From global ideas to local action

Building capacity to reshape urban transport policy

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Velo-City 2017 conference participants mingling with locals on the bike paths.

Arnhem, The Netherlands
Unpacking policy transfer as a situated practice: Blending social, spatial, and sensory learning at a conference

Abstract  | Conferences are theorized as crucial sites, not only for professional development, but also for policy learning. However, little empirical evidence has examined pathways for why and how learning is realized. Using a unique case approach, this paper unravels conference learning dimensions by combining literatures of policy transfer and policy mobilities with situated learning theory. Our case was a four-day international conference on cycling, taking place in the Netherlands, a country well-known for high rates of cycling and commonly sought for advice on cycling policy. Using a questionnaire with participants (n=293) together with ethnographic fieldwork, we examine key attributes of the learning activities and the learning setting. Structure for fieldwork derived from situated learning theory, where learning is a social phenomenon embedded in sensory and spatial circumstances. Findings demonstrate that acquiring technical understanding (i.e., design specifications, sample policy language) was less prominent than the acquisition of social and experiential knowledge. Additionally, the bicycle acted as a sensorimotor transition instrument for spatial discovery, evoking emotion, and social connection. The conference represented an opportunity to convene both tacit and explicit knowledge, where an embodied experience (for example, riding a bicycle in the Netherlands) may also act as critical asset to professional development in this emerging practice. The paper adds to the debate about learning in transport policy practice by unfurling contextual mechanisms and engaging with practitioners in “their world” – an ordinary practice of attending a conference in a unique location.

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4.1 Introduction

Transport planning, for the past years, has been undergoing a paradigm shift towards ‘sustainable mobility’ (Banister, 2008). Policies needed to achieve sustainable mobility are well-known, yet inertia persists and barriers to implementation eschew progress. Leveraging support is fundamental to successful policy implementation – and the lack thereof might produce failure (Banister, 2005). One of the underlying issues remains *how* to cultivate such support – “a deeper understanding of acceptability” – among decision makers, transport planners, and more broadly the public (Banister, 2008, p. 79). This invites us to explore interventions capable of stewarding a breakthrough in understanding if and how the mindsets of transport practitioners can be reshaped to support alternative mobility futures? The aim of this article is to explore a topic central to this: learning.

Substantial literature bodies, originating in political studies, examine ‘policy learning’ and ‘policy transfer’ as processes by which knowledge about policies – but also administrative systems, institutions, and ideas – moves from one context to another. While policy learning has been long-discussed as a social, context-dependent, non-linear process (Bennett & Howlett, 1992), policy transfer is critiqued for its rational framework (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2012; Evans, 2009). Taking cues from geography, alternative theories have emerged. ‘Policy mobilities’ underscores aspects of power, politics, and relations in the socially-constructed movement of policy knowledge (Peck & Theodore, 2010). However, the role of learning in transport policy change persistently puzzles transport researchers (Marsden & Stead, 2011).

The questions of how actors learn or how policy actually transfers are less developed, especially in the transport domain (Glaser et al., 2019; Marsden & Stead, 2011). Commonly, actors learn about “best practice” policy by traveling to places that are or have historically been frontrunners – through study visits, conferences, official visits, etc. These places are crucial “sites of encounter, persuasion, and motivation” (Temenos & McCann, 2013, p. 346), where interaction between actors is theorized to result in a “shared experience of learning” (Stone, 2004, p. 559). Policy scholars generally agree that such experience is important in learning and that “acquiring experience about the working of a program in its national context is an essential step in lesson-drawing” (Rose, 1993). Though recognized as instrumental in some transport policy transfer research (i.e., Attard & Enoch, 2011; Ma, 2017; Pojani & Stead, 2015), empirics and analyses of specific activities, experiences, and
interactions during such visits – and the relative effects of these variables – are left unexplored. In other words, how does the “site of transfer” contribute to learning (Hudson & Kim, 2014)?

To address these gaps, the question guiding for this paper is how do professionals involved in transportation policy transfer learn? To do so, we explore a particular phase of the learning process, the acquisition of knowledge, using a specific case of an international conference which intends to advance learning, sharing and transferring of “good cycling policies.” While the conference incorporated many traditional conference attributes (i.e., plenary sessions and social events), it also offered a point of difference for the participants: the conference took place in the Netherlands, a country renowned for high cycling rates, around 27% of all trips by bicycle (Harms & Kansen, 2018), and sought after for policy advice due to their “success.” Cycling for transport (as opposed to leisure or sport) has accumulated attention in recent years, as a technology and mode with environmental and social benefits (Krizek, 2018; te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017). Knowledge on how to increase cycling levels generally focuses on improving cycling infrastructure and programs to increase participation (Buehler & Dill, 2016; Pucher et al., 2011). However, cycling rates in most cities remain very low, indicating a disconnect between knowledge accumulation and application (see Kearns et al., 2019).

This paper contributes to emerging knowledge on the transfer of cycling policy, especially from a “matured” cycling environment anointed with “best practice” status. By combining a conference participant survey (n = 293) and ethnographic observation, our empirics also contribute to the dearth of studies that engage with actors “on-the-ground”. Finally, we employ seminal theories from education and cognitive psychology to contextualize policy learning experiences. In doing so, the paper expands interdisciplinary work to test new frameworks and generate new insights and pathways for future investigation.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we embed this research into (policy) learning literature, specifically addressing conferences, with contributions from policy mobilities. We argue that sensory, spatial, and social dimensions
involved in the policy learning process require more attention. Drawing from cognitive psychology and education literature, we then conceptualize conference learning using theories of *situated learning* and *embodied knowledge*. Subsequently, we present an overview of the case and describe our research design. After presenting the results, we discuss implications for practice and research.

### 4.2 Conceptualizing conferences: venues for situated (policy) learning

Conference attendance is a fact of the contemporary knowledge economy. Any transport professional or academic is well-aware of the many conferences in the field, including the Transportation Research Board’s (TRB) Annual Meeting, with over 14,000 participants in 2020. While conferences come in different forms and with varying objectives, audiences, and identities, their underlying aim is “professional development” – not only the acquisition of facts and information related to a particular profession, topic, or discipline, but also to establish and foster relationships in that arena (Wiessner et al., 2008). Literature on conferences has only emerged relatively recently, and mostly in the domain of human resources and business management (for example, see Garud, 2008; Wiessner et al., 2008). Despite their omnipresence, and a robust, supporting industry, theoretical or empirical development of conference learning, even within these domains, remains scarce (Andersen, 2015).

Learning is an elusive concept with regards to the search and movement of policy ideas, instruments, or knowledge from one place to another. Theoretical approaches to learning vary subtly, but all delineate “an improved understanding of cause-and-effect relationships in the light of experience” (Meseguer, 2006, p. 38). Within policy studies, conferences are theorized as “sources of learning” (Evans & Davies, 1999, p. 381) and as mechanisms for the movement of ideas and policies (Cook & Ward, 2012). These are places where policy actors build trusted relationships (McCann, 2010) and establish or maintain networks (Stone, 2012). Within transport research, conferences (and study tours) are recognized as instrumental in policy learning (Attard & Enoch, 2011; Bok, 2015; Pojani & Stead, 2015) as they offer opportunities to uncover best practices (Macmillen & Stead, 2014) and to build “consensus and influence public opinion” (Attard & Enoch, 2011, p. 550). However, generally, differentiations between conferences and other learning settings (i.e., study visits),
empirics of activities, experiences, and social interactions, and other mechanisms of individual and group travel, are left unexplored.

Although not specifically examining learning nor transport policy, only three papers examine the role conferences play in mobilizing and promoting best practice policy (see Andersson & Cook, 2019; Cook & Ward, 2012; Temenos, 2016). Cook & Ward’s (2012) theoretical contribution provides a framework for how conferences contribute to the movement of policies. First, conferences act as “informational infrastructures” that ephemerally assemble and facilitate the movement of policies, especially of “best practices”, through the dissemination of information. Second, “transfer agents” bring form and legitimacy to policy models promoted at the conference. Third, face-to-face interaction serves as a central mechanism for policy learning.

We build on this framework to include a fourth element: the situated and embodied experience. In situated learning theory, developed by Lave & Wenger (1991), learning is foremost a social process in a situated social and physical environment. In this view, learning is not separated from the world, but rather occurs within a complex dynamic of actors, actions, and situations. Informed by cognitive psychology and earlier education theories, activities form the basis of situated learning and thus the experiential aspect of immersing oneself and one’s physical body in the activity. Human cognition, where memory and learning take root, materializes from the body’s interaction with the social and physical environment (Wilson, 2002). These interactions produce emotional, somatic, and motor responses, which are stored in long-term memory. Building up a repertoire of sensorimotor experiences – and memories – can produce, over time, “embodied knowledge” and has been shown a powerful force for learning (Skulmowski & Rey, 2018; Wilson, 2002). Reflection on these experiences, through shared dialogue and negotiation within a community, creates collective knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990).

For this case, we employ the above perspectives to examine learning dimensions of this conference. Our intention here is not to educate the reader in theory, which would involve a lengthier chapter; rather, we outline salient features of situated learning theory that give structure to and expand our
understanding of policy learning experiences and consider mechanisms of the process.

Four elements of situated learning are: content, context, community, and participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These elements tend to overlap in many ways. Content derives from the facts of the lessons taught, usually through auditory and visual media. Lessons surrounding the content demonstrate the problem-solving nature of learning and therefore are application- or activity-based. The lessons are embedded in a broader context – the time, place, situation, but also values, environment, and behaviors. Learners share experiences and deepen the learning through reflection, dialogue, interpretation, and negotiation within a community. (This element is expanded in Wenger's 1998 theory of Community of Practice.) Finally, participation represents not only the exchange of ideas and reflections within the community but also the immersion of oneself in the activity or the experience, which allows for co-production of knowledge.

The potential role that conferences might play in the type of social learning system described above becomes quite clear. In this paper, we draw on these perspectives to discuss the unique case at hand: a conference on cycling in one of the “cycling capitals” of the world.

### 4.3 Learning from the Dutch and the experience of cycling

Some scholars suggest that the destination is particularly meaningful for policy learning, mostly due to the destination’s historic success with policy change – for example, Bogota for bus rapid transit (Montero, 2017) and London for road pricing schemes (Attard & Enoch, 2011). The Dutch have been sought for their expertise a range of planning issues, including land use planning (Thomas & Bertolini, 2015) and water management (Hasan et al., 2020). While research has deemed some Dutch cycling policies as “irresistible” (Pucher & Buehler, 2008) and an element of international interest (Pojani & Stead, 2015), Dutch cycling has garnered surprisingly limited empirical attention in the policy learning or policy transfer literature (Glaser et al., 2020a).

Since the 1980’s, many cities in the Netherlands have dedicated policy efforts to transport and land- use systems that cater to multimodal transportation and
accessibility (Bertolini & le Clercq, 2003), especially cycling (Pucher & Buehler, 2008). Around 27% of all journeys in the Netherlands are taken by bicycle; this figure rises to 66% of all trips in certain neighborhoods of Amsterdam (Harms et al, 2014). For any professional working on transport-related issues in, for example, the US – where bicycle mode share (as measured by commuting trips only) peaks at 4% in Minneapolis and 6% in Portland (Pucher et al., 2011) – Dutch cycling trends demonstrate astounding differences.

In some practitioner circles ‘learning from the Dutch’ about cycling is a well-worn strategy. Relying on Dutch policy advice has a strong history and is supported by Dutch cities, international governments, consultancies, and international networks (i.e., European Cyclists’ Federation (ECF), European Commission’s Horizon 2020 and CIVITAS projects). A regular feature of these projects and networks includes “study tours” or official visits to the Netherlands, where Dutch cycling policy and infrastructure design are main topics. Participants also often ride bicycles themselves, either alone or more commonly in small groups (Glaser et al., 2020a). Although these projects are well-funded and study tours or visits are resource-intensive, little empirical research has gleaned their impact (Blake et al., 2020).

The experience of cycling as a form of everyday transport is emerging as a particularly unique experience, as it falls between driving and walking, a logic with repercussions on traffic and urban design (Forsyth & Krizek, 2011; Hamilton-Baillie, 2008; Liu et al., 2021). Cycling represents an interaction between built-environment characteristics, often designed “from above,” and social performances “from below” (Jensen, 2013). Others argue that the benefits of scaling up cycling include its potential to enhance emotional well-being (Krizek, 2018) and social capital (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017). One reason for this is that cycling is an “embodied” experience (Spinney, 2009; Vivanco, 2013), and as such, all senses and the body itself are actively used to negotiate with others in the public domain (see Van Duppen & Spierings, 2013, p. 235 for extensive discussion).

With the perspectives above, we argue that the social, spatial, and sensory experiences of cycling are important factors in the process of policy learning
around cycling policy (Glaser et al., 2020a). We suggest here that the situated and embodied components of cycling in a “matured” cycling environment offer a specific and unique experience for learning about cycling policy.

4.4 Research design and data collection

Our main research question is how do those involved in transportation policy transfer learn? To operationalize this question, we divide it into two sub-questions:

(a) What learning activities do conference participants engage in?
(b) How does the learning setting play a role in participant learning?

Due to the distinctive circumstances of the conference described above (and elaborated further in subsequent sections), we employ a mixed-method unique case study research design. An abundance of research exploring policy learning uses ex-post or retrospective research designs, often centered on qualitative interviews. In answering our questions, we pivot to an ethnographic “following” approach (Wood, 2016) in order to intentionally focus on mechanisms of knowledge acquisition. A descriptive, single-case approach allows for in-depth analysis of human and social behaviors embedded in a certain context and provides insights into behaviors and processes (Lewis-Beck et al., 2003; Yin, 2003). Our unit of analysis is a unique event, where we investigate the activities and experiences of participants embedded in the conference and its environs (Arnhem and Nijmegen, The Netherlands).

In order to explore the first sub-research question, we employ a questionnaire from conference delegates (n = 293). Working in tandem with European Cyclists’ Federation (ECF) conference staff and previous evaluations, a series of questions (see Appendix A) were added to a self-administered conference evaluation instrument. Our additional questions assessed personal mobility habits; individual practices of learning about cycling-related policies and practices; conference experience and session attendance. A random sampling technique was used on the final day of the conference, and eight conference staff plus one researcher distributed 500 paper-versions of the questionnaire to conference participants. A replicated online version was disseminated for additional participation (available for 30 days after the conference). A cover letter in both paper and online versions detailed the aims of the questionnaire and study, researcher contact information, confidentiality and anonymity, and ethics of the study. Measurable responses were ranked on a 4-point Likert Scale and analyzed using Excel.¹ Open-ended questions were collated and coded for content themes and patterns.
To investigate the second sub-research question, about 50 hours of intensive ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by the main author, to investigate how conference conditions contributed to situated and embodied learning. Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology and sociology, aiming to discover, uncover and represent “how people make sense of the world” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 2). Ethnography has been used in other transportation studies, especially in geography (Sheller & Urry, 2016), including cycling (Bonham & Wilson, 2012; McIlvenny, 2015; Spinney, 2011; Van Duppen & Spierings, 2013). Such a “following” or “tracing” approach has been used elsewhere in transportation policy learning case studies (Bok, 2015; Ma, 2017; Montero, 2017; Wood, 2015).

To provide structure to our observations, situated learning theory was tested. One reason for this was to define elements of the learning process, especially those sensitive to experience and context. For this, the theoretical descriptions of the theory (as previously described) provided a framework for observational focus. Another reason was curiosity for theoretical experimentation and diversification. While educational theories have been used to analyze policy learning (Dunlop, 2009), situated learning seemed especially appropriate for this case, where the experiential component was relevant.

Semi-structured, direct- and participant-observation took place throughout the conference (i.e., indoor and outdoor sessions, coffee and lunch breaks, programmed social events), documented using field notes, with guidance from (Yin, 2003) and permission obtained from ECF. Conference materials (including on-line materials) were included. A case protocol supported the observation data collection (Appendix B) by outlining critical tasks and substantive questions concerning the research (Yin, 2003). While no single approach can provide guidance here, the situated and embodied experience of the conference participants was examined by observing sensorimotor, somatic, and social interaction. As such, of particular relevance was movement, emotion, and dialogue.

For the present study, the researcher maintained a covert role as a conference participant. The overlapping space of researcher-participant was clear, and as an ‘insider’ with ‘access’, it was not a neutral position. In this way, this study has been a reciprocal learning process, both for the subjects in this case as well
as the researcher. Ethical considerations of covert data collection methods were gauged. The social phenomena under investigation are not characteristic of ‘sensitive’ human activity and behaviors (i.e., vulnerable populations or stigmatized, deviant, or secretive behaviors). Additionally, the unique contribution of the fieldwork, yielding findings which were rich and contextualized, may have been compromised by overt identity.

### 4.5 The case of Velo-City 2017

The Velo-City conference series began in 1980, and as an annual conference in 2010. The conference aspires to “encourage cycling as part of daily transport and recreation” and to “enrich and inspire” the delegates who attend (Velo-City, 2017). As with many conferences in transportation and mobility, Velo City possesses a particular identity; it is not sold to particular practitioner type or audience, such as only researchers or only consultants, rather it aims to “bring together the global cycling community” (Velo-City, 2017). As such, certain expectations of participants might center around this unique opportunity to interact with a wide variety of individuals sharing interest in the topic.

Organized by the ECF, the series rotates between European and global locations every year; ECF receives bids from cities wishing to host the event. Arnhem-Nijmegen won the 2017 Velo-City bid and represented the first conference in its history to take place in the Netherlands, a country well-known for its high rates of cycling, as previously discussed. (Comparatively, Velo-City 2016 was in Taipei and 2018 in Rio de Janeiro, both cities with substantially reduced cycling mode shares than the Netherlands.) The region of Arnhem-Nijmegen consists of two cities, 15 km apart, connected by regional (rail) transportation system as well as a “fast cycle route” – dedicated and separated bicycle infrastructure. Velo-City called the area “dynamic, innovative” and the “perfect role model for urban areas across the world” (Velo-City, 2017). The 2017 theme and motto, “The Freedom of Cycling,” urged participants to “experience a sense of freedom” while cycling. To encourage such experience, conference admission included access to a typical, but conspicuously brightly-colored, upright Dutch bicycle for personal use throughout the duration of the conference.

The conference occurred over four days (June 2017), in three separate buildings plus a large “Expo” tent with companies from the bicycle industry and consulting. On
three days, 22 different sessions overlapped between 9am and 6pm. The fourth day, Thursday, offered 43 sessions. Indoor session formats were diverse: traditional ‘plenary’ lectures with 1-3 “keynote” speakers presenting individually to the entire conference delegation; panel and round-table discussions where 3-6 people, often positioned as ‘experts,’ presented on a pre-determined topic; ‘pecha-kucha,’ where 6-7 speakers each give a brief, timed presentation; and also ‘speed dating’ where a larger number of speakers exchange with participants in a line-up with the goal of hearing from “as many contributors as possible”.

Indoor programming was complemented with outdoor and “mobile” sessions, with guided bicycle tours as the main feature. Three “master classes” offered a “deeper,” more “personal session,” and were also led by Dutch practitioners positioned as “an expert on a particular topic.” In these outdoor group sessions, participants were guided by bike on certain pre-planned routes with several stops along the way in order to, for example, “experience some highlights of cycling infrastructure in Nijmegen,” or to “see the enormous amounts of bicycles at the station” or even, as a special event, to “be an Amsterdamer for a day.”

4.6 Results

Overview of questionnaire respondents

A total of 317 unique respondents delivered questionnaires (165 on-line and 152 in-person). Some 24 surveys were removed due to excessive nonresponse (more than 50% of the items were blank) leaving 151 on-line, and 142 in-person (293 total). Table 4.1 reports statistics on gender, age, profession, and years of career experience. The impressively diverse sample included 46 countries, with most-represented as Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Australia, the UK, and the USA.

The remaining section corresponds to the two research questions. First, we summarize results from the questionnaire (what learning activities do conference participants engage in?). Thereafter, we delve in to the ethnographic fieldwork to examine the second question (how does the learning setting play a role in participant learning).
### Table 4.1 Overview of respondent demographics (N=293)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Survey Sample (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current residence</strong></td>
<td>Europe (The Netherlands)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe (other)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USA/Canada</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia/New Zealand</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age range</strong></td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66+</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>High school (or less)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professions</strong></td>
<td>Civil servants</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transport advocates</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic (staff)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic (student)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career experience</strong></td>
<td>0-5 years</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>28</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: compiled by author
What learning activities do conference participants engage in?

Our questionnaire bestowed key insights into how transport professionals who work on cycling issues learn about cycling in general. Participation in conferences and study tours were most prevalent but with lower frequency than professional network groups. That is, 77% of respondents attended at least one conference (other than Velo-City 2017) in the last year (40% a couple times in the last year and for 9% this was their first conference); 69% of respondents (n=290) had participated in at least one study tour (domestic or international) on cycling in the last year (38% a couple times in the last year, and 9% never). Additionally, about a quarter of respondents use network groups, professional manuals, and/or audiovisual material on a monthly basis – and about half of respondents use sources from the internet on a weekly basis.

Among reasons for attending Velo-City, 43% of respondents were especially attracted to experiential aspects, such as “hands-on experience” and “outdoor sessions.” Of the 53 non-Dutch respondents who had also never visited the Netherlands before, 23 specifically wrote-in their desire to “experience cycling in the Netherlands.” One-fifth of respondents were drawn to social elements, such as meeting new contacts and catching up with existing contacts. Only 8% were keen to receive feedback on their work and 12% to present their own work.

Participation in conference activities (both indoor and outdoor) was uneven and shows preference for certain kinds of sessions. 72% of respondents attended 3–5 indoor sessions per day (9% attended 6–10 sessions). These results indicate that most delegates likely did not attend sessions for their full-length and likely jumped from one session to another. Plenary lectures were most attended, whereas “speed-dating” sessions were least attended (73% did not attend).

Additionally, most participants partook in outdoor cycling activities: 56% participated in at least one guided bike tour per day (18% more than 3 tours per day). Conversely, 44% did not participate in any programmed cycling activities. Nevertheless, 85% reported bicycling alone every day during the conference and 60% reported bicycling alone for more than 15 minutes every day.
How does the learning setting play a role in participant learning?

With the ethnographic fieldwork, we explore how the conference – situated in the Netherlands – played a role in participant learning. Our goal here is not to systematically evaluate learning efficacy. We use situated learning theory and the framework by Cook & Ward (2012) to give structure and depth to these observations.

Face-to-face, social and mobile connections

Social interaction seemed shaped by the conference spaces and programming, though it is unclear whether or not this was deliberately designed. There were striking differences in opportunities for social interaction between the indoor sessions, informal socializing, and outdoor cycling tours (see Box 1). In most indoor sessions, participants were silent, stationary (sitting or some standing in the back of the room) and besides the occasional joke, facial expressions were neutral or intent. During presentations, members of the audience sometimes listened or took notes, many only partially engaged, or were seen coming and going. Moderators of the session took one or two questions from audience, to which presenters briefly responded. In cases observed, however, the moderator limited further debate, explanation, or engagement.

Box 1: Examples of differences in social, spatial and sensory learning at Velo-City 2017

The above three images convey Velo-City’s varied opportunities for social, spatial and sensory learning. Figure 1 shows an indoor session with participants’ varied levels of engagement and limited social interaction. Figure 2 shows the informal space of the conference hall foyer, where opportunity for inadvertent and serendipitous face-to-face interaction occurred. Contrasting to the first photos, Figure 3 shows participants of an outdoor bicycle tour. The guide (in high visibility vest) and a participant are having a conversation while cycling on a separated bicycle path.

Images with permission from European Cyclists’ Federation
Comparatively, high levels of social interaction occurred during informal spaces and in-between formal programming – lunch and coffee breaks, random encounters between participants such as to and from conference locations, on public transport, at common accommodations, and, notably, while cycling. Throughout each day, participants were observed in the main gathering reception room greeting, embracing, shaking hands with each other, often with elated expressions and high spirits. Many delegates used these moments as opportunities for processing information from sessions with those from their professional networks. Others used this time to establish new relationships. Yet others could be seen alone, taking notes, working on laptops or other devices, or reading through the program. Although alone, placing themselves in the common area created an open invitation for social interaction.

The bicycle itself also acted as a sensorimotor tool to mediate the material and immaterial, and to bridge social encounters. Outside the conference hall, pairs and small groups of participants were leaning on or touching “their” bicycles. In some instances, pairs of participants were in road space or on sidewalks, straddling their bicycles, facing one another and talking, as if they had unexpectedly met. Others were observed deciding to spontaneously cycle together to a particular site in Nijmegen (such as ‘Het Groentje’ bicycle bridge or the Rijnwaalpad bicycle route), or to a social activity programmed by the conference. Such inadvertent and serendipitous social meetings by bike, such as those just described, were prevalent. On the final afternoon of the conference, observations were made at the bicycle drop-off area, where participants returned their conference bikes. While for some the return seemed unemotional, many others were heard lamenting the hand-off, indicating they will “miss” their Dutch bike.

**Applying ‘informational infrastructures’ in a shared, embodied experience**

The most prominent “informational infrastructures” available at Velo-City were accessed through conference sessions (Cook & Ward, 2012), with the showcasing of best practice policies. Despite abundant indoor programming, the opportunity to explore the Dutch bicycling landscape – alone, socially, and in a guided tour format – was positioned as a fundamentally unique
feature and activity of this conference. In this way, information from conference sessions could be readily applied to a personal experience, or also shared in a group. Situated learning theory suggests that this experiential aspect of learning might contribute to enhanced knowledge production. The combination of a sensorimotor and social experience allows for an engagement in an embodied practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 54). This practice promotes “knowing as an activity by specific people in specific circumstances” (p. 52). The circumstances in our case are indeed quite specific – a conference about cycling embedded in a highly matured cycling environment, with those who are also working on cycling issues.

This embodied experience is particularly relevant to this research and it was observed in two ways: (1) the planned, outdoor sessions and (2) through participants’ use of and interaction with their conference bicycle. The conference content extended into the geographical context through many ‘outdoor,’ ‘mobile’ sessions led by pre-selected Dutch ‘experts,’ as previously explained. We summarize observations from two outdoor sessions below.

In both observed outdoor cycling tours, participants appeared especially enthusiastic and positive, with visible cheerful emotions and facial expressions. Some individuals already knew each other by name or face and, before the session began, were recounting stories about their travel to the Netherlands, previous bike rides, and excitement about “being here” and the events or sessions to come. A couple participants were quietly examining, adjusting, or fiddling with their Dutch bicycle, such as the rear-tire locking mechanism, checking the air in the tires, ringing the bell, adjusting the seat height. When the session began, the Dutch guide gave an introduction and, in one tour, had participants introduce themselves as well. Many had prepared questions for the Dutch expert and when questions were asked at one of the many ‘stops’ along the way, participants listened intently, some taking notes and nearly all taking photos. Photos and videos were taken throughout the tours; often starting with one person, and then spreading to most. Often occurring while cycling, photos were taken of infrastructure (i.e., bike paths, sign-postings, traffic signals, intersections, bicycle racks), social moments (i.e., ‘selfies’ with other participants), and other ‘human infrastructure’ observed, such as children or young families cycling past the group.
Notably, a range of emotions and reactions to the sights and stories, and often shared through expressions and gestures, were observed during the tour. At times, exhilaration was noted (by speed, for instance, from descending a grade from a bridge). At other times, a visible contentedness or tranquility, for example, when we were crossing over a bridge and experienced a vista of landscape. Some individuals displayed signs of discomfort or stress, such as when we approached an unsignalized intersection busy with many other cyclists. In numerous instances, individuals recounted these fleeting feelings, observations, or emotions to each other. As the tours progressed, many participants began cycling side-by-side—sometimes with the guide—to discuss the sites, ask questions, sessions attended, and to compare and contrast experiences. At the end the tour, participants shook each other’s hands (some even embraced), and made plans to continue their discussions, continue riding (skipping sessions they planned to attend) or to attend a subsequent session or social activity together.

An embodied experience was also manifested through the incorporation of ‘Dutch cycling’ into their new, yet ephemeral lifestyle. Throughout the cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen, conference participants could be seen going about somewhat ‘typical’ Dutch lives using these bicycles: going to the grocery store, train station, to and from their accommodations. It could be said that they were ‘doing what the Dutch do’—and in this respect, the content was placed (albeit temporarily) in the lives of those learning. Here, the logic of ‘becoming a local’ could be seen in their participation of these rather mundane daily activities. We did not assess the extent to which participants reflected on the meaning of these activities, or how they applied knowledge from the conference to new situations. However, during the observed sessions, the act of cycling in Netherlands constituted a primary conversation topic among participants, sometimes as the subject of the conversation and other times as the passive activity. Overall, both the outdoor sessions and individual cycling experiences allowed participants to tangibly experience ‘Dutch cycling,’ to interpret and reflect on its meaning both individually and in the presence of a peer community, including Dutch ‘experts’.
Legitimacy of a distinctly Dutch experience

Beyond assembling this conference’s ‘informational infrastructures,’ as evidenced in the conference traditional indoor sessions, the performativity of various socio-cultural aspects of ‘Dutch cycling’ offered an important bridge to build legitimacy of the policy model at hand. The performative nature of this conference was palpable, beginning with opening celebration where the King and his staff rode typical Dutch bicycles from the conference venue through the city of Nijmegen – with local and national press riding alongside. The occasion brought about a ‘buzz’ of excitement, as displayed by the hundreds of (smiling) delegates taking photos as His Majesty rode away. There is indeed a long history of Dutch royalty being photographed by the press riding typical Dutch bicycles (see Kuipers, 2013). In this case, the act symbolically reinforced a specific ‘truth’ to the observing international delegates: yes, even the King of the Netherlands rides a bicycle.

The set-up of the conference sessions also clearly demonstrated a performative aspect that promoted Dutch expertise. Traditional lecture or panel sessions were held in auditoria that seated the audience on escalating levels facing a stage on which the ‘expert’ presenters spoke. Speakers were selected by the conference staff to “impart their expertise and knowledge” (Cook & Ward, 2012, p. 140). Specifically, Dutch cycling ‘experts,’ institutions, and organizations were given a prominent role as knowledge providers: 78% of all sessions (83 of 107) included at least one Dutch speaker, and 39% of all speakers were Dutch (199 of 307 speakers). These ‘transfer agents’ play a specific role in fostering the movement of ideas and policies by bringing legitimacy to the policy models they underline. They were also given a different status, as their names and headshots were in the conference program manual.

4.7 Limitations

A single-case research design naturally poses concerns regarding external validity and generalizability, due to the unique circumstances. Overlapping conference sessions constrained choices for where, when and whom to observe. As such, the experiences of all conference participants could not be represented. To enhance validity, a case study protocol (see Appendix B) was generated to guide fieldwork, using situated learning theory for structure. Since no previous work in this realm can provide guidance, we draw from similar studies ‘tracing’ behaviors and movements
in policy learning. Observations for evidence were triangulated with the questionnaire results.

To manage the validity of questionnaire items (including the wording), two researchers carefully constructed and piloted the questions. Self-selection bias could not be eliminated; the audience of the conference already represented a select group of individuals who chose to attend this particular conference. We also acknowledge issues arising from missing data. With 293 respondents, the total response rate remained around 21%, indicating many participants’ insights are left unknown. Additionally, the questionnaire results demonstrate items with non-response and missing values could contribute to biased findings.

4.8 Conclusions and discussion
The process of learning in transport policy change remains an ambiguous process with cryptic outcomes. Empirics on transportation policy learning often bundle learning process(es) within the pretense of policy transfer. The tendency to emphasize policy outcomes, while valuable, bypasses nuances of the learning process, such as the spaces and conditions in which learning takes place. In response to these gaps, the case presented here offered an opportunity to detach the learning and transfer processes, delimiting the empirics to a subset of the learning process, knowledge acquisition. We use a four-day international conference on cycling as a unique case study, as the conference was also situated in the Netherlands, a country with high rates of cycling. In this instance, our focus remains on unraveling the relationship between the learning spaces and learning mechanisms, not outcomes of the learning process.

The paper presents the Velo-City conference as a situated and embodied policy learning experience. Structure for our ethnographic observations derived from elements of situated learning theory, where learning is a social phenomenon and a function of sensory and spatial circumstances. This study extends the abundance of ex-post research by contributing much-needed observations of ‘on-the-ground’ experiences of transportation practitioners (Marsden & Reardon, 2017; Vigar, 2017). As such, our findings add depth to
the debate about learning in transport policy practice by unfurling contextual mechanisms and engaging with practitioners in “their world” – an ordinary practice of attending a conference in a unique location. While we still do not know what was learned, which would require a different research approach, we gained a sense of how practitioners have learned. As such, the findings contribute to better understanding of the conditions of learning experiences that could more effectively promote sustainable transport policies. In the paragraphs below, we highlight three implications of our findings that warrant further consideration in the learning and transfer of sustainable transport policies.

**Designing for embodied learning**

Our questionnaire findings indicate that conferences represent primary professional development venues (and study tours, secondary) among transportation professionals working on cycling. Although the Velo-City conference provided abundant cognitive-intellectual learning such as indoor sessions, the high level of this programming conflicted with needs for informal, face-to-face social interaction and experiential learning activities. For practitioners and conference organizers, this finding endorses the idea that new models of conferences be explored. Our findings valuably emphasize the social, sensory, and experiential factors of the conference, while cognitive and intellectual components are given less prominence.

However, these findings leave room for further understanding. Specifically, are there conditions of professional development opportunities that can deliberately foster embodied learning? The set-up of the conference was given, and which we did not design, and in this case, cycling, not coincidentally, offers a very specific potential for learning due to the experiential element, especially as it was embedded in a matured cycling context. It is perhaps not surprising that social elements were abundant, such as face-to-face and inadvertent encounters, also demonstrated by Montero (2017) to build trust and cohesion among a group of actors. However, the “group” in this case is an amalgamation of varied participants from numerous countries, who are also keenly aware of the policy model promoted by the conference. Therefore, we wonder, what is the role of individual motivation for learning?
The conference was also designed to give participants the opportunity to experience Dutch cycling (through the use of a Dutch bike and guided tours). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a majority of participants indeed cycled, alone and in groups. The bicycle acted as a sensorimotor transition instrument for spatial discovery, evoking emotion, and social connection. In this way, the conference assembled an opportunity for interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge, where experience and understanding constantly interact.

**Incorporating emotion into (policy) learning**

While emotions in urban planning practice have been studied (Ferreira, 2013; Hoch, 2006), the study of emotions in the practice of policy learning is less familiar but however relevant, especially for transport policy and practice. In a field that traditionally relies on cognitive objectivity, algorithmic predictions, and “indifference to the force of passion” (Hoch, 2006, p. 368), emotions and feelings are generally excluded, perhaps even discouraged. Throughout Velo-City, the sensory element was overwhelmingly apparent, especially on the bicycle rides and tours, and manifested through gestures, expressions, and sharing of positive and negative emotions. Here it is hard to ignore the powerful role of emotions, joy, and fun so evident throughout this case, and confirmed in other studies on cycling participation (i.e., Glaser et al., 2020a; Jensen, 2013; Nello-Deakin & Nikolaeva, 2020).

While the conference indeed designed some of these activities, their lived experience could not be pre-determined and therefore left much room for serendipity. These observed experiences, as discussed above, appeared to be a co-production of social, spatial and sensory conditions that the conference fostered. We wonder, then, in a situation such as the largest international conference on cycling, if a contradiction of cognitive-emotional pressures may arise: *am I allowed to have fun, to show emotion?*

Evidence we gathered indicated prevalent, strong, and a range of emotional responses to the embodied experience of cycling. Indeed, some of the most well-respected education theorists have produced convincing empirics demonstrating that positive feelings, such as attraction and interest, are linked with stronger learning outcomes, possibly due to their integration with long-
term memory (as previously discussed). In geography and policy studies, ‘being there’ or ‘seeing it’ is theorized to enhance learning. At least for cycling, our research suggests that ‘feeling it’ may also have a distinct place in the policy learning process. This invites further questions such as, do positive emotional experiences contribute shaping behaviors, mindsets, and future policy decisions?

**Acquiring and transferring cycling knowledge**

The transportation sector continues to experience intense pressure to develop its workforce due to rising demands from technology advances (Cronin & Alexander, 2019) and calls for policy reform away from auto-dominated planning traditions (Glaser et al., 2020). Skillsets are quickly evolving and transportation organizations are asked to find innovative ways to train staff that fit today’s needs (Cronin & Alexander, 2019). Planning for cycling, including design and policy, represents an emerging and growing practice for which learning is seen as crucial (Pucher & Buehler, 2017). However, low levels of expertise and support by mid-level managers and engineers are major barriers to implementing cycling policy objectives (Dill et al., 2017). The evidence presented from this case invites further exploration regarding what practitioner knowledge is valuable and how it is produced and transferred in an emerging practice.

In the case of Velo-City, our results imply that building cycling knowledge is more than “information exchange” (Pucher & Buehler, 2017, p. 689). Acquiring a technical breadth of understanding, such as design specifications or sample policy language, was less prominent than the acquisition of social and experiential knowledge. As with other conferences, connecting with peers and cultivating professional networks were sought-after activities. Where this case differed, however, was that the conference represented an opportunity to situate this knowledge and build skills not generally recognized in transport planning practice: the distinct legitimacy of attaining an authentic experience riding a bicycle on “best practice” bicycle infrastructure. We wonder, however, if the showcasing of Dutch (cycling) examples and the intermingling with particularly Dutch experts elevate legitimacy of policy models (Cook & Ward, 2012; Glaser et al., 2020). One question arising here would be: how was the Velo-City experience leveraged in subsequent policy work and how was it received?
Directions for future research

We close with a few points for future research in transport policy learning. As policy learning activities generally consist of groups, collective learning with a temporal dimension comes to the fore. Additional research examining to what extent learning occurs from conferences or study tours could further explain how this learning interacts with the transfer of policies. Also, the role of emotions in policy learning is ripe for further research, especially involving experiential learning, travel, and social dynamics. Finally, how transportation professionals incorporate that learning into their practice or how this type of learning compares to other related disciplines, such as urban planning, might further enlighten this area of study. Experimental, prospective, cohort, and longitudinal research designs, incorporating ethnographic work, might valuably attend to temporal dynamics that cross-sectional ‘snap-shots’ often miss. Finally, a willingness to experiment, to cross discipline lines, and to coalesce ideologies could further unravel intricacies of such learning processes.
References


Chapter 4


Notes

¹Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under agreement for this study. Data are available from the authors with the permission of the European Cycling Federation.

²Cycling side-by-side in the Netherlands has been discussed previously as a unique feature of Dutch cycling, owing to high quality infrastructure and a culture of cycling (Van Duppen & Spierings, 2013).