

An Education Strategy for Practitioners in Public Administration Master's Programs

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ABSTRACT

Master's programs in Public Administration (MPA) may contribute to a better platform for exchange between the academy and the field of practice. But how should such programs be designed and run to meet the ambition of bringing together study and work experience? This contribution analyzes that question and develops an educational philosophy of de-linking and re-linking. It reports on the educational practice of the MPA program for practitioners at Erasmus University Rotterdam, which is based on this analysis and philosophy. The thesis of the paper is that programs like this one need a specific pedagogical approach. An outline of such an approach is presented.

INTRODUCTION

This contribution presents an argument, concrete ideas, and experiences with respect to teaching Public Administration to professional public sector practitioners. Public Administration as an academic discipline is devoted to (a) acquiring insight into the dynamics of administrative structures, cultures, and processes, and (b) developing ways to improve these. In order to contribute to public administration practice, there must be mechanisms that trigger the application of academic Public Administration knowledge and insights to real-life practice. Such mechanisms exist, but are neither trivial nor self-evident.

The publication of research on public administration, tested theories, or tailored advice does not guarantee its use. Extensive literature on the "utilization" of social science research (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Weiss, 1980; Ringeling, 1996; Patton, 1997; Shulha & Cousins, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Van der Meer, 1999) reflects the uneasiness that many academics, researchers and evaluators feel. Their sound arguments are disappearing into proverbial desk drawers, and they look for explanations of this phenomenon. Often, practitioners feel that

academic statements, reports, and advice are too general, too abstract, and too hard to translate to complex and unruly situations and problems. Or, they simply can be too *theoretical*, politically undesirable, or unpractical. These views reflect the uneasiness of practitioners with regard to (social) science. Of course, there are many examples of fruitful interactions between practitioners and academics, but they are not entirely self-evident. Therefore, it seems sensible to investigate the conditions and mechanisms for constructive intercourse.

This argument is relevant for the design of Public Administration education, especially when the students are practitioners. In master's programs this often is the case. In the Anglo-Saxon world, most students enter a master's program after some years of professional experience. This is *a fortiori* and, by definition, the case for mid-career master's programs. In the continental European tradition, however, most students complete their master's degrees immediately after obtaining their bachelor's degrees. Nonetheless, there also are some master's programs specifically designed for students with professional experience.¹ One of these, the Erasmus Master's Program of Public Administration for practitioners, will be used in this paper to exemplify our argument.

In the European setting, three kinds of master's programs must be distinguished. First, there is the master's program that comes immediately after completion of a related bachelor's program. This is the most common model, comprising 80 to 90 percent of the market, with the average student aged 21 or 22. Next, there are two kinds of master's programs for people who are already working in or close to the public sector. One is a program for students who have been working in or around the public sector for a number of years. They have a bachelor's degree, and sometimes even a master's degree, in another discipline, such as law, and now want to have a master's degree in Public Administration. Their average age is 34. We call this a mid-career master's program. At the top end, there are executive programs. For the most part, students in these programs already have a master's degree, are high-flyers in their organizations, and are being trained for even higher positions. Their average age is around 40. In this article, we focus on the mid-career programs.

Although scientific knowledge and insight may creep into practice via many barely traceable ways (Weiss, 1980), it seems plausible that the educational channel for practitioners could work well (a) if they can recognize and acknowledge the applicability and relevance of subjects, issues, analyses, methods, etc., of a program, and (b) if they are able to actively link their practice, on the one hand, with taught concepts and theories on the other. Therefore, key questions² for the design of MPA programs for practitioners include the following:

- How can we make our teaching more recognizable and relevant for practitioners?

- How can we help practitioners link their practice to their study experiences, and vice versa?

Others programs have coped with the same questions. The Kennedy School at Harvard introduced a rigorous case-study method as a way to combine practice and theory. This approach is used in the executive programs of that school. The action-inquiry approach used in the Leadership and Organisation of Public Services program at the University of West England, Bristol, and the focus group approach at Copenhagen University (Pedersen & Jensen, 2007) reflect other methods used to create and intensify the relationship between theory and practice within learning processes. Still other approaches are possible, some of which are discussed in this contribution.

OUTLINE

In the next section of this paper we describe our initial view on what we have to teach,³ and our further ambitions for the part-time MPA program at Erasmus University. These views are based on our insights about what we have to offer, and on our ideas about what is needed and asked for by practitioners. However, this is only a starting point for program design. It needs to be supplemented by a valid idea of how learning processes take place. In the section on ambivalent connections, we consider the idea that –in the case of educating practitioners– establishing links between their study and their working practice is vital for effective learning. We will show that this idea needs to be qualified. We developed a didactical approach based on this qualified view, which includes the elements of both *de-linking* and *re-linking*. We describe how we shaped and implemented this approach, and report on the results. Finally, we focus on the transference of acquired knowledge and offer insights to real-life practice, and draw some conclusions for designing and strategizing MPA programs for practitioners.

THE MISSION OF THE ERASMUS UNIVERSITY MPA PROGRAM FOR PRACTITIONERS

The MPA program for practitioners at Erasmus is set up for students who have at least two years' experience on a job in the public domain, and the average length of professional experience is five or six years. The program aims for a goal of teaching relevant public administration knowledge and methods at an academic level that enhances the professionalism, effectiveness, and reflectivity of practitioners. In striving for these aims, the program tries to maximize use of the students' professional experiences, and their real-life daily work settings. We now elaborate on the main elements of this mission.

Public Administration Knowledge and Methods

Public Administration is about understanding the structure and function

of the public sector, across a variety of agencies and private organizations that perform public tasks. It also is about design, development, implementation, and evaluation of policies and administrative or organizational arrangements and strategies in the public domain. For practitioners, Public Administration needs to offer theoretical models, explanations, and insights into the processes and mechanisms that determine how public and semi-public bodies function. It also looks at their mutual interactions, their interactions with societal organizations and citizens, and the intended or unintended outcomes of their policies and services. Based on these insights, Public Administration can contribute to new ways of analyzing, policy-making and management, and, hence, also can enhance the professional performance (Freidson, 2001) of students.

Academic Education

The Rotterdam MPA program for practitioners provides education at an academic level. This means that students should (a) have a clear image of the state of affairs in the public domain and be able to reproduce and apply Public Administration theory to them, and (b) also be able to choose, criticize, and develop different theoretical perspectives. It is not a program of nuts and bolts, but one that deepens the reflective skills of its participants.

Professionalism and Effectiveness

Moreover, graduates should be able to relate, translate, and apply Public Administration knowledge, insights, and theory to real-life practices and problems. Their strategic repertoire should be enlarged; their possibilities to choose between different perspectives should be improved. They should be able to present analyses and ideas in a convincing way, and they should be able to advise, collaborate, and manage. They also should be able to discuss and evaluate the effectiveness of concrete policies, as well as management measures and strategies.

Reflectivity

Finally, we want our students to be reflective with respect to the sources and status of knowledge; societal and organizational problems, norms and values; and their own roles and practices. They should be aware of the epistemological nature and basis of knowledge, and think about its implications for the status and use of theories and research results. They should be critical of the definition of problems and ask questions such as the following: Whose definitions are these? Are there competing definitions? Are other definitions possible? They should not take norms and values for granted, without recognizing them as such, and without knowledge of the background of these types of normative ideas. Lastly, they should be able to view and evaluate their own (professional) behavior from different perspectives.

AMBIVALENT CONNECTIONS

These ambitions require that the content of study and the related process of learning and reflection be connected to the students' working practices. This is, we think, self-evident for the third element of professionalism and effectiveness. As a matter of fact, these goals require transfer to real-life practice by a *conditio sine qua non*. But, it can be argued that the other elements of our mission also need—or at least benefit from—a myriad of intelligent connections between study and work practice (Pedersen & Jensen, 2007).

When we started this program, our idea was that the professional experience of the students would facilitate the learning process in general, as well as the process of linking theory to practice, and vice versa. Important elements in our argument included the following ideas

- Acquiring factual knowledge of the structure and function of public administration can be considerably intensified and speeded up if one is observing and experiencing public administration in practice, while also reading supplemental books and taking courses.
- Information on historical developments, trends, and theories potentially could be understood and more easily and quickly seen as relevant by students with professional experience than it could by those without such experience. Experience and practice give *flesh and blood* to abstract notions and concepts. We think most factual knowledge barely would need to be presented.
- Informed choice, critical review and sensible development of Public Administration theories also will be greatly facilitated, to say the least, because the relevant empirical reality is at hand. One even could claim that without the *resistance* that *reality* provides, a critical evaluation of theoretical notions hardly is possible.
- Broader reflection on the meaning and impact of theories, of course, also needs *resistance* to stimulate thinking. But reflection on problem definitions, values, and one's own behavior remains fairly abstract and without engagement if it takes place outside its pertinent context. In our view, reflection, like ethics, needs to be situated (i.e., related to concrete phenomena and issues).

The preceding argument on how professional experience can enhance learning processes is a theory in itself. If we test this theory and reflect on it by confronting it with our own experience in the Rotterdam program, it could appear to be a rather poor, if not invalid, one. Because there is ample evidence that the mere existence of relevant work experience does not provide any guarantee for more effective and efficient professional and academic learning. On the contrary, it may considerably limit the speed and quality of the process.

This is so, we think, because socialization in real-life practice tends to make it self-evident. Sometimes exceptional students think that Public Administration is about social work (because it is their work domain) and they simply are not able to see other things at stake in the public sphere. Far more general is the phenomenon where students are convinced that they *know* the relevant reality. This is understandable, because their *ideas* about reality continuously seem to be confirmed by their perceived and interpreted experiences. This prevents them from recognizing the meaning and added value of insights and ideas that an academic program can offer.

For these students, theories tend to appear as intricate languages that scientists (should) use, but only to reformulate things already known. Theories may be judged according to the extent that they correspond to their known reality, but they hardly contribute to understanding that reality, let alone to forming a different perspective of the same reality. In response to an assignment for which students were asked to apply a specified theoretical perspective to a known case, we received many papers from students who told their own stories about the case, without any reference to the theory, and were convinced that they had adequately fulfilled the assignment.

If real-life practical experience has become self-evident, this severely limits students' abilities for critical reflection on theories and practices, development of new ideas and strategies, and their situated application. In fact, we often have students with a fairly instrumental attitude. They know reality, its dynamics, and its problems, and they ask for the *right* (generic) solutions.

Thus, the challenge to designing MPA programs is how to maximize the potential advantages of students' professional experiences, while simultaneously minimizing the contradictory effects of these same experiences during the learning process.

DIDACTICAL APPROACH

In anticipation of and in reaction to the impeding mechanisms identified in the preceding section, we developed a didactic approach to guide our teaching and facilitation of learning processes. Our model comprises four key elements.

- **Unfreezing:** Self-evident notions and practices should be critically examined and questioned, if substantial learning is to take place. In a sense, students must become disconnected or de-linked from their real life *practice* in order to be able to look at it and eventually act on it in new ways. The concept is akin to Lewin's concept of unfreezing as a necessary first stage in the process of change (Cummings, 2004).
- **Cognition:** Students are presented with new and relevant empirical and theoretical knowledge, and work actively on and with

- this material.
- Reflection: Students, as guided and facilitated by the faculty, should think about administrative problems and solutions, public administration theories and models, policy instruments, management strategies, etc., as an ongoing (critical) sense-making process.
 - Application: Students must utilize theories, insights, knowledge, and competencies for research, consulting, policy, and management practices.

Figure 1.

Rotterdam Public Administration Evening Program Curriculum

The program consists of the following courses, which together constitute a comprehensive whole:

First year:

- Explorations (10 evenings)
- Policy (13 evenings)
- Organization and Management in the Public Sector (6 evenings)
- Scientific Methods Training I (3 evenings)
- Government and Economic Policy (9 evenings)
- Government and Information Society (6 evenings)
- Constitutional and Administrative Law (6 evenings)
- Human Resources Management and Financial Management (6 evenings)
- State, Democracy and Bureaucracy (6 evenings)
- Comparative Public Administration (6 evenings)

Second year:

- Policy and Society (14 evenings)
- Steering in the Public Sector (14 evenings)
- Scientific Methods Training II (4 evenings)
- Public Management and Management of Change (13 evenings)
- The Administrative Professional (14 evenings)
- Thesis

All courses are obligatory. There are no electives. Students are required to attend. The courses are offered consecutively, in the order presented above, for two evenings a week. Each course ends with an exam and/or a written paper.

The steps of unfreezing and reflection require confrontation with and debate of different ideas, approaches, interpretations, etc. Therefore, in addition to reading and attending lectures, interaction between students and teaching staff, and interaction among students (with different experiences in their professional careers), is vital in our didactical approach. So, a substantial part of the sessions is interactive in nature and includes plenary discussions, group work, presentations, mutual consultation, etc., that uses materials from the students' own professional experiences. A short outline of the program is depicted in Figure 1.

The first course, Explorations, focuses on unfreezing. The remainder of the first year focuses on cognition, and the second year focuses on reflection and application. However, all four elements also find their places in each of the program's 15 courses, albeit in different combinations. In fact, the ability to de-link and re-link; the ability to search for, develop and use new knowledge; and the ability to reflect — all constitute the core competencies that we want our students to learn and apply as professional PA academics.

In the remainder of this paper we focus on the methods and instruments for de-linking (unfreezing) and re-linking (application). It shows that cognition and reflection are implied in these two processes.

DE-LINKING

In this section we discuss strategies for de-linking (i.e., creating distance between students and their day-to-day experiences and self-evidences). Some of these strategies are translated into specific elements and inserted in the study program. Others are strategies applied within different courses. Some strategies are applied more systematically than others. For some strategies we already have evidences of their impact, and we summarize those.

Presentation

In the presentation and marketing of the program, we emphasize that it will cause students to question things that appear self-evident. We make it clear that the program will provide knowledge, theories, and methods, but that it will not result in recipes for success. We explain that it is an academic program for training students to think, analyze, theorize, design, develop, and evaluate themselves.

Interaction and Participation

Of course, listening to lectures and reading books and articles can contribute to new ways of looking at things, and thus cause reflection on one's own convictions and practices. But this process can be far more intensive if students are *forced* to deal with the material in a more active way. Therefore, we have introduced two elements to the program. The first is requiring students to

actually attend the courses two evenings a week. If they are absent more than incidentally, they usually are given an additional assignment that requires them to actively engage in the subject matter. Second, we frequently apply interactive forms of work – both between the lecturer and the students, and among students. In this way, students are forced to make their ideas explicit and to confront them in the process of debating other views culled from literature, lecturers, or other students. Moreover, they are forced to rethink these ideas, scrutinize their validity, and evaluate possible alternative views.

Our experience shows that practitioner students in general like the interactive mode. However, it does not always result in even short-term changes to their levels of academic and reflective thinking. Discussions between faculty and students, on average, seem to be more effective in this respect than debates among students. Students tend to place less value on group discussions without faculty participation, which may indicate that they do not produce many new insights, or that students are not (yet) able to recognize new or unexpected elements in their mutual interactions without faculty guidance.

The Course: Explorations

To clear the ground and give some direction to the students' critical and reflective activities, the program starts with a course called Explorations. In it, four key issues are discussed: (a) The structures and functions of government, (b) societal problems and the role of government, (c) public management and organization, and (d) the added value of (public administration) science. We begin by asking the students to define each theme, to formulate their norms about it, and to express their observations of the theme's actual function, as well as their presuppositions of the mechanisms behind it. Next, we ask further questions in a Socratic method, in order to challenge their ideas and reach notions that are even more self-evident to students, and that also appear to be debatable. We explicitly identify different views among students and they confront them with each other. The course is rather open-ended, with some conclusions, because it mainly provides questions, contradictory views, and interpretations. Students are given an article to study on the theme of the next session, which then starts with a presentation by a faculty member who elaborates on a specific view. After these two new inputs are introduced into the debate, students break up into working groups and try to generate counter-arguments, which then are commented on by the presenting faculty member.

Most students evaluate this course as “confusing.” Things they once thought they were sure about now appear to be not as self-evident as they used to be. At the same time, students consider the Explorations course to be very motivating. According to the faculty, this perspective is the intended outcome. Students learn something else, too. Because knowledge is not offered in a clear-cut fashion, they have to look for it. And the knowledge they find can fundamentally differ from

their *preconceived ideas*. In general, it certainly helps to *unfreeze*—hence to de-link— students from key, self-evident ideas.

Agenda-Setting

At the end of the Explorations course, students write an essay. In it, they are asked to formulate a substantive agenda for their course of study that starts with their own motivation on the one hand, and addresses the three most intriguing course topics on the other. What do they want to learn, and which questions do they want to answer during their study? This assignment forces students to be more explicit about what is new to them, and about what they do not know or understand. This process is designed to consolidate the uneasiness induced by Explorations. Still, in reading the essays, we can conclude that many students merely redefine fundamental questions into fairly instrumental ones. The process of de-linking and unfreezing is not a one-shot business. Therefore, we consider it vital that the *unfreezing* element be included in some way in each course.

Uncommon Interpretations

The various courses encompass many real life cases, some of which are from the students' own experience . One function of this practice is to train students in assessing and reflecting on the nature of a situation, problem or trend. Students often provide a straightforward interpretation, because they tend to experience the situation as factual, and their descriptions of it as unequivocal. By offering them alternative perspectives and interpretations, and by explicitly using theoretical notions or not, we show that, upon closer scrutiny, many things are not as obvious as they appear to be. It takes a lot of persistence and supervision to force students to actually apply different (theoretical) perspectives to situations and then evaluate them.

Feedback

In papers and presentations, students frequently give their own accounts of specific situations and processes, often from their own practice. This provides us with extra opportunities to give feedback, not so much in terms of the (in)validity of the account per se, but in terms of the quality of the evidence and arguments used to support it. Thus, insofar as available time allows us to do so, we not only mark papers, but we also give students qualitative comments in written or oral form.

Mentors

Immediately after the introductory Explorations course, students are asked to complete a self-assessment of their competencies with respect to study, research, communication, consultancy, and management. If desired, they can be assigned to a faculty member who acts as a mentor. In consultations between students and mentors, a plan is formulated to improve relevant competencies.

Sometimes this plan includes a specific task that will be performed in certain courses (e.g., making a presentation, writing, practicing analytical skills, using research methods, etc.), and sometimes it means taking additional courses. It also is possible for the plan to include exercises and experiments to be applied at their own workplaces. In this case, students are forced to act differently in known situations and they learn, by consequence, to view these situations in new ways. Moreover, consultations between mentors and students on all aspects of study and real-life practice contribute to *de-linking*.

However, we still lack evidence on the impact of mentorships in this respect. Nevertheless, based on our impressions, we are looking for ways to improve the effectiveness of this part of the program.

Collaboration

Another device for de-linking is found in the interaction between students. If they have to work together in small groups on projects, cases or papers, or if they have to participate in group discussions, their varied views and experiences tend to confront each other. This especially is the case if student groups are heterogeneous in terms of the tasks and functions they perform for their jobs, and in terms of the (policy) areas they work in. We also require students to work with different partners on different assignments during their study, which creates more diverse interaction and further confrontations of ideas. It also prevents students from only repeating the things they already are good at, while leaving their weaker competencies for their fellow students to handle.

Starting Session – Master's Degree Year

Courses taken during the master's degree year emphasize reflection, which by definition implies an element of de-linking. As part of a two-day starting session for the master's year, we conduct a social simulation experiment in which students fill different administrative positions. By doing this, we create a "collective reality" experience that generates material for joint reflection. This joint reflection occurs during an evaluative session after the simulation. In this evaluative session, it becomes clear that most of the students' behaviors during the simulation are not very reflective. Even after one year of study in the program, it remains difficult for students to distance themselves from the situations they are engaged in. However, thoughtful reflection—in the sense of applying different perspectives, thinking of alternative interpretations and courses of action, etc.—appears quite possible in the evaluative session, with some guidance.

Reflective Courses in the Master's Degree Year

In the thematic courses of the master's year, we try to create conditions that encourage more reflection on both theories and practices. The four master's year courses are

- Policy and Society;
- Governance in the Public Sector;
- Public Management and Organizational Change; and,
- The Public Administration Professional.

In these courses, the emphasis is on (a) debate and the assessment of societal, administrative, and organizational problems, (b) the meaning and usefulness of theoretical approaches, (c) the construction of strategies and solutions, and (d) the arguments on which these are founded (Rein & Schön, 1994; Freidson, 2001). All of these elements, however, require putting self-evident thinking on notice, which is a continuing role of the faculty. During this part of the program we try to stimulate more reflection by the students than ever before.

RE-LINKING

De-linking enables re-linking in new ways, thus bringing home the program's added value — in both an academic and professional sense. To be sure, re-linking to a considerable extent is already embedded in the devices we designed for de-linking. For example, tempting students to look through new lenses at known situations simultaneously de-links and re-links them. Things simply cannot be taken for what they appear to be, yet new theoretical perspectives can be applied in sensible ways, while perspectives from other actors also make sense.

Still, it is useful to make an analytical distinction between de-linking and re-linking and summarize the main instruments we use for the latter. This is because the process of assessing the quality of the program and developing it further requires that de-linking and re-linking each be evaluated on its own account. For, if there is too much de-linking and effectively no re-linking (or the other way around), the net result with respect to our mission would be meager. Moreover, some devices actually have more to offer with respect to re-linking than to de-linking.

Again: Interaction and Participation

The sensible linking of new perspectives and theoretical ideas to real-life practices is possible only if students actively engage in applying them during a critical mode. This aspect is enhanced by debate on the applicability and implications of perspectives, concepts, presupposed relations, etc., among students and between students and faculty. In fact, these debates constitute the core element of reflective courses in the master's year. In the first year, this and the following instruments (except the last one) for re-linking already have been applied.

Examples from Work Practice

An obvious device for re-linking is to illustrate theories by using examples

that are recognizable to most, if not all, students. Our faculty is able to produce such examples by drawing from past occupations or administrative functions, as well as research and consulting projects. It is our observation that this is not only illuminating for the students, but that it also motivates them to follow the line and consequences of an argument.

For example, most students are working in governmental organizations, while our teaching staff has been involved in research and consulting projects related to change in these types of organizations. So, when we explain and evaluate theories of organizational change and ways of managing change, we are able to link this in a sensible way to students' experiences, thus helping them to view these experiences in new ways.

Assignments with Respect to Work Practice

By combining both previous devices, students are forced to go one step further and apply the perspectives and ideas they have studied to real-life cases. In the program's early stages, it helps to choose cases that are recognizable, but not highly familiar to students. Thus, they can learn linking without too much interference from existing links (self-evidences). Gradually, it becomes possible for them to look more closely at their own workplace practices in new ways. Of course, feedback on these assignments is vital in order to guide the process of re-linking.

Guest Speakers

Another way to (re-)link insights from study to actual practice is by debating with guest speakers who are practitioners or consultants. They present the theories, analyses, and practices they use in their profession, which provides students with new practical ideas and insights. Debating with guest speakers provides another way to explore, test, and support (or reject) notions and ideas acquired during study. It also offers opportunities for part-time students to improve their interview skills, by determining what are the most relevant questions to ask. In this respect, the guest is not really giving a lecture, but rather is serving as the subject of research activity.

It is clear from our experiences that guest speakers need to be carefully selected. They should be able to be both concrete and reflective at the same time. That is, their contributions should be *empirical* and recognizable, and should make room for differences in students' interpretations and discussions. We also have found it necessary for guest speakers to be appropriately scheduled during the course. That is, the faculty must make it clear to students why a guest has been invited to a particular lecture, and explain what kind of discussion would be useful with that guest. Moreover, during or after the session, the faculty should revisit main points from the presentation and debate them, in order to explicitly connect them with the theme of the course and the theoretical notions considered. As in the case of practice-related assignments, the (re-)linking process should (especially in early

stages of the program) not be left totally to the students.

Collaboration

After being trained in de-linking and digesting public administration theories and approaches, re-linking may be facilitated by collaboration between students. The idea is for them to discuss how re-linking might sensibly take shape. Contrary to the heterogeneous groups that we used for de-linking, it is more useful here to work with homogeneous groups. Students who work in the same (types of) organizations search (through a mutual exchange of ideas) for new interpretations and analyses of what is happening (or how things might be changed) in their own practices, and utilize what they have learned. Such debates actually are about *how* new links can be made.

Final Project

In the final project of the master's year — which can have different formats — re-linking is the core business. Students investigate a specific issue or case and write a research report, policy advisory, or an organizational analysis and advisory piece. They are required to apply public administration theory to empirical phenomena and to specific policy or management problems. Frequently, students engage in a project that is directly related to their daily work, and in many cases projects are devoted to an issue or problem with which their own organization is struggling. In such cases, the student's task, and that of his/her supervisor, is to continue de-linking, while simultaneously making new sound and solid links between theory and practice — not only in analyzing, but also in designing and eventually implementing plans and strategies.

It seems to be quite difficult for students to take a detached view of their own professional settings and then engage in re-linking, or try to develop new interpretations and analyses. Students frequently believe that they are *really* addressing the case. The struggle to truly reflect in new ways on a situation or problem that one knows thoroughly is the required final step, which, if survived, makes a reflective academic

TRANSFERENCE

An additional problem of relating study to work practice needs to be addressed. It is not self-evident that acquired knowledge, insights, and competencies are actually used by students in their professional settings. Transference of what is learned to the real-life setting depends on situational factors and mechanisms. The point is that professional behavior also is social and organizational behavior. That is, it is not only subject to professional expertise and methods, but also to social codes and expectations. With respect to *reflection* in both general and *unconventional* interpretations, and specifically with respect to solutions, individual professionals are not always able to *realize*

these behaviors in an uncomprehending environment. In fact, the problem becomes how to de-link, change, and re-link thoughts and ideas in others (Van der Meer & Mastik, 1993). We think that this problem should receive greater attention in our program. In our course on the Public Administration professional, we might devote some time and energy to making students aware of the problem and reflecting on what can be done about it. In a sense, the final project — if connected to a daily work practice — can be considered an exercise in transference to organizational behavior. A successful accomplishment makes a reflective practitioner.

An interesting question is whether the program and the university have a duty to fulfill anything in this respect after students have completed their study. And if so, how can this be done? Follow-up sessions after a year or so are one possible format.

RESULTS

Results of our educational strategy thus far are mixed. In general, students are fairly satisfied with the program. They often report that it helps them view their own work situations in new ways and, consequently, they act differently. Many students also report that the program influences their way of thinking and that it generates new questions. This is substantiated by student essays required in the framework of the program's final course. In this assignment, they are asked to return to their initial expectations and agendas, as formulated in an essay from the very first course, and to reflect on what they have learned since then.

On the other hand, we observe that graduates differ widely in their abilities to reflect, critically analyze, and theorize upon policy, administrative, and organizational issues.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we argued that an MPA program that seeks to combine academic education, practice-oriented professionalization, and reflectivity has much to gain from linking study and work practice. But, we also identified one pitfall — the practitioners' lack of distance from their day-to-day experiences. Therefore, we have concluded that a major investment in *de-linking* is necessary. Because students can be too close to the subjects they like to study, new, sensible connections have to be established between what is learned and elaborated on during coursework, and what part-time students practice and experience every day on their jobs.

So far, a number of instruments that we created and applied have enhanced the steps of de-linking and re-linking. We outlined how we expected those steps to work and how we experienced them. But this is only a set of first steps. We have much to learn from pedagogical literature and from the experiences of others who manage programs for practitioners. And, we now are in a position to (re)link these insights and experiences to our own day-to-day practices in the program. This is

one consequence of reformulating a pedagogical problem that is central to master's programs such as Public Administration.

We aim for students to have the experience that the great poet T.S. Eliot (1979) once phrased so wonderfully:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 E.g., the MPA program at the Copenhagen Business School, Denmark; the joint MPA program of the Karlstad University in Sweden and the Hedmark University College in Norway; the Executive MPA program conducted by the Kompetenzzentrum für Public Management of Bern University, Switzerland; the MSc program in Public Management at the University of Birmingham, and the MSc program on Leadership and Organization of Public Services (LOPS), in Bristol, both UK, as well as programs at Bocconi University (Milan, Italy), Limerick University (Ireland), Potsdam University (Germany) and other places.
- 2 These questions focus on the *supply* side. Of course, similar questions can be asked about the *demand* side, but those are beyond the scope of this contribution.
- 3 The analysis in this article starts from the supply side and searches for linking strategies to the demand side. In a later paper we will work the other way around.

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