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Teaching Public Administration through Blended Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the disconnect between the practice of public administration and the teaching of public administration warrants reform in public administration education. Using Goldsmith and Eggers' (2004) list of eleven skills needed by modern public administrators as a foundation, a proposal for designing public administration courses is developed by pairing the integrative thinking model with blended learning training design. At the core of the new public administration course are simulations which are supported by independent study and collaborative class activities. The goal of this new course design it help the student begin their development of the eleven skills.

Even today, most public administration courses and textbooks still present the traditional model of public administration: the hierarchical, bureaucratic pyramid that uses command-and-control regulations enforced by an army of civil servants to fulfill its designated mission in a slow and formalistic manner (See for example: Rosenbloom and Kraychuk, 200). Often, public administration is considered a lesser form of business administration (Jreisat, 1999). The most common themes in public administration courses are the political environment, human relations, decision making, communication, leadership, organizational culture, performance management, and change management. Students are presented with each topic in turn and exposed to managerial techniques to handle each of these themes. But, public administration scholars criticize this view of public administration as not being reflective of public administration in the 21st century. "As a field of study, public administration is more than the sum of its managerial techniques being fashionably applied at any period in modern history" (Jreisat, 1999, p. 9). In the words of Frederickson (1999), the practice of public administration has repositioned itself in the new century.

<center>The New Public Administration</center>

According to Frederickson (1999), modern public administration has four features. The first is "new institutionalism" which can be summed up as policy preferences and policy decisions are shaped by the experiences and knowledge of public administration professionals. The second feature, "network theory," deals with formal and informal linkages of shared goals and beliefs that public leaders use to manage their agencies. These two features are combined into the third feature, "governance theory,"

which deals with the skills and training of the public leader as they manage government agencies and programs. There is some controversy over governance theory among scholars as being an ill-defined concept, but it is an important concept in the new public administration. (Frederiskson and Smith, 2003). The final feature is the complexity of issues that confront public managers and leaders. Problems such as global warming, homeland security, and immigration reform cross jurisdictional borders and require coordination and resource sharing among different levels of the governments and working through third parties. McGuire (2006) and Robinson (2006) also describe similar models of the new public administration.

Rainey (2003) also observes this shift in public administration:

> Theories and expert opinion have moved away from emphasis on highly bureaucratized organizations with strong chains of command, very specific and unchanging job responsibilities, and strong controls over the people in them, and towards a more flexible, "organic" organizations, horizontal communications, and a virtual crescendo of calls for participation, empowerment, teamwork, and other versions of more decentralized, adaptive organizations. (p. 23)

Kettl (2005), who has written extensively on governance, argues that 21st Century American Government has shifted in five different ways. First, is "a policy agenda that focuses more on *problems* than on *structures"* while the second way is "political accountability that works more through *results* than on *processes."* The third way is that "public administration that functions more *organically*, through heterarchy, than *rigidly* through hierarchy." The fourth way is that "political leadership that works more by *leveraging action* than simply by *making decisions"* and the fifth way is that "citizenship that works more through *engagement* than *remoteness"* (italics in the original; p. 4). This

shift is due to the increase of "wicked problems[1]" which confront government leaders and managers.

It is clear that the practice of public administration has changed greatly from the traditional model that is taught in public management courses. Berry and Brower (2005) argues that a "sea change" is needed for public administration education. Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) list eleven skills needed by managers and leaders in the new public administration:

1. Big picture thinking

2. Coaching

3. Mediation

4. Negotiation

5. Risk analysis

6. Contract management

7. Ability to tackle unconventional problems

8. Strategic thinking

9. Interpersonal communications

10. Project and business management

11. Team building (p. 158).

As Goldsmith and Eggers observe, many of these skills are taught in business school but none of the listed skills are taught in public administration courses (p. 176). The remaining sections describe how "integrative thinking" and "blended learning" will be used to create the modern public administration course.

Integrative Thinking

Integrative thinking is an educational model created by the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Business. It was developed after extensive interviewing and research of successful business leaders to determine how they confronted problems and developed solutions (Martin, 2002). The Rotman School uses this educational model for all of their business courses and this approach has been adopted by several American universities.

The model consists of four steps. The first step, "Salience," is where the manager determines what features of the problem to focus on. In this step, the manager is encouraged to ignore the traditional functional boundaries so as not to limit their options. The second step, "Causality," is to determine the relationships between the salient features and how these features interact. In the "Sequencing" step, the manager determines how to consider the problem. The manager can break up the problem into parts or treats the problem holistically. The fourth and final step, "Resolution," is the production of choices from which the final decision will be made.

To fully realize the benefits of integrative thinking, three types of learning must be present: experiential, conceptual, and directional. The courses must provide students with experiences and the opportunity to reflect on those experiences (along with others' experiences). The student must also be exposed to a number of conceptual tools and should develop the capability to create their own conceptual tools. Directional learning is important in that it prepares the student to learn how to balance between focusing on a task while accounting for uncertainty and being flexible enough to alter their goals in light of sudden opportunities (Austen, 2002, p. 13).

Blended Learning

Integrative thinking is the educational model for the new public administration course while blended learning is the course design. Bersin (2004) defines blended learning as a "combination of different training 'media' (technologies, activities, and types of events) to create an optimum training program for a specific audience . . . . [and where] traditional instructor-led training is being supplemented with other electronic formats" (p. xv). The rationale for blended learning is that addresses the different learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) and the multiple methods of information delivery reinforces the lessons. A major component of blended learning design is providing experiential learning as this is considered the most effective method of delivering instruction (pp. 32-33).

The goal of a blended learning course is "mastery" of the subject which is demonstrated by having the student successfully teach the material to another person. To achieve mastery, the course designer uses a combination of six learning modes (reading, seeing, hearing, watching, doing, and teaching) to build the course (Bersin, 2004, p. 35). Along with the traditional lecture, the course designer will use a combination of collaborative and independent study "media types[2]" that deliver different lessons depending on the content of the material. The overall course design will either be a "program flow" model or a "core-and-spoke" model. With the program flow model, activities are designed to follow each other chronologically while in the core-and-spoke model, there is a central activity or activities surrounded by supporting activities which can be used at any time during the course (pp. 56)

The major advantage of the blended learning course design is that it incorporates the four "Cs" necessary to convert information into knowledge (Davenport, 1998). Through the various activities, the students are encouraged to compare (First "C") pieces of information to other pieces of information. The students consider the consequences (Second "C") contained in the information and how the pieces of information connect (Third "C") to each other. During the course, students are encouraged to hold conversations (Fourth "C") about the information that is being presented. The six modes of learning and the sixteen media types support one or more of the four "Cs " and thus the course designer has several options to create the optimum mix of activities for a course.

In the next section, a course design for the new public administration course which incorporates integrative thinking and blended learning will be discussed. At the core of this course design is two simulations which provide the experiential learning while supporting activities reinforce the lessons derived from the simulations.

The New Public Administration Course

As noted before, public administration is a multidisciplinary, complex combination of practical skills and academic theory. In the traditional course, public administration is presented in functional and theoretical categories which obscure the dynamics and interconnections of the concepts. To get a sense of how public administration is actually practiced, simulations are a much better method because they can demonstrate how the concepts work together and the tradeoffs necessary to manage the public's business.

For the proposed new public administration course, the blended learning course model will be core-and-spoke with two simulations as the core of the course and

supporting activities as the spokes of the course. In searching for suitable simulations for the core, the list of public manager skills (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004, p. 158) was used as the selection criteria. Currently, there are no simulations that encompass all eleven skills but two simulations do come close in providing most of the skills. Hence the suggestion to use both simulations in the course.

The Core: Simulations

The first simulation is Virtual U[3] which is a free stand-alone simulation distributed by the Sloan Consortium. In this simulation, the student (or team) takes on the role of a college president. Through various scenarios, the student learns to make budget decisions, hiring decisions and how to achieve certain goals such as increasing enrollment or attracting more research money. Through this simulation, the student gains experience in the internal operations of a government agency such as balancing budgets and dealing with employee morale.

SimCity[4] is the second (and probably more well-known) simulation. This is a commercial product by Electronic Arts in which the student takes on the role of a city manager. The student can create a city, make decisions about zoning, where to place utilities, and build schools and hospitals based on citizen needs. This simulation gives the student experience in the external operations of a government agency whereby they try to build a well-functioning city in response to citizen demands.

There are other simulations that can provide a lesson on a specific public administration topic. For example, "Who Wants to Be a Brooklyn Judge[5]" is an online

game developed by the *Gotham Gazette* as part of their series on judicial corruption. This simulation can be used as the starting point for a topic on governmental ethics.

Through the use of simulations in the new public administration course, students gain "deep smarts" which is defined by Leonard and Swap (2005) as being "based on know-how more than know-what – the ability to comprehend complex, interactive relationships and make swift, expert decisions based on that system level comprehension but also the ability, when necessary, to dive into component parts of that system and understand the details" (p. 2). Deep smarts is based on collecting experiences and reflecting on those experiences. A person with deep smarts (which typically takes ten years to develop) has a wider range of experiences of experiences (both rare and common) than a person who has just begun working in the field. Leonard and Swap use the image of a bell curve of experiences to demonstrate that deep smarts professional's experience range encompasses more of the bell curve than a neophyte professional (p. 24).

Thus, the advantages of simulations. Rather than wait for a real-life experience to occur, simulations can be used to recreate the common experiences and rare experiences thus speeding up the time to develop deep smarts. As Leonard and Swap (2005) explain, the benefits of simulations are that they create the "sense-making receptors" which enable the professional to determine what type of situation they are in. Simulations also aid in building skills necessary for managing both the common events and rare events. Simulations also allow the student to "fail safely" in that the student can try to manage a crucial event without actually putting the agency or people at risk (pp. 35-38).

As powerful as simulations are, they do have limitations. Students need some basic knowledge both in how to operate the simulations and the concepts presented in the simulations. Students also need to be motivated to work with the simulation (this is often a minor problem given the new generation of students' enthusiasm for video games). Simulations provide some feedback but often more is required for the student to master it. And as well-programmed and realistic-appearing as modern simulations are, they still cannot fully capture the real-life event not to mention the associated emotions of knowing that the situation is real and carries real consequences (Leonard and Swap, 2005, pp. 38-40). Therefore, the supporting activities (the spokes) have been chosen to reinforce the simulations lessons or to fill in knowledge gaps.

The Spokes: Supporting Activities

The five supporting activities are a mix of independent and collaborative work because this promotes "greater learning and the development of critical-thinking skills" (Bender, 2003, p. 14). The first two activities are independent works which are designed to give the student the basic skills to manage the simulations, understand the concepts presented in the simulations, and to reflect on real-life experiences. The instructor will use in-class lectures, podcasts, and rapid e-learning to brief students about the simulations and provide the foundational knowledge on budgeting, human resources, and associated topics. The students will also be required to read books, articles, or web resources on various public management topics to learn how governments have dealt with public administration issues. For example, students may be directed to read *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (Brinkley, 2006) to

reflect on how public officials can manage (or mismanage) preparations for and the response to natural disasters.

The three remaining activities are collaborative activities which are designed to encourage conversations about the information the students receive through the lectures and the readings. The collaborative activities are also designed to provide additional feedback on the lessons learned from the simulations. One activity is to create a class wiki[6] in which students contribute best practices on playing the simulations and offer their opinions on how these strategies may work in real-life. Another activity is to have students create a blog[7] in which they post their reflections on class activities and comment on other students' postings. The third activity is to have students create webquests (guided tours of websites) that can be used as resources for other students in public administration. A good tool for this activity is Trailfire[8] which allows users to post comments on other websites and create a "trail" of websites for other users.

Advantages of the New Public Administration Course

The advantages of the blended learning / integrative thinking approach to designing the public administration course are manifold. The blended learning approach will reach the individual learning needs of the students, generate excitement about the subject, and begin the process of developing deep smarts through the heavy use of experiential learning. The integrative thinking model will give the students expertise in problem-solving which they can carry on to other courses and into their careers. For the instructor, he or she can see that real learning and knowledge acquisition is taking place through the various artifacts that the students create. But the paramount advantage of the

new public administration course is that students are beginning to develop the necessary

knowledge, skills, and abilities to manage 21st Century administrative agencies.

Disadvantages of the New Public Administration Course

There are disadvantages to the new public administration course for both the

students and instructors. There is the learning curve for students in learning how to work

the simulations and collaboration tools which will impact the course schedule. Students

will have to learn to deal with ambiguity and publicly "failing" in front of their peers as

they first learn to work with the simulations. Finally, this new public administration

course requires more intellectual labor than the traditional "take lecture notes and be

tested over the material" model. The last is really not a disadvantage but it will appear to

be to the students.

For the instructor, there is a great deal of preparation before the course. A good

method for preparing for course like this is Fink's (2003) book on significant learning

experiences. As the course requires a good deal of group work, another good resource is

the *Handbook on Project Based Learning* (Markham, T., Mergendoller, J., Larmer, J.,

and Ravitz, J., 2003). The *Handbook* has a number of handy templates and advice for

dealing with troublesome groups. It is also necessary for the instructor to become fully

conversant with the simulations and collaboration tools before the course begins.

During the course, the instructor must be prepared to hold back so that the

students can learn on their own but, intervene when it is necessary to help a student

become "unstuck." There is also a great deal more grading and facilitation involved in

this course design which can be alleviated in part by creating rubrics for the various activities.

Conclusion

The disconnect between the practice of public administration and the teaching of public administration indicates that public administration schools need to change their course content and instructional methods. Combining the integrative thinking model with blended learning course design is an effective way to help students develop the eleven skills (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004) for working in the complex, hollow, network-centric, and heterarchial administrative agency of the 21st Century. Simulations - supported by other course activities - provide the experiential learning necessary for students to develop the public management "deep smarts." The problems facing public managers and leaders are becoming increasingly "wicked" and thus the imperative for reforming public administration teaching.

Endnotes

1. Defined by Kettl (2005) as problems that give "little time to react," carry a "high cost of failure," is "critical to citizens' needs," and the "responsibility for solving these problems is highly diffused" (p. 19).

2. The sixteen media types as categorized by Bersin (2004):

      a. Instructor-led training

      b. Webinars (live e-learning)

      c. Courseware (web-based)

      d. Simulations

      e. CD-ROM-based courseware

      f. Rapid e-learning courseware (PowerPoint-based)

      g. Internet-delivered video

      h. Electronic performance support system (online help)

      i. Offline video

      j. Video conferencing

      k. Collaboration systems (chat rooms, discussion boards, wikis, etc.)

      l. Conference calls

      m. Job aids

      n. Workbooks

      o. Books

      p. On-the-job exercises (pp. 269-278)

3. Virtual U can be downloaded at http://www.virtual-u.org/index.asp.

4. For more information on Sim City, visit http://simcity.ea.com/.

5. http://www.gothamgazette.com/judgesgame/

6. PBWiki is a free and user-friendly service for creating wikis - http://pbwiki.com/

7. Blogger is a free and user-friendly service for creating blogs – http://blogger.com

8. http://trailfire.com/

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