

# An Opening for a Policy Analysis course at a European MPP

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## **Abstract**

Introducing a typical MPP class to professional Policy Analysis is challenging, and especially so in Europe. This paper describes a workshop-style module on writing policy memos designed as an introduction to professional policy analysis. It is styled as a way of bridging Michael O'Hare's Theory T and Theory C pedagogies for the introductory course. The class begins with a review of concepts – what public policy is, and its difference to popular terms such as 'governance'. The class also discusses expectations from the job description of a 'Policy Analyst'. The workshop then turns to look at an actual memo, to which we return throughout the session with regards to various elements of memos. Two different structures are introduced. Elements such as problem definition, causal stories and common policy criteria are discussed at length. For manifestly illustrating these elements, the class undertakes exercises on the spot. We then consider the pros and cons of two divergent approaches to background investigation and analysis. The workshop concludes with pointers on the skill of concise writing, with emphasis on rhetoric, framing and forensics.

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Introducing a typical MPP class to professional Policy Analysis is challenging, and especially so in Europe. A majority of the class generally seems to have arrived at it to buy time after a bachelor's in economics. That majority generally have little or no background understanding of law, public administration or politics. Conversely, those that come from political science or one of the other disciplines may not appreciate policy as the primary *raison d'être* of the discipline of economics.

To compound the problem, terms such as 'institutions' and 'governance' are fashionably pervasive in any European discourse. They are thrown around classrooms and seminars with carefree abandon to stand for a variety of species. That has advantages, including making students from various disciplines feel at home. Often though, speaker and audience alike appear to revel in the lack of substantive concrete meaning. The popularity of those catch-all does not help set apart 'public policy' as a distinct species.

This paper describes a workshop-style module on writing policy memos designed as a day-one introduction to professional policy analysis, such that students appreciate the contribution of the various disciplinary threads to the final product of such analyses before they go on to learn numerous assessment tools and methods. The class begins with a review of concepts – what public policy is, in abstract and material terms, and what it is not. The class also discusses expectations from the job description of a 'Policy Analyst'. The hands-on part of the workshop looks at an actual memo, to introduce structures and elements of memos. For manifestly illustrating some of the key elements, the class undertakes exercises on the spot. We then consider the pros and cons of common analytical approaches and conclude with pointers on the skill of concise writing.

Here I make the case for introducing said workshop-cum-lecture as a way of bridging the two pedagogical approaches that O'Hare (2006) lays out for policy analysis classrooms. He calls

them Theory T (for “telling”) and Theory C (for “coaching”). The primary difference he lays out between the two is that between the common and familiar Socratic lecture format and most practical training – O’Hare shares the example of piano lessons. While I too like to bring the hands-on activity of Theory C early in a Policy Analysis course, I prefer to start at Theory T and gradually weave in a Theory C approach, more so given the diverse nature of my class. I welcome the idea of a Latvian fresh graduate consulting a Chilean ex-Policy Analyst classmate as to the best metric to cite in support of a proposal for education policy, but not before they have put their heads together to ponder over the much more abstract question of what constitutes policy. Theory T in this course is not so much merely ‘telling’ what public policy is and what it is not, but exploring together the difficulty of agreeing on what it is and the underlying reasons.

### **Policy and Governance**

The trouble here is that because most students are comfortable with terms such as ‘institutions’, they try to map the new terms they encounter in an MPP in reference to that frame. Most assume that both ‘governance’ and ‘policy’ are some level of subsets of the overarching term and thus reassured, spare their minds any further bother. So how do you set them apart? It helps to start with the terms they know, and with assessing what they understand by them. To every student in Europe, background notwithstanding, institutions are ‘rules of the game’ (North 1990). That much is clear. The term ‘governance’, on the other hand, has no such crisp definition and hence the trickier one to set apart from ‘policy’. I have tried to capitalize on the trend of distinguishing things as horizontal or vertical. Governance is horizontal, I tell them, whereas policy is vertical. Roomful of nonplussed eyes, some rolling over. Governance is a collective term for aspects that cut across all sectors within the governmental structure. Qualities that characterise the bureaucracy in utilities are likely to be the same in forestry. When you say, “politicians in Dystopia are corrupt”, you are making a

comment on the quality of governance in Dystopia, broadly and generally. It is the state of affairs, it is how things work there. It is an idea close to ‘institutions’. It is also somewhat static.

Policy is dynamic, as it is specific. The current policy in the utility sector will rarely have anything to do with the policy in the forestry sector. In some related or comparable sectors, policies may stem from the same or similar policy principles, and could surely interact, but the content will vary just as much the context obviously will. To hammer home that difference in another way, my colleague at UNU, Luciana Cingolani, likens governance to shape and policy to content. I prefer to formulate the divide as that of form and function.

To merge the two metaphors, we may imagine governance as a set of strainers or sieves held horizontally in space. Holes on the sieve represent various sectors. All holes are the same shape and that shape outlines constraints. Policies are solutions that trickle through the sieves, decided from the top, and delivered to the bottom. Policies may themselves have structural elements – the shape of the particles of whatever is flowing, or they may not - ‘ideal’ fluids that pass through holes of any shape without effect.

### **Favoured Definition**

What is public policy then? A succinct definition that encompasses the key elements of the concept that I want my future policy analysts to remember is: ***Public policy is a government’s chosen solution to an identified problem.***

That concise definition sets out the following:

- Policies are solutions.
- Problems have to be identified first. Until and unless it is appreciated as such, it is not a problem.

- The solutions need to be chosen from amongst many.
- Solutions match problems one-to-one, as an initiating simplification.

Of course, students soon make you realise that the above characterisations draw to an extent from one's assumptions as to a form of government. The static-dynamic dichotomy, for instance, assumes a British-style parliamentary system, where over years as governments are voted in and then out, the bureaucracy stays put. Policies change with every passing government, but the deeply ingrained qualities of the bureaucracy stand as if timeless, largely because the set of people serving there themselves are fixed to their job titles and departments.

## **What is Public Policy?**

Public policy is a government's chosen solution to an identified problem.

Now, a student from Belgium or Bulgaria can be excused for not immediately grasping the metaphors above and hence the concept at stake. Ministers in these countries carry with them a coterie of officers that are also considered 'bureaucrats'. Every time the country goes to polls and new ministers are sworn in, ministries empty of workers and a new stock of civil servants takes over. In fact, the country that we often use for reference for cases, the United States, also has an ever strengthening tradition of political appointments. In such a set-up it is arguably more difficult to make the distinction. We then arrive to the understanding that the term governance encompasses more than just the bureaucracy. There are other architectural elements ranging from the more absolute kind such as those enshrined in the constitution, to cultural elements that pervade the society beyond government itself.

As we have noted before, policies themselves may have structural implications – setting up a new agency or a particular manner of reporting or enforcement, for instance – whether by design or necessity. It is important to be wise to the distinction, to be able to discern what that part is in any proposal on the table, as opposed to the essential ‘solution’ part.

### **The Bridge**

Having sorted out the conceptual space, we are ready to cross the bridge from the Theory T to Theory C pedagogy. The class discusses expectations from the job description of a ‘Policy Analyst’. In particular, students are asked to reflect on the following quote from a JPAM review of Policy Analysis texts by Mendeloff (1998):

*The policy analyst is a producer of policy arguments, more similar to a lawyer — a specialist in legal arguments — than to an engineer or a scientist. His basic skills are not algorithmic but argumentative: the ability to probe assumptions critically, to produce and evaluate evidence, to keep many threads in hand, to draw for an argument from many disparate sources, to communicate effectively. He recognizes that to say anything of importance in public policy requires value judgments, which must be explained and justified, and is willing to apply his skills to any topic relevant to public discussion.*

The discussion often gets heated around contentious points such as the worth of a policy analyst working with the “civil society”, the ignominy of accepting a jack-of-all-trades job description and inevitably, the role of politics. The last of those is not helped by the much-mentioned fact that in most European languages the same word connotes both ‘politics’ and ‘policy’ (Saretzki 2007). Most of the students in Europe are not thinking of joining the government in that job description, mostly because here by and large they are unheard of. These students are mostly interested in international organisations and hence take a while to reconcile their vision with the above quote.

The workshop then turns to look at an actual policy memo, to which we return throughout the session with regards to various elements of memos. The sample in focus is an actual student assignment submitted at Harvard. Two different structures are introduced, with a discussion of pros and cons. One structure states the recommendation upfront and proceeds to arguments for and against, with rebuttals for the latter. The other follows the more classical Bardach (2008) order: it begins with a problem definition, enumerates criteria relevant to the context, lists alternatives and compares each based on the criteria, concluding with a hint of a nod at the best alternative. Again, though, given the specific orientation of European students, we leave the Harvard student's memo, to inspect samples of the sort of policy briefs regularly churned out of UN and other international and inter-governmental organisations. A particularly popular one among these is one recently authored by the actor George Clooney (2010).

We spend considerable time on the first element—problem definition. The class chooses one from the brief cases from university life and tries to arrive at a problem statement. As students come up with their formulations, each statement of the problem is projected onscreen in real time (see Annex I). By the 10<sup>th</sup> statements or thereabouts, the following points begin to stand out:

- (a) that problem definition varies greatly by actors, and
- (b) that framing a problem a certain way limits the set of potential solutions in a most illuminating manner.

Very early in the ensuing discussion, students realise the implications of beginning the statement with “The university does not...” vs. “Students cannot...” or “There is a lack of...”. In group 90 strong, someone invariably comes up with a variation to the effect of “There is no problem”, which, as all teachers of policy know, is an all-important insight.

The session also stresses the fact that precisely because of the issue of actor-dependent definition, the narratives in the case try to remain as neutral as possible. They stick to description and refrain from prescription. They try not to lead the reader, so that in class we see a variation in the perception and framing of the problem. Yet, no matter how hard one tries, it is very difficult to avoid suggesting a frame in any description. All language erects and evokes frames and sub-conscious thoughts respond to the frames. For more on that, students are led to George Lakoff (2004).

We then consider the pros and cons of two divergent approaches to background investigation and analysis. I distinguish them as the Holmes/Poirot difference in methods. Holmes uses his deep knowledge of crimes committed in the past to seek out patterns in the evidence from new ones<sup>1</sup>. Holmes, the policy analyst, pours over past reports, statistics and indices. Poirot speaks to “stakeholders” and applies his own reasoning, afresh to each new case. The approaches are not mutually exclusive, of course. In occasional exceptions, after all, the celebrated detectives did swap methods.

The workshop concludes with pointers on the skill of concise writing, with emphasis on rhetoric, framing and forensics. While a main part of the skill of memo-writing is analytical, that is still a ‘back-end’ skill, to borrow parlance from information technology. The final product is a written document and the results of the analysis have to be presented to an audience that is likely to know the context better than the analyst, but unlikely to be as well-versed in analytical techniques. Most writers rely on the universal art of story-telling to accomplish that job. In class, we review Deborah’s Stone’s (1989) ideas on the use of causal stories, besides some advice from the best in the business, a coach of award-winning Hollywood screenwriters speaking to the Harvard Business Review (McKee 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> In *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes remarks, “There is a strong family resemblance about misdeeds, and if you have all the details of a thousand at your finger ends, it is odd if you can't unravel the thousand and first.”

The purpose of all these Hollywood references in the classroom is, of course, singular. The hope is to promote the quintessentially American understanding and teaching of policy analysis on this continent and better orient students of public policy merely as a discipline to a view of policy analysis as a profession.

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## Annex I: A Brief Case and Sample Problem Statements Generated in Class

Lars joined a graduate school not so long ago. Near the end of the academic year, murmurs of the word 'thesis' were all around him. He realized he was lagging in the game. Despite having met a number of teachers, he did not manage to find a supervisor; most of them remained non-committal. Soon, Lars completed all taught courses and went on to join a job with a local government back in his country. About an year later, Aamir, a first year PhD fellow, gets an email with a plea to help Lars in a supervisory capacity for a thesis he has "almost" finished writing.

Frisca<sup>2</sup>: There is a lack of communication between students and staff.

Inge: The university does not help students find a supervisor.

Chloe: Students are entering the labour market without proper qualifications.

Andjeny: Students have difficulty writing interesting proposals.

Kumba: An adequate number of teachers is not available.

Ewa: One cannot supervise a finished thesis.

Douwe: Lars has not finished his thesis.

Neo: Teachers are not motivated enough.

Silvia: Students do not have enough time for thesis writing.

Joris: A student could write a thesis without supervision.

Angie: Education stakeholders are failing to meet their goals.

Jeff: The quality of students is questionable.

Jari: Thesis regulations are not good enough.

Jacinta: The university does not provide adequate support for thesis writing.

Shalton: There is no problem.

Jesse: Lars is an idiot.

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<sup>2</sup> Names changed.