

Reflective Practitioners Can Help Teach What is Preached

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Abstract

Public Administration instructors can employ a variety of methods to help reflective practitioners or students play a bigger role in teaching. In this paper, the classroom is viewed as a forum to build and expand the practiced or witnessed knowledge bases of graduate and undergraduate Public Administration students. Under the premise that students learn from other students, teachers need to develop improved methods to allow practitioners teach what is preached. One method is to document the students' experiences in the public sector. In graduate courses these experience can be encapsulated with the distribution of resumes. These experiences will serve as a probe to engage students to reflect and disseminate their professional knowledge in the classroom. Students will be encouraged to bring other administrators (e.g., bosses, parents) into classroom discussions. We may attempt to get job descriptions from these administrators so we can develop a common identity in the classroom. As the class progresses students will be asked to role-play and approach situations from the perspective of other students in the course. This paper will address the false dichotomy between teachers and practitioners.

Introduction

The preeminence of professional knowledge in the field of Public Administration challenges the best teachers. Since teachers are expected to know more than students, the question becomes know more of what? Teachers should know the literature and the a joining theories of Public Administration better. Students with decades of experience should know practice better. Teachers and practitioners each have theoretical perspectives and this is a basis for commonality. Teachers can benefit from developing improved ways of allowing practitioners help teach what is preached.

This paper will note the status of Public Administration knowledge, the relevance of practitioner knowledge, and the used of multiple pedagogical methods in the classroom. The

next section details the often changing class profile and necessitates the advent of improved methods. The remaining sections of this paper detail improving practitioner input, improving classmate knowledge, getting practitioners to preach, concerns, and the false dichotomy between teachers and practitioners before the final conclusions are forwarded.

Current Concerns and the Crisis of Public Administration Knowledge

The crisis in professional Public Administration knowledge has been addressed without abatement. This crisis has two fronts. First, what is the relevance of research to practice? Second, how does classroom instruction prepare students for the world of practice? The answer to these questions may hinge on the ontology and epistemology of practice. Both research and teaching can benefit from elongated discussions on the ontology and epistemology of practice. There is an assumption that research and teaching based on practitioner knowledge will be more applicable to practitioners. There is an assumption that research and teaching that provides "how to" practice knowledge will be more valuable to practitioners than theoretical discussion. These assumptions may not be correct.

Practitioner Knowledge

How do practitioners communicate knowledge? It is assumed that practitioners (e.g., city managers) will find themselves in a knowledge production and dissemination factory. These practitioners must continually collect information, place the proper "spin" on it, and communicate this information to staff, department heads, elected or appointed officials, constituents, and to the citizens severed by the agency. Many practitioners in the classroom are adept with knowledge utilization and they often use reflection-in-action. The practitioners may also be adept at using reflection on reflection-in-action "so as to produce a good verbal description of it" (Schön, 1987: 31). This knowledge can benefit from improved ways to enter the classroom.

The store of professional knowledge generated by practitioners has opportunities to go beyond the workplace and become accessible to others wanting to learn about Public Administration. Academic journals like the Public

_____ use a section of journal, "The Reflective Practitioner," to get practitioners to document and disseminate their knowledge. Students often write papers in our courses. These papers are almost always required to have an academic component based on a literature review or a set of readings. In a sense the academic component is used to name and frame practice. We would not allow students to write paper based solely on reflection-of-action: either their own or others. Students often read and critique what other students have written. What is the status of the store of professional knowledge that is practitioner-based? In the classroom the documentation and communication of practitioner knowledge is often ephemeral. When practitioners help teach what is preached the ontological and epistemological questions become extremely important as they often know more than they say or write. Therefore, some emphasis on all three types of learning, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic is important.

Multiple Methods

This paper offers the integration of several pedagogical techniques. The reliance on the didactic style with lectures, and textbook-based self-learning will not be appropriate to having practitioners teach what is preached. The combination of critique of writings (practitioner and academic authored), role-playing, case studies, and experiential exercises will be beneficial. To avoid the "time drain" these methods often place on classes, they are designed to gain background information or completion outside of class and interjected spontaneously and often simultaneously. Just as instructors prepare to teach, they only select information that is relevant from a vast array. When reflective practitioners communicate they also selectively pick information of their knowing-in-action. For example, a city manager that always conducts external searches for department heads; however internal candidates (including interims) can apply. She or he knows this process is the best way to ultimately hire a most highly qualified applicant, call it theory. As the process is communicated and how internal and external candidates are reviewed represents reflection-in-action on the part of the city manager. This communication will only represent a small amount of knowledge held by the city manager. When the city manager writes a paper and reflects on reflection-in-action a reader may get more information and a richer

background on the process. After the city manager has communicated it may be interesting to get the hired department head (e.g., police or fire chief) to reflect on the process and address the students questions.

Current Class Profile

Typically, a Public Administration class has a profile characterized by diversity. The diversity in the class profile is a strength of the learning environment. First, the distinction between pre-service and in-service is important. In applied public administration classes the pre-service student will have to relate to limited experience and search for the ways theory can be interjected into the discussion. The in-service student will have years of experience and will use this knowledge as a backdrop or as the focal point of discussions. Both types of students can use theory as brought into the class by the instructor through readings and presentations as the "common thread" for the discussions. In a sense, theory can level the discussion field between in-service and pre-service students. Second, there are gender differences. These are important as they can bring forward perspectives that one sex may miss. For example a female administrative assistant may discuss feelings of exclusion from the all male strategic planning committee. A male may have feelings that there should be female representation, but the intensity of their feelings of exclusion may better be communicated by the female. Third, foreign nationals and U.S. citizens provide distinctly different world views. These views must be communicated in English and are often subject to the limitations of this language. Other types of variations to the profile such as hometown, geographical region, age, ethnicity, disability, and religion may be important in isolated instances but they do not overlay the class profile.

Improving Practitioner Classroom Input

In-service students are in a unique position in Public Administration classrooms. Their wealth of experiences needs to be disseminated to other classmates (pre-service and in-service) and to instructors. (The best classes may be the ones where instructors learn a lot.) Many of these experiences will naturally come forward during the semester based on cues from discussions. For example a practitioner may note that, "We had a similar problem with

purchasing in our agency." This type or queue may not register for the pre-service student as they may have not had exposure to this type of problem or purchasing. Also the pre-service student may have a limited basis to understand the experiences of the in-service students. The pre-service and in-service distinction among students does not warrant separating them and teaching them "material appropriate to their career stage" (Denhardt, 2001:528). These problems can be transformed into what Reichard (2002) calls "problem-oriented learning." Three key ingredients to problem-oriented learning are a challenging and relevant problem, intrinsic learning motivation, and the transfer of learning results.

Instructors of Public Administration can view the developmental needs and managerial skills of students on three levels: cognitive, linguistic or interactive, and psychosocial (Denhardt, 2001). Instructors can assign readings as an attempt to get the students on a common cognitive level. This level involves getting students to know the field of Public Administration from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Problem-oriented learning has the opportunity to mold the linguistic or interactive level with its emphasis on interpersonal skills and to influence the psychosocial level with an emphasis on intrapersonal skills.

Improved Classmate Knowledge

The use of problem-oriented learning (Reichard, 2002) or appreciative inquiry (Cunningham, Riverston, and Roberts, 2005) requires students in the classroom to have a better understanding of each other. It is amazing to think that students could leave a classroom and be complete strangers at the end of a long semester. First, each student should be required to post their resume on a class page and each student is responsible for having knowledge of this resume. As the semester progresses and a student mentions other practitioners (e.g., the county sheriff, probation officer, or human resource director) on a regular basis, the instructor may solicit the job description of this practitioner for class distribution. Students should also provide documentation of their experiences in the public sector related to the course content. For example a student in a budgeting class may document the paying of a water and sewer bill, the questioning of a property appraisal, and the verification of the sales tax on a receipt. The

parameters of these experiences need to be "fleshed-out" so the students can write snippets on these experiences that may contain value and ethical insights. The documentation of experiences provide students for an opportunity to engage in self-reflection.

The instructor must become intimately familiar with the student's submissions. As the instructor views the class the topography, varieties of practitioner knowledge should be apparent based on the students' experiences. For each student these experiences would include the name of the agency, position, duties and responsibilities, length of service, and career development.

Getting the Practitioner to Preach

Initially, the in-service student's input is important but as the semester progresses their will be more opportunities for pre-service input. For example, the instructor may ask the in-service student, "Has your agency ever confronted a problem where department heads have to purchase office supplies?" If the answer is yes, the instructor can have the in-service student detail the problem. These details could include the scope of the problem (all departments), the time costs, the duplication of efforts, the incompatibility of computers, and other particulars. After this problem detail are presented, the instructor can call on another student to play the role of the in-service student and think and express how the problem could have been addressed. The in-service student is keep on hold as they know how there agency addressed the problem. With the use of the Socratic method, another student may be called on to see how the International City/County Managers Association's (ICMA's) chapter on procurement and purchasing bears on this situation. Eventually, the instructor will call on the in-service student that presented the problem to discuss how the situation was addressed or how it can be addressed in the future. After the discussion the instructor may provide a mini-lecture based on theory or other practices that may detail the particulars of centralized and decentralized purchasing and ensures a transfer of learning back to all the students in the class.

This example illustrates the use of multiple pedagogical methods in learning sequences. The problem is essentially addressed using case study, role playing, textbook

learning, and lecture methods. In this sequence there will be an integration of theory and practice. At the same time the developmental needs and managerial skills of students on the three levels can be addressed. The cognitive skills are improved as the operations, policies, and political context of purchasing are forwarded. There is an incentive to read the textbook in this example the ICMA book. The linguistic or interactive development takes place as the students involved in the role-playing are forced into a situation with certain amount of anxiety generated as the answer to the problem is pending. The psychosocial level is developed by self-reflection on the part of the in-service student in detailing the problem. Through this experience self-confidence should be build into all students when they confront similar problems. These students are developing cognitive, interactive, and psychosocial managerial skills.

Many of the pre-service students may begin to look at the in-service student as a role model and which will increase learning motivation as they see the transfer of learning results to a position they aspire. Having pre-service students develop a clear perception of a future job is important. This perception should include projected job satisfaction, challenges, and required skills. The pre-service student will see themselves as closer to the skilled practitioner. The in-service student may benefit from how the other students would have handled the problem or to be able to teach other students the most appropriate way to address the problem that actually worked. In another scenario, the in-service student may develop a better understanding of how to or not to address the problem.

Concerns

There are several concerns related to getting practitioners help teach what is preached. First, time and effort needs to be placed into this type of pedagogical method. Some explanation should be provided on the course syllabus. The documentation of various problems related to course content should take place outside of class and updated in class. The parameters of this documentation require discussion. Second, some instructors may feel threatened by this method as in-service students are playing the role of the instructor. Instructors may believe that they are shirking there responsibilities. This methodology may be akin to the new practitioner instructor of an evening class that decided to have a guest speaker each night to teach the

material in the Public Organizations and Management course. This class schedule fit the practitioners experience of "calling on experts." Third, this method may cause a drain of valuable class time. The reflection-in-knowing must take place prior to class discussion. Fourth, the communication problem highlighted by Cunningham, Riverstone, and Roberts (2005) does not dissolve. Any time scholars or practitioners enter the role of teachers the danger of creating incomprehensible language may surface. "To communicate effectively, each party must know what it is doing, consider its audience, and tailor the medium and message accordingly" (Cunningham, Riverstone, and Roberts 2005, 46). This concern is evident when students' papers are poorly written and English is a second language. Instructors must remove or minimize barriers that can prevent productive communication.

The False Dichotomy Between Teachers and Practitioners

This paper strongly suggests that Public Administration education can benefit from structured and stronger input from practitioners in the classroom. Both teachers and practitioners can teach and each can learn from each other. There are also attempts to get practitioners to better learn from teachers that produce research. A city manager from Missouri City, Texas wrote a short email that provided a synopsis of several scholarly articles and their application to city management (see Appendix A.) This city manager counters Miller and King's (1998) argument that social science cannot produce basic knowledge that practitioners need. At the end of his email the city manager is suggesting the Texas City Management Association (TCMA) provide a section called "theory of the month." What is learned by these city managers through this type of forum will find its way into the classroom, thus reinforcing the practitioners ability to teach what is preached.

Conclusions

When reflective practitioners teach what is preached it enriches the classroom in which there is no monopoly on knowledge. Practitioner knowledge is shared in ways that cover auditory, visual, and even kinesthetic learning. Classmates, students, and instructors, gain opportunities to develop management skills at cognitive, interpersonal, and psychosocial levels.

References

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Appendix A

Theory and City Managers

Mention “theory” to many city managers and they will either yawn or get a glazed-over look in their eyes. In fact, I sometimes think that theory and city managers mix similar to oil and water. By the way, I yawned a many a time when I was city managing! In spite of this disharmony, however, I believe that current research with updated theory would be helpful to city managers in their decisionmaking. For example, consider the following research by university professors:

- **News Media’s Impact on City Policy:** The news media with their negative reporting of cities and racial framing of all issues have political consequences in the policies adopted by your city council. The news media make local problems seem unmanageable. They contribute to public cynicism and undermine the public’s trust in government. They cause your council members to spend more than necessary on their public safety budgets. (Dreier, Peter (2005) How the Media Compound Urban Problems. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 2.)
Application to City Management: Explain to council members that the news media reports do not accurately represent what is happening on the street; that just because the central city is experiencing gang violence or a particular type of crime does not mean that your city is facing the same problem. This may help to alleviate some of the pressure on council members to spend more money on increased police department staffing.
- **What affects conflict on the council?** The authors found that “credible leadership” by the manager and mayor significantly influenced council conflict. Also, the behavior of the council itself and age influence conflict. (Ihrke, Douglas M. and M. Scott Niederjohn (2005) Conflict on City Council in Wisconsin. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 4)
Application to City Management: Helps you to predict the conflict potential on new city councils, to better understand the conflict, and to address it.
- **Effective Public Hearings:** Many city managers and councils go through the motions of public hearings and then wonder why the hearings fail to achieve their intended goals of public participation, public input, public buy-in of policy, etc. Laws requiring public hearings are only minimum standards and additional input methods are required. The authors list six critical factors for enhancing municipal public hearings. (Baker, William H., H. Lon Addams, Brian Davis (2005) Critical Factors for Enhancing Municipal Public Hearings. *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 65, No. 4.)
Application to City Management: Helps to make your public hearing a meaningful and useful process.
- **Race and Housing:** How to ensure integrated housing patterns in your city? How to prevent “white flight” or white avoidance? Why do some neighborhoods temporarily integrate and then become largely Black? There are stable integrated neighborhoods in the country and there are segregated neighborhoods. (Ellen, Ingrid Gould (2000) Stable Racial Integration in the Contemporary United States: An Empirical Overview. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 1. and Rosenbaum, Emily and Grigoris Argeros (2005) Holding the Line: Housing Turnover and the Persistence of Racial/Ethnic Segregation in New York City. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 3)
Application to City Management: Helps you to better understand housing issues related to race.

These research topics were recently published in professional academic journals related to political science, government, and public administration. While they are not absolute in their conclusions just as city management is not an absolute science, they do provide current information on various city issues. And they could help city managers make better decisions with new facts, new perspectives, alternative approaches to a problem, etc.

Do these research topics tweak your interest? Would you like to know more about such research topics? Would you like to keep up with the ongoing research in local government and public administration?

If you answer yes to any of the questions, then I believe such research information could be disseminated through the TCMA website and in the monthly TCMA newsletter. It could be accomplished with a “theory of the month” and/or a summary of current research with references for obtaining the research.

Your comments and thoughts are welcome.

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