The Studio Approach in Public Administration Teaching: Bringing Coherence and Practice Into the Curriculum

Menno Fenger and Vincent Homburg
Erasmus University

Abstract
Designers of public administration and public affairs curricula face the challenge of incorporating various disciplinary perspectives into a coherent curriculum that is academically challenging as well as oriented towards real-world administrative and political challenges. This article describes and analyzes the redesign of a Bachelor of Public Administration (BPA) program at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The curriculum, which was first implemented in the academic year 2007–2008, features a sequential program of modules that are integrated through overarching studio modules. The theoretical and pedagogical backgrounds of the curriculum are explained and the authors reflect on the design requirements, implementation issues, and impact of the curriculum.

Public administration is nowadays widely acknowledged as an independent and interdisciplinary discipline within the broader family of social sciences. The discipline is intellectually and methodologically indebted to the disciplines from which it has emerged (Lynn, 1996; Rainey, 1990; Vigoda, 2002), like political science, law, sociology, and economics. Furthermore, public administration typically has a strong orientation toward the analysis of real-world problems and the design of solutions.

The interdisciplinary character—as well as the ambition to blend academic orientation with reflection on everyday political, professional, and societal puzzles—raises important questions with respect to the design and implementation of public administration curricula. Abel (2009) calls for a specific pedagogy for public administration that bridges theory and practice in a context of diverse (disciplinary) perspectives, and Denhardt (2001) identifies the relation between theory and practice as the center issue in public administration education.
Actually devising such a public administration pedagogy, and designing an interdisciplinary curriculum, are big challenges. In a classic text on interdisciplinary curriculum design, Heidi Hayes Jacobs identifies two principal problems in designing and implementing such curricula:

1. The “potpourri problem,” meaning that interdisciplinary curricula are vulnerable of being composed of relatively randomly assigned, condensed disciplinary courses (Introduction Political Science, Introduction Economics, etc.) in which vital discipline-based concepts or lines of reasoning are either understated, trivialized, or ignored (Hayes Jacobs, 1989); and

2. The “polarity problem,” meaning that professors having roots in more established disciplines may end up in continuous disciplinary quarrels either directly with one another or indirectly as they project disciplinary-based knowledge and skills on students they all teach to (Hayes Jacobs, 1989; see also Bloom, 1987).

The existence of the potpourri and polarity problem does not imply that interdisciplinary curricula are inherently flawed; they are presented here to argue that curricula should be carefully designed and implemented to avoid these problems. Careful design here refers to issues like:

- Giving explicit attention to the scope of the program (Hayes Jacobs, 1989);
- Making deliberate choices with respect to the order and sequence of courses and training of specific practice-oriented skills (Hayes Jacobs, 1989); and
- Balancing the training of academic skills (such as mastering quantitative and qualitative research methods) with development of practice-oriented, professional skills (like negotiation skills and writing skills; Edwards & Ringeling, 2003).

Recently, the curriculum design literature has been augmented with literature on quality of learning of students (e.g., student study progress) in various curriculum designs. Schmidt, Cohen-Schotanus, and Arends (2009) have analyzed the graduation rates of medical students in various types of curricula, and Jansen (1996) has analyzed the relation between curriculum design and study progress. In both studies, it was concluded that curriculum design affects quality of learning, student dropout, time to graduate, and number of graduates passing within time.

In this article, we introduce a specific pedagogical approach, the so-called studio approach, that aims to bridge the worlds of theory and practice and to equip public administration students with the academic and professional skills to
better deal with various (sometimes diverging) disciplinary perspectives on real-world societal problems. This approach has been implemented in a public administration bachelor’s program at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. With an intake of about 175 students per year (in the academic years 2009–2010 and 2010–2011) and a total student population of about 450 students, the bachelor’s program is one of the largest European public administration programs. It was the first European academic program to receive an American accreditation (by NASPAA) in 1999. The program was furthermore accredited by the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA) in 2002, and most recently by the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) in 2011. In the subsequent sections, we focus on the redesign of the curriculum that was first implemented in the academic year 2007–2008 and report on what the formal curriculum (Goodlad, 1979) looks like (in terms of general curriculum design considerations, aspirations and ambitions). We also reflect on the trade-offs and pitfalls in the curriculum as experienced and perceived by students and professors (Goodlad, 1979). Subsequently, we focus on the impact of the redesigned curriculum in terms of changes in study progress, study pace, and dropout rates. We end the article with an inventory of upcoming challenges.

**Methodology**

The two main authors of this article have been involved in the design and implementation of the curriculum design as executive program directors of the bachelor’s program under scrutiny. The analysis presented here is informed with observations and experiences that result from actual design and implementation activities (participatory observation). Additionally, the analysis makes use of quantitative data concerning study progress and dropout rates that were collected in the process of a recent accreditation procedure (eventually granted in 2011). Furthermore, qualitative student panel interview data and inputs from discussions from staff meetings were used to substantiate the analysis.

**Background**

Interest in and need for deliberate design activities with respect to interdisciplinary curricula—be it in public administration, criminology, health studies, business administration, international affairs, or the like—stems from a number of developments.

First, a considerable degree of specialization can be witnessed in many monodisciplinary academic disciplines. This specialization results in subdisciplines with distinctive languages and methodologies, like sociological rational choice theory or European law. Given budgetary and temporal limitations to curricula, selections of subjects and developments have to be made, preferably in a well-thought-out, deliberate, consistent, and coherent manner. If one combines
specializing disciplines in one curriculum, one runs the risk of realizing fragmented programs for students.

Second, a common student concern is the perceived irrelevance of academic skills in their lives outside academia, either now or in their envisaged future careers. Only in an academic context are students forced to devote specific amounts of credits to monodisciplinary perspectives like public choice theories or democratic governance. Outside academia, policy makers and stakeholders deal with societal problems and concerns in a flow of time that is not divided into disciplinary fields. We do not argue, however, that in designing and implementing public administration curricula we should completely ignore dealing with specific disciplines. Rather, we argue that it is necessary and useful to create learning experiences and reflective activities with respect to societal developments that urge students to actively study the idiosyncratic concepts of economics, sociology, or philosophy (to name just a few disciplines) that are relevant for the societal developments at hand.

To deal with the above-mentioned challenges, there are various design options for an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum (Table 1). Hayes Jacobs urges us to think of these options not as discrete alternatives to organize a curriculum (i.e., all-or-nothing propositions), but rather as a toolbox that can be used by professors, curriculum designers, or program directors to identify, clarify, and combine decision options that facilitate integration.

The design options suggested by Hayes Jacobs urge us to think about how themes and disciplinary concepts and methodologies can or should be intertwined. In fact, following the alternative design options, three separate questions need to be addressed in any specific curriculum design:

1. How to select relevant disciplinary perspectives, concepts, methodologies, and themes that together make up the curriculum;
2. How to order the selected themes and disciplinary courses in the curriculum (which activities or courses are organized concurrently, and which courses or activities are sequenced); and
3. How to blend the training of academic skills with the training of professional skills.

With respect to the first question, Ackerman (1989) remarks that despite rhetorical appeal (“who can be against aiming to help students achieve a coherent, integrated view of the world?”) integration in interdisciplinary curricula (as defined by Hayes Jacobs) is not always sound, because disciplinary perspectives do not necessarily yield didactic added value when applied to a specific theme, phenomenon, puzzle, or problem. It is important to select those disciplinary perspectives that, when applied to a specific theme or puzzle, actually challenge students to decompose and disassemble the themes or puzzles at hand, and with that, get an actual
Table 1.  
*Alternative Curriculum Design Options*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</table>
| Discipline based     | In this alternative, separate disciplines are taught in various courses that are scheduled throughout the day or week. No deliberate attempt is made to show relationships between courses. Advantages: Disciplinary specialization enables use of general courseware, few coordination efforts necessary. Disadvantages: Fragmentation of student attention and efforts throughout the day or week. Knowledge does not relate to life outside academia.  
*Example:* In the first semester, courses are scheduled in such a way that each student follows two classes in Public Management, two classes in Public Policy, and two classes in Methodology per week. In subsequent semesters, other courses are offered in a comparable fashion. |
| Parallel disciplines | The content of separately taught courses is organized in such a way that attention is paid to the same or comparable phenomena within specific time slots. It is hoped that if students follow courses, they will find the (implicit) linkages between disciplines. Advantages: Concurrent teaching of the same subjects without much coordinative effort. Disadvantages: Students do not necessarily see and understand the linkages in loosely coupled courses.  
*Example:* Comparable to the discipline-based curriculum, with the addition that in week 1, Public Management, Public Policy, and Methodology all use examples and exercises related to public health insurance reforms. In week 2, the examples and exercises relate to the use of performance indicators, and so on. |
| Multi-disciplinary    | The curriculum features courses in which specific themes or issues are taught using content, theories, and methodologies from a limited number of related disciplines. Advantages: Some sort of integration emerges without much coordinative effort. Disadvantages: Likely to evoke resistance from students that are confronted with different sets of standards and criteria for passing modules.  
*Example:* Courses are scheduled in such a way that each student follows classes on Public Health Insurance Reforms (in which, for example, public management and public policy professors jointly operate). |
feeling of discovery and understanding. The problem here is that objective and easy-to-apply criteria either do not exist or are notoriously situational.

With respect to the second question, it can be stated that in terms of quality of learning and passing rates, sequential programs generally perform better than programs that offer simultaneous courses (Jansen, 1996). An explanation for this is that programs with (many) simultaneous courses confront students with competing demands for efforts, study time, and energy. Students normally respond to these conflicting demands by prioritizing the most interesting, hardest, or perhaps even the easiest courses over the other courses, a process that might eventually result in students maximizing effort in one course at the expense of all other courses. A sequential program might be less diverse on specific moments in
time but does not confront students with competing demands. It therefore forces students to devote energy on a course-by-course basis with few possibilities for excuses (Coleman, Bolte, & Franklin, 1984; Vaughan & Carlson, 1992).

**Design Issues**

At Erasmus University Rotterdam, until 2006 the 3-year Public Administration Bachelor program had been organized in nine trimesters. According to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), each year consists of 60 credits (also called ECTS). Each trimester offered up to four concurrently offered courses, mainly delivered in the form of lectures, and some core curriculum courses had compulsory workshop-like sessions. Although systematic evaluations among students and reports of accreditation bodies as well as the passing rates of individual courses were quite satisfactory and encouraging, the overall passing rate of the Bachelor program (or, inversely, the time it took students to complete the Bachelor program) raised alert signs with the faculty. Of the cohort that started in the academic year 2003–2004, only 27.9% managed to finish the bachelor’s degree in 3 years or less. This rate dropped to 12.2% in 2004–2005. Of the 85 students who started in 2003–2004, 17 (20%) didn’t manage to complete the 3-year program within 5 years or were still busy finishing the program by 2010.

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**Table 1.**

*Continued*

| Complete program | Students create the full curriculum out of their day-to-day lives. The student’s life is synonymous and synchronized with academic life. Advantages: Students feel empowered and self-directed. Disadvantages: There are no guarantees that students receive exposure to elements of what a formal curriculum would look like; hence, it is notoriously hard to have a complete program curriculum get accepted by (future) students and accredited by professional bodies and/or public authorities. *Example:* Based on experiences of how students are being treated by public health insurance companies, hospitals, doctors, and financial institutions, students start studying questions regarding public health insurance following the sequence of events, questions, puzzles, and dilemmas students are confronted with throughout a relatively long period of time (weeks, months). |

*Adapted from Hayes Jacobs (1989).*
Although the dropout percentage of students was also fairly high (average dropout rate within 1 year throughout the 2003–2006 time interval was 28%), it was especially the percentage of students who didn’t manage to complete the program within 4 years that raised concerns.

Apart from the concerns about study progress of cohorts of students, there were also ambitions to better equip students for their future careers within the public sector. This required on the one hand more systematic attention for professional skills like debating, communication, and negotiation (as opposed to academic and cognitive skills alone). On the other hand, the application of theoretical, disciplinary knowledge to everyday practical issues of public governance needed strengthening. Various authors stress the increasing complexity and uncertainty of public governance (see for instance Abel, 2009; Smith, 2008). This calls for a pedagogical approach that teaches students how to deal with these issues of complexity and uncertainty. Faculty and program directors expressed the ambition to improve the preparation of students for future careers while at the same time integrate academic skills of designing research proposals, mastering qualitative and quantitative research methods, and writing academic papers in the core of the curriculum (Edwards & Ringeling, 2003). The redesigned curriculum was expected to contribute to the achievement of the mission of the public administration program, which is “to educate students in public administration, so that they can identify and analyze relevant societal questions, are able to advice on policy options to solve these and organize the necessary processes to implement these solutions.”

Following these lines of thought, a set of aspirations forming the backbone of an ideal curriculum (Goodlad, 1979) began to emerge. These aspirations concerned the development of an academic public administration curriculum in which existing disciplinary perspectives (economics, political science, law, sociology, methodology, organization science, and public policy) were to be sustained, thereby fully utilizing the existing staff members’ disciplinary orientations. Furthermore, the express intention was to maximize students’ study progress throughout the curriculum and to develop professional skills alongside academic skills. As Table 2 illustrates, the curriculum features both theoretical/cognitive as well as reflective/practical skills, and blending these various types of skills required a specific interdisciplinary public administration pedagogy.

Inspiration for improving the achievement of practically oriented learning objectives was found in the professional training of some creative professions. Therefore, the concept of the studio was introduced into the program. Schön (1984, p. 2) distinguishes between the professional schools of contemporary research universities and the studios of visual arts and architecture, and the conservatory of music. The first group adheres to “a core of systematic, preferably scientific knowledge which they teach in an orderly progression: first the relevant basic science, then the relevant applied science, and finally a practicum.” In the
Table 2.
*Learning Objectives of the Public Administration Program at Erasmus University Rotterdam*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Skills</th>
<th>Learning Objective (graduates have…)</th>
<th>Cognitive/Theoretical</th>
<th>Reflective/Practical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>1. Demonstrable knowledge and understanding of public administration concepts and theories</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Demonstrable knowledge and understanding of adjacent disciplines, such as sociology, political science, economics, and law</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Demonstrable knowledge and understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of societal phenomena</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>4. Ability to develop, conduct, and evaluate public administration research</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Ability to apply different public administration concepts and theories in order to comprehend societal phenomena</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Ability to adequately apply acquired knowledge and understanding to public administration practices</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making judgments</td>
<td>7. Ability to gather relevant data and, based on these data, make judgments and give recommendations that integrate relevant professional, ethical, and academic interests</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Ability to recognize and reflect on normative dilemmas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Ability to distinguish between empirical analyses and normative statements</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
latter group, students learn “to make or to perform. Everything revolves around the acquisition of artistry, through practice and coaching.” At Erasmus University, it was felt that introducing elements of the training for creative professions in the public administration curriculum might contribute to the achievement of learning objectives 4–13 (see Table 2; see also Shaffer, 2004).

To meet the above-mentioned design requirements (interdisciplinary program with professional and academic skill development, with optimization of overall study pace within the curriculum) and taking into account the “potpourri” and “polarity” challenges of interdisciplinary curriculum development, some staff members developed a formal curriculum (Goodlad, 1979) in consecutive meetings. To optimize the overall study pace of students, the core curriculum is organized in a sequential order (Coleman et al., 1984; Vaughan & Carlson, 1992). In the first and second year, eight disciplinary courses are lectured in 5 weeks each (4 weeks of class activities, week 5 for examination). The third year begins with an elective (minor) that covers 10 weeks, but the basic order of courses is the same. Disciplinary courses are delivered using plenary lectures. Each course is completed with an exam; there is only one re-sit opportunity, scheduled within 4 weeks of the initial exam. As such, the selection of disciplinary courses did not change; however, the sequence and order of courses (that is, sequential instead of concurrent) did.

To optimize students’ ability to deal with the practical side of public administration issues, studio sessions were introduced in the program alongside plenary lectures.

### Table 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>10. Ability to function as a broker between different values and interests</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Ability to report on public administration issues and research results to different target groups according to academic standards</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning skills</td>
<td>12. Ability to reflect on their own learning strategies and acquired skills</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Developed learning skills that enable them to make decisions about future professional development, including a master’s program</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the first half of the program, studio courses overarch various core curriculum (disciplinary) courses. In the second half of the program, studio sessions are an integral part of disciplinary courses. In both cases, students participate in twice weekly, workshop-like sessions. These sessions, in which 15–18 students gather, have a number of purposes:

1. Especially for the overarching studio courses, students study, digest, and reflect on specific puzzles, phenomena, or social problems using content and perspective from various disciplinary courses. For instance, in the first studio course, social problems that are characteristic for large metropolitan areas are discussed both from a general public administration perspective, from the viewpoint of sociology, and using the perspective of social science methodology. In this way, studio courses and sessions serve to integrate the various disciplines.

2. In specific studio sessions, students are trained to master analytical, professional, and/or research skills. Students participate in simulations (e.g., following the Harvard Case Method guidelines), or, in other sessions, give oral presentations, report lessons from the field, draft policy recommendations based on field observations, or apply qualitative methods by analyzing video footage or interview transcripts using a coding scheme. Sometimes, students themselves organize specific sessions based on student-initiated subject matter.

3. Studio sessions are designed in such a way that they keep students on task (Stalling, 1980): Through assignments, students are forced to keep up with the pace of the subject matter as is it presented to them, thereby reducing student procrastination.

In general, studio sessions are meant to organize learning experiences that confront students with the need to disassemble and reassemble real-world phenomena using key concepts, skills, and lines of reasoning that are presented to them in various disciplinary courses.

The formal curriculum (with course names and order of courses) is depicted in Table 3. Overall, the formal curriculum bears with it characteristics of a discipline-based curriculum (note the order of disciplinary modules) as well as a multidisciplinary curriculum (note how Studios 1, 2, 3, and 4 overarch and are synchronized with specific but not all disciplinary modules), whereas some studio sessions take the form of an integrated day curriculum (in the sense that the content of some sessions is organized around subject matter suggested by students).

At the same time the ideal curriculum began to take shape, at the university level the so-called binding study advice was developed and introduced for all bachelor’s programs (so also for bachelor’s programs in arts, economics, management...
### Table 3: Formal Curriculum of Erasmus University Rotterdam's Public Administration Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bachelor 1</th>
<th>Block 1</th>
<th>Block 2</th>
<th>Block 3</th>
<th>Block 4</th>
<th>Block 5</th>
<th>Block 6</th>
<th>Block 7</th>
<th>Block 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Core issues in Public Administration</td>
<td>Introduction Sociology</td>
<td>Introduction Methodology</td>
<td>Administrative Map of the Netherlands and Europe</td>
<td>Economics: Instruments and Policy</td>
<td>Introduction to State and Administrative Law</td>
<td>Core Concepts of Management and Organization</td>
<td>Methodology (qualitative research)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studio 1</td>
<td>Studio 2</td>
<td>Studio 3</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 1</td>
<td>Studio 2</td>
<td>Studio 3</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor 2</td>
<td>Introduction to Political Science</td>
<td>Methodology (quantitative research)</td>
<td>Policy and Politics</td>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>Political Philosophy and Democracy</td>
<td>International Governance</td>
<td>Public Organization and Change Management</td>
<td>Management in the Public Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
<td>Studio 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor 3</td>
<td>Minor (elective)</td>
<td>Policy and Institutions</td>
<td>Interned Government</td>
<td>Working in the Public Sector</td>
<td>Information Society and E-Governance</td>
<td>Bachelor thesis and reflection on professional practice</td>
<td>Bachelor thesis</td>
<td>Bachelor thesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Studio Approach in Public Administration Teaching**
administration, law, philosophy, and sociology). This binding study advice policy implies that students who do not manage to complete 67% (40 out of 60 ECTS) of the first year within 1 year of study, and 100% (60 out of 60 ECTS) of the first year within 2 years of study, are expelled from the bachelor’s program they are enrolled in.

The university policy with respect to the binding study advice was followed by specific aspirations taken up by the public administration program management, the most important ones being that (a) at least 60% of the students starting the Bachelor program should have a positive binding advice, and (b) that the eventual Bachelor program success rate for those achieving a positive binding advice should be 90%. To meet the conditional 90% success rate, it is mandatory that the first year is representative of the full Bachelor program.

Implementation Issues

In the academic year 2007–2008, the formal curriculum was implemented; thus, both professors and students were exposed to a new program—and, more important, to a new pedagogical approach. In this section, we report the way professors, tutors, and students experienced the redesigned curriculum (in terms of Goodlad, 1979: the perceived and experienced curriculum). In the implementation of the new curriculum, four issues appeared to be more complex than anticipated: (a) determining the balance between the core curriculum and the studio sessions; (b) integrating analytical and professional skills in the studio courses; (c) defining the roles of tutors that supervise the studio sessions; and (d) meeting the diverging demands of various types of students.

The first implementation issue concerned the relation between the core curriculum and the studio sessions. Before the curriculum redesign, responsibilities for the content of specific courses were deceivingly simple: Separate courses were administered and carried out by specific (disciplinary-based) professors, who in practice undertook little coordinative effort to integrate their specific courses with adjacent courses. In the new situation, the sequential structure required more coordinative effort from various professors to (a) integrate specific core curriculum courses with adjacent core curriculum courses; and, more important, (b) to identify candidate subject matter and skills to be trained and fleshed out in studio sessions. In practice, professors having disciplinary orientations tended to compete with one another for the inclusion of specific subject matter in studio sessions. So indeed, the polarity problem reported by Hayes Jacobs (1989) could be observed in practice. The studio sessions were initially supervised by junior members of staff (typically junior lecturers who were supposed to act as mediator) who found themselves in a new position, having to balance, struggle with, and sometimes integrate various disciplinary perspectives. The balancing act was not without particular importance: If disciplinary professors perceived a gap between their courses and the content of studio sessions, their motivation for
and involvement in the design and support of studio sessions decreased substantially, resulting in less coherent structures. For the new curriculum to flourish, it was mandatory to keep all professors on board. It appeared that in practice, the studio coordinator needed a strong say in the design of the studios. Therefore, in the second run of the curriculum, studio coordinators were recruited from senior members of staff (typically associated professors with some authority and overview regarding the total curriculum). Obviously, the task of designing and implementing the newly devised studio sessions was more demanding than was apparent at first.

The second implementation issue relates to skill development. We have indicated that one objective of the studio sessions was to improve the development of analytical, professional, and research skills in the curriculum. It was believed that the small-group, integrative settings of the studio sessions formed a suitable platform for this. But although in various studio sessions attention was paid to these skills, the overall results were not satisfactory. Assignments and exercises in specific studio sessions were not designed to meet the requirements of a time-on-task, study-pace-optimizing curriculum. Rather, they were more tailored to the cognitive processing of substantive information. Therefore, a systematic analysis was carried out of all activities in studio sessions with regard to skills training in the 2009–2010 run of the curriculum. This resulted in an overview of gaps and overlaps. In the 2010–2011 run, specific groups of skills were allocated to specific studio courses, and coordinators have been awarded the task of developing exercises and assignments for different skills.

A third implementation issue is that the success of the courses—as indicated by students' performances and evaluations—appeared to depend on the roles and activities of individual tutors who supervised the studio sessions and their instructions. To meet the increased teaching load, in the first run of the redesigned curriculum a combination of junior staff, PhD students, and master's students was employed. Different tutors appeared to have different interpretations of their roles as supervisors of studio sessions, and the norms used for evaluating assignments diverged substantially. Moreover, tutors themselves perceived their status as being lower and their tasks as being less important than that of professors. Some of them tried to alleviate this problem (and gain status) by summarizing and discussing content from lectures in studio sessions, thereby duplicating the efforts of professors. Although this approach was not compatible with the ideal curriculum, the resulting competition between professors and tutors was in fact occasionally applauded by the students, who thought they were being well served by the tutors. To correct this situation, in the following runs a gradual shift has been made toward the professionalization of the tutors who supervised the studio sessions. In the current situation, about 80% of the studio sessions are supervised by graduated junior staff members who are selected, trained, and coached for their roles as tutors and have tutoring as their main task. The remaining 20% are supervised by PhD students who are also intensively coached.
A related issue concerns the “efficiency” of assignments. The task of giving feedback on assignments and grading was initially much more demanding for tutors than the staff members had envisaged. In subsequent runs the situation was improved, but designing didactic sound assignments that are challenging for students and, at the same time, efficient in terms of tutor’s effort proved to be quite challenging.

A final issue in the implementation of the new curriculum was the issue of how to deal with conflicting demands of the diverse population of students. In the redesigned curriculum, students are forced into the framework of a “fixed” curriculum with short, intensive courses and overall, integrative studio sessions. This curriculum turned out to be challenging and demanding for most students since the curriculum forces students to keep up with the pace. But because of this fixed and compulsory character, there is little space to cater for the needs of students with diverging demands, including students facing difficulties in keeping up with the study pace as well as students seeking intellectual and/or professional challenges. To make things worse for the latter category of students, attendance requirements of the studio sessions often prevent excellent students from enrolling in other academic programs (like the philosophy bachelor’s program). The redesigned program has, more than the program it replaced, a one-size-fits-all character.

Results

The first run of this redesigned curriculum was in the academic year 2007–2008. As the Bachelor program consists of 3 years, the first bachelor’s students who have followed a complete run of the curriculum graduated at the end of the 2009–2010 academic year. To analyze the results of the redesigned curriculum, we use three indicators: (a) study pace and performance in year 1, (b) study pace and performance after 2 years; and (c) study pace and performance of the full 3-year program. Moreover, we provide some qualitative impressions regarding the results of the redesigned curriculum based on analysis of discussions among staff members and analysis of input by students in quality improvement panel sessions.

Study Pace and Progress After 1 Year of Study

Table 4 provides an overview of the performance of students in the first year of the Bachelor program. With the introduction of the system of the so-called binding study advice, an influx of students who had been expelled from other programs at Erasmus University—most prominently business administration, economics, or law—started in public administration in the year 2006–2007. Based on university procedures and national regulations, rejects are not allowed to reenter the program they were expelled from; but they are in fact allowed to subscribe to other programs (like the Public Administration Bachelor program). The influx of rejects from other programs increased from 28 in 2006 to 68 in the current academic year 2010–2011. This explains the structurally higher number
of students after that date, and it also partly explains the bad results of the class of 2006–2007. It appeared that students who performed badly at other disciplines also did not perform well in public administration in the first year. In 2006–2007, which was by far the worst year, 60% of the students who had failed at other programs dropped out within 1 year. However, after the introduction of the redesigned curriculum, students’ performance increased to the 2005–2006 levels, even if the influx of rejected students from other programs kept increasing.

Table 4.
Student's Performances in Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 ECTS (100% of compulsory credits)</td>
<td>37 (42.0%)</td>
<td>27 (24.8%)</td>
<td>33 (32.0%)</td>
<td>45 (38.5%)</td>
<td>41 (27.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–60 (ECTS) (more than 66.6% of compulsory credits)</td>
<td>26 (29.5%)</td>
<td>23 (21.1%)</td>
<td>43 (41.7%)</td>
<td>41 (35.0%)</td>
<td>61 (40.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 40 ECTS (less than 66.6% of compulsory credits leads to a negative advice)</td>
<td>21 (23.5%)</td>
<td>42 (38.5%)</td>
<td>24 (23.3%)</td>
<td>29 (24.8%)</td>
<td>46 (30.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exception because of personal circumstances</td>
<td>4 (4.5%)</td>
<td>17 (15.6%)</td>
<td>3 (2.9%)</td>
<td>2 (1.7%)</td>
<td>4 (2.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total*</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Totals corrected for students leaving the program within 3 months.

Overall, we conclude that there is no notable trend (before and after the introduction of the redesigned curriculum) in the number of students who manage to complete the first year (60 ECTS) within the time frame of 12 months. There is an increase in the number of students who receive a conditional positive advice, though (40–60 ECTS scored within 12 months).

**Study Pace and Progress After 2 Years of Study**

The second indicator for the performance of bachelor students is the number of students who are allowed to continue with the program after 2 years. This group includes student with a positive advice and with a conditionally positive
advice. Table 5 gives an overview of these results. Again, the year 2006–2007 appears to be a negative outlier, but overall a positive trend here is lacking (as suggested by authors like Coleman et al., 1984, and Vaughan & Carlson, 1992).

Table 5.
Results After 2 Years

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive advice after 2 years</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(70.5%)</td>
<td>(56.9%)</td>
<td>(68.0%)</td>
<td>(59.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative advice or stopped after 2 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(29.5%)</td>
<td>(42.2%)</td>
<td>(27.1%)</td>
<td>(34.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exception because of personal circumstances</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.9%)</td>
<td>(0.9%)</td>
<td>(4.9%)</td>
<td>(6.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall Bachelor Study Pace and Progress

The third indicator is the final result of the program. In Dutch universities, there are no strict deadlines for finalizing the bachelor’s program since most students continue a master’s program at the same university. Most programs allow students from their own bachelor’s program to enter the master’s program with a small part of the bachelor’s program unfinished. The performances are calculated based on students with a positive study advice after 2 years. We see a significant increase in the cohort that has followed the first full run of the new program. This trend seems to continue in the second full run if we take into account the number of students who are actually participating in third-year courses in 2010–2011 (Table 6).

Reflection and Alternative Explanations of Progress

From this analysis, we conclude that there has been only a marginal increase in students’ performance and progress compared with the situation before the redesigned curriculum if we take the year 2005–2006 as a benchmark. However, the before-after data are susceptible to alternative interpretations. These are discussed here.

The first confounder is that at the same time the redesigned curriculum was implemented, there was a relatively large influx of rejects from other programs (notably business administration students). This influx of rejects can be assumed to offset a potential higher study pace and progress of the (larger) population of
non-rejects. As noted earlier, it can be observed that students who performed badly at other disciplines also did not perform well in the Public Administration program in the first year.

A second (but positive) confounder is that professors who supervise the bachelor graduation theses report that students are conceptually and methodologically better equipped to write their bachelor theses. Moreover, the self-reported weekly study time has over time increased from about 21 hours (2005–2006) to 27 hours (2009–2010). In the absence of “hard data,” it is hard to interpret these finding in a rigorous way, but an alternative explanation is that with the curriculum redesign, the program has become more demanding, eventually increasing the number of rejects and dropouts.

Conclusions

In this article, we have reflected on a redesigned public administration curriculum that was implemented with the aim to increase study progress, facilitate interdisciplinary integration, and bridge the gap between practice and theory in public administration. The implementation of the curriculum revealed new roles for and also tensions between professors working within disciplinary fields, tutors supervising studio sessions, and students. In this final section we reflect on the lessons learned that may be relevant for other undergraduate programs in public administration. We identify three lessons.

The first lesson concerns the ways in which the studio approach can contribute to integrating theory and practice in public administration programs. Since the first implementation of the redesigned curriculum, we have learned that studio sessions form a consistent and continuous element in the curriculum that serves to integrate various disciplinary perspectives and challenges students to develop practice-oriented skills alongside academic skills. However, as we have indicated

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's diploma in 3 years</td>
<td>24 (38.7%)</td>
<td>17 (27.4%)</td>
<td>31 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's diploma within 3.5 years</td>
<td>9 (14.5%)</td>
<td>11 (17.7%)</td>
<td>2* (2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aData available for 3 years and 2 months. </TBFN>
in this article, the contents of these studio sessions are essential for their success. Therefore, a lot of effort is required to actually design studio sessions. It is a task that requires insight into the overall curriculum, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge about practical public administration. Therefore, we advise that the role of designing and coordinating studio sessions be assigned to experienced lecturers with practical experience. Lecturers of disciplinary core modules do not necessarily possess the required competences.

The second lesson, perhaps somewhat disappointingly, is that program directors should not have too high expectations about the impact of the studio approach on students’ study progress or results. Contrary to the educational science literature, more specifically the literature on curriculum design and study progress, we did not record a substantial increase in study pace and study progress in the first and second year of the program. A positive effect might be deduced from the first full run of the new program, but the data available on consecutive runs do not allow us to extrapolate these findings. At this moment, we conclude that it is more difficult to affect student behavior and study success than is perhaps suggested by the curriculum design literature; achieving these goals is also definitely more difficult than expected when we introduced the new curriculum.

The third lesson that can be drawn from the experiences of introducing this approach at Erasmus University concerns the quality and roles of the tutors supervising the studio sessions. As indicated earlier in this article, program directors introducing these kinds of approaches should anticipate two developments. The first is the understandable but undesirable tendency of tutors to actually “teach.” Learning in studio sessions occurs through the confrontation of students with practical experiences. Making errors, discovering, and experimenting are essential in this process. Especially in the first runs of our redesigned programs, some of the tutors fell into their old habits of instructing and explaining, thus preventing an optimal learning experience. This approach calls for a very deliberate and careful selection and training of tutors. Moreover, as many parallel groups are organized at the same time, operational differences between tutors are likely to occur as well as to prove undesirable. Differences in interpretations of assignments or deadlines, and even in the process of marking assignments, trigger criticism from students. This issue can be solved partly through adequate training of the tutors, but in our experiences that is not sufficient. Throughout a studio module, the team of tutors needs to operate as a team, which requires a large amount of communication within the team and at least weekly meetings with the complete team of tutors, the lecturer of the core disciplinary module, and the studio coordinator.

As a final consideration, we note that the curriculum redesign we have reflected on in this paper was originally conceived as a one-off, structural, design-oriented change. In practice, it turned out to be a more or less continuous quality improvement effort that now, 4 years after its first implementation, still requires fine-tuning and more substantial continuous redesign, taking into account experiences and
feedback from professors, tutors, program directors, students, and so forth. Moreover, we discovered that the curriculum redesign is not only a redesign of sequence and scope of the program but also a challenge that urges professors, tutors, and students to reflect continuously on the type of knowledge, required skills, and orientations that together make up a vital public administration community.

References


Menno Fenger is associate professor of Public Administration at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He is executive director of the bachelor’s program in Public Administration. His research focuses on processes of policy change in social security. In 2010, he was elected by students as “Best lecturer” in the Public Administration department of Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has been involved in various projects aimed at innovation of the program, including the kick-start project: an attempt to increase study results from first-year students.

Vincent Homburg is associate professor of Public Administration at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He is executive director of the bachelor’s program in Public Administration and teaches E-Government and Public Management courses at bachelor and post-initial master levels. Homburg has published in journals like *The Information Society, Information Polity*, and the *International Journal of Public Administration*; he has edited several books and authored *Understanding E-government* (2008, Routledge).