

designing 'political work'

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I want to think and talk about developing a new course in what it is people do when they do politics. It's informed by ideas about practice, and charged by the need to make that mean something in respect of public action. I guess one of the motives is to make sense of the kinds of things we've been doing and talking about for a few years now. What is 'political work' and how is it done?

For me, one of the interesting things about the focus on practice is the way it calls into question almost everything we think and know about policy and politics. And I want to use this discussion, similarly, to call into question everything about the way we work: about the way we think and do teaching, learning and assessment, about how we work together, about how we connect as academic social scientists with other worlds of practice. Whatever comes out of that needs to be both flexible – responsive to changing issues and resources – and sustainable. The notion of a 'course' is only to place some as yet unrealised object among us around which we might talk.

I'm trying to find the right way of doing this talking, and now it occurs to me that this is an essential problem, one to do with the politics of politics (or the policy of policy), a meta-political process on which all else turns. And then – *obviously* – it's something that I/we will only work out in practice. For now, I'm writing rather than talking, because it's the most immediate way of getting together. I want to go on and organize a series of meetings over the next few months at which we might talk more. Meantime, think of this as the first post to a blog that doesn't yet exist.¹

This is no more than a background paper, explaining where I'm coming from. I can see that I/we might have to begin again, in a different place altogether, but I can only know that if I can explain where I am now. You'll have seen already that I'm struggling a bit with voice and register, swinging between the impersonal and the informal, the mundane and the grandiose, which is partly why much of what follows consists of little more than notes. But I guess that only testifies to the problem of knowing what this is all about.

parameters

The key referents 'policy', 'politics' and 'practice' are all radically, enduringly undetermined. My strategy is to close in on the idea of practice, leaving the actors (and authors) themselves to make claims about politics. In passing, I want to erode the distinction between 'policy' and 'politics', which I think I do best by

¹ By the same token, I'd like to think everything I/we produce might be treated in the spirit of 'open source' software: anybody might take it up, use and improve it, with due acknowledgement and with an equal obligation to make those uses and improvements public.

simply not acknowledging it.

It follows, I think, that the course should be interdisciplinary. I don't see any other way of engaging with practice, and it's what I'd want to do anyhow. I'm aware how easy it is to claim interdisciplinarity only to be exposed as biased or constrained (disciplined) in some way, but I think that's probably useful. By the same token, I'd want to appeal to students in government and politics, international relations, social and public policy, anthropology and sociology at least, as well as perhaps those in professional fields such as nursing, social work, management and law.

Similarly, I'd want the course to be inter/national. It should draw on material from different countries and contexts, but it should elide and erode the distinction between national and international 'levels'. I want to get at the immediacy of practice, at the way political work is done between men and women with first and last names, in streets and rooms of all kinds whether in Edinburgh or London, Seattle, Cairo, Berwick or in any other community or neighbourhood. I want to develop a sense of the 'multiple local' spaces of politics.

This is not a training course; it will not teach students 'how to do politics'. Nevertheless, it should provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own practice or experience of political work.

pedagogy

I think the way to learn about practice – whether as teacher or student – is by case study. Case studies should be the point of orientation for teaching and learning, and the assessment task should be for students to research and write a case study of their own. In this way, in the spirit of informed and critical practice, the course is designed to integrate empirical understanding and theoretical reflection with practical investigation.

But what should we do with case studies? How should we interrogate them? The essential question is the ethnographic: what is going on here? More specifically: what is political work? What does it comprise? What are the activities by which policy and politics are achieved? When people do politics, what is it they are doing? More analytically, we might ask what is being done, why and to what effect. What action is being taken? What knowledge does it entail? What rules are being followed? What *is* political work?

In terms of delivery, my provisional thoughts are that:

- the course should be delivered in two-hour workshops of no more than twenty students each;
- workshops should comprise: a short introduction to the topic or concept at hand; collective interrogation and discussion of a set case study; presentation of other case studies; summary discussion;

- assessment should be by a single course paper which (i) presents a case study of political work; (ii) provides relevant background, context and a review of literature; (iii) offers appropriate reflection, analysis and discussion.

But there must be other ways of going about this.

topics and materials

It's been interesting to discover how difficult it is to identify a stable set of topics for the course. This may be because 'practice' is necessarily ill-defined: it belongs to – perhaps even constitutes – the realm of real-world activity which escapes formal definition. Nevertheless, we have to specify some body of material, as well as some kind of sequence or order in which to proceed. Or do we? Should we reject or deny even that?

If not, where are we going to find the material we want? Where and how is practice represented in the literature? Searching databases on the terms 'politics' and/or 'policy' and 'practice' throws up both too much and too little. Papers in social and public policy routinely assert 'implications for practice', with seemingly little sense of what practice is or how it might change. How trade regulations or constitutional arrangements work 'in practice', equally, seems to have more to do with aggregate processes than with the thought and action of human beings.

Having said this, and now prompting you, I half expect to be deluged with references. If that happens, then great, bring it on. If not, though – if there really isn't much – my question changes. Why do those of us who do 'policy' and 'politics' take so little account of practice? Why are we so shy of practice? Is it so ineffable, or are we somehow scared of it?

Of course, it may be that practice isn't in the (academic) literature, it's somewhere else: in fiction, dramatized on film and tv, in diaries and documentaries, on blogs, in fleeting conversations. Or it eludes representation altogether: once described and prescribed it moves on; its logic and function is precisely not to be available for capture in this way. I don't quite believe that: in order to constitute a practice, behaviour must be communicable in some form, though there may be an iterative relationship between actions and representations of them.

Anyway, I have a provisional list of topics and readings; I still want to create a list of video and web-based resources. I've gone about this pragmatically (how else?), more or less in the style of grounded theory. I've looked for material I intuitively recognised as relevant, creating, abandoning and recreating categories simply in order to know what I was collecting, in order mentally to hold on to it, so to speak. As meaning finitism tells us, adding new items to categories changed those categories, their labels and their relationship to others, and they're still evolving.

But what are my categories categories of? Not practices as such, but modes or domains, perhaps even functions of politics within and among which practices are to be determined (in a sense, it may be that doing this becomes the object of the course). But do these categories work? Do they provide access to practice?

As I have it now, there are three groups or sets of topics: the first comprises substantive material ('cases'), following a trajectory from 'outside' (activism) to 'inside' (administration) and back ('the front line', by which I mean the boundary between political and non-political). There's then an analytic or theoretical session on the nature of practice, designed to integrate and reflect on what's been raised so far, and a session on 'researching practice' designed to set students up to produce case studies. There's then a shorter section on generic phenomena likely to be relevant to all cases: interaction, artefacts and spaces.

1. activism and protest
2. representation
3. administration
4. development
5. the front line

6. political work: [politics, policy and] practice
7. researching practice

8. interaction: meetings
9. artefacts: documents [and other things]
10. spaces of practice

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