

PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION AS “NOT GETTING STUCK IN A RUT”: CONNECTING THE POLITICS OF CRISIS WITH THE POLITICS OF REFLECTION

Innovating through learning from crises is the holy grail of crisis management research. And yet, reflection – a powerful means of learning - hardly features in the burgeoning literature on crisis management. In response, I try to connect ideas of *public sector crises* with *public reflection*. One of the connections I make here is between the politics of reflection and the politics of crisis. Using UK local government as the focus, I offer a reading of crisis discourses which suggests contrasting ways in which crises are understood and represented. From this analysis I develop a set of dialectics as a basis for public reflection. Engaging with dialectics can be a means of “not getting stuck in a rut” (Boje 2008) but I draw out the political dilemmas inherent in such engagement. This paper therefore connects the dynamics of reflection with enduring concerns about how practitioners can learn and innovate in turbulent times.

The dialectics constructed in this paper suggest a number of contrasting dimensions of crisis and its relationship with innovation and change. Crisis implies disruption and yet is sometimes invoked to call for continuity. Crisis implies dramatic and discrete episodes and yet crisis discourses constitute a constant and continuous thread throughout the history of local government. Crisis evokes an enemy (to be fought) but is often embraced as a friend. Crisis discourses provide a charge sheet against public

managers or is the basis of a cry for their assistance. Crisis implies endings and beginnings, the smallness of actors or their enormous significance to our futures.

The pay-off of engaging with dialectical views of crisis, lies in the potential to illuminate ideas (and oppositions) that otherwise may go unconsidered. For example, for policy makers, particular dialectics can call to mind ideas about the conflicting imperatives that public managers are routinely asked to satisfy. For a group of 'front line' practitioners they may heighten a sense of embedded crisis but create new space for agency by underlining that crises are often discursively constructed and, in that mode, are open to challenge in ways that can enable them to frame innovations or new possibilities and alternatives. However my approach also highlights that engaging in a process of public reflection about public sector crises is a highly political act, one that contains risk as well as reward.

Focussing on public reflection is an important undertaking as it connects scholarship on crisis management, and accounts of public sector innovation and change, with persuasive ideas about how practitioners learn, and it also connects the politics and struggles of crisis with the politics and struggles of reflection. The construction and exchange of strategic knowledge about crises can be achieved by practitioners through *public* reflection, particularly when this involves engaging critically with dialectical ideas or ideas which challenge dominant assumptions about the world. By offering a reading of local government crisis discourses, and highlighting different representations of and assumptions about public sector crisis, I provide one basis for

this process of public reflection, and draw out the political dilemmas entailed in the process.

I construct a dialectical basis for thinking about crises in ways which can enable collective reflection by practitioners on their practices and marshal a set of ideas and provocations which can form the basis for further discussion with practitioners in public sector settings. Dialectic reflection in particular embraces the capacity of practitioners to engage *critically* with challenging ideas as a way of informing and illuminating practice through a process of “recasting” (Raelin, 2001). A process of *public* reflection appears to be particularly apposite for the consideration of public sector crises, crises that revolve around the futures, value bases and practices of public organisations. However, the political character and context of public organisations serve to heighten both the risks and rewards of public reflection. The situated nature of public sector practice, and public sector scholarship, also means that it is easy to get “stuck in a rut”. Engaging practitioners with dialectical views of crisis - the interacting senses and meanings of crises - offers a promising way to prevent this and to achieve learning and innovation.

Selected References

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