

Study and Work Experience: Delinking and Relinking

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by

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Introduction

In the practice of public administration there is an increasing need for insight in the nature and causes of societal problems. Also the need for knowledge of the conditions for and impact of public policies is growing, as is the quest for methods for effective governance in multi-actor contexts. The diversity and turbulence of value patterns and societal developments make the nature of societal problems and the dynamics of policy processes increasingly hard to grasp. New administrative arrangements or strategies, new modes of interactive and cooperative policy-making and new substantive policies, therefore, frequently have unanticipated and scarcely understood consequences. It is understandable, then, that many practitioners in the public domain are looking for reflection on and new approaches to their day-to-day practice. The part time program in Public Administration we run in Rotterdam is one response to this need, for which there appears to be a continuous en substantially growing demand.

However, at the same time academic Public Administration research and theory is much criticized for its lack of practical relevance or utilization. Practitioners often find scholarly analysis and prescriptions too theoretical and too general. While at the same time scholars are astonished and sometimes disappointed that politicians and administrators do not incorporate 'evident' scientific findings in their strategies. The extensive literature on 'utilization' of social science research stems from this astonishment (See Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980, Lindblom, 1979 and Ringeling, 1983).

Although it is plausible that scientific knowledge often somehow finds its way towards policy processes in the long run, and it is obvious that scientific reports are sometimes used to legitimate (or fight) existing policies, it is clear that there are serious problems in the communication between 'science' and 'practice'. These prob-

lems, too, manifest themselves in post-experience MPA programs. As a consequence, key questions¹ become:

- *how can we make our teaching more recognizable and relevant for practitioners?*
- *how can we help practitioners to link their practice to their study experiences and vice versa?*
- *how can the practical relevance of Public Administration research and theory be enhanced and made tangible for practitioners?*

Although the last question may be the most important, in this paper we will focus on the first two, since these are directly related to the design and management of MPA programs. The third question is potentially a nice subject for a separate study in the future.

Outline

In the next section of this paper we will describe our view on what it is that we have to teach and what further ambitions we have with the part-time program. This is based on our insights about what we have to offer and on our ideas about what is needed and asked for. This constitutes a necessary starting point for our argument. But it may be desirable to redefine our agenda during the educational process as both our insights and those of our students develop.

Then we elaborate on why linking study with work practice and experience is necessary if our aims are to be realized. Our central thesis in this connection, however, is that sensible linking requires a preceding (and repeated) delinking. Therefore, we proceed with presenting some strategies for ‘delinking’. With most of these we already have some experience, and if so, we will report on it. We also discuss a number of strategies for ‘relinking’, which in practice are often interwoven with strategies for delinking.

¹ These questions focus on the supply side. Of course, similar questions can be asked about the demand side, but these are beyond the scope of this contribution.

Finally, we devote attention to problems related to the transference of new knowledge, insights and competences to real life practices. One key question in this connection is what responsibility MPA-programs have for supervising such transference.

The mission of the Erasmus University part-time PA program

The part time PA program at Erasmus is set up for practitioners, professionals, having at least two years experience in a job in the public domain. It aims at teaching relevant PA knowledge and methods at an academic level in order to enhance professionalism, effectiveness and reflexivity of practitioners. In striving for these aims, the program tries to make a maximum use of the professional experience of the students and the real life setting they are working in daily. We elaborate on the main elements in this mission.

Public Administration knowledge and methods

Public Administration is about understanding the structure and functioning of the public sector, including all kind of agencies and private organizations performing public tasks. It is also about design, development, implementation and evaluation of policies and administrative or organizational arrangements or strategies in the public domain. For practitioners, Public Administration has to offer insight in processes and mechanisms that determine the functioning of public and semi-public bodies, their mutual interactions as well as interactions with societal organizations and citizens, intended or unintended outcomes of their policies or services. On the basis of these insights, Public Administration can contribute to new ways of analyzing, policy making and management, and hence to the professional performance of students.

Academic education

The part-time program is education at an academic level. That means that students should not only have a clear image of the state of affairs in the public domain and be able to reproduce and apply Public Administration theory, but also to choose, criticize and develop different theoretical perspectives.

Professionalism and effectiveness

Moreover, graduates should be able to relate, translate and apply Public Administration knowledge, insights and theory to real life practices and problems. Their repertoire of acting perspectives should be enlarged, their possibilities to choose between different perspectives improved. They should be able to present analyses and ideas in a convincing way, to advise, to collaborate and to manage. They should also be able to discuss and evaluate effectiveness of concrete policy and management measures and strategies.

Reflexivity

Finally, we want our students to become reflexive with respect to the sources and status of knowledge, societal and organizational problems, norms and values, and own roles and practices. They should be aware of the epistemological nature and basis of knowledge and think about its implications for the status and utility of theories and research results. They should be critical on the definition of problems: whose definitions are they; are there other competing definitions; are other definitions possible? They should not take norms and values for granted, without recognizing them as such and without knowledge of the background of these normative ideas. Besides, they should be able to view and evaluate their own (professional) behavior from different perspectives.

Linking

These ambitions require that the content of the study and the related processes of learning and reflection be connected to the working practices of the students. This is, we think, self-evident for the third element. Professionalism and effectiveness as a matter of fact are explicitly dealing with transfer to real life practice. But our argument is that the other elements of our mission also need – or at least benefit from – a myriad of intelligent connections between study and work practice.

Acquiring factual knowledge of structure and functioning of public administration can be intensified and speeded up considerably if observing and experiencing public administration in practice supplement reading books and taking courses. In fact, most factual knowledge hardly needs to be presented. Also information on historical developments, trends, and theories can potentially be understood and positioned far easier and quicker by students with professional experience than by those without such experience. Experience and practice give ‘flesh and blood’ to abstract notions and concepts.

Informed choice, critical review and sensible development of theories of Public Administration is also greatly facilitated, to say the least, if the relevant empirical reality is available. One could even claim that without the ‘resistance’ that ‘reality’ provides, a critical evaluation of theoretical notions is hardly possible.

Broader reflection on the meaning and impact of theories, of course, also needs ‘resistance’ for thinking. But reflection on problem definitions, values and own behavior remains fairly abstract and without engagement, if it takes place outside the context to which it pertains. In our view, reflection, as does ethics, needs to be situated, that is to be related to concrete phenomena and issues.

This argument is a theory in itself. If we test this theory and reflect on it by confronting it with our own experience in the part time program, it appears to be a rather poor, if not invalid, one. For there is ample evidence that the mere existence of relevant work experience does not provide any guarantee for more effective and efficient professional and academic learning. On the contrary, it may considerably limit the speed and the quality of the process. This is so, we think, because socialization in real life practice tends to make this practice self-evident. Sometimes an exceptional student even thinks that Public Administration is about social work (being the domain in which he is working) and is initially simply not able to see other things that may be at stake in the public sphere. Far more general is the phenomenon that students have the conviction that they ‘know’ the relevant reality. This is understandable since their ‘ideas’ about the reality seem to be continuously confirmed by their perceived and interpreted experiences. This prevents recognizing the meaning and added value of insights and ideas an academic program can offer them. Theories tend to appear as

intricate languages that scientists (should) use, but that only reformulate things already known. Theories may be judged according to the extent they correspond to the reality already known. But they hardly contribute to understanding that reality, leave alone to a different perspective on the same reality. In response to an assignment in which students were asked to apply a specified theoretical perspective to a known case, we received many papers in which students told their own story about the case and were convinced that they had fulfilled the assignment in an adequate way.

If real life practical experience has become self-evident, this severely limits critical reflection on theories and practices, development of new ideas and strategies, and their situated application. In fact we are often confronted with students with a fairly instrumental attitude. They know reality, its dynamics, its problems and they ask for the right (generic) solutions.

These experiences, and more specifically our interpretation of these, led to the conclusion that the constructive 'linking' sketched above requires a preceding 'delinking' process in which the self-evident nature of ideas and presuppositions about reality and its dynamics is removed. Acquiring and developing scientific knowledge requires that 'common sense' be made debatable. Professionalization requires critical scrutiny of existing practices. Reflection requires distance. Therefore, we now turn to strategies for delinking in our part time MPA program.

Delinking

In this section we discuss strategies applied for delinking. Some of these strategies are translated into specific elements inserted in the study program. Others are strategies applied within most modules. Some strategies are applied more systematically than others. For some strategies we already have evidence as to their impact. If so, we will summarize these.

Presentation

Already in the presentation and marketing of the program, we are emphasizing that it is going to put question marks to things that appear to be self-evident. It is made clear that the program will provide much knowledge, theories and methods but that it will not result in recipes for success. It is an academic program training students to think, analyze, theorize, design, develop and evaluate themselves.

Interaction and participation

Of course, listening to lectures, and reading books and articles can contribute to developing new ways of looking at things, and thus to reflection on own convictions and practices. But this process may be expected to be far more intensive if students are ‘forced’ to deal with the material in a more active way. Therefore, we have introduced two elements in the program. The first is that we require students to actually attend the courses during two evenings a week. If they are absent more than incidentally, they usually get an additional assignment that requires them to engage actively in the subject matter. Second, we apply interactive forms of working, both between lecturer and students and amongst students. Thereby students are forced to make their ideas explicit and confront them in debate with other views from literature, lecturers or other students. Moreover they are forced to rethink these ideas, scrutinize indications for their validity and evaluate possible alternative views.

Our experience shows that practitioner students in general like the interactive mode very much. However, it does not always result in short term changes in the level of academic and reflective thinking. Discussions between the faculty and students on average seem to be more effective in this respect than debates among students. Group discussions without participation of the faculty tend to be valued less by students.

The course ‘Explorations’

To clear the ground and give some direction for the critical and reflexive activity of students during the courses, the program starts with a course called ‘Explorations’. In this module four key issues are discussed: structure and functions of government, societal problems and the role of government, public management and organization, and

the added value of (Public Administration) science. With respect to each of these themes we begin with asking the students to define it, to formulate their norms, to express their observations on actual functioning and their presuppositions on the mechanisms behind it. Next, we ask further questions in a Socratic way to challenge their ideas and get at notions that are even more self-evident to students, but often appear to be debatable too. We explicitly identify different views among students and confront these with each other. The course is rather open ended with some conclusions, but many questions and contradictory views and interpretations. Students are provided with an article on the theme to be studied before the next session, which starts with a presentation by a faculty member elaborating a specific view. After these two new inputs in the debate, students go into working groups and try to come up with counterarguments, which are then commented upon by the presenting faculty member.

Most students evaluate this module as ‘confusing’. The things they were sure about appear not to be as self-evident as they thought they were. But at the same time they consider the module Explorations as very motivating. For the teaching faculty, that is the intended outcome. They learn something else too. Knowledge is not offered to the student in a clear cut way. They have to look for it. And that knowledge can differ fundamentally from their ‘preconceived ideas’. In general, it certainly helps to ‘un-freeze’, to delink students from key ideas that seemed to be self-evident.

Agenda setting

At the end of the course ‘Explorations’ students write an essay. In this paper they should formulate a substantive agenda for their study, starting from their own motivation on the one hand and the three most intriguing topics of the on the other. What do they want to learn, which questions do they want to answer during the study? By giving this assignment we force students to be explicit on what is new to them and on what they do not know or understand. This is meant as a way to consolidate the uneasiness induced in Explorations. Still, reading the essays, we must conclude that many students redefine fundamental questions in fairly instrumental ones. The process of delinking and unfreezing is not a one shot business.

Uncommon interpretations

In the different courses many real life cases, sometimes directly from students' experiences, are discussed. One function of this practice is to train students in assessing and reflecting on the nature of the situation or problem or trend. It appears that often students come up with a straightforward interpretation. They experience the situation as the observation of simple facts. By offering them alternative perspectives and interpretations, explicitly using theoretical notions or not, we show that on scrutiny many things are not as self-evident as they seem. It often appears to require much persistence and supervision to force students to actually apply different perspectives and evaluate these.

Feed-back

In papers and presentations, students give their account of specific situations and processes, again often from their own practice. This provides us with extra opportunities to give feedback. Not only in terms of the (in)validity of the account per se, but also in terms of the quality of the evidence and arguments to support it. Thus, in so far available time allows us to do so, we not only mark papers, but also give students qualitative comments in written or oral form.

Mentors

Immediately after the introductory module 'Explorations', students are asked to complete a self-assessment of their competences with respect to study, research, communication, consultancy and management. If desirable they are then linked to a faculty member who acts as a mentor. In consultation between student and mentor a plan is formulated to improve relevant competences. Sometimes this plan includes a specific task to be performed in certain modules (presentation, writing, analytical skills, research methods) or taking additional courses. It is also possible that the plan includes exercises or experiments to be done in the own work practice. In this case students are forced to act in new ways in known situations and learn, by consequence, to view these situations in new terms. Moreover, the consultations between mentor and stu-

dents on all kind of aspects of the study and real life practice may contribute to ‘delinking’.

At this moment, however, we do not have much evidence on the impact of mentorships in this respect. Nevertheless, on the basis of our first impressions, we are looking for possibilities to improve the effectiveness of this part of the program.

Collaboration

Another device for delinking is situated in the interaction between students. If they have to work together in small groups on projects, cases or papers, or in group discussions, their – different – views and experiences are confronted with each other. This is especially the case if the groups are heterogeneous in terms of tasks and functions the members fulfill in their jobs, and in terms of the (policy) areas they work in. We require students to work with different partners on different assignments to be done during the study, thus inducing more diverse interaction and confrontation of ideas. That also prevents them to focus on the things they are already good at, leaving their weaker competences to their fellow-students.

Start session masters year

In the modules of the masters year the emphasis is on reflection, which by definition implies an element of delinking. As part of a two-day starting session of the master year, we conduct a social simulation experiment in which students occupy different administrative positions. In this way we create a collective ‘reality’, thus enabling joint reflection. This is done in an evaluative session after the simulation. It appears that– even after one year study in which the preceding ‘delinking’ instruments were applied – it is fairly difficult to organize ‘distance’ to what is going on in the simulation while it is played. However, in the evaluative sessions such distance is quite well realized (probably due to skills students had acquired in the mean time), thus enabling thoughtful reflection on how patterns and self-evident notions are generated and consolidated and on conditions and strategies for change.

Reflexive modules in the master year

In the thematic modules of the Master year, we try to create the conditions for more reflection, both on theories and practices,. There are four modules in the Master year:

- Policy and society;
- Governance and the public sector;
- Public management and organizational change;
- The Public Administration professional.

In these modules, the emphasis is on debate and on assessment of societal, administrative and organizational problems, on the meaning and usefulness of theoretical approaches, on the construction of strategies and solutions, as well as on the arguments on which these are founded (Cf. Schön, 1983) . All these elements, however, require self-evidences to be put at issue. It continues to be the task of the faculty to do this. In this part of the program we try to stimulate reflection by the student even more than before.

Relinking

Delinking enables relinking in new ways, thus bringing home the added value of the program, not only in an academic sense but also in a professional mode. To be sure, relinking is already embedded to a considerable extent in the devices we designed to delink. For example, tempting students to look with new lenses to known situations is at the same time delinking and relinking. Things cannot simply be taken for what they seem to be. But also: new theoretical perspectives can be applied in sensible ways. Or: perspectives from other actors make sense as well.

Still, it is useful to make an analytic distinction between delinking and relinking and summarize the main instruments we use for the latter. This is so because assessing the quality of the program and developing it further, requires that delinking and relinking be evaluated each on its own account. For if there is much relinking while there effectively is no delinking, the net result with respect to our mission is too meager. More-

over some devices have actually more to offer with respect to relinking than to delinking.

Again: interaction and participation

Sensible linking of new perspectives and theoretical ideas to real life practice is only possible if students engage in applying them actively in a critical mode. The latter aspect is enhanced by debate among students and between students and faculty on the applicability and implications of perspectives, concepts, and presupposed relations. In fact, such debates constitute the core element of the reflective modules in the master year. The following instruments for relinking (except the last one) are already applied in their first year.

Examples from work practice

An obvious device is illustrating analysis and theories presented in courses by examples that are recognizable for most, if not all students. Through earlier occupations or administrative functions, research and consulting, our faculty is able to produce such examples. It's our observation that this is not only illuminating for the students, but also motivating to follow the line and consequences of the argument.

Assignments with respect to work practice

One step further, in fact combining both previous devices, is forcing students to apply perspectives and ideas studied to real life cases. In early stages of the program it seems wise to choose cases that are recognizable, but not very familiar to students. Thus they learn linking without too much interference of existing links (self-evidences). Gradually, it should be possible to come closer to the own working practice in new ways. Of course, feed-back on such assignments is vital in order to guide the process of relinking.

Guest speakers

Another way to (re)link insights from the study to actual practice is the invitation of and debate with guest speakers, themselves practitioners or consultants. They present theories, analyses and practices they use in their profession, which may provide students new practical ideas and insights. Apart from that a debate with a guest speaker is a way to explore, test and support (or reject) notions and ideas acquired during the study. It also offers a possibility for our part-time students to improve their interview skills by trying to discover what relevant questions could be asked. The guest is in that case not giving a lecture, but is requested to answer questions.

It is clear from our experience that guest speakers should be carefully selected. They should be able to be concrete and reflexive at the same time. That is, his or her contribution should be 'empirical' and recognizable and leave room for differences in interpretation and discussion. We also found that it is necessary that guest speakers are properly embedded in the course. That is, the faculty running the course must make clear for what purpose the guest is invited and what kind of discussion with the guest will be useful. Moreover, during or after the session the faculty should pick up main points from the presentation and debate in order to explicitly connect them with the theme of the course and theoretical notions considered. Like in the case of practice related assignments, the (re)linking process should (especially in early stages of the program) not be fully left to the students.

Collaboration

After training in delinking and having digested Public Administration theories and approaches, relinking may be facilitated by collaboration between students. They will discuss how such relinking might sensibly get shape. Contrary to the heterogeneous groups that we use for delinking, it seems useful here to work with homogeneous groups. Students working in the same (type of) organization then search in mutual exchange for new interpretations and analyses of what is going on (or how things might be changed) in own practices, utilizing what is learned during the study. Such debate actually is about *how* new links can be made.

Final project

In the final project of the master year – which can have different formats – relinking is the core business. Students investigate a specific issue or case and prepare a research report, a policy advise or an organizational analysis and advice. They should utilize Public Administration theory in dealing with empirical phenomena and specific policy or management problems. Frequently, students engage in a project directly related to their daily work, in many cases devoted to an issue or problem with which their own organization is struggling. In such cases the task of the student and his/her supervisor is to keep organizing distance (delinking) while at the same time making sound and solid new links between theory and practice, not only in the analysis, but also in designing plans and strategies, and eventually in their implementation.

Transference

Finally, an additional problem of relating study to work practice should be addressed. However, successful the program is in delinking and relinking thoughts, knowledge and insight at the level of the individual student, transference of this new skills and competence to actual professional behavior, is dependent on situational factors and mechanisms. The point is that professional behavior is also social and organizational behavior. It is not only subject to professional expertise and methods, but also social codes and expectations. Especially with respect to ‘reflection’ in general and ‘unconventional’ interpretations and solutions specifically, individual professionals are not always able to ‘realize’ these in an uncomprehending environment. In fact the problem becomes: how to delink, change and relink thoughts and ideas in others. We think that this problem should get due attention in our program. We might devote some time and energy in the module on the Public Administration Professional to make students aware of the problem and to reflect on what can be done about it. In a sense the final project – if this is connected to the daily work practice – can be considered as an exercise in transference to organizational behavior.

It is an interesting question whether the program and the university have a duty to fulfill in this respect after students have completed their study. And if so, how.

Results

The results of our educational strategy thus far are mixed. In general, students are fairly satisfied with the program. They often report that it helps to view their own situations and work in new ways and consequently to act in new modes. Many students also report that the program influences their way of thinking and it generates new questions. This is also substantiated by essays students write in the framework of the final module of the program. In this assignment they were asked to return to their initial expectations and agenda, as formulated in an essay in the first module, and to reflect on what they have learned in the mean time.

On the other hand we observe that graduates differ widely in the extent to which they are able to reflect, analyse critically and theorize upon policy, administrative and organizational issues.

Conclusion

In this paper we argued that an MPA-program that seeks to combine academic education, practice oriented professionalization and reflexivity has much to gain from linking study and work practice. We also identified the pitfall of the lack of distance practitioners often have from their practice and day-to-day experience. Therefore, we concluded that a major investment in 'delinking' has to be made. Students can be too close to the subject they like to study. New sensible connections have to be established between what is learned and elaborated during the study and that very practice part time students experience everyday.

A number of instruments we thought of and applied until now, enhanced both steps of delinking and relinking. We outlined how we expect and experienced the last years them to work. But this is only a set of first steps. We have much to learn from peda-

gological literature and from the experiences of others who manage programs for practitioners. We are now in a position to (re)link such insights and experiences to our own day-to-day practice in the program. This is a consequence of the reformulation of the pedagogical problem that is central to programs like Public Administration and Public Affairs.

What we aim for is that students have the experience that the great poet T.S. Elliott once phrased so wonderful:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

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