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RESEARCH REPORT NO. 56

TEACHING PRACTICAL POLICY ANALYSIS

George Kent

April 1971

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13. ABSTRACT

Students can learn to grapple with real political problems by doing policy analyses, studies designed to produce well-supported recommendations for action dealing with particular problems. Instead of asking what is being done about particular issues, they could ask what should be done. These questions could be examined in a systematic and analytic way, in a variety of formats. Engagement in political studies of this kind can develop the student's skill at analyzing and managing real political problems, it can enhance his sense of efficacy, and it can provide him with a firmer grasp of political concepts and information than would be obtained with traditional teaching methods.

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ABSTRACT

Students can learn to grapple with real political problems by doing policy analyses, studies designed to produce well-supported recommendations for action dealing with particular problems. Instead of asking what is being done about particular issues they could ask what should be done. These questions could be examined in a systematic and analytic way, in a variety of formats. Engagement in political studies of this kind can develop the student's skill at analyzing and managing real political problems, it can enhance his sense of efficacy, and it can provide him with a firmer grasp of political concepts and information than would be obtained with traditional teaching methods.

TEACHING PRACTICAL POLICY ANALYSIS[1]

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Many conscientious teachers of politics feel derelict in their duty if they do not provide detailed course outlines, annotated bibliographies, and well-honed lectures for their classes. The result is often a well-organized bore which, in spite of the great effort, turns out not to be very educational. The most serious failure is that by managing so much, the teacher cheats his students out of the opportunity and experience of taking on responsibility themselves. In being told precisely what pages to read, how long a paper to write, and what topics to study, the student's own decision-making power is emasculated. He becomes incapable of facing the kind of real-world problems he is sure to encounter in later life.

This is of utmost importance for students of political science and international relations. Real political problems do not arise in the form of multiple-choice questions. Answers are not simply right or wrong. A substantial part of the real-world analyst's task is to identify the problem he faces, and then to decide what to do about it. While there is a great deal of advice around about what to do about real political problems, there is very little advice on <u>how to decide</u> what to do.

Students cannot be given very much realistic experience in policy analysis, but they can be given a good taste of it. Problems can be analyzed and recommendations can be formulated in assignments in traditional

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[1]This essay, first drafted while the author was at San Francisco State College, was prepared in connection with the Dimensionality of Nations Project, supported by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, ARPA Order No. 1063, and monitored by the Office of Naval Research, Contract No. N0014-67-A-0387-0003.

courses. More intensive experience can be provided by devoting whole courses to policy analysis. The question motivating these problem-oriented courses would be "what should be done?" Other questions like "what is the detailed background of the problem?" should be treated as secondary, and not be allowed to become the central focus. The action orientation provides the basis for the organization of the course and for the organization of the student's thinking. The test of the relevance of any particular approach or subtopic is whether or not it helps in deciding what should be done.

A great deal of experience has already been gathered in the use of simulation exercises in teaching.[2] Policy analysis exercises have some similar features, but they are different in many important ways. While in most simulations specific decision-making problems are handled with instant analyses as they arise, in policy analysis exercises students engage in a more contemplative study of their problems, without the stress of demands for immediate results. In fact, the analysis itself is often done at home, with the results brought to class for critical analysis. The nearest thing to it in simulations is the position paper which is sometimes called for, but these are usually for "public" consumption, and are not used for a systematic formulation and evaluation of alternative courses of action.

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[2]Cf. Harold Guetzkow _et al._, _Simulation in International Relations: Developments for Research and Teaching_, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963; Sarane S. Boocock and E. O. Schild (eds.), _Simulation Games in Learning_, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1968; William D. Coplin (ed.), _Simulation in the Study of Politics_, Chicago: Markham, 1968; _American Behavioral Scientist_, Vol. 10, No. 2 (October 1966) and Vol. 10, No. 3 (November 1966); John R. Raser, _Simulation and Society: An Exploration of Scientific Gaming_, Boston:Allyn & Bacon, 1969; Alan R. Thoeny and Frank B. Horton, "Simulation Games as a Teaching Technique: A Preliminary Review," U.S. Air Force Academy; George Kent and John Sloane, "The Simplest Simulation," _Social Studies_, forthcoming.

In doing policy analyses the student must be more systematic and more explicitly analytical than he does in simulations. The student does not play the role of the decision-maker himself, but takes the role of an adviser to a decision-maker. He cannot simply prescribe actions but must also provide a well-developed rationale for choosing them, including some evidence of having formulated and evaluated alternative plausible courses of action. These painful steps are usually skipped when more or less realistic simulations are allowed to unfold at their own pace.

When students are called upon to work together to produce a joint analysis, the effort differs from simulations precisely in the fact that they are asked to work together, and not as if they were independent, sometimes opposing factions. Their goal is common by definition. Their meetings are more like the cabinet meetings of individual countries than the meetings of separate countries at an international organization or on a battlefield.

The students' own concerns and motivations can be harnessed to policy studies by using current and well-known problems rather than contrived and uninteresting ones. The student can take his role to be that of a staff assistant to some executive decision-maker, whether the President of the United States, a leading revolutionary, a student leader, the Secretary General of the United Nations, a local precinct captain, or any other figure. The problems should not be abstract and philosophical questions of principle, but should be earthy, concrete, specific questions about choices of action: If Saudi Arabia were to request additional anti-aircraft installations, should the United States comply? Should the politician campaigning in the tenth district publicly advocate capital punishment? Should a revolutionary leader advocate urban sabotage campaigns

in Bolivia? Should the United Nations state that the troubles in Northern Ireland are beyond its legal competence? What should be the limits of American assistance to Israel and Saudi Arabia? The student's task would be to produce an analysis and recommendations for action, in writing, by a specified date.

Thus the alternative to overly-managed courses is not the simple and expeditious abandonment of all structure, the "what would you like to talk about today" evasion. While the policy analysis course cannot be pre-programmed except in the broadest outlines, the teacher still has a great deal of hard work to do. He must supervise, guide, provoke, suggest, encourage, and offer constructive criticism. He must know when to leave the students to their own devices, stewing in indecision, and he must know when to rescue them with subtle suggestions. Students' errors will often be so gross that alert instructors, even without special training or experience, may be competent to conduct basic classes in policy analysis.

Each student can be asked to choose and work on a given problem independently, with each of them responsible for writing his own final report. A different dimension of experience can be added by asking advanced classes to work as a group to produce a single set of recommendations. This is far more difficult than it would be for any single individual operating alone. In theory the group product, benefitting from every individual's contribution, should be superior to the recommendations that could be produced by any single individual. Realistically, however, the problems of division of labor, coordination, general organization, etc., encountered in the group setting may actually work to make the group product inferior to the best that could have been obtained from individuals operating independently. Anyone who has ever participated

in real-world committees concerned with taking or recommending action knows that the problems are enormous. The classroom provides one good opportunity for the student to be self-conscious and analytical about the problem of managing the interaction.

After an abortive, overly theoretical Seminar in Policy Analysis, the writer tested this more practical approach in two different courses. In each case the common focus was the Arab-Israeli conflict. The major assignment was the requirement that the group as a whole produce written recommendations for dealing with the conflict by a specified date. They could be addressed to any or all of the concerned parties, and they could deal with any or all of the many interconnected problems which comprise the conflict. The recommendations had to be useful and realistic.

Some of the more striking findings in these courses are reported here. The frequent repetition of similar errors of judgment by the students provides clear evidence of the need for training in practical policy analysis. Other instructors who try to teach similar courses will have to be alert to the same kinds of weaknesses.

The obvious first step in analysis is to define the problem. It is not quite so obvious what information is relevant to the definition or to what detail the problem needs to be defined. One certainly does not gather <u>all</u> the information relating to the topic. It is soon discovered that there is not simply one well-defined problem, but instead a whole constellation of intricately connected problems. Moreover, what at an earlier time might have appeared to be purely procedural questions (e.g., whether there should be negotiations, or what should be the shape of the negotiating table) become substantive problems in themselves.

When asked to characterize a political problem, students automatically produce a detailed history of its evolution. Extensive history is substituted for an intensive analysis of the current situation which is, after all, the problem which must be dealt with. Apart from providing general background, it should be understood that for the policy analyst, history is relevant only to the extent that it helps one to understand the currently existing problems. What happened in the past, of itself, does not matter. In general, the problem needs to be studied only to the extent that it helps the analyst to develop and evaluate possible courses of action.

Political conflict lies in the incompatibility of the current values of different political entities having different capabilities for pursuing their values. Thus a problem like the Arab-Israeli conflict can be effectively articulated in terms of the foreign policies of each of the concerned factions with respect to the dominant issues. A group of analysts can list the factions and then divide among themselves the responsibility for studying and reporting on their policies. It is also important to assess the capabilities of the factions to determine what they could do to achieve their ends. The general historical background helps in understanding these current positions.

The common historical approach to the understanding of political problems is related to the common temptation to analyze them in highly moralistic terms. Students are preoccupied with allocating blame, with deciding who is right and who is wrong. While this is surely an important consideration, that debate should not be allowed to take the place of formulating recommendations for action. Only limited attention should be given to moral, legal, or abstract philosophical questions. They are

relevant, but if answering them becomes an end in itself, they become a distraction from the major work at hand.

The analyst knows from the outset that he cannot hope to generate fully satisfactory solutions to all of the problems. He must make hard choices as to how he will allocate his attention, choices as to which subproblems are the most worthwhile focus of his concern. The other problems remain important but are temporarily set aside to expedite the analysis.

Once a particular subproblem is selected for emphasis, the proposals that have been offered in the past by others should be reviewed. These should include recommendations offered both by partisans and by more neutral observers. The reactions of the primary concerned parties of these past proposals will sharply refine the analyst's understanding of their values.

The analyst should then go on to exercise his imagaination and produce new proposals of possible courses of action. These ideas may be entirely new, or they may be variations on themes previously suggested by others. These proposals should not be articulations of abstract principles or recommendations for generally good behavior (e.g., to be more "understanding") but should be recommendations for specific actions by specific parties.

One common mistake of amateur policy analysts is that they interpret their task as that of necessarily finding <u>solutions</u>. On the model of the textbook arithmetic problem, they understand their job as that of finding a satisfactory answer, one that, in effect, will make the problem go away. Their prior schooling teaches them to treat problems as puzzles which have solutions, solutions which definitely exist and only wait to be discovered.

Real political problems are not this way, so this perspective has very serious consequences. In the classes described here the students read widely and a number of experts representing the different factions were invited as guests to discuss the conflict with the class. This intensive exposure to the issues, and especially to past failures, along with the consistency of the experts' pessimism, quickly led many students to the conclusion that no solution was possible. While this may have been accurate, the unfortunate consequence was that many of the students wanted to give it all up.

Many students took the position that palliatives, modest efforts to limit or control the difficulties, were not worthwhile or could not possibly work. (Some took the position that ameliorative steps would necessarily be counter-productive, a position which might be accepted if it were cogently argued. The protest here is against unreasoning, crippling pessimism.) If they became convinced that they could not find a solution, they wanted to abandon the problem and go on to another one.

It took a great deal of manufactured optimism, pressure, and coaching from the instructor to carry the point that the practical political task was to find the best things that could be done, even if those things were not very good. Political problems are not simply solved or unsolved, and they cannot be abandoned. When the possibility of finding a thoroughly satisfactory solution evaporates, instead of giving up the effort altogether the analyst should limit himself to more modest objectives. He should adopt the view that he faces a problem about which something must be done. A recommendation to take no action is acceptable if it emerges from a full and proper analysis and is not chosen simply by default. He should survey the range of actions which could be taken and

ask which of these would be best. If solving a problem is not possible, ameliorating it may still be worthwhile. With this perspective there is less of a temptation to withdraw in frustration if total success is not achieved.

Often different possible actions are discussed and compared as if it were necessary to choose among them when in fact it would be possible to do several different things, whether simultaneously or serially. There is no real need to choose between, say, imposing an arms embargo and offering to meditate a particular dispute. One must decide whether or not to do each of these things individually, but there is nothing in their nature to force a choice between them. Similarly, analysts do not need to choose between working for short-term or long-term changes (e.g., a cease fire, as compared to the establishment of a new state of Palestine) but can work simultaneously on both fronts. Of course it may be desirable to choose one topic or the other as more worthy of the analyst's attention, rather than spreading his resources thinly over a wide variety of problems. But that choice is imposed by the analyst, and is not required by the nature of the contemplated actions.

Restricting one's focus of attention is useful and necessary, but it is also risky. The analyst may select just two or three alternative courses of action for intensive study and then identify the best of these alternatives. To slip from saying that this alternative is the best <u>of those studied</u> to saying that it is simply the best can be a serious error. If it is argued that, say, internationalization of Jerusalem would be superior to administrative control by religious bodies, this would not warrant the conclusion that internationalization would be best, without qualification. The alternatives studied often are only a subset of the

possible alternatives, so the best of the subset is not necessarily the best of all possibilities.

Student analysts are inclined to simply list desirable states of affairs (e.g., arms embargo, cease fire, internationalization of Jerusalem) without developing the ideas. This is almost as useless as suggesting to an executive that he should make wise decisions. Good recommendations specify who should take what concrete actions to bring about the desired ends. Somtimes students offer old ideas (e.g., mediation, arms limitations, a binational state) as if they were entirely new. The analyst should study comparable past recommendations or actions to identify the objections that had been raised or the reasons for failure. He should then show how the variation he has designed would overcome the difficulties that had been encountered before. The improvements on the old idea might take the form of qualifications, more fully specified time frames, making certain actions by one party conditional on the actions of another, guarantees by external powers, contingency plans, broadened options, specifications of fall-back positions, and so on. The hallmark of good recommendations is that they anticipate objections and deal with them.

Once some recommendations are tentatively selected for further study, a major task is to assess the likely reactions of the concerned parties. Where reactions seem likely to be negative, the proposal should be reexamined to determine if it can be altered in some way to make it more palatable without at the same time losing its advantages. Obviously the party required to take the action must favor the proposal. Other affected parties, however, do not always have to be enthusiastic supporters. Too often students find the least objection to a proposal to be sufficient grounds for rejecting it. They do not fully appreciate that sometimes

certain policies should be implemented even in the face of complaints. Some actions might be wise to take even if particular parties object to it.

At the opposite extreme are those students who find it remarkably easy to recommend the application of overwhelming force. There is a great lack of finesse. Some students do not propose subtle pressures or sequences of increasingly strong threats, but suggest simply that a given country be made to do whatever is required. Whether or not this failure of imagination is peculiarly American, it is most disturbing.

Some of the difficulties encountered in policy analysis are peculiar to the management of the group, and are not relevant for the individual analyst acting alone. A major difficulty is that of inducing leadership to emerge. It does not take long to discover that idealistic democratic processes are incompatible with getting work done in a committee. Someone must take a commanding position if only to limit debate on trivial points. Few students are willing to step forward to fill such a position, partly because of doubts about their own competence, and partly because of the feeling that too much responsibility will fall on the shoulders of the leader. The difficulties might be eased if it were agreed that the chairman would control the discussion and would oversee organization, but would have little or no other substantive responsibilities. That is, the leader might be purely a delegator of tasks.

Policy analysis groups can be organized in a variety of ways. They can be divided into subcommittees with different substantive responsibilities, possibly corresponding to the divisions in the anticipated table of contents of the final written report. In one of the courses dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, one subgroup took the responsibility for writing a section on background and analysis of the current problem,

another took up the problem of obtaining a cease-fire and/or negotiations, another focused on the problem of the Palestinians, and another accepted the task of writing the final summary and compilation of recommendations. Representatives of each of the topical subcommittees can, collectively, serve as an editorial board, with overall responsibility for the continuity and coherence of the group's final report.

Instead of dividing into groups with different assignments, the group working as a whole might plan its targettable of contents early in the semester, and then work through it together, stage by stage. This logical progression from introductory analysis to final recommendations, taken up sequentially by the group as a whole, may be more beneficial to the participants than a division of labor sustained throughout the semester would be.

Another possible organization would have the group divided into two or three subgroups, all with identical assignments. They would be required to work independently, and to bring in drafts on an appointed day well before the final recommendations were due. The best of the different groups' efforts could then be combined into one final paper. This procedure reduces the effects of any single group's tendency to lock in to a single line of thinking. While it requires more time and effort, this organization is likely to produce better results than the whole group working together.

The teaching technique in policy analysis courses should be subtle and Socratic. The instructor should not be too quick to point the way out of dilemmas that arise, and if too much guidance is asked of him or too much deference is granted to him, he should excuse himself. His timely departure from the classroom may provoke more free-wheeling discussions,

and may sometimes force students to face up to their disorganization and indecision. Suggestions the instructor does wish to make can sometimes be softened simply by converting them into carefully turned questions. The group will often drift from the agenda, but occasional questions about relevance--like "so what?"--can help them to recover.

Courses oriented toward policy analysis can also provide effective education of the kind sought in traditional courses. The two classes described here, for example, were nominally on Comparative Foreign Policies: Middle East. Because of their intensive involvement, the students seemed to learn more about the policies of the countries than they would have in traditional lecture courses on the same topic. Their understanding of the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict was surely deeper than it would have been if it were simply described to them.

Problem-oriented courses seem to be very effective in other branches of study, but doing policy analysis has not been regarded as an essential component of the political science curriculum. It should be. It can be incorporated in a variety of ways. Students should be encouraged to write term papers and even dissertations which are devoted to policy questions rather than the more traditional research topics. Students should be encouraged to conduct systematic studies on what policy should be in different areas. Certainly many students would welcome that kind of innovation.

The techniques of practical policy analysis cannot be adequately conveyed through lectures. Information and theory must be supplemented with training and experience. Courses in policy analysis must be designed loosely to provide a demand for insight and creativity on the part of the students. The instructor and students should be free to adapt to each

other and to the chosen problem as the semester progresses. The enterprise should be opportunistic, but there should be a clear and constant sense of purpose, focused at all times on providing hard experience in formulating and recommending courses of action in realistic political problem situations.