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Exploring the third world of academic life: What can academics who study governance offer to politicians and public servants who practice governance?

Presentation at the Hans Sigrist Symposium, University of Bern
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Contents

1	The academic contribution to practice: a third world?.....	3
2	What can academics offer to practitioners? A naïve model.....	5
2.1	Why do practitioners want academic advice, if not to tell them something new?.....	5
2.2	Why do practitioners want academic advice, if not to fix problems?.....	6
2.3	What kinds of knowledge can academics offer that might be useful to practitioners?.....	6
3	Final reflections and pointers to further debate	11
4	Acknowledgements.....	15
	References.....	17

'There are significant problems with exploitation of social science research in government, local government, commerce, the voluntary sector and the media. These come about because of "interface management" and communication problems, although the caution of some academics towards close engagement with practitioners is a source of disappointment to many users of social science research' (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003, p5)

1 The academic contribution to practice: a third world?

Academics who study governance tend to define themselves by their academic products – books, scientific articles and conference papers. These take pride of place in their CVs and their reputations within the academic community. For the academic community this is our first world – the world of research and publication. Increasingly, teaching is our second. As it is more and more closely measured, scrutinized, accredited and evaluated teaching, too, becomes an item on the CV. The outstanding teachers among us are gradually beginning to receive recognition.

Of course it is known that in political science and public administration many academics also undertake advice and consultancy roles. They do work for public authorities and political parties. [They always did – the Prussian cameralist professors of the 18th century were frequently successful consultants (Schumpeter, 1954).] But nowadays, in most cases, these activities do not feature prominently in our professional personae. They take place in shaded corners – their nature and their influences remain largely unexplored. Advice and consultancy constitute a kind of underdeveloped or ‘third world’ – a place where sometimes worthy and sometimes exotic projects may occasionally be undertaken, but these are certainly not ‘mainstream’, and are not regarded as a likely source of academic innovation. Indeed, a few of our academic colleagues pride themselves on never doing consultancy, and in Faculty meetings remarks which characterize consultancy as a lower-order activity are not uncommon (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003). So, while some academics spend a substantial amount of their time on this activity, they do not get promoted for it (and nor do they win international prizes!).

There is, then, a prior issue with respect to the status of advice work, I would like to suggest that in fact it is not some inherently inferior form of intellectual activity. Indeed, in my own experience, meeting demanding and urgent questions from powerful officials in a ministry or agency that has commissioned my advice has often turned out to be every bit as conceptually and pedagogically challenging as doing ‘pure’ academic research. If a comprehensive history of academic public administration were ever to be written I believe it would have to give a good deal of space to the ways in which academics have themselves been stimulated by doing consultancy. Not every step forward in theory or technique comes from the quiet contemplation of existing scientific publications.

Quite frequently, one suspects, these advances come from an academic being exposed to something unusual or unexpected while conducting consultancy projects of one kind or another. We should talk about this more, and acknowledge that, for many of us, this is an important and creative part of our academic lives.

But whatever the status of advice work may be, its relative obscurity raises a number of crucial issues.

1. First, of what does this advice consist? What is it that academics can do that other kinds of advisor cannot, or cannot do so well?
2. Second, what are the 'rules of engagement' governing these partly hidden exchanges? Is there an agreed set of procedures and relationships, or do we need a code of conduct?
3. Third, what is the impact and influence of these rivulets – or possibly rivers – of academic advice? Do we, collectively, have a small, medium or large effect on public decision making and service provision – perhaps we academics are actually part of a 'consultocracy' (Saint-Martin, 2000)?

Regrettably, it is not possible to cover all this ground in one short speech. I will therefore concentrate mainly on the first question: what is it that academics can usefully offer to the world of practice? At the end, however, I will also find a little to say about what my exploration of this first question implies for the other two.

2 What can academics offer to practitioners? A naïve model

To begin with, one might suppose that the answer to this question depends on at least two things. First, there is what we believe the world of practice knows already – one might think there is little point hiring an academic (or anyone else) to tell you something you know already. Second, what theoretical and technical knowledge does the academic have to offer? In the simplest case, therefore, the practitioner does not know how – lets say – to change a lightbulb. The academic has spent many years changing light bulbs and comes and fixes the practitioner’s problem. Such simple transactions may occasionally occur, but, to the best of my knowledge, they are unrepresentative of academic advice-giving as a whole. So what is wrong with our two questions and our simple model of the academic as a problem-fixer?

I want to argue that there are many things wrong with this ‘lightbulb’ model. In particular:

- It is incorrect to assume that practitioners always hire academics in order to learn something new
- Fixing specific problems is only one of the challenges faced by politicians and public servants – and it is by no means obvious that when they have problems to fix academia is the first place they would look for a fixer
- Problem-fixing knowledge is only one type of knowledge: academics have many other kinds, both explicit and tacit

We may take each of these points in turn.

2.1 Why do practitioners want academic advice, if not to tell them something new?

Those hiring academic advisers may have a variety of motives, in addition to or even in contradiction to the desire to learn something new. They may want to legitimize a course of action they have already decided upon by decorating it with an ‘independent’ assessment or evaluation. So they choose an academic whose views they believe to be sympathetic to their already-chosen solution. They lean on the authority of expertise to reinforce the authority of political power – it is one of the oldest

partnerships in history. Or they may simply want a ‘technical fix’ – someone to tell them about best practice for the implementation of a particular approach which they have already determined to pursue.

2.2 Why do practitioners want academic advice, if not to fix problems?

Politicians and public servants do not exist simply to fix problems. They spend a great deal of their time maintaining relationships, defending organizational territories, trying to influence agendas, and even trying to clarify their own minds on issues they have become aware of but have not yet ‘framed’ or decomposed or fixed into a slot alongside all their other policies and priorities. They search for popular issues, or newly-emerging problems or they simply strive for greater coherence between the different issues they are called upon to address.

Thus politicians may simply want what in boxing is called a ‘sparring partner’ – someone to try out ideas on in a safe, confidential setting. Recent work I did in Denmark indicated that ministers and council leaders there placed a high value on having such trusted sparring partners, who were often senior public servants but could also be academics or others hired from outside (Kettl, Pollitt and Svara, 2004). In other political cultures – such, I gather, as the Swiss – politicians of different persuasions may sometimes want to use academics as neutral moderators of multi-party discussions. Academics have sometimes been used in this role in EU meetings where officials or ministers from a number of member states are present and may not yet know each other well. This is almost the opposite of the sparring partner, because it is a calming rather than a provoking role, but deep knowledge of the issues is vital for both kinds of intervention.

These kinds of motives seem rather common. They have more to do with clarification, interpretation and definition than with providing new information. Structuring ideas and facilitating debate are things one would hope academics were especially well-practiced at.

2.3 What kinds of knowledge can academics offer that might be useful to practitioners?

Taking into account the variety of practitioners’ needs and motives, one may distinguish a number of different ways in which academics are

commonly able to offer something of value to practitioners (see also Pollitt, 2003, chapter 7):

1. Agenda setting and re-framing: academics may be asked to identify future ('coming') issues or to reflect in challenging and innovative ways on existing problems (re-framing). This can be done through a wide variety of instruments – from the advisory commissions which are so common in Sweden and the Netherlands to dinner with the minister, or a teatime conversation in the privacy of the Under-Secretary's office.
2. Expert moderation of inter-party or inter-institutional discussion: academics can act as the neutral but expert steering persons when there is a need to restrain factionalism or inter-institutional rivalry in policy discussions. This role is probably more common in multi-party systems than one party governments, and also occurs in international settings.
3. Conceptual clarification: e.g. what is meant by 'public accountability'? How do you define 'quality'? These are issues where the academic is probably familiar with a wide range of literature in which such issues are discussed, which will not be known – or not in such detail - to the average manager. Academics are trained to be aware of definitional issues and their consequences, and can frequently help managers to sharpen their formulations. In particular academics can usefully insist that the problem(s) to be solved are defined as clearly as possible. This can help managers to work hard on problem identification and diagnosis before they reach for a solution. It is the opposite of bad consultancy, which has sometimes been characterised as 'solutions in search of problems'.
4. Questioning false assumptions: this is a kind of therapy function. Academics are trained to ferret out underlying assumptions and drag them into the light of open debate. They can do this for managers as they can for students. This can prove surprisingly useful. For example, when discussing the modification of a public service better to fit the expressed wishes of users, it can be valuable to ask whether the reform is being carried out on the assumption that the modified service will still attract the same group of users? How reliable is this assumption? Are there trends which are changing the mix of users, and possibly introducing new types of user who may

have different requirements (e.g. more very elderly users, more users who do not have good language skills, more users from a particular ethnic group?). Another example would be the assumption that bonus pay will incentivize public servants to work harder. In some circumstances this may work, but in many it apparently does not. The assumptions about the beneficial effects of bonus (or 'merit') pay also tend to overlook the motivational impacts such systems have on those staff who do not receive a bonus.

5. Guidance on how to structure decisions: some academics are experts in decision analysis, and can advise managers on how to structure decision-making processes so as to more accurately and reliably reflect the underlying probabilities and values involved in a particular decision or series of decisions. Typically this might involve modelling the decision, making value judgments more explicit, seeking the best possible information on the probabilities of alternative outcomes, and advising on how, technically, to weight probabilities with values/utilities and to discount for effects which take place at different times in the future (Dowie, 1999; Hammond, 1996). Decision analysis has made considerable contributions to particular parts of the public sector (e.g. health care, environmental safety issues – see the journal *Medical Decision Making*) but much less so to some others (e.g. social work or management reform itself).
6. Advising on how best to collect data. Academics usually have a strong training in social science methods. When a manager needs to know something, and that something requires research in order to find it out, s/he will frequently benefit from discussing with academics the selection of methods for data collection (Robson, 2002). It may be an issue of statistical sampling, or one of how to minimize bias in interviews, or what statistical tests to carry out on an existing body of data, or what combination of methods to use when trying to establish what citizens want and expect from a particular service.
7. Substantive advice based on middle-range, contextually-based generalisations: e.g., that measuring the performance of professionally-delivered human services tends to be more complex and subtle than measuring the performance of standardized administrative routines such as issuing licenses or checking applications for a

social security benefit. Therefore it would be wise to use performance indicators in a more diagnostic, more cautious, less mechanical way in health care and education than in more standardized 'production' services. Or (to take another example) that contracting out has worked well for certain types of service in countries X, Y and Z, but has proved much more controversial and difficult for certain other kinds of service. This kind of advice is therefore based on substantive knowledge of what is happening in a variety of settings, and in the past (see Schick, 1996 for an unusually widely-cited example). Crucial to the quality of this advice, however, is a careful discussion of the degree to which the different settings really are comparable – a discussion in which the manager receiving the advice would be well-advised to take an active part (Pollitt, 2004a). For example, telling the manager of a hospital in Birmingham how TQM was successfully installed in a Toyota plant in Japan may be of limited use (there are too many glaring - and subtle - differences in context). But telling the Birmingham manager how TQM was successfully implemented in a hospital in Manchester may be more useful/transferable (Fukuyama, 2004, Pollitt, 2003).

8. Technical tips based on previous experience in other, similar contexts: e.g. when measuring the time taken to deliver money benefits to claimants set the target in terms of the average time taken to complete all payments rather than the % of payments made within a certain time period. The former system (averaging) will oblige staff to pay attention to all claims, whereas the latter (completing 90 or 95% of payments within x days) may tempt staff to neglect the small percentage of really complex and difficult claims (National Audit Office, 1998). Again, this is substantive, expert knowledge which comes from prolonged and focused exposure to empirical study. And, again, care is needed that lessons are being transferred across broadly comparable contexts. A footnote here is that academics may be gaining a relative advantage with this kind of advice. This is because rapid and repeated reorganizations undermine the institutional memory of some public sector organizations, so that they are more and more obliged to turn to outsiders for knowledge of the past – even of their own past (Pollitt, 2000)

Note that, of these eight kinds of advice, only two – the last two – are usually to do with directly solving problems by the application of new

knowledge. Furthermore, even these two are extensively context-dependent. So these are not 'eight steps to success' or 'one best way', applicable in all tasks and times and places. Indeed there are several reasons why the generic proverbs so beloved of the popular management writers whose books fill the airport bookstands are unlikely to be particularly useful to public sector practitioners (Pollitt, 2003, chapter 7).

Note also that there are two rather different roles built into these various forms of advice-giving. One (which has a high salience for activities 1 to 4) involves challenging, re-conceptualising and generally thinking innovatively about practitioner agendas. The other (especially tasks 6 to 8, with 5 as a hybrid) is the more traditional role of the 'expert' offering advice on how to do things. In this second role academics are perhaps closer to normal consultancy, whereas in the first they are confidantes and/or court jesters for those in power. The performance of both roles - but especially the first - is affected by the local culture and institutional structures. So, for example, academics playing the challenging and re-conceptualising role had better be conscious of whether they are working in a highly adversarial two-party system like the British one, or a highly consensual multi-party system like the Denmark. The rules of conduct are likely to be different.

3 Final reflections and pointers to further debate

At the outset I mentioned three major questions about the academic contribution to practice, but I have only managed to scratch the surface of the first one. In closing, however, let me return to that wider agenda. For in answering the first question we have cast some shadows forwards over the later ones.

The second question concerned the rules of engagement between academics and practitioners. It would seem from our answer to the first questions (above) that not one set of rules but several would be desirable. That is because academics are providing not one kind of service, but a variety, and the conditions for optimizing the quality of these services is likely to vary. For example, when acting as a vigorous sparring partner, questioning a politician's or mandarin's assumptions or deconstructing their policy concepts, the conversation requires protection and confidentiality. Trust and safety is of the essence: if the practitioner thinks his or her sparring partner will deal them a damaging blow to the head in public they will not take the risk of training with the academic in the first place. On the other hand advice on how to collect data or how to structure a decision is a much more technical task, where transparency and open dialogue are much to be desired. The key, perhaps, is to define what sort of advice it is that is wanted, to do so early and to make sure that the ground rules are both appropriate to that type (1 to 7 above) and are clearly understood by all parties concerned. Some of the disappointments which rather frequently occur (on both sides) are almost certainly due to misplaced expectations about what kind of advice is supposed to be being provided (what the Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003 jargonised as 'interface management').

Staying with this second question, we may reconsider the vexed issue of politicians 'using' academics to bolster their legitimacy. What if the practitioners want to lean on your expertise to confirm a course of action they have already determined upon? A common academic reaction is that this is a terrible state of affairs, to be avoided at all costs. Certainly, when dealing with the politically and administratively powerful, we gentle academics would do well to heed the old proverb, cited by (inter alia) Chaucer, Erasmus and Shakespeare, that if we sup with the devil, we should use a long spoon. But that surely cannot mean that we should always refuse to engage in advice where a policy is already decided upon, and po-

litical positions have been taken? Academics can still make several types of contributions at that stage. They can advise on how best to collect monitoring data, they can offer substantive advice on implementation and they can sometimes give technical tips about how to solve some specific administrative problem. In short – always assuming they do not find the basic objectives of the policy repugnant or its modalities stupid – there are many ways in which academics can try to ensure that what is done is more conceptually coherent and technically efficient than it might otherwise be. If, however, the academic does find the announced policy repugnant or stupid, then his or her role should presumably shift to that of public critic rather than adviser. To become a confidential adviser in such circumstances is to enter a trap. As academics, rather than commercial consultants, our prime duty is that of ‘speaking truth to power’ (Wildavsky, 1979). If practitioners do not wish to listen to us inside their house, we can usually choose to make ourselves heard outside. That is a great privilege, and sometimes we should use it.

Of course, it is not always easy to draw these lines. Some university units and centers have become very heavily dependent on consultancy income. They may want to speak truth to power, but they must also earn a living. All the more reason, one might think, why academics should discuss advice-giving more often, and try to develop robust, shared and public rules of engagement to cover the different types of advice-giving. Sometimes we may need to specify that the spoon is of a certain minimum length, and at other times we should not touch the soup at all.

Finally, the third question concerned the extent of academic influence – whether our community has a small, medium or large effect on practitioner decisionmaking. Academics in certain sub-fields – evaluation for example – have devoted considerable thought to this question. The findings are frequently depressing (Pollitt, 2004b) but the point that emerges here is a more fundamental one. It is that academics can and do contribute in so many ways and at so many different levels that to capture the full extent of their influence will always remain extremely difficult. There may be a systematic tendency to underestimate our influence. Brand new policies whose parentage can be traced directly to the advice of some academic guru are only the tip of the iceberg (and are rarely seen). The larger mass of academic influence exists below the surface – in clarifying concepts, injecting new ways of seeing familiar problems, sparring over assumptions, avoiding administrative pitfalls observed in other settings, and so on. Carol Weiss, who has thought about this issue for long-

er than most of us, calls this kind of advice 'enlightenment' rather than 'instrumental' use (Weiss, 1979; 1986). There is perhaps a tendency among academics themselves to be unduly cynical about such indirect influences. We feel inferior relative to what we see as the harder-nosed, more confident and practical advice streaming in to governments from private sector management consultants (Saint-Martin, 2000). This is an issue worth debating at length in another place, but suffice it to note here that there is plenty of evidence that private sector management consultancy often proves unsatisfactory, or unusable, to public and private sector clients alike (Argyris, 2000; Jackson, 2001; Pollitt, 2003, chapter 7). We should seek to compare our reality with their reality, not reality with a stereotyped ideal.

So let us not underestimate these varied academic engagements, and let us not ignore them. A real academic is one who reflexively analyses his or her experiences with practitioners, just as s/he might analyse a scientific text. The confidences of practitioners must be preserved of course – that is a question of basic professional ethics and if in a particular instance we do not want to observe this constraint we should not agree to do the work. But as a community we could do much more to bring our extensive advisory activities out into the open for academic debate and scrutiny. That is our unique way of strengthening the validity and reliability of our thinking, and of clarifying issues of value and ethics. We should not hesitate to apply it to the experiences we have gathered in the hitherto hidden world of consultancy. In short we should study advice-giving, just as we study other forms of organizational behaviour. We should clarify and categorise its modalities, its ethics and its effects. Instead of remaining a hidden, 'third world' for academics, practitioner advice-giving should be included in our on-going attempts to sustain and improve quality in research and teaching.

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