

A Matter of Education: Changing attitudes and expectations on design in the public sector

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Following a push for changes in the education of managers in business schools and a rise in design courses in MBA programs (i.e., Ackoff 1993; Dunne & Roger 2006; Hendry 2006; Liedtka et al 2013), the conversation of educating managers has moved to the public sector.¹ Design thinking, service design, co-design and user experience have become part of the vocabulary of scholars and researchers in policy studies, public management and public administration sciences.

Comparable with the developments in the private context, the shift is triggered by a new concern for public sector innovation. Central to such innovation efforts is the hope for a new (cap-)ability within the public sector to provide more citizen-centric policies and services. To get there, new ways of thinking and working are needed within public organizations as well, for example to ‘reconnect policy-making with frontline workers’ (Adobewale & Starkey 2009). This quest has opened public management education to design thinking, service design and user experience. Renowned scholars and researchers in policy studies, public management and public administration sciences have begun to look at designing policies like cars (Peters 2015; Peters and Rava 2017), making public administration a design science (Barzelay & Thompson 2010); exploring public management as a design-oriented professional discipline (Barzeley 2019) and looking to design principles for policy (Howlett & Rayner 2007; Howlett 2019). Much of the early design education of policy makers and public managers took place within the confines of public organizations as part of specific projects and individual initiatives (Body 2007). More recently, dedicated public sector innovation labs have sought to advance

¹ See in particular the influential 2006 article by Martin Roger and David Dunne in the journal by the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* ‘Design Thinking and How It Will Change Management Education: An Interview and Discussion’ or Roger’s keynote at the Strategy Conference at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in in 2007, ‘The Design of Business’. Jeanne Liedtka was also an early promoter of design education in MBA programs and has produced a number of books on methods and tools (<https://jeanneliedtka.com/books>).

the education and application of design-led approaches within the public sector.² There is, however, a growing consensus that sustainable public sector innovation efforts require systemic transformations not only within public organizations themselves but also within those institutions that educate the public workforce for the future.

Efforts by public servants to include citizens and other members of the public are summarily describes as ‘collaborative innovation’ (Torfing 2016, Torfing 2019; Sørensen 2020), though this risks a loss of nuances in the application of co-creation, co-design, co-value and co-production. While the theoretical and analytical discussions have moved forward in an attempt to assess the value, relevance and contribution of design approaches to public management and policy making (Bason 2010; Bason 2014; Andrews et al 2015), the educational side has received far less attention. At issue here is the question where, when and how future public managers and future policy-makers should engage in these new practices, new methods and approaches. Who can or who should offer such education and what form(s) may such education take?

Answers to this question are urgent, as expectations to be proficient in methods like co-designing and co-developing solutions with people are now recognized at the EU level as key in its efforts to advance democracy, cultural heritage and social and economic transformation.³ Currently, such educational efforts remain uncoordinated and random. Yet, unless the very schools and programs tasked with equipping future public managers, staff and policy makers with the skills and capabilities needed for a citizen-centric public sector, the heavy lifting currently undertaken by public organizations in this area will have little impact in the long run.

To underline the need for changes to the curricula in public management and public policy programs, this paper provides a reflection on teaching human-centered design to two student cohorts in the same MA Public Policy Program in 2010 and 2015. In an effort to open new paths to provide appropriate design education for future public managers and policy makers, the paper reflects on the changes in student attitudes and expectations and points out theoretical, practical, structural and cultural issues that arise when design is being taught in settings built on a fundamentally different logic to that of the arts.

² Early organizational examples include the Australian Tax Office, which held design courses for its staff in the late 1990s (Junginger 2017) as well as the later ‘Lab’ at the United States Office of Personnel Management (Junginger 2015), OECD’s OPSI Lab and the i-labs supported by NESTA, UK.

³ See, for example Cluster II of the Horizon Europe funding scheme, which requires co-design to be part of any of the proposals. (https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/cluster-2-culture-creativity-and-inclusive-society_en).

From training to educating public managers

Historically, those seeking a role in the public service have received training in institutions separate from those seeking to join the business world. Public management education remains distinct from that of this business management.⁴ In this context, the absence of a comprehensive history of public management education is noteworthy.⁵ A google scholar search conducted as part of the research for this paper produced 849 hits with the keywords “education of civil servants”.⁶ Another search for “education of public servants” produced a return of 296 papers on the topic, with the majority (232) showing a publication date from 2000 or later. This is in line with the observation by Browne and Osborne (2005) that public managers continue to be trained, not educated. They point out that education for public managers has to shift from training to education to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to engage in change management – a key task in any public sector innovation effort.

Early forms of design education tailored to the needs of policy makers and public managers took place within the confines of public organizations – as part of specific projects and individual initiatives. Today, a series of public sector innovation labs – experimental and protected spaces within an otherwise stoic and often archaic organizational setting –strive to advance the application of design-led approaches to public sector challenges. There is, however, a growing urgency to rethink the education of future public managers and future policy makers prior to joining a public organization and before they start their civil service careers. Traditional policy schools and universities offering public management programs continue to prepare their students well in the law, decision-making, and economics. However, they remain slow to integrate and to embrace design education into the curricula of future policy-makers and future public managers.

In Germany, a person’s educational level determines the kind of career she or he can embark on as in the public service. Four career paths exist, each is connected to a specific line of duty: 1) basic duty 2) midlevel duty 3) elevated duty and 4) high-level duty.⁷ Undergraduate

⁴ This situation may explain the lack of ethical and moral considerations in the business world as well as the somewhat lack of understanding of key business skills among public servants.

⁵ Doern, G.B. and Kinder, J.S. (2007) offers an interesting take on this.

⁶ Google search June 3, 2021, keywords ”education of civil servants”, 849 hits. The search for ”education of public manager” produced 0 hits. The search for ” ”educating public managers" generated 40 hits, with several pointing out the specific needs for preparing public managers for ”the era of informatics”.

⁷ This information is available only in the ”Amtssprache” (German) by the German government: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/jetzt-durchstaaten-de/laufbahnen-454850>.

programs are almost exclusively offered by universities of applied sciences. MA and PhD level programs targeting the elevated and high-level duty lines are typically run by universities.⁸

Experiences with Design Education in Policy Schools (2010 and 2015)

Educational programs are embedded within a market. Design education, too, is shaped by the needs of industry and business, the demands of students and society, the ambitions and motivations of educators, and last but not least the laws and regulations by national, regional and local governments. We find therefore a number of courses, seminars and programs in design that either push the “technology” of design (design as *techné*) into schools and universities, organizations and institutions. A situation where design methods are pushed into the market “without proper consideration of whether or not it satisfies a user need” (Martin 1994, p. 43). At the same time, we can observe a strong market-pull, that “stimulates the proliferation of innovation to satisfy emerging market needs” (Martin 1994, p. 44). There is no meaningful survey available at this moment that would capture the breadth and depth – or lack thereof – what forms design education currently assumes in such institutions. It is safe to wager that the growing hunger of students in policy schools for design thinking and co. is stimulating a pull market for anyone confident to wear the label design thinker and happy to run a three-hour workshop before moving on to the next school. This approach provides opportunities and at least encounters with and exposures to designerly ways of knowing (Cross 2006) and the ‘design way’ (Nelson and Stolterman 2012). But to instill a design attitude (Michlewski 2015), this is simply not sufficient and fails both students and educational institutions.

At the same time, as the following two course reflections show, opening existing public service curricula to meaningful design education faces a number of challenges. In 2010 and in 2015, I had the opportunity to teach two different student cohorts in the same MA Public Policy program. The first course in 2010 was the first time I was engaging with policy students. I was familiar with MBA students and had led professional development workshops for two Academy of Management conferences. So I set out with some confidence but also a number of anxieties.

Course 1, 2010: Innovating Public Organizations through Human-Centered Design

The course was an elective for students in the second year of the MPP program. Unfortunately, the students’ were at the end of their educational journey. The last thing they needed was

⁸ For an example see <https://www.uni-speyer.de/en/>.

someone raising questions and challenge their positions they had formed through writing their all but finished written MA Thesis. Understandably, they were proud of their accomplishments and skills in the key areas of their program. At least some students had chosen my design class in order to avoid another, possible harder and possibly more boring class. Some figured sitting in a fun and creative elective would allow them to prioritize other ‘important’ class work they still had to finish. Roughly fifteen students signed up, a nice class size.

To this cohort, everything design relating to organizations, services and policies was novel. None of them had heard of design thinking before, co-designing was not ‘a thing’ yet, neither were public sector innovation labs. About two students had some kind of creative background (marketing or advertising, I remember). When I learned that students in this program were being ranked by their professors at the end of each year for their potential and that this ranking mattered in terms of financial support and other rare but treasured resources, I began to grasp the challenge I was in. These rankings also influenced the career opportunities after graduation. While this caused stress it also meant that a number of students felt reaffirmed in their thinking and doing by their system. These students had few incentives to inquire into people, products, services and systems. Moreover, they were trained to accept organizational systems for what they are and to focus on how to ‘game’ the system, rather than changing the systems and the human interactions within it.

Teamwork for them meant to 1) agree to work together, 2) clarify and discuss what needed to be done, 3) assign responsibilities for each task, 4) work solo on accomplishing the one task agreed to and 5) meet up again to somehow weave the solo results into one paper or presentation (i.e. one final product). This approach was very efficient and effective, and economic. It had served them well in all the other classes they had attended for their two-year program. Alas, this is not how we go about designing and developing products – be they services or else...

Figure 1 provides an overview of the fourteen-week course *Innovating Public Organizations Through Human-Centered Design*. My teaching pursues what educational scientists call a flipped classroom approach (Bergman & Sams 2012) and problem-based learning (Savin-Baden & Major 2004). Both align well with experience-based inquiries at the heart of human-centered design, with strong references to John Dewey’s ‘Pattern of Inquiry’ (1938). This in itself was a bit unsettling to these students who had – at the time – been used to Powerpoint lectures and frontal teaching.

In an attempt to open up their thinking about organizations, design and the ways in which we go about organizing, I assigned Richard McKeon’s *Philosophic Semantics and*

Philosophic Inquiry (1966). It is a reading I work through with MA and doctoral students supported by an in-class, hands-on exercise. The problem was that we were stuck in a room that was designed for round-table discussions, Powerpoint presentations and lecturing. Getting off from one's chair or moving around was not so much part of the thinking of whoever had designed the classroom – and tables were not very moveable either. We ended up squeezing in two corners of the floor (*Figure 3: Floor Exercise*). Nonetheless, we progressed and by week nine, we were able to form into five student teams who were equipped to conduct a six-hour real design inquiry into the German national employment agency. Some students did not speak the language of the German bureaucracy and struggled to understand that this “inability” can be an asset to a designer to experience what it means to be vulnerable when engaging with a government agency. However, the competitive culture outside my classroom that prohibited any show of weakness made this very stressful for those students.

Figure 1: Overview Coursework 2009: Innovating Public Organizations Through Human-Centered Design

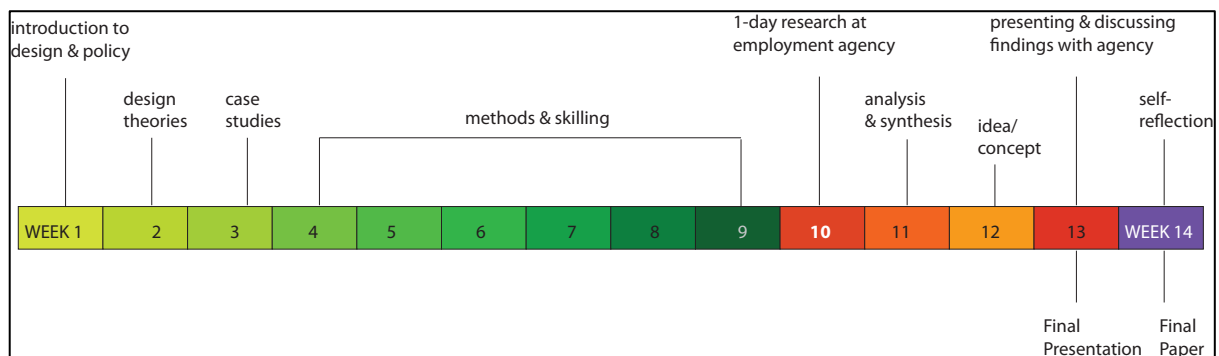


Figure 2: Student work course 2009 & Figure 3: Student floor exercise

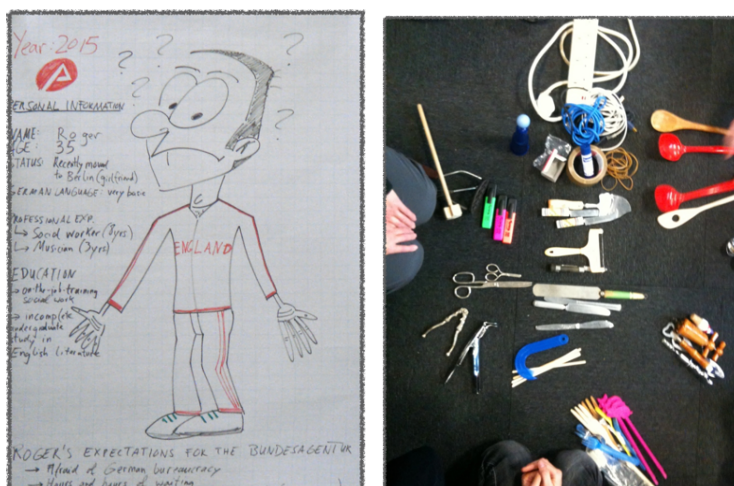


Figure 2 shows one of the outcomes of the in-class project. Despite entering into the employment agency awed by its performance management, they started to see some shortcomings of that approach and produced five concepts for improving the human interaction and the human experience. These were presented to the staff that had also allowed the students some unique glimpses into their work. The ideas the students came up with had serious potential for translation into actual changes to the system and its services.

As a design educator, I felt good about the course until I received the evaluations. These revealed the confusions and stressed the design approach put on individual students whose expectations and needs I clearly did not meet. The point of design education is to lure students out of their comfort zones, to encourage them to engage with complexity, wickedness and with uncertainty. This can be an unsettling, however valuable, experience. But an elective that receives poor evaluations is an elective that won't be taught again. There is the additional problem that education can be a process and the actual learning is often recognized much later.

Course 2, 2015: Design in Policy-Making and Implementation


Fast forward to 2015. Again, my course was offered as an elective, again around 15 students joined. This time, many students brought a very different set of motivations for taking my class. The title of the course (Design in Policy-Making and Policy Implementation) was also more ambitious and pointed to a different kind of engagement with design than in 2010. There were still one or two students who assumed it was least time-consuming choice of all other choices. But this time, roughly a third of the students already had either attended a design thinking event or workshop. Some actually had earned a certificate in design thinking from a popular design thinking institute. Perhaps surprising to the reader, this posed a whole different set of challenges for teaching – human-centered design does not treat design thinking as a method or a set of techniques, rather as an overarching principle from which specific methods and techniques follow.

By 2015, I was able to draw on external guest lecturers who actually worked in government and who applied human-centered design in one of the public sector innovation labs. The level of class-room conversation on human-centered design quickly rose to a level not thinkable five years earlier. *Figure 4* shows a screenshot of one of the blog entries produced by two students in this cohort. By that time, concepts of service design had swapped over from business schools and professional design agencies, so that students could come up with their

own group projects to explore a customer journey. *Figure 5* shows an example for one of the student projects. They were able to explore the relevance of design to public sector innovation observing their own mother trying to apply for an electronic ID card – which never really took off in Germany despite much anticipation. They were able to make fun of the German online tax system, when they pointed out that it has the name of a bird known for its thievery (Elster, the German name for Magpie). Students in this cohort ended up organizing an extra-curricular visualization class to improve their visual communication.

Figure 4: <https://medium.com/@caio.werneck/why-should-a-policy-student-researcher-or-practitioner-be-interested-in-design-943c7fea46f7>

Why should a policy student, researcher or practitioner be interested in design?

 Caio Werneck Feb 23, 2015 · 3 min read 🔗 🔖

Reflections on the first session of the course Design in Policy-Making at the Hertie School of Governance in Spring semester of 2015. I do not answer the question from the title, but intend to be able to do so in May.

Our first day was a double-session to introduce the background of design theory and set the grounds for the upcoming discussions in the Design in Policy-Making course. The readings — Buchanan’s Wicked Problems in Design Thinking and Dewey’s The Pattern of Inquiry, helped us to reflect on the concept of design in relation to science and arts. Dewey’s chapter, dated from 1938, seemed quite relevant to current discussions, as he breaks down the logic of research activities in a more comprehensive way.

“*Inquiry is the directed or controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinate one*”. (p117)

Alas, the room situation had not improved. We were in a different room, and I made it a point to rearrange the tables so group work would be possible. With a two-hour slot for each

teaching session, we had to account time for rearranging the room before the start of the class and then again afterwards. Facility rules required that. Luckily, the students found our classroom set up valuable enough that they learned to prepare the room proactively before we got started. From a design educational perspective, there is some benefit in this requirement. It goes to show students that we can change and redesign our spaces and that we can take action to make things work for us. Nonetheless, it adds to the complications of teaching.

Observations on Theoretical, Practical, Structural and Cultural Levels

Drawing on these two courses, I want to point out some of the issues that will need to find consideration for design education to unfold its potential for future policy-makers and public managers. On a structural level, it is obvious that as an elective, design will continue to be treated as a nice to have but not a must, as an add-on but not as something inherently relevant or valuable to the skills and capabilities required for those making decisions, developing policies and public services. Physical classrooms are ill-suited for design/project work. There is hardly any space for pinning up work one might share; furniture is difficult to move and the general set-up difficult to allow for teamwork. These aspects have been changing and have been taken into consideration. But my visits to different policy schools and programs show that spaces suitable for collaboration, innovation and co-creation are still an exception if they exist at all. As I mentioned above, this might also be considered a design challenge.

More interfering are the demands of a design project course in terms of time slots and or blocks that provide flexibility for fieldwork. Again, some thinking here has changed over the past years but there is still plenty of room for better integration. Also weighing more heavily are common evaluation requirements, for example, the use of a grading curve that means some students must be graded down in order to satisfy the curve. This in itself presents an outdated view on education and learning. This leads us to talk more specifically about cultural changes necessary to allow for students to engage in design inquiries that encourage trial and error, early failing is an option. A dominant culture of competition and ranking is obviously not the safe space students need to experience and engage with issues of complexities and uncertainties. With co-design, co-creation and co-development acquiring common status in policy schools, students are now better prepared for real teamwork and collaboration. However, it is an aspect we pay close attention to in design schools and we are aware that it takes time to develop team skills that can handle friction, argument and debate. There are still some students who expect that learning about design involves making only and who are surprised to find that

serious design requires serious theoretical concepts. This alludes back to structure because those who allow for a design course to be taught often share the same perception and limit the time slots so that either the practical or the theoretical part has to be emphasized but both cannot be addressed. Summing up the observations leads to the following recommendations:

- integrate design education and design projects early on in the curriculum
- provide spaces that promote integrated product development and teamwork
- create a safe space for students to experiment and if necessary, adjust the student ranking/evaluation system to enable students to fail and succeed, to undergo and to act.

Despite the recent developments, there exists a need for raising students' awareness of how design thinking, design methods and design practices shape policy design and implementation. I end this paper with a plaidoyer for introducing students to principles of human-centered Design and for skilling students in user research, participatory/collaborative design & iterative prototyping. Some policy schools have set up such programs now. The Danish Design Centre (DDC) has been actively supporting these efforts through their annual conference *Experimentation by Design*.⁹ The DDC is also leading a design education program with a Canadian university's School for Public Policy. In addition, it is involved in an EU project that has recently produced a MOOC for public managers and policy makers. Alas, that takes the public policy schools and programs out of the equation – again. And with that, we are stuck with the sporadic and varied deployment of design and design thinking in government:

“At present, design thinking is being pursued across a range of government agencies, but its overall deployment in the public sector is varied and sporadic. This can lead to implementing design thinking for the wrong reasons or with unrealistic expectations.”¹⁰

Time to get unstuck.

⁹ The keynote for the 2020 conference is available online: <https://medium.com/danish-design-centre/we-need-a-new-era-of-enlightenment-and-we-need-it-now-27b74346813b>.

¹⁰ Centre for Public Impact, a BCG Foundation, Blogpost, October 28th, 2016: Design thinking in policymaking: opportunities and challenges, <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/design-thinking-in-policymaking>.

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