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# Reflections and speculations on teaching and learning in public administration

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## Abstract

The scale and impact of the current global financial and economic crisis affect not just the public and political institutions established to manage the economy, but also those programmes in institutions of higher education which seek to work with professionals, practitioners and decision makers. If we can witness a public crisis of confidence in the capacity of our existing family of institutions to manage the change, then we might expect to observe similar changes in universities, too. This article reflects upon the nature of the relationships between universities (business and management schools) and the wider public and political community. It also attempts to anticipate some of the potential consequences of the crisis in terms of how the academy might reflect upon its assumptions concerning teaching and learning approaches, and expectations within the discipline of public administration. We suggest that the present crisis is an opportunity to think about the curriculum and pedagogic choices we make and to promote a more collaborative approach to learning, drawing upon models of reflection and professional practice to be found across different disciplines including social work and teaching.

## Keywords

collaboration, knowledge exchange and transfer, reflection, teaching and learning

The scale and impact of the international financial and banking crisis of 2007 is still evident. The immediate short- and medium-term consequences have been both political and economic. Across advanced economies in Europe and North

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America, central governments have cut public spending and introduced a range of measures, most of which have been described as introducing an “age of austerity” (Coote, 2010). The short-term political consequences of these measures have varied across nation-states but they have included public demonstrations, organised and localised opposition and resistance to the cuts in public spending, and street demonstrations as well as public disorder. The economic consequences are more uncertain. The collapse of a number of economies in the European Union and the weaknesses now explicit and understood within the eurozone suggest much more profound consequences over the medium to longer term. These changes have had their political impact too, with changes in government in a number of European countries. At the same time we can observe important consequences for higher education and the role and legitimacy of not just public administration but management and business education as well. As *The Economist* noted on 8 May 2010, ‘The financial crisis has dealt them (business/management schools) a double blow. It has damaged their reputations, because so many bankers are MBAs. It has dented their market: Wall Street laid off 240,000 people in the 18 months from the middle of 2007’ (p. 71). But, perhaps the more significant set of questions for this Journal is the one that links the banking crisis with its impact not only on public spending (and higher education), but also on the assumptions and expectations that inform the curriculum and the teaching and research agendas across the sector.

We think that this new context will shape both the research and curriculum development discussions within the fields of public administration and public management. The political, financial and social changes that have taken place do call into question received ways of thinking and doing. As both researchers and teachers it seems to us that we need to reflect upon the ways in which we design, develop and validate our teaching and learning programmes. We want to borrow from the work of Costley and Stephenson (2009) in which they talk about the development of taught or professional doctorates. The key points they make seem to us to summarise the new challenges for those of us who do work across the different boundaries of subject discipline, organisational structures and professional learning. They argue that

universities have to think across the disciplines in terms of structure and in terms of knowledge creation, recognition and use. The programmes offer a means to innovate and become creators and critical users of knowledge and thus to bring about change and make a positive impact on professional practice. This is done by locating the focus of the programme within the context of work, external to the university whilst recognising and linking the critical thinking, research expertise and other hallmarks of academia with real-world issues confronting communities and professional areas. (p. 184)

We think their outline sets the context within which we need to think about the impact of these broader changes to our practice.

We want to invite readers to reflect on the banking crisis and the impact on public spending as an opportunity to think about the nature of the contemporary public administration curriculum and the extent to which these twin crises affect our pedagogical choices. We are aware, too, that there are significant additional factors which need examination. These include the organisational “home” of those involved in the teaching of public administration—business or management schools—as well as those research agendas commissioned by the research councils, professional bodies and academics, and the extent to which they comfortably co-exist.

We do appreciate that this represents a very broad and complex set of arguments and discussions. We do recognise that we are unlikely to cover all of the themes outlined above. At the same time we wanted to use this article as an opportunity to highlight a number of questions and dilemmas for those of us involved both in the pedagogical issues raised by the current crises as well as in responding to, or anticipating the policy and practice agenda prompted by the crises. We see what follows as sketching out some of the pedagogical questions. We accept that some may not accept all of what we are suggesting nor will some accept the framework within which we attempt to locate it. However, we do want to offer what follows in the spirit of genuine reflection. We think that we are working in a period of profound political and social change. And we recommend the essay by John Marakakis (2012) on the crisis in Greece as a timely and helpful set of insights into why we think this is a period of real change. As he comments,

the furore over the country’s economic troubles has deflected foreign attention from the collapse of the political system, though it’s causing Greeks more anxiety than the disastrous drop in their standards of living. They know it has ceased to function and that it cannot be expected to bring about an economic recovery. (Marakakis, 2012: 35)

We could extend these vignettes of social and economic crises re-enforcing the political and institutional crises across Europe and North America. Our point is to establish the context within which we may start to think about what the implications of these changes are for those involved in both public policy analysis and research as well as the teaching and curriculum design of programmes for practitioners and senior professionals. We think that this crisis is different both in kind and degree from those that have taken place since the end of World War II. Certainly in Europe we can see how the economic crisis feeds into a political and administrative set of crises. Whilst it may be the case that the crisis within advanced economies is experienced differently, we do not think that we should underestimate the profound changes that are taking place.

We accept that the discussion that follows is too strongly rooted in a European/North American-centric view of what is happening and that, as a consequence, it is difficult (if not impossible) to make the shifts in thinking we are suggesting. But we think that these important changes in both the funding of public services (and the parallel development associated with the management and administration of those

goods and services) and the perceived legitimacy of the idea of the 'public' are ones to reflect upon.

As David Harvey (2010) argues, 'we need new mental conceptions to understand the world. What might these be and who will produce them?' (p. 237) Harvey goes on to suggest that part of this new mental map will call into question particular (and accepted) ways of thinking. The economic crisis (he says) provides the jolt by which we are being challenged to think differently about the world.

It is in this spirit of encouraging discussion and debate that we want to set out one way of thinking about the nature of the curriculum and the approach to teaching and learning within the fields of public management and administration. We accept that our take on the scale and potential impact of the crisis may not be shared but we do think the discussion and examination of the implications of the crisis are necessary.

We want to propose the following lines of enquiry:

- the banking and financial services collapse represents a major crisis for both advanced capitalist economies and the political and administrative institutions of the state;
- the economic crisis as an explicitly political crisis has the potential (real in the cases of Ireland, Greece and Italy) to call into question the legitimacy of political institutions as well as the political class;
- that these crises also call into question the perceived legitimacy of other social and administrative institutions associated with the running of the state—education, local government and other agencies linked to those white collar administrative/professionalised services and roles. In short, we are suggesting that the banking crisis has the potential to question the social, political, educational and organisational infrastructure of the state.

## Developing our argument

The scale of the political crisis may not be as significant or as profound as the banking crisis. Indeed we may be guilty of overstating the nature of the crisis. But, we do think that we are living through a period of change and transition and that the assumed certainties of 20 to 30 years ago no longer apply. In a quite profound sense we think that the intellectual and pedagogical assumptions or expectations that are present within a particular theoretical framework or discourse no longer provide us with the intellectual or conceptual route map to assume that it will be "business as usual" quite soon.

We do accept that not all colleagues will share our analysis. But, in the spirit of discussion and debate we hope that readers of this Journal will engage with some informed speculation. Indeed, part of our thinking on this has been influenced by the decision in Europe to prioritise cuts in central government or welfare spending as the primary route out of the crisis. This does not just lead to job losses in the

public sector (over 250,000 in the first year of the austerity cuts in the UK) over time (year-on-year cuts) but, also, the redrawing of the boundaries between the role and function of the public and the private (or not-for-profit). These changes are more than just the redefining of who does what, but a more important political shift too which is much about the idea of a “public realm” or the “place of the public” in civil society, which is legitimised by the wider community. It is these relationships and bonds that we suggest are changing and will be changed in this new context. They create more uncertainties and disruptions.

These potential uncertainties or disruptions include the following: the way we think of knowledge and the disciplinary boundaries we create, and the extent to which these constructions facilitate or inhibit thinking across boundaries; the ways in which we create, develop and plan the curriculum and teaching and learning approaches within higher education to develop and support the current and next generation of managers; the place of research and critical enquiry within our disciplines and how research cultures are fostered and nurtured across disciplinary and organisational boundaries; the extent to which the distinctions between public, private and not-for-profit are fixed and unchanging; the relationship(s) between and within these different categorisations and the teaching, learning and research implications these relationships have for managers, researchers and professionals; the ways in which the concept and practice of public administration is understood across different professional disciplines; and the extent to which teaching, learning and research practice encourages critical self-reflection (See Boud and Middleton, 2003; Claxton, 2006; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Karlsson et al., 2008).

We think that the conventional way of framing some of these discussions and debates within the discipline of public administration has been to assume that there is a direct relationship between the ideas and forms of knowledge associated with public administration and its organisational or structural base within higher education institutions (HEIs). At the same time there has been, we argue, an intellectual, academic and (probably) inter-personal debate between different branches of management/administration education, with centres of competing interests emerging over time. These intra-disciplinary and inter-sectional disputes are to some extent, peripheral from a more sophisticated and nuanced analysis of what is taking place within the discipline and across and between disciplines.

The changes in public and political institutions in the UK in the post-war period with the development and (especially) the growth of the welfare state and associated para-professional disciplines resulted in significant changes in the ways in which we think of the state and society (Wenger, 1998; Williams 2002). It is these changing relationships of which the traditional notions of public administration failed to take account.

The growth of the welfare state and the increase in health, housing and social and welfare professionals led, in turn, to important changes in the ways in which universities and higher education institutions were developed and supported by successive UK governments. The increase in degrees in these professional areas of practice had their own impact upon teaching and learning strategies and

curriculum choices. These developments, also, generated their own research questions and agendas alongside their own research degrees and, by the latter part of the 20th century, their own professional doctorates.

It is these developments in the public education of welfare professionals as well as the changes in the governance of services and the political environment within which such developments were taking place that has (to some extent) marginalised public administration. The social, economic, political and ideological developments in the UK from the late 1970s onwards were evident in the political choices made by the New Right up to 1997 and then by New Labour from 1997–2010 (Diamond and Roberts, 2006; McQuaid, 2010; Mulgan, 2007). An understanding of both the context and the choices made requires, we suggest, drawing upon the traditions and lines of enquiry or analysis to be found within the discipline of a “new” public administration. We set out below what we think these lines of enquiry look like and then we develop our model of a new public administration.

## **Developing lines of enquiry and reflection**

We set out below what we think are some of core elements in re-imagining a public administration discourse that seeks to bring together the different constituent parts of the policy and practice worlds – practitioners, professionals, policy makers, political leaders and academics. We think that a necessary part of this process of reflection and analysis requires an assessment of the extent of the impact of the banking crisis on traditional models of governance and decision making. In a sense it is possible to argue that whilst the economic and financial consequences of the crisis are evident across Europe and North America they are, nonetheless, separate from the intellectual examination of what constitutes the “public” in public administration. Such an approach rules out placing too much focus on the inter-relationships between the political and ideological, and the policy and the practice of decision making. The rise of the New Right in the 1980s and the consequential focus on the values and politics of neo-liberalism and linkages between the ideology of neo-liberalism and the choices and actions of a number of Western governments has provided a different context within which to locate these ideas.

A key starting point for exploring the ways in which these ideas disrupt existing power relationships and governance structures/systems is to examine the relationships between institutions of higher education and particular policy or practice developments that might be illustrative or pre-figurative of these relationships. We have discussed elsewhere (Diamond and Liddle, 2005; Diamond and Liddle, 2009; Hagen and Liddle, 2007; Liddle and Diamond, 2007; Liddle and Diamond, 2008) that the relationship between HEIs and practitioners is undervalued within the dominant higher education discourse in the UK, and as a consequence maintains professional, intellectual and economic barriers against closer working and co-operation.

These barriers are also reflected within peer review and esteem indicators awarded to journals or to researchers and their departments. The allocation of



resources via research grants or funding councils re-enforces these separations and divisions. In a sense there is an inherent bias against understanding of structures, systems and organisations that claim to promote greater transparency and understanding of policy and practice. During times of economic and political stability it may be possible for this environment to remain stable and functioning. Indeed, we can argue that it was through a period of change (in the UK) from the Labour government of the 1970s to Thatcher's New Right government of the 1980s that an era of New Public Management was identified and researched.

These periods of relative stability also provided opportunities to develop research links with agencies and organisations working within and across the public sector. In the UK the period from 1979 to 2010 provided a long period of relative stability and continuity in both policy and practice. It is possible, for example, to see through the example of area-based regeneration as a line of continuity in practice as well as conceptual thinking. The successive waves of regeneration schemes introduced in the late 1960s by a Labour administration, up to the major initiative launched by New Labour in their first term (after winning in 1997), share many characteristics. They provided a genuinely rich source of enquiry and research by both academics and practitioners. For the purposes of this article, there are two key features that were common across the schemes and that resonate with us now: first, there was (and remains) the policy, practice and intellectual challenge of developing inter-agency/multi-agency working. These include the following: working across boundaries (of practice/discipline/organisation/territory) requires rigorous research and an analysis of power, governance and decision making, resource allocation and reward models. In addition, both participants/learners will wish to reflect upon the conceptual framing of "issues", differing notions of what constitutes professional practice, as well as looking at participatory models of decision making. We suggest that their discussions and this "learning" need to frame or situate all of the above within a political and economic context.

Second, and developed from a number of social and welfare models of professional practice from the late 1970s onwards, was the importance attached to critical reflection and how communities of practice offered alternative (and legitimate) centres of discussion, evaluation and research to prevailing models of what constitutes such places (Jones and Morris, 2008; Kaban and Smith, 2010; Pearce, 2010).

If we were to un-pick these developments and sit them alongside the curriculum and teaching models available on most programmes of study associated with public administration, teaching and social work, we suggest that many would be absent or marginal at best – and this is in a period of relative stability. There are clear areas where we can observe trends and developments in linking professional practice to intellectually robust, critical self-reflection and that is through professional doctorates or knowledge transfer or exchange schemes.

Each of these separate initiatives (professional doctorates, knowledge transfer and exchange initiatives) can be seen as representing a challenge to traditional models of academic disciplines and forms of knowledge. In particular, they call into question a particular approach to how we conceptualise knowledge,



understanding and critical enquiry as legitimate forms of thinking. The point we want to highlight here is how these differences (and tensions) between different parts of the academy are demonstrated through the various indicators of excellence and reward to be found in the funding councils, learned societies and professional bodies. Indeed, we want to suggest that the argument put by Amin and Roberts (2008), in their discussion on the relevance of the idea of communities of practice (COPs), summarises these ideas really eloquently:

The interest in CoPs is indicative of an important shift in thinking that recognises that knowledge and creativity are born out of habituated practice (rather than competencies mastered in isolation or bundles of codified knowledge unproblematically mastered down the chain). This recognition is partly a rebuttal of old ways of thinking about knowledge, but also relates to a more general perception that capitalism . . . (is) becoming more dependent on mobilizations of knowledge, especially those embedded in the hidden and tacit qualities of situated practice. (p. 14)

The challenge for academics and practitioners who want to work across these different boundaries of professional practice or disciplinary boundaries remains how to develop an approach to learning that values thinking and critical reflection and situates this learning in a “new” space and blurs such boundaries. The critical point made by Amin and Roberts (2008) above is to see these developments as sitting alongside the changing and evolving demands of a modern capitalist economy. We can observe the obvious ways in which the organisation and categorisation of knowledge reflects the dominant mode of production. Or as Amin and Roberts (2008) put it, ‘the dynamics and returns of the knowledge economy are still traceable to regulatory regimes; systems of innovation enshrined in the national educational, scientific, industrial, infrastructural and policy environment; and the organized structures of research institutions, corporations and industrial clusters continue to make themselves felt’ (pp. 31–32).

But the collapse of the banking and finance system call into question much more than the mode of economic production and organisation. We might anticipate, over the medium term, observing changes in the ways in which the knowledge economy is supported, developed and sustained through research institutions and the models of regulation and governance that nation-states (through their different associations) might seek to implement. Our point is that these changes – both the detail of them as well the underlying thinking that informs them – will be reflected in our curricula as well as our research and practice.

We want to suggest that we are in a phase of transition and change. The consequences of the banking collapse for the international economies are far reaching and profound. This has a number of direct consequences for all of us but we have sketched out (above) what we think they are for those involved in teaching, learning and researching within public administration.

We think that the developments associated with professional doctorates and knowledge exchange or transfer initiatives offer some indications of the potential

opportunities to redraw the curriculum and think differently about teaching, learning and research across different boundaries of practice and thinking. We do not see these developments as representing long-term indicators of change. We think that the traditional and conventional ways of framing knowledge within higher education institutions are still resistant to such changes. We anticipate that the change process will be uneven (across and within disciplines) but that those colleagues who want to innovate and who are supported within their institutions are likely to benefit from the new circumstances. Again we do not expect such developments to be uniform across the sector. But, we think that it is possible for institutional leaders to learn from those engaged in collaborative research and practice and to reflect upon the very localised models of shared learning and research that are present, as well as those that cut across nation-states and international boundaries.

We are being careful and cautious in our possible curriculum and pedagogic choices. We have quite deliberately drawn from practice and debate informed by the development and practice of professional doctorates. We see (and have experienced) the models of practice evident there as representing examples of good practice which we want to transfer (where it does not yet exist) into the fields of public administration and management. We are aware that (for some) the movement will be one way – that traditional ways of thinking about public administration or management have remained outside the discourse of critical reflective practice. Yet, it seems to us, such a model of thinking and learning represents an approach to intellectual and academic study which has the potential to bring together different disciplines and ways of thinking. We are also aware that approaches to thinking and learning that seek to link ideas and practice (communities of practice or action learning sets) are (in some instances) seen as marginal or counter to legitimate ways of thinking and enquiring.

We want to suggest below that we can re-imagine these relationships as ones that genuinely seek to establish mutually agreed goals and that by thinking about the concepts and ideas which have informed professional doctorates and knowledge exchange initiatives we come close to describing a model for a “new” public administration.

## **Towards re-imagining a new public administration curriculum**

We want to use the debate on the development and introduction of professional doctorates as a way into the broader reframing of a new public administration curriculum. We think that this approach has the benefit of bringing together a number of separate but (we think) related debates. These debates can be summarised as follows:

- the “knowledge” debate – how we define, categorise and value different forms of knowledge from abstract propositional knowledge to embedded knowledge (Gilbert, 2009);

- the value of “critical reflective practice” – how it is defined, understood, experienced and analysed, and the significance of embedding the idea of criticality into reflective practice (Bradbury et al., 2010);
- the necessity of examining and learning from “collaborative” or “cross-boundary” working – using the discourse of cross-boundary working to explore the ways in which individuals working in organisations are able (or not) to develop and sustain ways of working which cut across the boundaries of disciplines or professional knowledge (Benneworth, 2007; Walsh and Kahn, 2010; Whitchurch, 2008; Williams, 2002);
- the extent to which the academy values learning from professional practice, and in so doing organises the learning and the supervision so that it is seen as valuable and legitimate (Brew and Peseta, 2009).

We offer these distinct elements as illustrative of both the necessary (but not sufficient) conditions with which to construct an appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of professional practitioners and intending practitioners in public administration, and also as representing the categories within which the content, learning outcomes and assessments can be slotted. Our experience of working with those who are seeking to achieve a professional doctorate or with those designing such programmes suggests that it is these debates that inform and shape their thinking and practice.

These categorisations oversimplify the level of complexity involved, but they nonetheless point to the core questions raised by this discussion. We think that in situating this discussion in the context of the impact of the banking crisis on our understanding, we make explicit the potential value of the public administration discipline and discourse. In a very real sense the global crisis has, since 2007, highlighted the extent to which civil society or civic (or state) institutions were present or absent in the management and administration of public institutions during the banking collapse.

It is these political and policy questions, we think, that bring together the themes and concepts outlined above with the lived practice of public managers and administrators. The very nature of the political, economic and social instabilities that the banking collapse engendered in the institutions of advanced Western economies has led to a re-writing of the assumed rules and processes shaping political decision making. The potential collapse of the eurozone has profound implications for the governing elites across Europe, and in particular of those in the International Monetary Fund.

These changes are not marginal, as they represent a severe disruption in the conventional thinking of the post-war political and governing class. Thus, whilst this is the background to the development, discussion, agreement and (where appropriate) accreditation of curricula, which may be tailored to meet the needs of particular groups of managers/administrators, it can become the foreground too. The shift from being part of the landscape in which change, crises and conflict are implicit to a new setting where they are explicit reflects the experience and

practice of those undertaking such programmes. Whilst we are suggesting that the scale of the crisis requires a new paradigm within which to situate a new public administration discourse, we recognise that such a proposition will be contested.

The categories outlined above represent a contribution to the discussion. We want to see them as initial (and very preliminary) thoughts on how we might reframe the curriculum. We think that they offer a way of conceptualising a potential approach to teaching and learning and so might then inform the choices we make about content and sequencing. We do recognise that the choices we make about content - how it is organised, assessed and presented - are critical. But, we wanted this discussion to be learning-led rather than driven by the content. In a sense, we believe that in times of stability we often think uncritically about the content choices we make. This contribution is not, therefore, suggesting that a new public administration curriculum should be (or can be) content-lite. We think that the curricula choices we make, and especially where we are engaged in the co-construction of a curriculum with external professional bodies or through dialogue with students (from sub-degree to taught doctorates), require a high level of understanding and political awareness. But, we think too that there is a risk that the questions of content dominate and can rule out alternative ways of thinking and learning. We think that current crisis provides us with a real opportunity to think and act differently.

## Concluding thoughts

This article is one contribution to what, we think, is an important debate bringing together different strands of thinking and practice in teaching, learning and researching public management and administration. Our starting point has been the scale and impact of the global economic crisis. We think that this represents one of those profound moments of social, political and economic change. Thus, whilst the full consequences of the changes experienced since 2007 are still not evident, we can be sure that they will affect political institutions and the relationships between the state, civil society and the market.

The ways in which these relationships are re-constructed and contested have significant implications for those existing institutions of governance and administration present within liberal capitalist economies. We think, as a consequence of the impact of the crisis on the relationships between the state and civil society, we can anticipate a restructuring of existing systems and processes of governance (including ideas of democratic oversight and representation).

These changes have implications too for the recruitment, selection, education, training and management of public managers and associated public sector professionals. We have touched on one aspect of these processes - namely the possible model of teaching and learning we might adopt in response to the crises. We suggest that a core proposition represented by our model above is the stress we place on the ideas of collaborative learning through enquiry as well as through

the co-construction/co-production of a curriculum to inform such enquiry. We are not suggesting that there is a natural organisational home for such a model of learning; rather that it is contingent upon a recognition of the necessity to bring together a multi-disciplinary approach which, in turn, promotes, encourages and values self-reflection rooted in a critical analysis of the state and its political and administrative institutions.

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