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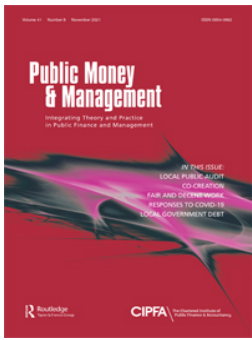
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New development: The emerging role of a ‘learning partner’ relationship in supporting public service reform

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IMPACT

This article describes why managers of public services who are engaged in reform should consider engaging in learning partnerships. The authors explain how this emerging approach provides important sources of reflexive practice to members of partnerships, including policy-makers, consulting firms, and academia; they show how these sectors can collaborate to build learning capacity across multiple stakeholders; as well as the dilemmas and dualisms involved.

ABSTRACT

As public services face the limits of existing approaches to public management, emerging practices are highlighting the importance of continuous learning and service reform. While many approaches, methods and aids for learning exist, managers embracing complexity are making use of relational resources to scaffold their learning capacity-building. This article introduces the idea of ‘learning partnerships’: a set of nested learning relationships between public managers, consultants, and researchers and academics, which extends the literature on academic–practitioner collaborations and builds a relational mechanism for learning into the action learning action research (ALAR) and learning organization genres.

KEYWORDS

Action research; consultancy; complexity; collaboration; learning organizations; partnerships; public management; systems

Introduction

The work of the public sector is increasingly complex, characterized by unconnected structures, competing goals and targets, and inadequate governance and performance management (Christensen & Lægreid, 2017; Eppel & Rhodes, 2018). These features challenge the efficacy of New Public Management (NPM) and an increasing appreciation of complexity has triggered some public sector professionals, commissioners and policy-makers to migrate from NPM to alternative models of public management, which focus on improving service outcomes by making collective learning the engine for change, and a central job for managers (Lowe et al., 2020). Complexity-informed public management is intended to be more than rhetoric: it will improve service outcomes if practised and the academic and policy-making sectors have been encouraged to adopt complexity perspectives to help public management with service reform (Morcol, 2012; Room, 2011).

There have been few attempts within public service reform to characterize the conceptual and practical roles and relations between learning providers (including consultants and academics) and practitioner clients. This article describes the emerging public management praxis of participation in partnerships focused on learning and how this is being developed

and shared across the public management, consultancy, academic, and non-profit sectors.

The insights presented in this article are drawn from experience of academic work and ongoing learning relationships between Northumbria University, the Centre for Public Impact, Collaborate CIC, Easier Inc., the Lankelly Chase Foundation, the Plymouth Alliance, the Tudor Trust, and Gateshead City Council, all of whom have intentionally engaged practitioners, consultants, and academics in their learning to support their own public service reform. Through this work we have identified a missing conceptual space which describes an emerging body of practices within a set of collaborative relationships that we have labelled ‘learning partners’.

The roots of the learning partner approach

Traditionally, learning organizations have action at the heart of their knowledge creation (Fiol & Lyles, 1985), and pursue learning as a largely internal process. There are several methodologies commonly consulted to support the operationalization of double-loop learning in complex service organizations where learning systems are built to challenge existing assumptions which are undisturbed in single-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Notable approaches

include the Vanguard method (Seddon, 2008) and the Cynefin framework (Snowden, 2015), as well as a much larger array of methods and tools, including appreciative inquiry (Johnson & Leavitt, 2001), storytelling, prototyping, and learning communities (Wilson & Lowe, 2018).

However, as public sector practitioners and managers develop their practices in a shift away from NPM, complexity-informed practice and wider systemic gains are being supported using facilitation to increase their ability to learn, and through the promotion of experimentation (Easterby-Smith, 1990), and continual academic work to build the evidence base about how change occurs. Through a process of action learning action research (ALAR), participating organizations have been sharing their journeys in informal learning communities. The ALAR paradigm has long advocated the supportive role of ‘critical friends’ spotlighting the role of a learning relationship (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001), and offers a perspective for describing the interconnectivity between the role of an academic in a change–action process and the role of the change agent.

Practitioner, consultant, and academic engagement in participative conversations for learning with, from, and about each other, has fertilized multi-level learning which aligns with and extends the action research methodological underpinnings described by Steckler et al. (2010). Steckler & Torbet described action research in three levels: first person (self-reflection); second person (mutual enquiry about shared issues); and third person (communicating learning in ‘landscapes of practice’—see Pyrko et al., 2019).

To develop communities of practice and inform the wider field of public management practice, a comprehensive and wholesale action research approach to a learning partner role is constricting, time-consuming, and problematic to achieve in practice. Therefore, the current articulation of the role of the learning partner is informed by complexity theory, action learning, and sets out our expression of multi-level action research methodology, none of which are static terms.

The purpose of a learning partner

Those working towards alternative public management and commissioning practices have committed to continuous learning to drive whole-system reform and performance improvement. This learning is achieved through experimentation, gathering data, sense-making, the practice of reflection and reflexivity.

The facilitation of this inquiry is an important role in a learning organization and is intended to help people and organizations reflect on their work and build understanding about themselves, the organization,

system, context, and process (Lowe & French, 2019). In this way, a learning partner acts as a mirror to support managers to make sense of the information fed back to them (Bishop, 1990; Lowe & French, 2019).

A learning partner also uses mirroring to make the complexity of systems more visible thus optimizing dynamic responses to, and decisions about, exposed practices, processes, and cultures.

Senge and Scharmer (2008) have described the potential for large-scale transformational change through knowledge-building when practitioners, consultants, and academics partner in learning communities, creating ‘soft’ learning infrastructure through collaborative relationships.

The structure of a learning partnership

Within the network of relationships emerging between actors of complexity-informed public management and social change, public management practitioners, consultants, and academics have all established positions in the soft infrastructure of systems. This structure, or network of relationships, is also supporting the mutuality of learning within, between, and across learning partner participants. First, the practitioners and managers are building a cumulative body of knowledge to share among themselves, becoming critical social learning systems. By participating in learning partnerships, they demonstrate a commitment to critical action learning, analogous to the first-person action research.

Second, management consultants have expertise in building relationships with public sector clients. Although consultants are traditionally engaged for their temporary resourcing of policy direction, implementation, or reform (NAO, 2006; Hodge & Bowman, 2006), these endeavours have tended to ‘drive ideologically motivated new public management reforms’ (Saint-Martin, 2005). When not engaging in ‘business-like’ efficiency drives, a consultant’s ability to strengthen internal capacity is increasingly notable (Massey & Walker, 1999). Consultants offer a fast, short cycles of action learning, which are predominately focused on their specific client and tasks but can foster second-person learning by encouraging double-loop and triple-loop learning with the community as a whole.

Third is academics, who have a remit for knowledge exchange, increasing research impact and demonstrating relevance and civic engagement. Academics are appointed for their pedagogical role as well as their research expertise and are also beneficiaries of this partnership in the dual client focus as described by Badham and Sense (2006). This role fosters third-person action research, where frameworks, theories, and deep pattern spotting can be offered across the landscapes of practice. This is a slower action learning cycle, but has a capability to

help inform, widen, and sustain shifts in management across the public sector.

However, this partnership work is susceptible to constant tensions and competing agendas between these three groups (Senge & Scharmer, 2008; Badham & Sense, 2006). For example, those appointed to build organizational capacity have a dependency on that need continuing to exist. While Senge and Scharmer (2008) proposed that learning communities could respond to these interest and power conflicts, Badham and Sense (2006) and French and Bell (1999) are sceptical about the mutual gains of action-orientated learning relationships. They describe the tendency for academic action learning partners to neglect research and become client-centred, action-specific, thus continuing to 'work within the paradigm of normal science' (p. 138). Thus, these learning partners risk the support they can offer practitioners who are pursuing paradigm shift in public management. The consultant-client relationships and the consultant-academic relationships will be naturally problematic due to the 'dilemmas' and 'dualisms' present in collaborative and reflective action learning (Archer, 2007).

Our experiences indicate that these risks signal the requirement for learning partners to be supported in their learning partner practice. A further structure to a learning partnership addresses this, as well as the ethics, quality, and governance of the learning partners. The therapist's therapist framing offers a language and a practical model of best practice—professional therapists often engage in a learning 'supervision' relationship with a therapist of their own, participating in self-reflection for the development of their own professional practice (Aponte & Carol Carlsen, 2009). Like therapists, learning partners who receive learning development can improve client outcomes (Bennett-Levy, 2019), as well develop their own learning facilitation practice.

The work of a learning partner

Learning work with each learning organization is necessarily varied, ranging from a dependency on facilitation for technical approaches to practice (a more interventionist approach), to collaboration with facilitators for 'emancipatory' change (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001), or the transformation of systems to align with new consciences and mindsets.

The work of a learning partner can be articulated in terms of convening, conversing, and curating work. Convening is space- and time-orientated work which involves the instigation, and sometimes maintenance, of occasions and contexts for mutual and situational sense-making (Weick, 1995), co-creation, governance (review and evaluation of intentions based on evidence provided through the process of action learning) and reflection among all the appropriate and

necessary actors. Conversing is relationship-focused work which involves instigating, encouraging, nurturing and, where needed, mending the conversations and relationships. Curating is a data-focused role, concerned with the capture, construction (perhaps through recording) and maintenance of the boundary objects (representations, stories and evidential data and architectural projections) that emerge and evolve in the conversations, narratives, and maintenance of collective history and memory to support progress and reflection.

Specific activities are of notable aid to a learning partner, and competence using them is an important requisite for the work. First-person learning facilitation involves deep-dive active engagement through interviews, guiding reflection, coaching, workshops, and representing the reflections and data in a dynamic illustrative way. Second-person learning facilitation involves facilitating learning events, writing to share emerging patterns, and convening communities of practice. The third-person work involves the abstraction and analysis of deep patterns and theories of social change observed through the learning partnerships, that can help the advancement of paradigm shift.

The core responsibility of a learning partner is to nurture into existence and encourage these activities to happen effectively and to share that learning—with their learning partners, and across practice communities and landscapes as well as academic communities.

The need for equivocal relationships for sustainable systemic change

Learning partnering is an emerging methodology to assist public sector practitioners, commissioners, and managers to drive complexity-informed service reform. It has an associated set of ALAR practices which help to systematize the approach, and which foster benefits for all the key players (public and non-profit organizations, consultants, and academics). However, this partnership work is susceptible to tensions arising from the competing agendas of these three groups (Senge & Scharmer, 2008; Badham & Sense, 2006). The consultant-client relationships and the consultant-academic relationships are naturally problematic due to the 'dilemmas' and 'dualisms' present in collaborative and reflective action learning (Archer, 2007). It will take more experience and research in completing cycles of learning and seeing more learning partnerships through different phases of their life-cycles to fully understand these challenges.

Nonetheless, this article offers a methodology which speaks to the complexities faced by public and non-profit sector practitioners. It highlights that complexity-informed public management requires

relationships that offer sustainable learning capacity for individual organizations, but also for improvement and change within wider systems, communities, and landscapes of public management practice.

Disclosure statement

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