The Role of Participatory Evaluation in democratising education processes in the Public Administration: experiences from the Tuscany region

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About the area addressed

Education and democracy seem to go hand in hand in several respects. First of all, many modern constitutions associate education with citizenship rights. All citizens should have the best possible education, regardless of their background, and be able to contribute to society and participate in public life. The potential of e-learning to support this democratisation process is now a lively research topic, especially at international level [11,13].

Secondly, democratising education may also mean making it really universal, or that the system cannot just cater for the 'average pupil', it has to be good at dealing with those who are 'below' or 'above' the norm. Many schools have applied this kind of personalised teaching for years, tailoring the curriculum and teaching method to stretch and challenge all pupils, using mentoring, catch-up or out-of-hours schooling. ICTs – information and communication technologies - are also increasingly used to monitor pupil performance and to identify where additional intervention is needed.

Thirdly, especially e-learning and mobile learning are seen as new ways to enable life-long training and continuous professional improvement of people.

In this paper, we address the topic of 'democratising education' according to a different perspective, by referring to the potential role of 'the many' [10] – citizens, customers, ordinary people – in increasing by quantity and quality the level of education of 'the few' – administrators, law makers, civil servants and the like – that are committed to the management of the 'public thing'. This approach relates with a participatory evaluation of public decision-making and policy actions. Following Elliot Stern (quoted in [9]), by evaluation we intend "any activity that, throughout the planning and delivery of innovative programmes, enables those involved to learn and make judgements about the starting assumptions, implementation processes and outcomes of the innovation concerned". Rowe and Taylor [8] contend that "evaluation makes little sense unless it is understood as part of a learning process". A process that is obviously organisational, but can also be understood as the multiplier effect of a sum of individual feedbacks. It is our research question the extent to which the use of ICTs can enhance the efficacy and/or efficiency of this organisational learning in modern public administrations.

The Living Labs concept [6] is a recent innovation approach set forth in Northern Europe, with sound antecedents in the US [12], by which all stakeholders of a product, service or application do actively participate in its development process. These stakeholders can be public authorities, civic communities, SMEs and large industries, academia, content providers, individual people. The underlying R&D methodology enables innovation to be created and validated in a collaborative, multi-context, real-life environment, where the person is focused and monitored in all his/her social roles as (e.g.) a citizen, user, consumer or worker. This human-centric, experience-based perspective seemingly ensures a user-driven design and development of products, services or applications, but also user acceptance. The underlying aim is to reach a more sustainable innovation by taking benefit of ideas, experiences and knowledge of the people involved in the product, service or application 'consumption' with respect to their daily needs, in their every day lives, encompassing all their societal roles.

While seducing in principle, the argument of actually involving people in innovation, evaluation or simply decision making faces at least two theoretical and practical limitations, which are also familiar to the theorists of modern democracy.

The first one is the lack of scalability of any participatory solution. As James Fishkin [5] once stated: "The (real) problem of democratic reform is … how to bring people into the process under conditions where they can be engaged to think seriously and fully about public issues". However, this can be simply impossible to reach as the number of participants in public debates increases above a certain, very low threshold. Robert Dahl [2] showed this paradox with a back-of-the-envelope calculation: "if an association were to make one decision a day, allow ten hours a day for discussion, and permit each member just ten minutes – rather extreme assumptions … - then the association could not have more than sixty members" in order to allow everyone to have their say.

The second problem lies in the availability of relevant information for decision-making. Paradoxically, the advent of knowledge society has deprived people of a timely updated range of information sources, which has long been the dream of rational behaviourists, as information (and its relevance) evolves at greatest speed over time, and is made available at many heterogeneous sources. As a result, not only are people's decisions taken with limited access to relevant information, but for the same reason, they are also subject to change radically over time. This is a familiar concept to marketing experts, now used to talking about people's 'moods', and the best ways to cope with, or anticipate (drive?) them.[1]

It is (also) having this limitation in mind that almost forty years ago, Peter Drucker, the famous 'guru' of management, advocated [4] the building up of "an independent agency … independent of pressures from the executive as well as from the legislature" to play the role of 'performance auditor' for public administrations, that is, to convert people's expectations into policy goals and to compare with them the results obtained. While Drucker's idea of an agency has not taken place so far, modern regulation theories now admit in its place the establishment of rules, procedures and standards, helping to make governments more accountable for their performance towards the citizens. Some international comparisons (from OECD Puma to EU Sigma) show that the 'power of standards' can be used to elicit process reengineering, comparability and harmonisation of public administration practices. However, a limited attention has been given till now to change realised through managerial standards implementation.

In either case, what is also missing is an institutional framework ensuring that the results of citizens evaluation are taken onboard by the interested organisations. In terms of Robert Dahl's [3] conditions for democratic decision making, i.e.

1. Effective participation,
2. Equality in voting,
3. Gaining enlightened understanding,
4. Exercising final control over the agenda, and
5. Inclusion of all adults

we are asking for more consideration of efficacy and effectiveness of the selected evaluation process.

It is known since Sherry Arnstein's seminal work [1] that the development of participation in a selected context can reach various levels of granularity, including 'loose coupling' and rhetoric 'manipulation'. Moreover, Dahl himself admits that in the real world, it is very unlikely that every citizen can have equal opportunities to influence the policy agenda. While a unified and systematic approach to public performance evaluation is missing, it is an open question if the use of innovative concepts and tools for social and democratic dialogue can allow a more extensive participation of citizens/customers in the governance and accountability process.

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[1] Conversely, it has been noted that the recent rise of the so-called "*Web 2.0*" increasingly allows more 'connected citizens' unite in 'social networks', thus having the possibility to keep an adequate level of information and knowledge on public and other matters.

Experiences from the Tuscany e-Democracy laboratory

Tuscany is the fifth largest region in Italy (22,997 sq. Km.), with a total population of 3,547,604 in 2001. Wedged deeply like a triangle in the heart of Italy, it is a transitional area between the highly industrialized North, and the principally agricultural South. It stretches over the Western side of the Apennines and includes the islands of the Tuscan archipelago. Its Northern borders are clearly defined, less evident are the Eastern ones, crossing the ridge of the Tusco-Emilian Apennines and taking in the upper Val Tiberina. Still more uncertain are the South-Eastern and Southern borders – the so-called Tuscia, now in the Lazio region - that seem justified only for historical, linguistic and generally cultural reasons.

The population of Tuscany is not uniformly distributed: high-density areas sharply contrast with others where urban density is markedly lower than the national average. Its mountain or rural areas, especially after the Second World War, have suffered a population drain towards the industrialized areas or lowlands: the provinces of Grosseto, Siena and Arezzo have been the most affected ones. Currently, the population is heavily concentrated along the Tyrrhenian coastline – the so-called "Area Vasta" - and in the lower Valdarno, from Florence to Pisa, where density is of about 500 persons/sq.m and a concentration of ICT industries has given birth to the so-called "Arno Valley".

The standard of living in Tuscany is generally a little bit higher than the national average (also the unemployment rate is lower than national average), though there are some differences among inner areas. The total population employed was 1,437,000 in 2001, of which 54,000 in the agricultural sector, 492,000 in industry and 891,000 in other activities (services). In 2001, a very significant share of the population fell under the age categories 25-44 (1,067,056) and 45–65 (945,536) years old, with an elderliness ratio of 189,8%, quite higher than the national level.

The following picture[2] shows the performance of the Tuscan society in relation of the ICTs, and highlights a "trend in motion" towards an informed use of the web. Respondents seem to place a lot of trust in a further increase of Internet use; this expresses the awareness in the population of the innovative and constructive importance of this instrument. Values above the EU average[3] are found both in the attention to the web service and the search for more regional information on-line: this can also be explained by the intense tourism activity, which calls for on-line sponsorship of the tour operators, so as to guarantee year round incomers.

Tuscany is, indeed, one the Italian regions which are most active in e-Government projects. Apart from the State-funded initiatives in the area of ICTs, a good share of which belongs to the Tuscan Public Administration, it is worth to mention here the following:

- Circa 1995-now: Building up and maintenance of a region-wide telematic infrastructure, called RTRT (first example in Italy), linking all the main public entities of Tuscany and a significant representation of private sector (profit and no-profit);
- Circa 2001-now: Conception and implementation of the "e-Toscana" initiative (the Action Plan of Tuscany Regional Administration), including a "long list" of 50 specific projects for ICT development in the private sector, e-Government services deployment and e-Inclusion in the Regional Information Society, with an overall investment of more that 100 million €;
- Ongoing activities for dissemination of free and open source software and experimentation of broadband and other innovative infrastructure solutions.

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[2] Borrowed from *BISER (IST-2000-30187) Project - Benchmarking the Information Society: e-Europe Indicators for European Regions*, together with the related comments.
[3] The BISER average refers to 28 selected EU regions, thus is not representative for the whole EU territory in a statistical sense. However, it has been checked that the sample is very similar to the EU with regard to average values for key socio-demographic and business sector variables, respectively.
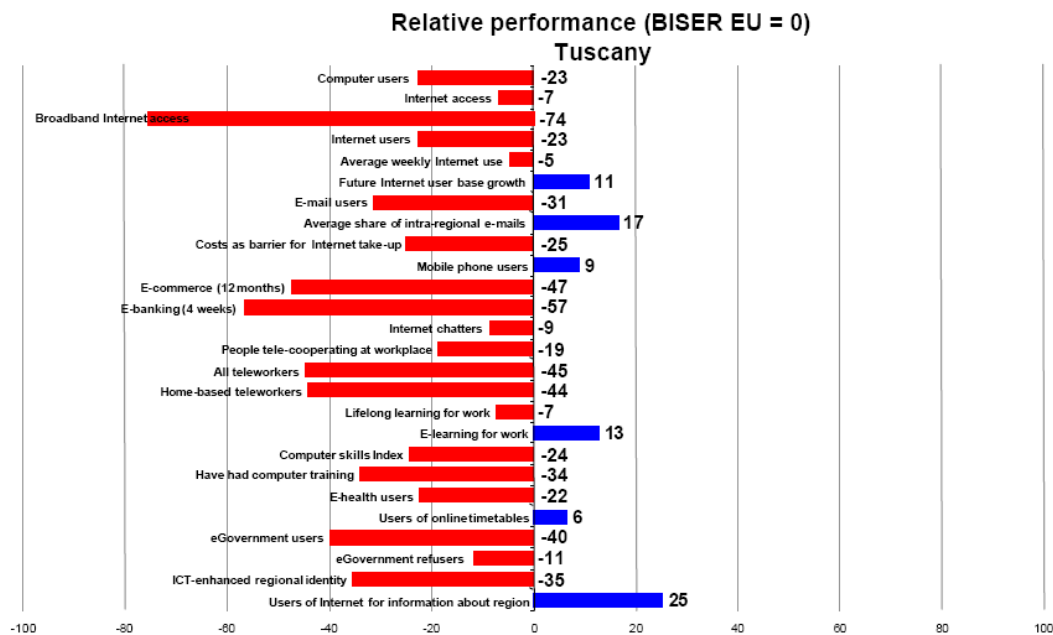
Figure 1: ICT indicators in Tuscany

Another very good example of public intervention in the field is the 5,7-million (€) investment plan funded by the Regional Administration over the past two years, in order to spread some 300 "PAAS"[4] within 38 Tuscan Municipalities, in cooperation with non profit entities and voluntary associations.

Each PAAS has been built with a financial contribution of 15k€ and is now up and running at least 12 hours a week (50% of time between 6pm-10pm, at least once on Saturdays or Sundays), under the supervision of an NGO and/or Municipality.

The latest statistical record available of the PAAS network (as of end of March 2006) is the following:[5]

- 255 access points running (299 forecasted)
- 306 associations involved (341 registered)
- 180 municipalities involved (192 forecasted)
- 7,692 registered users (15% below 14, 8% up to 18, 21% up to 25, 34% up to 40, 18% up to 65, 5% over)
- 44,356 accesses so far

In this specific instance, public intervention was motivated by the awareness of a delay accumulated by Tuscany with respect to its "competing regions" and of the opportunities that investments in the area of ICT could create both for citizens and businesses. However, with a 21st-century hardware and software installed at each PAAS, and an old tradition of meeting and teaming up in their off-duty activities, a side effect of this operation was to start looking at the Tuscan population as a potential testbed for an ICT-supported participatory legislation process.

Not surprisingly, the starting point was a proposal for institutional change. The Regional Cabinet, led by President Claudio Martini, appointed Mr. Agostino Fragai as delegated member to the reform of the political decision making and "cooperative governance system", with a specific orientation to citizens' involvement in the legislative process. In January and May 2006, two specific events were organised in Tuscany, to collect and discuss the international evidence on (e-)Participation in Europe and worldwide.

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[4] This acronym may be translated from Italian as "Point of free-of-charge, Assisted Access to internet Services".
[5] Source: Tuscany Regional Administration.

A specific website was created[6] with more than 100,000 hits in just a few months. More than 50 public meetings were held throughout the Tuscan territory, including focus groups and other forms of structured interactivity. The idea was to start the discussion around a draft regional law on citizens' participation, using a bottom up approach, in order to identify the core issues and the possible guidelines of this legislation effort, without starting from a predefined text, but rather recognizing the participation experiences on course in Tuscany. In parallel, a coordinating group was created at the Department for Public Administration of the National Government, with the presence of several Regions, to enlarge the discussion about the topic at a multilateral level.

On 18th November 2006 in Marina di Carrara, the Region held the second experience in Italy (after the City of Turin in September 2005) of electronic Town Meeting, a participatory method allowing involvement of large audiences, where the participants carry on a simultaneous discussion in small groups, individually expressing their opinions through an electronic polling system. Domain experts contribute to the process, stimulating reflection about the various issues at stake. The work sessions incorporate participatory planning techniques such as Open Space Technology and Focus Groups.

In a large pavilion of one of the most important exhibition areas of Tuscany, Carrara Fiere, almost 500 people – equally representative by gender, and belonging to all social and professional groups, including immigrants, religious minorities and policy makers – coming from the 10 provinces of the Region were gathered for one single day throughout three different working sessions:

1. how to improve citizens participation on a specific public project (e.g. participatory budget, urban planning, etc.);
2. how to manage the impact of major public works on the communities involved (similar to the French débats publics);
3. how to get more information on public policies and create a "culture of participation" within the Tuscan politics and society.

Fifty tables were set up, each seating ten people. Every table was equipped with a computer, connected to the others by means of a wireless network, and was presided over by a facilitator who conducted the discussions; each facilitator also had a remote control for voting.

Discussion on each subject of the three sessions was briefly introduced by several domain experts, and supported by a Discussion Guide circulated before the meeting. The participants in each table were allowed had some predefined time to discuss and send their comments to a central computer. The central group of experts (the "Theme Team") was in charge of summarizing the comments received and to send questions back to the groups for a final vote on each of them. Much of the day's organization was ensured by almost 100 volunteers who carried out not only some important logistical tasks such as reception and participants orientation, but also the delicate role of facilitators and members of the "Theme Team", thus constituting the supporting structure of the whole process of interaction.

This kind of public debate and consultation of individual citizens – the results of which can not be assessed until now – was motivated, among other things, by the need to improve the current, and already working in the Region, cooperative governance system going beyond the simple concertation and trying to take benefit of the long standing 'cultural' tradition of civic and political engagement in Tuscany. Activities of the electronic Town Meeting were disseminated through webcasting on a national TV channel (MTV) and the PAAS network mentioned above, to ensure the widest possible impact.

One year later, the electronic Town Meeting experience was replicated in the context of evaluation and priority setting of Regional Health policies. In the meantime, the Tuscany Law on Participation – first example in Europe of such a kind - was passed according to a draft prepared by the Cabinet and sent to the Regional Council in light of the proceedings of the 2006 trial.

However, the essence of this trial, to borrow the title of a book by James Surowiecki [10], is that in some cases "the many can be wiser than the few". Which cases? Certainly not those where some kind of "prior

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[6] See http://www.regione.toscana.it/partecipazione

selection" of the panel members has been made according to education, race, wealth or other discriminatory parameters. This would only amount to renew, in a more subtle way, the effects of James Madison's "mischiefs of faction". On the contrary, the selection made by the Tuscany Region was basically on a motivation basis, integrated with prior and parallel moments of training (by means of the Discussion Guide and the role of table's facilitators) to allow participants in the electronic Town Meeting a full knowledge of the 0rules of the game' and a real empowerment to democratically influence – through informed judgement, consensus and voting – the nature and the quality of the following legislative choices to be made by the Cabinet and the Council.

Conclusions

In this paper, we provided an insight from a theory of democracy perspective into the current, intense work being carried out by IT experts and scholars in the topic of organisational learning of public administrations. We discussed an original experience, now ongoing in the Region of Tuscany (in Central Italy), to show that an alternative pathway may exist for citizens' involvement in the evaluation of public sector performance, that is not undermining the fundamentals of representative democracy.

Our current standpoint is that in order to increase efficiency and efficacy of the participatory evaluation process, we should be looking for the best ways to:

- bridge the digital divide, so as to allow an increasing number of citizens to have access to the enabling resources for ICT enabled participation, thus overcoming the infrastructure and training gaps that still prevent the majority of people belonging to specific age groups or social classes to reach a fair and comparable degree of involvement in the Internet "community life" – compared with the youngest, or the most affluent, shares of population;
- let people converse, interact and "have their say", as it is through an open minded and transparent approach to 'the people's will' that new ideas, hints, opportunities for policy making can come up and the whole governance process can take benefit;
- keep citizens aware of the true dimension of issues at stake, so as to enable an informed judgement – not just the expression of a "wishful thinking" or worse, a contradictory yet binding statement.

Future research should assess whether the Living Labs paradigm can be helpful in consolidating the theoretical foundations for a citizens-focused, participatory performance measurement system that is coherent with the 'networked' configuration of modern public administration, based on the continuous interaction with other stakeholders, especially coming from the private sector.

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