Notes From a Fellow: Combining Policy Work and Teaching

October 26, 2021

I'm writing this as I transition from being a full-time fellow at the Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) to being an academic affiliate who will contribute a few hours a week to a few specific projects. I'm also getting ready to dive back into teaching at the London School of Economics and Political Science after a year away. So I'm thinking about how to balance project time and teaching time, and how to find the synergies that will help me make the most out of both.

Heather Kappes

The projects I've worked on this past year at OES have given me a better understanding of some of the myriad ways "policy" is actually made. From what I've seen, psychology research influences the design, implementation, and communication of government programs much more often than it shapes the wording of legislation. For example, we're wrapping up a project looking at [how documentation burdens affect the equitable distribution of small business relief funding](). This work may shape decisions about what documentation to require in future programs. I'm looking forward to talking about this work with students and helping them brainstorm about applications of the psychology research I cover in the courses I teach.

My experience this year will also shape how I curate that research: how I make decisions about what to put in my syllabi and what to leave out. Even more than before, I will focus on covering findings that are robust, as indicated by being preregistered, having been replicated, or being openly shared and critiqued. There's too much at stake in the policy world to spend time applying weak ideas.

Fortunately, there are a growing number of people in the psychological sciences who are pushing us to improve our methods and reanalyzing and critiquing older research to help us understand its limitations. I'll be covering their approaches in my teaching with the hope of developing students into informed skeptics. Whether or not they themselves go on to work in public policy, I think we'll all be better off.

I didn't expect to spend so much time during my year at OES writing, but I've learned that

communicating scientific ideas and findings to government administrators is often done with a memo or a report. Producing effective documents for this audience requires a good grasp of plain language. I know that as an instructor, I often struggle with the curse of knowledge—once you understand a topic, it's hard to explain it in an accessible way to those who don't. Policy work helps build the plain-language communication muscle in ways that I expect will help with teaching.

> *Even more than before, I will focus on covering findings that are robust, as indicated by being preregistered, having been replicated, or being openly shared and critiqued. There's too much at stake in the policy world to spend time applying weak ideas.*

I've also found that working on large collaborative projects with external partners forces good planning and time management in ways that many academic collaborations, with their often indeterminate roles and vague timelines, don't. Over the coming year, I'll be combining ongoing OES project work with teaching and my own research (as well as personal and family obligations). I'll need to stay balanced and protect my time.

One concrete tool I'll use for that borrows from an OES practice: using running notes for each project. Skimming these notes before a meeting can prevent the need to spend the first half-hour rehashing "where did we leave off last time?" These notes are also a way to make sure key decisions are documented in one place.

Of course, an academic's biggest challenge is often saying no to new and interesting projects in order to protect time to make progress on existing ones. To that end, I find it helpful to think about my obligations to the students or colleagues who are waiting for the time and energy I promised them. In the world of policy-relevant research, it might also be helpful to think about obligations to beneficiaries who are served by the programs you're working on. I'll try that over the coming year when new interesting projects come my way!

This is my final installment of "Notes From a Fellow." I hope these dispatches have helped some readers to get a feel for what it's like to work with a government team. I'd be happy to talk to those who have questions or want to share ideas. You can find me on email (h.kappes@lse.ac.uk) or Twitter (@heatherkappes).