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This article focuses on the “swamp-like” practice of public service and explores how graduate professional education must be reshaped if we are to produce leaders who can make sense of the challenges that face our world. It argues for education that is more experiential, more behavioral, more interactive, and more collectively oriented.

Learning to Love the Swamp:

Reshaping Education for Public Service

Don Schön has written eloquently about professional education and the need to train people to be reflective about their practice so as to improve it. He describes two territories of practice: the “swamp” and the “high, hard ground.” The swamp is his metaphor for the important, complex, and messy problems that resist technical analysis. On the high, hard ground the problems are also real, but less important to both individuals and the wider society. The appeal of high ground problems is that they either are—or are framed to be—amenable to technical understanding.

I want to argue that the world of public service has more swamp than high ground. Many of the tough problems that lure us to public service and test our leadership once we’re there are swamp problems: achieving justice or economic or social equity or even health care reform; undoing the effects of racism; ensuring that all children are raised and

educated so that they are whole and capable and have hope for the future — these are just some of the important, complex and messy problems that resist solutions through technical means alone. Effective leadership of and in the swamp cannot be based only on the application of clear rules developed on and for the high ground, although sometimes this is what is needed.

To be effective in public leadership, people need the capacity to lead and manage in the swamp. There are no rules for this, no set techniques that guarantee the right answer. Intimate contact with the realities of the swamp and the ability to reflect on and learn from our own and others' experience are what it takes to make sense out of the mess. Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus at the Center for Creative Leadership turn a more elegant phrase when they define leadership as a process of meaning-making in a community of practice. Ron Heifetz, in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, defines leadership as mobilizing people to tackle tough problems. Each of these views is powerful and more on point than others that rely simply on notions of influence. Whichever view is adopted, the pressing question is how we can educate and prepare people for leadership.

First, we must take reflective swamp learning seriously. Second, we must develop new ways—perhaps with the help of other disciplines—to investigate and frame theories of public management for the swamp. Finally, we must invent more ways to teach reflective practice and prepare people to learn systematically from their own experience so that they might better navigate the messy realities of day-to-day public management. This article focuses on the first and the third ways to prepare people for leadership.

Taking Reflective Swamp Learning Seriously

According to Donald Schön, practitioners have a choice. They can stay on the high ground where they can solve the less important problems using prevailing standards of rigor, or they can descend into the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous inquiry. The fact for leaders in public service, however, is that there isn't or shouldn't be a real choice. Effective public leaders must master both kinds of terrain. They must be able to solve the high ground technical problems that present themselves, and they must be able to navigate and lead others through the swamp and its reality. The swamp doesn't beckon from a distance; it's a large part of public life. What

distinguishes our best public leaders, however, is that that is not all they do. The best not only work in the swamp, but they make sense of it for themselves and others.

So how exactly do leaders and their organizations make meaning from the swamp? Technical rationality and science are not particularly helpful here. Competence in the swamp is more a clinical matter, deriving less from applying scientific laws of behavior or technical models developed for the high ground and more from a deeper understanding of the situation at hand and its relationship to other similar situations. In psychology or anthropology, a clinical perspective in public management begins with an intense involvement with and reflection on a particular situation. Of course, leaders do not work simply on their own. They are generally responsible for organizations or parts of organizations whose task it is to manage or solve a social problem. A leader's primary task in the swamp, therefore, is to help the organization become sufficiently reflective, so that it can make meaning from the mess with which it is confronted.

Reflective organizations are places where people can think about what they are doing, pool their thoughts and feelings in the service of learning about the organizations, and then use this knowledge to manage themselves in their roles. This reflective capacity involves an interpretive stance toward one's experience in an organization. From this perspective, one hears anecdotes, not as facts but as clues, and sees one's own experience as yielding information about the larger social system. This allows members of an organization to develop hypotheses, act, and make mid-course corrections as the learning continues. Learning as you go inevitably precludes a master work-plan approach, which, while comforting, often interferes with opportunity to learn from the unexpected. This is an anxiety-confronting rather than anxiety-evading approach. In acknowledging and confronting work-related anxieties, staff have greater personal resources available for working, in part because the energies used to defend against troubling aspects of organizational life are then freed for other purposes. The intense anxieties associated both with change and with tasks in human service organizations render the reflective stance painful, yet even more important.

Reflective organizations are places where people can bring themselves fully to work. Being fully present at work is a remarkable and powerful

experience, all the more so if one contrasts it experientially with its opposite, disconnection or alienation. William Kahn, at Boston University's School of Management, has explicated what he calls psychological presence, what it means to be fully present as a person occupying a particular organizational role such that one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are all accessible as one takes up a role. He identifies four dimensions to psychological presence: attention, connection, integration, and focus. When these elements are present, people are personally accessible to work and can contribute both ideas and effort. Others experience both openness and empathy; the individual both growth and learning.

Reflective practice is vital for the swamp; it enables people to be present, and helps them and their organizations make meaning from what are generally complex, multidimensional experiences. It also helps them do what they are mandated to do: confront and resolve public problems.

Creating A New Vision for Public Service Education

At the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, Ron Heifetz has been teaching leadership classes for more than a decade in an effort to expand the envelope of what can be taught. He acknowledges that others see leadership skills as largely unteachable, but proceeds to argue the case. Heifetz uses the "here and now" experience of the class itself to engage students to reflect on the exercise of leadership. He offers various frameworks for students to consider, often from social psychology. These frameworks are not the direct material of the class, however. Rather, their power and relevance are tested against the students' own past and present experiences as they are revealed in the classroom, and in the future. Heifetz makes it clear that he teaches the way he does because it is useful to students and consistent with what he is trying to teach. He argues that people learn best by experience, a contention well supported by the literature on adult learning and learning in general. To make what he calls "experiential evidence" useful requires providing people with either the conceptual frameworks to organize the evidence or ways to develop such tools. It is to that end that Heifetz offers both external frameworks and the questions he poses in class.

Both Don Schön and Chris Argyris also have well-developed theories about teaching reflective practice designed to build professional "artistry."

They conceive of the classroom as a studio, where the learner has repeated opportunities to practice under the experienced eye of a master practitioner.

We need multiple models, opportunities to learn how to teach in new ways, and the incentives to tackle what clearly seems daunting. I would like to track my own encounters with the task of preparing people to lead in the swamp. Currently, I am involved in two efforts. The first, at the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, is geared to our student body, which consists of both full and part-time students, some young and some mid-career. The other, on behalf of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is targeted to an elite group of ten mid-career Children and Family Fellows selected each year from a pool of nominees. The context is quite different for these two pieces of work, but the themes are remarkably consistent.

The Wagner School Clinical Initiative

In 1992, I was recruited to the Wagner School to manage our clinical initiative, funded by the Ford Foundation. The clinical initiative was originally an effort to create new ways for students to learn from practitioners, academics, and from experience in public and nonprofit organizations, as well as from lectures and readings in the classroom. The Wagner School has three programs (health policy and management, public and nonprofit administration, and urban planning) and three specializations (management, policy, and finance). The clinical initiative, along with initiatives on diversity/multiculturalism and international affairs, is designed to cut across the school and these divisions.

Initially, it was as if we envisioned two types of learning—classroom learning and work-based learning. The task, as we first saw it, was to strengthen the work-based component and deliver a better balance between the two. More recently, we've stepped back and begun to see this conceptualization of clinical education as unproductive. It buys into the damaging notion that practitioners are too busy doing to think, and that thinking is the exclusive domain of the academy. The truth is that the best practitioners are always thinking, are always engaged in a reflective dialogue with their work. At the Wagner School, therefore, we're moving to a concept of clinical education that sees learning as iteratively connected to both

work and school. Students move back and forth between both spheres, learning in both places, integrating both kinds of knowledge, and testing the learning of one realm with the learning of the other.

The Wagner School Clinical Framework

Exploration

To ground this interactive perspective, we have created a three-tier framework for clinical education at the Wagner School. It begins with exploration. If learning involves going back and forth between the classroom and the workplace, students who come to graduate school with little or limited relevant professional experience are at a disadvantage. They have no context within which to assess what they learn in class. Exploration helps build the context and allows students to investigate roles and institutions in a given field in public service. It is a way for them both to deepen and broaden their base of experience. We have developed a number of ways for students to explore. For example, students who enroll in our health policy and management program with little health care experience are encouraged to participate in a noncredit course that explores roles and institutions in health care, or to take the expanded version of our introductory course in community health that includes visits to diverse settings in which health care is delivered in New York City. Mentoring programs and internships also provide this critically needed context. The achievement for us is not just the addition of some of these elements, but the shift in perspective that acknowledges the need for experience and context.

Exercise

The second aspect of our clinical program we call exercise. Here, we use the safe environment of the classroom for students to practice the skills they are developing. While we have just begun much of this work, at best this kind of exercise should be highly interactive and involve lots of feedback. Case studies and simulations are part of this kind of learning, of course, particularly because they actually put students in a role and push them to enact the strategy they casually recommend or allow students to experience the gap between what they advise and what they do. Research confirms that

whether one is a violinist or an athlete—or presumably, a public servant—it is not just skill or innate talent, but practice that matters.

Experience

Finally, we are reformulating the experience component of our program. We are working to encourage faculty to provide more opportunities for students to bring their own experience to bear in the regular classroom and we have created at least one new course for senior people in health care—Strategic Leadership in Health Care—to do just that. Of course neither faculty nor other students want to hear just undigested stories. Consistent with the notion that students need tools to understand, frame, and make sense of their own and others' experiences, I have created a new course, Reflective Practice: Learning From Work, which explicitly teaches students how to reflect on themselves and their work. Each student who takes the course is required to be working or in an internship. The focus of the course is not on the organization, but rather on the students' experience of themselves at work.

We offer a range of frameworks and perspectives, some from other disciplines and some from experience, that help students immerse themselves in and attend to the experience of work. We encourage students to begin a life-long habit of reflecting on themselves that we hope will result in both the distance and full engagement necessary (Heifetz refers to this as “going to the balcony”) to make sense of what is happening. In the course, we introduce students to the distinction between person (what you bring to work) and role (what the job or task brings with it). Students examine, both at work and in the here and now of the classroom, how they take up or neglect to take up their various roles. We offer various frameworks on learning styles and preferences as a way of encouraging students to take a step back and begin a process of self-assessment. Self-assessment is extended by students soliciting “role messages” from co-workers about behaviors that help or hinder effective performance, or new behaviors that should be encouraged by the intern/staff member at work. Students read about the nature of authority and then critically analyze their own and others' use of it. Students are working to develop the skills and perspective for understanding themselves and their impact on others. They also study both the theory and the reality of the psychological aspects of organizations and self, and the inter-

action of the two at work.

A simple set of questions is used to help students frame their stories and move toward developing lessons learned from their experiences. Too often in the classroom, students uncritically unload something that happened, without trying to make sense of it or to consider how it could be useful to others; of course, some practitioners do this as well. We train students to be more disciplined, and to work through these questions as they bring in some aspect of their experience from work:

- What prompts you to tell the story? What just happened that made you think of this particular story?
- What's the moral of your story? What is the specific point you're trying to convey?
- What is the generalized lesson of the story you or others might abstract? and
- How could you test this generalized lesson?

This focusing process allows students to make meaning from the mess of their experience at work. Its appeal is its relative simplicity. It does not depend on a master teacher or require gifted or senior level learners.

The Final Project

The last experience component of our clinical initiative is the final project. Students, under faculty supervision, must complete a project for real-life clients. Unfortunately, many of these real life projects are still pre-digested, manageable pieces of work. Too often, they are decontextualized, high-ground projects. In the best of all possible worlds, we might actually put students into swampier situations or construct ways of teaching that accompany their real swamp work, but placing students in swamp projects may be oxymoronic. Projects that are already framed, organized, and thought through enough to hand off are not how one encounters the swamp. Yet, thinking back on my days as a practitioner, I understand the field's reluctance to allow students to come in and muck around. The toughest, swampiest work is often at the heart of the agency's most critical challenges and depends on intimate knowledge, trust built up over time, and sensitive communication.

A student concerned with getting in and out without much engagement might easily do damage.

What we need to do, at the least, is acknowledge that these final, experiential projects both at NYU and at other schools are often high ground. We should not pretend to students that they are otherwise and mislead them into thinking that the real world of public service comes already divided into projects. Barring a swamp placement, we must teach reflective practice even in the context of a high ground project. For example, students assigned to an organization for a particular project might engage staff there about the ongoing nature of the other, swampier work. Or, we might create seminars for those in similar fields or roles that allow working mid-career students to deconstruct their ongoing experience in the swamp. If we mean to prepare students for the rough and tumble of the public sector, we have to tackle these difficult issues.

The Casey Foundation Seminars

In addition to the clinical initiative at the Wagner School, I have been engaged in developing seminars for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Children and Family Fellowship, which accepted its first class of fellows for the 1993-1994 year. The Foundation chose to make a sizable investment in leadership development because it saw a gap between the need for leadership to change the systems that serve disadvantaged children and families and the capacity of current leadership. It invented a program not quite like any others; it is national, where many are community-based. It is full-time for 11 months, and thus geared to people ready to make major changes in their lives. It aims both to broaden fellows' visions of what can be done and increase their capacity to achieve change. It is largely experiential, not academic, and while it is prepared to individualize the placements and other support for its fellows, it is group-based. It targets children and family systems, not leadership in general, and uses a nomination process to identify emerging leaders. A fellow's year is designed around a learning plan. In general, fellows spend three five- or six-week periods in residency and select two organizations or sites in which to do a field placement.

I was engaged, through the Wagner School, to design a series of seminars for the fellows. The seminars are organized around learning, at the

individual, organizational, systemic, and societal levels. During the course of the year, fellows meet in seminars and come together, grounded not only in their own experience before the fellowship where they have been actively working on changing the systems that serve children and families, but also with fresh insights into the efforts of others as seen in their field placements. The seminars provide frameworks for fellows to consider as they attempt to make sense of what they are learning and also offer the space and support to try to create new theory as well as new behaviors. The first class of fellows did in fact construct their own social theory based on four tenets: race does matter; power needs to shift to the ground; leadership is a collective, not an individual experience; and reform requires complex, relational approaches, not just technical fixes. They came to believe that while the technical information they gained (e.g. new financing strategies), was important and the networking and support vital, their most powerful learning emerged from their collective struggle to make sense of what they saw.

We devote a great deal of effort to the personal development of each fellow. The focus is on increasing their capacity to use themselves effectively in service of the kind of systemic change they are seeking. Issues of anger, power, competition, racism, and fear all come up throughout the year. Armed with extensive feedback from a specially-designed multi-rater instrument and a significant amount of self-evaluation and self-revelation, we attend individually, in pairs, and with the whole group to examine and support behavioral change.

Learning to Love the Swamp

The swamp of public service is always alive, teeming with new growth. It requires new and continuing engagement of people prepared to call its name, describe its wonders, and wrest meaning from its confusion. It requires leaders, and we must learn to prepare them differently.

Analytic skills are important, as are management tools. Obviously missing seems to be the personal and social, psychological and cultural aspects of effective leadership. The problems we face are not yielding to traditional approaches. We are in desperate need of leadership able to confront the mess and make sense of it for themselves and with others. The best and the brightest for the 1990s and beyond will not be those who bring packaged

solutions to clear problems but rather those who can help themselves and help others learn to make meaning in the face of chaos. The problems are too tough for us to ignore the value added by enlarging our approach to educating leaders. How we do this will no doubt vary. Just as the learning is personal, so will be the teaching strategies. Whatever the approach, I believe we need more of the following in our approaches:

- more context
- more experiential opportunities with frameworks
- more here and now
- more personal
- more behavioral
- more swamp-like
- more collectively oriented, less heroic
- more interactive
- more valuing of what people bring in and
- more acknowledging of the tough stuff

My work on the Casey Fellows program and on the clinical initiative at the Wagner School is my effort to make sense of the mess of leadership development. It is still a work in progress; I see myself joining others who are attempting to enlarge the scope of public service education.

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Suggested Readings

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