MAKING PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAMS EFFECTIVE AND RELEVANT: THE ROLE OF THE POLICY SCIENCES

Peter deLeon and Toddi A. Steelman

INTRODUCTION

As we leave the 20th century, it seems appropriate to reflect on the discipline and pedagogy of public affairs.[1] This essay addresses the question: Is public policy education effective and relevant for the challenges of the 21st century? To answer this question, we also need to ask two additional questions: Is it necessary to change? And, if so, how might such change occur?

There are no "objective" indicators (e.g., wars or depressions) that portend crisis in the American polity and its attendant public policies. Moreover, the state of public policy programs in the United States seems quite robust. Graduates from public policy programs are finding employment in the hearty economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and public policy programs have grown markedly in the 50 years since Harold D. Lasswell (1949, 1951) forecast them, and since the first public policy programs were established in the 1970s (see deLeon, 1988). However, growth in academic public policy programs and ready employment are not complete measures of success or salience. While the discipline has experienced many undeniable triumphs in terms of prominence, it has been less successful in providing effective long-term solutions to some policy problems, such as poverty alleviation, homelessness, sustainable development (i.e., balancing environmental and developmental concerns), health care, education, and campaign finance, to name a few. Derek Bok (1997) has offered a series of calibrations by which government and their policies might be measured, in which the United States clearly has a mixed reading.

In addition to lack of effectiveness in some areas of public policy, the United States and the world community in the 21st century will be a far different place than it was in the 1950s or the 1970s, as Lasswell himself surely knew (see Lasswell, 1956). To wit: the American public trusted federal and usually state governments; devolution was not the phrase de jour; democracy and market-based economics were not a global consensus, either as a development medium or even an agreed-upon goal; technology was not as dominant nor as questioned; public, private, nonprofit, and citizen sectors were more sharply defined and distinct in their mission and goals. As these few examples indicate, changing contexts and new trends provide adequate justification for appraising the status of public policy curricula and anticipating its relevance for the future.

---

[1] We are hardly alone in this endeavor. Ronald Brunner's (1991) reflections on the status of the discipline point to the policy movement as part of the problem. Michael Reisman (1987) provides an insightful analysis of a meta-curricular theory for continuously making legal education more effective and relevant; also see Brunner (1997a, 1997b).

This article addresses the current challenges facing public policy as a discipline and proposes suggestions to speak to some of these challenges. In our opinion, two dominant trends must be attended to if public policy is to be both effective and relevant in the 21st century. First, public policy practitioners and teachers need to make a greater commitment to finding common interest solutions to the social problems in their society. This can be done by moving closer to the ideals and principles advocated by Harold Lasswell under the heading of the "policy sciences" more than 50 years ago. Second, we need to adapt our programs to the changing world around us. We propose that new programs will be more successful in meeting the challenges of the second task than those of the first.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAMS

The problem with contemporary public policy curricula is that they have strayed too far from the original vision advocated by the founders of the discipline.[2] Public policy was built on a foundation of problem-oriented, contextual, multi-method inquiry in the service of human dignity for all (Lasswell, 1971). The policy sciences, as developed by Lasswell and his colleagues, proposed intellectual tools to aid practitioners in the identification and specification of policy problems and the development of sensible, useful, and politically viable solutions to them. The integration of knowledge across disciplines was, and has been, a key to this practice. The desired result from this training was to produce "professionals"—those who have acquired knowledge and skills critical to society and who accept responsibility to use them in the common interest (deLeon, 1988; Lasswell, 1971, pp. 4–9). Provided that these goals are worthy ones—and we suggest they are—the problem that we define is that public policy schools have either strayed from this original vision or are not doing a good enough job communicating this vision to their students. We propose five observations of shortcomings in present day public policy programs to support this claim.

Government Is Perceived as Irrelevant

The most troubling, and surely the most damning, indictment of the study of public policy is that governments (at all levels) are perceived as irrelevant, meddlesome, and outmoded. Americans are seen widely to distrust government because it is "inefficient, wastes money and spends on the wrong things" (Nye, 1997, p. 1; Orren, 1997). As public servants and policy practitioners, we have somehow created the impression— real or perceived—of ineffectiveness. At times, policies have been proposed that were later seen to be incompetent, problematic, and even downright unworkable. In these situations, practitioners have eroded the trust of the public's faith in government.

This situation should be seen as a clear call to make ourselves, our students, and what we teach (and practice) more relevant to the public whom we allegedly serve. But how do we do this? An evaluation of additional trends within the discipline indicates how everyday teachings and practices are predicated on a problem-blind, a-contextual, narrow disciplinary focus that is often insufficient to address the multidimensional, complex problems found in the real world which real people face.

Misuse of Theory

For some years now, the Holy Grail in policy research has been predictive theories. We admit readily that theory is useful and necessary for the discipline, provided it is

---

[2] See Brunner (1991) for an extended diagnosis of the challenges facing the policy movement.

used fittingly. However, two trends suggest that theory often is used inappropriately or incompletely. First, theories are not meant to be predictive in an absolute sense, even though theory often is invoked for such purposes. Theory should be used to *suggest* what may *or* may not happen in a given context rather than to predict or prescribe in a deterministic fashion. Applying theory in an indiscriminate and contextually barren manner can lead to ill-defined policy interventions. Second, the focus on specific theories can lead to an overly narrow problem definition and prevent the integration of knowledge across disciplines. For instance, focusing on correcting a market function in accordance with microeconomic theory may provide elegant insight into an important part of a much larger policy endeavor. Focusing *only* on the precepts of microeconomic theory to the exclusion of the broader political, social, or cultural aspects of the problem may lead to an inappropriate and fragmented policy solution that results in unintended policy consequences, a condition Amatai Etzioni (1988) has thoroughly documented.

Failure to Discern the Common Good and Neglect of Ethics and Values

The prevalence of single-interest politics has overwhelmed the concept of the common good. Single-interest politics can promote narrow solutions to multifaceted policy problems. Contributing to this problem is a gap in the ability of policy practitioners to assess a situation and make determinations about what may be in the common interest and advocate a common interest solution. To be sure, this fragmented condition accurately reflects the state of American public policy, so the blame can hardly be laid entirely at the feet of public policy scholars.

   Moreover, a preoccupation with "objective" policy analysis has led to a generation of practitioners who have shied away from making anything approaching a "value-based" decision or recommendation (Amy, 1984). Policy is inherently a normative practice, which is why ethics is central to the study of public policy. For years, policy scholars have argued that technical, value-free information should drive policy decisions. In retrospect, this has been conceived widely to be naive, perhaps even wrong (see deLeon, 1988). Simply put, values matter. However, public policy programs often fail to teach the conceptual and intellectual tools necessary to make value decisions. In the absence of such training, technically driven solutions that focus on "objective" analysis techniques render decisions devoid of explicit ethical, moral, and value dimensions. Technical guns-for-hire lobby legislators and lawmakers and seldom consider what it means to "speak truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1979) as they promote narrow interests to the exclusion of common sense solutions for the common good. In the process, the Lasswellian maxim regarding human dignity for all is all but lost.

Disproportionate Focus on A-contextual Analysis

Many public policy programs favor a-contextual analysis techniques to the exclusion of more contextual approaches. This preference stems from the search for deductive, quantitatively driven and generalized solutions to social problems that spring from the positivist tradition. As such, many programs provide deductive training in political science, psychology, economics and other disciplines with an underlying methodological emphasis in quantitative techniques. Quantitative analyses, with its focus on aggregate data sets and generalizable findings, can be reductionist in the methods used to assess the values and issues important to specific publics. This is not to say that the focus on deductive theory and quantitative methods is not useful, but if students have training *only* in these tools, they will use them in appropriate as

well as inappropriate ways. Of course, Abraham Kaplan's (1964) time-honored aphorism (which he labeled the "law of the instrument") comes to mind: "When all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail."

Neglect of Communication Skills

Given that today's public is generally better educated, has greater access to information, and in many ways has a greater expectation of involvement in decisionmaking, students of policy need to know how to communicate with the public and address their expectations on an interactive basis. The implicit message in many public policy programs is that the practitioner is writing *for* or speaking *to* the public, not entering into a dialogue *with* the public. While one-way communication efforts are appropriate in some settings, two-way and open communication is an increasingly necessary tool, especially if we are to add more contextual methods to our methodological pantry.

ASSESSING THE RELEVANCE OF PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAMS

To thrive and prosper in the future, not only must public policy programs strive to make themselves more effective, but they must also strive to be more relevant to the surrounding world. As the world changes, policy programs must assess and adapt their curricula accordingly. We suggest four important trends for public policy programs to consider in the pages that follow.

Decentralized and Interdependent Authority

Intergovernmental programs, such as welfare, health care, and environmental protection, have grown markedly in recent decades. An intergovernmental perspective is crucial to understanding how our contemporary and future programs will perform (Conlan, 1998; Goggin et al., 1990). Devolution of authority to states and localities means it is no longer acceptable to train students to understand how the federal, state, or local governments operate as insular entities. Thus, a greater emphasis must be placed on intergovernmental relations. Moreover, as the balance of power or legitimacy shifts, students should also be made aware of the respective strengths and weaknesses affiliated with less or more centralized forms of governance.

Democracy and Market Economies as the Dominant Paradigm

Democracy and market-based economic structures are now touted as the dominant ideals to have emerged from the end of the Cold War. However, economic crises in emerging markets in Russia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America serve as reminders that free-markets are not without their pitfalls. Likewise, political and economic liberalism have their down-sides (Dahl, 1999). The implications are that policy programs have a responsibility to train students in the advantages as well as the disadvantages of a democratic and market-based society. This means understanding both markets and market failures. Likewise, democratic practices do not emerge overnight, and they are not always benign. Democratic practices must be taught and cultivated, and different types of "democracy" may be useful for different cultures and nations. The corruption-plagued Russian government certainly suggests that there are many necessary weigh stations on the road to a democratic economy.

Eroding Boundaries between Public, Private, and Nonprofit Sectors

The traditional boundaries between the public, private, nonprofit, and citizen sectors increasingly have become blurred. In this world of decentralized and devolved policymaking (social welfare and public education are only two examples), there has been growing recognition for all sectors to work together to find potential solutions, working closely with the private sectors and (increasingly) the nonprofit sectors in such areas as policy implementation. In this new arrangement, the public sector may find an expanding role as convener and facilitator. Rather than dictating policy solutions *ex cathedra*, although that role will surely remain appropriate in certain circumstances, policy practitioners need to become more skilled at recognizing whom they need to bring to the table, how they can encourage cooperation, and how they can mediate workable outcomes.

Technology and Information Revolution

The revolution in communications has altered how we think about information, how we promote issues, and how we stay in contact. Greater access to information has and will continue to transform politics and policy at the federal, state, and local levels. Policy practitioners must be able to disseminate information more quickly to constituents and respond to their concerns. Centralization of information will mean that government agencies and the public could benefit from statistical profiling and data mining, thereby facilitating better targeting of services and service delivery, as well as abuse of privacy. Interest groups—some as minuscule as a single person—will be able to communicate with and inform each other more rapidly about policy developments, with only minimal concern for credibility. The public as a whole will have to learn how to become involved effectively and how to discriminate good information from the all-too-frequently bad.

These communication innovations have their distinct down-sides and we have an obligation to address the potential for abuse and the consequences concomitant with such behavior. These technology- and information-inspired developments also have the potential to widen the gap between those who have the skills (and resources) to participate in a highly technological society and those who are skill- and resource-deprived.

MAKING PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAMS MORE EFFECTIVE AND RELEVANT

At the most fundamental level the policy practitioner is meant to improve the quality of decisionmaking (Lasswell, 1971). From the perspective of policy sciences, the quality of a decision is assessed not on the degree to which it conforms to or uses theory or specific methodologies, but on the degree to which it actually helps citizens and meets specified goals.

At the outset of this essay, we posed three questions: In reply to the first question we suggested that there is still some distance yet to make policy programs more effective and relevant. In response to the second question—Is it necessary to change?—we assert that change is imperative if our field is to thrive and regain the trust of the American public. The status quo might be comfortable but it represents a road to complacency and, ultimately, intellectual and practical vacuity.

As for our third question—How might such change occur?—given the diversity of public policy programs and their attendant, variegated educational approaches, it would be foolish for us to suggest a specific set of courses that all schools should

follow.[3] Here we provide some broad conceptual guideposts to direct those interested in securing a more effective and relevant public policy program. Our argument is that these guideposts could be incorporated either explicitly or implicitly into a variety of curriculum or programs.

Concepts to Focus Inquiry

To focus inquiry, the policy sciences suggest the use of intellectual tools called "conceptual frameworks." These frameworks assist in taking fragments of knowledge about the problem and integrating them in a comprehensive structure. In this way, different theories and data can be incorporated into a comprehensive map of the problem and potential solutions can be considered.

   The policy sciences approach is distinct from other disciplinary approaches in their emphasis on understanding the social and decision context as well as the diagnosis of the specific problem. Eager to try new techniques or approaches, we often put the methodological cart before the substantive horse, leaping to provide solutions before adequately understanding the source of the problem. To focus inquiry, the policy sciences suggest tools to understand comprehensively the context and nature of the problem. From this perspective, one begins by focusing on the social and decision spaces where the problem occurs.[4] Once the decision and social context are established, students then are encouraged to diagnose the problem and clarify specific goals with respect to the problem. Other tools from the policy sciences (e.g., central theory) are useful in offering additional insight to focus inquiry, but are not elaborated upon here.[5] Suffice it to say that if public policy programs focused on teaching techniques to create more contextually rich "maps" for understanding the conditions that influence the problem, as well as devoting more attention to defining the problem, the solutions for consideration would be more appropriate for the problems defined.

Modes of Inquiry

Modes of inquiry represent the acknowledgment that analysis is composed of a tangible set of methodologies that allow insight into policy problems. These modes of inquiry can provide information about many aspects of the problem and how potential solutions might be specified, implemented and evaluated. The policy sciences encourage multiple methods when trying to understand a problem in its given context. Consequently, we suggest that the toolkits of policy practitioners be enriched with explicitly contextual approaches from a variety of different disciplines including: interviewing skills (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), cognitive mapping (Austin, 1998), ethnography and participant observation (Atkinson and Hammersby, 1998), participatory policy analysis (Durning 1993), content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Lasswell and Pool, 1952), narrative analysis (Atkinson 1992), Q methodology (Brown, 1980; McKeown and Thomas, 1988), and cluster analysis (Sneath and Sokal, 1973).

[3] For an exercise in foolishness, a complete public policy curriculum is outlined by deLeon and Steelman (1999).
[4] For more detailed discussion of contextual mapping and social and decision processes please refer to Lasswell (1971).
[5] Please refer to the landmark volume *Jurisprudence for a Free Society* by Harold D. Lasswell and Myers S. McDougal (1992).

Competencies

Competencies refer to a set of more practical, often more "human" skills than addressed under modes of inquiry. For instance, to ensure that policy practitioners' skills are relevant for the 21st century, we suggest that programs undergo periodic reappraisals to determine whether the human skills they are teaching are in accordance with the needs of society. As we have suggested above, the world is a different place today than it was a generation ago when the first public policy programs were initiated. Especially relevant for today's practitioner, yet not an exhaustive list are competencies in the area of: communication (Meltsner, 1980), information management, conflict resolution, mediation and facilitation (Fischer, 1998; Schon and Rein, 1994; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987), and ethics and values (Tang, 1986).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we project that it will be much easier for public policy programs to make their programs more relevant to the needs of the 21st century than to make them more effective. Effectiveness requires a constellation of coordinated actors well outside the purview of the academy. In essence, it is easier to update courses to address gaps in competencies than it is to address the underlying philosophies that guide inquiry and how inquiry is undertaken. To make programs more relevant, new courses can be defined and adopted as new challenges arise. This is a relatively painless process [ouch!] within the academy. However, making the program as a whole more effective for providing common interest solutions to well-defined problems means undertaking a degree of introspection and change that institutional and individual vested interests may find threatening. For instance, the incentive structures for faculty, departments, and universities encourage atomistic thinking and research to the detriment of more common interest efforts. Thus, changing the normative content of programs is a monumental challenge given the existing values and preferences within academic institutions.

Our purpose in this essay is less to identify *the* public policy curriculum for public affairs programs, and more to present a number of present and emerging observations and concerns that should define and affect *any* public policy program. We openly admit that this essay basically reflects our particular views and especially those relating to the policy sciences, thus implying rather naturally that others can propose alternatives concepts, methods of inquiry, competencies, and, most centrally, alternative observations and concerns. But we do argue that given the enumerated observations and concerns, the proposed curriculum is relevant on three criteria. First, it evolves the public policy curriculum in ways that are increasingly germane to the body politic; failing that desideratum would be to fail the basic philosophy of the policy sciences. Second, it moves public policy toward a methodological catholicity, one willing to include a variety of tools that appear to be salient to contextual problems. And, third, it stresses the normative underpinning of public policy that has been neglected in too many policy analytic exercises. In short, the proposed curriculum reaffirms in a contemporary manner the broad outlines of what Lasswell and others proposed a generation ago.

PETER deLEON is Professor of Public Policy, Graduate School of Public Affairs, The University of Colorado, Denver.

TODDI A. STEELMAN is Assistant Professor of Environmental Policy, Graduate School of Public Affairs, The University of Colorado, Denver.

REFERENCES

Amy, D.J. (1984). Why policy analysis and ethics are incompatible. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 13(4), 573–591.

Atkinson, P.A. (1992). Understanding ethnographic texts. Newbury Park: Sage.

Atkinson, P.A. & Hammersby, M. (1998). Ethnography and participant observation. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Austin, Diane E. (1998). Cultural knowledge and the cognitive map. Practicing Anthropology, 20(3), 21–24.

Berelson, B. (1952). Content Analysis in Communication Research. Gencoe, IL: Free Press.

Bok, Derek (1997). Measuring the performance of government. Ch. 2 in Joseph S. Nye Jr., P.D. Zelikow, & D.C. King (Eds.), Why americans don't trust government. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brown, S. (1980). Political subjectivity: Applications of Q methodology in political science. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Brunner, R.D. (1997a). Raising standards: A prototyping strategy for undergraduate education. Policy Sciences, 30(2), 167–189.

Brunner, R.D. (1997b). Teaching the policy sciences. Policy Sciences, 30(2), 217–231.

Brunner, R.D. (1991). The policy movement as a policy problem. Policy Sciences, 24(1), 65–98.

Conlan, T. (1998). From new federalism to devolution: Twenty-five years of intergovernmental reform. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Dahl, R.A. (1999). On democracy. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

deLeon, P. (1988). Advice and consent: The development of policy sciences. New York: The Russell Sage Foundation.

deLeon, P., & Steelman, T.A. (1999). The once and future public policy program. Policy Currents, 9(2), 1–9.

Durning, D. (1993). Participatory policy analysis in a social agency: A case study. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 12(2), 231–257.

Etzoni, A. (1988). The moral dimension. New York: The Free Press.

Fischer, F. (1998). Beyond empiricism: Policy inquiry in a postpositivist perspective. Policy Studies Journal, 26(1), 129–146.

Goggin, M., Bowman, A.O'M., Lester, J.P., & O'Toole, L.J. (1990). Implementation theory and practice: Towards a third generation. New York: Harper Collins

Kaplan, A. (1964). The conduct of inquiry. New York: Chandler Publications.

Lasswell, H.D. (1949). The democratic character. The Political Writings of Harold D. Lasswell (pp. 465–525). Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Lasswell, H.D. (1951). The policy orientation. In Daniel Lerner & Harold D. Lasswell (Eds.), The Policy Sciences (pp. 3–15). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lasswell, H.D. (1956). The political science of science. American Political Science Review, 50(4), 961–979.

Lasswell, H.D. (1971). A preview of policy sciences. New York: American Elsevier.

Lasswell, H.D. & McDougal, M.S. (1991). Jurisprudence for a free society. New Haven: Kluwer Law International.

Lasswell, H.D. & Pool, I. deS. (1952). Political symbols. In The comparative study of political symbols: An introduction. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

McKeown, B. & Thomas, D. (1988). Q methodology. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Meltsner, A.J. (1980). Don't slight communication: Some problems in analytic practice. In Giandomencio Majone & Edward S. Quade (Eds.), Pitfalls of analysis. New York: John Wiley.

Nye, J.S.Jr. (1997). Introduction. In Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Phillip. D. Zelikow, & David C. King (Eds.), Why americans don't trust government. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Orren, G. (1997). Fall from grace: The public's loss of faith in the government. In Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Phillip. D. Zelikow, & David C. King (Eds.), Why americans don't trust government. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reisman, M. (1987). Designing curricula: Making legal education continuously effective and relevant for the 21st century. Cumberland Law Review, 17(3).

Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, I.S. (1995). Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schon, D.A. & Rein, M. (1994). Frame reflection. New York: BasicBooks.

Sneath, P.H.A. & Sokal, R.R. (1973). Numerical taxonomy: The principles and practice of numerical classification. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.

Susskind, L. & Curikshank, J. (1987). Breaking the impasse. New York: BasicBooks.

Tang, R. (1986). Ethics in policy analysis. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Wildavsky, A. (1979). Speaking truth to power: The art and craft of policy analysis. Boston: Little, Brown.