenomenon she calls passive learning. Accordingly it becomes very difficult to decide whether learning actually has taken place, as learning can occur without resulting in policy change and that policy change can occur without stemming from learning.

### 3. A social constructivist model of learning.

This article will seek to overcome the distinction between language and learning by using a constructivist approach to learning. Constructivism has also been the basis of analysis of learning in other disciplines; social psychologists such as Gergen (1998, 2001)<sup>5</sup> and Shotter (1995) have for example contributed to clearer constructivist understanding of learning.

The social constructivist approach to learning originates from the Anglo-Saxon language philosophy which was founded by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1953) proposed that language did not get its meaning through a mental or subjective process but as result of its practical use (in so called language games). From a constructivist perspective knowledge is therefore a sociocultural process in which learning occurs through

communicative processes among people contrary to conventional perspectives on focus on cognitive characteristics. Learning occurs when words are put a new and different relationship one another which gives rise to a new context of understanding an issue (Norval, 2004). This means that learning is not caused by cognitive acquisitions or accumulation of facts, but by a change in terminology.

The social constructivist approach to learning in other words sees learning as the result of a process in which interacting people together begin to address the world in new ways as a socially constructed reality (Wittgenstein 1953: § 169). In addition, contrary to the conventional perspectives which see learning as a cumulative process (i.e. "filling a bucket with water"), constructivism does not necessarily perceive learning as a cumulative process.

However, learning also often involves struggles for power. In the constructivist approach power are understood in terms of (power-) relations which are based on the ability to define concepts in the various practices, that is the ability to establish an epistemic community in the "Haasian" sense thereby defining the situation. The dominating logic of argumentation in the European employment policy is therefore defined by the dominating coalition of actors and other actors are forced to use the dominating concepts if they wish to be understood and have their arguments accepted.

Even though learning is embedded in concrete practices it always transcends the individual practice when an individual takes up a new practice. The transcendence occur through "trajectories of participation" (Lave, 1999) which designates the movement of an actors from one area of practice to another. This means that learning is spread when the concepts used in one field or location is transferred to another field or location as actors move from one circle of interacting actors (e.g. a transnational committee) to another circle of interacting actors (e.g. the national administration). Of course transfer of the usage is not certain and chances are the usage might be altered somewhat to fit the new setting.

However, as pointed out by Trine Flockhart a change in the language constituted relations can also be the result of "strategic social interaction" (Flockhart, 2004) where the shift does not reflect learning but pro forma change in the vocabulary. This phenomenon is a methodological weakness in the social constructivist approach which must be taken into consideration in concrete analysis. However, the problems are probably smaller than they seem to be.<sup>6</sup> The reason is that even strategic social constructions must be used

continuously. Consequently, if a change in the use of concepts is not the result of learning it would require an almost schizophrenic personality to uphold as learning as learning is not just changes in language but also in language constituted relations to others. Another potential weakness in the constructivist methodology is as mentioned above that learning might not result in policy change in the Member States. This is, however, not due to strategic social interaction but often a result of weak trajectories of participation. This will be dealt with further below.

If the social constructivist definition of learning is accepted a range of factors influencing the potential for policy learning in committees can be sketched.

A basic precondition for learning to take place is naturally that people are in contact with each other and that meetings have a certain frequency. An indicator of the potential for learning in the European employment strategy is accordingly that the participating persons meet relatively frequently.

For analytical purposes other factors which influence learning understood as changes in language constituted relations can be divided in to dimensions: External and internal processes with regard to the committees in which learning is intended to take place. On these dimensions conditions can facilitate the harmonization or fragmentation of the concepts used by the involved actors.<sup>7</sup>

External processes can create conditions that either enlarge or limit the conceptual room for manoeuvre, i.e. by imposing narrow political mandates which limits the possibility if the committee members to change their positions on the basis of professional knowledge and new concepts thereby inhibiting learning. Conversely, an enlargement of the conceptual room for manoeuvre can promote learning. As a proxy for the conceptual room for manoeuvre I propose the degree in which the committee members are forced to rely on political mandates.

A second external factor which may promote or impair learning is the degree of uncertainty concerning what policy is right and wrong the committee (Mintzberg, 1979). If the degree of uncertainty is high the committee members have a small faith in the usual solutions to problems they will be more open to new suggestions (Simon, 1945). Furthermore, the chance of learning being successful is highest when the members of the committees view a continuation of the status as unacceptable. With regard to the employment policy the



degree of unemployment is a proxy for the success of the employment policy. A high degree of underemployment can accordingly be expected to promote learning as the actors will be looking for new solutions to the problems as they perceive them.

However, processes internal to the committee may also promote or impair learning processes. A successful forum facilitating learning can be defined as one in which consensus is reached among previously disagreeing scientists on whatever technical or policy issue that is placed before it and in which the forum's decisions are accepted by all major coalitions involved (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). One internal factor which can be thought to affect the potential for learning is the norms which regulate the argumentative competition in discussions in the committee. If the existing norms support the willingness to accept other members arguments if they are good and accordingly to reach a common position the potential for learning will be high. A proxy for the possibility of reaching a common position and accordingly to learn is the degree of willingness to reach a common position. One might, however, add that the strength and substance of norms may vary with the subject under discussion. For example willingness to reach a common position may be more firm if the discussions concern technical or empirical questions rather than deeper normative beliefs (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

A second potential internal factor influencing learning is the presence of an authoritative persuader or so called "policy broker" which is perceived as relatively neutral by all members of the committee (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Authority based on professional and scientific knowledge, neutrality and a commonly accepted use of language supports the learning processes as the participants can be expected to be more willing to listen to such an actor. An indicator of a member's authority can be the extent to which the other members view the person as having analytical capabilities or experience beyond the ordinary.

Figure 1 depicts learning as determined by external and internal processes which can be expected to influence the potential for learning by either pressuring for fragmentation or harmonisation of the use of concepts among the members. Fragmentation of concepts refers to low or no degree learning whereas harmonisation constitutes learning.

## Figure 1: Model for analysing the potential for learning in committees.

(see the end of the article)

In conclusion, five hypotheses concerning the learning processes of the European Employment Strategy taking place within the committee on European employment policy can be derived from the model. The five hypotheses are the following:

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

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

Hypothesis 3): Learning is more likely where the group is faced with clear evidence of policy failure.

Hypothesis 4): Learning is more likely in groups where individuals are willing to reach a common position.

Hypothesis 5): Learning is more like when an authoritative member is persuader.

The article tests these five hypothesis on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data collected in Nedergaard (2005a, 2005b) of which the first substantiates the conclusion using quantitative tests.

### 4. Learning in the European employment strategy.

The European employment strategy has the following yearly cycle: Guidelines – indicators – national action plans (NAP) – evaluation – peer review. In the end of the year the Commission and the Council of Ministers examine which problems are still unresolved, and recommendations are subsequently issued. The Employment Committee (EMCO) is the cornerstone of the European employment strategy and it is in this forum all elements are discussed.

#### H1) Learning is more likely when participants meet frequently:

The EMCO normally meets four times a year one day at a time. In addition the committee meets twice a year in the country of the presidency. According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999: 146) a successful forum for

learning should meet at least about half a dozen times a year which indicates that the first and basic condition for learning to take place in the European employment strategy is fulfilled.

H2) Learning is more likely if the participants are not directly subject to political pressure:

The meetings in the EMCO are closely connected to the preparations of the meetings in the Council of Ministers and the agenda in the EMCO is often structured by the subjects that are to be dealt with at the next Council meeting. The discussions in the EMCO often resembles a political dogfight in which all words and sentences in the recommendations to the Council of Ministers are subject to struggle. For every subject on the agenda in the Council of Ministers which concerns the European employment policy the EMCO prepare a note on its attitude towards the question. The attitude is most often – not surprisingly – supported by the ministers as they have been briefed in advance by the same public servants who have participated in the EMCO meetings. The EMCO meetings are consequently highly politicised, and the public servants most often negotiate on the basis of a “soft mandate” (meaning that negotiations are carried out in “the spirit of the minister”) or a “hard mandate” (meaning that negotiations are carried in accordance with instructions by the minister. The relevant documents in the EMCO are prepared by a so called Support Team consisting of eurocrats from the Commission acting as a de facto secretariat for the EMCO. In sum, with regard to hypothesis 2 it can be concluded that the EMCO on this dimension is too politicised to support a high potential for learning.

H3) Learning is more likely if there is a great difference between the performance of the Member States (e.g. with regard to unemployment).

The discussions in the EMCO often concern a trade off between how much security or flexibility should characterise the labour markets in the EU. The debates are dominated by two coalitions which weigh the relative importance of the concepts differently. One coalition consists of member states which prioritise flexibility and asserts that flexibility creates jobs and rules for job security accordingly should be “modernised” in order to create incentives for hiring new people. This coalition consists of among others Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, the new east- and central European countries and sometimes Germany. In general these countries have a lower degree of unemployment than the participants in the other coalition which supports job security regulations consists of France, Luxembourg, Spain, Greece and Belgium among

others. The discussions on the subject of job security vs. flexibility is often political rather than technical and empirical, however, it has been shown in Nedergaard (2005a) that the member states with a high degree of unemployment are more likely to accept the flexibility argument. Accordingly, it can be concluded that learning is more likely when participants have experienced a policy failure, in this example in the form of a high degree of unemployment. Consequently, the hypothesis is confirmed.

H4) Learning is more likely in a group when the participants are willing to reach a common position.

On the one hand the decisions in the EMCO are in practice made unanimously and reflect a delicate balance between the representatives of the member states who are advocates of job security and the representatives who advance flexibility arguments. This indicates that norms do to some extent must support the openness to arguments from other members. However, as mentioned above the meetings in the EMCO are highly politicised. Norms supporting establishment of genuine consensus through the force of the better argument would promote learning to a larger extent. Consequently, the unanimous decisions in the EMCO to some extent also reflect negotiated compromises rather than learning. In sum, it can be concluded that on the one hand the EMCO is characterised by willingness to compromise but that the compromises are reached in a politicised environment. Consequently, willingness to reach a common position on the basis of common professional norms does not exist.

H5) Learning is more likely when there are persons in the committee who possess authority and can act as persuaders or policy brokers.

The Commission participates directly in the EMCO-meetings<sup>8</sup> and plays the situation defining role despite the fact that the presidency is formally held by a representative of one of the member states. Normally the Commission representative<sup>9</sup> presents his or her view on the topics on the agenda as the first speaker which means that the debates often depart from the Commission's presentation. Even though the Commission plays the situation defining role it does not have the status of an actor with professional authority or a neutral persuader but is contrarily seen as a political actor. The Commission also plays a decisive role in the organisation of the peer reviews which the EMCO decides to carry out. A peer review functions as a seminar in which the policies of a Member State are reviewed by two or three other Member States. With regard to employment policy the reviews for example concern the efficiency of public actions, the integration

on the labour market, conditions of equal treatment etc. The members who participate in the EMCO are usually involved in the making of the peer reviews.

In spite of the Commission's strong position, representatives of Member States which have experienced a success with regard to their employment policy can often to some extent act as authoritative persuaders in the discussions. However, in all situations there are limits to how much a successful Member State can go against the dominating argumentative logic in the Committee which is most often defined by the Commission.

In conclusion, the Commission is the strongest persuader in the Committee but it does not possess the necessary authority to maximise the potential for learning. Conversely, Member States which have experienced success in their employment policy can to some extent act as authoritative persuaders. However, this does not change the fact that the committees in the employment policy lack a neutral and professional persuader who can boost the learning processes.

While the present employment situation in much of Europe which is the most important defining feature of the cooperation in the EMCO meetings in overall terms promotes the learning processes, a range of factors (the use of political mandates, the dominating coalitions, and the role of the Commission) which acts to impair the learning processes. In the following section concrete reforms of the EMCO that will serve to promote the potential for learning are recommended.

##### 5. How can the potential for learning in the European employment strategy be increased?

With regard to the evaluation of the degree of learning in the European employment strategy (and accordingly the justification for existence of the strategy) there is no scholarly consensus. The Commission's own evaluation from 2002 is not surprisingly positive and concludes that during the five year operating life of the strategy significant changes have occurred in Member State policies (Commission, 2002). Likewise Kerstin Jacobsson (2003) has pointed out the positive effects. She claims that a form of "cognitive consensus" has been achieved concerning common challenges, goals and approaches to policy. Borrás & Jacobsson (2004) have on a more general level argued that the development of common discourses and central concepts have been central to the growth of new policy coordination processes. In opposition it has

been argued that no scholarly consensus exists as to whether the strategy works and (in case it works) how it works (Trubek & Trubek, 2003:13).

Some researchers base their scepticism about the European employment strategy on the absence of formal enforcement measures (Alesina & Perotti, 2004). They conclude that the entire strategy is a play to the gallery as no government on the one hand takes the national action plans seriously but on the other hand wish to withdraw and risk being blamed for the failure of the strategy. According to a constructivist approach to learning the availability of formal sanctions is however neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure learning. On the basis of an examination of the peer reviews, Casey & Gold (2004) conclude a learning process has been established but that its effect has been limited as the review-programme has only reached a very small epistemic community. However, against the validity of Casey & Gold's conclusions it can be asserted that they apply a naïve individualistic concept of learning as they do not examine how learning takes place but only attempt estimate the learning effects by asking the involved actors whether they have learning anything.

In sum, it seems that the existing analysis of the learning in the European employment strategy underestimate the degree of learning that takes place. However, on the other hand, this does not mean that the potential for learning cannot be increased and attempts to do so ought not to be made. On the basis of the concrete hypothesis concerning learning and the analysis above it is possible to make a range of concrete recommendations which can be expected to increase the degree of learning in the EMCO.

1) Firstly, the EMCO should have a group of professional sub-committees which report to EMCO but at the same time have an autonomous status. The model is used successfully at the Nordic level and it could facilitate learning according to hypothesis 2 (isolation from political pressure) and hypothesis 4 (willingness to reach a common position). A professionally oriented group of subcommittees could also promote learning on the basis of the assumption in hypothesis 5 (the presence of an authoritative persuader) if some of the participants have accepted and neutral expertise in the respective areas.

2) Secondly, the EMCO should have more time to discuss the national action plans as well as other reports and its agenda should be so closely linked to the meetings in the Council of Ministers. Consequently, one would avoid exclusively having discussions which are deadlocked by political mandates (cf. hypothesis 2)

and the participants in the EMCO itself would be more isolated from political pressure and thus more likely to be willing to reach listen to arguments (hypothesis 4).

3) Thirdly, it can be expected that learning most easily can be facilitated in areas in the employment policy where the difference between the policy performances in the Member States is greatest. Accordingly, Member States experiencing policy failure would be able and open to learn from their more successful counterparts (cf. hypothesis 3). Likewise, representatives from countries that are experiencing success could act as authoritative persuaders (hypothesis 5). Consequently, the European employment strategy should focus on areas where the differences with respect to policy performance are greatest if the learning potential should be maximized. Policy performance of the respective countries is presently not a criterion when it is decided which areas are chosen to be included in the employment strategy. It should, however, in addition be noted that areas which contain deep normative differences might be more resistant to cross national learning than areas where the differences have a more technical nature.

4) Fourthly, the president of the EMCO should play a far more prominent role at the expense of the Commission. This situation would be similar to the way the "open coordination" takes place in the Nordic cooperation. Furthermore, the a representative from a Member State which has experienced policy success could be appointed for president as it is more likely that he or she could function as an authoritative persuader (cf. hypothesis 5).

5) Finally, the representatives in the EMCO should come from the directorates rather than the international offices in the minister's departments in the Member States as this would increase the distance to the political level. This can be expected to increase the possibility of establishing norms that would support a willingness to reach a common position on the basis of professional knowledge and argumentation.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of the open method of coordination has been defined as mutual learning by the Portuguese presidency at the European Council summit in Lissabon in 2000. Accordingly, it is very relevant to examine the extent to which the framework for the practical work with the open coordination can be expected to facilitate learning. In this article I have argued for the necessity of conceptualising learning in constructivist

terms in order to be able to examine whether the conditions for learning are optimal. I have, furthermore, (on the basis of Nedergaard 2005a and 2005b) analysed the framework the surrounding the work in the European employment strategy on the basis of some concrete hypothesis and recommended a range of reforms of the framework for the cooperation.

The article has shown that the institutional setup surrounding the work in the employment strategy has some characteristics which be expected to facilitate learning (the meeting frequency, the partial presence of authoritative persuaders) but also that setup should be reformed in order to ensure that the potential for learning is maximised (with regard to hard and soft political mandates, the situation defining role of the Commission, the only partial presence of authoritative actors).

Furthermore, In order to maximise the potential for learning it has recommended that:

- 1) That a range of professional and autonomous sub-committees which reports to the EMCO are established.
- 2) That the EMCO is given more time to discuss the national action plans as well as other reports in meetings which more loosely defined agendas.
- 3) That the cooperation is concentrated around the areas where the differences in terms of policy performances among the Member States are greatest.
- 4) That the president of the EMCO is given a more prominent role at the expense of the Commission.
- 5) That the members of the EMCO to a higher extent should come from the directorates in the Member states rather than the minister's departments.

All these reform proposals are within the range of the practically possible.

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**Figure 1: Model for analysing the potential for learning in committees.**

Fragmentation

External pressure 3) Limited potential for mutual learning.	4) No potential for mutual learning.
1) Large potential for mutual learning.	2) Limited potential for mutual learning.

Harmonisation

Internal pressure

Fragmentation