

Metaphor, Model, and Museum: Reflections on the Art of Educational Policy Making

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In this paper, the author uses three concepts from the arts to prompt reflection on the artistic nature of educational policy making. The metaphor of humanity's quest for knowledge as depicted by Alexander Pope is combined with elements of a physical model and components of the Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec to highlight some characteristic truths about the policy process itself. The arts illuminate the nature of educational policy making as a unique creation, combining in harmonious tension elements of culture, technology, materials, form, function, and spirit. A formula or assembly line approach to either art or policy will result in nothing more than cheap imitation.

Dans cet article, l'auteure utilise trois concepts issus des arts pour promouvoir la réflexion sur la nature artistique des politiques éducationnelles. La métaphore de la quête de l'humanité pour la connaissance, telle qu'énoncée par Alexander Pope est jumelée aux éléments d'un modèle physique et aux composantes du Musée de la civilisation à Hull, en vue d'éclairer quelques vérités particulières au processus de la politique elle-même. Les arts éclairent la nature des politiques éducationnelles et en font une création unique en combinant harmonieusement des éléments de la culture, de la technologie, de la matière, de la forme, de la fonction et de l'esprit. Toute approche qui voudrait réduire, soit l'art, soit la mise en place de politiques éducationnelles, à une formule ou à une ligne de montage serait réductrice et rien de plus qu'une piètre imitation.

*A little knowledge is a dang'rous thing!
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain.
And drinking largely sobers us again.
Fir'd at first sight with what the Muse imparts,
In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,
While from the bounded level of our mind*

*Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind;
But more advanc'd, behold with strange surprise
New distant scenes of endless science rise!
So pleas'd at first the tow'ring Alps we try,
Mount o'er the vales, and seem to tread the sky,
Th'eternal snows appear already past,
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;
But, those attain'd, we tremble to survey
The growing labours of the lengthen'd way,
Th'increasing prospects tire our wand'ring eyes.
Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise.*
(Alexander Pope, 1711/1941)

Alexander Pope spoke wisely when he reminded us that a little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing. In the life-long endeavor of learning, the apparent success of most quests is, in reality, just a temporary stop. Wildavsky (1979) affirmed the transitory nature of policy making when he referred to policy as a "temporary resting place," (p. 83) perhaps better thought of as a scaffolding emphasizing the ongoing nature of education than as a framework permanently supporting the established education system.

In this essay the reader will not find new definitions of policy or additional attempts to probe its failure to deliver the significant changes in educational practice that one might anticipate. Here, educational policy is conceived as a less permanent, more fluid entity than is perhaps traditional. Taking as a starting point the notion of policy making as an art, the purpose of this paper is to prompt reflection about some of the artistic qualities of the process. A metaphor, a model, and a museum are used to suggest some of the fundamental artistic qualities of educational policy making.

The use of the term art to describe policy making endeavors is not new. Titles, such as *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990) or *Leadership is an Art* (Dupree, 1989) suggest an artistic component or practice. The authors of these two books actually discuss some artistic elements. However, in other titles, for instance *The Art and Science of Institutional Research* (Fincher, 1985) or "Educational Policy Making: The State of the Art" (Mitchell, 1984), the word art is used with little or no elaboration or discussion of artistic elements in the text itself. Such elements as connoisseurship – capturing the expressive essence of an experience, interpretation, and assessing significance – which Eisner (1976) advocates as part of an artistic approach to educational supervision, could perhaps enhance the latter works as well as a discussion of the art of policy making.

The Metaphor

The use of metaphor to help define, extend, or clarify our thinking has been frequently advocated (Kaplan, 1964; Rein & Schön, 1977; Morgan, 1986) as a valid way to explain and to report experience. Whorf (cited by Boyd, 1988) believes that the language of metaphor, however vivid, accurate, or elaborate, may be best understood as "not simply a reporting device for experience, but a defining framework for it" (p. 507). Yet, metaphor is not merely the product, the report, or the definition of the experience. For those who embrace the concept of metaphor it is a tool available to help with the construction of a shared understanding of the experience and its meaning.

Applying Pope's metaphor of a continuous journey to the endless quest of educational policy making helps to overcome the temptation to conceive of policy as a fixed determinant of appropriate action for individuals or organizations. Educational policy may then be conceived as an ascent up a steep and treacherous mountain, fraught with the dangers associated with paradigms and paradigm wars (Gage, 1989); or with the violent practice "of bashing rational explanations as ill fitted to the realities of organizations and their environments" (Cuban, 1990, p. 5). If we manage to survive such challenges, it may only be to fall prey to the difficulties inherent in what Wise (1977) has called hyperrationalization: excessive prescription, procedural complexity, inappropriate solutions, first-order solutions, failure to understand the process of education, misplaced belief in the powers of legislation, simplistic solutions, or wishful thinking. Understanding policy making as a quest suggests that our assumptions and past practice may no longer be adequate; new tools, maps, and approaches may be required. Metaphor may help us to overcome the tendency, described by Simeon, to take for granted "existing values, norms, institutions, and patterns of power when it is precisely such broad shapers of policy which need exploration" (1976, p. 554).

Capra (1982), Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979), and others suggest that the old world view is changing, that a startling and dynamic new world view will better equip us for the trek. The new world view is complex, emergent, and holographic. It is characterized by multiple, valid perspectives and approaches, and by mutual causality. Such a dynamic view recognizes that leadership for the journey may rotate as participants demonstrate different competencies to deal with changing conditions and overcome emerging difficulties.

Developing the metaphor of educational policy as a quest or a journey permits each participant in the process to share in the construction of its

meaning. Participants may approach the task with differing goals, with varying degrees of preparedness, and with individual expectations. They may, in fact, experience the journey itself differently. Using a metaphor helps to frame the task in terms of an ongoing process, a unified quest, a continuous search for perspective and for attainment which permits the creation of meaning from a number of unique and disparate perspectives.

As with powerful verbal or visual metaphors contained in more conventional art forms like poetry or painting, each observer will bring to the artistic interpretation his or her own background, experiences, and artistic preferences. One strength of the metaphor may be its usefulness to help bridge the constant tension between individual understanding and meaning and the construction of a shared reality, understood, at least in general terms, by those who have participated in the development of the metaphor.

Although the focus here has been the metaphor of learning as a journey, prompted by reflection on a segment of Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (1711/1941), a wide variety of metaphors will be useful in heightening our understanding of educational policy making. Morgan (1986), for instance, presents eight extended metaphors of organizations, each of which contributes a different perspective to our understanding of what might constitute appropriate educational policy. For example, while the metaphor of organizations as machines supports a rational and highly specified approach to policy making, the metaphor of the organization as a brain leads to a more flexible view of organizational policy. Another metaphor, the organization as a psychic prison, suggests that while "organizations may be socially constructed realities, these constructions are often attributed an existence and power of their own" (Morgan, 1986, p. 199) which may be confining or constraining; hence the metaphor may lead to a call for radical reform and resistance to the status quo.

The use of a variety of different metaphors might help to reveal some advantages and disadvantages of understanding an activity like instructional supervision in different ways. Thus we might reflect on supervision as a mechanistic, prescriptive process; as an imprisoning and confining process in which teachers are disempowered and treated as subordinates rather than as professionals; or as an ongoing quest for instructional improvement.

Metaphor then becomes a powerful tool for the creation of a shared understanding of a policy situation. It may be particularly helpful for developing policy in which the intent is to provide guidelines rather than prescription, recognizing that the details of both policy and implementation may vary according to different individual perceptions and experience and with the shared reality of the context.

The Model

The flexibility of the metaphor to reflect and to adapt to different individual understandings of the policy situation may enable a group of disparate individuals to reach agreement over the broad terms of a given policy. Additional artistic components, such as those contained in a three-dimensional model, may be useful in the creation of a more detailed policy. A model identifies some possible ways in which the components of a policy metaphor may be combined into a unified (although temporary and somewhat fragile) whole.

The writers cited previously who have advocated the use of metaphors and models in social science research are aware of both their benefits and limitations. Metaphors and models may sometimes blind their advocates to aspects outside of a particular perspective; they may be forced, artificial, and exaggerated. However, they may also provide concrete representation of how a specific policy would work in practice. They may direct attention to similarities and resemblances between specific policies or among a variety of situations. Senge (1990) identifies the development of mental models as one of the dimensions of a learning organization. He asserts that it is not enough to focus on broad ideas or a general vision or goal. Rather, Senge advocates making explicit our deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, pictures, or images which influence how we understand the world or how we take action, in order to subject them to careful scrutiny.

Although many models conceived in formal administrative or academic arenas are purely semantic, Kaplan (1964, p. 267) recognizes that models may be either *semantic* or *physical*. In this section, the semantic model for policy analysis proposed by Simeon (1976) will be developed into a more concrete and physical model. The result will demonstrate the potential utility of a combined semantic and physical model in facilitating understanding of the interrelationships between and among the various facets of educational policy making.

The physical starting point for this model is a form, long conceptualized by mathematicians, but only recently discovered to exist in nature: the five-pointed quasi-crystal formation (figure 1). This new crystalline form, discovered by two physicists playing mathematical games (von Baeyer, 1990) has been chosen to emphasize the importance of serendipity and playfulness in the creative process of model development. In addition, the crystal embodies the emerging perspective of chaos theory (Wheatley, 1992) in that it changes discontinuously and qualitatively rather than in predictable fashion.

Although a number of other semantic models for policy analysis could have been used (Sabatier, 1991; Kingdon, 1984), Simeon's dimensions have been chosen to demonstrate the increased potential and power of combining them in a unified and fluid model, rather than in a static fashion in which the dimensions are understood as discrete variables. We visualize concepts from the semantic model for policy analysis proposed by Simeon (1976) on separate facets of the model. Blank facets remain in recognition that the model is not definitive, but provides for the unknown, ambiguous, and constantly changing face of the policy process.

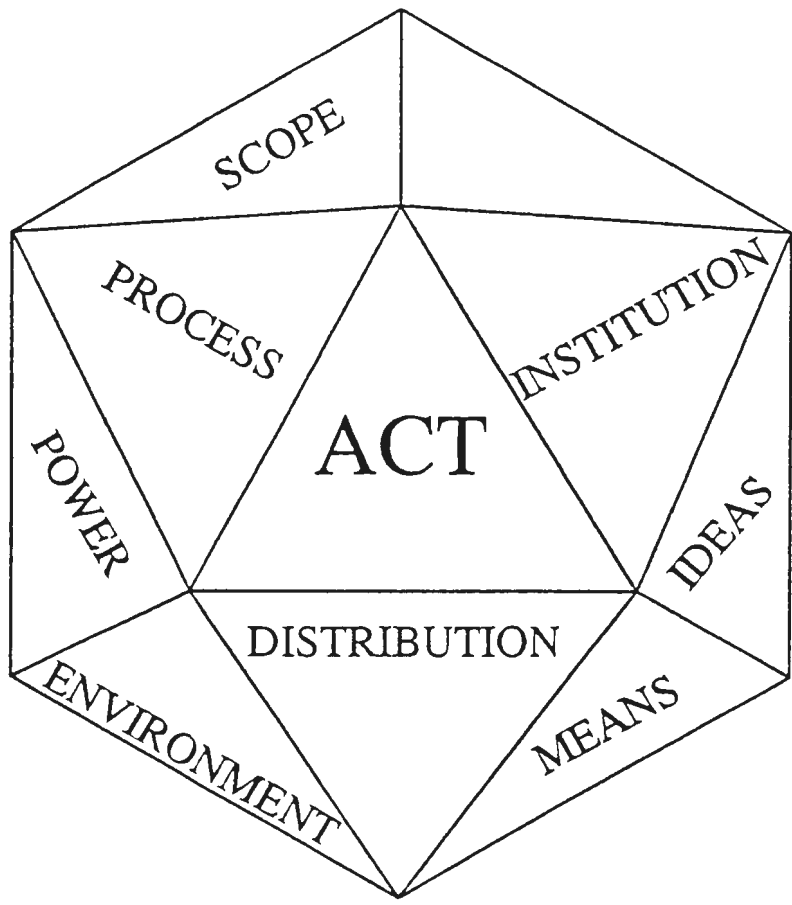


Figure 1. A Quasi-Crystal Component.

Simeon describes three dimensions of policy which, he claims, operate as dependent variables: scope, means, and a distributive dimension. *Scope* refers to the range of administrative involvement, growth, and spending in a policy matter. *Means* indicates the degree of direct or indirect control or influence present. *Distribution* identifies "who gets what," as well as how distributive decisions are made and why some people seem to be ignored or excluded from the process.

Simeon expands this discussion by suggesting that these dimensions could each be examined through five additional approaches, each of which acts as an independent variable, "to have some capacity to explain patterns of policy" (1976, p. 566). Policy could be examined as a consequence of the *environment*, of the distribution of *power*, of prevailing *ideas*, of *institutional* frameworks, and of the *process* of decision making. When labeled with Simeon's dimensions, the single crystal serves as the component from which to build a model.

Constructing the model. A builder of models will quickly recognize that there is a myriad of possible forms into which to fit the crystalline component. And yet, as quickly as it is set in one place, another position seems desirable. A process as fluid and dynamic as policy making cannot be captured in a static model. Thus, figure 2 depicts the crystalline component rotating, whirling, and spiraling in an ever expanding vista of policy choices and opportunities.

Connecting devices, now labeled on some of the previously empty facets, are what Carr and Kemmis (1986) call the "moments of action-research" (p. 186). Although most studies of policy cannot be termed action-research as it is commonly known, the concept of a spiraling model will help to inform the policy-making process itself. It operates in a "self-reflective spiral" of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, "each of which 'looks back' to the previous moment for its justification, and 'looks forward' to the next moment for its realization" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 161). Thus, the model is both semantic and physical. It suggests that policy must be situated in both discourse and practice, that it is both constructive and reconstructive. Policy makers operating from this perspective "can transcend the positivist view of rationality, with a view which consciously and dialectically interrelates *theory and practice, individual and society, and retrospective understanding and prospective action*" (p. 187).

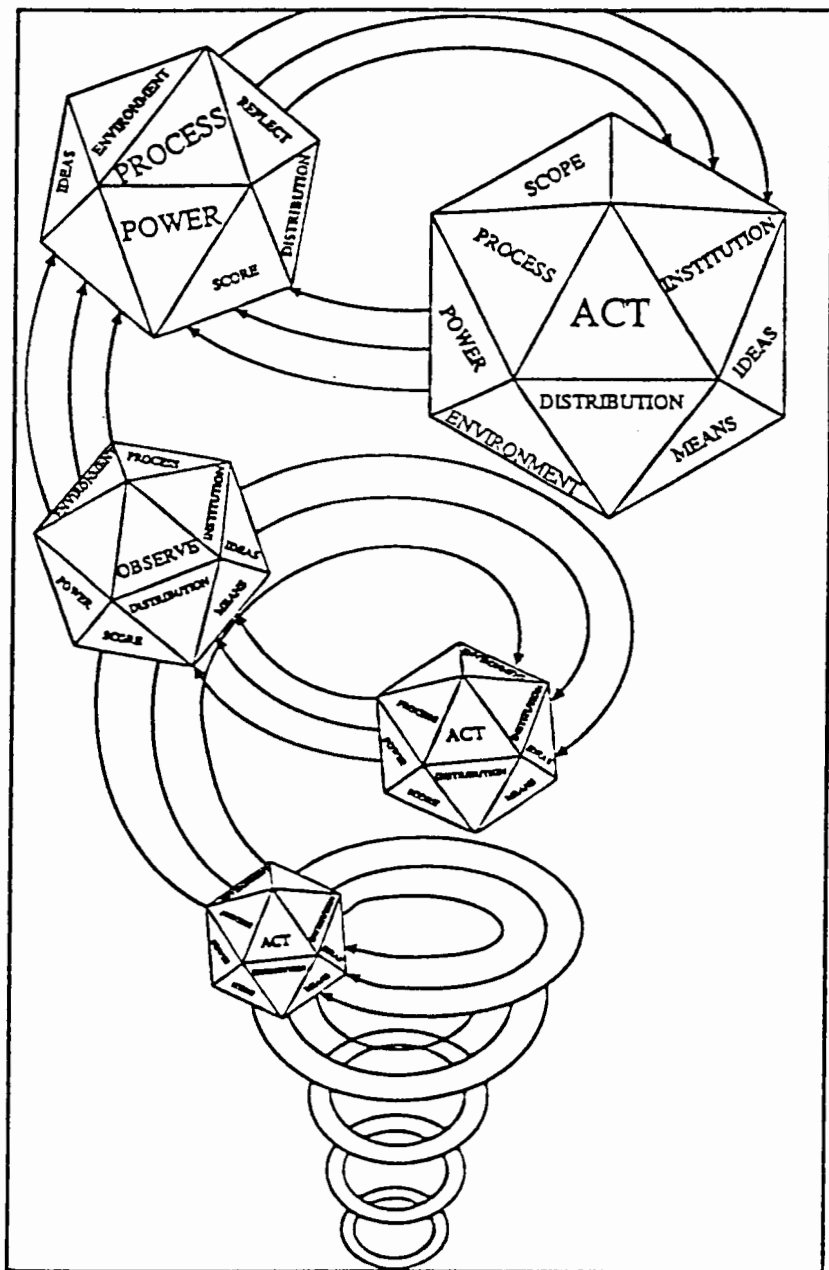


Figure 2. A Process Model.

The model depicted in figure 2 is reminiscent of the artistic creations made from commercial kits of metal and magnets, rods and cones. Once begun, it seems to take on a life of its own. Indeed, the model builders must be careful not to reify the model itself, for it is fluid and flexible. The components are held in a tenuous relationship imposed on them by the participants in the artistic and creative activity of policy making. An apparently small adjustment – an additional participant, a change of temperature, a slight movement in the surrounding environment – may cause a significant metamorphosis in the form or structure of the model itself. Hence, the model as a physical representation of the combined design role of planners, practitioners, inquirers, and others who influence the pattern of the model, reminds us that policy is not static. Rather, just as an artistic model fulfills the requirements of a unique situation and reflects the resources, perceptions, and experiences of its builders, so good policy is designed for a specific context by a specific group of policy makers.

This model, which combines the process cycle of action research with the variables of Simeon's political model, may help to illustrate the flexible and dynamic interrelationships among the various facets of educational policy. For instance, it may help us to understand that although the scope, means, and distributive aspects of policy may, as Simeon (1976) suggested, sometimes be dependent variables, they may also operate as independent variables. Likewise, the other five dimensions of Simeon's model may not always be best understood as independent variables.

One example will suffice. In one school system with several small schools serving predominantly First Nations populations, the distribution of power operates as an independent variable. However, because the dominant power group consists largely of white males, all of whom are also members of a dominant religious group, the predominant ideas, and the decision-making mechanisms are not independent but rather dependent upon this power structure. Further, description of this power in action would be quite different from reflection on its nature and ethical use in this specific minority situation. Hence, viewing the dimensions of power and decision making from the flexible perspective of the proposed model would help to demonstrate the complexity of their intersection.

This combined semantic and physical model may be useful for the conception, development, and implementation of educational policy; however, it is the underlying principles which are key to this discussion of how artistic components may illuminate the nature of policy making. A model has the potential to make tangible the fundamentally intangible qualities of the policy process, to demonstrate in concrete fashion the harmonic and

dynamic relationships among materials and resources, context and purposes, designers and builders. Likewise, in its fundamentally asymmetrical form, the five-pointed quasi-crystalline form also stands as a reminder that disharmonious elements such as conflict, confrontation, and political maneuvering are also inherent in educational policy making. These elements, too, need to be resolved into a dynamic tension which itself provides some of the impetus for the spiraling model.

An Illustration: A Museum

An example from architecture will illustrate these underlying artistic principles. A number of prominent theorists have incorporated some form of an architectural metaphor into their thinking and writing about organizations. Tichy and Devanna (1986) speak of the difference between having a map or using a blueprint when planning educational policy. Habermas (1985) discusses the relationship between postmodern architectural design and its social, political, and technical context. Schön (1983) entitles a chapter "Town planning: Limits to Reflection-in-Action" in which he discusses how the case of the town planner illustrates the process of framing the planning roles. The architectural design roles of leadership have been elaborated by Senge (1990), parallel architecture has been advocated as a component of planned change (Riffle & Smith-Davis, 1991), and architectural components have been developed into a model for evaluation design (St. John, 1985).

The Museum of Civilization (figures 3 & 4), designed by Cardinal and erected in Hull, Quebec in 1989 serves as a unique and concrete illustration of the power of art (in this case architecture) to serve as both metaphor and model for policy making. As metaphor, the very concept itself of a Museum of Civilization seems contradictory. In what ways is it possible for a solid, physical reality such as a museum to reflect a dynamic, fluid, and socially constructed notion like civilization? Similarly, to what extent is it really possible for educational policy to guide and direct an entity as dynamic and uncontrollable as educational practice?



Figures 3 and 4. The Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.

As a model, the Museum of Civilization provides a powerful, visual reminder of some of the essential design elements of good policy. The Museum is an undulating, curvilinear form, with no apparent beginning or end. It was designed with a large number of site constraints, including the small size of the site itself and the necessity of vision windows to ensure that other landmarks of the National Capital Region remain unobstructed. Cardinal has stated that he designed the museum to be a "symbolic form" which would

... speak of the emergence of this continent ... the emergence of man from the melting glaciers; ... the way in which man first learned to cope with the environment, then mastered it and shaped it to the needs of his own goals and aspirations. (Building appraisal, 1990, p. 18)

Later in elaborating the design process, the architect asserted that "decisions about the internal functions were constantly being made during design" (p. 19).

The building itself is not conceived as a static portrayal or reflection of the landscape. The two wings of the museum, the northern "Canadian Shield" and the southern "Glacier Wing" communicate the spirit of Canadian geography and climate. They provide an appropriate structure for housing the displays of a dynamic and changing civilization. Computer assisted drafting (CAD) technology, stylized structure, and appropriate materials, somehow combine to reflect a spirit which becomes an appropriate medium for the message. Bressani (1990) has said of the Museum of Civilization that:

it is impossible – or possible from only a few well chosen points of view – to reduce the whole composition to a series of constituent forms derived from an internal structure or transformed through some formal operations Order [is] emanant from the surface itself and therefore relative to the viewer's immediate position in the building. (p. 24)

An appreciation of this design principle seems as appropriate to policy as to the museum itself. When we attempt to prescribe definitive educational policy-making procedures from the outset, or reduce them to constituent entities which are easily within the grasp of the educational policy maker or practitioner, then we do the whole field a disservice. Policy may perhaps be better understood as flowing, dynamic, interactive, and symbolic "relative to the ... [participant's] immediate position" (Bressani, 1990, p. 24).

Bressani (1990), reviewing Cardinal's approach to the Museum of Civilization, makes an unusual observation: "He plunges into chaos to retrieve a world as unruly as possible by an overarching order. Paradoxically, this unconciliatory disposition accounts for liberating vitality" (p. 24). The Museum of Civilization as metaphor and model seems to capture

the essence or spirit of the policy process. The human element, the energy which defines policy making as complex, dynamic, ambiguous, and interactive is embodied in the design and style of the Museum of Civilization. Decisions concerning internal functions are made as the process emerges. There is no one point from which one can view the whole structure. The constraints of the site and the external environment are overcome. Hence, the museum stands, a creative example of architecture which fulfills its purpose in an exemplary way. Good educational policy, like the Museum of Civilization, may be understood as artistic: complex, dynamic, ambiguous, emergent, and interactive. There is no one right way; indeed, a variety of approaches and perceptions may strengthen the process. If we permit an ongoing decision-making process to shape policy and recognize that the whole may best be perceived from a variety of perspectives, we may paradoxically help to develop a more cohesive and a more effective policy.

If the concepts of art and architecture are helpful in creating and implementing educational policy, the completed policy structure itself may be more harmonious, meaningful, and purposefully liberating. The processes of dialogue and planning will incorporate both the order and the chaos of the educational context to create new educational policy identified by its liberating vitality.

A Temporary Resting Place

Metaphors can expand to embrace the constructed realities of increasing numbers of participants. Metaphors such as Alexander Pope's concept of a journey (1711/1941), those advanced by Morgan (1986) for organizational analysis, or those created by educational policy makers engaged in an ongoing quest for better and more effective policy, have the potential to both open and inform the process.

But no matter how powerful or evocative, the metaphor is constrained by the linear nature of language as well as by the linguistic and cultural experiences of the artists and the observers. Further enhancement of policy processes might result if the solitary reliance on semantic models and discourse were expanded to include concrete, physical models, both constructed for policy purposes and introduced from the works of art. Creating, observing, and reflecting on concrete, visual, yet transmutable forms like the quasi-crystal may be one way to develop a more creative and flexible approach to policy making.

Art is holistic – a unique combination of spirit, culture, technique, materials, and form. Its beauty cannot totally be analyzed or explained. We

know that art is not produced on an assembly line or created by a formula or a recipe. So too, we recognize that there is no prescriptive, assembly-line approach to good policy. The paintings of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Varley, Picasso, and Kurelek are all unique and highly valued. The poetry of Pope, Poe, and Pratt, although distinct in style, stirs the reader through its evocative language. The classical architecture of the Acropolis, the gothic spires of Notre Dame Cathedral, and the postmodern architecture of the Museum of Civilization are all exquisite examples of form suited to function, of art combined with technical expertise, of design appropriate to purpose. There is no one definitive best way to pursue the journey, to develop the metaphor, to erect the model, or to create the art.

The art of educational policy making is multi-dimensional. As the Museum of Civilization illustrates, policy cannot be simply reduced to a series of components, steps, functions, or specific words without losing its essential life and spirit. Perhaps Cardinal is right; each policy may best be viewed as a symbolic form – shaped to the needs of our goals and aspirations. To truly speak about the art of policy making, one may actually have to use art itself as an integrative and holistic representation of the complex process.

In this paper I have begun to illustrate how artistic concepts might be used to enhance educational policy making by reflecting on Pope's metaphor of a journey, developing a multi-faceted quasi-crystal model, and interpreting the Museum of Civilization as both a metaphor and a model for policy making. Originality, creativity, and excellence in design are valued characteristics of art. Policy makers in the next decade who explicitly recognize and incorporate such artistic qualities into their deliberations may find that they are able to create more flexible, more meaningful, and more effective educational policy.

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