

The Relevance of Regulation: Teaching Public Affairs Students in Applied Fields

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ABSTRACT

Teaching about public affairs can be difficult in applied programs of study. Undergraduate students in applied fields tend to have more utilitarian perspectives on higher education, valuing it for the accomplishment of specific career-related objectives. This can make teaching about government difficult because students may not see the immediate relevance of such study for their career paths. This article posits that instructors can frame undergraduate public affairs classes to emphasize the relevance of government and public affairs for students' careers. By taking a constructivist approach and focusing on government regulation as it pertains to students' majors and programs of study, instructors can transform students' career-related self-interest into a foundation for deeper learning about government, public affairs, and the challenges of modern governance.

KEYWORDS

Constructivism, regulation, undergraduate, general education

Both academics and practitioners have noted a crisis in the degree of public interest in civics and public affairs. This is an unfortunate reality that we as instructors of public affairs must contend with as we seek to educate our students.¹ Of course, this problem is not universal, and many of us have the good fortune of preaching to the converted, so to speak, as we teach undergraduate government majors or graduate students pursuing master's or doctoral degrees in related fields. Teaching such a select group of students allows us to delve into the latest developments in our fields and engage students in intricate debates about the nature of politics, public administration, and/or current events related to government and public affairs. But at some point in our careers, many of us have had to cope with lack of student interest and develop strategies to tackle the problem.

The problem of a lack of interest in civic and public life is not new and has been well documented. In 2000, Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, calling attention to a decline in civic engagement and discussing reasons for it and possible solutions. Putnam makes the case that factors such as suburbanization, economic pressures, and the availability of myriad entertainment options have led Americans to become less involved in civic institutions that have historically connected citizens and fostered strong social ties. Americans have increasingly become more isolated and compartmentalized into discrete social units, resulting in decreased quality of society's social capital. This loss of social capital—the social, political, and economic value resulting from social ties—is especially problematic for poor and working-class communities, as social capital can be critical for social and economic

progress (Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2002; Whiteley, 2000). Social capital is also important for the proper political functioning of the American democratic republic, because citizen participation is necessary for the formation and maintenance of a legitimate government responsive to public needs (Paxton, 2002).

Certainly, counterarguments and qualifications of Putnam's perspectives are also relevant. Some scholars qualify the notion that civic engagement has been on a steady decline, positing that the concept of civic engagement itself is complex, requiring a more nuanced discussion. Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 284) argue that the growing academic interest in civic engagement has led to "conceptual stretching," because the very term *civic engagement* has been applied to a growing set of phenomena, including "everything from voting in elections to giving money to charity, or from bowling in leagues to participating in political rallies and marches." Civic and political participation are multidimensional concepts and it is possible that some aspects of civic engagement are on the decline while others are not.

Other scholars posit that civic engagement has not declined but rather has changed in recent years; for instance, new forms of digital civic engagement may be increasing and should be recognized even as traditional forms may be decreasing (Carpini, 2000; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2007). Still others counter the generational explanation for a decline in civic engagement, noting that such declines seem to be driven by economic factors, especially increases in economic inequality, rather than changes in the lifestyle or values of modern generations (Clark, 2015). Taken together, these arguments show the need for a more precise discussion of declining civic engagement and interest in public affairs. Nevertheless, changes in engagement are relevant for us as professors, because their effects are often evident in the classroom and can make teaching more difficult.

Other related factors can also make teaching today's students in applied fields difficult. One

challenge relates to changing student and societal views regarding the purpose of higher education. Simply stated, there has been a shift in the public's understanding of the role and purpose of higher education, from a perspective that emphasized the intrinsic value of higher education toward one that increasingly sees education in light of the economic benefits it can bring to individuals and society. Some of this shift is positive, as improved access to higher education has indeed expanded economic opportunity for people across the socioeconomic strata. The passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (the GI Bill) in 1944, the Higher Education Act of 1965, and the expansion of community colleges at midcentury were just some of the twentieth-century governmental initiatives that reflected this shift, making higher education and its benefits accessible to a broader cross-section of the populace (Loss, 2012; Mettler, 2007; Vaughan, 2006).

While imparting the knowledge necessary for Americans to function successfully in the economy has long been an important aspect of the mission of higher education, the economic function has steadily intensified, now reaching a point where some note that it may be eclipsing college's traditional mission. This shift in the priorities of higher education, often referred to as the neoliberalization of higher education, has resulted in a substantial transformation in how colleges are funded, how they function, and how they are viewed by students and society. Critics of this shift note that colleges have changed from developing the intellectual, moral, and civic character of young people toward producing the human capital to supply the increasingly skilled labor needs of global businesses and corporations (Giroux, 2014; Holborow, 2012; Shultz, 2012). Higher education has increasingly moved toward programs in applied fields and professional education, leaving traditional academic fields in a precarious situation. This reductionist view of higher education's purpose fundamentally alters and undermines the civic and cultural significance of colleges and universities and sacrifices the intellectual, moral, and civic development of young people (Giroux, 2014).

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND RELEVANCE

Instructors who have considerable discretion regarding the content of their classes can take advantage of approaches to cope with, and perhaps even counter, this unfortunate dynamic. In this educational context, it is important to pinpoint key factors that act as barriers to teaching public affairs to students in applied fields who are seeking primarily vocational or technical careers. One major barrier may involve the difficulty of establishing a sense of topical relevance for this student population.

Establishing relevance in subject matter for learners is an important concept that education scholars have increasingly noted; it has become a central topic in the development of learning theory that guides instruction as well as new concepts and innovations in classroom practice (Patchen & Cox-Petersen, 2008; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Splitter, 2009). Central to this discussion is constructivist learning theory, a school of pedagogical thought that puts the concept of relevance at the center of student learning. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes the need for information to be relevant to students within their own contexts, to maximize student learning; and in this emphasis, constructivism differs from prior learning theories. For instance, behaviorism, the earliest school of thought in learning theory, emphasizes human learning as a set of behaviors; as such, learning can be best achieved by finding ways to alter individual behavior patterns or by changing the environment to change behavior patterns (Anderson, 2008, p. 6). Learning is considered a change in observable behavior under this model, caused by external stimuli in the environment (Skinner, 2011). While influential in its time, behaviorism gradually gave way to cognitivist theories of learning, which emphasize more internal aspects of learning such as memory, motivation, thinking, and reflection. Cognitivists emphasize that learning is an internal process rather than an external behavior and that one's ability to learn depends on the capacity of the learner, the intensity of effort exerted during the learning process, and the learner's prior knowledge (Ashman & Conway, 2002; Flannery, 1993; Mandler, 2002).

Constructivist learning theory, in turn, emphasizes learning as a process by which the individual builds new ideas based on prior knowledge and experience. Under constructivist models, learners interpret data according to their personal reality and this interpretation is the foundation of learning. The external world is observed, data are processed and interpreted, the individual forms his or her understanding of this data, and that becomes personal knowledge. Individuals learn best when new information is placed in the context of what they already know and is applied in a real-world setting, such that the new data acquire personal context and meaning for individuals (Anderson, 2008, p. 7). As such, constructivism offers a promising framework for addressing the challenges of teaching public affairs to students in applied fields. A constructivist approach to civics education can potentially transform the difficulties of teaching public affairs into strengths, as students tailor and transform the curriculum to benefit themselves and their understandings of their own fields while simultaneously developing knowledge about civics and public affairs.

The question is, how do we do this? How can we tailor instruction in public affairs such that students in applied fields can immediately see the relevance of public affairs for their future career paths?

THE RELEVANCE OF REGULATION

As students and scholars of public affairs, we are well aware of the significance and impact of American government on people's everyday lives; in fact, this is how fields like public administration generally see and study government, less in terms of theory and more in terms of practice, focusing on how governmental functioning actually affects society (Rosenbloom & McCurdy, 2006; Stillman, 1997; Waldo, 1948). And government's regulatory function is a primary way in which government affects society, influencing our lives and the economy through regulatory action to protect the general welfare while simultaneously considering the needs and concerns of industries that must comply with such regulation. Given

that students in applied fields are primarily focused on subject matter that is directly relevant for their career aspirations, it makes sense for public affairs instructors to teach in light of how governmental activity, in assorted ways, has an immediate impact on and significance for students' intended fields of employment.

While traditional topics such as the institutions of government and the concept of checks and balances are central to public affairs education, we can frame the teaching of such topics to be more relevant to our students' specific fields. At the outset of a semester, for instance, we can focus on how the American constitutional system arose in part out of a desire to create a legal framework that would encourage a strong national economy. As part of the Federalist and anti-Federalist debates, the founders recognized that the confederate form of government would not be sufficient to facilitate a robust national economy, as self-interested sovereign states could engage in protectionist activity that would undermine a national economy. A more robust national government with broader powers over commerce was needed to prevent such national economic infighting.

Students in applied fields might also be well served to learn about the development of Congress's commerce power over the 20th century. Beginning as a response to public calls for regulation of the industrial economy of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the U.S. regulatory state has since developed to encompass numerous regulatory bodies that exercise extensive powers over the national economy. Many regulatory agencies and laws created during this early period continue to affect our economy and industries today, making them relevant for students in applied fields. For instance, the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 affects modern-day business. Corporations planning for mergers to improve competitiveness and profitability must seek U.S. Justice Department approval and clearance by relevant regulatory agencies. Learning of this regulatory function may be of immediate value to students entering the technology or telecommunications industries. And this would give instructors an

opportunity to draw such students into a conversation about the role of government in the economy and the judgments made when balancing the right of private companies to pursue profit with the need to protect consumers from monopolies and resulting economic exploitation.

One concern about this approach is that students in applied fields may still find connections between the topics and their career concerns to be too distant. As a remedy, instructors might assign fluid and open-ended projects that allow or even require students to make specific connections at the outset of a semester, prompting students to see the relevance of governance and regulation for their fields. Computer science majors, for instance, in their rather focused programs of study, may not ordinarily learn about government and how it affects their industry. Nevertheless, developments in computer technology have had a great impact on society and the technology industry is an increasingly important area of governmental regulation and policy making. A public affairs class focused on establishing relevance with computer science majors would first seek to familiarize students with the historical link between government and the technology industry, emphasizing the effect of this relationship on technological advancements. Instructors could introduce students to the history of federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), explaining how DOD activities affected development of technology, especially after World War II. A host of technological innovations, such as personal computers, the Internet, and global positioning systems, originated in DOD-funded projects, and the agency continues to be a significant source of financial support for technology research (Blumenthal, 1998).

More recently, the technology industry has been involved in prominent public policy debates, such as those about net neutrality and national security. Net neutrality—the idea that telecommunication companies must treat all Internet data the same in terms of pricing and speed—has become a topic for public affairs as

the nation argues over how to balance the right of companies to function freely, on the one hand, with consumer protection and the preservation of competition and innovation, on the other. As regards questions of national security, many of America's top technology companies, such as Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and Apple, have found themselves in unexpected struggles with the federal government as they seek to protect customer privacy in light of government requests for access to user information (Perlroth, Larson, & Shane, 2013; Semitsu, 2011; Soghoian, 2010). And the controversy surrounding Edward Snowden's leaking of information about the National Security Agency's surveillance program revealed how the realms of technology and public policy can cross in unexpected ways. Familiarity with government and the Constitution is thus clearly potentially important and relevant for computer and technology professionals.

ENGAGING LEARNING PROCESSES

A properly crafted public affairs class for applied majors could also prove relevant for students by helping them develop the general education skills critical for success in modern organizational settings. While computer science students, for instance, will likely work in technically sophisticated positions, they will also work in human organizations and thus be required to utilize communication and critical thinking skills beyond the technological realm. One author reviewing the experimental use of a computer-science-oriented public policy class at MIT was "struck by the lack of student familiarity with how large institutions work and/or any kind of politics" (Blumenthal, 1998, p. 16). The author noted how one student, in a class evaluation, revealed his or her struggles in dealing with the complexities of public policy as they pertain to computer science; this student implored the instructor for "less ambiguity, please!" in the public policy coursework (Blumenthal, 1998, p. 16). Thus, there is an opportunity here to help students develop skills in communication, in engaging with others who have diverse perspectives, in civic learning, and in critical thinking (Adelman, Ewell, Gaston, & Schneider, 2011).

Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that undergraduate students are not developing these skills to a sufficient degree. In their 2011 book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Professors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa expose the growing crisis in the teaching and development of general education skills at American colleges. They found that during students' first two years of college, about half did not demonstrate any significant gains in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and other higher-level skills. After four years, about a third of students still did not demonstrate significant improvements in these areas. While the problem has multiple causes, there are steps we can immediately take to address the issue in our own classes. Many professors have considerable latitude in how we teach our classes and what skills and competencies we emphasize as we deliver instruction and assess student learning.

One way to creatively incorporate a strong general education component into public affairs classes, while making assignments engaging and more immediately relevant for students, is through building a prominent online component that emphasizes general education skills. The online world is replete with engaging examples of media reports on public affairs topics, which can introduce students to controversies in public policy while at the same time capturing students' attention. These media-based introductions can be further developed through research projects that allow students to learn the issues, and potential solutions, in greater depth. Assigning students to write a blog throughout the semester is one example. This type of assignment could gradually draw students into a public affairs research project while allowing them to exercise their communications skills, building in complexity and detail throughout the course. Blogging is a resilient form of communication on the Internet, making development of skills in this area both academically and practically valuable and relevant. Blogging is also a form of writing likely to be familiar and accessible to students, perhaps making a blog as an ongoing project more natural than other types of writing. Further, blogging is usually perceived

as an informal and low-stakes style of writing and, because it is done in a digital format, it is easily editable and correctable, potentially lessening student anxiety about writing. Students might then use their blogs as a foundation for more thorough research projects.

Related, vlogging—the video counterpart to blogging—is another digital online practice familiar to millennials and available via open-source and open-access tools. Vlogging supplements text and still images with video, making it a more complete communications medium for personal expression. And while vlogging is a visual form of communication, it also requires a certain amount of research, scripting, and processing of information in order to complete video production projects. As such, vlogging is another avenue for teaching students about public affairs topics subjects, perhaps serving as a Trojan horse of sorts: students who may not have an initial interest in public affairs topics might nevertheless be open to learning about the technological and stylistic aspects of vlogging.

THE VALUE OF SIMULATIONS FOR HIGHER-LEVEL LEARNING

While the general education skills of research, reading, and writing are important, we should also help students in applied fields develop higher-order learning skills such as critical thinking and an understanding of ethics and values systems. Silvia (2012) highlights the value of simulations in inspiring student learning, especially higher-level learning. According to Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning, higher-level skills include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Silvia (2012) notes that these skills are often not sufficiently developed through "the traditional pedagogical techniques of assigned readings, lectures, tests, and papers" because these techniques "often fail to replicate the real world" and "frequently do not require the students to integrate, synthesize, and apply the course material in realistic situations" (p. 400). In contrast, simulations, defined by Queen (1984, p. 144) as "concentrated learning exercises specifically designed to represent important real-life activities by providing the learners with the essence or

essential elements of the real situation without the hazards, costs or time constraints," give students the chance to develop higher-level skills, preparing them to function effectively in real-world organizations (see also Figueroa, 2014). Simulations also provide opportunities for students to develop skills that go beyond those in Bloom's taxonomy but are typically a focus in public affairs classes, including "increasing responsible citizenship, developing a continued interest in public affairs and policy, building the capacity to integrate the course materials to develop policy arguments, and fostering the ability to apply theoretical concepts to real-life situations" (Silvia, 2012, p. 400).

At first glance, classes about regulatory issues might not seem like natural fits for simulation assignments. The study of government regulation is inherently a technical endeavor, leaning toward development of analytical techniques such as cost-benefit analysis rather than the higher-level learning facilitated through engaging classroom simulations. But studies of the regulatory state can indeed offer a variety of opportunities to develop higher-level knowledge that could benefit students in applied fields. For instance, much of the development of public policy occurs within deliberative committee settings, giving instructors the opportunity to design simulation assignments that prompt students to research policy questions, outline potential impacts on specific industries, and then debate differing perspectives. Simulated legislative committee hearings can be constructed in the classroom, allowing students to play a variety of roles in the policy formation process and advocate for and/or against different policy positions. This would allow students to experience firsthand the complexities and competing values inherent in regulatory policy making. Participating in simulated committee hearings, in addition to writing more standard research papers, would supplement students' research and writing practice with the development of communication skills, including through using graphic presentations often used by stakeholders in such hearings.

Focusing on the theme of government regulation offers opportunities for learning that also go further. Additional learning arises because the act of regulation, though technical, is in fact a human enterprise, one characterized by vigorous interaction among interest groups and actors, thus requiring participants to be skillful in the arts of negotiation, compromise, and collaboration. Many private, public, and non-profit employers value these skills, making their development through regulatory simulations especially relevant for students in applied fields.

The government rulemaking process is another setting in which diverse public and private sector actors meet to discuss and promote perspectives on policies that will result in enforceable government regulation. Simulations of the rulemaking process, especially the federal negotiated rulemaking process, can help students learn collaboration and negotiation skills. Federal agencies began using negotiated rulemaking in the early 1980s, concerned that traditional rulemaking was excessively adversarial and did not sufficiently draw affected parties into the process (Carey, 2013). While negotiated rulemaking can become considerably complex, often characterized by many months and stages of multistakeholder meetings, the process can be simplified for pedagogical purposes. And even a simplified simulation can illustrate the complexities inherent in negotiating rules that seek to protect the general welfare while accounting for economic costs to companies and society. Such simulations let students role-play as various actors, whether as an interest-group representative, a public policy mediator charged with providing direction and focus for the group, an elected official favoring a particular course of policy action, or an agency administrator interested in creating a rule that she or he believes is in the public interest. Students can try out many roles in a simulation of the negotiated rulemaking process, helping students in diverse applied fields see the regulatory issues that affect their industries from a variety of perspectives, challenging them to broaden their views on complex issues in their chosen fields.

The regulatory process also lends itself to assignments that go beyond simulations. Due to public participation requirements of the regulatory process, well-crafted assignments can prompt students to become real and active participants in that process as it relates to their industries. Agencies seeking to promulgate new rules must provide a time period for public participation. Public participation can consist of allowing comments on proposed regulations through public hearings or written submissions. As part of this process, the regulating agency is required to consider and respond to all well-written comments submitted during the allotted period. Thus, while logistics may limit students' ability to attend public hearings, assignments that use the notice and comment process would enable students to participate through submitting well-researched and -written letters to regulatory agencies. Such assignments would allow students to exercise their research and writing skills while giving them firsthand experience with an important but often overlooked process of our democratic system.

IMPLEMENTING INSTRUCTION

This approach can be used in a variety of public affairs classes, depending on student and instructor needs. For instance, an introductory course in American government can highlight the relevance of the regulatory state in the latter part of the semester, after discussing the context of American government and politics and familiarizing students with the institutions of government. A more advanced course in public policy and administration might present the relevance of the regulatory state more uniformly throughout the semester, presupposing student knowledge about the basic institutions of government and allowing instructors to shape the class and semester around regulatory issues applicable to students' career fields. A class emphasizing issues related to public participation and civic engagement could address regulatory issues affecting students' chosen careers, stressing the importance of participating in the policy process to help ensure well-considered and durable regulations.

In short, this approach of incorporating the regulatory process in teaching public affairs is

flexible and appropriate in a variety of classroom settings. This constructivist approach, because it emphasizes using relevant subject matter and engaging learning processes, is also likely to promote fuller absorption of the material, giving public affairs instructors a unique opportunity to effectively teach and connect with that cross-section of the student population geared toward applied fields.

Although we can incorporate this approach to public affairs instruction in various ways, a semester-long assignment is a good avenue for exposing students to the political and policy-making activity relevant to their specific industries. Such a semester-long project could begin by asking students to identify their professional association(s)—the organizations that represent specific industries and seek to have industry perspectives reflected in government policy. This simple introductory assignment would immediately connect the class subject matter to students' majors and career interests, helping quickly establish the topical. Instructors could then build on this initial assignment by requiring students to research contemporary legislation or policies that affect their industries and that their professional association(s) are addressing. This would draw students further into considering the public affairs subject matter and reinforce the relevance of governmental activity for their industries.

Additionally, by prompting students to begin looking at policy issues analytically, taking into account the perspectives of their professional associations as well as competing interests, this project would engage students in the analytical form of learning reflected in Bloom's taxonomy. The culminating portion of the semester-long project could press further, prompting students to go beyond analytical thinking to assess the value systems underlying the debates surrounding their chosen public policy issues. Weighing the perspectives and interests of multiple stakeholders would also help students develop a sense of knowledge about and appreciation for civic activity and the workings of public affairs. This last is essential to what we seek to teach in the classroom as well as to the

general education learning outcomes deemed so important today (Adelman et al., 2011; Hart Research Associates, 2016; Schneider, 2015).

CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSION

As we seek innovative ways to teach government to students in applied fields, it is important to acknowledge the possible unique challenges of doing so. We should try to empathize with our students, as they face a job market characterized by intense global, and not just local, competition. Today's jobs require increasingly sophisticated technical skills, and students must enroll in college to gain access to well-paying jobs of almost any sort. Continuously rising tuition costs have understandably pushed students to focus on maximizing the immediate economic value of their college education, leaving them less room to explore topics such as government and public affairs. Even so, there are ways to reach such students and make seemingly extraneous subject matter relevant to them. With a bit of creativity and flexibility, we can teach such students about public affairs in a way that captures their attention and more directly connects with their career goals.

We can begin by grounding learning about public affairs in career-based self-interest, to avoid the criticism that such instruction has little relevance for students in applied fields. And focusing on the government's regulatory powers, which are so central to our modern economy, provides an avenue to achieve this. But in implementing this approach to civics education, we should nevertheless remind ourselves not to limit the understanding of public affairs only to students' most immediate career interests. Focusing on career relevance may prove useful for inspiring student learning, but we should not see this approach as an end in itself. Rather, it is a pathway for student learning about broader issues of public affairs. As students study and learn about how government regulatory activity affects their lives and career fields, they will also, in the process, inevitably learn about society's competing economic interests and government's struggles to craft regulations that further the public good (Sunstein, 2014).

Thus, a nursing student who may have been interested in only learning her discrete craft may come to learn how nursing is integral to the greater health care system, a complex system that the government struggles to regulate so that all Americans can have access to high-quality health care. Architecture students interested in only learning the art and science of their field in order to secure a professional position may come to appreciate the historical reasons for local building codes, developing an appreciation for the challenges of architectural design in modern cities. There are countless such examples, but the point is that public affairs instructors have real options and opportunities when teaching students in applied fields. When properly woven into public affairs education, a student-centered approach can be a powerful motivator for student learning and an alternative pathway for teaching students in applied fields about the importance and relevance of government, civics, and public affairs.

NOTE

- 1 This article uses the term *public affairs* generically to refer to the broad array of government-related classes typically taught at American colleges and universities.

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