

Using Pragmatism to Bridge the Gap Between Academe and Practice

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Presented at the 2006 Conference of the American Society for Public Administration,
Denver, Colorado, April 1-4

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The marriage of theory and practice is endlessly fertile. (James, 1907, 210)

Introduction

In a 2003 *Public Administration Review* article, Michael Bolton and Gregory Stolcis (2003, 627) ask why practitioners find academic research so nearly irrelevant. They are dismayed by the lack of congruence between practitioner needs and academic research. Their analysis points to several causes. For example, the scientific method rewarded in academia often fails to fit real world problems. Practitioners are also more comfortable with knowledge derived from experiential sources such as case studies and common sense. The scholars focus on developing theoretical versus practical knowledge was also criticized.

The divide is also manifest from the academic side. For example, renowned scholars like Ken Meier (2005,654) believe “many of the concerns of practitioners are just not very interesting.”¹ Hugh Miller (2005, 372) is impatient with practitioner’s

¹ It should be noted that much of the Meier (2005) article was tongue in cheek and this may not be his view.

questions and does not want to perform a “teaching service” because he is addressing his remarks to the scholarly guild.²

This divide is also apparent in related fields such as business administration. Warren Bennis and James O’Toole (2005, 2-3) maintain that business schools have lost their way because they have adopted a physics or economics model of science and have ignored the real world of business. Faculty are rewarded for publication in journals that use sophisticated quantitative techniques that provide “little insight into complex social and human factors and minimal time in the field discovering the actual problems facing managers.” They suggest that business schools adopt a model closer to medical school where practicing doctors teach and do research.

This paper is to first, describe the nature of the academe/practitioner divide. Second, the practitioner friendly philosophy, classical pragmatism is introduced as a way of addressing the divide. Classical pragmatism treats theory and methods of research as tools of practice. Third, the Texas State MPA Program successfully applies classical pragmatism and the “theory as tool of practice” in their capstone research projects. In so doing student/practitioner skills are strengthened and a practitioner friendly academic research (process and product) results.

Academic/Practitioner Divide

² Ironically, Miller (2005) was chiding our own Greg Stolcis (2004).

Jos Raadschelders (2005) developed a four-part typology of public administration knowledge that is helpful in explaining why the scholarship of academe is often of little use to practitioners (1 – scientific knowledge; 2 – practical experience; 3 – practical wisdom and; 4 – relative existence). Raadschelders (2005) four types of knowledge are suggestive of the complexity of the divide and how it can manifest itself in different ways. Practical experience and practical wisdom are associated most closely with practitioners while scientific knowledge and relative existence (post modern) are primarily the domain of academics.³ If practitioners and academics find themselves operating within different knowledge spheres it is perhaps not surprising that they question the relevance of each other. The knowledge of PA is multidisciplinary and draws upon a broad array of theories and approaches found there. Raadschelders (2005) suggests that these forms of knowledge are compartmentalized and we need meta-theories that can unite them. As we shall see, the classical pragmatism of Dewey and James is a good candidate to dispel this compartmentalization.

Aimee Franklin and Carol Ebdon (2005) introduce the Wheel of Practice as a device to explore how practitioners view the world. The phases in the Wheel of Practice begin “when the practitioner identifies a need for a change and has a vague *idea* that innovation is necessary to guide them in this change” (Franklin & Ebdon, 2005, 635). From there the practitioner “attempts to identify *best practices* based on the experience of others” (Franklin & Ebdon, 635). Third, the practitioner *adopts* the practice and finally,

³ While both of these approaches are in academia, this is also a source of conflict.

“after implementation, the changes lead to certain *consequences*” and *adaptation* in light of the consequences (Franklin & Ebdon, 636) (italics added).

Franklin and Ebdon (2005) draw distinction between the empirical worlds of science and practice. The two approach the external world from different directions. The scientist/logical positivist use rigorous tests of verification. Practitioners live in a world of variety and exception and are satisfied with “information on best practice” (Franklin & Ebdon 2005, 637). They are willing to justify their “course of action through the use of outside information deemed to have high credibility because it works; or ‘experts’ have said so” (Franklin & Ebdon 2005,637). Franklin & Ebdon (2005, 646) conclude that public administration needs to “strengthen the connection between the Wheel of Science and the Wheel of Practice.”⁴

Franklin & Ebdon (2005) do not discuss where theory fits into the wheel. Can the connection between science and practice be strengthened through theory? The classical pragmatism of Dewey and James include a role for theory and that as we shall see strengthens the “connection between the Wheel of Science and the Wheel of Practice” (Franklin & Ebdon 2005, 646).

The debate over the role of science and practice is also manifest as a debate over the methods used. Scientific knowledge is associated with quantitative techniques like regression or formal modeling, while practical wisdom is associated with qualitative

⁴ We will see that the Wheel of Practice advocated by F&E has many similarities to Dewey’s “community of inquiry” principles. Unlike F&E’s Wheel of Practice that does not have an explicit role for theory or theorizing, classical pragmatism treats theory as a tool of practice.

methods such as case studies (Bolton & Stolcis 2003). The reward system in academia favors sophisticated quantitative methods. For example, Bennis and O'Toole (2005) are concerned about tenure and promotion decisions linked to publishing in highly quantitative journals.

In "The Iron Cage of Methodology," Daniel Lowery and Karen Evans (2004, 307) carefully examine the connection between empirical truth claims, theory and method in public administration. They build a model that link quantitative techniques to positivism and theories like behavioralism, economic theory and engineering. Qualitative techniques, on the other hand, are associated with interpretivist/constructivist paradigms and theories such as critical theory, decision theory, political theory, pragmatism and legal theory. Lowery and Evans (2004) clearly show how the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of public administration calls for both quantitative and qualitative methods. They believe that public administration is weighted toward quantitative methods and the methodological training of Ph. D. and MPA students contributes to this emphasis. They maintain that a broader array of methodological approaches that include a wider inventory of qualitative techniques have the potential to strengthen both the field of study and the practice of public administration. This in turn should enhance the relationship between public administrators and citizens.

This paper is designed to show how the approach to applied research used by the Texas State University MPA Program addresses the academic/practitioner divide

by employing the classical pragmatism of Dewey, James, Peirce and Addams in their capstone projects. Dichotomies like theory/practice, quantitative/qualitative and science/practical experience are bridged and brought to bear on public administration issues.

Classical Pragmatism⁵

Classical "Pragmatism is the philosophy of common sense. It uses purposeful human inquiry as a focal point. Inquiry is viewed as a continuing process that acknowledges the qualitative nature of human experience as problematic situations emerge and are recognized. Recognition involves the doubt associated with questioning existing belief systems. Doubt is resolved through critical reasoning and ultimately tested in action. It is the philosophy of common sense because actions are assessed in light of practical consequences. Finally, inquiry is not necessarily limited to individual effort rather it often incorporates a "community of inquirers." (Shields, 1998) In other words, the problem, evidence and resolution are all subject to input from the community affected by the problematic situation.⁶

The above definition is very close to the framework Franklin and Ebdon (2005, 636) (Wheel of Practice) use to explain the dynamics of practical *experience* as a mode of knowledge in public administration. In the first stage of the Wheel of Practice Franklin

⁵ For more information on pragmatism and public administration see Brom and Shields, 2006; Evans 2000; Evans 2005; Hildebrand 2005; Shields 1996; Shields 1998; Shields 2003; Shields 2004; Shields 2005; Snider 2000; Snider 2005; Stolcis 2004; Webb 2004.

⁶ Also, problematic situations are not limited to practical concerns but can include the creation of abstract knowledge.

and Ebdon discuss the practitioner's sense of a "vague idea" for a need to a change that motivates a search for "best practice based on the experience of others." The definition of pragmatism actually refines the meaning of this "vague idea." Pragmatism "acknowledges the qualitative nature of human *experience* as problematic situations emerge and are recognized" (seems pretty close to that vague idea). Franklin and Ebdon's "vague idea" also probably emerges when practitioners notice their "doubt" that things that are need to change. The search for best practice is the way the "doubt is resolved." The best practices are similar to working hypotheses (it is the practitioners working hypothesis that the best practice should be tried - and subsequently tested in action!).

Hopefully, the search for best practices incorporates some "critical reasoning" found in the definition of pragmatism. According to Franklin and Ebdon (2005) the practitioner "adopts the practice." Or, from the pragmatic definition potential solutions are "tested in action." After implementation, practitioners assess the *consequences* of adapting the best practice. Classical pragmatism assesses action in "light of practical *consequences*." I would argue that the Wheel of Practice is a restatement of the definition of classical pragmatism within the context of public administration (minus a few important elements like the community of inquiry).

For purposes of this discussion, classical pragmatism has a way of viewing theory that helps bridge the divides such as theory/practice and science/practice. For

the classical pragmatist, theory is a tool of practice. James and Dewey illustrate this point in many of their works.

Theory as Tool

In *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey (1938) demonstrates how the pragmatic view of science contrasts with the ancient Greek tradition. “The Greeks used *theoras*, *praxis* and *poiesis* to classify ways of knowing. “Theoras (or theory) is derived from the Greek word for god. Theory dealt with the divine and the ‘fixed essence’ of nature” (Shields 1998). The foundational notions of knowledge are derived from this tradition. For Plato, “aesthetic contemplation precluded or rendered inferior any serious interest in instrumentation” (Hickman 1990, 83). Praxis (or practice) dealt with the “concrete performance of some activity based on the deliberate choice of a free citizen” (Hickman 1990, 107). Poiesis (or product) is associated with productive activities.

The hierarchy of Greek social organizations reflected these ‘ways of knowing’ (Hickman, 1990, 109). The philosopher engaged in contemplation, the artisan (sculptor, ship designer), engaged in making, the craftsman (carpenter, shipbuilder) handled the society’s production of goods and services. This philosophic formulation, reinforced by a social structure, created a “division between practice and theory, experience and reason” (Dewey 1938, 73). As a result scientific discovery was not valued in Greek society.

Dewey argued that in the actual productive activities of 20th century science, the classical Greek hierarchy was inverted. For modern science, “theory became a tool of

practice and practice a means to the production of new effects. Theory no longer had to deal with final certainty but instead as working hypotheses with the tentative and the unsolved" (Hickman 1990, 99). Theory helped resolve the problematic situations in practice and production - scientific progress occurred in the interaction between practice and production. Theory became a tool that mediated scientific progress (Shields, 1998)

Hotel Corridor

The theory practice debate can be examined using the hotel corridor metaphor introduced by William James (1907, 54). Theories are found within rooms that are connected by a corridor. All the rooms open out to it and all the rooms can be entered. Those with a problematic situation own the corridor and the right to move freely from room to room. The theories inside the rooms are judged by their usefulness in addressing the problem. For example, considered a patient with back pain (problematic situation). He or she is in the corridor with the problem. The hotel rooms may correspond to chiropractic, orthopedic, or acupuncture fields of study. Each room contains very different paradigms to explain the source of pain. There are also different ways to diagnose (interact with empirical world) and treat (hypotheses and test hypotheses) the pain. The person with the back problem knows when relief occurs. The ultimate test of the value of the treatment is the relief of pain (consequences).⁷

⁷ Of course consequences are not as one-dimensional as this example suggests. There may be differences in cost and time among the treatment approaches. There will also be differences in the ability of the patient to understand and

The multidisciplinary nature of public administration is consistent with the hotel corridor metaphor. The tools of theory and methods found in the rooms should enable practicing public administrators to address problematic situations. Even within the hotel room there may be an array of tools and different ways to approach the problem at hand.

Using pragmatic logic, one would not expect a unifying PA theory. Rather, PA is organized around the principle that theories are useful and should be judged by their usefulness in solving problems. The theories of political science, psychology, sociology, economics, and so forth are in the rooms. "Unity is achieved because the pragmatic administrator owns the corridor, walking from room to room using the theories that address ongoing problems. Ownership of the corridor joins theory and practice." (Shields 1996, 399). The corridor is the connecting framework that can dispel the compartmentalization of PA knowledge discussed by Raadschelders (2005).

Perhaps Bolton & Stolcis (2003) are saying that the choice of hotel rooms is too limited, or the tools in the hotel rooms are difficult to understand and apply. The approach to research methods at the Texas State MPA Program creates an additional hotel room where MPA students can craft their own tools or learn how to better use and choose the tools in the other rooms.

Theory as Map

relate to the approach. For some problems, there may be agreement that one of the rooms has the best approach (broken back). Nevertheless, the patient knows if the pain is reduced and can experience healing.

Dewey often used the metaphor of a map to explain theory. Like maps, theories are tools. They represent a reality that help one resolve problems. They allow us to navigate the experiential world. Like maps, theory in empirical inquiry must have a directive function (Dewey 1938, 402). Mapmakers take a three-dimensional world and translate it to a two dimensional map. In the process, they distort and make choices that account for the interests of the user but given an overall purpose/problem this translation-distortion facilitates navigation. All maps have distortions. And, maps have practical use in resolving how to travel from one point to another. (Shields 2005) In addition, like most tools, maps are tangible. One can see and touch a map. It is also possible to build or construct crude maps when faced with a problematic situation. Good maps also allow the searcher to see both the big and little picture simultaneously.

Work Smarter

William James has a practical justification for theory, People who use theory work smart because it takes “far less mental effort” to understand the complexity of the world. Theory is a “labor saving contrivance” – a tool that helps us make sense of the world.

The facts of the world in their sensible diversity are always before us, but our theoretic need is that they should be conceived in a way that reduces their manifoldness to simplicity. Our pleasure at finding that a chaos of facts is the expression of a single underlying fact is like the relief of the musician at resolving a confused mass of sound into melodic or harmonic order. The simplified result is handled with *far less mental effort* than the original data. And a philosophic conception of nature is thus in no metaphorical sense *a labor-saving contrivance*. (James 1959, p. 4) (Italics added).

Using this conceptualization, one can see the value of theory and theorizing (reducing the manifold to simplicity) for everyday life. Practitioners may be able to use the tool (theory) or may be able to build the tool (theorize) to address problematic situations – and work smarter.

Community of Inquiry

The community of inquiry is an idealized construct that demonstrates how theory is used as a tool in the larger process of inquiry. It also demonstrates how inquiry is social. Further, Dewey and Addams conceptualization incorporates a rich theory of participatory democracy. Obviously, public administration faces problematic situations in social environments. Further, the link to participatory democracy provides a way for public administration practitioners to explicitly link their practice to broader democratic values.

Common to all communities of inquiry is a focus on a *problematic situation*. The problematic situation is a catalyst that helps or causes the community to form and it provides a reason to undertake inquiry. Most problematic situations require further investigation and action (i.e., inquiry). Second, members of the community of inquiry bring a *scientific attitude* to the problematic situation. The scientific or experimental attitude is a willingness to tackle the problem using working hypotheses that guide the collection and interpretation of data or facts. Both theory and method are viewed as tools to address the “problematic situation.” In addition, the notion of community is inescapably linked with *participatory democracy*. The parameters of the problematic situation and approaches to resolution are shaped by the interaction of the community and the facts. The democratic community

also takes into account values/ideals such as freedom, equality and efficiency as it considers goals and objectives. The three key ideas: problematic situation, scientific attitude and community as participatory democracy, reinforce each other. The three components must work together for the community of inquiry to really be effective (Shields 2003, 511).

Dewey's problematic situation is a flexible construct. Some problems may best be addressed using formal scientific approaches. On the other hand, practitioner experience might also be used to address a more narrow or contextual problem. The 'problematic situation' can be addressed by different sources of knowledge. The scientific attitude suggests that the knowledge should, however, be connected to the empirical world. And, it should be approached with the willingness to see the unexpected.

Dewey's process of inquiry begins and ends in experience. Empirical consequences; not popularity, consensus, or rhetorical prowess controls inquiry. Dewey has "faith that the conclusions yielded by the process of inquiry will be persuasive to those who engage in it for precisely the same reason that scientific explanations are persuasive. There is a community engaged in inquiry. Inquiry is an open-ended process with positive feedback. The knowledge yielded by this process--what Dewey calls warranted assertibility--is not infallible, simply the best currently available" (Webb, 2000 p. 5).

The community in the community of inquiry is not based on physical proximity but rather rooted in the desire (of interested parties) to address a common problem. Dewey's conception of community is also closely connected to his understanding of

democracy as a kind of cooperative experiment (Seigfried, 1996, p. 92). The values of democratic community – mutual toleration, mutual respect, give and take pervade all aspects of his thought. For Dewey the success of the community depends upon cooperative efforts to seek the common good in a democratic way.

Dewey does not see democracy as simply giving everyone a say in a squabble over cutting up a pie of given size. Rather, his conception includes the capability of designing a better pie or imagining and constructing something other than a pie. This characteristic requires the capability for inquiry on the part of the participants (Shields 2003, 523).

Theory & Practice: The Texas State MPA Program

Perhaps the connection between academe and practice can be strengthened if practitioners see how academe can provide the hotel rooms and maps that help resolve problematic situations. In addition, and more importantly, academe can help practitioners learn how to theorize and build their own theories (and communities of inquiry).

Since 1998, the capstone papers of students at Texas State University have won the Pi Alpha Alpha masters student paper award five times⁸. The papers are so successful because students have mastered the art of building and using the tool of

⁸ The actual Capstone papers or Applied Research Projects run 50 to 100 pages. The Pi Alpha Alpha papers are shorter versions in keeping with the 20-page limit. Most Capstone papers written since 2001 are available at <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/arp/>. This website also contains abstracts and titles for the capstone papers since 1992. The Texas State University library has catalogued all ARPs dating back to the mid 1970s.

theory (or conceptual frameworks). These conceptual frameworks built by the students act like maps that give coherence to their efforts.

Critical Thinking

Before examining how Texas State University Students use theory as a tool in their Applied Research Projects, we will take an aside to investigate how critical thinking also plays a part. In 1956, Benjamin Bloom identified six broadly accepted levels of the cognitive domain (Limbach & Waugh 2005). These are introduced here because students must reach the higher or critical thinking levels of the cognitive domain if they are to build a theory. Table 1 identifies the levels and describes the intellectual activities associated with each.

Table 1
Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain

Levels of Cognitive Ability	Focus	Behavioral verbs representing Intellectual Activity
Knowledge	Focuses on remembering and reciting.	Who, what, when, where, define, describe, memorize label, list, recognize, identify, write, recite
Comprehension	Focuses on relating and organizing the information previously learned.	Summarize, restate, paraphrase, illustrate, match, explain, defend, relate, review, generalize, tell
Application	Focuses on applying information according to a rule or principle in a specific situation.	Apply, change, put together, make, report, solve, interpret, prepare, discover, produce, design
Analysis	A type of critical thinking that focuses on parts and their functionality to the whole.	Examine, classify, categorize, research, contrast, compare, disassemble, differentiate, separate, diagram, analyze, subdivide
Synthesis	A type of critical thinking that focuses on putting parts together to form a new and original whole.	Combine, hypothesize, construct, originate, create, design, develop, suppose, organize, generate
Evaluate	A type of critical thinking that focuses on valuing and making judgments based on information.	Compare, recommend, assess, value, appraise, solve, criticize, weigh, debate, consider, defend, evaluate

Source: Bloom 1956; Limbach and Waugh 2005, 49

Most college courses focus on the knowledge and comprehension levels. (Limbach and Waugh, 2005). The theory building associated with developing an applied research project requires students to move into the analysis, synthesis and evaluation sectors of the cognitive domain. Building these critical thinking capabilities has a double bonus. Not only are students able to build a theory that helps organize

their research project; they leave the course with stronger critical thinking skills. Skills they are able to put to use in their roles as practicing public administrators.

Capstone Project

Texas State MPA students learn to build these tools as they prepare to write their Applied Research Project (ARP). The ARP is written in a two-course sequence. The first class (POSI 5335 Problems in Research Methodology)⁹ is a research methods class that emphasizes conceptual elements of research. Students are required to find their topic, specify a research purpose, write a literature review (find the hotel rooms), construct a conceptual framework (build their theory), operationalize the conceptual framework (use the theory to direct empirical investigation or lay out the details of the map). These requirements become components of a prospectus they present orally to the class¹⁰. In the oral presentation of the prospectus they are required to share their research purpose and construct the two conceptual framework tables that are akin to the tangible maps discussed earlier. The first table links their conceptual framework to the literature and the second table operationalizes the conceptual framework.

In this class we distinguish between larger theories like those identified by Lowery and Evans (2004). Larger theories are like the hotel rooms. Students visit these rooms as they do their literature review.¹¹ They also gain the *knowledge* and

⁹ See <http://uweb.txstate.edu/~ps07/sy35fa99.htm> for the syllabus of POSI 5335 Problems in Research Methodology.

¹⁰ See <http://uweb.txstate.edu/~ps07/prospectus1.htm> for the prospectus requirements.

¹¹ The students use another tool (*Step by Step* notebook) grounded in Dewey's pragmatism to write their initial literature review. See Shields (2004b) for more information.

comprehension (Bloom's 1st and 2nd levels of cognitive ability) about the problem while they do their literature review. Only after they have a fairly sophisticated understanding of the problematic situation, can they move to the *analysis* and *synthesis* stages necessary to build a theory or conceptual framework. Students are also encouraged to use their practical experience to more fully understand the problem. The movement from finding a research topic to building a framework involves, "Read, Write, Think, Connect to Experience" (Shields 1998).

The early stages of the literature review are devoted to reading and taking notes (or Read, Write) – critical thinking involves moving from mastery of the material (Bloom's *comprehension*) to an ability to "examine, classify categorize...combine, hypothesize, construct" the theory (Bloom's *analysis* and *synthesis*). Generally the practitioner students choose an initial problematic situation from their world of work (management or policy). Ideally, the reading is related to their experience. Students often *apply* (another of Bloom's levels of cognitive ability) the readings to their experience as they move into *analysis*, *synthesis* and *evaluation* modes of critical thinking necessary for theory development.

In the second course (POSI 5397 Applied Research Project)¹², the students act independently. They are expected to submit a written prospectus (with the purpose statement and conceptual framework tables included), collect, organize and analyze the

¹² See <http://uweb.txstate.edu/~ps07/sy97fa99.htm> for information on POSI 5397 Applied Research Project.

data, write and finally defend their paper in an oral examination¹³. The conceptual framework and operationalization tables are also included in the final Applied Research Project (literature and methodology chapters). The conceptual framework tables are equivalent to the tangible maps that can be seen and touched.

Philosophic Approach to Theory

Dewey, James and Peirce did not specifically address the mechanics of social science/administrative science research. In his 1964 book, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, Abraham Kaplan applied many of the ideas of the classical pragmatists to social science research and methodology. Kaplan's (1964) sense of methodology incorporates a logic-in-use that focuses on the "problem at hand" and carefully considers conceptual aspects of empirical research.¹⁴

Kaplan also maintains that the traditional "hypothetico-deductive" method of inquiry associated with behavioral science methodology (and logical empiricism) is problematic because "most of the important incidents in the drama of science are enacted behind the scenes" (Kaplan 1964,10). Kaplan views theory as too often in the "shadowy background" or "ghostly in appearance." How can one work with a ghostly tool? Conceptual elements of methodology should be "exposed to sunlight" (perhaps made more tangible). (Kaplan 1964, 268). Dewey describes this phase of methodology

¹³ After the prospectus receives faculty approval, it is submitted to our Institutional Review Board

¹⁴ His *Conduct of Inquiry* is considered a classic in methodology and draws heavily from Dewey's (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. In the preface, Kaplan (1964, xv) gives explicit credit to John Dewey, William James and Charles Sanders Peirce.

as the “twilight zone of inquiry” (Dewey 1916, 174). The logic-in-use of Dewey and Kaplan emphasizes the “behind the scenes” elements of inquiry such as procedures for forming concepts and hypotheses (Kaplan 1964, 23). The “behind the scenes” elements of inquiry can and should be “exposed to the sunlight.” This was also a “behind the scenes” element in Franklin & Ebdon’s (2005) *Wheels of Science and Practice*.

Theory and Practice

One of the unique aspects of Dewey and Kaplan’s approach is the extraordinarily tight connection between theory and practice¹⁵. Theory is used to organize exploration of the problem at hand. Dewey and Kaplan’s key insight is that without the problem there would be no need for theory. Conceptual frameworks are connected to outcomes or problem resolution because they aid in making judgment. Theory includes the “logical instruments” of reaching judgment (Dewey 1938, 283). Dewey’s common sense approach to theory and empirical inquiry has appeal to concrete, practice oriented, student / practitioners. It also gives them a new appreciation of the role and function of theory in management and policy.

It should be noted that the focus of this paper is the tangible frameworks that guide data collection. Because micro-conceptual frameworks are applied to the problem at hand they guide data collection and interpretation. Thus these frameworks guide the most practical, mechanical, elements of empirical inquiry. For example questionnaire design, interview questions and content analysis coding sheets should be guided by

¹⁵ See Dede 2004 for additional discussion of how MPA Programs use Dewey to bridge the theory/practice nexus.

theory. Choice of statistical tests as well as variable construction should be guided by theory. In the process, theory is connected to data collection and interpretation. Kaplan (1964, 268) points out that

every theory serves, in part, as a research directive. Theory is useful because it guides the collection of data and their subsequent analysis, by showing us beforehand where the data are to be fitted, and what we are to make of them when we get them.... Without a theory, however provisional or loosely formulated, there is only a miscellany of observations, having no significance.

For Kaplan and Dewey theory emerges as a tool to address an immediate practical problem and is most evident in the collecting, organizing and interpreting of empirical evidence (both qualitative and quantitative). Theory enables analysis and synthesis because its structure provides a big picture and a little picture simultaneously.

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Concepts and theories have a role in inquiry as “prescriptions for organizing the materials of experience so as to be able to go about our business” (Kaplan 1964, 46). A theory conforms to the facts and it is a way of looking at the facts. “Theory must fit God’s world, but in an important sense it creates a world of its own” (Kaplan 1964, 309).

The student’s choice of the conceptual framework (which tool?) is directed by the nature of the problem. But how do micro conceptual frameworks help organize the observed world and connect it to the research problem? Dewey points out that, “problems are constantly changing and therefore require conceptual tools which must

¹⁶ The connection between Dewey, Kaplan and the philosophical underpinnings of these courses is more fully developed in Shields (1998) “Philosophy of Science” and Shields (2003) “Pragmatic teaching philosophy.”

be constantly refashioned to meet the new demands” (Flowers and Murphy 1977, 812). Hence, there are two kinds of tools (micro frameworks), ones that can be pulled out of the tool box (ready made) and those that must be created. When students engage in empirical research, they must first identify a problem and then search for a theory or tool to help connect the problem to observed data. When a conceptual framework already exists students must be able to recognize it. If there is no ready-made framework, they must build their own.

This approach emphasizes the connective function of theory. Theoretical frameworks help students connect forward into the problem and give direction on how to collect and analyze data. They also have a connective function backward to the literature and larger theoretical frameworks (i.e., economic theory, organization theory, decision theory, critical theory, systems theory) identified by Lowery & Evans (2004) and Raadschelders (2005)). Students are expected to justify their framework by connecting it to the scholarly literature (or an existing PA framework).

A literature review enables the student to get to know their topic, connect the larger literature to their work experience and refine the research question or problem. The literature review may also reveal where previous inquiry has stopped. Using Bloom’s taxonomy the literature review ensures that the student has *knowledge* and *comprehension* of the subject matter. These levels of cognition are necessary before the *analysis* and *synthesis* of recognizing and building a conceptual framework can occur. Conceptual frameworks are built upon the premise and practice of a careful, thoughtful

and reflective review of the literature. Students are thus expected to draw upon the wisdom and insights of the literature and their experience to develop a plan or map to guide their inquiry. The authors of the literature become part of their “community of inquiry.”¹⁷

Classifying and Nesting Micro Frameworks

The two-course sequence described earlier emerged as a way to address problems with student papers identified in the 1980s. The papers were often unfocused and disjoint. They lacked conceptual coherence. The two-course sequence was designed to remedy this problem.

After the new two-course sequence was added students found our demand for conceptual coherence especially challenging. Using the ideas of Dewey and Kaplan we addressed the student concerns by developing a typology of conceptual frameworks (See Table 2). In other words, there were different types of frameworks for different types of problematic situations. The frameworks are linked to research purpose, question, method and statistical technique. It should be noted that the research question/purpose is akin to Dewey’s “problematic situation.” The method and statistical techniques apply the scientific attitude. Once the typology of frameworks was developed, we were more concrete in our discussion and better able to help students develop their theoretical tools. This is an example of how classical pragmatism, through

¹⁷ Students quite often contact scholars in their literature reviews. Most students are pleased that the scholars are so willing to answer their questions and discuss the topic.

devices like the typology of conceptual frameworks, provides a meta theory that can unite the compartmentalization identified by Raadschelders (2005).

Table 2
Classifying Micro-Conceptual Frameworks¹⁸

Research purpose (1)	Research Question (2)	Micro-Conceptual Framework (3)	Research Technique/ Method (4)	Statistical Techniques (5)
Exploration	Anything Goes What, When, Where, Why, Who, How, or any combination of the above	Working Hypotheses	Usually qualitative techniques: field research, structured interviews, focus groups, document/ archival record analysis	Qualitative evidence may not be statistical But anything goes Any type of statistical analysis possible
Description	What	Descriptive categories	Survey and content analysis	Simple descriptive statistics: Mean median, mode frequency distribution, percentages, t-statistics
Gauging	How close is process/policy to an ideal or standard? How can x be improved?	Practical Ideal Type	Case study, survey, content analysis, document analysis, structured interviews	Simple descriptive statistics: Mean median, mode frequency distribution, percentages, t-statistics
Decision making	What is the best decision? Which approach?	Models of Operations Research	Cost Benefit analysis, Cost Effectiveness Analysis, linear programming, decision tree, etc.	Quantitative techniques of Operations Research
Explanation		Formal Hypothesis	Usually Quantitative, Experimental and quasi experimental	t-statistics, correlation, Chi-Square, analysis of

¹⁸ This table appears in an earlier *J-PAE* article Shields (2002).

	Why		design, Survey, existing data analysis	variance, simple and multiple regression
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The conceptual framework column is the centerpiece of Table 2. It connects forward and backward in the inquiry process. Before a framework is chosen students must specify a problematic situation that can be converted to one of the five research purposes - exploration, description, gauging, decision-making or explanation. When the "purpose" is determined the choice of framework is clear (e.g. students doing exploratory research develop working hypotheses while students doing gauging research use the practical idea type model). After the type of framework is determined, the intellectually challenging work of building a framework begins. The challenge is less if they have a good literature review (and have learned about frameworks in class lectures and assignments).

The conceptual framework tables the students are required to construct link to their research purpose. Thus the nature of the research purpose (problematic situation) directs the type of framework built or found and used. Requiring students to construct these tables has led to both better Applied Research Projects and have made the projects easier to supervise (James's - labor saving contrivance).

Ideally the required "conceptual framework table" connects column 1 (research purpose) and column 3 (micro-conceptual framework) of Table 2. The operationalization table dictates the specifics of the methodology. The required "operationalization table" connects column 3 (micro-conceptual framework) and

column 4 (research technique/methodology) and sometimes column 5 (statistics). Hence, theory or the conceptual framework is the centerpiece of all applied research projects. Once we are satisfied with the operationalization table, it is clear how the ARP will be organized and consistent supervision does not require as William James would note a good memory.

Without the knowledge that they would be required to develop and present a conceptual framework and operationalization table, students usually avoid the challenging critical thinking necessary to conceptualize. Both tables present unique challenges, The conceptual framework table requires theorizing. In the operationalization table, students are expected to show how their conceptual framework moves from the abstract to measurement and modes of evidence collection. In other words, they move to the real world of public administration practice.

The typology of Table 2 unites the Wheel of Practice and the Wheel of Science (Franklin & Ebdon). The problematic situation determines where one will fall in the typology. It is probably true that practitioner's problematic situations usually fall in the first four categories (exploration, description, gauging and decision-making). Academics may more often lie in the explanation section. Nevertheless, both can have problematic situations arise that can fall almost anywhere on the typology.

Quantitative/Qualitative

With this framework the debate between quantitative and qualitative methodology dissolves. Both techniques are included because the problematic situation

dictates the types of data and methodology needed for problem resolution. The quantitative component are usually linked to problems that can be classified as explanation and decision-making. Here the ideas of logical positivism and operations research make sense. On the other hand, if the goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular program's processes – qualitative methods of case study would be most appropriate. Further, many problematic situations require multiple data sources. Triangulation falls out naturally as the way to collect data. Some mixture of quantitative and qualitative data is often necessary to address their research purposes (problematic situation).

A Few Examples

It should be noted that these frameworks are developed to deal with the complexity of real world problems. Research questions are not answered with a simple yes or no. For example, Rachael Jeffers (2003) wanted to better understand the nature of development sprawl and study the attitudes of city managers toward sprawl. After extensive reading and reflection on her experiences with city managers¹⁹, she focused the investigation by examining how sprawl influenced city finance and service provision, annexation policy and regional government policies. Because her research was preliminary, she developed three working hypotheses (and a series of sub-hypotheses) that were categorized by the criteria above. She used the working hypotheses to develop her questionnaire items.

¹⁹ Rachael works for the Texas Municipal League. She interacts daily with Texas City Managers.

Valerie LaCour Francois (2004) was asked by her supervisor to analyze the City of Austin's employee grievance procedures. She was expected to make recommendations to improve the current system. Valerie used a practical ideal type framework to identify key components of grievance procedures found in the literature. That way she could compare the existing system with a standard developed from the literature using case study techniques (similar to Franklin & Ebdon's (2005) best practice). She used interviews, surveys and analyzed grievance procedure documents. Interview and survey questions corresponded to the elements of her practical ideal type framework. Recommendations were easy to organize and fell out naturally from the practical ideal type framework.

Keiji Shiota (2003), a young accountant, was interested in investigating how public finance officials in local government assessed the Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB) new reporting requirements (as summarized in *Statement 34*). He used categories (adequacy and accountability, usefulness, accuracy of representation and cost of implementation) as the basis of his empirical investigation (source of his survey questions).²⁰

Conclusion

Does the Texas State MPA Program approach to scholarly research address the Bolton and Stolcis (2003) concern? Probably not – it cannot change the reward system in

²⁰ Unfortunately, the nature of an empirical capstone project limits size and scope of the research questions that our students investigate. Many of the most interesting questions require time, skills and effort well beyond the expectations of the class. We always keep in mind the goal of graduation and finding a manageable topic as the student focus on their research question/purpose.

academia. It does, however, address some of the issues. It provides a framework to view where different kinds of research fit. It helps future practitioners be better consumers of academic research. It demonstrates the practical usefulness of theory both as a tool to address practical problems and as a way to build critical thinking skills that can last a career. *The interface of academia and practice can be endlessly fertile.*

A few weeks after I began this paper, I got an email from a former student. He wanted to express his thanks and to explain how the Texas State ARP had influenced his work as a public administrator. It is obvious he uses the “theory as tool” notion of the conceptual framework (or structure as he calls it) to be a more effective administrator.

Also, a few months after my long awaited graduation from your MPA program, I was promoted to a senior position within our community outreach and government affairs department at Houston METRO. We are extremely busy right now but I enjoy the challenge of it all. Thanks to my MPA training, I sometimes drive my coworkers crazy with my extensive project planning; my action plans often look like mini applied research projects. *I guess I have a need to be very thorough, and I can be a stickler for structure.* But I think that it may come down to the fact that I do enjoy writing. *I have embraced my non-linear nature, but I've also learned to recognize and appreciate the necessary framework in everything that I do.* I've always been struck by how bureaucrats come up with goals or strategies without looking at the big picture. I now realize that this is precisely what makes the field of public administration very interesting, especially for those who, like me, enjoy public service.

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