

A *THINK PIECE*: SETTING AN AGENDA FOR PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP: KEY QUESTIONS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SCHOLARS, PRACTITIONERS, AND LEADERS – WHY THE NEXT DECADE OF PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP MATTERS

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Abstract

The period from the late 1980s to the present has been one of change and disruption at all levels of contemporary public administration. It is possible to categorize this period of change through different lenses from those of social and economic issues to those of significant political and environmental changes. At different times over the last forty years these changes have disrupted the existing institutions of government in nation states and the assumed models of governance and administration. The focus of these changes has often concentrated on the impact they have had on civil society, communities and nation states including the roles of representative governments. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which public administration pedagogues and scholars adapt to these changes and adapt their ways of working or understanding the context within which they function. This *Think Piece* seeks to identify what the changes have led to in terms of the pedagogical questions they raise; the issues that inform the design of the curriculum; and the implications these have for the education and training as well as the continuing professional development of practitioners and leaders of public administration.

Keywords: public administration, pedagogical research, practitioners, education, training.



1. Structure and outline of the *Think Piece*

The primary focus of this discussion paper is to reflect on the relationship between the significant political, economic, social, and environmental changes which have taken place over the last forty years and the PA curriculum. Specifically, the paper will argue that these changes have disrupted many assumed expectations about curriculum design and pedagogy. In particular, I will suggest that these disruptions have the potential to underline the significance that pedagogical enquiry and scholarship has for acting as a bridge between practice and research.

The Think Piece is organized into three strands. Strand 1 addresses the key global changes that have disrupted the conventional assumptions which inform the field of public administration; Strand 2 explores the disruptive influence of technology for teaching and learning and Strand 3 attempts to situate these different but complementary ways of thinking about PA pedagogy and practice by anticipating changes for the field (as a discipline or study) over the next decade including the roles played by networks and journals.

There is an important caveat to what follows: I recognize that curriculum design (including assessment and teaching and learning strategies) is subject to levels of audit and inspection through different quality assurance and enhancement models. It is important to note that these are themselves products of an increased regulatory and compliance environment which can be traced to dimensions of Strand 1. A number (but not all) of Public Administration scholars and departments in universities are subject to many regulatory 'eyes': from university internal systems to external accreditation or recognition by professional bodies or international agencies established to represent the special interests of Public Administration networks or groups. The point we need to note here is the extent to which public administration scholars have relative (not complete) autonomy over their curriculum design. At all levels there are processes which include complex skills of navigation and negotiation. The PA Curriculum does not exist in an agreed and mutually understood space. It is subject to change. My point in this paper is to suggest that this process has accelerated and is much less stable than it was and that one consequence of this has been to undervalue the significance that the teaching and learning space has to offer a much broader set of conceptual, theoretical, and critical perspectives which shape Public Administration as a discipline or field of enquiry.

2. Strand one: global disruptions

The starting point for this discussion in this section is to recognize that the patterns of change and disruption are not even in terms of their impact. The unevenness of their impact raises other questions or lines of enquiry, the essential point for this discussion is that it is possible to identify and categorize these changes and to recognize the impact they have had and continue to have on public administration as a field of professional practice as well as a direct impact on the curriculum at all levels. For the purposes of this paper, I have selected the following as illustrative of the disruptions that have not only shaped global

development but, also, reimagined the pedagogy of Public Administration as a discipline:

- The influence of ‘neo-liberalism’ or New Public Management (NPM) from the late 1970s onwards in advanced social democratic states. We can discuss the extent to which NPM as a model ‘failed’ or ‘succeeded’ but for this discussion that’s not the key point. The disruptive power of NPM was that it led to a reframing of the legitimacy of public service organizations and institutions. Within a learning and pedagogical context this called into question the role of local government, its legitimacy as well as its function. In the wake of NPM across the globe the new orthodoxies of global agencies and institutions (including governments in the USA and the UK) were that private sector values and ways of working should shape public service practice. This included the marketization of previously public services (including in the UK health and education) and the privatization of the public sector. For those teaching and developing programs of study for new practitioners or existing ones this was a profoundly disruptive period (the legacies of which are still evident). Specifically, the adoption by governments of the NPM approach and framing of the role and function of government ruled out or delegitimized alternative perspectives. In the UK by the mid-1990s the dominant political discourse on the role of local government had been defined by the values and beliefs of neo liberalism. Whilst in some universities there was resistance to such an approach this was, largely, to be found in research centers rather than as part of continuing professional development or taught undergraduate programs. The significance, I think, is that the disruption presented by NPM was as significant as the liberal/social democratic consensus which emerged after 1945. It constituted a ‘world view’ and this shaped and set the approach to PA pedagogy for the next forty years.
- The changes after 1989 in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union led to important and significant developments in the creation of a new civic infrastructure and political institutions to replace the existing ones fashioned after 1945. There are interesting connections between the changes taking place during this time period and those taking place through the dominance of NPM. In both settings there are profoundly important questions being posed about the role of parliamentary institutions and the systems of governance needed to support (in the case of Eastern Europe) developing nation states. And, whilst, in both settings there are questions of transition (from one way of understanding the world to a new approach) there are, also, separate but related questions of what system is regarded as ‘democratic’. For those involved in public administration this is a fundamental question both as a concept but also as a practice. The model of democratic practice being presented by western liberal societies through institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF or the European Union was one in which state monopolies were considered bad and the public service reforms of contracting out and breaking up of state-run services were regarded as necessary to create a market economy. In the context of PA pedagogy this period might be seen as highly creative (in contrast to what was happening in the West): the opportunity to develop and create a new PA curriculum in which the disciplinary components could be agreed upon at the level of the national state and/ or in dialogue with practitioners and pedagogues across the states of

the former Eastern Europe. The establishment of networks and associations which explicitly sat within this geographical space and intellectual space are clear signs of a wish to establish an independent pedagogy and curriculum.

- The collapse of the global banking sector in 2008 can be seen as representing disruption on different scales and levels. The Global Financial Crash (GFC) had an immediate and direct impact on the global economy. But its precise and short to medium term was uneven and not consistent. In many states in the global North there followed periods of austerity and contraction of the economy. The austerity measures introduced as part of the payment to 'save' the banking sector focused in most places on public sector spending. This meant cuts in staffing levels, withdrawal of some services, a reprioritization of services (cutting completely services that were now considered low level) and a cut in the public sector workforce. As the events of 2020 (COVID-19) showed pandemic preparations were part of these cuts in many states. The GFC could be seen to have changed the political discourse in a number of liberal democratic states. For PA scholars these changes had different consequences: potentially a decline in continuing professional development numbers and cuts in MPA numbers or undergraduate provision. The latter (in some places) led to internal restructuring with mergers or closures of PA departments or schools. On the other hand, for some PA scholars and researchers there were demands for their skills either as consultants or working with middle managers and senior leaders on how to adapt to the impact and form of austerity. In some settings this meant working with public leaders and managers as they sought to work within the financial and budgetary limits imposed upon them as universities too adapted to the new conditions.
- The Climate Emergency and the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by many public institutions and nation states have had a direct impact on curriculum design and teaching. There are numerous examples of programs from undergraduate to masters where the SDGs form part of the curriculum either explicitly or as part of case studies. The SDGs can, also, be found in many continuing professional development courses to support public managers in adopting them into their practice. We can see the SDGs as illustrating a different set of drivers for change than those identified above. As with the examples set out below this group of changes might be considered as being more 'aligned to the norms and values of conventional public administration': the SDGs assume a necessary role for local institutions. The idea of linking the 'global' with the 'local' neatly sums up the SDG model but it also situates the adoption and implementation of the SDGs at the local level. For Public Administration pedagogues this is an opportunity to reimagine their PA curriculum in ways that do run counter to the assumptions of NPM and neoliberalism. The latter assumes that the role of the public agency or institution acts as a drag on innovation and efficiency whereas the former sees the local institution as a necessary part of addressing the impact of the Climate Emergency.
- The impact of the Global Pandemic of COVID 19 on Public Administration pedagogy can be characterized in three different ways: firstly, has been the mode of delivery with a

rapid but uneven pace and quality of on-line teaching and learning; secondly, the extent to which curricula and PA pedagogues were able to respond to the policy and practice context and include these in their teaching, learning and assessment; thirdly, the lessons learnt from the response to the pandemic across all public agency settings (what did it say about the role of public health agencies and pandemic preparedness?; what did it say about the response of national and local governments to working with vulnerable groups and organizing containment responses at the local level?; and what broader sets of conclusions can be drawn about the medium to long term impact of the pandemic on public administration education and training?). Each of these separate elements is significant for public administration educators and pedagogues. Arguably, most public administration researchers might only be concerned with the third category — the broader lessons learnt. But PA educators were, directly, concerned with the immediate necessity to continue their teaching and program delivery and so had to adjust to different practices and approaches.

- The questions of Social Justice and Equity: the impact of both #Me Too and Black Lives Matter. The broader issues of social justice have been implicit in conventional Public Administration programs. The allocation, distribution, and assessment of impact of public goods and services are core to any PA program (regardless of setting or disciplinary frameworks). The ways in which resources are decided and priorities set are recurring themes and topics for discussion and analysis. From the roles of ‘street level bureaucrats’ to that of national governments, how decisions are made and implemented are core to any PA program. These questions revolve around power and decision making and illustrate the contested nature of PA. They can, also, be framed in an apolitical way too in which the focus is more on the bureaucratic/ civil service approach to decision making. The direct and important impact of both these movements has shifted the level of the discussion. Building as they do on the Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s and the Women’s Movement these campaigns have a much more direct impact on the internal practice of PA scholars and pedagogues. Their actions and campaigns are asking practitioners to address their internal practices, not just their public service delivery practice. The questions raised are, therefore, broader than just including the issues as case studies of decision making. They direct the attention of faculty members to their own institutions and the ways in which decisions are made (from resources to recruitment and promotion) as well as who they work with outside the university setting.
- The decolonization of the curriculum initiative sits alongside this reimagining of how we construct the curriculum and decide what constitutes not just topics for inclusion but, also, how we frame knowledge and analysis. In unpacking the PA curriculum (in any national setting or the criteria for accreditation by awarding bodies) the point is made by those advocating this approach that it is important to revisit the underlying assumptions that frame existing PA curricula and programs. In part, this can be seen as a significant step in reassessing the assumption that PA both as a form of practice as well as constituting an agreed knowledge base can ‘travel’ regardless of context and social

and economic structures. This approach does have direct relevance for those awarding and accrediting bodies which do influence and define the PA curriculum globally. The influence of academic networks which have as their core a focus on research and theory building but nonetheless shape teaching and learning cannot be underestimated.

3. Strand two: the disruptive influence of technology

There have been three important shifts in the technological revolution over the past decade and each of them implies a quickening of change not a slowing down or achieving a 'steady state'. These three changes include: the ubiquity of the World Wide Web and the accompanying technology through mobile phones and the sheer increase in available information and knowledge which is readily accessible (often at no cost) but not always subject to quality checks; the impact of Covid-19 which accelerated this process and required universities to ensure that all provision was online and available to all. It is important to remind ourselves that this was a very uneven process and for some universities in some parts of the world this was a seamless process but for others it was profoundly disruptive lacking quality and consistency; and finally, both of these changes make the design and delivery of programs of study much more likely to fit the needs of participants than of providers (over time).

Technology facilitates (not always equally) access to information and ways or modes of learning which conventional face to face (whether in the classroom or the workplace) provision does not. It's an exaggeration to suggest that these are more democratic places of engagement, but they may be more democratic places of access.

4. Strand three: anticipating future changes

The next decade is likely to be one of accelerated change. The drivers of disruption and change for PA scholars, faculty members and practitioners create uncertainty and instability. Whilst we might understand this as we engage externally through research and scholarship the defining feature of these changes is their impact internally. Arguably, this has been felt differently depending on where you work and the local as well as national context. We tend to recognize and engage with these changes as they affect political, cultural, and economic processes. We can then observe them, analyze them and publish our findings. This process or act of distancing can limit our understanding of the cumulative impact of these changes. For pedagogues and scholars of teaching and learning the opposite is true: the impact of all these changes brings us closer to the communities or groups we are engaged with either because they are students in programs or practitioners on short courses or other qualifying units of study. And because as scholars of teaching and learning our role is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Conventional researchers do not have that role as part of their primary responsibility. It may be part of what they do by intention or choice, but it is not core to their role nor is it necessarily recognized for purposes of promotion or appointment.

I want to suggest that over the next decade as the global community of PA practitioners, professionals, leaders, and academics seek to make sense of these significant disruptions, the influence of PA pedagogues is likely to increase. Whilst the profound challenges of the Climate Emergency or the impact of the global pandemic are not to be underestimated it is in the places and sites of practice or decision making where there are gaps in skills and capacity of thinking.

I anticipate that over the next decade (at least) there will be a need to develop, support and nurture the leadership capacity of public agencies as they adapt to these significant disruptions. These processes will include (but will not be limited to) the following: at an executive leadership level (including those who are identified as having the talent and potential to act) the need for upskilling in adaptive leadership; at middle leadership levels the need to grow the capacity and skills of middle leaders across a number of different forms of knowledge (including budget setting, consultation, collaboration and managing decline as well as leading on supporting leadership and decision making processes which recognize the importance of equity and diversity).

The providers of such programs (varying in length, level, accreditation, and mode of learning) will likely be based in universities because that is where the research skills and pedagogical skills and knowledge are based. It is likely that over the next decade the organizational model of PA will change too. In part, this will be a consequence of changing organizational models of universities but, also, because PA leaders in universities will need to position what they do and provide such that it is much more accessible to practitioners, professionals and public agencies and institutions. We should not underestimate the longer-term impact of the technological revolution nor the need for local government leaders and those who seek to shape local government ways of working to be as focused and informed as they can be.

My argument is that the changes over the past three to four decades have been slow compared to what is to come. Arguably in most PA conversations there is a perception that university-based PA is behind the pace of change in local government. Given the Climate Emergency and the additional changes (global disruption through the pandemic, global uncertainty through political instability and the increase in a lack of trust in local institutions) we can anticipate an acceleration of disruption not a slowing down.

5. Concluding thoughts

This *Think Piece* has set out a number of significant disruptions for those involved both in the teaching of PA and also for those who research questions raised by the disciplinary setting of Public Administration. The role and contribution of the broader PA global community are factors too in anticipating the pedagogical questions facing us over the next decade. On the positive side, it appears as if the different PA networks (often nation state based) have survived the immediate disruptions of Covid or the impact on university funding. We can see lively and vibrant PA networks and associations working (often through voluntary contributions) to sustain the discipline in their country. In

addition, there are many international PA networks which are more organized and are membership based which have survived and supported activities (from annual conferences to peer reviewed journals) and these suggest — in the short term — a vitality and vibrancy which are positive. The global publishing houses, also, support and publish PA journals. These appear to be growing in readership (or probably in downloads) and are seen as necessary as part of a quite different process: the benchmarking and rating of journals which in turn is used for promotion. I want to speculate that over the next decade this will become less significant. Pedagogical research and scholarship are less valued in this benchmarking culture but, in practice, they are likely to be more influential on PA practitioners as they seek to make sense of their context than only empirical research.

Looking ahead I see further patterns or waves of disruption which are likely to directly impact the internal worlds of PA scholars and researchers than the ones outlined above.