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Assessing the Professional Orientation of Public Personnel Administration Courses

Courses in public personnel administration form an important part of the public administration curriculum. However, public administration education has come under substantial criticism for not adequately preparing professionals for careers in the public service. This article describes some key characteristics of education for the professions and uses these characteristics as criteria to assess the course syllabi for nearly forty public personnel administration courses. After finding that the vast majority of these courses appear to lack the requirements for courses in professional education, the article presents some suggestions that instructors of public personnel administration might wish to incorporate in the design and delivery of their efforts.

By
Blue Wooldridge

Courses in public personnel administration (PPA) form an important part of the public administration curriculum. More than 44% of the 175 colleges and universities belonging to the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) who reported their degree requirements in a 1982 survey required a course in public personnel administration in order to qualify for the master's degree.[1]

Public administration education, however, has come under substantial criticism. Critics claim that public administration education is not adequately preparing professionals for careers in the public service.[2] Part of this criticism has claimed that public administration education shares too many characteristics with education for the arts and sciences and too few with the characteristics of professional education.

Professional Education vs. Education in the Arts and Sciences

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The distinction between the purpose of science, which involves the discovery of knowledge and that of the professions which is primarily concerned with the application of knowledge,[3] has particular meaning for the educational institutions preparing human resource inputs to these "estates."

Roy Ingham of the University of Florida, dividing institutions of higher education into arts and sciences and professional schools, suggests:

☐ "Arts and science have as their traditional mission the production, dissemination and conservation of knowledge...the purpose of professional schools ought to be to improve the performance of their respective social institutions."[4] He goes on to say that, for example, the mission of a College of Education should be to "improve the educative systems" of the community or society.

Academic institutions that seek to improve performance of their social institutions teach about artificial, not natural, things. They teach, "how to make artifacts that have desired properties and how to design."[5] Herbert Simon said, while delivering the Compton Lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "Design, so construed, is the core of all professional training, it is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences."[6]

Assuming one agrees that professional education is significantly different from education in the arts and sciences and that public personnel administration rightly belongs as part of professional education, how can one assess the degree to which a specific public personnel administration course corresponds to the required characteristics of professional education? This article will describe a methodology developed by Professor Richard Bolan in his critique of contemporary planning theory courses[7] and apply it to course syllabi in public personnel administration.

Criteria for Assessing the Professional Orientation of Public Personnel Administration Courses

Placing too much emphasis on a course syllabus can be misleading, since its existence may be only a university formality. In some instances, it may not be required at all and therefore may not even exist. In other cases it might not actually reflect the activities that transpire in the classroom.

However a syllabus is important, for as Bolan points out:

☐ "it represents the open gambit to the student. It is the first communication from the instructor and it is formal and written...the document is the first clue to the student as to what he/she can expect".[8]

What should be looked at in the course syllabus that would assist in judging the professional content of the course? The first area upon which to focus is the statement of the course goals and objectives.

Bolan asked: "Does the course syllabus offer a good statement of the goals and objectives of the course? Are the goals particularly oriented towards what the student is supposed to learn rather than the instructor's goals? Are the objectives behavioral, that is, do they indicate how the student should be able to perform after completing the course?"[9]

The identification of student-oriented behavioral learning objectives (SOBLO) is an extremely important element in the educational planning process for at least six reasons:

❑ Once a student-oriented behavioral learning objective is identified, focused debate can take place on whether it truly describes the expected performance of an employee in that profession.

❑ Clear articulation of learning objectives increases the possibility that essential clues will be provided to the students as to what is expected to be the increased competencies resulting from participating in this course. Just as some management theorists feel that the establishment of objectives motivate workers, so might the identification of SOBLO's motivate students to achieve them.

❑ Objectives are important for the instructor also. With precise SOBLO's in mind, the instructor is best able to assess and choose appropriate instructional materials and instructional methods.

❑ The articulation of SOBLO's makes it easier for the development of learning materials designed to reach the stated objectives.

❑ With SOBLO's clearly stated the instructor is better able to design appropriate graded assignments.

❑ Finally, if a profession is concerned with the application of knowledge, the instructor can review her course syllabus to ensure that it contains the appropriate mix of objectives that reflect the familiarity, understanding and application levels of learning. More than syllabi in the arts and sciences, the syllabus of a professional course should emphasize SOBLO's that describe the ability to apply skills.

From the description of professional education provided above, it is clear that the goal of a public personnel administration course should reflect the improvement of the personnel administration subsystem of public management, and that the behavioral learning objectives should be heavily

weighted in favor of those that describe the application of that knowledge and skills needed by public personnel managers.

The next step in this assessment process is to look at the actual learning activities (the instructional design) of the course. Within the past few years some excellent work has been carried out which relates the effectiveness of different instructional methods to specific behavioral learning objectives.[10]

This literature can provide guidelines, and also warns that there is sometimes a significant gap between the opinions of users and the findings of research:

☐ "Tradition often locks educators into suboptimal behavior pattern. Whenever techniques are selected on the basis of illogical or irrelevant criteria, we have committed an injustice to our (students), slowed the movement toward professionalism in the (instructional) field, decreased the probability of...program success and failed to exercise our responsibilities.[11]

In their article "Competency Development and University Methodology," McCleary and McIntyre related the effectiveness of seventeen methods of instruction on a high-medium-low scale. They measured the extent to which the methods tended to be practical and effective in reaching the objective describe in terms of specific level of learning (familiarity, understanding or application) and competencies to be learned (technical, conceptual, human). Their findings are illustrated in Table 1.[12]

As was stated previously, public personnel administration courses that are professionally-oriented would place a strong emphasis on objectives that involved the application level of learning. Thus, reflecting the work of McCleary and McIntyre, the second step in the analysis of a personnel administration syllabus would be to determine the extent that instructional strategies such as simulation, human relation training, clinical study, team research and internships are to be utilized in the learning experience.

Finally, the analyst should ask (to paraphrase Bolan[13]) *to what degree do the assignments required in a public personnel course evoke professional behavior?* Do the assignments test the ability of the student to apply professional knowledge and skills befitting the product of a well designed professionally-oriented personnel administration program or do the assignments require the student to perform as a scholar as in an arts and science course?

Table 1

	Levels of Learning			Competencies to be Learned		
	Fami-liarity	Under-standing	Appli-cation	Tech-nical	Concep-tual	Human
Reading	High	Med.	Low	Low	Med.	Low
Lecture	Med.	Med.	Low	Low	Med.	Low
Discussion	Med.	Med.	Low	Low	Med.	Low
Field Trip	Med.	Low	Low	Low	Med.	Low
Case	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Low
Scenario	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Low
Individualizes Instruct'nl Package	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Low
Computer-Assisted Instruction	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Low
Tutorial	Low	Med.	Low	Low	Med.	Low
Student Research	Low	Med.	Low	Low	Med.	Low
Laboratory Approach	Low	High	Med.	Med	High	Med.
Gaming	Low	High	Med.	Med.	High	Med.
Simulation	Low	High	High	High	High	Med.
Human Relations Training	Low	High	High	High	High	High
Clinical Study	Low	High	High	High	High	Med.
Team Research	Low	High	High	High	Med.	Low
Internship	Low	Med.	High	High	Med.	Med.

High, Medium, Low = Extent to which the method, when competently employed, tends to be practical and effective in learning the designated skills at the levels desired.

As Professor Bolan pointed out, "Professional behavior requires more than the behavior of a scholar."[14]

In summary three characteristics of a professionally-oriented course are:

- ❑ student oriented, behavioral learning objectives reflecting the application level of learning;
- ❑ instructional strategies appropriate to the achievement of these objectives; and
- ❑ assignments that evoke professional behavior.

These characteristics will be used as criteria and applied to a sample of public personnel administration course syllabi in the next section.

Assessing the Professional Orientation of Public Personnel Administration Course Syllabi

Recently, the author joined a faculty of public administration after an absence of several years from an academic department. In preparing to teach a core course in public personnel administration, the author reviewed thirty eight PPA course syllabi. The remainder of this article will present the results of an analysis of these course descriptions using, the characteristics of professional education discussed in the previous section.

The first part of this analysis involves viewing the goals/objectives of the courses in order to determine if they present student oriented, behavioral learning objectives that reflect the application of skills needed by a public personnel administrator. Four of the course syllabi provided no descriptions of goals or purpose at all. Twenty presented goals that were, in the opinion of the author, not student oriented behavioral learning objectives. Ten of the syllabi included student oriented behavioral learning objectives, but only at the familiarity and/or understanding levels of learning.

Only four of the thirty eight course descriptions provided student oriented behavioral learning objectives that included mention of acquisition of skills that, again in the opinion of this author, reflected the behavior of a public personnel administrator.

Perhaps some examples of each of the categories would clarify this classification. Those course goals that did not include student oriented behavior learning objectives were typified by statements such as:

❏ "The course will explore issues relating to the reform of civil service...The central theme of the class will be an exploration of the problems with civil service reform and an assessment of the success of attempts to improve such systems."

❏ "This course will attempt an overview of the now turbulent and changing field of public personnel administration. It will be an introduction into the concepts, practices, and problems of modern personnel management."

❏ "This course is intended to provide an overall view of public personnel management as well as an in-depth analysis of several major concerns in

administering personnel in the public sector. Background theory as well as practical applications will be examined."

❑ "This is a graduate level course designed to expose students to a broad array of the major historical, conceptual and technique applications in the field of personnel (sometimes called human resources) management."

While these statements are useful they are not, in the opinion of this author, "...particularly oriented towards what the student is supposed to learn rather than the instructor's goals". They are not,"...behavioral, that is, they do not indicate how the student should be able to perform after completing the course". These statements are the description of preferred course goals and objectives as provided by Bolan.[15]

Ten of the syllabi did contain student oriented behavioral learning objectives but only at the familiarity and/or understanding levels of learning. Examples include the following:

❑ "Upon completion of the course, you should have acquired: an understanding of the major political, economic and social forces which impinge upon public personnel management, an understanding of the major theories and techniques operative in public personnel management today, and an understanding of the major unresolved problems currently confronting public personnel management."

❑ "Students will demonstrate an understanding of the scope of public personnel administration in terms of core personnel functions as well as the connections between the functions.....Students will be able to explain the term 'merit system,' the principles which underpin a merit system and the historic and contemporary forces which challenge this idea."

The goals/objectives in these syllabi do indicate how the students will be expected to change after completion of the course. There is, however, no mention of any change in performance or new abilities in the application of PPA related skills.

Statements of purpose in four of the course descriptions contain not only student oriented behavioral learning objectives but ones that include expectations of the acquisition of skills and the application of knowledge. Examples of these statements are:

❑ "...diagnosing obstacles to EEO. Constructing and evaluating EEO/AA policy statements. Evaluating Training..."

❑ "Demonstrate the ability to perform basic job analysis and position classification. Select a valid examination (or test) for personnel use and

critique it. Construct an instrument to evaluate employee performance, and evaluate a system to improve productivity."

☐ "Students will be able to analyze an organizational setting and, based on that analysis, design an appropriate performance appraisal system."

☐ "You should be sufficiently familiar with the techniques of personnel management...to permit you to analyze and solve common failings that typify public personnel systems throughout the nation."

It appears as if the last four sets of examples are more indicative of the outcomes of a professional course in public personnel administration. They facilitate the analysis that was described earlier.

The next step in this analysis will be to ascertain the degree to which the thirty eight course syllabi reflect instructional strategies that appear to be effective in achieving the application level of learning. There was very little in the way of description of what was to transpire during the class time.

Only two of the syllabi indicated that simulation activities would be utilized, and three others described class exercises that would provide "applications" of the concepts discussed. The few others that did address the issue of classroom activities spoke of lectures and student discussion. Except for the examples described above, there is little indication that the types of instructional strategies recommended by McCleary and McIntyre for the acquisition of skills were being utilized in the courses related to these course syllabi.

The vast majority of the graded assignments in these courses involved student participation in class, in-class examinations and book reports and/or research papers. The conclusions reached in this review paralleled those of Professor Bolan when he concluded, after his review of the planning theory course descriptions, "Expectations (or ways to pass the course) are similar to those in history, English literature, mathematics and introductory psychology; sit through a dozen or so lectures, read the assignments, pass a final and/or write a term paper."[16]

The proportion of the total class grade that was based on classroom participation ranged to 40%; in some courses all of the graded was based on in-class examinations; whereas the value of book reports/research papers ranged as high as 90% in at least one course. Several instructors based part of the students grade on written analysis of cases. At least three courses required the students to be graded on written responses to exercises; one had part of the grade based on the students results in a simulation and at least one required the students to prepare a professional project, in this case an Affirmative Action Plan.

Summary and Conclusion

It has been suggested in this article that the characteristics of professional education should be different from those of education in the arts and sciences, and that courses in public personnel administration belong to professional education.

Syllabi describing professionally-oriented courses should reflect:

❑ student oriented, behavioral learning objectives reflecting the application level of learning;
❑ instructional strategies that include simulation, human relations training, clinical study, team research and internships; and
❑ assignments that evoke the behavior of a public personnel administrator.

A review of thirty-eight PPA course syllabi finds few of these characteristics. If one of the purposes of public personnel administration education is to prepare professionals with adequate skills to work in the field, instructors of such courses might want to integrate into the design and delivery of their learning experiences more of the qualities of professional education.

Notes

1. 1982 Directory Programs in Public Affairs and Administration: A Survey Report of the Member Institutions of NASPAA (Washington, DC: National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, 1982). NASPAA is an institutional membership organization of more than 215 university programs of public affairs/public administration education and over twenty associate member organizations dedicated to the improvement of public service education.

2. Examples of this criticism can be found in: William J. Donaldson, "Centennial Agendas Project Newsletter" #3 Ref. 1-38 (Washington, DC: American Society for Public Administration, October, 1981); David Brown, "Is Public Administration Really Interested in Management?", a paper presented at the Annual National Conference, American Society for Public Administration (Phoenix, Arizona: April, 1978); Blue Wooldridge, "Inadequacy of Public Administration Schools", The Bureaucrat, Summer, 1981; and Richard E. Brown, "Centennial Agendas Project Newsletter" #4 Ref. III-26, (Washington, DC; March 1, 1982)

3. Richard L. Schott, "Public Administration as a Profession: Problems and Prospects." Public Administration Review (Washington, DC: American Society for Public Administration 1936, Vol. 36).

4. Roy Ingham, "A Different Modus Vivendi for Colleges of Education: An Argument for Rejecting the 'Science' Model and Replacing it with the 'Design' Model" Unpublished paper, (Tallahassee, FL: University of Florida, 1979).

5. Herbert Simon, *The Science of the Artificial* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970).

6. Ibid, p.55.

7. Richard S. Bolan, "Do Planning Theory Courses Teach Planning?" *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 1, No.1, Summer 1981.

8. Ibid, p.12.

9. Ibid.

10. Several studies have attempted to show the linkage between specific educational/training methodologies and the achievement of levels of learning objectives. These studies include: Stephen J. Carroll, Frank T. Paine, John J. Ivancevich, "The Relative Effectiveness of Training Methods: Expert Opinion and Research", *Personnel Psychology*, 1972, Vol. 25, pp. 495-509; John Newstrom, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Training Methods" *Personnel Administrator*, Jan. 1980 pp. 55-80; McCleary and McIntyre, "Competency Development and University Methodology", *The National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, March 1972, pp. 53-68 and Louis Olives and John W. Newstrom, "Learning Through the Use of Simulation Games," *Training and Development Journal*, September, 1981.

11. Newstrom, Op Cit.

12. McCleary and McIntyre, Op Cit.

13. Bolan, Op Cit.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

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