LEARNING IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT
Thinking critically, thinking caringly, thinking creatively

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The difference between learning to copy and learning to think

For senior managers, the difference between learning by rote and learning to think independently is central. In rote learning we learn how to exactly reproduce something, we copy. This is fine for some purposes: we need to know exactly where the keys on the keyboard are, otherwise we produce nonsense or type very slowly; and we must reproduce our signature consistently otherwise our cheques or credit card payments may be rejected. But for most purposes in senior management we need to make intelligent judgments about cases that consist of a unique new set of circumstances, not completely the same as anything we saw before. We have to think critically, to judge how far previous examples or various general management ideas are relevant to the new case. By 'critically' I mean relying on evidence, good logic and considered values, not automatic opposition. A good film critic gives both praise and criticism, according to when they seem due. Automatic opposition is uncritical; so is automatically following fashion.

Let's look at the rise and spread of the doctrines called New Public Management, NPM. These emerged in the 1980s expecially in New Zealand, Australia and Britain and in sister forms in the USA; and spread widely, including in Southern Africa, partly through promotion by international agencies like the Commonwealth Secretariat and major management consultancy groups. NPM has done a lot to shake-up sleepy and self-serving public organizations, often by using ideas from the private sector. It provides many options for trying to achieve cost-effective delivery of public goods, like separate organizations for policy and implementation, performance contracts, internal markets, sub-contracting, and much more. But it has been spread somewhat like a religion: it is *assumed* to be modern, relevant and superior, so there is no need felt to prove that it suits the case concerned; to query this is held to show that you are outdated and reactionary.

Christopher Pollitt (of Brunel University, London, and Erasmus University, Rotterdam) records in his study 'Justification by Works or by Faith?' how thin was the

empirical backing for NPM while it was being evangelized worldwide.[1] No thorough pilot studies had been done, let alone ones giving clear lessons and based on consultation also with medium and lower-level staff or customers about their experience in the experiments. Governments pushed ahead with massive changes on the basis of high hopes, misleading comparisons, a few examples, often heard of from abroad, assurances from highly paid consultants, and the views of some top civil servants and politicians far from the delivery line.

By now, NPM has lost much of its shine, as experience mounts. In the Netherlands, what we see of the public and semi-public utilities such as the railways in Britain—complex new organizational systems, lavish remuneration of managers and investors, and often poor, sometimes disastrous, records of public service—means that copying British-style NPM is no longer on the policy agenda. In New Zealand the costs of a too narrow approach to public management have been major and there is considerable backlash.

Learning in public management in the past: nature and limitations

Christopher Hood of the London School of Economics has gone a step further, to ask *why and how* administrative doctrines often get adopted without a good basis of evidence. I recommend especially his book with Michael Jackson called *Administrative Argument*.[2] They suggest that politically successful arguments in the past about principles for administration have rarely been based on extensive reliable data or careful logic and comparison with alternatives. More often they have relied on appeals to authority, metaphors, proverbs, and selected supportive examples. Yet as Herbert Simon pointed out in his famous book *Administrative Behavior*, for every one of these administration proverbs there is a contradictory one, equally plausible, that is ignored – until the next wave in administrative fashion when those opposite views may become a new orthodoxy. *Administrative Argument* catalogues 99 proverb-like doctrines in administration, about who should do what or how, and discusses influences on which ones get picked out when. Simon wanted to establish administration on a more scientific basis, by precise large-scale testing of which doctrines work when and where. But the record of that sort of work in academic public administration has been rather indecisive and short of influence, since it rarely gives bold, inspiring, sweeping conclusions—situations and criteria have so many aspects, vary so much and keep on changing.

Far more influential, argue Hood and Jackson, have been approaches which contain attractively-packaged sets of administration proverbs and satisfy all or most the following six requirements.

[1] C. Pollitt, 1995. Justification by Works or by Faith? Evaluating the New Public Management. *Evaluation*, vol.1, no.2, pp.133-54.
[2] Dartmouth Publishing Co., Aldershot, UK, & Brookfield, Vermont, USA, 1991 (reprinted 1996).

First, they must pick up a felt mood of the time. NPM matched a desire to 'jack up' the public sector and cut costs. In some countries, for example, the swing voter group was now relatively well-off and averse to more taxes,.

Second, the approaches use persuasive metaphors and build on appealing and widespread 'common-sense' ideas. NPM stressed masterful 'management' (the word comes from the training of horses) rather than more modest 'administration', and equated budget-cutting with fitness and losing weight: 'mean' came to mean 'lean'. It relied on simple pictures provided by economists, that people are restless calculators oriented to financial incentives and predominantly self-interested. Only vivid simple images will capture the imagination of enough people and be remembered and used. This is how business management 'gurus' work. Metaphors also genuinely help people to think and to be more creative.

Third, they should be stated in general terms which allow different groups to interpret the package differently, in line with their concerns. NPM's 'performance' talk could appeal both to cost-cutters, interested in financial performance, and to quality-raisers.

Fourth, the approach promotes the private interests of some influential groups while declaring to serve the public good. NPM schemes, for example, have involved not just well-intentioned copying of a current fashion but ample rewards for top public officials, who gained private sector type remuneration packages and who after leaving the public sector frequently entered interested-party private companies.

Fifth, examples and comparisons are used to give reasoned support, but only selected ones which support the pre-set conclusions. The examples often come as easy-to-remember stories, parables of failure or success, like we see in much management guru literature. NPM presented inspirational stories: of the bad old ways and the shining modern alternative. It ignored cases which didn't fit.

Sixth, the approach is proposed in a forceful dramatic way, which induces people to accept its story and conclusions even in the absence of solid evidence; for example by insisting that a crisis demands immediate action. At a time of fear of being outcompeted by Japan and others, the ideas which Tom Peters's famous *In Search of Excellence* (1982) put forward from study of a few successful American companies had considerable impact, even in public management and other countries. (Ten years later most of the companies had collapsed.)

These six factors help explain how packages of ideas from business management and economics—NPM drew from both sources—have often become more influential in public management than ideas from the public administration discipline itself, which were too complex, unmarketed, and harder to use. Economics-based reasoning has had the added advantage that, given its boldly oversimplified picture of people's motives, it builds impressive looking mathematical models of behaviour which give definite

predictions. This provides a direction and a feeling of decisiveness. And yet the oversimplification is dangerous.

So how might we do any better: think independently and yet influence and motivate? One lesson, especially from the study of public administration, is the importance of being empirical, case-specific, and respecting complexity. Another lesson, especially from economics, is the value of a systematic approach to thinking. And from business management especially we can draw a lesson about the power of metaphors and stories, for seeing new angles, communicating, and persuading. Here are a few suggestions on how we might combine these three requirements.

A method for thinking critically

Systems of pat answers inhibit us from thinking and learning. We need methods to help us think, including to check assumptions and counter-arguments. I and my students have found the following method very helpful. It helps one to clarify and test positions and think creatively about improving them or finding alternatives. It uses two tables for analysis. The first is for understanding more clearly the components and meanings of what you or someone else says. The second is for then seeing the structure of the argument, how and how well the components fit together. Only if we clarify meanings, as in the first part, are we ready to check logic, in the second part.[3]

When proof-reading our own work we nearly always miss some errors. Similarly, ordinary reading usually misses many significant aspects in a text. So in the first part of the method we look closely, line-by-line and word-by-word, at a selected key passage. We place the text in the first column of a table and divides it into sections, to examine in detail. Ths helps us to both get close to a position, carefully look at all its parts, and keep our distance, think about it in a detached way.

In the second column one identifies and comments on key words and phrases, including the major images and metaphors. Some people say 'New Public Management' was in fact largely *old private* management, and often different from what successful modern private sector companies try for. Bringing business practices into public administration has been tried since the late 19th century; and many NPM components, like performance-related pay, were widespread even long before then. Sometimes long pedigree is seen as a virtue, but NPM presented itself as 'New' to avoid attention to the mixed record of previous attempts on the same lines and to why they had declined.

[3] The method is explained using worked examples from Southern African policy debates in my paper 'Structures and Meanings: - A Way To Introduce Argumentation Analysis In Policy Studies Education', *Africanus* (UNISA), vol. 30, no.1, pp.49-72. The first part adapts the method of argument analysis provided in evaluation specialist Michael Scriven's *Reasoning* (1976, New York: McGraw Hill). The second adapts the format for viewing policy arguments from William Dunn's *Public Policy Analysis* (1994, Prentice Hall).

Another useful guideline is to identify language which hints at praise or criticism and thus gives a pointer towards the conclusions of the piece. Sometimes it is worth having a third column in which one takes the key words and phrases and rewords them more neutrally or with an opposite evaluative load. This helps to clarify the conclusions which the actual choice of words led towards; and to suggest possible counter-arguments, other ways of viewing the same situation, against which the text should be compared when we judge it overall

In the final column one then identifies the main conclusions and assumptions of the text, both the stated ones and those unstated or hinted at. So overall the first table could look like this:

THE TEXT	COMMENTS ON MEANINGS	A REWORDING OF KEY COMPONENTS	MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE TEXT
Section 1			
Section 2			
…..			

The second part of the method builds on the results from the first. In a second table we lay out for each important conclusion the basis on which it is proposed: the asserted or assumed data and principles.

I Claim [this conclusion],	*given this Data (empirical facts)*	*and this Principle (or principles = theoretical and/or value statements);*	*Unless (/except when) one or more of these counter-arguments applies*
Conclusion 1	Data 1.1, (1.2, …)	Principle 1.1, (1.2, …)	Rebuttal 1.1, (1.2, 1.3, ,…)
Conclusion 2	Data 2.1, (2.2, …)	Principle 2.1, (2.2, …)	Rebuttal 2.1, (2.2, 2.3, ,…)
…..	….	……	……

The possible counterarguments (rebuttals) can either be direct doubts about the identified data and principle(s), or other doubts or exceptions concerning the claim.

The overall procedure nearly always provides interesting new insights about what is being said and how, and a helpful basis for evaluating and if necessary changing it.

Learning versus accountability?

The 'logical framework' (logframe) can be another useful format for thinking. Whether under its own name or at the heart of newer packages like 'Results Based Management' and 'Project Cycle Management', it is widely required by funders. But it has often become a cage for control which stops us from learning. Let us see how.[4]

The logframe is another matrix or table. We can describe it in the terms we've just used. In the first column is the claim, a program or project proposal, consisting of a hypothesized chain of means and ends. This relies on, first, the theoretical assumptions behind the means-ends hypothesis, and second a value proposition that the highest end in the chain (the 'goal' or 'development objective') is a justified public priority. In addition a number of specific empirical assumptions may have to be satisfied for the design to work. The various assumptions should be identified in the final column. Their non-fulfilment gives us possible rebuttals. Between the column of objectives and the column of assumptions come a column or columns for measuring performance at each level in the means-ends chain.

The logframe can help us face basic questions about a design: how is the project/program justified in terms of more fundamental criteria than just its own outputs – how does it contribute to public priorities? how does it relate to factors outside its control but which affect how it would work and contribute? how realistic are its assumptions about them? When used like this, especially to keep our eyes on the validity of our assumptions about an uncertain future and an imperfectly understood operating environment, the logframe provides an important service. A key element of learning is to learn about our ignorance, identify what we do not know.

Unfortunately most use of the logframe has been preoccupied instead with monitoring the fine detail of achievement of the originally set objectives. We see this in the traditional matrix design: two centrally placed columns about performance indicators dominate, while the assumptions column is relegated to the far right, illogically divorced from the means-ends chain whose links it is supposed to elaborate. The original design was assumed to be basically adequate and to form a 'contract' between implementers and funders, so the priority was to monitor how far it is followed. Logframe-based management has then often ignored changed conditions and outdated assumptions, and been a brake on learning since it was focused on enforcing the original 'contract', not on reviewing and updating it.

In evaluation and monitoring, the choices here are discussed in terms of 'learning versus accountability'. But the most basic form of accountability is to show, not that one has stuck by rote to outdated plans, but that one is paying attention to reality and to fundamental public priorities. Some 'Results-Based Management' goes in this direction,

[4] For a fuller discussion and illustrations, see my 'Evaluating the "logical framework approach" - towards learning-oriented development evaluation', *Public Administration and Development*, vol.20, no.1, pp.17-28.

but unfortunately holds on to the unsuitable traditional version of the logframe matrix. The philosopher George Santayana warned that if we don't learn from the past then we are doomed to repeat it. Regrettably much management practice has been *determined* to repeat and reproduce old plans, rather than learning. The plans became ends and not means.

Thinking caringly - learning about values

Learning for the future thus means learning from the past, having an interest in history, precisely in order not to repeat it. A worrying trend reported in South African education is a dramatic decline in the wish to study your, admittedly painful but profoundly instructive, history.

Studying history can also be a path for learning to care about others. So are mentoring, role models, and stories and examples from everyday practice, not only about 'saints'. Caring values are central for public managers, and cannot be presumed to automatically grow and be sufficient. In the absence of attention to public values we may become dominated by the values of the market and the search for status through wealth alone.[5]

Ideals of public service and public-spiritedness are critically important for the operation of community and state, and of markets. However the stories in simple economics models, including some now applied to public affairs in 'public choice theory' and so on, often concern actors of great selfishness and much knowledge. They care little and may feel little need to learn from each other – and yet society thrives. These parodies of reality support market-based philosophies of self-interest which in fact rely on inherited ethics of public service, but undermine them. Public spirit, like self-interested attitudes, can increase or decrease according to its environment and whether it is fostered or not.

We need a realistic middle road between ideals of purely self-sacrificing public service and the 'public choice' theory models. People are not only self-interested, nor with a completely fixed idea of what is their self-interest; nor are they purely passive or totally public-spirited. They are not super-knowledgeable but each has valuable knowledge and some willingness to learn from and cooperate with others. Participation increases their co-operation with a policy, and increases its quality. These are the bases for a 'social learning' approach.[6]

[5] This section draws on my 'Thoughts for the Next Phase in Education and Training for Public and Development Management', pp.165-188 in *The State of Public and Development Management in South Africa*, eds. F. Theron & E. Schwella, 2000, School of Public Management & Planning, University of Stellenbosch.

[6] Louise White, 1990. *Implementing Policy Reforms in LDCs*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Learning to think creatively

Lastly, we have to learn how to create, as well as how to criticize and care; and how to *un*learn inadequate paradigms and values which we should discard. Many interesting books now discussive creative thinking, including for public management, to identify and transcend the old fetters in our minds. No doubt this will be a topic in future issues of SMS Review. I will only say that the methods introduced earlier help considerably. Identifying a metaphor, rewording a proposition, finding an alternative image, locating an assumption, formulating counterarguments – all foster richer thinking, further options, better communication and improved learning.

Learning in public management is a fascinating and vital field. I congratulate DPSA for founding this journal, and wish it a great future.

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