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Teaching Public Policy at
the Urban Comprehensive College

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that public policy courses can be constructed in ways that are deeply relevant for students in highly applied programs of study, transforming public policy into a tool that can help develop student knowledge about particular career paths while introducing students to the field of public policy and public affairs. But doing so requires that instructors utilize a constructivist approach to instruction, placing the student and his or her career interests at the center of the teaching process and only then utilizing this foundation to teach the essential public policy subject matter. Such a focus requires that both instructors and students collaboratively develop essential topical knowledge about various technical career paths, knowledge that can be used as a bridge to maintain and foster student interest while serving as a tool for teaching students about public policy and essential broader lessons in civics.

Teaching Public Policy at the Urban Comprehensive College

Does public policy matter to today's students? Clearly, we as researchers and practitioners involved in the world of academic public affairs understand that public policy is a deeply important societal phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to deliver this message to students with other concerns and distractions in their everyday lives. This difficulty can be compounded when seeking to teach public policy to students enrolled in technical and applied programs of study. While students enrolled in computer science, nursing, or construction management programs, for instance, may enroll in a public policy course, it is likely that such students will, at best, enroll in such a course out of a personal interest in the subject matter or, at worst, to fulfill basic social science graduation requirements.

This is unfortunate and represents a lost opportunity for both students and instructors of public policy at such colleges. In this paper, I argue that public policy courses can be utilized in ways that are deeply relevant for students in highly applied programs of study, turning public policy into a tool that can help students develop knowledge about their particular career paths while introducing students to the field of public policy and the greater world of public affairs. But doing so requires that public policy instructors incorporate some basic principles in their processes of instruction. Most importantly, public policy instructors must place the student and his or her career path and aspirations at the center of the teaching process and only then utilize this foundation to teach the essential subject matter of public policy. Such a focus requires the instructors and students collaboratively develop essential topical knowledge about various technical career paths, knowledge that can be used as a bridge between the instructor and the students to maintain and foster student interest and engagement while serving as a tool for teaching students about public policy. Interdepartmental collaborations will also be essential for instructors interested in taking such an approach towards teaching public policy. Both

topical and institutional knowledge about the workings of diverse fields and departments can result in the creation of a course that is more tailored towards student professional needs while also potentially providing value in prompting individual disciplines to reflect upon themselves as professions. Despite the challenges, a properly constructed and administered public policy course can act as a hub of activity for both students and faculty learning and working in colleges focusing on diverse and applied career paths.

The Challenge of Teaching Public Policy

While public policy may be a topic of great interest to us as academics or to students of public affairs, teaching a topic like public policy can be difficult when addressing students outside of these majors. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges instructors at comprehensive colleges, community colleges, and technical colleges have is a problem that is unfortunately endemic in today's society. This problem is a decrease in the level of civic engagement. Robert Putnam called attention to this problem in his book *Bowling Alone*, noting how Americans, for some time, have become more separated from one another and that participation in civic associations has been on the wane in American society (Putnam, 2001). This decrease in civic engagement has been caused in part by the “busyness” of modern life and college students are often no strangers to this phenomenon. Concerned with the economic affairs of life and the pursuit of employment, many students have become disconnected from the world of civics itself and an understanding of its relevance to our everyday lives. I posit that this decline of interest in participating in civic life may be causing a decrease in student understanding of the importance and relevance of public policy processes to our everyday lives, including our career paths.

Another challenge in drawing student interest towards public policy studies is perhaps, at least in part, the fault of the academic fields themselves. We are all aware of how abstruse academic arguments in political science, public policy, and public administration can be and how often our respective academic fields do not sufficiently connect these arguments to phenomenon that is relevant to the everyday world of public affairs. In pursuit of pushing the bounds of research in our own fields, we increasingly look at our fields discreetly and outside of the larger political and social context in which they exist. Esoteric arguments are often made about the foundations of public administration as a field, the politics-administration dichotomy, or the propriety of studying public policy distinctly from political phenomena (Mead, 2013; Spicer, 2010; Waldo, 1948). In many ways, the fields of public policy and administration have become more technical, more compartmentalized, and more separated from the world of everyday politics, making it difficult for students outside of these disciplines to see and appreciate the value of this knowledge for their own fields and careers.

And finally, there is simply the reality of differences in the mindset of students engaged in technical and professional programs of study and students studying the social sciences. I posit that students in schools of engineering, computer science, nursing, or construction management enter college with very specific career related goals in mind. Unlike liberal arts and social science students, schools in professional and technical programs are more likely to have a utilitarian view of a college education, seeing it primarily as a means toward securing a well-paying position in their chosen profession; students in the liberal arts and social sciences may, on the other hand, be more experimental in their approach towards education, seeing the process of education as an end in itself. Certainly, I am likely oversimplifying the matter here, but I believe this phenomenon is one that is likely present and one that instructors in public policy must address as they seek to successfully teach classes in public policy within these educational environments and institutions.

Addressing the Pedagogical Challenge

The question now is, how do we address these problems? How do we make public policy a topic that is interesting, engaging, and relevant for students who may not be enrolled in public affairs programs? And what is the best theoretical framework by which to operate as we seek to teach public policy to such students? For the purposes of this paper, I would like to primarily focus on the broader pedagogical framework that can provide the foundation on which to build a teaching strategy in this educational context. Therefore, I will first explore the main existent learning theories with the aim of identifying the broad learning theory framework that can guide public policy professors in teaching in this context.

Learning theory is a diverse field, encompassing a broad array of ideas from multiple disciplines. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, I will summarize the main learning theories with the objective of utilizing their implications for undergraduate public policy education in diverse and applied programs of study. Learning theories seek to provide us with a variety of views regarding how learning takes place (Harasim, 2012). While a variety of learning theories abound, they can be generally categorized into three major schools of thought: behaviorism, cognitivism, and most recently constructivism. Each of these schools takes a different perspective on how learning occurs and thus each may have important implications for how public policy can and should be taught in this context.

The earliest school of thought in learning theory was behaviorism. Behaviorism as a learning theory was derived from the psychological school of behaviorism developed by psychologist B.F. Skinner. It posits that all human actions should be regarded as behaviors; as such, they can be best modified by finding ways to alter individual behavior patterns or changing the environment in order to change behavior patterns (Anderson, 2008, p. 6). Learning would be considered a change in

observable behavior under this psychological model, caused by external stimuli in the environment (Skinner, 2011). While this school of thought was influential, critics noted that there were many forms of learning that were not observable through displays of human behavior. As such behaviorist learning theory gradually gave way to cognitivist theories of learning. In response to the criticism that behaviorism had become too dependent on external incidents of behavior to explain learning, cognitivists developed a new theory emphasizing the internal components of the learning process. Cognitive theories posit that learning involves the use of memory, motivation, thinking, and reflection (Anderson, 2008, p. 7). Cognitivists asserted that learning was an internal process and that one's ability to learn is dependent on factors such as the capacity of the learner, the intensity of effort exerted during the learning process, and one's prior knowledge. For cognitive theorists, learning is an internal mental process and pedagogy needs to be developed around this reality. More recently, educators have moved towards constructivism as a theory of learning and guiding pedagogy. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learning is a process by which the individual builds new ideas based on prior knowledge and experience. Under constructivist models, learners interpret data according to their personal reality and this interpretation is the foundation of learning. The external world is observed, data is processed and interpreted, and then the individual forms his or her understanding of this data which becomes personal knowledge. Learners learn best when new information can be placed in context of what learners already know and can be applied in a real-world setting so that this data acquires personal meaning for the individual (Anderson, 2008, p. 7).

From a reading of the tenets of constructivist education, it seems that constructivism may particularly offer a host of tools that can be utilized to address the aforementioned challenges facing instructors teaching public policy at community colleges, comprehensive colleges, and other colleges devoted to instruction for technical careers. A constructivist approach to public policy education in this

context can potentially transform the aforementioned difficulties of teaching public policy into strengths, as students tailor and transform the public policy curriculum in ways that benefit them and their understanding of their own fields while simultaneously developing knowledge about civics and the public policy process.

Public Policy and Computer Science

A constructivist approach towards teaching public policy may, for example, be useful when teaching public policy to computer science students. Computer science students are engaged in very focused programs of study and may not get an opportunity to see how their profession both affects and is affected by the world of public affairs. For quite some time, the entire field of computing and technology has had a great impact on our society and has been the subject of significant policy discussions and governmental regulation. The fact of the matter is that computer science majors will be called on to play a major role in the formation and implementation of public policy as we move increasingly towards a world of data driven decision making. Despite theoretical evolutions to the contrary, the values of the new public management and its focus on data-driven, evidence-based decision-making continues to affect our society, placing computer engineering majors at the center of much discussion and decision making in these organizations.

Under a constructivist pedagogical framework, a properly crafted introduction to public policy would introduce computer science students to the rather profound effect that governmental agencies, such as the Department of Defense have had on the development of computer technology. Computer engineering majors should realize that their knowledge is critical to the policy-making process and that there is a rich history of significant policy discussion with regards to computer-related topics. Marjory Blumenthal highlights the prevalence of public policy in historical programs of technological study, noting that the long history of regulation has spawned many telecommunications policy courses and degree programs; she also notes how the Department of Defense drove early computing public policy during the World War II era and continues to be a significant source of research support for the technology industry; wireless and mobile communications and encryption technologies were also driven by the efforts of this agency (Blumenthal, 1998).

Indeed, it is the esoteric nature of computer science knowledge that makes it so critical that computer science students remain adept about the world of public policy, how public policies are formed, and how they can take action to ensure that public policy is rational with respect to their field and reflects the reality of the needs of their trade. We need only to remember the late Senator Ted Stevens' attempt to explain the functioning of the Internet in his speech against net neutrality, when he noted that “the Internet is not something that you just dump something on. It's not a big truck. It's a series of tubes” to understand the need for those employed in the technology industry to understand and communicate with actors in the world of public policy (Wired Blogs, 2006). This humorous description would become the rallying cry of proponents of net neutrality and can be used as an example to illustrate why the technology community needs to understand the relevance of public policy for their industry, lest regulation be left to the whims of out-of-touch policymakers.

And perhaps this example also calls attention to another potential benefit of a properly crafted public policy program of instruction for computer science students. Throughout the flurry of a computer science student's education, the student may not get the opportunity to develop the general education skills that would allow them to communicate important issues about their trade to critical public stakeholders. Computer science students will work in technically sophisticated positions. But still, they will work in organizations and at times be required to utilize their communications and critical thinking skills in ways that pertains to human, rather than just technological, problems. A properly crafted public policy course can also offer the students the opportunity to develop and apply communications skills in a way that may be relevant to their career organizational contexts, thus garnering greater student interest. One author reviewing the experimental use of a computer science oriented public policy class at MIT noted that he was “struck by the lack of student familiarity with how large institutions work and/or any kind of politics” (Blumenthal, 1998, p. 16). And in a student

evaluation regarding this class, the author notes how one student pleaded for “less ambiguity, please!” in the public policy coursework, showing the lack of exposure computer students may have to ambiguous organizational situations and problems (Blumenthal, 1998, p. 16) Clearly, there is an opportunity here to help computer science students develop some of the general education skills that have been highlighted as a central for a proper and well-rounded higher education program, including skills in communications, an ability to engage with others having diverse perspectives, civic learning, and critical thinking (Adelman, 2011).

Public Policy and Nursing

Nursing is another growing profession with programs of study at comprehensive and community colleges throughout the nation that may similarly benefit from an open and constructivist approach to public policy instruction. While nursing experts continue to emphasize the need for nurses to develop knowledge in health-related public policy, most nurses continue to lack this knowledge and skill (Conger & Johnson, 2000). This may seem a curious reality to us as public policy scholars, as nursing is a profession that is typically considered to have an intrinsically social and public service mission. Conger and Johnson seek to explain this situation, noting that while nursing has historically been connected to population focused care and social justice, “medical advances allowed cure of illness rather than merely symptomatic care; and nursing changed focus from populations and prevention to individuals and cure” (Conger & Johnson, 2000, p. 99) Therefore, changes to the nature of nursing itself have led the profession to something of a withdrawal from the politics and policy related to nursing and healthcare. Moreover, nursing has historically been thought of as a practice that occurs within the private, intimate sphere of human relationships (Scott & West, 2001). This has resulted in an introspective focus in nursing, a focus that despite its value, has “encouraged nursing to remain

relatively inattentive to the larger social, economic, and political forces that are altering the human health experience” (Spenceley, Reutter, & Allen, 2006, p. 183). Some scholars lament this reality and emphasize the importance of change. Spenceley asserts the importance of communicating the value of knowledge in civics and public policy to nursing students, noting that “the inclusion of politics and policy in the nursing curriculum can establish a pattern for nurses to understand how policy development and political activism are vital for evolving nursing practice”; nevertheless, “the word policy often conjures up thoughts of policy and procedure manuals, or other necessary administrative evils that operate at a distance from the intimate universe of nursing practice” (Spenceley et al., 2006, p. 180). In the case of nursing, teaching public policy may give instructors the opportunity to aid the discipline of nursing in reconsidering the foundations of its own profession and the proper conceptualization of the role of the nurse.

Public policy instructors may also be well served by considering the teaching of public policy to students engaged in professional fields of study as an opportunity to teach the host of general education skills that have recently been reemphasized as so critical to students in undergraduate instruction. Again, basic skills in reading, writing, critical thinking, and in collaborating with others are essential skills that students will need throughout their lives and are requirements for working within complex organizations. Interestingly, skills in civic engagement have been identified as among the essential general education learning outcomes critical for today's college degrees. The Lumina Foundation defines civic engagement as “working to make a difference in the civic life of communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes. In addition, civic engagement encompasses actions where individuals participate in the activities of

personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi).

In the case of nursing, teaching public policy gives us the opportunity to aid the discipline of nursing in reconsidering the foundations of its own profession and the proper conceptualization of the role of the nurse while simultaneously reemphasizing this critical component of the essential general education learning outcomes necessary for today students. And certainly, engaging in creative projects around the topic of public policy allows nursing students to address other critical general education learning capacities such as skills in inquiry, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving (Adelman, 2011). Public policy instruction, therefore, can offer considerable benefits to the nursing curriculum. Some research has shown explicit benefits for this form of instruction; for instance, Byrd provides empirical evidence that policy instruction improves the political astuteness of nursing students (Byrd et al., 2012). Finally, Conger and Johnson summarize the benefits of policy instruction, noting that, “the outcome of purposefully including health policy and political activism in the baccalaureate curriculum would be more knowledgeable and politically active nurses regardless of practice arena.” (Conger & Johnson, 2000, p. 101).

Challenges and Conclusion

Therefore, it seems evident that public policy as an academic subject should not be a subject relegated just for students who are public affairs majors in schools of political science, public policy, or public administration. Students in professional and applied fields of study of various sorts can benefit considerably from an education in public policy. Interestingly, public policy as a subject of study can in some instances prompt students and scholars in these applied disciplines themselves to reconsider the knowledge base of their professions, putting the history and the entire conceptualization of their

respective professions in a new and broader light. This benefit stands in addition to the other benefits public policy instruction can provide as a vehicle for helping teach students the broader general education skills they will need to succeed in their lives and in the workplace, including an education in civic engagement. Thus, by leading from behind, by putting the formal subject of public policy at the back of the classroom rather than at the front, students in professional fields of study may in fact yield maximum value from the study of public policy. Moreover, the field of public policy itself may actually be better served, actualizing its goal of delivering to students knowledge about the policy process and an appreciation for the importance of understanding public policy than when directly teaching the subject matter and leading from the front.

Certainly, there remain some questions that arise from a review from the literature and a consideration of this approach towards teaching public policy. First, there is the question of how deeply public policy should be integrated with the subject matter of individual applied fields of study. Certainly, this will be an issue for the individual respective disciplines to figure out and contend with. Nevertheless, there is a strong case to be made for the infusion of public policy instruction, and by extension, the infusion of the value of civic participation and engagement for many professional disciplines. There are also some other more technical problems of pedagogy to address. For instance, if public policy is to be introduced into the curricula of professional schools of study, when should it be addressed? For those interested in substantially affecting and reforming the way various disciplines perceive themselves, there is a case to be made for introducing public policy as a subject of study early the curriculum, in order to help change the way nurses, for instance, think about their practice, public responsibilities, and discipline. On the other hand, leaders in individual fields may wish to take the opposite approach, placing public policy projects further towards the end of programs of instruction, serving as an elective course requirement that allows students to look at their past experiences in their

professional programs of study in a new light, rather than coloring the entire learning experience from the outset.

Another potential conundrum is whether public policy should be taught in a manner that is specific to professional programs of study or in a way that emphasizes a more purist public policy orientation. Certainly, a good case can be made for teaching public policy in a way that is specific for subject areas; for instance, we might posit that it is best to design a public policy class specific for nursing, computer science, or construction management students. Doing so might help ensure topical relevance and help maintain student interest throughout the course. On the other hand, a more general course that draws on students from various different disciplines could offer its own unique benefits, allowing students to learn from the perspectives of other disciplines and learn about the policy process in a more universal manner. Again, there are probably unique benefits for both approaches and empirical research in this area may yield diverse perspectives and pedagogical prescriptions. Finally, there is the discussion as to whether public policy should be an elective or a required course for professional disciplines. Perspectives on this may differ and the case for public service oriented professions such as nursing may be made more easily than others, such as computer science, which is associated more with private sector employment and orientation.

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