Northumbria Research Link

Responding to Complexity in Public Services: The Development of the Human Learning Systems approach

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Abstract

The challenges facing public services and non-profit organisations are complex and multi-faceted, confounding the orthodoxies of bureaucratic public administration and New Public Management approaches. This paper 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, we summarise the current state of development, content and operation of HLS and its collaborative process, involving more than 300 organisations. Drawing on the experience of public and non-profit service professionals in adopting and experimenting with this approach we argue that HLS provides a helpful an innovative conceptual frame to promote constructive engagement with complexity in public management theory and practice. We discuss its implications for practice and future academic inquiry including the future development of the innovation.

Keywords: Complexity; Public Management; Public Services; Performance Management; Learning; Systems;

The challenge of tackling complexity in public service

The public sector is challenged to achieve goals that are interconnected, ambiguous and wicked (Head and Alford 2015) in a context where complexity is increasingly recognized as an unavoidable feature of modern governance (OECD 2017; Eppel and 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 and Wilson 2017, Pell et al. 2020). A range of approaches have 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 (Hobbes 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 amongst policymakers 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 and Plimmer 2019), this conversation has become synthesised 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 organisations 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 Human Learning Systems approach to public service

HLS has been informed by ongoing academic work in the challenges of performance management for service organisations (Lowe and Wilson 2017) and latterly responses to the challenge of creating an approach to a complexity-informed management practice (French et al. 2020; Lowe et al. 2020a; Lowe et al. 2020b). Key to the development of HLS is an ongoing conversation amongst 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 organisations are commissioned to deliver are produced not by independent service interventions and

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 amongst 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 organisations and other actors, and the fragmentation of modern public service landscapes

Complexity in this interpretation is represented in the complexity or needs amongst users of human services such as health and social care, criminal justice, or education, where the complexity of need amongst 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 operationalise.

An inductive and collaborative approach to develop HLS practice and language was undertaken with organisations 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 organisations 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 into tackling complex need (Lowe and 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-focussed service design. This element of HLS tackled experiential complexity most significantly, as a recognised 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 term 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:

- recognises the *variety* of human strengths, needs and experiences

- builds *empathy* between people – so that they recognise, and seek to act on, the emotional and physical needs of others

- uses *strengths*–based approaches – recognising 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 the 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 to get in the way of learning, promoting a culture focused on manipulation and gaming, rather than meaningful improvement (Lowe and 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. Organisations 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 e.g. 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 on-going learning approach is operationalised:

- An iterative, experimental approach to working with people

- Funding and commissioning for learning, not services – shifting from commissioning specified services to funding organisations' 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 organisations 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 and 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-organisational 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.

Human Learning Systems as 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 an significant profile in the UK and internationally: over 40 organisations 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. Most significantly, HLS appears to have provided a language for expressing a 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 the innovation in the everyday reality of public and non-profit sectors. For instance, the 'System Steward' role has been deployed in Lankelly Chase Foundation's approach to place-based funding.

Secondly, HLS has sparked practice-sharing amongst organisations 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 were convened across the UK over the last two years drawing on the experiences of those practicing HLS approaches. Organisations 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 organisations, including commissioners, charitable funders and delivery organisations 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' overall impact is the subject of evaluative research complicated by the limitations of the current methodological orthodoxy (Mowles 2014). HLS focusses organisations 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 and 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 need (French and 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. 2020).

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 endeavors, 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 but the first move to strengthen the evidence base and advance an alternative agenda in the reform of public service.

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