

Learning Design, the Missing Piece of the MPP Curriculum

Michael O'Hare, Prof. of Public Policy*

ohare@berkeley.edu +1 510 642 7576

Melanie Schoeppe, MPP candidate

Goldman School of Public Policy

University of California, Berkeley

A key step in the canonical “eight-fold path” recipe for policy analysis is labeled (for example, by Bardach) “Alternatives”. The rest of the analysis generates descriptions of the futures that would follow each alternative under consideration, estimating their scores according to appropriate criteria with an eye to choosing the best one. At the implementation level, public managers choose actions from alternatives in a similar (though usually less explicit and analytic way). But where do these alternatives and managerial options come from?

Many “ideas in good currency” are already present in a policy debate. However, an operational policy always needs some degree of customization from tweaking to major creative effort. Making alternative policies that cannot be found in inventory requires a distinct competence, central to a variety of enterprises like architecture, engineering, and art, called *design*. In architecture, the discipline/craft of making physical environments, learning to design occupies about three-quarters of graduate training. In public policy, it is generally invisible or accidental. We emphasize that learning to design is distinct from learning to criticize or appreciate design, as different as composition from music criticism.

Design is learned through a well-developed “Theory C” routine in which students design responses to an incompletely specified opportunity, in a procedure with named stages (concept design, *parti*, design development, working drawings) with expert questioning (desk crits) along the way and comparison of student designs in presentation and discussion. There is no other method known by which to acquire this competence.

The Program and Policy Design studio at the Goldman School of Public Policy creates an environment that empowers students so that they engage in the design process in order to learn how to design, and to design. They tackle current issues with real users and constraints, and unknown answers. Their tools become their imagination, community of learners, and research results that can be the solution to problems they have rather than, as is too often the case in the rest of the curriculum, more problems they don't want. This process of creation hinges on teacher-student trust. Trust from the students that this is a continuous process where success is dependent on growth. Trust from the teacher, that facilitating a class within a process, and not towards a right answer and defined knowledge set, will not detract from the teacher's value, impact, or prestige.

Leadership in a studio is provided from behind the troops and among them, not ahead as it's impossible to tell someone else *what* to design. Consequently, students are in a process empowered to engage in continual learning (essential to a growth mindset)

rather than stuck searching for a right answer that's being withheld from them. This is professionally relevant, as there are few employment opportunities for someone skilled at being in a room with someone who knows the truth.

The studio illuminates how society will evaluate and use each design, through students judging and evaluating each other's projects and working collaboratively (several of the projects are group assignments). A large fraction of the course grade is assigned by students on the criterion "X's contribution to my learning in this course".

Translating the traditional studio process to policy design requires, of course, a fair amount of design. Some elements of a conventional studio are difficult to replicate in an environment where products are typically notated in prose and equations rather than drawings and models, especially the informal help and criticism students tend to give each other when drawings and models are out on each student's drawing board. Another challenge is the awkward fit between the social science culture of argument to prove a point (for example, that a given design is optimal for the assignment) or test a proposition and the culture of exchange and adaptation typical of the design fields (there is no copyright in architecture and no real concept of plagiarism). Many of the students' highly developed skills, like finding an exception to refute a generalization, have little utility in the studio context.

*to whom correspondence should be directed