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Linking Theory to Practice in Public Affairs Education: Tradition and Innovation

Laila El Baradei

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Linking Theory to Practice in Public Affairs Education: Tradition and Innovation

We always talk about the importance of linking theory to practice in the field of Public Affairs Education, whether it be a Master of Public Administration, a Master of Public Policy or any other chosen name for the graduate degree offered under the umbrella of Public Affairs education. **Public Affairs programs aim to graduate students who can work in the public sphere and get things done. How this link happens in our classrooms varies a great deal. Methods can be plotted along a continuum that starts from the very traditional to the most innovative, and the sky may be the limit.**

Many of the textbooks used for teaching Public Administration emphasize the importance of practice and action. One of the popular textbooks used for teaching the introductory course is that by Robert Denhardt with the chosen title, *Public Administration: An Action Orientation*, whereby the author emphasizes the importance of understanding what public administrators do, and what actions do they need to take. He makes this point clear throughout the textbook, and even in the title of the book. Another book that tackles this topic is *Strategic Planning in Public and Nonprofit Organizations* by John Bryson. Throughout the textbook one main point is emphasized again and again. Strategic management is the combination of planning and implementation, and without implementation, nothing gets done, no results are achieved and your plans may not be worth the ink used to write them with.

Some of the traditional methods used to establish the link between theory and practice include the use of case studies, based on either fictitious and hypothetical situations, or real-life problems. In both settings the students are required to try to work out a solution for the problem at hand. Faculty may also give assignments and research work to students that requires them to go the field and meet with government officials, policy makers or nonprofit workers in order to get a sense of what is happening in reality. During class discussions and lectures, faculty may also make sure that what students study, in terms of theories, and what they read in the literature, gets to be explained through reflecting on real incidents in the public sphere.

As for the more innovative methods used for establishing the link between theory and practice, I would like to touch on computer-based simulations, capstone projects servicing real clients, public policy labs and lately use of big data and artificial intelligence. The Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) has been successfully conducting for a number of years a simulation competition for graduate students. Through the use of computer-based simulations based on real life 'wicked' problems, it helps in spreading awareness about the new simulation tools and games available that may be used to teach students the complexity of public affairs.

Capstone projects serving real customers, and community-based learning modes also abound in the field of public affairs education. These projects and course offerings enable students not only to reflect on what is happening in reality, but also to offer their know-how and try to put to good use the theories they study by helping organizations find solutions for some of the problems they face. By that, when things go well, it ends up being a win-win situation for all.

Another modality for linking theory to practice is through public policy labs. I have a positive experience to relay with directing what we call in our school the, "Public Policy Hub." The idea is to connect with government organizations, get them to identify what some of their policy related problems are and then assign a volunteer group of graduate students and alumni, who have been well trained on policy research and on preparing policy briefs, to work on the issue. The

students benefit greatly from working with government bodies, get to understand all the challenges faced, collect the data to the best of their abilities, and then try to be creative in communicating and advocating their recommended policy solutions.

Finally, when attending the latest NASPAA 2019 conference in Los Angeles, I got to learn more about big data and about artificial intelligence and how they can be used to enhance experiential learning. There were several presentations that demonstrated the use of multi-layered data analysis, for example: data compiled about school performance, street graffiti and burglaries, and then used to predict drug abuse. Another example that struck me was the 'Empathy Machine' and how through sophisticated software it was possible to come up with a program that enhances physicians' empathy with their patients, for example showing them through the computer simulation how a patient with eye problems actually sees in a blurred manner. These were probably student teams working on enhancing the level of empathy by caretakers and physicians for their patients, so they did not end up with a written report, but they took it a step further.

Establishing the link between theory and practice is key. Every day, faculty and students will work together on coming up with more and more tools to further solidify that link.