

Teaching Across Multiple Approaches

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Abstract: Based on recent concerns about our discipline, additional approaches to teaching about politics, public affairs, and public administration are presented. A course project design is presented that incorporates elements of these newer approaches. Preliminary feedback on learning success is provided.

TEACHING ACROSS MULTIPLE APPROACHES

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Michael Bobic (2005) recently wrote a provocative article about what happens to our Political Science graduates and why we, as professors, should care. He titled his paper "Do you want fries with that?" to highlight the employment outcome for many of our graduates. He suggests that we, as faculty, must fully re-imagine what we are doing and provide sufficient "value-added" knowledges and skills so that our majors have a competitive advantage in the world. He is appalled that our graduates earn about \$17,000 per year after they leave us while the median, few-years-out post-college graduate is earning almost \$40,000. He cogently argues that our explicit goals for Political Science programs should be to train future government leaders and employees; provide skill-based education for citizenship, government employment and public service; and create political literacy to influence the community; and, for less than 30% of our student, prepare students for graduate study. He reminds us that our students overwhelmingly tell us that they want good jobs as an outcome of their educational experience and they expect and deserve good job advising from us. Bobic explicitly suggests that if we will not change our ways, we should stop offering our major to undergraduates since we do them more harm than good.

Similarly, in a recent address to the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, Lester Salamon (2005) suggested that the primary question before public citizens and practitioners is "how to comprehend, and to manage, the reinvented government that we have created, how to design and manage the immensely complex collaborative systems that now form the core of public problem-solving" (11-12). He argues that public problem-solving is now deeply collaborative; uses highly specific tools that require political as well as expert tool skills; is accomplished through networks spanning public, not-for-profit, and for profit enterprises that must be orchestrated; and focuses on performance rather than control. He urges MPA and Public Affairs faculty to design programs that teach the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed in this new environment.

If these two analysts are correct, we must develop teaching/learning approaches in political science, public affairs and public administration that enhance student learning and skill development to meet the needs for effective "governance" in a highly networked, uncertain, politically charged world. Based on these colleagues' concerns, we faculty must "re-tool" some of our own skills and engage more contemporary approaches to learning. Three approaches to learning/teaching appear to have the highest likelihood of developing the new types of knowledge, skills and abilities our students must take from our discipline if they are to find meaningful jobs and reasonable remuneration. These three approaches include team and collaborative work, experiential/vicarious learning, and problem-based learning.

The need for team and collaborative work is now highly valued (Klingner, 2005; Denhardt, 2001; Donovan, 1998) in many public venues and appears to be even more important for the future. While students need to gain skills in collaboration and teamwork to be effective in their future professional lives, there are also immediate outcomes for students from team/collaborative learning that can reinforce the rewards of teamwork. For example, students who learn in team environments tend to receive immediate benefits such as development of interpersonal skills and positive attitudes towards learning and persistence (Colbeck, Campbell, and Bjorklund, 2000; Chapman and Van Auken, 2001). Similarly, Schumaker (2005) found that students who worked in teams learned group dynamics, increased interpersonal communication skills, and made new friends in the process. From the student's perspective, classroom collaborative and team building activities increase student understanding of the subject matter, critical-thinking skills, communication skills, and independent learning capacity without boredom or feeling overwhelmed (Yazici, 2004). These collaborative experiences promote the networking and orchestrating skills that Salamon describes as essential for political leadership.

Another approach highlights the importance of experiential activities for student development within the discipline or field. Dorothy Olshfski (1994) cogently argues that faculty should teach management through vicarious experiences in a “think-aloud” method using a verbal protocol analysis that requires the student to verbalize thoughts, without censoring them, as they perform an analysis of a problem. Contemporary students (or faculty) who are also experienced leaders/managers provide other non-managerial students a “think-aloud” environment that allows non-management students to learn vicariously how to approach leadership/managerial problems and recommendations. Likewise, Cindy Simon Rosenthal (1999) argues that experiential activities for students, especially when they involve interviewing, reach a wider variety of students who might otherwise find class work dull or difficult and promote heightened awareness of difficulties faced by practitioners. Whitaker and Berner (2004, 287) found that experiential projects help students integrate and assimilate coursework taken during an MPA program and provide valuable services to organizational “clients.” The experiential approach develops political skills, helps students comprehend system complexity, and promotes mentoring and vicarious learning of management skills – the very knowledge and skill requirements suggested as critical for success.

The third approach, problem-based learning, is based on the foundational belief that concrete focus on a specific, real-world problem promotes a number of valued learning outcomes. Two Dutch scholars of policy sciences, Huub Spoormans and Sophie Vanhoonacker (2005) argue that problem-based learning promotes problem solving, raises awareness of complexity, motivates students to want to discover, develops capacity for self-directed learning, forces the use of multidisciplinary sources of information, etc., that are important for gaining access to professional jobs. Another byproduct of the problem-solving approach is to create cohesion among the program participants – a networking activity that may likely last far beyond the classroom. Problem-based learning, most often applied in medical training, applies practices such as clarifying difficult terms, defining problem(s) to be tackled, brainstorming ideas in-group, analyzing problems, finding and applying appropriate information/techniques. Through these problem-based activities, students can focus on tool-kit development and learn to appreciate why constituencies consider effective governmental performance important. Again, these are the critical skills and knowledge identified by our colleagues.

The Activities Required by the Three Models

All three of these approaches promote the development of the “new” skills for political science, public affairs, and public administration majors. Based on these approaches and the findings of these authors, the basic instructor and student action requirements for applying these approaches to course projects can be delineated. Some of the key practices include:

1. Instructor guides team creation and development early in the group experience [Schumaker]
2. Instructor and students reflect on group processes during the group work to especially address issues related to conflict resolution – technical and political [Schumaker]
3. Instructor provides feedback to participants throughout the project and activities performed within the collaboration/group [Schumaker]
4. Instructor seeks equity in work distribution and grading [Schumaker]
5. Students and instructor together pick projects that mirror or are group activities in the “real world” [Schumaker, Rosenthal]
6. Instructor and student role-model effective team management and networking skills [Schumaker, Olshfski]
7. Sufficient classroom time is given to group work and feedback [all]

8. Group members have some input into evaluation [Schumaker]
9. Students interact with contemporary practitioners in "live" settings [Rosenthal]
10. Various brainstorming, problem analysis, and information gathering and presentation techniques are explicitly taught and used [Spormans and Vanhoonaker]
11. Active observation of "real" practitioners and vicarious discussions about successful techniques and their contexts are integrated [Olskfski, Rosenthal]
12. Students believe the products have real use to the practitioners or community.

Holistically weaving these activities requires that the exact outline or details of the project remain somewhat incomplete until students have developed enough understanding to participate in project selection and evaluation. The instructor has to be comfortable facilitating the work of many students, sometimes through a small group leader structure. There must be sufficient trust among the students and instructor to assure willingness to disclose difficulties or problems that need to be addressed. Most of this trust can be established by the instructor modeling the appropriate collegial behavior with the students – i.e., by seeking student advice on a number of matters related to the project and submitting his/her ideas to critique by students and by encouraging students to observe and practice collegial behavior.

An Integrative Project Design

I attempted to combine these activities into a course offered to graduate students from a number of undergraduate and graduate majors. Students come to this **Public Organizations** course with vastly different sets of knowledge, skills, and abilities. About one-half the participants have had or currently hold jobs in the public and not-for-profit sectors. About one quarter of the students have had management experience. The rest of the students are pre-service or international students.

The formal course outcomes are (a) Critique various organizational and administrative theories; (b) Apply theory and critique to a large-scale organization; (c) Collect, analyze, and report information; make logical deductions and inferences; and convey those complex findings in oral and written form; (d) Gain an understanding of group behavior and practice in group leadership; (e) Perform library, web-based, and information gathering research related to a specific assessment target. The process outcomes, not formally specified to the students until later in the course, are (1) bond/connect students into team; (2) create ownership of "problem/project;" (3) mentor/teach interview, team membership, conflict resolution skills; (4) mentor/teach various decision-making skills; (5) create vicarious learning opportunities through class discussion and group tasks.

At the first class meeting (3 hour session), students are provided with a typical syllabus. Each is asked to introduce himself or herself to the group after the instructor has role-modeled the type and extent of information to provide. After the student introduces himself or herself, the instructor "interviews" the student to model effective interview behavior and each student is asked, among other things, what kind of person s/he is like to work with and what kind of person s/he likes to work with. As the introductions progress, each participant is asked to re-name and re-identify each student who has been previously introduced. By the end of the activity, each student is able to name and provide background information on each other participant in the class. Students are asked to thoroughly read the syllabus and preview the major texts to think about a large, government or not-for-profit organization in the community that is of interest to them. The instructor tells them that the class' job for that semester is to perform an organizational analysis and deliver recommendations based on that analysis to the head of an agency or establishment.

In the second class meeting, student's are asked to introduce another student. After a very brief introduction of each student, the instructor solicits questions from the remainder of the class for the introduced student. In this way, students begin practicing asking each other

questions, using interview techniques, and building knowledge about each other. Afterwards, the students are lead by the instructor into deliberations about a possible "target" organization for the semester. Various processes for decision-making are presented by the instructor and used by the class members during these deliberations. The target is then selected by some method that the students have agreed to apply. Different classes of students prefer different techniques for selection.

In the same second class meeting, students are asked to choose a domain or component (Rainey, 2003) of the organization that they wish to evaluate. If enrollment is large, multiple students select the same component or domain. These smaller groups of students will work together on the same component and become a group nested within the larger team group. Again, different approaches for choosing among alternatives are proposed by the instructor, and student participants are asked to suggest methods that might help still non-committed students to make a choice among components and domains of organizations. All students commit to an element or domain within the second or third class meeting.

Throughout the first half of the course, students read texts and articles about organizational structure, culture, environment, performance and goals, power, decision-making, technology, leadership, teamwork, networks. However, when commenting on the readings, the instructor only uses examples of concepts from the perspective of the target organization, and students are asked to develop hypotheses about the ideas presented in the books and articles that might be tested within the target organization.

By the fifth class meeting, students must begin developing strategies for gathering information about their domain/component from or about the target organization -- e.g., background information and analyses of similar types of organizations, website information and hard copy documents from the target, interview ideas, review of historical or public records, etc. All students are required to do at least one interview with a management official within or strongly connected to the target organization. Interview frames are developed and discussed among students and with the instructor before interviews are conducted. By the eighth week, students must have collected and begun synthesizing all background information regarding the target relative to the student's domain/component. All team members offer suggestions about possible sources of information for any other student. All students are told that they must begin any new data collection no later than week eight. The types of data that each student wants to collect is presented to the entire subgroup or team for discussion. All data collections methods are subject to approval by the team leader (the instructor). Each student is told that s/he is expected to "keep an eye out" for relevant information or data that other students on the team may need.

Throughout weeks seven through 15, after the core texts and articles have been discussed, much of the assembled class time becomes a weekly evaluation team meeting with the instructor as team leader. At the end of each period, time is set aside to describe and discuss the specific team leading, team building, and conflict management skills that were used during the team meeting held that day or in subgroups meeting outside of class. In some cases, component teams are asked to work out their conflicts in front of the larger group so that all team members can learn and "pitch-in" their possible solutions.

In addition to classroom meetings, all students are enrolled in a "Blackboard" platform, which is used as other methods of communicating among class members. Students extensively use the Discussion feature to "pitch-in" topics, issues, and problems when class is not "in session." Students also use external e-mail extensively to communicate with the instructor and other students in the component team. Typically, about 1/3 of the class members will use the commonly viewed Discussion feature of blackboard; another 1/3 will use direct e-mails with all or selected students; and about 1/3 will not use either out-of-class communication device.

Each week, each student reports to the rest of the team members about progress towards various milestones – data collection, data analysis, development of recommendations, preparing for delivery of recommendations. The instructor asks and encourages all students to provide constructive ideas and feedback about each other's progress. Each student is requested to 'pitch-in' anything that s/he has learned that might be useful to another team member.

The last two weeks of class time are spent as a team working on developing specific recommendations that will eventually be forward by the team leader to the head of the target organization. Students are told that their final activity will be to present their findings, make their recommendations, and answer questions within a ten-minute period for each area. Students are expected to dress professionally and outside faculty and public managers are invited to attend to functions. Most students take the oral report seriously, and practice the presentation before hand. Within 24 hours of the presentation and question session, each student submits his/her final report that includes information on how the domain or component of the target organization has been historically evaluated; how it was evaluated by this team; what information about the target organization was collected and provided; what were the significant findings based on that information; and what are the major recommendations (with appropriate fiscal and personnel cost notes provided).

The Evaluation of the Experiences

Students

Of the 40 students who have been through this course experience (with three different targets), 70 percent were very positive about the experience. Many commented that the class felt more like a "capstone" experience than a regular class because they had to think across so many domains – external and internal politics of organizations, human resources, budgeting, strategic planning, leadership, etc. Students appreciated the use of "real world" examples (targets) and all 40 students believed that the interview with one or more management officials was the most interesting and important part of their experience. Most students also said that the amount of work for the class and project was much more than they typically performed, yet they reported that the work was much more interesting than other types of assignments and they really enjoyed "digging" into an organization. All students self-reported a much deeper understanding of the complexity of accomplishing outcomes, making things work, and how achieving public purpose.

Almost all students encountered multiple problems with contacting officials, getting access to information, finding the appropriate person(s) to request information, getting sufficient background information to understand what they were "looking at, etc." About 70% demonstrated high levels of persistence. They tried to meet the goals and milestone of the team assignment, sought help from other team members and the team leader about alternative ways to achieve milestone, and tried to convince organizational informants to help. About 30% rejected the team approach and attempted to go it alone with a typical "academic" paper approach. While the team members would not openly "call" these students on their failure to participate fully as team members, the non-participating team members got much cooler receptions of their individual presentations of recommendations and lower evaluation scores from their teammates at the end of the project.

Instructor

Students need much more help than anticipated in learning how to interview elites. Each time this course is offered, more examples of more tasks are provided to the student and this seems to improve their performance of the major milestone tasks. Students need extensive guidance on how they can demonstrate the process outcomes -- (1) teamwork; (2) ownership of "problem/project;" (3) interview, team membership, conflict resolution

skills; (4) decision-making skills; (5) team leadership skills. If students are provided early the criteria with which to evaluate each segments of their own performance, they will tend to use this guidance, if reminded by the team leader. Students are very reluctant to engage other team members about lack of effort, yet, they want to let the team leader to know that some other team member is not pulling his/her weight. More frequent team 360-degree evaluations among team members may help, especially if individual team members are provided the overall results from those evaluations about their specific behaviors. In team meetings, students often want to focus on "personalities" of leaders [the soap opera effect] rather than on other domains and components of organizations. The instructor needs to intervene in discussions to get the team back on track and focused on the entire organizational evaluation.

The best organizational targets appear to be about 500 to 1500 employees in size, located within driving distance for students, within well-researched industries/professions, public [for access to information] or not for profit entities with well-developed websites, and organizations one or more supportive high level managers who can assist with access issues. All of the students much preferred face-to-face interviews with managers rather than telephonic interviews. The team leader (instructor) must be ready to make major readjustments if students drop out of the course or participation; and assignments within the team have to be molded to team members' abilities. For example, international students with poor English language skills were given contextual/comparative assignments that required document reviews or gathering comparative data on organizations similarly situated to the target organization.

The element of interview, data collection, and formal oral presentation of recommendations convinces most all students in the course that this project is "live." Students appeared more motivated when they knew their peers, other faculty, and public management officials were going to hear and read their "segment" of the overall report. Most in-service students role-modeled excellent team membership or leadership skills. Pre-service students reported that they had gained confidence in talking to managers and employees and in understanding how complex organizations worked. Many of the students have chosen to use this **Public Organization** course project as the basis for their final "capstone" project for the MPA program.

More evaluation of this approach will be undertaken as these students complete a battery of assessment activities within the program and as they report on their learning after graduation. However, after-course feedback suggests that students believed that their learning was greatly enhanced using these methods. It appears that these approaches do engage students more than our traditional methods. To paraphrase Rosenthal (1999), perhaps one experience is worth a thousand words.

Notes

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