Local governance, local autonomy and local democracy: towards a comparative framework

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Introduction

This paper brings together three related but distinct concepts to offer a framework with which to understand and compare the governance arrangements for learning and skills in the UK; local governance, local autonomy and local democracy. Each of these three concepts has potential relevance to understanding the context of learning and skills policy and the potential and constraints upon reform: local governance focuses attention on the ‘exosystem of institutional relations that contributes to the shape of a local learning ecology’ (Hodgson and Spours 2009, p11); local autonomy provides a particular emphasis upon the scope for difference in the development of local learning and skills policies; local democracy places a particular role upon ‘input legitimacy’ as a basis for both popular support and widespread understanding (and, therefore, buy-in) for learning and skills policies in a locality.

These three concepts often suffer from being treated either as synonymous labels for the same broad issue or as being problematic concepts which are in competition with one another. Emerging forms of network governance at the local level are often considered as challenging or even undermining local democracy (Bache and Chapman 2008). Equally, local autonomy and local democracy are rarely treated as distinct analytical concepts, despite the recognition that they are not always mutually dependent (Pratchett 2004). By separating them out, however, it is possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of how they relate and, possibly complement one another in the shaping of learning and skills policy. In so doing, the aim is to develop a framework that enables the comparison of ‘exosystems’.

Local governance: market, hierarchy and networks

The literature on local governance distinguishes three main types of governance structure; markets, hierarchy and networks (Rhodes 1999). It is tempting to see local governance as moving from hierarchical structures through to market based relationships in the 1980s (especially but not exclusively through the implementation of compulsory competitive tendering), though to contemporary forms of network governance (Stoker 2004). In reality, however, the picture is much more mixed. In some senses, there has been such a progression but in other senses it is much more complex (Kjaer 2004).
Table 1: Markets, Hierarchy and Networks

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<th>Markets</th>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
<th>Network</th>
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<tr>
<td>Basis of relationship</td>
<td>Contract and property</td>
<td>Employment relationship</td>
<td>Resource exchange</td>
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<td>rights</td>
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<td>Degree of dependence</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Interdependent</td>
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<td>Medium of exchange</td>
<td>Prices</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Means of conflict</td>
<td>Haggling/courts</td>
<td>Rules and commands</td>
<td>Diplomacy</td>
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<td>resolution and</td>
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<td>coordination</td>
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<td>Culture</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Subordination</td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
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Source: Rhodes (1999, pxviii)

A key point about these different governance structures, however, is that they are not options to be chosen between but, instead, they coexist in contemporary polities (Hooghe and Marks 2003). Indeed, individual organisations may find themselves operating in, and being influenced by, all three structures at one and the same time.

In the context of learning and skills, for example, there are clearly elements of the market at play, as different providers (often in different economic sectors) compete with one another. At one and the same time, these organisations are subject to elements of hierarchical governance, most obviously through central legislation, guidance and so on, but also through inspection and performance regimes and, ultimately, through the control of resources (especially capital resources). Organisations are also encouraged (and even compelled through hierarchical resources) to work in partnership with one another to develop strategic approaches to learning and skills, and wider policies at the local level. Network governance has not just emerged organically, it has also been a clear policy of the New Labour government since 2004, and has been actively encouraged as a means of developing a more holistic approach to addressing issues at the local level (Stoker 2004). Thus, local FE and six form colleges, and other education providers, are normally key members of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and are expected to contribute to the development of Local Area Agreements (LAAs), as part of the governance of a locality.

The coexistence of these three governance structures gives rise to challenges of steering, especially at the exosystem level. At the conceptual level, these three structures pose ontological challenges for the way in which steering might take place. Markets and hierarchies suggest a behaviouralist solution to steering, in which logics of consequentiality predominate. In contrast, networks suggest a more collaborative understanding of relationships in which trust is the underpinning logic (Lowndes and Pratchett 2008).

At the practical level, steering is of even greater significance. While, superficially, organisations might be collaborating through formal partnerships at the local level, they are also competing for scarce resources, and the market can be expected to influence their behaviour. At the same time, they may be receiving different messages through separate, hierarchical relationships which are not joined up at the centre. In such contexts there is not only an absence of clear leadership but also, quite often, an absence of shared vision and objectives. Steering such networks is complex, therefore, especially in the absence of clear steering tools at the exosystem level.
Local autonomy: choice within constraint

Thinking about local autonomy starts from a different point. Instead of focusing on the governance structures in place, it is possible to focus on the extent to which localities have a degree of autonomy to act. I distinguish three types of autonomy (Pratchett 2004):

- **Freedom from** – defined as freedom from hierarchical constraints to act in particular ways.
- **Freedom to** – defined as the capacity to initiate particular activities.
- **Freedom as** – defined as the capacity to shape the wider sense of local identity.

Freedom to and from tend to be thought of as organisationally specific. Freedom as refers more to the exosystem level, and the combination of organisations.

Local autonomy needs to be seen, therefore, in the context of the ‘earned autonomy’ policies which became a feature of Labour’s third term (Pratchett and Leach 2005). Central government are increasingly set the framework within which local difference can emerge.

My argument is that the rise of network governance, especially where it is truly in operation (i.e. where there is real buy-in among partners), provides more scope for ‘freedom as’ type autonomy, because each can use elements of ‘freedom to’ and ‘freedom from’ to achieve higher levels of autonomy for the locality.

Local democracy: enacting institutions

The democratic challenge is twofold; the first around accountability and the second around legitimacy.

The accountability challenge is one in which representative democracy is no longer an adequate model for holding governance structures to account. Similarly, markets have largely been rejected in political science as the best means of delivering public goods, especially once they move beyond the scale of the common pool (Ostrom 1990). How then, are network governance structures to be held accountable and made responsive to their publics? The rise of participatory mechanisms at the organisational and inter-organisational level is one way, creating multiple centres of democracy within the locality (Skelcher 2005). However, these are processes of democratic enactment which are yet to be realised fully (Saward 2003). They also need to be balanced against potentially less responsive forms of accountability imposed through audit, inspection and performance regimes.

The legitimacy challenge draws upon Fritz Scharpf’s critique of the European Union, in which he distinguishes between input and output legitimacy (Scharpf 1997).

- **Input legitimacy** = political systems achieve legitimacy among the public by the processes through which decisions are made – requires active democratic institutions.
- **Output legitimacy** = political systems achieve legitimacy through what they achieve – focuses upon efficiency and effectiveness.

Local governance has traditionally been more focused on input legitimacy. However, network governance perhaps shifts the emphasis to output legitimacy. In diffuse policy areas such as learning and skills there is a normative argument that citizen buy-in to the
policy process may also lead to more engagement with the outputs. There is a normative argument, therefore, in favour of a shift towards more input legitimacy for network governance.

Conclusions

A comparative framework, therefore, needs to address the following questions:

Governance
  • What are the dominant structures of governance in a locality and in what mix are they constituted?
  • How is steering achieved at exosystem level?

Autonomy
  • What space is there for exosystem level autonomy?
  • How are actors using 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' autonomy to achieve wider forms of autonomy at the local level?

Democracy
  • What patterns of accountability are dominant in relation to individual organisations and formal partnerships and how are they being enacted?
  • How is output legitimacy being balanced with enhanced input legitimacy?
References


