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New development: Responding to complexity in public services—the human learning systems approach

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ABSTRACT

The challenges facing public services and non-profit organizations are complex and multi-faceted, confounding the orthodoxies of bureaucratic public administration and New Public Management approaches. This article discusses the merits and potential of the emerging 'Human Learning Systems' (HLS) approach to the funding, commissioning and management of public services as an alternative management logic. Building on prior introductory work, the authors analyse the current state of development, content and operation of HLS and its collaborative process, involving more than 300 organizations. Drawing on the experience of public and non-profit service professionals in adopting and experimenting with this approach, the authors found that HLS can provide a helpful and innovative conceptual frame to promote constructive engagement with complexity in public management theory and practice.

IMPACT

Current approaches to public management based on principles of marketization, management and measurement are increasingly being seen to fail when faced with the complex world of public services. The Human Learning Systems (HLS) concept represents an alternative approach which embraces the complexity of the real world of organizations working to deliver services. Produced in collaboration with an emerging community of funders, managers and commissioners of services, HLS offers a framework which bridges academic complexity theory and the diverse contexts of practice. This article introduces HLS as a means to enable organizations, practitioners and service users to work together more effectively.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration; complexity; learning; non-profit; performance management; public management; public services; systems

The challenge of tackling complexity in public service

The public sector is challenged to achieve goals that are interconnected, ambiguous and wicked (Head & Alford, 2015) in a context where complexity is increasingly recognized as an unavoidable feature of modern governance (OECD, 2017; Eppel & Rhodes, 2018). Researchers have long noted that complexity creates a number of profound challenges for public sector management, particularly in the period since the widespread adoption of New Public Management (NPM) (Rhodes, 2008; Haynes, 2015; Pell et al., 2016; Lowe & Wilson, 2017; Pell et al., 2020). A range of approaches has been developed offering methods to address these challenges—notably the Vanguard method (Seddon, 2008) and the Cynefin framework (Snowden, 2015). Academics have also provided insights into how functions such as leadership (Hobbs, 2019), contracting (Brown et al., 2018) and evaluation (Mowles, 2014) might be re-framed to better deal with the realities of a complex world.

An important parallel conversation has been taking place among policy-makers and service professionals on the issue of developing an approach to public management compatible with the complex realities

of contemporary public and non-profit governance and management. Following two significant reports exploring emerging practice (Davidson et al., 2017; Lowe & Plimmer, 2019), this conversation has become synthesized into an alternative model of public management termed the 'Human Learning Systems' (HLS). HLS's unique contribution to addressing this set of challenges is that it seeks to take a holistic approach to funding, managing and commissioning in the context of complexity. Informed both deductively by complexity-informed academic scholarship, and inductively through the practice and experimentation of over 300 organizations across the UK and beyond, the HLS approach constitutes a challenge to the current orthodoxy of NPM with a distinctive managerial logic and growing community of practice.

The HLS approach to public service

HLS has been informed by ongoing academic work in the challenges of performance management for service organizations (Lowe & Wilson, 2017) and by responses to the challenge of creating an approach to a complexity-informed management practice

(French et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2020a; 2020b). Key to the development of HLS is an ongoing conversation among engaged practitioners and a wider participative process involving a range of public service and non-profit leaders working with complexity in their work. HLS takes as a starting point that the purpose of public service is to help improve service outcomes. In contrast to results-based management approaches, it adopts the view that the outcomes public service organizations are commissioned to deliver are not independently produced by those designing interventions or services but from the systems in which they are embedded (Lowe et al., 2020a). HLS responds to a particular view which suggests that the complexity challenge can be structured across multiple levels (French et al., 2020):

- *Experiential complexity*: from the variation in how outcomes are experienced by individuals, and the multiple pathways to shared outcomes across the population.
- *Compositional complexity*: from the interdependence among causal factors leading to the creation of outcomes.
- *Dynamic complexity*: from the co-evolution of interacting factors and the instability inherent to complex systems.
- *Governance complexity*: from the autonomy of public service organizations and other actors, and the fragmentation of modern public service landscapes.

Complexity in this interpretation is represented in the complexity or needs among users of human services such as health and social care, criminal justice, or education, where the complexity of need among service users is significant. However, while complexity theory has clear implications for practice, it can lack traction in the heterogenous contexts and practices of services, and therefore be difficult to operationalize.

An inductive and collaborative approach to develop HLS practice and language was undertaken with organizations tackling complex needs, led by a partnership of academics at Northumbria University working with the social consultancy Collaborate CIC, and later the non-profit Centre for Public Impact. Following a report drawing together ideas created with Collaborate CIC (Davidson et al., 2017) and a subsequent invitation to explore its implications further, over 300 organizations answered a call for evidence about operating in ways which responded to complexity. A second report drew together learning from these examples, featuring more in-depth research with services at a more advanced stage of development in tackling complex needs

(Lowe & Plimmer, 2019). Drawing from this activity in parallel with a wider programme of research into complexity-informed management practice, the three thematic areas of HLS were identified.

Human

The first element was involving a 'human' element in the design and operation of services and interventions, which was often seen to be eroded by managerialism and metric-focused service design. This element of HLS tackled experiential complexity as a recognized necessity to understand and respond to the variety of people's needs and strengths. Respondents described ways of designing services to engage with rounded human beings, with their own strengths and capabilities, and practice often therefore incorporated a strong relational dimension, particularly with service users. Services were often designed as being people- or human-centred, particularly through the work of practitioners. Another dimension of this 'human' was a faith in the tendency of service professionals to act with human compassion and care, rather than with self-interest assumed by default in NPM-based reforms. Through further analysis and codification, the mnemonic 'VEST'—Variety, Empathy, Strengths and Trust—was coined to capture the range of practice employed. This:

- Recognizes the *variety* of human strengths, needs and experiences.
- Builds *empathy* between people—so that they recognize, and seek to act on, the emotional and physical needs of others.
- Uses *strengths*-based approaches—recognizing and building on the assets (rather than deficits) of people and places.
- *Trusts* public servants to act on their intrinsic motivation to help others and get better at what they do.

Key here is the understanding that management practice which is implicitly guided by the underpinning assumptions of New Public Management can crowd out the importance of human relationships, and many public service employees in our empirical work spoke of being deeply uncomfortable with what they considered common practice, and instead emphasised the need to 'be more human'.

Learning

The second common element was adopting a focus on learning as a central focus and purpose of performance management and evaluation. A focus on blame and accountability was often seen by our respondents to

get in the way of learning, promoting a culture focused on manipulation and gaming, rather than meaningful improvement (Lowe & Wilson, 2017). HLS contrasts this approach with a process of social innovation in which a public service problem is identified, experiments are undertaken to identify 'what works' in relation to that challenge, and then these solutions are taken to scale. Organizations responding to complexity adopted learning as a continuous process of adaptation across the often separate processes of planning, implementation and evaluation. Learning is a key engine of service improvement in complex environments and necessary in responding to the limitations brought about by four levels of complexity (French et al., 2020). Learning in a complexity-informed system is inspired by approaches to action learning, where action is embedded into the learning process, although the learning can take many, evolving forms, for example appreciative inquiry, reflective practice, learning communities, learning partnerships and rapid learning circles are common approaches used by HLS experimenters. The HLS approach identifies the following ways in which an ongoing learning approach is operationalized:

- An iterative, experimental approach to working with people.
- Funding and commissioning for learning, not services—shifting from commissioning specified services to funding organizations' capacity to learn.
- Using data to learn—using monitoring data for reflection, rather than target-based performance management.
- Creating a learning culture—creating a 'positive error culture' in which people are encouraged to talk with their peers about mistakes and uncertainties in their practice.

Systems

The third and final element discussed by managers engaging with complexity was the significance of thinking about systems as the basis for social interventions, rather than organizations or projects. Building on roles played by actors in key elements of the HLS approach, such as within Lankelly Chase's Place action inquiry (French & Lowe, 2018), HLS identifies the potential for 'system stewarding' roles to ensure that systems can operate effectively to produce desired outcomes. This involves multiple actors taking on a distinctive supra-organizational role, responding most specifically to governance complexity:

- Building relationships and trust between actors in a system.
- Establishing shared purpose.

- Developing shared values, principles and behaviours.

Systemic practice is located at the funding and commissioning level, with the distribution of financial resources playing a critical role in improving the health of that system, for instance by promoting collaboration rather than competition.

HLS as a future public and non-profit management practice?

Through the collaborative development process, HLS has emerged as a distinctive agenda for the public and non-profit sectors, with a significant profile in the UK and internationally: over 40 organizations practice HLS, and 15 of those have formed a collaborative body to develop HLS and promulgate practice. A group set up to study and practice HLS on the UK's local government Knowledge Hub has grown to a membership of over 400. From conversations with adopters and our research case studies, we have indications about how HLS has helped improve practices in the face of complexity.

First, and most significantly, HLS appears to have provided a language for expressing shared, but often unseen and unheralded, practices. This shared language has been useful not just to understand problems and re-orient practice, but to actively experiment with solutions and ground an innovation in the everyday reality of public and non-profit sectors.

Second, HLS has sparked practice-sharing among organizations pursuing complexity-informed practice. With infrastructural support provided by Collaborate CIC, the Centre for Public Impact (CPI) and Northumbria University, a series of masterclasses and events has been convened across the UK drawing on the experiences of those practicing HLS approaches. Organizations adopting HLS have also been brought together into the HLS Collaborative—a vehicle for spreading and developing practice. These conversations have attracted participation from a range of public and non-profit organizations, including commissioners, charitable funders and delivery organizations with both national and local footprints. HLS acts as a connective framework in this context providing an overarching conceptual grounding within complexity-informed management theory.

Evidence of HLS's overall impact is the subject of evaluative research complicated by the limitations of the current methodological orthodoxy (Mowles, 2014). HLS focuses organizations on the development of pre-conditions which generate outcomes, however the manifestation of improvement itself is often a non-linear process, requiring a complexity-informed approach to evaluation including modesty in claims of attribution (Lowe & Wilson, 2017). HLS exemplars, however, are now reaching a stage of maturity whereby such benefits

are beginning to be demonstrable, and individual case studies carried forward by the HLS Collaborative provide emerging evidence of service improvements arising from adoption of HLS principles. Lankelly Chase's Place action inquiry, for instance, has enabled the development of stewarding capabilities at a place level which have bolstered service responses around complex needs (French & Lowe, 2018). Initiatives like Gateshead Council's approach to prototyping have documented evidence of improved lives through human-centred design and iterative learning practices (Smith, 2020). Plymouth's co-commissioning approach has demonstrated how collaborative models of contracting can be enacted at a large scale—covering an entire city and amalgamating several commissioning budgets (Lowe et al., 2020b).

As HLS moves from a particular community of practice toward a substantive and integrated model of services, it is crucial that it is embedded in a distinctive academic research agenda, conversant with the implications of critically evaluating complex endeavours, to shape its development and inspire wider systemic reform of the public service. The recent effort of HLS Collaborative partners to co-develop context-rich and embedded case studies with HLS partners is just a first move to strengthen the evidence base and advance an alternative agenda in the reform of public service.

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