Do we Practise What we Preach when we Teach (and Research) Public Administration?

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“Science further presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is worth being known. In this, obviously, are contained all our problems.”


1 Introduction

1.1 Exploring the borders of the theory-practice gap in PA studies

In 2018, the new Italian Minister of Public Administration announced a “new” incentive plan for the civil service in order to boost employee motivation and PA performance. The newness of this typically NPM reform is uncertain, since performance-related pay (PRP) for local government employees was introduced in Italy for the first time in 1983, and two years later for the rest of the civil service. Since then, PRP has been revised and reformed several times. Similar patterns can be observed in the rest of European and Western countries, where PRP reforms have kept being introduced since the 1970s (Lah and Perry, 2008; Proeller et al., 2014). This is a typical example of what we observe within the practice of public administration reforms, which has been so deeply and extensively investigated (Pollit & Bouckaert 2017; Ongaro 2009).

If we turn our attention to what PA theory says on PRP, we know how huge and consistent the body of knowledge is in demonstrating not only the limited impact of pay for performance on public employee motivation and performance (especially when compared to other sectors), but also the reasons of PRP failure in the public sector and the risks of its persistence.
This is just an example – among several others – of a short circuit between theory and practice in PA.

The purpose of this example is not meant to establish the rare impact of PA studies on practice – a long list of counter-examples can be made here – but to illustrate that breaks in the learning loop between theory and practice occur, the ways in which they can occur, and what implication this has on the practice of scholars.

In common debate the theory-practice gap is frequently framed as a matter of divergent agendas: scientific reliability of academic research often pushes for the selection of research topics and questions not always relevant in practice; scientific journals and their reviewers are more interested in methodologically solid studies, even if they are not that strong in terms of implications for practice, which is a disincentive for more practice-oriented research. The divergent agendas issue was one of those most cited by participants in the EPPA Seminar on PA Theory and Practice, held in Strasbourg on 5 and 6 April 2018. However, the case of PRP diffusion presented here highlights another aspect of the theory-practice gap: we have a strong coincidence of the PA reforming agenda in the real world with PA research and theory (public management reforms, public personnel policies, public service motivation theory, to provide a list of just the PA research topics involved there), and a remarkable effort to transform this body of academic knowledge into practical implications (Christensen, Paarlberg & Perry, 2017). Nevertheless, even when theory is relevant to the real world of PA, it does not always inform the practice.

The explanation of why NPM reforms are so persistent, despite the solid body of scientific evidence explaining the highly controversial results (Pollit, 2000), is deeply rooted in PA theory and especially in new institutional theory, which has brought enlightenment to how the logic of appropriateness inspires managerial reforms more than the logic of effectiveness (March and Olsen, 2004; Thoenig, 2003). Yet, what are the implications for the academic practice of such theoretical explanation? This issue constitutes the basis of the present contribution, which aims to offer some thoughts on how to bridge the PA theory-practice gap, starting with the practice of PA scholars themselves, which is not limited to the job of research, but also to teaching and disseminating, as will be illustrated in the next paragraphs.

1.2 Objectives, structure and approach

Beyond pure research activities, PA academics are also quite often teachers and sometimes consultants, board members and opinion leaders. According to this perspective, the field of PA practice is also occupied by scholars, and
this is the **locus** of this article. The objective of this contribution is to explore how PA studies can inform PA practice, starting with the job of academics in their research, teaching, and other dissemination activities. To this purpose, the methodological approach in this chapter is used to review some of the most common practices of PA scholars in their knowledge production and supply through the lens of some of the most influential PA theories or logics, such as Public Value, Public Governance and New Institutionalism, to explore the coherence of the theory-practice gap within the job of academics.

Thus, this paper is divided into three parts. The first, borrowing some concepts from the Public Value paradigm, aims at exploring what value is created in the process of PA knowledge production in terms of different target beneficiaries and types of PA knowledge: does the difference in terms of target beneficiaries (academics, students and practitioners) affect the type of value created by PA knowledge? Do such differences give rise to different and irreconcilable epistemologies?

In the second part, the focus is narrowed down to a typical field of encounter between scholars and practitioners, which is the executive education of PA. In this part, the practice of teaching PA to executive students is reviewed through the lens of New Institutional Theory and Public Governance: how can we bring PA theory into the practice of teaching in terms of content, approach and methodologies?

The third and concluding part, based upon the previous discussions, offers some tentative recommendations about how we can move and shift teaching and executive education – according to the EPPA purpose – for the next 20 years.

Some premises are required to introduce this chapter.

The first is about how much insight and how many ideas of this work come from discussions with the diverse and passionate group of participants at the EPPA seminars, especially the one held in Strasbourg on 5 and 6 April 2018, which focused on the topic of “PA and Practice,” followed by the final EPPA meeting in Lausanne on 4 and 5 September of the same year. Both occasions were an amazing and quite rare opportunity openly to exchange thoughts and opinions in a structured context on this critical topic, combining the perspective of leading scholars in different European schools of public administration, together with consultants and researchers involved in policy-making and advice, and with public executives from all institutional levels, from all over the EU, coming from local, regional and national institutions of many different countries.

The second premise is how the subfield of PA studies, Public Management – where the author comes from – represents at the same time a resource and a limitation. It can be a resource to this debate for its intrinsic practical
orientation: using and adapting Mintzberg’s words to capture this context, management is a combination of *art, craft and science* (Mintzberg, 2004). So is public management. Even the etymology of “management” derives from the Latin word *manus* meaning “hand,” as a symbol of its strong connection with practice and practical activities. However, Public Management is just one view among several others on PA studies – as discussed in other chapters of this book – and it can limit the perspective on PA practice to the domain of public management practice or – at least – public management reform as a policy field. Thus, this point of view can be challenged or integrated with other perspectives on public administration studies.

The last premise is about the reflexive nature of this contribution, coming from the everyday practice of teaching public executives, designing and delivering action research projects and customised executive education programmes for public administrations in the field of public management. It includes some of the thoughts on how to use PA theory to inform executive education for public managers and why further explorations were needed over recent years, to the point of inspiring the redesign of an Executive Master Programme for Public Managers at SDA Bocconi School of Management, under the direction of the current paper’s author (Hiedemann, Nasi and Saporito, 2017). Leveraging on this set of direct experiences and reflexive observation, this contribution aims to share some kind of learning from this. For this reason, even the slightly provocative tone of some of the paragraphs is also full of respect, gratitude and affection for this amazing job we have the privilege to do, which is to create and disseminate knowledge about and for public institutions.

## 2 Exploring what (public) value PA knowledge production creates, for whom, and how

### 2.1 Targeting potential PA knowledge beneficiaries

Whether Public Value is an established PA theory or more a reference for public management practice in search of more theoretical grounds is still under discussion (O’Flynn, 2007; Benington, 2011; Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2014; Hartley et al., 2017). For the purpose of this chapter, the notion of public values is conceptualised “as that which is created or added through the activities of public organisations and their managers. The focus is on what is added in value pertinent to societal outcomes” (Hartley et al. 2017, p. 673). From this point of view, based on the pioneering contribution by Moore
(1994, 1995), a strategic approach is used to redesign public services (Osborne, Radnor & Nasi, 2013) in order to move them closer to user needs and, thus, more effective and valuable. According to this perspective, which is largely influenced by marketing studies, the key question about public value creation is: for whom is this service creating value? Who will be the direct or indirect beneficiaries of such a service? Without a clear notion of the ideal recipients of any public endeavour (services, projects, programmes), there is no clear reference how to appraise whether the process has created public value or not. For example, the strong tradition of state schools, state universities and almost free (or for a very low fee) education in many European countries is fundamental in guaranteeing a well-established right to education. Yet, we ask if they really create public value. When we look at how educational attainment is distributed in society, we find that family wealth and parental educational attainment still play a crucial role in the schooling experience and success of the children. Paradoxically, we could have a completely free university just populated by the sons and daughters of the richer and more powerful classes, if other obstacles inhibiting access to higher education for the poorest are still there, with costs brushed aside (such as other cultural and social obstacles and many others). If the intention of state universities is to democratise access to higher education, then the public value to be created should be measured in terms of the increase in graduates from the lower classes. According to this logic, a clear definition of the target recipients and their needs is the critical starting point to orient value creation.

Applying the same logic to our context of PA knowledge producers and disseminators leads us to ask what our target is. Who are our ideal beneficiaries? How should we segment the PA knowledge of potential users? These questions can be useful for investigating the coherence of PA knowledge supply in relation to knowledge needs.

Going back to the presentations and commentaries shared in the Strasbourg meeting, the answers to these questions can be summarised as follows: PA knowledge has three typical markets of target beneficiaries – the scholars themselves, students and practitioners.

The first is the academic community. Research findings are meant to become published studies, mostly read by other scholars, with the purpose of building up – through a collaboration process primarily based on academic journals – a stable, reliable, coherent and comprehensive set of descriptions and interpretations around the function and evolution of public institutions. Since the PA field of study is widely fragmented and divided into an increasing number of sub-fields – an indicator of it can be how many new EGPA study groups have been created in the last decade, or how many new academic
journals have been launched in the field of PA studies – the PA academic community is probably too vast a definition, and it is perhaps more appropriate to talk about several interconnected knowledge communities. However, their mechanisms of functioning are almost the same, thus the academic professional profile – despite some differences among national educational and academic systems – is very similar: research is their primary mission, followed by or in conjunction with teaching undergraduate and/or graduate students, depending on the context. For this reason, PA scholars are at one and the same time PA knowledge producers and beneficiaries.

Moving on to the second segment of PA knowledge beneficiaries, PA students, their profile varies across countries and contexts very much according to a number of variables, such as whether or not Public Administration is a mandatory field of study for those who want to join the civil service; student age and professional seniority; the type of programme (undergraduate course vs. master or executive education programme). This specific target group of PA knowledge beneficiaries can be considered between practice and academia because not all students involved in a PA class are necessarily prospective (or current) public executives, nor is the intellectual development the sole expectation that students have. If PhD students are probably closer to (or likely to join) the academic community, MPA students are definitely closer to (or likely to join) the practice community. Yet in both cases a good mix of theory and practice is necessary – for PhD students in order to inspire relevant research questions, and for master’s students in order to enhance the awareness of public action and its deeper and wider meaning.

The third segment of potential beneficiaries of PA knowledge is the practice community stricto sensu, including all those people involved in the administration of public institutions. Here, on the opposite side of the academic community, the roles and professions within this large group are several and heterogeneous. First, it can include – depending on the definition we want to use – both civil servants and elected or politically appointed representatives. If we focus our attention on European democracies, the separation between politics and administration is still relevant, which is not necessarily the same in other political regimes, for instance, in Central Asian emerging republics. On our continent, when we target the practice community we should be clear if we are including politicians or not. Here the differences can be relevant. Political discourse usually turns our attention to PA issues when we start asking questions like: why are amazing policy plans not effectively implemented, or why do public services cost so much, or why does it take so much time to get things done in public infrastructure. In the political debate, no matter the embraced ideology, PA is still addressed as the “bureaucratic
burden” to be lifted. Even if the approach to PA is often affected by such stereotypes, politicians are a relevant part of the PA practice community, given the power and interest they can have in the PA reforming agenda. Narrowing the focus down to the non-political community of practice, this group still includes many diverse components. Public managers and, more generically, public officials are probably the most involved in everyday PA practice. Considering the differences in terms of administrative systems, institutional levels, policy fields and contexts, this group is still wide and heterogeneous in terms of attention and interest to PA knowledge. Focusing on Public Management studies, public executives are, at the same time, the typical and ideal object of research and an ideal target as knowledge beneficiaries. Using the lens of Public Governance, since the production of public services more and more involves other players from the non-profit-making or private sector, the PA practice community should also include non-profit managers, social entrepreneurs, impact investors, philanthropists, and a big list of PA stakeholders, funders, providers and, more generically, a large group of private partners of public institutions. All of them can gain some benefit from a better understanding of PA functions, trends and perspectives in this field. Thus, in the “governance” era, when we target the PA practice community we should frame it as a blended group of professionals and intersectoral managers, instead of keeping a line between executives from the public and the private sector.

In other words, in the process of PA knowledge production scholars can address as beneficiaries of their research these three possible groups of recipients. In terms of preferences, according to the Strasbourg seminar results, scholars love to talk to other scholars who are their prominent target audience and the natural recipients of the vast majority of their work. Some of them enjoy sharing their knowledge with students through teaching activities, which is a very typical activity for many PA scholars. Few – according to the Strasbourg seminar results – consider politicians, public executives, social entrepreneurs and private PA partners as an explicit, stable and intentional target of research and dissemination, thus the supply to this group is quite residual. Is this picture a problem or not? Do we want to be more relevant and see scholarly research have a bigger impact on PA practice or not? Going back to the strategic marketing metaphor, are we reaching our ideal target, or not?

During the EPPA seminar discussions, there was a high degree of consensus that there is a potentially strong interest within public institutions and communities in PA research findings, but scholars rarely proactively approach them. In other words, the emerging diagnosis is that the gap may be related more to supply than the potential demand for PA knowledge. A consolidated explanation of this observation offered in Strasbourg seems based
on rational choice theory: action research is not incentivised enough, since it does not drive academic publications. According to this perspective, the problem is rooted in scholarly practice – there is just too little interest in the practical implications of research. A similar interpretation has been related to the misalignment of academic research questions and practitioner interest and agendas. We are not investigating enough aspects that are interesting for the practice (i.e. making challenges of territorial reforms) while we are collecting evidence on less relevant topics. Here a third tentative explanation is offered: what if different knowledge beneficiaries also require different types of knowledge in terms of layout, places and epistemologies, and not just different topics?

2.2 PA Knowledge: one or many products?

Following the Public Value paradigm, we need to better define what kind of value PA knowledge creates for different beneficiaries. To this purpose, the questions to be answered here are: how does PA knowledge differ in terms of layout and format when it is designed for the three different clusters of potential beneficiaries, i.e. academics, practitioners and students? Where can it be accessed, in terms of physical or virtual places? What kind of needs does PA knowledge satisfy and how?

The first difference is the way in which the knowledge format and layout for the three different groups of beneficiaries are used for “consumption.” Papers and articles usually presented in academic conferences or published in scientific journals are for the academic community. Students are more often the recipients of books, handbooks and other readings, such as case studies and notes. Turning our attention to policy-makers, public executives and other private PA partners, the knowledge format is less typical and formalised. Some academic journals also explicitly address practitioners, aiming to serve both communities. Quite often handbook prefaces state that they are talking to students, executive students and practitioners. Executive summaries, infographics and other more practitioner-oriented layouts are more frequently used by consulting companies or by other knowledge providers such as applied research centres, but not usually by academics in their practice. In other words, PA knowledge is a product quite well established in terms of layout and format when the recipients are the community of academics or the community of students. Executives are usually more easily addressed by non-academic research, since they are less frequently the recipients of a specific “product line” offered by academic departments.
The second difference concerning how to access PA knowledge, online journals and academic conferences is respectively the virtual and physical place where scholars meet other scholars to exchange and produce new PA knowledge. Students usually access PA knowledge when they enrol in a PA programme as part of their undergraduate or graduate education. The places where scholars and practitioners can meet are less clearly defined and more casual. Apart from executive programmes or applied research initiatives, the way collaboration between PA scholars and PA executives is organised is less structured, more informal, and often moves from classrooms to boardrooms.

The third difference is about the different needs that the three communities of beneficiaries have regarding PA knowledge. What scholars look for within their community is usually clear evidence to build up rigorous and generalisable explanations and interpretation of PA functions and development. Students – especially in undergraduate programmes – are more interested in descriptive information and illustrations, since they often need to be introduced to the basic function of Public Administration and related theoretical foundations. The most valuable part of PA knowledge for executives and policy-makers is actionable knowledge in terms of solutions to given problems, advice and guidelines. Hence, this leads to the success of best practice and similar approaches to PA knowledge within the practice community. To simplify this, scholars are interested in “why” questions, students in “what” questions, and practitioners in “how” questions. Just as an example, the topic of pay and incentives for performance is addressed by scholars in terms of why they are less effective in the public sector, with related explanations, such as motivational theories. Students need to start with what the features and limits of civil service compensation plans and motivation are, and what the differences from the private sector are, before jumping into deeper issues. Executives – even if they have shown an interest in more theoretical questions – want to know how to design new compensation plans or to motivate their public employees. These different needs give rise to different epistemologies: the first two refer to positive or descriptive theories, while the last refers to normative or prescriptive knowledge. This interpretation of the distance between academia and community of practice has been called the “two cultures” problem, one of the priests of research purity, the other of soldiers of organisational performance, each culture informed by its own norms and frames of reference (March and Sutton, 1997; Datar et al., 2010). Focusing our attention on how PA knowledge can be used in the practice community, new institutional theories explain the power of clear norms, rules, guidelines and other forms of prescription as a source of legitimacy for public action. In that sense, evidence-based PA can be seen as a sort of
“scientification” of the source of legitimacy of public action and decision making in the public arena.

To conclude, scholars tend barely to focus on how to reach practitioners. Playing with words, we can say that practitioners are not included in academic practice, since this practice is not generally perceived as the business of scholars. As noted in Strasbourg, this gap is not due to a lack of interest in the practice community, but to a scarce supply. Furthermore, the signs of such scarce supply are the shortage of stable and institutionalised places of exchange between academics and practitioners, and the low diffusion of journals, papers or other more usable formats – such as executive reports or infographics – offered by the world of academia for the practice community. In addition, among the list of reasons for this gap that were explored during the Strasbourg seminar – such as small incentives for scholars who want to work on action research projects – the epistemic distance probably deserves to be better investigated. Consulting companies or similar agencies are more willing to carry out research projects aimed at offering benchmarking analysis, costs-benefit analysis, evaluation projects and other types of “actionable knowledge” that can easily be implemented into policy design. In other words, they offer solutions and answers to given questions without any specific theoretical background. Alongside this, PA Theory has clearly explained how much those “evidence-based” solutions play the game of legitimacy in policy-making (Weiss, 2001). If the epistemic gap can be one of the reasons for scarce interaction between scholars and practitioners, how can this be filled? How much space is there in the case of action-research projects to inject some theoretical perspectives, which is typical of academic research? Is it possible to combine critical thinking with prescription, or positive interpretation with normative guidelines?

3 Back to PA theory to better inform the practice of teaching PA with public executives

3.1 Theorising or pushing isomorphism?

Among the “how” questions coming from the real world of PA practice, “how can we change the administrative system” is the one question that has been among the most persistent and prominent. The ways scholars have been approaching the long list of research questions related to the “change issue” of public administration are countless, but a certain stability can be identified in the theoretical paradigms and explications used to deal with it. Since Max
Weber’s studies, the Public Administration research agenda has been strongly influenced by the institutionalism umbrella paradigm, as over time it has been articulated in a myriad of old and new versions (Peters, 2011). Narrowing the field down to public management reforms in European or Western countries from a comparative and historical perspective (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2017; Ongaro, 2009; Mele & Ongaro, 2014), the (new) institutional theories have been useful not only in explaining the dominance of the NPM paradigm, the convergence and hybridisation of different administrative systems, but also the controversial and limited impact of those reforms on performance more often oriented to a formal compliance rather than a measurable managerial impact (Capano, 2003; Anessi-Pessina, Nasi & Steccolini, 2008; Mele, 2010). The publicness of such organisations makes them more exposed to external legitimacy pressure in the absence of other sources of pressure (i.e. market competition for the private sector) (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). After decades of research in this field, the managerial reforming agenda keeps displaying a strong normative and mimetic isomorphic power over public institutions at local, national and international levels in almost every continent, regardless of the impact of performance. In other words, managerial recipes have just been replacing (or more often adding to) red tape, since both – public management and bureaucracy – answer the common need of external legitimacy of public action. Since the diffusion of New Public Management, we have still been observing the perpetual dissemination of a sort of “managerial orthodoxy” for public administrations, as just a set of new management-like formal procedures and prescriptions to comply with and conform to, regardless of the organisational needs it is meant to answer. However, when Public Management becomes an orthodoxy, who are the evangelists?

Years ago, during the redesign of the above-cited Executive Master Programme for Public Managers offered by the SDA Bocconi School of Management, it turned out that the research agenda and results of some faculty members had been under-represented in their teaching, since they did not believe that this kind of knowledge would be interesting to public managers. The effort of providing actionable knowledge and very practical insights to an executive audience – features that have always been considered a strength of the cited executive programme – was driving some of the faculty to a sort of epistemic schizophrenia: the same assumptions and discourse that they were used to challenge through their research were applied to their executive teaching classes to match public manager expectations. The fear of being considered “too theoretical” or “not relevant for the practice” was deeper than the confidence in the implications for practice of their papers
and research. This observation was an amazing occasion to open an internal debate on what we want to offer our executive students, with regard to what we think they need, which is not necessarily what they ask for. Using this case to reflect on the role of schools and scholars involved in Public Management studies, the question becomes controversial: can we be, at the same time, public management evangelists and their most critical reviewers? Going back to the epistemological issue discussed above, what role do we want to play both in the classrooms and in the boardrooms? How willing are we to raise more questions and doubts, rather than giving quick answers and solutions? How much do we trust in our theories and the value they can offer for the practice? Or are we changing epistemologies once we change audience?

3.2 Theorising on governance, but practising government?

Among the theories of Public Administration, one of the most popular that stands out – and is meant to overcome the New Public Management paradigm – is Governance or Public Governance (Rhodes, 1996; Osborne, 2006), which focuses attention on the plurality of actors involved in the production of public value, the fragmentation of power among different governmental levels, the increasing involvement of non-profit-making organisations in public service delivery, overcoming the diffusion of private-public partnerships, and the formal and informal influence of stakeholders in the policy process. All these aspects call for a new way of explaining the function of public administration. Despite the democratic risks and limits of the informal and negotiating nature of management practice within the governance paradigm, the collaborative exercise and the net metaphor continue to fascinate scholars and practitioners. Yet, how much are the current Public Management programmes (i) inter-sectoral, (ii) collaborative and (iii) network-based?

(i) Despite the dominant narrative of interdependence across sectors in PA theory, if we turn our attention to executive education and other dissemination initiatives for the practice community, it is still uncertain how much they are open (and attractive), not just to managers of the public sector, but also those from the non-profit-making and private sectors. Here, yet again, differences in terms of institutional contexts and across countries matter and play a major role, but intersectoral initiatives are still a minority within the supply of PA master’s or other executive programmes. Conversely, MBA programmes and other general business management programmes have always been attractive for public managers too, and such educational experiences are among the drivers of NPM values dissemination in dominant discourse on public administration. How far can MPA or other PA programmes be
directed at (or are able to attract) managers from the private or non-profit, not to be able to jump into a public career, but because they recognise the need for new visions and competences to interact and create value with public institutions? If some intersectoral programmes are offered, for instance in the field of public-private partnerships (PPP) or public infrastructure financing and other related topics, they are rarely delivered by PA professors and the paradigm of business is still dominant, which is probably one of the reasons why there is insufficient focus on how to create public value with PPP, instead of just shareholder value (Vecchi et al., 2017).

(ii) How collaborative and co-produced are executive PA programmes in the field of PA, where collaboration and co-production have been recognised as key factors in public value creation? If, on the one hand, we can observe a progressive evolution of the curricula, moving away from the public version of traditional business functions (organisation, leadership and HR, budgeting, cost accounting, finance, procurement, etc.), to new courses, such as public governance, negotiation, co-production and other collaboration-based topics, how much does this paradigm inform the practice of teaching itself? Educational services – executive programmes included – are a typical co-produced service, since learning is experience-based (Kolb, 1984) and it occurs within the interaction between the teacher and the learner, in an enabling setting. Thus, executive programmes can be amazing laboratories where one can experience co-production and teach it through the practical experience of a well-designed co-produced service. Some insights about how to move from a delivery paradigm to a co-produced approach in the field of executive education for public managers have been offered, in terms of co-designing practices of curricula, learning metrics and evaluation methodologies, and the overall learning experience (Hiedemann, Nasi & Saporito, 2017). However, a lot of other co-produced practices in executive education can be better formalised and diffused, such as the use of learning journals and self-case studies – together with, or instead of, traditional case studies – in order to have leverage over the reflection of practice as a place of learning, using theories as analytical tools; and in order to enhance peer-to-peer learning, using the classroom as a structured setting to share experiences and ideas.

Finally, (iii) if networks are one of the most popular topics of PA studies, it has not been so influential in training design for public officials and civil servants. There, the assembly line is probably the most appropriate paradigm to understand how training programmes have been run for a long time. Training is not so infrequently conceived as the sum of a linear sequence of courses, each delivered by a different professor or trainer, not necessarily integrating with each other in terms of vision, mindset or frames of reference, like workers
in an assembly line. If there is any project work, internship or other practical experience, it is added as another workstation through which the manufacturing piece (the trainee) has to pass. This is even more evident in government national schools and similar recruitment and training institutions, built up as the archetype of the French ENA, where in general there are few core faculties, and where teaching hours are bought on the market and provided by different professors, professionals or other senior civil servants. In this model, the trainee is frequently passively exposed to speeches, lectures and lessons, without a clear *fil rouge*, or any other andragogical methodology, actively and intentionally to help learners to make sense of and create value from such a diverse range of perspectives. The institutional model of government schools has always been more focused on the recruitment side than on educational or training aspects, since these ENA-like schools have been established as the gateway to the civil service elite (Saporito, 2016). The critical part has always been how to access it, and not really what happens after joining the school. Even critics of the ENA model are more focused on how the recruitment process reinforces elitism and corporativism (Rouban, 2014), rather than how effective it is in terms of educational services. Here the network challenge for the education and training of civil servants could be how to organise, integrate and promote collaboration between the plurality of institutions, public and private, local and national, academic and non-academic – such as governmental departments or agencies, academic departments and colleges, research centres, and any other PA knowledge provider or disseminator – to be actively involved in contributing to the development of a new public ruling class.

4 Concluding remarks and recommendations for teaching PA to executives

The reasons behind breaks in the learning loop between theory and practice occurring in the public administration field can be researched not just in terms of the behaviours of policymakers or public executives – whose decisions are normatively accused of being insufficiently evidence-based – but also in terms of scholarly behaviour and practice. Using some of the most popular theories or paradigms diffused in public administration theory to observe and interpret PA scholarly practice, some conclusions and many further questions can be offered.

The perceived value of PA knowledge varies within the broad range of beneficiaries. Each of the three clusters of potential knowledge recipients
(academics, students and practitioners) reaches PA knowledge at a different point, through different formats and layouts, and for different purposes. PA knowledge is predominantly a “product” of scholars for other scholars, aiming at building up a better understanding of PA function and evolution, and academic conferences and journals are the material and immaterial places of interaction. Teaching students, especially undergraduates and/or graduate students, is another frequent activity in PA scholarly practice, but the type of knowledge offered in this case is not necessarily the same as for the academic community. Students are more interested in a wider, but less profound, description of the state of the art, and even the formats to convey knowledge, such as books, case studies and lessons, are different. Despite the differences, PA knowledge is a quite well-established “product” for both communities and it continues to be reproduced and diffused through institutionalised formats and places. Practitioners, on the other hand, are reached by PA knowledge in sporadic and less formalised ways, and even the places of interaction are less structured and frequently informal. Consulting companies or other knowledge providers on the market more often play a major role, compared to academia, which tries to defend its position, leveraging on the accreditation of the executive education that reinforces the formal value of knowledge, such as credits, degrees, grades and diplomas. However, the greatest difference regarding what kind of value PA theories produce is based around the type of knowledge that is considered valuable by practitioners: best practice, guidelines, tools and other forms of normative knowledge are considered more relevant than explanations, explorations, descriptions and other forms of positive knowledge preferred by scholars in their research and teaching. According to this interpretation, the gap between theory and practice is more than just a misalignment of research interests between scholars and practitioners, and is linked to an epistemic gap between positive vs. normative. How irreconcilable is this gap?

This issue is tremendously most relevant for those scholars involved in executive education programmes, where the interaction with practitioners is structured and formalised. Here the dilemma between positive and normative theory is more superficially framed as being either very analytical but too theoretical, or very practical, but too superficial. Sometimes the risk of this interpretation is to fall into a sort of theoretical schizophrenia, where we offer practitioners the same managerial toolbox that in academic papers we have described as useless or scarcely successful. The evergreen metaphor of the managerial toolbox is a paradigm of what practitioners expect from executive education: clear norms and practical tools. However, if we try to interpret the success of the toolbox metaphor, it is probably due to how it
openly puts the “problem” of management far from the manager and the set of his/her behaviours, judgments or decisions. Once tools are designed and implemented, things are supposed to be fine, as in a never-ending mechanism of hope (Brunsson & Olsen, 2018). It is not very often that you listen to a public executive asking to learn what he/she can change in his/her behaviour or decisions in order to improve. Just as an example, public managers usually ask how to motivate public employees, but hardly ever ask what they can change about themselves in order to become better leaders; or they ask how to work on job design to reduce staff turnover, even if team members usually leave because of the boss, not the job, and thus they should be interested in how to change their behaviour. In other words, practitioners tend to consider themselves not to be part of the picture, but more external “shunters.” Thus, if a need for knowledge can be observed here, even if not directly expressed by policy-makers or public managers, it is to enhance awareness about their role and the space they have to recognise, interpret and mindfully deal with the context and its challenges, including the isomorphic pressures.

The same conclusions can equally be drawn for scholars in the way they perceive the theory vs. practice gap: what if the problem is not just the scarce interest of practitioners in evidence-based policy or the superficial attraction for best practice and protocols, but the practice of scholars themselves?

Since the purpose of the EPPA project is not just to review the “state of the art” but also to formulate future directions for the next 20 years, what are the implications of these discussions for the practice of teaching PA?

As a sort of summary and a further development of what has been presented up to this point, we can try to identify, by applying the comparative approach, the current or dominant learning model for executive PA programmes in Europe to, better to focus on what it could be like in the future.

The first relevant dimension is about how to define the target beneficiaries, since – as has already been said – the way knowledge is imparted and used is deeply influenced by the characteristics of the users. If, at the present, PA programmes and other initiatives for the practice community tend to look mainly at civil servants, public managers or people within public institutions, the challenge for the future is how to reach a wider social group of PA stakeholders, which also includes private/non-profit entrepreneurs, CSR experts, managers from public utilities and other private industries closer to public interests (like infrastructures or impact investing), consultants for the public interests and all the professionals involved in the “governance” arena. If the creation of public value involves more and more professionals and managers from other sectors, it means that they should be included
in our concept of PA practice community together with professionals and managers from the public sector.

Table 1  Comparing Learning Models for Teaching PA in the Present and in the Future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Present Learning Model</th>
<th>Future Learning Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target beneficiaries</td>
<td>Public managers and executives (or prospective public managers and executives) from public institutions</td>
<td>Public managers and executives, non-profit entrepreneurs, CSR experts, managers from public utilities and private sectors closer to public interests (infrastructures, impact investing), as well as public interest consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning objects</td>
<td>Learning logics and tools of management applied to the public sector</td>
<td>Empowering individuals, organisations and public-private networks to create public value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>PA knowledge is produced in academia and transferred to practitioners</td>
<td>PA knowledge is co-produced within the process of formally and informally observing – from outside and from inside – the functioning of public institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge dissemination formats</td>
<td>Formal: books and articles; conferences; classrooms</td>
<td>Informal: blogs, websites and social media, infographics, online videos; high added-value meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providers</td>
<td>Local and national PA departments, schools and universities</td>
<td>European or international networks of PA knowledge co-producers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance measures</td>
<td>Credits</td>
<td>Organisational change and public value created</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering the heterogeneity of potential beneficiaries, the main goal of any executive education and training initiative cannot be limited to disseminating logics and tools of management applied to the public sector: first, for the reasons already given regarding the paradox of considering public management knowledge as an orthodoxy to be preached; second, because the learning objectives should be embedded in the purpose of grouping together public, private and non-profit-making involved in creating public value, which cannot be limited to teaching management. Thus, the main purpose of such executive initiatives should be empowering individuals, organisations and public-private networks to create public value, each from its location and role, and each in coherence with its organisational mission. Even if the learning journey always takes place at the individual level, it should
also have an impact on organisations and meta-organisations involved in the public value creation process, as will be better explained later on.

The way learning objects are framed is deeply influenced by the underpinning epistemology. If in the current and dominant model PA knowledge continues to be considered more as an “academic product” to be transferred to practitioners, as stated above, PA knowledge can, on the other hand, be considered as co-produced within the process of formally and informally observing the functioning of public institutions. If scholars are in charge of the formal and scientific observation and interpretation, it does not mean that practitioners (both from inside public institutions and from the stakeholders’ community) do not have an original and relevant point of view on the evolution and exploration of new arrangements to create public value in a “governance era.” This could be the platform for collaboration between scholars and practitioners in the process of knowledge co-creation.

Based on the differences in terms of epistemologies, different dissemination formats can be identified. We keep trying to reach the practitioner audience using traditional and formal tools, such as books and journals for the written discourse, and conferences and other “school-based” settings as a place of meeting and interaction, but how up-to-date, contemporary and coherent are these formats for the proposed epistemology? In a future that has already come, to be influential means being involved in a more informal and collaborative form of written discourse, using blogs, websites and social media, where information is designed in a more user-friendly way through infographics and short videos. Moreover, the digitalisation of the executive education (i.e. MOOC and other online programmes) is spreading out thanks to lower fees, no travel costs, a more flexible learning schedule. Would these electronic places of communication and learning be substitutes for any other form of face-to-face interaction? Here the debate is open. Probably some physical interaction will be in place, if it will offer an irreplaceable value in terms of learning experience: classrooms should be run more like boardrooms, where people are called to participate actively, bringing and sharing their own experiences, negotiating meanings, building mutual trust, and expanding the space for action.

To what extent can individual schools or departments be the sole providers of such a learning experience? Probably we need not just to become more interdepartmental, but we also need to create more collaborative learning initiatives that actively engage different types of institutions, both public and private, according to a partnership and networking mindset. As an example, for teaching “European public management” to public executives, we have been experimenting with quite a successful format, where SDA Bocconi
partners with ENA, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Commission, and the European antenna of the largest Italian association of entrepreneurs. Over the period of a week, Italian public managers travel to the three cities of Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Brussels to visit these institutions and discuss with a select number of representatives a well-structured and agreed agenda of topics. Each institution profits from the experience: ENA can offer their executive students from a similar programme the opportunity to collaborate in small groups with visiting Italian peers; EIB can use the occasion to communicate their investment policies and share opportunities for the Italian public administrations; EU senior executives from the European Commission are willing to meet Italian public managers, not just because policy dissemination is part of their mission, but because it is also an informal occasion to orient the national, regional and local policies, as for the hot topic of how to overcome the limits of accessing and usefully spending European funds; and, finally, lobbyists are willing to engage national institutions on their platforms. At the end of the study tour, participants can take home a wide-reaching perspective on how European institutions work from the inside, and what the role of their national or local institutions could be like within a multi-level governance setting, in addition to the networking opportunity that a similar experience can offer. The main objective of such an experience is to create partnerships where the commitment of each member to the agreed learning goals and defined agenda is strong and well-focused.

Lastly, to better orient the design of a new executive learning experience, we may need new, clear performance measures: the “accreditation” of diplomas and certificates as a result of introducing the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and similar systems, can become a bureaucratic trap and risks shifting the focus from looking for a transformative educational experience to accumulating credits. To avoid this trap, it would be worth being bolder in selecting and communicating our educational performance indicators, moving from a more traditional set (i.e. number of face-to-face vs. e-learning hours; numbers of credits; faculty seniority and CVs; impact on career success; traditional exam performance) to more social impact measures: how many innovative ideas have been implemented thanks to the programme; how many new partnerships have been established thanks to the programme’s networking opportunities; and, in a few words, what public value has been created, what kind of impact it has had, and for which beneficiaries.
References


