Chapter 2
Displacing Concepts of Social Learning and Democratic Citizenship

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> *The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. (Latour 2004, p. 246)*

Introduction

Some 15 years ago, the Leuven research group on social pedagogy developed the notion of social learning to make sense of participatory civic practices of groups and communities. Ever since, the concept of social learning has gained increasing attention as a framework to analyse the learning in social systems. Especially the notion of 'communities of practice' has largely contributed to the popularity of the social learning approach. Increasingly, however, social learning is considered to contribute to the different consensus seeking processes in the public domain. Our concept never intended to be a contribution to such kind of practices in the first place. Yet, the way it was received in the field had such unintended effects. Taking into consideration Gert Biesta's suggestion that democratic learning in public spaces often is connected with moments of interruption of the existing order, the consensus orientation of social learning can be questioned. It is this question that is central in my chapter. I explore the reasons why the concept of social learning has been received in that particular way and how it can be redefined so that it does (better) justice to the ideas and practices of 'democratic learning in public spaces'. Various authors from different disciplines have inspired me in this investigation. In particular Bruno Latour's work, and that of his collaborators, has been very helpful in redefining what democratic practices are about and how social learning could be related to that.

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The Ongoing Debate on Democratic Citizenship

The debate on responsible citizenship has been coming and going ever since democracy was established in our societies. Recently, we have again witnessed a return of issues of democratic and/or active citizenship on the agenda of policymakers, of social researchers, of journalists and other people concerned about the state of society. This definitely is a sign of the times, or an important signal that so-called democratic, advanced liberal societies, are dealing with important challenges that urge for a reassessment of concepts and practices of democratic participation. Various actors and authors put the citizenship issue on the agenda for a thousand reasons. Some wanted to strengthen the national identity, whilst others warned against that. Some were nervous about the growing individualisation in late modern society, fearing an erosion of the support base of social solidarity. Others noticed an increased risk of indifference, ethnocentrism and racism in a society becoming rapidly multicultural. In relation to this, the growing group of newcomers was put under pressure to accommodate better to the mainstream values and norms of 'good citizenship' in our societies. Still others pointed to the welfare beneficiaries opting out of active commitment for society, thereby putting the welfare system under pressure. Furthermore, dynamics of globalisation were thought to be weakening the nation state and consequently fragmenting citizenry. There was also a variety of observations about the growing complexities of the social, cultural and economic conditions we live in today, creating unpredictability, ambivalence and insecurity. Some other critics began to openly disapprove of the liberal morals of the 68 generation in family life, education and the media which had allegedly undermined the traditional values and norms of good citizenship (see Furedi 2009; Dalrymple 2010). Finally, still other observers consider the increasing impact of market mechanisms on social and political life as an important reason for the indifference of citizens to public matters and the erosion of democratic practices.

This incomplete list gives some evidence of the multiple reasons and arguments pointing to the alleged problem of citizenship-at-risk and/or democracy-at-risk. In line with this, different conservative and progressive remedies have been developed to restore or renew practices of active and democratic citizenship and of political participation. Various 'activation' strategies have been put forward to reintegrate unemployed people into the labour market (see Weil et al. 2005). Several initiatives of co-governance have been developed by authorities on different levels to allow ordinary citizens to engage more actively in policies and political decision-making (Holford and van der Veen 2006). These observations elucidate the intensive debate among those who are concerned about the future of democratic and civic life. It is also evident that it is extremely difficult to conclude which argument has most validity. All arguments are rooted in specific worldviews, even in case of social researchers who base their reasoning on systematic empirical observations. Therefore, it is important to get the debate going and to try and respond seriously to the old and new arguments. Basically, democracy is about engaging in collective debates, actions and decision-making on how to organise the complexities of our

public life. Hence, as Johnston (2005) mentions, citizenship is not simply about the exertion of rights and duties following the membership of a particular nation state (citizenship as status), but also about actively engaging in practices that contribute to these debates, actions and decision-making (citizenship as practice). In what follows, we will explain how we are trying to (re-)position ourselves with regard to the ongoing debate on democratic citizenship as a learning opportunity. This exploration will hopefully also clarify how, over time, concepts that had a particular meaning some decades ago have been displaced in line with the transformations that took place in society at large.

In recent times, there has been a particular interest in the learning dimension of groups and communities, as an alternative to individualised perspectives (see Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Fenwick 2000; Latour 2005a, b). We have contributed to such theories by introducing the concept of social learning, to begin with, in 1995 (Wildemeersch 1995). Originally, we defined it as 'the learning of groups, networks, communities and social systems, engaged in problem solving activities, in conditions that are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflicting and hard to predict' (Wildemeersch et al. 1997). This approach was inspired by the risk society analysis, describing late modern times as chronically insecure, unstable and turbulent, due to both the complexities of society and the ongoing ambition of various actors such as scientists, technologists, politicians, business people and social activists to influence or direct the living conditions (Beck 1994; Giddens 1991). This obsession with change and transformation characteristic of advanced liberal societies also results into unexpected and sometimes paradoxical outcomes producing so-called self-manufactured risks. As a response to these late modern conditions, practices of reflexivity came to the fore. Dealing with these insecure conditions supposes in this perspective the mobilisation of reflective and even reflexive expertise of multiple agents so as to arrive at informed decision-making in various social, economic, cultural and environmental domains.

Inspired by this analysis, we introduced the notion of 'social learning' both as a frame of reference for relevant research mainly in non-formal learning contexts and as an opportunity in real-life settings to (a) increase the reflective and reflexive capacities of individuals and collectives, (b) create conditions of democratic participation enabling a maximum mobilisation of capacities of different actors involved in transformation processes, (c) empower the group or the community in terms of increased cohesion and/or identification and (d) strengthen the social fabric through increased participation in civil society. Hence, the concept had both an analytical and a normative dimension. The analytical dimension mainly related to the attempt to integrate various concepts of experiential learning and, while doing so, give the social aspects of such learning processes a more prominent place. As such, the theory of social learning would offer a comprehensive framework for the study of learning in and of groups and communities. The normative dimension had to do with the expected positive outcomes to be achieved in case of appropriate social learning practices. We applied the concept, in both directions, in various research projects in different domains such as policy planning for youth work organisations, environmental policy planning and multi-stakeholder negotiations for environmental
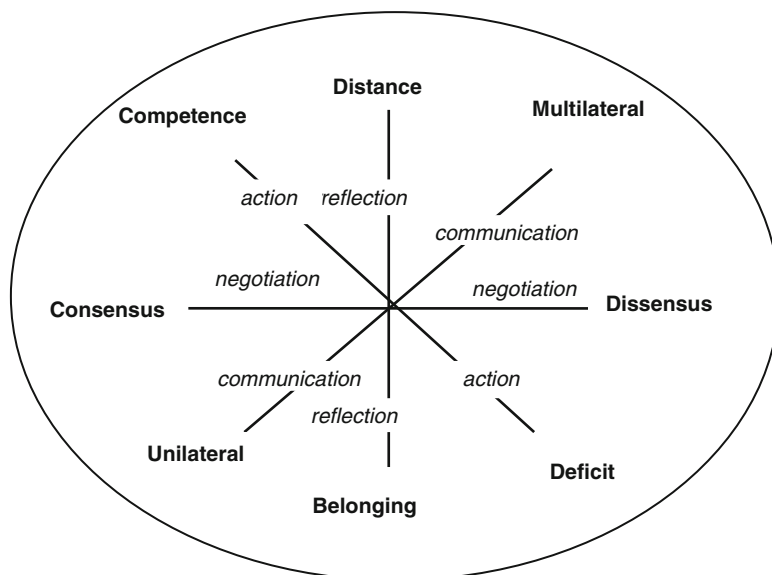
Fig. 2.1 Dimensions of social learning

protection and economic development. In all cases, we identified multiple actors engaging in informed actions, planning, collaborative and negotiation processes, thereby creating temporary communities of practice aimed at solving particular problems, at developing creative answers to challenges, at improving the living conditions, etc. We were careful not to let the normative dimension play too prominent a role in the theory by describing the process of social learning as a balancing act along tensions to be identified in every group or community engaging in problem-solving activities. We situated these tensions along the dimensions of action, reflection, communication and negotiation. In each dimension, we identified two opposite poles. In the action dimension, it was about 'need' versus 'competence', the reflection dimension opposed 'distance' to 'belonging', the communication dimension related to 'unilateral' and 'multilateral' poles and the negotiation dimension presented the tension of 'consensus' and 'dissensus'. The management of these tensions by the actors involved in problem-solving activities was identified as the central dynamics of the social learning process (Fig. 2.1).

Yet, the underlying normative/ethical dimension of this concept also related to the more or less explicit positive appreciation of the community orientation of social learning. Social learning was positioned as a positive contribution to the strengthening of communities. In addition, community building in its turn was considered a positive answer to processes of individualisation and fragmentation or the erosion of solidarity characteristic of late modern liberal societies. In other words, it was supposed to contribute to the renewal of active and democratic citizenship and the revitalisation of civil society. It was particularly this latter normative orientation of social learning which was criticised from different angles by various scholars.

We have brought these criticisms together under three types of critique on social learning. They will inspire us to refine our own position with respect to the social and political context in which it is supposed to operate.

The Communitarian Perspective Under Critique

Liberals consider the enlightenment principle that individuals free themselves from the shackles of ignorance a historical achievement of Western civilisation to be preserved at any cost. Therefore, they are worried and fear that the achievements of the enlightenment are not safe once and for all. Some liberal critics have argued that the social learning approach has a 'communitarian' flavour, which jeopardises some basic achievements and values of the enlightenment and modernity such as the individual autonomy and critical thinking.[1] Under suspicion of the liberals today are several tendencies which, for various reasons, point to the importance of communities rather than of individuals in the construction of the social and the political fabric. Indeed, a variety of agents ranging from conservative religious movements, over activists claiming the recognition of particular ethnic or cultural values and/or lifestyles, to social theorists criticising the erosion of social cohesion deplore the alleged loss of integrative bonds among the members of society. They have diverse arguments to emphasise the need of reinforcing all kinds of associative practices, which they consider 'the glue that holds society together' (Putnam 2000).

Both in social theory and in social policies and practices, we witness the revival of a communitarian approach, arguing that the identifications necessary for the constitution of society are constructed through practices of 'belonging' rather than through practices of 'autonomy'. Belonging, in this approach, is the result of the active social participation of people in groups or communities which form the linking pin between society at large and its individual members. It is argued that associations of citizens are the places where individuals learn to care about others, to value solidarity and to become responsible subjects and committed citizens. Therefore, the communitarians pay much attention to 'civil society', which is composed of multiple associations that constitute the 'social capital' of society at large (Field 2003). Civil society is considered a 'capital' because it is said to represent a vast reservoir of practices of social and civic integration. In this view, civic commitment is primarily based on practices of 'bonding' (Putnam 2000), creating experiences of 'sameness', of identification and belonging in communities or associations where people learn to transcend their private interests and end up sharing the same values and traditions and engage in more or less enduring relationships. Moreover,

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[1] The liberal critique to concept of the social learning was first formulated by Bas van Gent (formerly professor at the Leiden University in the Netherlands) at the occasion of our inaugural lecture (see Wildemeersch 1995). We have reflected on the argumentation ever since. An inspiring source which helped us to contextualise the former critique and to reconstruct the liberal, communitarian and radical positions clarified in this paper was Postma (2004).

under certain conditions, the ties of the members of such communities form the base for their social commitments in wider contexts. The emotional security that they derive from the membership of their community (or communities) enables them to link their communities with other ones, which do not necessarily have the same orientations or interests. These 'bridging' practices (Putnam, ibid), whereby people learn to take a distance from the references of their own communities, form the base for the constitution of civil society and for the identification with the so-called common good.

Social researchers such as Elchardus (2002) have argued, on the basis of extensive survey research, that especially people who have little or no sense of belonging, because they are alienated from associative forms of life and live their lives in relative isolation, express such negative and often bitter attitudes towards mainstream political decision-makers and/or newcomers in society. In line with these findings, not only politicians but also managers of the public broadcasting corporation, academics and leading figures in civil society have stimulated in many ways all kinds of events that bring people together and are expected to create a sense of belonging through active participation. In many communes in Flanders, for instance, local authorities now subsidise barbecues organised by street committees in order to foster warm communities.

So, in line with these communitarian arguments, social learning can be imagined as a process that contributes to the strengthening of civil society and counters processes of individualisation and fragmentation. As such, social learning can be considered both as a relevant framework to study these social phenomena and as a constructive practice, which contributes to the revitalisation of civil society. However, as we have shown, liberal critics are sceptical about the priority given to the community over the individual, also in the theory of social learning. And in addition to that, it is important to distinguish between 'community' and 'democracy'. In the communitarian view the ties of belonging are the best warranty for democratic commitment, whereas in a progressive liberal view – as we will see below – democracy is the result of opposing, often (ant)agonistic views on particular issues that divide, rather than unite citizens.

The Tyranny of Participation

As mentioned above, social learning is often related to participatory practices. Some authors who study such practices, especially in development contexts, have doubts about the emancipatory potential of such practices. Cook and Kothari (2004) even argue that participation has become a new tyranny. 'Power to the people' is no longer a slogan of radicals wanting to drastically change the power relationships in favour of the oppressed. It now has become an important instrument of marketeers, quality controllers, community developers, world bankers, politicians, managers, consultancy bureaus, etc. They all have introduced various direct democratic procedures, which should bring the voice of the citizen, the customer,

the student, the peasant and the audience to the fore. When some decades ago, direct participation was still a subversive wish, now participation is everywhere. According to the 'governmentality' perspective, drawing on the insights of the late Foucault, many of these participatory practices are part of a range of new technologies of persuasion, normalisation and inclusion (Rose 1999; Dean 1999; Quaghebeur 2006). Their 'hidden agenda' is that such participatory practices actually 'teach' the participants involved to define themselves as self-directed agents in an 'active society'. In line with this, participatory practices, which increasingly emerge in neo-managerial contexts, are considered by the governmentality scholars as a new kind of moral-ethical practice.

Our research on social learning concerning diverse participatory practices such as youth policy planning and multi-stakeholder collaboration on environmental issues seems to confirm partially some of these insights (Van Duffel et al. 2001; Wildemeersch 2007). Therefore, our initial enthusiasm about the social learning potential of participatory procedures has somewhat cooled down and resulted into a more nuanced picture of the pros and the cons of these collaborative practices. First, we observed that many of the participatory practices ended up with ambiguous results. Participation sometimes produces strong commitment of the actors involved, but also at other occasions, lots of refusal, resistance and sometimes resignation when eventually the procedures of collaboration turn out to be complex, bureaucratic and expert driven.

Similar reports come from the world of development projects in the South, where participatory planning is nowadays very mainstream and made concrete by procedures such as rapid rural appraisal, participatory rural appraisal and goal-oriented intervention planning. Originally, such methods were invented to reduce the power of technicians, experts, and policy makers and to create conditions of 'putting the first last' (Chambers 1997). However, the traditional experts are now being replaced by procedural experts who sometimes tend to 'impose' rather than 'give' the opportunity to participate (Tessier et al. 2004; Quaghebeur et al. 2004). Therefore, it is important to realise that participation, as a social learning process, is not necessarily equal to the application of techniques of co-governance. On the contrary, interesting and relevant social learning often comes about in situations where the actors actually do not (or no longer) engage in such formalised procedures and start questioning the rules of the game. In such cases, the social learning is actually 'confrontational' rather than 'consensual'. It is dividing rather than binding. It takes place in situations and contexts where the joint enterprise is interrupted rather than smoothly continued.

Interrupting the Joint Enterprise

This takes us to a third type of critique on participatory practices as social learning, which particularly problematises the consensual agenda implied in them. Especially the democracy theory of Mouffe (2005) has helped us to understand better the

current function of many participatory procedures including a variety of stakeholders in processes of co-governance. This political scientist makes a distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'. Politics is about creating consensus among different actors involved in a decision-making process, mainly by neglecting some of the basic conflicts, which often characterise practices of democratic decision-making. According to the author, various political observers claim that in advanced Western societies, we now have moved into an era where basic conflicts over major issues have increasingly been ruled out. In line with this, she firmly disagrees with authors such as Giddens (1994), who claim that we have today moved 'beyond left and right'. She further argues that politicians nowadays tend to reduce political problems to technical issues which can be resolved by experts. In this sense, our understanding of social learning as the mobilisation of problem-solving capacities available in communities of practice could be interpreted as an example of such technical reductionism of political questions. In line with this, Mouffe makes clear that today not all societal problems can be tackled with the help of the planning rationality of experts, as often is suggested. Many political issues remain basically conflict driven and therefore, politics is about dealing with conflicts rather than dealing with expert knowledge.

In opposition to the rationality of 'politics', Mouffe puts forward the notion of 'the political' by which she means that conflicts are not due to technical shortcomings that are best overcome by expertise, but are the reflection of old and new 'antagonisms' which govern our societies and our social and political life. As such, 'the political' is basically about dealing with conflicts. In the democratic arena, such conflicts are dealt with in a 'civilised' way, meaning that certain rules of conflict management are respected. In the context of 'the political', 'antagonisms' are turned into 'agonisms'. According to Mouffe, it is necessary for democratic practices to reclaim 'the political' by acknowledging the fact that 'difference' and 'agonisms' are constitutive to democracy. What makes democracy work are the 'differences' in opinions, in positions, in cultures and understandings which resist consensus and therefore, surface the painful oppositions which exist among the members of a community, a municipality or a nation. It is conflict or agonism which is the driving force behind democracy. The 'learning' which comes about in the context of conflicting democratic practices is not the learning connected with consensus-seeking, but the learning related to the resistance to accommodation, or the learning associated with the interruption of the joint enterprise. Or, as Biesta puts it: 'The moment of democracy is therefore not merely an *interruption* of the existing order, but an interruption that results in a *reconfiguration* of this order into one in which new ways of being and acting exist and new identities come into play' (Biesta 2011, p. 4).

It is not evident, however, to take conflict as the basis of democratic practice. It could sound like a counter-intuitive suggestion, even reinforcing the bitter oppositions in our societies, rather than appeasing them. The above-mentioned example of the politicians and the broadcasters mobilising civil society to restore social integration and social cohesion is a clear illustration of that. Yet, the problem with such an approach is that the reinforcement of the community dimension may actually not

result into a better integration of various communities but in a strengthening of the differences between the 'us' and the 'them', and a subsequent mutual stereotyping. Therefore, 'the community', especially when it refers to nostalgic interpretations of the togetherness and belonging, may not be the best space to experience 'democratic practices as learning opportunities'. They may rather function as exclusive and exclusionary spaces where the learning of citizenship ends up with the strengthening of the identities of those who are inside and negating the subjectivities of those who are outside.

Making 'Things' Public

So far, we have clarified in this chapter how our concept of social learning in participatory practices can be interpreted differently, depending on the theoretical perspective or on the context from which one observes democratic practices. However, the study of these different perspectives has taught us that at least in the context of advanced liberalism particular trends become dominant. Recently, Laessoe (2010) has presented a synthesis of these trends. He sees four major developments in this domain (ibid., pp. 49–50, our paraphrase):

- From a critical to a technical-functionalistic approach
- From a social mobilisation orientation to a consensus orientation
- From actions opposed to top-down strategies, to depoliticised local actions
- From a social learning approach, including broader contextual issues, to an approach limited to the concrete and decontextualised perspectives

Given these trends, the question arises how to position oneself, as a practitioner and as a researcher, vis-à-vis such developments. Should one try to modify such tendencies so that they become more genuinely democratic, or should one engage in more radical perspectives and democratic practices that 'interrupt the existing order' (see Biesta's introductory chapter in this book)? An inspiring answer to such questions has been given over the last 20 years by the French neo-pragmatist philosopher and scientist Bruno Latour, who has gained worldwide influence with his actor-network theory (2005a). In his work, he has developed models of research aimed both at interpreting some of the major issues we face today in our societies and at 'making such issues public' in view of stimulating democratic openness and debate, and solving the problems at hand. While doing so, he explicitly situates himself in the pragmatist tradition developed in the beginning of the twentieth century by the American philosopher John Dewey, who argued that democratic practices needed reinvention, due to the dramatic changes taking place in the society of those days.

Following Dewey, almost one century later, also Latour deals with the complexities of present-day society, and the limitations of the democratic and critical practices we have developed to handle them. He argues that the way our societies have dealt with challenges and problems, by making a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the experts or specialists who consider these matters in objective, detached

ways as 'matters of fact', and, on the other hand, the non-experts who are involved in these matters in subjective ways, informed by their own worries, histories, perspectives or self-interest, has become problematic. He argues that today, it is hard to make a clear distinction between 'matters of fact' and 'matters of concern'. 'It would imply, on the one hand, that there would be matters-of-fact which some enlightened people would have unmediated access to. On the other hand, disputable assertions would be practically worthless, useful only insofar they could feed the subjective passions of interested crowds. On the one side would be the truth and no mediation, no room for discussion on the other side would be opinions, many obscure intermediaries, perhaps some hecklings' (2005b, p. 9). Today, the possibility to identify transparent, unmediated and undisputable 'facts' has become increasingly rare. For many of the major challenges or crises that confront us this day, it is hard to distinguish between facts and moral, political or ideological judgements. All important matters that trouble or disturb us are subject to diverse interpretations, even among reputed scientists. 'For too long, objects have been wrongly portrayed as matters-of-fact. This is unfair to them, unfair to science, unfair to objectivity, unfair to experience' (ibid., p. 9).

To strengthen his argument, Latour goes back to the origins of democratic disputes in the European Middle Ages. He explains that in the Germanic tradition, the word 'Ding' referred both to 'a fact' and to 'a dispute'. 'Now, is it not extraordinary that the banal term we use for designating what is out there, unquestionably a thing, what lies out of any dispute, out of language, is also the oldest word we all have used to designate the oldest of the sites in which our ancestors did their dealing and tried to settle disputes' (Latour 2004, p. 233). Since originally in our language, the word object and the word 'gathering' were interconnected, Latour suggests that a return to this combination may be a fruitful way of handling many of the complex problems we face today. 'The point of reviving this old etymology is that we don't assemble because we agree, look alike, feel good, are socially compatible or wish to fuse together but because we are brought by divisive matters of concern into some neutral, isolated place in order to come to some sort of provisional makeshift (dis) agreement. If the *Ding* designates both those who assemble because they are concerned as well as what causes their concerns and divisions, it should become the centre of attention: *Back to Things!*' (Latour 2005b, p. 13).

In line with these observations, and in search of what he calls a new form of realism, he introduces the notion of 'object oriented democracy', which is a form of democracy that combines two forms of representation (Latour 2005b). One refers to ways to legitimately gather people around some issues. The other refers to the way the object of concern is represented to this gathering. 'But the two have to be taken together: *Who* is to be concerned; *What* is to be concerned' (ibid., p. 6). An important consequence of his understanding of this object-oriented democracy is that it indeed is not based on commonality but on difference. 'The general hypothesis is so simple that it might sound trivial – but being trivial might be part of what it is to become a 'realist' in politics. We might be more connected to each other by our worries, our matters of concern, the issues we care for, than by any other set of values, opinions, attitudes or principles' (ibid., p. 4).

Latour and his collaborators not only theoretically engage in forms of object-oriented democracy. They also design practical ways to investigate matters of concern and 'make them public' (see also Marres 2005). An example of such practices is the so-called hybrid forums that are set up to deal with controversial issues. These forums are hybrid 'because they are open spaces where groups can come together to discuss technical options involving the collective; hybrid because the groups involved and the spokespersons claiming to represent them are heterogeneous, including experts, politicians, technicians, and laypersons who consider themselves involved. They are also hybrid because the questions and problems taken up are addressed at different levels in a variety of domains …' (Callon et al. 2009). In their attempts to engage in such hybrid forums, the collaborators of Latour deal with a wide variety of matters of concern, such as the mad cow disease, HIV/AIDS, nano-technologies, GGOs, and global warming, which are all examples of issues characterised by radical uncertainty, where neither science and technology nor social and political actors have clear answers and where indeed processes of social learning may contribute to finding ways out (see also Finger and Asun 2001).

Interesting in this view on learning is that the traditional distinction between experts and laypersons fades away to a certain extent. Latour even goes so far as to say that everyone involved in these hybrid processes is somehow handicapped and needs crutches to deal with the challenges. This applies as well to the expert as to the layperson. And, as a consequence, the traditional opposition between expert and layperson is getting blurred. 'By fostering the unfolding of these explorations and learning processes, hybrid forums take part in a challenge, a partial challenge at least, to the two great typical divisions of our Western societies: the division that separates specialists and laypersons and the division that distances ordinary citizens from their institutional representatives. These distinctions, and the asymmetries they entail, are scrambled in hybrid forums' (Callon et al. 2009). The way these hybrid forums are conceived and constructed in practice is definitely a valuable source of inspiration to further elaborate our perspectives on social learning. Furthermore, Latour's actor-network theory includes many of the principles we have also dealt with in this chapter, such as learning to engage with ambivalence and insecurity, value conflict as a constructive part of democratic practice and the notion of 'displacement' (or translation) being a central concept to make sense of social learning (see also Crawford 2004).

In Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented the concept of social learning, such as we have developed it over the last 15 years, in the context of research dealing with issues that were considered complex, hard to predict and insecure. We connected this concept to democratic participatory practices in a way similar to Biesta's exploration of citizenship and democracy in the opening chapter of this book, where he distinguishes between the social dimension of citizenship and the political dimension. The social

dimension refers to the embedment of individuals in the social fabric, while the political dimension refers to the way they participate in public deliberation and decision-making. In our positioning of social learning in connection with citizenship and democracy, we have considered both the social and political dimensions of citizenship. We started from the observation that some critics of our concept of social learning classified our concept as 'communitarian' in the sense that it would foster uncritical identifications with homogenising collectivities. When dealing with this critique, we explored the concept of community and how communitarians linked it to theories of social integration and civil society. We explained how in that reasoning, (the learning of) democratic practice is paralleled to the identification with the joint enterprise of a community. In their turn, such communities are expected to strengthen the social fabric, while creating the framework for active, democratic citizenship, thereby reducing citizenship to its social dimension. We observed that this communitarian approach is based on the premise that democratic practices should overcome difference and, while establishing a common language and a common logic, should enable a consensus among the members of the communities and within civil society. This observation helped us to understand how many of the practices of social learning, which we studied in various contexts, eventually, lost their initial momentum because they were compressed by the consensus-seeking rationality of various policy approaches.

The argument of some political scientists and philosophers that democratic practice is not about creating consensus, but about dealing with difference, agony and disturbance, helped us to relocate social learning as a democratic practice in the context of public space. In doing so, the political dimension of social learning was emphasised. In this view, social learning as a democratic practice is inevitably located in so-called communities of strangers (Latour 2005b) or communities of those who have nothing in common (Lingis 1994; see also Biesta 2006). Such 'hybrid' communities emerge today in all kinds of places and spaces where people engage with matters of concern connected to controversial issues. What is new, however, is the insight that ambivalence and discontinuity are inevitable characteristics of the communities we engage in and that – for the sake of democracy – we will have to learn to deal with the strangeness and otherness of our partners in dialogue. Therefore, communities as locations of democratic practice always have a provisional and open character.

One of our ambitions in this chapter was to make clear that particular concepts may have different meanings in different discursive contexts. For instance, the notions of empowerment, of social integration or of civil society have no 'universal', abstract meaning. They can have quite different meanings according to the differential discourses in which they function. Moreover, concepts also get displaced (Schön 1963) or translated (Latour in Crawford 2004), because they may emerge in one particular discursive context and be moved towards another one. This displacement of concepts sometimes makes discussion and debate very difficult, because the interlocutors use the same words but, in doing so, refer to very different discourses. Now, by way of conclusion, one could say that notions such as social learning, democratic practice or active citizenship are particularly vulnerable to

such displacements because they are social constructions, which are ambiguous and multi-interpretive. Therefore, the mapping of how concepts are (re)located in their discursive contexts – or in the arenas where participants gather as strangers – is an important analytical activity with high relevance for the fields of practice and policy-making.

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