Working in and Against Hybrid Landscapes: Reflections on the Skills and Capabilities of Chief Officers in UK Local Government

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Abstract

This chapter examines the educational and developmental demands of public managers, exploring the necessary skills and competences required to move across the hybrid landscapes within which they increasingly work. Drawing on in-depth interviews with chief officers in local authorities across the United Kingdom, it first argues that the work of chief officers leads them to navigate between and across different dimensions: be it between sedimented and emergent institutions; "leaping in" and "leaping ahead" performances of leadership; and bonded or bridging relations. Assessing the requisite skills and behaviors of officers to move across such dimensions, the chapter draws attention to the capabilities of serial adaptation, authenticity, and puzzling. Such capabilities are not easily codified, being generated through experiential learning, and nurtured through the demands of reflexive practice. Spaces for reflexive practice are, it is claimed, integral to the developmental demands, resilience, and well-being of public managers, thereby privileging novel forms of critical reflection, action learning, and leadership development that facilitate the opening up of spaces of learning that straddle both theory and everyday practices. Ultimately, however, such forms of learning do not always sit well with the performance management mechanisms of teaching and learning, as well as learners' own expectations of the classroom. They arguably destabilize traditional power relations between the lecturer and the student, advancing the conditions for the further democratization of the classroom. The study thus ends with a call for more destabilization and experimentation in the provision of novel spaces of learning for public managers and public managers of the future.

Keywords

Chief officers · Austerity governance · Local government · Local government · Serial adaptation and spatialization · New municipalism · Reflexive practice

It is widely recognized that local authority officers or managers increasingly inhabit and move across a hybrid policy environment, in which they encounter multiple and competing governance logics and practices (Dickinson 2016). In the United Kingdom, new spaces and scales of governance, presenting opportunities for public innovation and market disruption, have come into being. City deals and combined authorities, partnerships, shared services, local housing and energy companies all operate across multiple and shifting arenas (Ferry et al. 2018; see also Morphet and Clifford 2017). Each arena brings into being a new constellation of actors, a plurality of identities, interests, and values which enter into the policy process. Indeed, the local policy landscape has been pulled and twisted in opposing directions by different forces from globalization, localism, and devolution through to austerity and shifting citizen values and expectations (see Hulme et al. 2015).

Of course, this hybridization is not new. It would be misguided to argue that local government ever worked to the rhythm of a single drum. New governance logics and practices have always been layered onto established regimes and ways of working. For example, new public management with its logics of measurement,

competition, and consumerization emerged in and around the 1980s, calling into question what were then seen as the inefficiencies of traditional public administration, which had already been brought into focus by the demands of techno-managerialism. Public governance with its logics of collaboration and engagement arguably followed in the wake of new public management, a counterbalance to the latter's potential for fragmentation and contractualization.

But, since 2010 and cuts to public funding, the focus on the hybridity of the local landscape, coupled with the demands of austerity governance, new digital technologies, and forms of co-production, has arguably triggered a renewed wave of critical thinking on the role of the public manager in the shifting landscape of the local. Indeed, a novel school of thinking around the twenty-first-century public servant has come to redesign the skills and craft of public leadership, drawing attention to relational and emotional work, to much-needed storytelling, to the orchestration of networks of providers and to the demands of acting as a system-architect or boundary spanner. Generic skills are increasingly seen to trump specialist or professional skills. And the emotional labor of working across spaces and the demands of emotional intelligence have been reasserted. Taken together, these demands have arguably come to militate against long contested but still embedded models of heroic leadership (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014; Dickinson et al. 2018; Needham and Mangan undated).

This chapter examines the educational and developmental demands of public managers, exploring the necessary skills and competences required to move across the hybrid landscapes within which they increasingly work. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with chief officers working in local authorities across the United Kingdom, it first argues that the work of officers leads them to navigate between and across different dimensions: be it between sedimented and emergent institutions; "leaping in" and "leaping ahead" performances of leadership; and bonded or bridging relations. Analyzing how officers move across such dimensions, it then discusses the requisite skills and behaviors of serial adaptation, authenticity, and puzzling. Such capabilities are not easily codified, being generated through experiential learning, and nurtured through the demands of reflexive practice. Spaces for reflexive practice are, it is claimed, integral to the developmental demands, resilience, and well-being of public managers, thereby privileging novel forms of critical reflection, action learning, and leadership development that facilitate the opening up of spaces of learning that straddle both theory and everyday practices. Ultimately, however, such forms of learning do not always sit well with the performance management mechanisms of teaching and learning, as well as learners' own expectations of the classroom. They arguably destabilize traditional power relations between the lecturer and the student, advancing the conditions for the further democratization of the classroom. The study thus ends with a call for more destabilization in the provision of novel spaces of learning for public managers and public managers of the future.

What Do We Mean by "Chief Officers?"

Over the years, titles and job descriptions change. The chief officer, at the head of functional department in the 1960s, had a very different role to someone who is now the head of a large multifunctional directorate. Equally, the status and authority given to such titles change over time, morphing and evolving across political and organizational contexts. This has significant implications for how we talk about "chief officers." On the one hand, when we refer to earlier studies and debates, we have to be aware the title "chief officer" carried with it a whole set of assumptions at the time and take these into account in our analysis. On the other hand, we need to be transparent about what we mean by "chief officers" in our own analysis. This is perhaps easier said than done. The title of "chief officers" can sometimes be used to refer to "chief executives," while that of "senior managers" might refer to chief officers and chief executives at one and the same time. For clarification, in this study, we use the term "chief officers" to denote the second tier of officers who sit "below" the office of the chief executive. Typically, we are referring to directors, members of the senior management or leadership team, who sit at the head of cross-cutting directorates or departments such as "place and regeneration" or "community services." These officers, we suggest, sit firmly within the strategic apex of the authority, with outward-looking responsibilities to make sense of the shifting context, threats, and opportunities facing the council. They are more often than not the privileged interface for elected members. Yet, at the same time, they anchor and steer such strategies within departments, with responsibilities to co-produce and translate strategies into practice across "their" directorates. In short, chief officers are the lynch-pin between the strategic apex or the "joint executive" of elected members and senior officers and the middle-line management in local authorities. We thus focus more on function than on title.

A Note on Method

The study draws upon a series of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of chief officers across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In addition, two workshops, attended by some 46 chief officers, were held at the 2018 autumn conference of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport. Finally, a desk-based literature review of academic articles, policy briefings, and position papers was undertaken to surface and map current thinking on the role of public managers, the skills and competences of local government officers, and the broader public sector workforce. All interviews used a standardized topic guide and were audio recorded. Interviews were designed to capture the perceptions of officers, generating an arena in which officers could voice, and reflect critically on, their daily working practices and routines in the context of austerity. We focused on teasing out how officers have experienced (or not) change in their work, questioning the relevance of established ways of working and how far new demands are challenging the established craft of local leadership and stewardship. Put alternatively, what are the demands of the multiple arenas and

governance logics that populate the local government landscape? And what are the skills and capabilities required by officers to move across these arenas and harness different logics?

Interviews were coded according to a combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies. In the first instance, a set of deductive codes breaking down the everyday work of officers was deployed to manually process the interview data (namely, skills and capabilities; forms of labor; relational management; personal identity; and activities and challenges). Emerging themes and exemplary transcribed statements were then shared across the research team. In order to tease out differences of interpretation and allow for critical reflection across the team, themes and statements were discussed collectively in face-to-face meetings. A second round of coding was then undertaken, applying a set of inductive codes that emerged from the initial analysis of the data (namely, space, time, and narrative). Lastly, in order to test emerging lessons from the fieldwork, members of the research team ran two workshops for chief officers, where participants were presented with initial findings and asked to comment on how they reflected (or not) their own working practices. These practitioner comments informed a further round of critical reflection by the team on its own interpretation of the data.

The World(s) of Chief Officers

Let us begin with a word of caution against any overly general claims or universal statements. Such claims, which typically advance the dawning of a "new" managerial epoch and concurrent skillset for officers, quickly run up against the hybridity of local landscapes and the plurality of managerial and political logics that officers work with and against. That said, the drawing of lessons requires us to avoid descending too far into the particular, in ways that over-privilege the individual and micro-experiences of chief officers to the exclusion of what might be common to their work across different local contexts. Thus, while we are careful not to impute universalizing forms of change onto chief officers, we nonetheless identify and characterize a set of coalescing elements, be it understandings, demands, and practices, that can be seen to shape the everyday worlds of chief officers. Such emergent patterns of coalescing elements help us to make sense of what it means "to be a chief officer" while recognizing that these elements are brought together in specific combinations and bundles across different contexts. Indeed, the generation of strategies and recognition of demands owes much to the economic, political, and social contexts of local authorities, as well as the backgrounds, styles, and training of chief officers themselves.

Moving Across Space and Time

So, how are we to read these multiple worlds of chief officers and the challenges that they encounter? We argue that reading the different accounts of public management

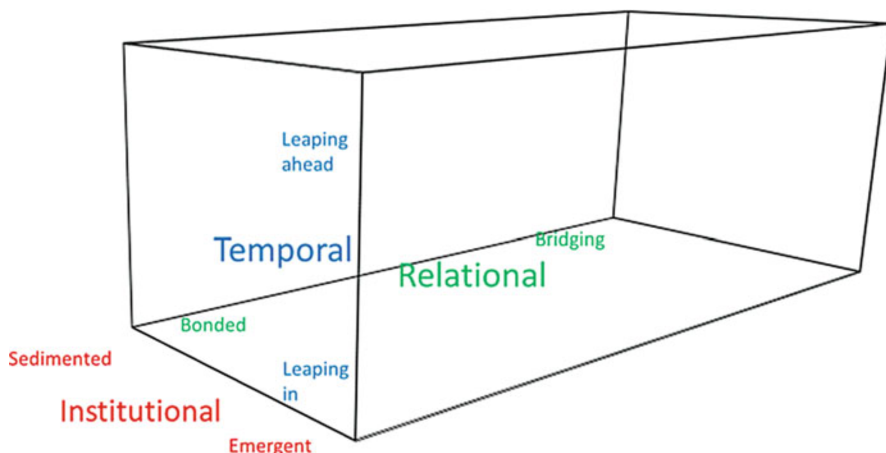

Fig. 1 Moving across spatial dimensions: Interpreting the changing world of chief officers

articulated by chief officers through the lens of space opens up new ways of understanding the challenges and opportunities that they currently face. Importantly for us, the construction of different spaces of work is highly significant, for the constitution and production of such spaces "gives form to and orders how this world [of chief officers] appears" while making possible "distinctive gatherings of beings – things and people – that establish relationality and open new spaces" (Dikeç 2017, p. 1). The politics of space-making or spatialization is thus in many ways the primary work of chief officers, for such processes bring into being different organizational logics, demands, and indeed temporal dynamics. Put alternatively, in our perspective, the primary challenge facing chief officers is ultimately developing the skills and capabilities to move across, and in and out of, different spaces (see Fig. 1).

With this in mind, we identify three primary dimensions to what we call the spatial work of officers. First, they traverse different institutional arenas, from sedimented to emergent arenas. "Sedimented" arenas are relatively rule-bound, with clear modes of decision-making and well-defined performative roles and scripts. In contrast, "emergent" arenas are more fluid and highly political in that the rules and norms of decision-making, and indeed roles and membership of the arena, are in the process of being defined and remain more open to question and challenge.

Second, chief officers move between two forms of leadership: "leaping in" and "leaping ahead" (Tomkins and Simpson 2015). This dimension speaks to the complex temporality of the different spaces in which chief officers operate. "Leaping in" brings officers firmly into the immediate and the present, requiring them in a logic of substitution to intervene in, and at times take control of, a situation. "Leaping ahead" follows a logic of empowerment, obliging officers to "move" into the future, opening up and facilitating future possibilities and alternatives.

Third, chief officers move increasingly between bonded and bridging relational spaces. Here we draw on the work of Putnam (2000) on social capital. “Bonding” relates to closing down spaces, to building the identification of actors with spaces, and to the drawing of boundaries or the incorporating of actors and their demands into existing spaces. “Bridging” refers to opening up spaces, to working across different communities, and to the drawing of equivalences across different groups and potentially across different arenas to forge new spaces of working (see Fig. 1).

Against this background, the work of officers becomes, we suggest, navigating between the different dimensions of the alternative spaces which they inhabit. They are constantly working across multiple institutional arenas, juggling different balances of temporal leadership, and forging boundaries through recourse to bonded and bridging relations. Much of this work is not the domain of “either-or” choices. Take for example, “leaping in” and “leaping ahead.” Effective “leaping in” cannot be simply predicated on the present, but rests also on an understanding of the past and the future. Similarly, “leaping ahead” is not merely about future visioning, it has to be grounded in the present and the past (Tomkins and Simpson 2015). Indeed, in practice, this temporal dimension is often collapsed as officers seek to bring the strategic into the everyday. Put alternatively, the everyday world of chief officers is not that of stark dichotomies, but the pragmatic messiness of “puzzling” and grounded expertise across multiple dimensions (see APSE 2018; Spinosa et al. 1997).

This is not to deny the need for officers to maintain what are traditionally seen as the “core” skills of leadership. Chief officers spoke repeatedly of the skills of strategy formation, effective influencing, good communication, political awareness, networking, and relationship management. Such core skills remain part of the armory of chief officers, for, as one officer commented, to “lead, [is] to have a vision, to be able to lead a team, to be able to communicate really well, and to be the interface between the politicians and the project.” However, the key question, we suggest, is how this so-called traditional skillset is mobilized to navigate the different dimensions of the multiple spaces in which chief officers move and to what end.

Chief Officers Have to Be Serial Adapters

With this question in mind, it is tempting to conceptualize the work and skills of chief officers as being intimately related to how they hold together the different spaces which go to make up the local landscape. Accounts of new public governance and managing across networks thus tend to endorse visions of senior public managers as “weavers” of different narratives and resources or holders of different geographies (Needham and Mangan undated, p.8). They often privilege practices of boundary spanning, in which senior public officials translate across the different networks and arenas, acting as a nodal actor capable of bringing multiple institutions into dialogue and coordinating policy responses across different spaces of governance (Dickinson et al. 2018; Williams 2019). Indeed, spatially, chief officers sit at the apex of super-directorates which amalgamate an increasing number of different

services, teams, and responsibilities. In managing across these directorates, they operate in both administrative and political worlds, with the latter's calculations and rationalities repeatedly framing their thinking and decision-making. But, at the same time, they move in and out of different decision-making arenas, internal and external to their authorities, representing, as they do, the council in new collaborations, partnerships, and quasi-regional bodies. Chief officers are, our research suggests, increasingly moving up and down different scales of government, thereby moving in and out of different geographies while navigating the increasingly hybrid landscape of local government.

> "I oversee planning, building control, economic development, to employability support workshops, a property portfolio, [. . .] statutory planning, strategic planning engagement. I also have a building services operation/property services, waste collection, an arms-length company [. . .] also. . .catering for schools, nursing homes, there's something else, parks. . .I had housing until 2015. . .so it is 5000 staff, £350 million". Research Participant.

Yet, while our research supports such roles of boundary spanning, it also challenges them. Despite such understandings offering important insights into the work of chief officers, we suggest that they also risk imposing a bias towards unity on the roles and responsibilities of chief officers. In other words, they risk following a managerialist quest to impose a form of singularity or overarching coordination on the hybrid landscape of local government. They hold on to the possibility of imposing order on a fragmented system, which in many ways constantly escapes such attempts to be ordered, remaining riven by boundaries and contingencies, despite there being partial points of fixity and temporary settlements.

Importantly, being more open to the impossibility of any such totalizing order draws attention to the compartmentalization of the different spaces in which officers work. It suggests that it is not always possible to bring spaces together or to translate across such different spaces so as to ensure a certain fluidity or flow across different arenas. Rather, certain spaces remain highly fixed and bounded, with officers moving into them and adopting different roles and responsibilities. In short, officers might well have recourse to an alternative set of practices, not always spanning boundaries, but taking on different roles, registers, and performances as they move from space to space. They might not join-up spaces or hold them together, but they may well have to live with rupture and disassociation. They may have to operate as serial adapters, entering different spaces, speed-reading scripts, grasping alternative rules and roles, and transforming their leadership appropriately.

> "On a typical day I have leadership roles across the council, corporate meetings, I chair various bodies within and outside the council, have to carve out time to do 'ward walks' (. . .), then governance related meetings (. . .) for example with the combined authority, but also meetings with partners we deliver services with. . .and they are a very wide range". Research Participant.

The Demands of Serial Adaptation

Such serial adaptation across multiple spaces poses a number of challenges for chief officers. One primary challenge is that of shape-shifting, whereby officers act instrumentally to adopt multiple roles, but in so doing, they lose any claims to legitimacy. Indeed, any leadership intervention across different spaces needs to remain anchored in an officer's self-identity or set of personal values or convictions. This is not to advocate a particular leadership style. Instead, it is to support visions of leadership that foreground the importance of leading from conviction, from lived experience while demonstrating integrity, particularly in the consistency of actions and expressed beliefs.

However, for us, appeals to such authenticity should be married to an awareness of, and challenge to, one's own values, habits, and default positions. This ethos of critical self-reflection is a key component of defining life stories and experiences, for to "know" yourself or to "tell our stories, we have to see ourselves as others see us," taking distance from one's own identity or "seeing oneself as an other" (Sparrowe 2005, p. 429). The self is always constructed in relation to, and with, others. As Sparrowe (2005 pp. 431–432) points out, the constitution of the self involves experimentation with different plot lines, alternative futures and pasts, which "are often derived from the 'plots' of others." This is not "a mark of inauthenticity. Rather, it is a hallmark of narrative authenticity."

In fact, challenging embedded habits through processes of "puzzling" means that chief officers should at times be wary of default established routines and being too grounded in the everyday (Spinosa et al. 1997). Any blinkered perspective risks losing the capacity to see alternatives, or other ways of knowing. Take, for example, the tactic of "leaping in" or what we might call "firefighting." "Leaping in" cannot follow a logic of substitution, whereby lead officers take control of a situation; it has also to incorporate a logic of empowerment, whereby followers are opened up to new ways of working and alternative strategies. Such logics of empowerment rest on recognizing difference and maintaining the capacity to see alternatives and question established values. Similarly, "leaping ahead" is not typified by imposing solutions, but opening up potential alternatives, recognizing that while lived experiences tells you one story, there are other stories to be told and engaged with (Tomkins and Simpson 2015).

Finally, it is difficult to avoid the normative justification of certain values. In other words, is it appropriate to make claims to a set of values which might, for example, not advance social justice? In privileging social justice, we impute onto the role of the council a set of values associated with the ethos of stewardship, municipal entrepreneurship and innovation, collaboration, and sustainability. But, such values, as we argue, cannot be seen as a straightjacket. They too need to be challenged and subjected to critical evaluation by other ways of knowing. To coin a phrase, they are a means of "way-finding" where the end state itself may not be set in stone (Chia and Holt 2009). As one officer argued: "the smart thing is not trying to get to answers. I think we need to find out what are the smart questions to ask and what are the propositions to test."

Supporting the Resilience of Chief Officers

Faced with such multiple demands and skillsets, one of the primary skills or capabilities of chief officers is that of resilience. Indeed, chief officers themselves value resilience as a key capability in the delivery of their responsibilities. Resilience can be seen in many ways as dealing with ambiguity or the emotional labor that uncertainty can produce. In part, calls for resilience respond, we suggest, to the tensions for chief officers in reconciling their public and private selves. Here, the experience of chief officers under austerity is arguably little different from that of other members of the local government workforce. The private self, or the personal identity, emotional commitments, and identification with public service, can come into tension with the public self, or the professional roles or institutional responsibilities, particularly the demands for budgetary cutbacks (Needham and Mangan 2016). In the context of austerity governance in the UK, the evidence suggests that resilience is becoming an increasingly important skill: senior officers need to be resilient to deal with the growing complexities and pressures they face in the current environment and with the emotional labor which these demands entail. Significantly, a recent 2018 survey reported that 48% of senior officers believed their workload had increased to an "almost unmanageable level," while 12% claimed that their workload was already "unmanageable." The majority of senior officers also admitted that they had considered leaving their role in the past 12 months (Golding 2018).

> "In practice, I am on call 24/7. My portfolio spans such a wide range of responsibilities that in practice there's always something coming up – my diary is just an indication of what I have to do, but, on an average day, other things will come up. I work ridiculous hours". Research Participant.

"Leaping Ahead" and the Discourse of the New Municipalism

Temporally, as we suggest above, chief officers are pulled in different directions. Budget cutbacks have increasingly led chief officers to "live" in the short term or present, with chief officers repeatedly recognizing the daily challenges of "firefighting." But cutbacks have simultaneously demanded a focus on the strategic, a realm of managerial thinking which is often more closely associated with the long-term or future visions. As such, chief officers work to different rhythms or time-scales, typified by the temporal pressures of reconciliating the strategic and the everyday. Such pressures have been amplified by the transformation of how officers experience time, with officers arguably recognizing an "acceleration" or "shrinkage" of time. This transformation comes in part, we suggest, from the speed of information communication technologies and social media, which have placed increasing communication and administrative demands on officers, particularly in the context of austerity governance (although we note that such demands are not necessarily negative, they can generate increased transparency or accountability of decision-making).

> "Austerity has required us to focus more on what really makes a difference, being strategic – but that goes with losing the ability in the sector to stand back, to value the reflection time that we need to look at innovative approaches...it has made us [senior officers] more focused because reduced resources mean you can only do X and not Y and so (...) you have to keep the focus on what you're setting out to do while you know you do get deviated all the time". Research Participant.

In fact, in the first instance, we found chief officers regarded austerity and budgetary reductions as the "new normal," part and parcel of their everyday practices. This may well be seen as another process of adaptation to the new environment of local government as chief officers have adjusted over time to the stark reality of cutbacks. But, we cannot simply read from this process of adaptation an acceptance by chief officers of austerity and its logics of cutbacks and service reductions. Opposition to austerity was voiced by the majority of our research participants, if to the dismay of many (particularly outside local government) this did not result in any collective voicing of opposition to, and direct mobilization against, centrally imposed cuts. But neither could this opposition be reduced to Do-It-Yourself politics of incremental resistance at the frontline, pushing at the margins of what is possible, although we are not in a position to deny that this can occur.

Rather, our evidence suggests that after some 10 years of austerity, chief officers increasingly articulated the demands of austerity through an emerging discourse of "the new municipalism." This new municipalism privileges forms of public entrepreneurship and commercialization for the public purpose. Indeed, in making such claims to public entrepreneurship, chief officers attributed local government with new forms of agency to engage in place stewardship and transform local ways of working and center-local relations. Again, this should not be seen as an endorsement of austerity. At the heart of this discourse, there sits a rejection of austerity, but it is married to an acceptance of the need for transformation and a growing belief in the agency of local authorities to deliver new forms of local stewardship and market interventions. Indeed, although somewhat atypical, one officer claimed: "the current environment forces local government to take more a strategic, creative, long term, collaborative approach," continuing that local authorities "are not 'reacting'; we need to be more innovative, creative, dynamic in the way in which we do business...this is the most exciting, liberating dynamic I've operated in in my 25 years in local government."

Overall, therefore, traditional ways of seeing chief officers no longer exhaust the challenges that they face in their work, if they ever did. Firstly, the rise of super-directorates has in practice put an end to the dilemma over whether to privilege technical or generic skills. All chief officers have to be generalists if they are to oversee the amalgam of services under their responsibilities. Secondly, the image of the Janus-faced chief officer looking at one and the same time to her department and to the broader strategic goals of the authority fails to capture the multiplicity of spaces within which chief officers move. The tension, at the very least, is no longer between department and corporate responsibilities, but between department, authority, and partnership or regional responsibilities and loyalties. It is this competing

assemblage of interests and accountabilities that chief officers have increasingly to navigate. Finally, the myth of political neutrality may well be repeated and "grip" the *corps* of chief officers, but the nuances of the divide between the so-called administrative and political roles and responsibilities are well-known. The worlds of chief officers intersect with those of elected members, as chief officers operate in the political domain both directly and indirectly through how they frame their advice and policy practices. But more importantly, our evidence suggests that the multiplicity of new governance spaces across local government, many of which may be characterized as relatively informal arenas without rules, may well translate into chief officers being dragged into what might be seen as political roles of representation. By default, they risk standing in, at the very least, for practices of accountability, having to give an account of developments across such fora to elected members and indeed fellow officers who are often absent from such arenas. With such challenges and shifting roles and responsibilities in mind, what are the implications for the formal education of chief officers and professional skills development?

Taking Practice into the Education and Skills Development of Local Government Chief Officers

In his analysis of the formal education for middle managers in the public sector, Paul Williams (2019) succinctly identifies the foundations of university awards available to public managers. He isolates a "toolbox" of MBA modules across the sector on the likes of "managing organizations," "leading change," and "working collaboratively." These courses deliver valuable and informed insights into the role of public managers, but as Williams points out, often the challenge lies elsewhere, less in the domain of content and more to do with how the programs are taught and delivered. As Williams suggests, the key question for the training and development of public managers is how to "strike the right balance between the teaching of explicit knowledge about collaboration in the form of facts, theories, models and approaches, with the development of tacit knowledge and experiential learning that assists in practical policymaking and practice" (Williams 2019, pp. 163–164). In this section, we build upon our understanding of the role of chief officers to consider how we might build into the education and training of local government chief officers the skills of adaptation, resilience, and reflective practice to meet the demands of the new municipalism. Our focus is not directed on determining the core learning outcomes of programs or narrowing down the list of competencies associated with the role of chief officers. This has been done effectively elsewhere. Rather, our analysis focuses on how we might seek to facilitate the processes of knowledge exchange and experiential learning between practitioners which is necessary to cultivate the craft of being a chief officer. In other words, how do we learn from what it is that officers do when they do policy? Or alternatively, how for example do we capture "knowledge" of the practical demands of collaborative arenas and the dangers of the likes of "shape-shifting", and how do we transmit such learning?

Our starting point is that learning about the practices of policy and management is ill-disposed to the rules and norms of conventional "teaching" and the logics of the classroom (Leigh and Freeman 2019). Doing policy is a craft that cannot be easily codified or transmitted through technical models or universal assumptions about the world. Indeed, as a set of complex practices, policymaking takes place, as Leigh and Freeman (2019, p. 380) argue "on the ground" in and through relational spaces and actions, which are highly contingent and riven by tensions between what is known and what remains unknown and uncertain (p. 386). Understanding or rather getting a grasp on such practices can best come from pedagogical strategies designed not to encourage learners or students to "read" about models of policy but to facilitate learning through action, through "doing" policy themselves (to borrow again from Leigh and Freeman (2019, p. 388)). In other words, it is not possible to codify effectively or reproduce fully the everyday rules of adaptative leadership and when and how, for example, to mediate the demands of shape-shifting. Such knowledge, we suggest, comes from tacit know-how, knowledge that comes through experience, and that resists codification. Attempts to construct codified models offer at best a simplified and decontextualized representation of the complex and messy realities of policymaking. Of course, these models are not without value as heuristics to "make [some] sense" of the policy process. But, in their failure to capture messy realities, they can offer up technical and depoliticized interpretations of policy that work to exclude forms of contestation and challenge while pushing to the margins or sidelining the exclusionary dynamics that privilege certain voices over others. More importantly, such attempts to codify policymaking can often lead public managers to iron out the messiness and uncertainty of their interventions retrospectively so as to fit with the steps and stages spelt out in the "textbook". Rather than recognize what might not have gone to plan, practices are made to fit, thereby reproducing a technical "clean slate" narrative of what it means to be a public manager.

So, if we are not going to entirely invest in models or best practice guides on learning, what do we do? Our evidence supports appeals to invest more in creating spaces of critical reflective practice for public managers as part of development programs and in-house delivery. After some 10 years of austerity governance, the strategic leadership capabilities of local authorities will, we suggest, wither on the vine *unless* chief officers have the opportunity and spaces to engage in reflexive practice; to benefit from mentoring and peer review; and to scan for future challenges and alternatives. Here, experiential action learning or learning communities come to the fore as a means of learning through doing and advancing critical reflection (Broussine and Ahmad 2013; Oldfield 2017). Action learning entails working over time in small facilitated groups of practitioners on "real-world problems" and tasks while gaining challenge from peers and external voices. As a mode of learning, it thus ties directly into everyday practices and offers a longitudinal engagement that opens up for public managers the opportunity to develop a continuing narrative on their practice and learning (Broussine and Ahmad 2013, p. 24). But, as set out by Leigh and Freeman (2019, p. 383), such action learning has to challenge the very construction or definition of the "problems" facing public managers, recognizing the multiple and often conflictual logics, knowledges and ways of seeing leadership. It is

not simply a question of learning to be more efficient at delivering services or leading collaboration within the dominant frames or accepted logics of a profession or discipline. Such learning, as it is widely recognized, does not go beyond the limits of single-loop learning, which entails getting more efficient at delivering a task but not questioning the underlying assumptions and conditions that make the task possible or legitimize its outcomes. Questioning such underlying assumptions and remaining open to alternative constructions of problems and policies, and the political conflicts over such constructions, firmly cements inquiries in the realm of double-loop learning (Argyris 1977). Triggering such learning, our evidence suggests, arguably drives forward the skills and capabilities of serial adaptation.

As part of this process, leadership development programs should look to harness the processes of problem definition or the art of problematization (Barnett et al. 2019). We contend that in the process of decision-making, it is common to run too quickly toward the definition of a "solution." Puzzling over or teasing out the problem or problems that underpin competing definitions of the issue at stake is a vital component of leadership (see APSE 2018; Spinosa et al. 1997). It is, however, given the time pressures on acting, an element of leadership that can be overlooked. Problematization challenges the status quo, bringing into question the issue of the dominant common sense that structures our thinking. It enables us to turn things on their head. For example, undertaking problem tree analysis whereby practitioners map and reassess the multiple facets of the demands being addressed by particular programs exposes to critical challenge the dominant problematizations underpinning the work of practitioners. It poses the "what if" question, teasing out narratives of "how we got here" and "what if we were to do things differently" (see Abbott 2004). In so doing, it draws attention to "paradoxes and contradictions [. . .] rather than order and patterns" (Broussine and Ahmad 2013, p. 22).

There are of course a number of methods for building such critical reflexive capabilities, all of which can integrate within the framework of action learning, while responding to the preferred learning styles of public managers. Methods such as case study learning, problem-based learning, and shadowing can all be adapted to engage with practice, crossing the divide between the classroom and the world(s) of public managers (in ways that privilege the direct encounter with the policy process). In so doing, such methods can thereby recognize the contingency of knowledge and practice while offering the potential to transfer agency toward the student or learner (Leigh and Freeman 2019, p. 382). Indeed, if married to a participatory and democratic logic of action and personal inquiry, learning environments can generate a dialogue in which "people develop greater self-confidence along with greater knowledge" (Broussine and Ahmad 2013, p. 23). Such dialogues can overcome the depoliticization and pessimism associated with a lack of choice or capacity to bring about change while creating a supportive space to address the emotional labor of work and the tensions between public and private identities. However, these dialogues and methods of learning, to emphasize once again, have to be tied to, or infused with, the ethos and skills of the reflexive practitioner that leads to a questioning of the established common sense, shifting the aims of learning to be less about the "solving" of problems and more about puzzling and working with

those problems and the politics and conflicts they will generate (see Broussine and Ahmad 2013; Leigh and Freeman 2019).

Overall, therefore, we are not proposing any method of learning as a panacea or "magic solution" that can navigate and simplify the messy interactions between the craft of policymaking and the formal education of public managers. Rather, we advocate the continued need for reflexive practice and for guaranteeing public managers the space for such critical thinking. Action learning, we suggest, offers one supportive space for generating such reflexive practice, but it is by no means the only method for bringing practitioners into such dialogues. With this in mind, we conclude in favor of a commitment to a particular ethos of reflexive learning. This ethos, we suggest, should be framed or organized around "know knowns" of professional development and the work of public managers, what we coin to be the "4Ps": the engagement with *practice*; active *participation* in learning and working with others; *puzzling* as a mode of inquiry; and *politics* or engaging with conflict as a driver of innovation. It is through the translation of these "4Ps" into the design and delivery of learning that we can best support the development needs of public managers, putting in place the supportive and safe environments that build resilience and the practices of authentic leadership and "way finding" that challenge one's own values, habits, and default positions.

Conclusions

This chapter examined the educational and developmental demands of public managers, focusing on the work of chief officers in UK local authorities. It argued that the everyday work of officers leads them to navigate between and across sedimented and emergent institutions, while they perform "leaping in" and "leaping ahead" leadership, and work to forge bonded or bridging relationships. Against this background, the study advanced the case for public managers to reflect critically on the practices of serial adaptation, authenticity, and puzzling. Such skills and competences, it concluded, are not easily codified; they are generated rather through experiential learning and nurtured through the demands of reflexive practice. Spaces for reflexive practice are indeed integral to the resilience and well-being of public managers, particularly those experiencing the emotional labor of working under conditions of austerity governance. Such spaces can challenge efforts to depoliticize central cuts to funding, opening up possibilities for public managers to reconstitute their own sense of agency (Broussine and Ahmad 2013, p. 20). In short, it is through the provision of such supportive environments in which public managers can reflect on, and challenge, established ways of working that learning can impact directly on the delivery of public services.

But, if these advantages of reflective learning and exploration are well known, how far do they "fit" with the institutional rules and norms of university teaching environments? Of course, it is difficult to generalize across such a vast sector. But, such forms of delivery, on the whole, do not always sit well within the performance management mechanisms of teaching and learning, as well as learners' own expectations of the classroom. They do not lend themselves easily to the formulas of module structures, learning objectives, and traditional classroom settings. At the same time, they require risky emotional work where neither the lecturer/facilitator nor the learner "know" where their learning might take them, or even if a so-called "solution" can be found. In other words, such forms of delivery destabilize traditional power relations between the lecturer and the student (see Leigh and Freeman 2019, pp. 388–9). Yet, in doing so, they potentially advance the conditions for the further democratization of the classroom. We thus end this study with a call for more destabilization and experimentation.

Cross-References

► Becoming a Competent Boundary Spanner
► Innovative Skills for the Public Servant of the Future
► Navigating the Complexity – the Future Public Service
► Public Servants for all Places
► Reshaping the Hybrid Role of Public Servants
► Senior Managers in Local Government Policy-Making
► Turning Up the Heat – Exploring New Approaches to Developing the Skills of Public Servants

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