The Learning Projects of Municipal Elected Officials

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Need for Study

- Providing comprehensive training for municipal elected officials is difficult due to:
  - frequent turnover
  - lack of previous experience in government
  - diverse issues
  - limited time
  - some resistance to training (Paddock, 1996)
- Identifying **recent** learning activities provides a way to assess the needs of the learners as they seek to become more knowledgeable about their professional practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to describe the learning projects related to the governmental role of a selected sample of elected municipal officials in East Tennessee.

The study includes the revision of Allen Tough's (1975) Learning Projects Interview Schedule. Eight demographic items were added to the revised schedule.

Adult Learning Projects

Allen Tough
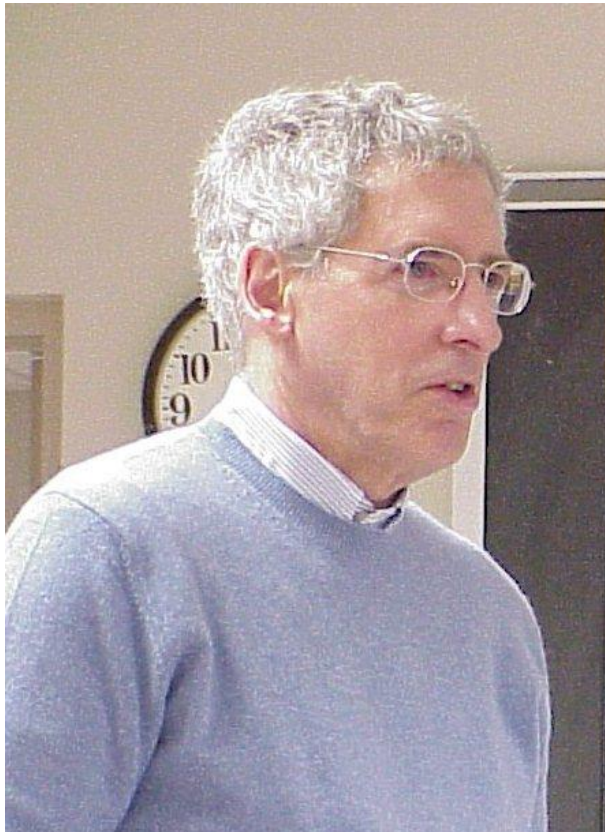
The Iceberg Analogy

What is a "learning project?"

… a combination of related learning episodes that are composed of seven or more hours of dedicated time to an effort to gain knowledge and skill that relates to the participant's governmental role. (Tough, 1971; Smeltzer, 2012).

What Challenges Impacted This Study?

- Interviewing "elite" participants
- Considering workplace relationships
- Modifying interview schedule enough to update it, but not so much that findings couldn't be compared to earlier studies
- Focusing on learning that centered on the participants' governmental role, rather than everything they had learned

Number of Cities and Elected Officials in East Tennessee by Population Range

	Population Ranges		Cities	Elected Officials
1	>100,000		2	21
2	50,000	99,999	2	11
3	25,000	49,999	5	32
4	10,000	24,999	9	49
5	5,000	9,999	19	112
6	2,000	4,999	24	130
7	<2,000		50	243
	TOTAL		**111**	**598**

Stratified Sample of Cities Selected by the Random Sequence Generator

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Knoxville	Johnson City	Maryville	Crossville	Erwin	Unicoi	Bluff City
				Signal Mountain	Madisonville	Surgoinsville
						Norris
						Lookout Mountain

Demographics

Table 3

Demographic Profile of Participants

Interview Item	Response	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	30	73.2
	Female	11	26.8
	Total	41	100.0
Ethnicity	Hispanic	1	2.4
	Not Hispanic	40	97.6
Race	Black	2	4.9
	White	38	92.7
	Mixed	1	2.4
Age Range	29 and Below	1	2.4
	30 to 39	3	7.3
	40 to 49	1	2.4
	50 to 59	11	26.8
	60 to 69	15	36.6
	70 and Above	10	24.4
Level of Education	Some high school	1	2.4
	High school/GED	4	9.8
	Some College	10	24.4
	Associates	1	2.4
	Bachelors	13	31.7
	Masters	8	19.5
	PhD	0	0.0
	Professional	4	9.8
Role	Mayor	11	26.8
	Vice Mayor	8	19.5
	Councilmember	22	53.7
Terms of Office	1 term	15	36.6
	2 terms	12	29.3
	3 terms	6	14.6
	4 or more terms	8	19.5
Years in Current Office	1-2 years	12	29.3
	3-4 years	9	22.0
	5-6 years	7	17.1
	7-8 years	5	12.2
	9-10 years	3	7.3
	11 or more years	5	12.2

Research Questions

1. What was the number of learning projects conducted by elected municipal officials within the past 12 months
2. How much time was spent on learning projects?
3. What was the thematic content of the learning projects?
4. Who was the primary planner of the participants' learning projects?
5. What resources were used during the learning projects?
6. What barriers or obstacles were encountered while engaged in learning projects?

Major Findings

- 41 participants from 12 cities

- 274 learning projects

- 6.68 projects per person

- Range between 2 and 16 projects per person

Time Spent Learning

- Average of 76.80 hours on each learning project*

- Range of 7 to 1,000 hours per project

- Each participant devoted an average of 513.24 hours annually in learning efforts

* That's 12.8 (40 hour) work weeks

Subject Matter of Projects – 50 Topics

Subject Matter	Frequency	Percent of Persons Who Learned about This Topic	Percent of Total Projects
Budget	29	70.7	10.6
Economic development	20	48.8	7.3
Parks & recreation	17	41.5	6.2
Planning & zoning	15	36.6	5.5
Water & wastewater	14	34.1	5.1
Citizen participation	10	24.4	3.6
Community vision/mission	10	24.4	3.6
Financial analysis	10	24.4	3.6

Who Planned the Learning?

- The learner was the primary planner in 32.1 percent of all learning projects
- The peer group, in this case the city council, board, or commission, was the primary planner in 20.1 percent of all learning projects
- The peer group with a professional was the primary planner in 19.3 percent of the learning projects

Learning Projects Data

Table 15
Additional Data for Learning Projects

Survey Item	Level	Frequency	Percent
Importance of Learning Project	Unimportant	1	.4
	Not very important	9	3.3
	Somewhat important	26	9.5
	Very Important	238	86.9
Current Effort	Not very active	9	3.3
	Definitely active	265	96.7
How Much Learned	Learned nothing	17	6.2
	Learned a little	40	14.6
	Learned a moderate amount	63	23.0
	Learned a lot	154	56.2
Enthusiasm Level	Not enthusiastic	5	1.8
	A little enthusiastic	23	8.4
	Somewhat enthusiastic	57	20.8
	Very enthusiastic	189	69.0
Benefit of Learning Project to Others	Not at all	1	0.4
	To a small extent	8	2.9
	To a moderate extent	29	10.6
	To a large extent	231	84.3
	Don't know/Not Sure	5	1.8
Taken for Credit	No	266	97.1
	Yes	8	2.9

Resources Used - 190

Resource	Frequency
Conversation	47
Board/Council	34
City manager or CAO	29
MTAS	27
Department Head	27
Internet/Websites	17
Management consultant	16
Citizens/Constituents	15
City attorney	15
Other cities	14

Resource	Frequency
Mayor	13
Professional staff	13
Thinking	13
Chamber of Commerce	12
Police chief	12
Budget workshop	10
Charter & codes	10
Planning commission	10
Finance consultant	9
Non-profits	9

Obstacles to Learning - 100

Barriers or Obstacles to Learning	Frequency
Lack of time	75
Family obligations	65
Work obligations	65
None	59
Lack of available resources	28
Cost of resources	27
Social obligations	27
Technology	25
Cost of programs	23

| Barriers or Obstacles to Learning	Frequency
Financial obligations	21
Health issues	21
Inconveniently scheduled courses/programs during workweek	20
Lack of available programs	19
Location of class	15
Unable to identify learning needs/Don't know what I need to know	12

Newly-Elected Officials

Elected officials in their first two years of office conducted fewer learning projects, but devoted more time to their learning efforts than did their more experienced colleagues.

Mean Number of Projects: New = 6, Experienced = 6.97

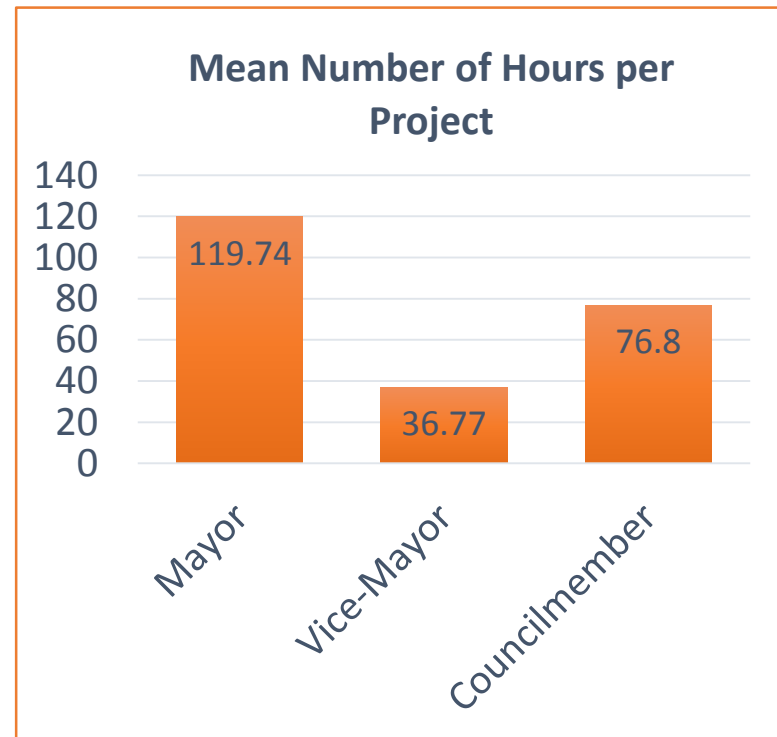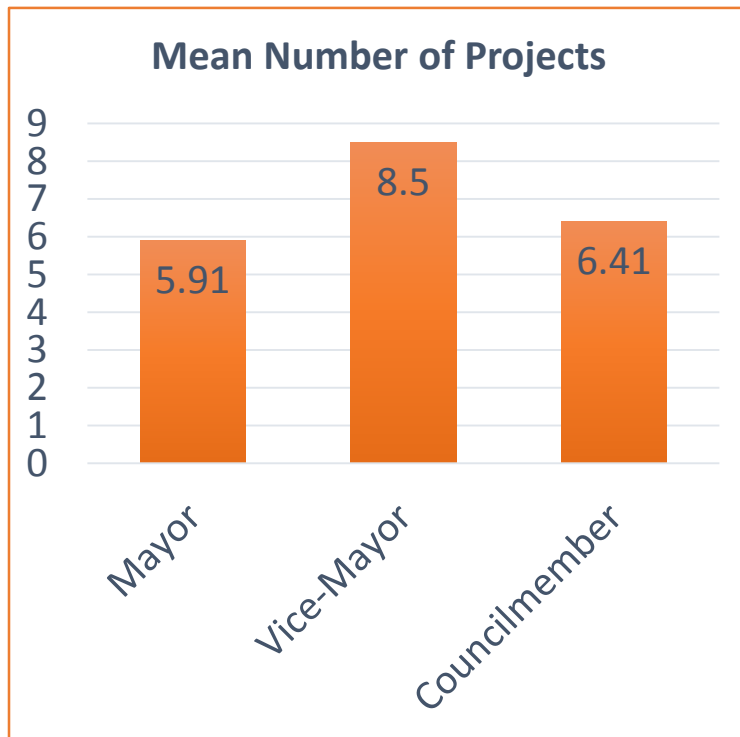Mean Number of Hours per Project: New = 79.87, Experienced = 75.7
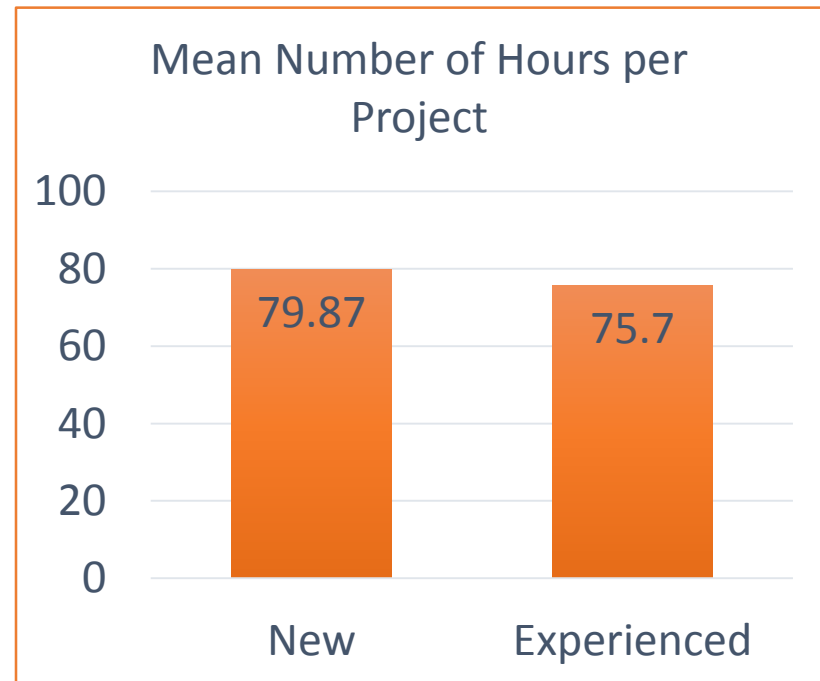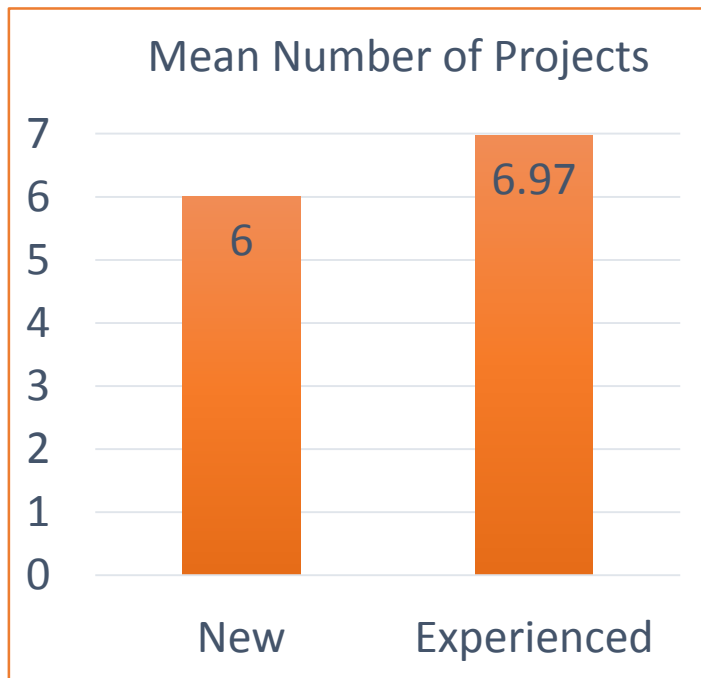
City Manager Cities

Participants in cities with managers undertook slightly fewer projects and spent significantly fewer hours on their learning projects than did participants in cities without a CAO.

Mean Number of Projects
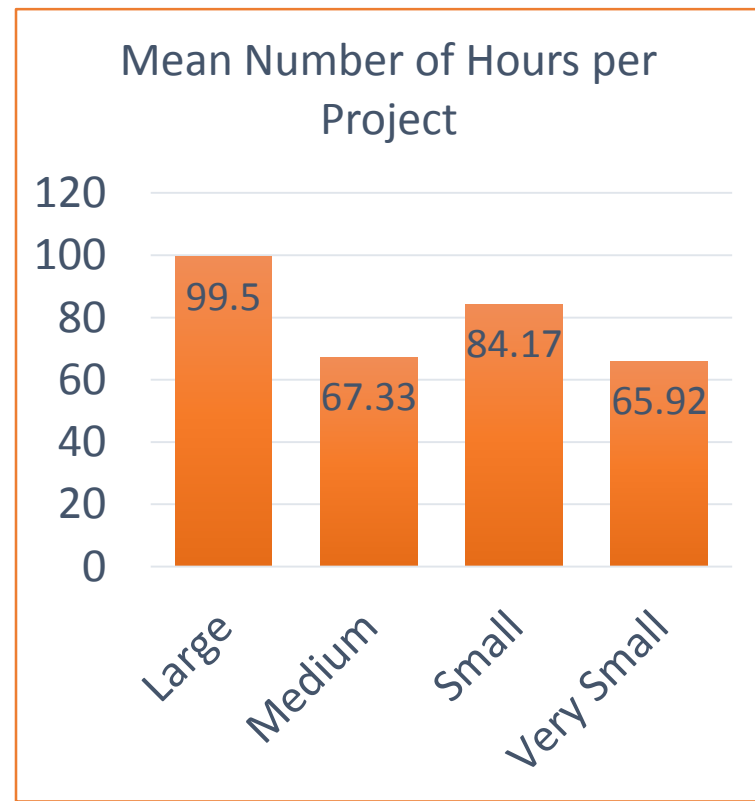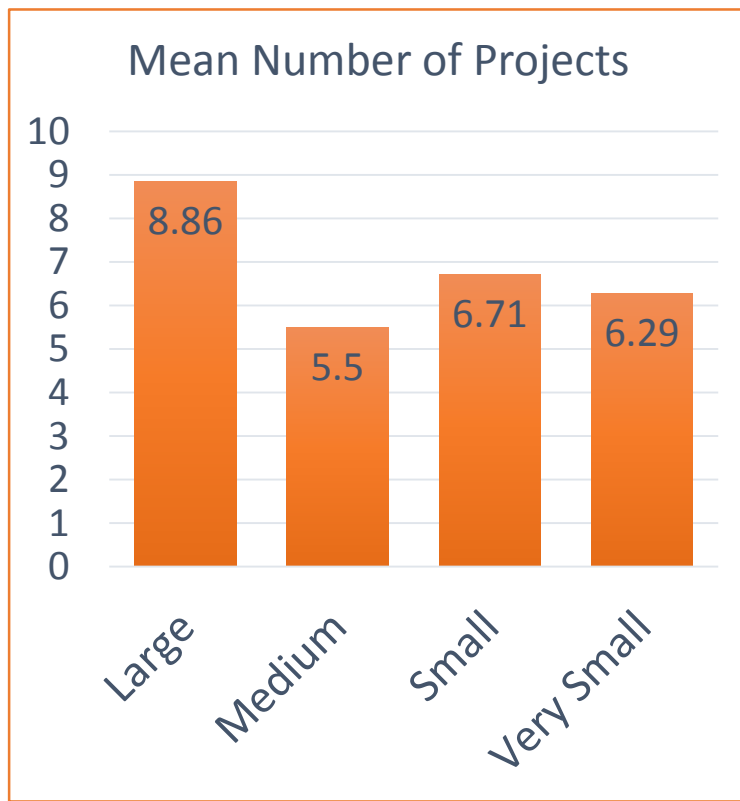

Mean Number of Hours per Project
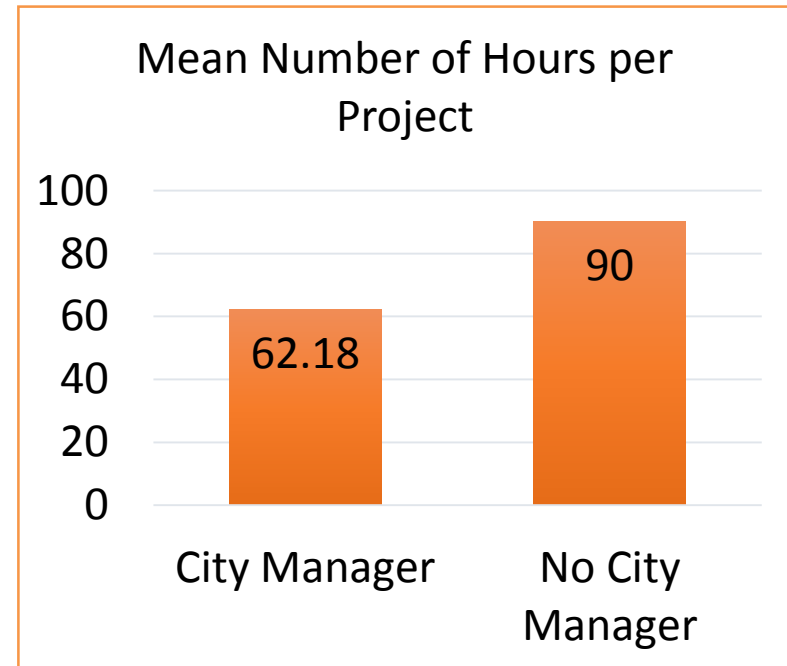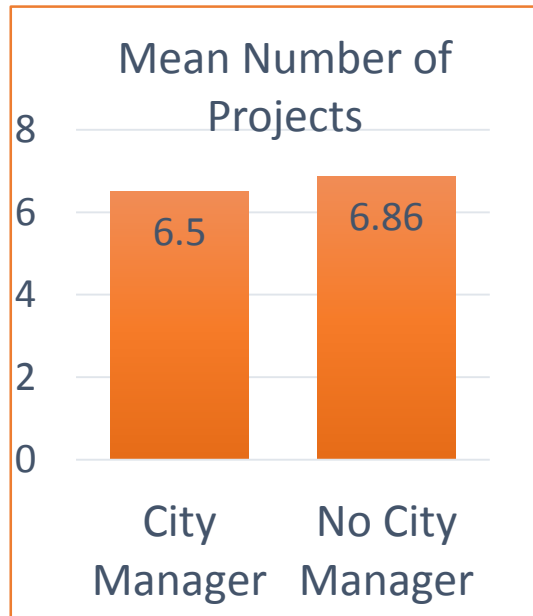
Governmental Role

The learning project experiences of municipal elected officials differed according to their elected role of mayor, vice-mayor, or councilmember.

Mean Number of Projects

Role	Value
Mayor	5.91
Vice-Mayor	8.5
Councilmember	6.41

Mean Number of Hours per Project

Role	Value
Mayor	119.74
Vice-Mayor	36.77
Councilmember	76.8

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Size of City

The learning project experiences of municipal elected officials differed according to the size of their cities.

Mean Number of Projects

City Size	Mean
Large	8.86
Medium	5.5
Small	6.71
Very Small	6.29

Mean Number of Hours per Project

City Size	Mean
Large	99.5
Medium	67.33
Small	84.17
Very Small	65.92

Implications

- Targeted experiences and resources for individuals who are running for municipal office as a means of preparing them to assume responsibility for holding office and their own continuing professional growth and development.
- Learning opportunities designed for newly-elected mayors and councilmembers, addressing both their need for information around subject areas and their development as a learner, as well as their desire to network with their peers in other cities.

Future Research

- By modifying the prompt sheets, the revised interview schedule could be used with other individuals who share a particular career, vocation, or practice.

- Applied research in the form of action research or pilot programs in the area of "train-the-trainer" programs would be of particular interest to organizations with the task of providing good governance education.

Acknowledgements

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