RESEARCH & EVALUATION

Community engagement and public administration: Of silos, overlays and technologies of government

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The public policy process in Australia is changing towards a more interactive, collaborative model, where governments seek to develop partnerships with civil society and private sector organisations to manage complex policy challenges. This article discusses research conducted into a project implemented by a Victorian government department that sought to involve stakeholders in addressing natural resource management issues in the agricultural sector. The research revealed that public administration practices associated with the new public management approach impeded the ability of the project to facilitate participation by diverse stakeholders in the decision-making process. The article challenges the view that the discourse of collaboration and community engagement takes public administration down a constructivist path and suggests that agencies need to become reflexive about the way in which public administration practices are constitutive of the community engagement process if they are to facilitate genuine participation of other stakeholders.

It is argued that the public policy process in Australia is changing towards a more interactive, collaborative model, where governments seek to develop partnerships with civil society and private sector organisations to manage complex policy challenges (Reddel and Woolcock 2004:75). Since the formulation of the ‘Growing Victoria Together’ policy statement in 2000 the Victorian State government has sought to actively engage citizens, communities, industry and other stakeholders to achieve the policy goals associated with the ‘triple bottom line agenda’, which aims to integrate and reconcile economic, environmental and social policy objectives (Adams and Wiseman 2003:12).

The government’s orientation towards collaborative arrangements has significant implications for the way in which policy decisions are made and the role of knowledge in that process. Traditionally rational modes of thinking, a belief in objective knowledge and an absolute truth as well as the logic of optimal choice have dominated the policy process. However, with many contemporary societal issues we are faced with a situation where what is considered legitimate knowledge differs from one situation and group of people to the next. There is often no single and comprehensively accepted body of knowledge that can be referred to in order to settle debates, and consequently uncertainty prevails. Moreover, many issues are so complex that they are beyond the capacity of one single agent to grasp and control. As Alford argues, ‘the knowledge and capacity to generate insights into these problems is distributed across those who have some stake in it’ (Alford 2001:12). This implores us to reject the prevailing positivist concept of objective, value-free and absolute knowledge as an a priori basis for decision-making and, instead, adopt a constructivist theory of knowledge that emphasises how knowledge is socially constructed through an ongoing dialogical
process between interdependent stakeholders. In other words, the collaborative approaches that are implemented in the face of uncertainty and complexity can only be successful if we recognise that knowledge is located between the interdependent stakeholders in a particular context and that so-called ‘rational’ knowledge is contested by diverse knowledge claims that arise from the interaction with the broader community of stakeholders in the rural development process.

Hess and Adams (2002:68) suggest that in Victoria the government’s orientation towards collaborative arrangements has taken policy development down such a constructivist path, which allows a diversity of participants to contribute to the policy development process. They argue that there has been a retreat from economic rationalism and that the goals and instruments of public administration are changing. In this article we explore this further through a discussion of the implications of the policy direction towards greater community participation for the tools, instruments and practices of public administration. We do this with specific reference to a project from the agricultural sector, the Developing Social Capability (DSC) project, which was implemented by the Victorian government department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) and later the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) between 2001 and 2003. This project was implemented in a context where agricultural policy was shifting from a primary emphasis on productivity towards a greater focus on sustainable development. This shift highlighted the limitations of NRE’s reliance on science and technology as the key driver of change, as issues of sustainability are the domain of politics as much as the domain of science (Röling and Jiggins 1998:283; Röling 2002:27). Consequently, the role of agricultural agencies changed from primarily servicing the farming industry towards facilitating negotiation and reconciliation of the diverse interests around environmental, economic and social outcomes. In response, NRE developed and implemented a number of collaborative community-based approaches that sought to bring together diverse yet interdependent stakeholders to address natural resource management issues in the agricultural sector.

The PhD research of the first author of this article explored whether and how the DSC project was able to create a space for genuine participation by diverse stakeholders and their diverging ways of knowing and doing things. In order to do that it examined the stories or narratives about the project that were invoked, enacted and described by various participants. Research findings indicate that as project team members engaged in prevailing public administration practices they developed and enacted positivist narratives about the project that subverted the project team’s constructivist orientation. As such, the findings reveal the ambiguities that result from implementing a constructivist cooperative approach within the context of prevailing positivist public administration practices and how this impacted on the ability of the project to create a space for effective stakeholder engagement. The article challenges the view that the discourse of collaboration and community engagement necessarily takes public administration down a constructivist path and suggests that significant organizational alignment is required for that to occur.

In the following section we discuss the narrative approach that underpinned our research in greater detail, before discussing the findings and their implications for public administration practices in subsequent sections.

**Research approach**

Our research into community-based approaches was based on a case study of the DSC project that was implemented by NRE. The DSC project was selected because it promised to employ an innovative approach, aiming to involve a diversity of stakeholders in the natural resource management process to an extent not seen

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before in NRE. The first author of this article participated actively as a member of the case study project team for the duration of the project. During that time she attended most meetings and a large number of events organised by the project. In total, twenty-eight one or two day long team meetings were attended, as well as training courses, seminars and project activities. Furthermore, two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the people involved in implementing the project were conducted (27). She also had access to project documentation and data collected by the project team itself, including notes of workshops (14), transcripts of focus group discussions (10) and notes of interviews with project stakeholders (28). The extensive nature of this data meant that there were often a number of different accounts relating to the same situation, which allowed the multiple, contested and contingent meanings constructed within the context of the case study project to come in to view (c.f. Denzin and Lincoln 2000:5).

Initially the transcripts of meetings, interviews, focus group discussions and other project activities were analysed in terms of the themes that emerged from them (c.f Seale 2004:299) – using NVivo software. This analysis revealed a number of competing accounts or narratives about the project, which operated simultaneously. Consistent with Somers and Gibson’s argument, people in the project performed their roles:

... by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; ... people [made] sense of what ... happened ... by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and ... people ... [were] guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives (1994:38-39)

Subsequent analysis explored the extent to which each of these narratives provided a space or structure for diverse stakeholders to participate in the project, and the way in which people enacted the narratives about the project (their practices). This was achieved through analysis of the discourse in which the narratives were constructed, as well as analysis of the way in which the narratives structured relationships between participants in the project. Analysis focused on the three basic elements of a narrative, which comprises an original state of affairs (the beginning), an action or event (the middle) and a subsequent state of affairs (the end) (Czarniawska 1998:2; Roe 1994). However, a text is only a narrative when it contains a plot. It is the plot that brings coherence to the narrative, as it is through the plot that problems are resolved or ambiguities reconciled. Furthermore, it is the plot around which characters and events revolve and it is the plot that makes the narratives meaningful. The plot dictates the boundaries of action and determines the roles of various characters. It is important to note here that we do not consider the plot to be inherent to the events and actions, but rather as put there (White in Czarniawska 1998:2), following Weick’s (1995:20-21) argument that as people make sense of an event, or narrate an event, they retrospectively select meanings to attach to it that are congruent with their identity in the particular context. The aim of the analysis was therefore to trace how people constructed the plot, in other words, to trace the story-telling practices within the case study project in order to explore why, when and how certain stories about the project were told and enacted, who and what was included in these different accounts and who and what was left out (Bojé 1998).

The narrative approach used in this study is based on Somers and Gibson’s notion of narrative, which conceives of it as a story that is constructed interpersonally within a specific social setting. It allows for agency, yet actors are not:

...free to fabricate narratives at will; rather, they must ‘choose’ from a
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repertoire of available representations and stories. Which kinds of narratives will socially predominate is contested politically and will depend in large part on the distribution of power (1994:73).

It is important to point out that as we analysed the narratives that operated in the context of the case study project, we did not make the distinction that is often made between narrative on the one hand, and paradigmatic or canonical thought on the other. The latter is considered to be derived from ‘abstract and general reasoning’ and is characteristic of much of the formal DSC project documentation that was analysed. Narratives on the other hand are considered to be more personal and vivid, and to ‘have a capacity to move people and, in so doing, to make things happen’ (Bruner, cited Carrithers 1995:266). However, this article argues that paradigmatic thought also constitutes a narrative because:

… it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or social network (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices (Somers and Gibson 1994:59).

Hence in this research, both the more personal accounts as well as what is referred to as paradigmatic thought were explored as narratives that people enact and re-construct as they locate themselves within them like characters in a plot.

A final point here is that this research was not an analysis of narratives that were explicit and coherent within the case study project, but of conversations, meetings, documentation, interviews and focus groups, where stories were sometimes explicitly told, but more often invoked and inferred through fragments of conversation (c.f. Carrithers, 1995:268). Apart from formal project documentation, most of the data took the form of what Bojé (2001) refers to as ante-narratives that reflect the ongoing, incomplete, multiple and discontinuous nature of storytelling. Our analysis then is of stories in context, rather than stories as objects; narratives are not considered as measures, indicators or representations of the project, but analysed in terms of the way they were constitutive of it (c.f.Bojé 1998:1-2).

In the next three sections we discuss project narratives that participants located the project within: a soft systems narrative, a project management narrative, and an evaluation narrative.

A soft systems project narrative

Several project team members’ thinking about the project was influenced by the soft systems philosophy advocated at the University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury) in courses for agricultural professionals (Bawden et al 2000). In response to increasing awareness of the systemic social and environmental issues arising from agriculture, proponents of the soft systems approach called for a systemic approach to agriculture that brings communities together to learn and act collectively to facilitate change. Moreover, they argue that it is important for agricultural professionals to recognise they are part of the system and need to learn to think in a systemic way. The Hawkesbury approach is therefore about scientists, farmers, agricultural professionals and others working with each other to co-construct new worlds together. This means that the main priority for agriculturists is not ‘...learning about systems through inquiry ...’, but learning ‘...how to become systems of inquiry’ (ibid.:400). A key member of the project team, a Hawkesbury graduate, saw the role of the DSC project team as a facilitator of such a learning system. Other team members also engaged with aspects of soft systems theory and talked about the project as a new way of working with the community.

The narrative of the project that constructed it in soft systems terms created a space for a multiplicity of stakeholders to participate in the learning system. Project notes state that the project would seek ‘the input of other stakeholders who are actively engaged in triple bottom line issues
relating to landscape management'. These stakeholders were to include land managers, extension agents, scientists as well as the broader community which has a stake in the environmental, social and economic outcomes of agriculture. Stakeholders would be engaged in the entire change process from problem identification to solution development and implementation. This approach recognised the contextual embeddedness of all participants in the change process, including government. In fact, NRE was no longer considered an expert or change agent, but was seen as part of a larger ‘conglomerate of change agents’ (project notes). As one project team member stated, the purpose of the DSC project was to:

... be a catalyst for a whole-of-community approach to innovation and learning within the agricultural sector.

And to:

... help the ‘NRE community’ to learn that meaningful natural resource management is possible if we include the wider community as part of the team.

The way in which this constructivist soft systems project narrative was operationalised in the project was through the implementation of a capacity building methodology that was loosely based on the Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS) process (Engel 1997). This methodology involves those people who are expected to act on an issue in the process of defining the problems and the development of pathways for action (Department of Primary Industries 2004:7). The RAAKS process is explicitly constructivist as it is driven by the ‘interplay among actors with different world views’ (Engel 1997:220). The process comprises three steps:

1. Definition of the issues through interaction with a growing and emergent group of project stakeholders

2. Analysis of constraints and opportunities to address the issue

3. Development of action plans

The aim was to implement and adapt this methodology within three pilot projects. The first pilot project involved NRE’s Topcrop program that works with the grains industry to increase farm sustainability. The aim of this pilot was to engage a broad range of stakeholders in the definition and analysis of the issue of stubble burning in Victorian cropping areas (a practice that causes significant controversy). The second pilot project involved NRE’s Environmental Best Management Practices (EBMP) project, which aimed to improve environmental management practices on farms. The purpose of this pilot project was to broaden the scope of the EBMP project and explore ways to engage the broader community in collective action within a catchment. The third and final pilot was negotiated with staff from the fisheries group of the FarmBis program, which provides funding for primary producers to participate in training programs. The aim of this pilot was to increase participation of indigenous people in the development of training and education services related to aquaculture.

Within these pilots, DSC project team members acted as internal consultants to existing agricultural programs and projects to improve the way in which these engaged stakeholders in dealing with specific issues. Each pilot project was led by a small group of people that included some DSC team members and some members from the partner project or program.

Overall, the soft systems project narrative afforded the project team opportunities to construct a project that differentiated it from prevailing ways of doing things within the organisation, to move towards a more collaborative approach to natural resource management and rural development. However, while team members welcomed the opportunity to be involved in such an innovative, soft systems project that allowed for significant stakeholder participation, there was
concern in the project team about the extent to which the project had the support of the broader organization. Moreover, most team members had little exposure to soft systems theory, and consequently they struggled to effectively convey what the project was about to others in the organisation.

**A project management narrative**

While the soft systems narrative captured the aspirations of people involved in the project, it was simultaneously subverted through competing narratives that constructed the project in positivist terms. These positivist narratives were constructed as team members used prevailing public administration processes, tools and instruments. The public administration approach that prevailed within the organization (and the Victorian government more broadly) is referred to as the ‘new public management’ approach, which is based on principles of corporate management and market relations. Examples of this approach include the introduction of private sector management methods, the competitive tendering out of services and the implementation of a quasi market within government departments as they are split into purchasers (policy-making) and providers (service delivery) (Davis and Rhodes 2000:76; Reddel 2002:55).

One characteristic of the new public management approach within the organization was an increased emphasis on the principles of corporate management. These principles were manifest in the project management framework that structured most activities within NRE and DPI (Department of Natural Resources and Environment. Agriculture Division 2001). Project management is a process by which activities are planned, organized, coordinated and controlled. It is often perceived and described by users as a neutral and objective way of structuring activities within an organization (Hodgson 2002:804).

The development of a project proposal was a standard requirement within the Department’s operating environment. The project management framework was taken for granted as the way of organizing the project, even though there were many instances where team members and other stakeholders explicitly recognized that project management procedures clashed with their soft systems orientation to the project. Their constructivist conceptualization of the project saw it as emergent from interaction with a broad range of stakeholders, which made it difficult to develop a project proposal that committed the team to ‘SMART’ (Specific, Measurable, Accountable, Realistic, Timebound) outputs/deliverables before other stakeholders had been consulted or involved. As project team members complied with the demands of the project management framework they often discussed how they were required to create a different account of the project in order to validate it within the organization.

The narrative about the project that is contained in the proposal begins with a discussion of existing extension programs and the extent to which these have led to sustainable management practices. Extension is the term used for a variety of communication and change management activities designed to facilitate practice change on farm. Since the post-war era most agricultural extension programs have been science and technology driven. The assumption has been that good science and technology leads to sound agricultural practices. A linear model of agricultural extension prevailed that assumed that agricultural technologies and knowledge are developed by scientists, and subsequently ’transferred’ or promoted to farmers in order improve their productivity (Black 2000:493). In recent decades more attention has been paid to the social and organizational aspects of this change process, and farmers have been invited to participate in the development of solutions that suit their particular needs. However, the DSC project proposal suggests that existing extension programs have had only limited success in engaging land managers. It is argued in this proposal...
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that extension programs were developed using knowledge and expertise that resided within NRE and its partners. To achieve significant change, new knowledge had to be accessed, and therefore collaboration with new groups and individuals was to be fostered. The plot of this narrative is about the project developing new extension methods that could lead to productivity improvements as the project would facilitate increased rates of adoption of sustainable management technologies by broadening the scope of stakeholder interaction in change management activities.

While this narrative refers to the need to broaden the stakeholder base in agriculture, it nevertheless conceives of the main actors of change as agricultural extension agents and land managers, as the plot revolves around increased rates of adoption of sustainable management technologies. This narrative does not provide the space for broader community and stakeholder participation in the project.

An evaluation narrative

The positivist narrative contained within the project proposal validated the DSC project within NRE. Another project narrative operated in a similar fashion. This was the narrative produced through evaluation activities designed to assist with project development in the early stages of the project. NRE and later DPI had a dedicated evaluation support team that aimed to enhance the organization’s evaluation capability. While this team advocated its approach as an organizational learning approach, its legitimacy was ultimately derived from the capacity to enhance accountability of projects within the organisation. The increased emphasis on evaluation was a further manifestation of the principles of corporate management that characterized the new public management approach to public administration within NRE and DPI. NRE/DPI’s evaluation support team advocated the use of Bennett’s hierarchy (Bennett 1976) for project development and evaluation. Bennett’s hierarchy refers to a hierarchy of steps in a program or project and provides a program logic that can be used for both project development and evaluation. This framework was developed through an analysis of the chain of events within agricultural extension programs (Department of Natural Resources and Environment. Evaluation Support Team, 2002). Programs and projects within NRE and DPI were encouraged to produce a report, or ‘performance story’, in terms of the steps in Bennett’s hierarchy, which include:

- inputs, or resources in the form of time, money and staff;
- processes, activities or strategies to achieve change;
- people, participants or users and their characteristics;
- reactions: participants’ or users’ ratings of the activities, processes or strategies;
- knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations change as a result of the activities, processes or strategies;
- production, behaviour or practice change associated with activities, processes and strategies;
- results and changes in the social, economic and environmental conditions.

This evaluation framework was designed on the basis of an analysis of existing agricultural extension programs. Not surprisingly it therefore conceives of the change process in linear terms and considers agricultural extension agents and land managers as the main actors of change. As such the narrative about the project that was constructed through evaluation activities was inconsistent with the soft systems narrative that reflected the aspirations of the project team to be more inclusive of the broader community.
Bennett’s hierarchy was used in the DSC project as a tool for project development in the early stages. Some team members expressed concern about the contradictions between the project’s constructivist soft systems orientation that emphasized the emergent nature of change, and this approach to evaluation that conceptualized change as linear. However, the use of Bennett’s hierarchy was justified as it was considered useful in communicating what the project was about in terms that others within the organization would understand. It was argued by evaluation support staff that projects within the organization could ‘talk to each other’ and be compared through the use of Bennett’s hierarchy. The use of Bennett’s hierarchy facilitated accountability, legitimacy and credibility of the project within the organization.

The account of the project that was based on the principles of Bennett’s hierarchy identified a hierarchy of ‘users’ of the project, distinguishing extension practitioners as immediate users from community stakeholders as end users. This account described the project as a linear process where the initial focus of the DSC project team was to work with extension staff to develop community engagement strategies that were to be implemented in subsequent pilot projects. The lead characters in this narrative were the providers (or the project team) and immediate users (extension practitioners and change managers) of a product (new approach to extension).

In subsequent meetings of the project the kind of positivist and linear discourse that characterized this account prevailed. A shift in the way in which the team discussed the project is evident from analysis of meeting notes. While potential participants in the project were initially referred to as ‘actors’, team members were now talking about community stakeholders and farmers as ‘customers’. Similarly, team members discussed their innovative approach in terms of the ‘product’ of their project. In fact, while the broader community featured very prominently in early meetings of the project, a network mapping exercise conducted halfway through the project made hardly any mention of the community, and featured extension agents as the primary focus for the project.

The way in which two of the three DSC pilot projects were implemented reflected this project narrative. The EBMP pilot and the FarmBis pilot projects were developed in consultation with NRE staff involved in the partner projects. As a result the issues that these pilot projects focused on were defined by NRE staff (‘how to involve more people in catchment management’ and ‘how to involve indigenous people in developing education activities for aquaculture’, respectively). This represented the very scenario that the project’s soft systems approach was trying to redress – the pilots worked within the parameters of problem situations identified by the Department itself, instead of engaging the broader range of stakeholders in (re-)defining problematic situations (see Boxelaar et al 2005). While the third pilot project did engage a broad and diverse range of stakeholders in re-defining the issues around stubble management, this pilot ended up supporting only solutions that involved scientists, extension staff and farmers. As a result, this pilot project failed to significantly change the way in which government dealt with the issue of stubble burning.

Overall, in the implementation of the pilot projects, the DSC project shifted away from the soft systems approach and as a result non-governmental stakeholders, such as farmers, citizens and community groups were marginalised from the change process. While their views and opinions were heard in each of the pilot projects, their participation in the project was no more significant than the kind of consultation that occurs in less participatory processes.

Nevertheless, the development of the project’s Bennett’s hierarchy was a milestone event for the team. This constructed a project narrative that, for the first time allowed several team members to see how the various project activities,
processes and stakeholders connected together. A (temporary) collective understanding of the nature and goals of the project emerged. The evaluation framework provided the narrative resources to construct a coherent story about the project, the team's role within it, and the position of the project within the broader organization. This had been something that the team had struggled with up to this point. Furthermore, acknowledgement and validation by the evaluation support team enhanced the team's identity within the organization and this was significant considering the fact that the project team was uncertain about broader organizational support for their project. There was significant engagement with this project narrative within the team. However, while the use of Bennett's hierarchy validated the project in the organization, this occurred at the expense of the very purpose of the project to explore new ways of doing things. The evaluation process constructed a project narrative that was consistent with and reinforced prevailing ways of doing things within the organization.

**Implications for public administration practices**

What emerges from this analysis is that project narratives were constructed in both positivist as well as constructivist discourse. According to the former, participation by stakeholders occurs within parameters set by government, as the linear approach it entails ensures that government remains the owner and driver of the development process. This is likely to lead to the kind of community engagement that assimilates community and other stakeholders into government regimes of practice (cf. Dean 1996), or government through community (Rose 1996:332-336). Constructivist discourse about the project, on the other hand, reflects the emergent nature of change and the contextual embeddedness of all participants in the project. This translates into a change program that deconstructs the dichotomy between government and other stakeholders and creates a space for genuine collaboration, where other stakeholders can perform their identities in a way that does not assimilate them into or marginalize them from government practices and priorities. In the DSC project the positivist narrative prevailed and this impeded the effectiveness of the project to create a space for genuine participation of diverse stakeholders in natural resource management.

What is significant about these competing project narratives is that they operated within the project simultaneously as team members enacted the project. These narratives were the source of significant ambiguity throughout the development and implementation of the project. Furthermore, as team members engaged in prevailing practices of public administration (such as those of project management and evaluation) project narratives were invoked and constructed that subverted the constructivist, soft systems aspirations of the project team.

The need for alignment of public administration practices, institutional arrangements and organizational culture with the emerging emphasis on community engagement is increasingly acknowledged (Edwards 2002; Hess and Adams 2002; Maarleveld 2000; Macadam et al 2003). Authors suggest that public servants are dealing with multiple and competing knowledge frames that are brought to bear on issues as diverse stakeholders become involved in the rural development process. As a result, public servants experience increasing complexity in their jobs as policy advice is now contested and developed in the public arena. It is argued that they require new skills such as those of conflict resolution, negotiation, communication and knowledge management (Edwards 2002; Hess and Adams 2002; Maarleveld 2000). The findings presented in this article support the view that existing practices and structures within government struggle to support the shift towards collaborative community-based approaches (c.f.Edwards Hess and Adams...
2002) and that change is required.

The question is how to conceptualize that change process and the differences and ambiguities that currently exist. Often these are couched in terms of the need to change (organizational) culture where culture is understood in terms of customs, traditions, belief systems and values.

Even before the development of community-based approaches within NRE there had been a push towards an integrated form of government that would be able to deliver across the triple bottom line agenda. The ‘One NRE’ project was implemented to facilitate organizational change and integration between the diverse divisions of the organization (e.g. agriculture, conservation). NRE was often referred to as consisting of silos or insular divisions that focused on a particular industry or activity. The ‘silo’ mentality was considered to impede the development of a more collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach to natural resource management. This organizational predicament can be explained with reference to Lillrank and Kostama’s (2001) concept of product/process (sub-)cultures that exist within silos of organizations (c.f.Boxelaar et al 2003). They argue that initiatives to facilitate organizational change need to take account of these sub-cultures in order to be successful. The notion of sub-cultures or silos within an organization implies there are distinguishable cultural dynamics that act as wholes within their own domains.

However, this notion of culture being located within silos or groups of people with their own customs, traditions, belief systems and values, is unable to account for the fragmented nature of organizational culture that existed within the DSC project and the broader organization. Our findings indicate that competing project narratives, reflecting diverse belief systems, values and practices, operated within the same space, within groups, and even within people, rather than across groups. Furthermore, it is clear that culture is embedded in public administration processes and practices, which are not ideology nor culturally neutral. Consequently, a mere focus on the belief systems, values, customs and traditions within an organization is problematic, as it fails to bring into view the fragmented, but also pervasive nature of organizational culture.

The silo-perspective considers cultural differences to be primarily vertically organized. More recently Hess and Adams (2002:71) recognized that the new approaches to public administration challenge prevailing organizational cultures in a horizontal way. They argue that the ambiguities in the case study project must be understood in terms of an ‘overlay’ of constructivist public administration ideas and practices that emphasize collaborative arrangements over the prevailing ‘new public management’ practices that derive legitimacy from positivist knowledge frameworks. Hess and Adams (2002:71) suggest there is a dual shift occurring within government in Australia. On the one hand there is consolidation and expansion of market-based policy approaches that are based on economic rationalist knowledge frames (the ‘new public management’), while governments are simultaneously embracing co-operative approaches to public administration.

Hess and Adams’ view of the constructivist approach as an overlay represents a rather benign view of the differences and ambiguities; it fails to come to terms with the pervasiveness of the positivist, rationalist, and linear mode of government referred to as the new public management approach. The term ‘overlay’ that is used by Hess and Adams conjures up an image of two approaches operating alongside one another, each with its own separate dynamic. Our findings challenge such a view, as they indicate that the tools and practices of the new public management approach to public administration (such as project management and evaluation) are constitutive and subversive of emerging forms of co-operative approaches to public administration.

Several authors, inspired by the work...
of Foucault (1991), argue that the co-operative approach to rural development (and issues more broadly) represents a new mode of government, where community is no more than a means of government (Rose 1996:335). They suggest that through the implementation of co-operative initiatives governments seek to establish rural subjectivities through which government objectives and programs are operationalized and implemented (Herbert-Cheshire 2000:207; Raco 2003:76; Rose 1996). Community engagement is considered a ‘technology of government that... colonises a domain, a space, or an institution, to reshape it according to its own requisites, to maintain and intensify the relations of authority it makes possible ...’ (Dean, 1996:59). In other words, these practices:

... not only impose conditions, as if from ‘outside’ or ‘above’, but influence people’s indigenous norms of conduct so that they themselves contribute, not necessarily consciously, to a government’s model of social order (Shore and Wright 1997:6).

This is done by structuring the field of possible action, which shapes the conduct of subjects to align with the objectives of ‘advanced liberal’ governments.

The regimes of practice associated with the new public management approach constructed the DSC project in positivist, linear terms. According to Dean (1996:64), such regimes of practice become technologies of government when:

... we can identify a complex assemblage of diverse elements, held together by heteromorphic relations, concerned with the direction of conduct ... Technologies of government are, in this sense, logistical. The powers they constitute are ‘infrastructural powers’...

These technologies of government:

... constitute domains and objects of knowledge, and produce ‘diagrams’ of truth about subjects ... [and] emerge from and inform the practical rationalities, forms of expertise and know-how that can render our being in the doublet of conduct performance (ibid:65).

This perspective is powerful because it is able to explain how prevailing organizational practices within NRE and later DPI continuously reconstructed the project in positivist terms. It explains why staff involved in the project, despite their constructivist soft-systems orientation to the project, enacted positivist project narratives as they engaged in prevailing public administration practices.

The DSC project represented a struggle of competing narratives, where the positivist narrative prevailed. However, the project did create the narrative space to express issues in participatory, constructivist terms. A constructivist, soft systems narrative about the project also shaped the conduct of staff and performance in the project. While the journey of the case study project team was one fraught with challenges, difficulties and ambiguities, it is nevertheless important not to underestimate the learning and change that resulted from people’s involvement in this project. For example, while the pilot projects failed to operate beyond the parameters set by government, DPI staff involved in the pilots report that the DSC project expanded their views about the relevance of other stakeholders in their activities and they also developed a better understanding of the views and practices of other stakeholders. Furthermore, while the project was unable to significantly transform organizational practices, it nevertheless marked a space within the organization from which to assert other ways of doing things (c.f. Pathak and Rajan 1992). The project served as a reference point that made explicit and visible the challenge to the prevailing model of public administration. Stenson and Watt (1999:200) refer to the kind of change affected by the case study project as ‘... the development of hybrid logics and practices of government’, where ‘... narratives of the social operate in shifting relationships with
other discourses and logics of government in the evolution of government repertoires’. It is important to add here, that such evolution must be understood as consisting of multiple and discontinuous pathways of change and transformation.

Conclusion
What emerges from the above is that the discourse of collaboration and community engagement does not necessarily take public administration down a constructivist path, as was suggested by Hess and Adams (2002). Analysis of the DSC project suggests that the constructivist aspirations for the project were subsumed within prevailing, positivist regimes of practice. This article has made explicit the ambiguities that result from implementing a co-operative approach within the context of prevailing positivist tools and instruments of public administration. Significant organizational alignment is required if community-based approaches are to take policy development down a constructivist path (Hess and Adams 2002). Agencies have to come to terms with the fact that their organizational structures, processes and practices are constitutive of the social organization of the change process and hence critical to the success of the engagement and collaboration process more broadly. It is important to diagnose where the tension between prevailing tools and instruments of public administration compromise the construction of inclusive platforms for change that create a space for diverse participants to participate.

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Endnotes
1 In 2002 the Department of Natural Resources 
and Environment was disbanded. Work 
done within NRE was divided amongst 
three new departments – the Department 
of Primary Industries, the Department of 
Sustainability and Environment and the 
Department for Victorian Communities. 
When this occurred, the case study project 
was located in the Department of Primary 
Industries.

A Chance to Reflect

Australian and New Zealand School of 
Government / Public Service Commission 
Roundtable on Public Service Reform (1974 
Alex Gash, Australian National University

Some of Australia’s most distinguished 
and influential federal public servants of 
the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s recently 
convened in Canberra to reflect upon the 
nature of public service reform since the 
Royal Commission into Australian 
Government Administration (RCAGA 
1974-1976). This unique session traced 
the main proposals of RCAGA through to 
the establishment of the Public Service Act 
1999, by focusing on the themes which 
influenced public sector reform – equal 
employment opportunity, budget and 
financial management reform, the search 
for enhanced public accountability and 
the evolution of parliamentary scrutiny.

Ex-Commissioner, Peter Bailey, 
opened the roundtable with his 
recollection of the main factors that 
influenced RCAGA, in particular the 
perceived failings of the Commonwealth 
Public Sector at that time. In the words of 
the former Commissioner, RCAGA opened 
a ‘Pandora’s Box’, especially in relation to 
departmental secretaries, that helped to 
shape the direction of the Commonwealth 
public service over the next two and a 
half decades.

Ian Castles, reviewed the splitting of 
the Treasury and the early days of the 
Commonwealth Department of Finance. 
Gail Radford followed with a synopsis of 
the first decade of Equal Employment 
Opportunity and the leading position 
taken by Australia in this field of public 
sector management. George Nichols and 
John Nethercote reflected on Labor’s 
search for enhanced flexibility and 
responsiveness, reminding us of the 
attention paid to public sector reform by 
the highest levels of government.

David Rosakly recounted his time as 
Assistant Secretary in the Department of 
Finance and the underlying rationale 
driving budget reform during the 1980s, 
while Peter Hamburger and Vic Rogers 
provided perspectives on parliamentary 
scrutiny and the Task Force on Financial 
Management Improvement respectively. 
Former Auditors-General Pat Barrett 
rounded off discussion with reflections 
on the development of the Audit Office 
and the challenges that confronted 
accountability throughout the 1970s, 
1980s and 1990s.

This was undoubtedly a rare 
opportunity for senior and influential 
decision-makers (both past and present) 
to reflect on the nature and content of their 
decisions and the directions which reform 
has followed. It was especially valuable 
to consider the consequences of ‘a good 
idea’ and the way ideas are shaped by the 
actions of politicians and senior public 
servants.