Although its value is sometimes disputed, ‘research informed teaching’ is promoted in the literature and across many universities (Healey & Jenkins, 2005; Gresty & Edwards‐Jones, 2012; Phoenix, 2014). Meanwhile, developing reflective and reflexive learners is considered especially relevant at postgraduate level and within Public Administration more generally where students tend to be early or mid-career managers (Quinn, 2013). Exposure to academic research is identified as one important way of achieving this (Henkel, 2004). Indeed, more broadly, there is now a developed pedagogical literature critiquing the use of research in teaching and the relationship between the two. Much of the existing work revolves around two broad ideas of the value in the classroom. These are either students learning about research findings and or students learning about the craft of research itself (Brew 2001; Griffiths, 2004; Healey, 2005). This article seeks to consolidate these themes and then to broaden the approach to demonstrate how concepts within research can be of intellectual worth for all students but especially for those who arrive at university with professional experiences with what it terms the ‘thematic value’ of research.

Rather than starting in the classroom, or with the perceptions of students or academics as is common in the broader literature (Jenkins et al 1998; Brew, 2003; Healey, 2005; Robertson & Bond, 2005), or even the tension between teaching and research (Martin, 2012; Robertson & Bond, 2005) the methodological approach of this article is to consider the topic from the viewpoint of the research itself; the production of which it suggests is an intrinsic good in a university. By briefly evaluating the changing higher education environment, it is able to contextualise the evolving pressures on public administration and the place of research conducted by those delivering programmes. It then considers the value of such research for public administration teaching.

It takes as illustration ten separate pieces of research published by the authors and in assessing their applicability to teaching demonstrates that the value goes beyond both developing research habits in students and knowledge dissemination though it finesses both of these by showing how students can develop from exposure to the practice of research and what they can learn from indirect research findings. The article goes further to draw out underlying theoretical themes from these distinct publications which it argues are directly transferable to the experiences of students as public managers or aspiring public managers irrespective of the knowledge outcomes of the work. These thematic values can be found implicitly in the publications and can be quite unintentional outcomes of the research.

The case is made that rounded academic research will always offer the opportunity of thematic interpretation and in developing reflexive learners who can draw on professional experience, successful integration of research in teaching can stimulate responses to practical real-life problems. In doing this, the article will finesse existing pedagogic work.

The study is far from exhaustive and represents the experiences and observations of the authors in using their research to support teaching. It is a first step and more work could be done to better understand thematic value of research. In part then, this article represents an invitation to other researcher teachers of public administration to contribute their own experiences.

**The Evolution of (Public Administration) Teaching and the Place of Research**

The environment in which universities teach students has evolved over the past two decades and the particular impact of this on the public administration discipline has been explored in recent publications (Diamond and Liddle, 2012; Barber 2014d). Since the 1990s, the demands on university educational outcomes has gradually moved from what might be considered ‘academic pursuits’ to what it can materially contribute to the economy (‘academic capitalism’) and graduate employability (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Kauppinen, 2012; Barber, 2014d). This in turn has put a new pressure on the use of research in the classroom. While the case has long been made that universities should ‘increase the circumstances in which teaching and research have occasion to meet’ (Hattie & Marsh, 1996, 533), the emerging environment makes more specific demands on its outcome. ‘Research informed teaching’, then, has been demanded in part to fulfil the new requirements of universities and with the idea ‘that if students engage in research-informed teaching, they develop many of the skills required by employers – such as enhanced analytical skills, and communication skills, together with the ability to develop and test hypotheses.’ (Phoenix, 2014). To what are universities responding? To put this more bluntly, in Britain and elsewhere, there has grown a prejudice amongst policy makers for universities to be more transactional. This is illustrated by the comments of former UK Education Minister, Charles Clarke, a decade ago that ‘one of the main purposes of university is to encourage people to think. But education for its own sake is a bit dodgy’ (BBC, 2003). The implications for scholarly activity here suggest that academic research for ‘its own sake’ is similarly viewed and the new measure of ‘impact’ could be cited as evidence of just what government expects academics to be doing. Undergraduate tuition fees has perhaps emphasised further higher education’s transactional requirement to lead to jobs or value in the workplace (Jones, 2010) and this again raises questions about the type of research to which academics might wish to expose students.

Within public administration, this is perhaps an easier swallow since the discipline has long engaged and developed mid-career professionals as well as those aspiring to work in public service or government. The tough financial environment following the 2008 economic crisis also intensified the need for public managers to be educated and trained better to perform in what is a rapidly changing world (Oldfield and van der Berg, 2012; Quinn, 2013). This has led scholars to argue that public administration education has an opportunity to make itself more relevant not least with collaborative approaches and ‘that the intellectual and pedagogical assumptions or expectations that are present within a particular theoretical framework or discourse no longer provide us with the intellectual or conceptual route map to assume that it will be ‘‘business as usual’’ quite soon’ (Diamond and Liddle, 2012, p 268).

Given these environmental pressures on universities and their teaching, it is little wonder that the emphasis on the use of research in the classroom can sometimes stress the value of the research findings and their practical application to the ‘real world’. To that must be added the benefits of drawing students in to the scholarly world and developing them as competent researchers. Being able to discuss one’s own output bridges the gap between the research and teaching functions of academics and of universities but it also capable of developing ‘reflexivity’ where ‘education programmes for public managers… cultivate a repertoire of stratagems that enable them to act rather than react, to analyse rather than criticise and to innovate rather than tolerate.’ (Quinn, 2013, p14). And it is here that the conceptual and thematic value of research can support these strategies, irrespective of the relevance or applicability of the output.

**MAIN SECTION**

In table 1 below we present some research publications by the authors of this article from a variety of sources: journals, books, chapters in books, a government publication, a consultancy report, and a discussion paper. This varied list is worth commenting on at the start. Unlike for the recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) whereby perhaps half of the publication outlets on this list would not have been considered, we have consciously thought inclusion of these non-REF type publications to emphasize a point: teaching based on research is not teaching based on any of the confines of a research excellence framework. We examine the value of these publications to public administration teaching through two lenses: (1) in developing students able to practically conduct their own research along with considering how the intentional and unintentional ‘impact’ or findings of the research can help students, and (2) the value of interpreting theoretical themes which can spark connections with intellectually curious students; what we have termed ‘thematic value’. While it is the second which represents an extension of existing pedagogic research, in all areas we take the view that since practical things can inspire theory and theoretical things can inspire practical outcomes, there is no need to promote ‘real world’ research any more than the purely conceptual. We use each of the publications to illustrate one or more of the values to teaching.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

**Learning to Do Research and Learning from Research**

Wherein lie the lessons for research-based teaching? Here we firstly emphasize and develop the value of academic research experience to the process of research and the benefits of the finding, something which already has a place in the literature.

Regardless of course, and Public Administration is no exception, developing student researchers can be found on the curricula of most university courses throughout the UK and beyond. To state what should be axiomatic: it is difficult to teach students how to do research if those teaching have not practiced research themselves. And herein lies the first lesson of teaching research methods based on how one has conducted research: the textbook approach is often not the most practical approach to conducting research and teaching it.

We are told by Ormrod and Leedy (2005, p.3) that “Research originates with a question or a problem”. Fisher (2007, p. 12 Table 0.1) starts his matrix of assessment criteria for postgraduate dissertations in business, organizational, and management studies, by heading the first column: *Identify a research question and design a project to answer it*. McNeill and Chapman (2005, p.7) approaching research from the perspective of teaching sociology students, comment, “Some research aims only to describe, in detail, a situation or set of circumstances. It aims to answer questions like ‘how many?’ and ‘who?’ and ‘what is happening?’ The writer wishes to do no more than add to our knowledge of the social world, simply for the sake of knowing. Other research sets out to explain a social phenomenon. It asks ‘why?’ and tries to find the answer to a problem. This may be a social problem or a sociological problem.”

What the above authors share is the identification of, first and foremost, the *issue*, the *question*, the *problem* that needs resolved. Research will then flow from this. Is this the case, however? In many cases, yes, but in quite a few others one suspects that the answer is no. In the discussion paper by YYY and Schaffer (1999) the primary author, YYY, has been able to produce the research first and foremost because Schaffer had access to a newly acquired data set purchased through EU funding from Goskomstat (the Russian Federation’s State Committee for Statistics). The data came first, and then the search was on to find a suitable exploratory topic.

For the article by XXX & Meyer (2011), the impetus for the research came from the gathering of a particular group of academics from across the world with different interests; attracted by a small seminar organized by Meyer to discuss Transatlantic Economic Relations. A broad multi-authored report followed and it is from some of the data generated and organized here that it was agreed XXX and Meyer could proceed with a scholarly publication.

In YYY *et al*. (2008) this article evolved from an accommodating Head of Department with control of a budget along with consultancy work in the Ignalina Region of Lithuania which ignited a spark of interest in the economy of Lithuania on the part of the lead author: data on Lithuania was purchased first (the national household labour force survey data set) and then a suitable area for investigation was sought by the lead author. In both cases the origins of the research came from data availability combined with a degree of happenstance (EU funding, an unexpected consultancy mission, and a line manager willing to invest in his staff).

Given the time constraints on students to finish dissertations or to complete final year projects, do we really advise them to seek out an issue and then design a project to answer it? Based on the research experience of both of the authors of this article, the answer is sometimes no. By all means identify a broad area of interest but if suitable data of a qualitative or quantitative nature is not to hand, then move on. It can be acceptable practice to find a data set or potential data source (a key manager, for example) and then work backwards to identify a problem, issue, or question, which one suspects will be possible to address with a data set or source that is readily to hand. The preceding advice is not only for the preserve of students. With limited research grants fought over, can those who have published in the academic community seriously say that they have never ‘worked backwards’ – find the data and then the issue will spring from it?

In the above examples, it is important to stress that what has informed the teaching of students has not been the *results* but the *process* of the research. Only someone who has actively engaged in research would have the knowledge and, indeed, confidence to recommend to students that they question the opening pages of an introductory textbook on research methods. It leads to the question of how can findings support learning. Continuing to view through the lens of existing publications, here we show that it is not only the explicit findings which can benefit students’ learning but also the indirect.

That examination of the process of conducting research continues when we look at XXX (2014a) which, while presented as a scholarly article, was developed from oral evidence given to a House of Commons’ Select Committee hearing in support of its investigation into constitutional change. Here, the author answered questions from Members of Parliament pertaining to their enquiry but the responses and the thought process which accompanied formed the basis of the published article which consolidated views given into a coherent piece of research directed by the author. Answering the Committee’s questions meant that findings were useful to the public debate and contributed to the report subsequently published by Parliamentarians. While students benefit from exposure to those research results, the indirect value was not only learning about the process of research but just as importantly about Select Committee’s influence on the public policy process. This is something of particular contemporary interest since Select Committees have steadily demanded greater influence especially since 2010.

The themes continue to some degree in XXX (2014b) which analysed the unintentional adaptation of constitutional practices resulting from the need to manage government in the historically unusual circumstances (for Britain) of a two-party coalition. This changed the way decisions and policies were made and the article categorized and illustrated the ‘stretching’ of practices. The indirect learning points here extended the critique of how policy makers arrive at decisions to how such judgments should be made.

Similarly, YYY (2006), which was an overview of the state of the economy in Kaliningrad, an exclave of the Russian Federation, in the summer of 2006. While a consultancy report, it is no less research than any journal article except that it addressed a client need (the Regional State Administration of the Kaliningrad Oblast[[1]](#footnote-1)). In some respects it had impact before this word gained recent coinage inasmuch as unless one can deliver findings to problems that the client has, the research is a waste of time. However, the execution of this research project demonstrated issues which have in turn been used to illuminate and enhance the cultivation of research in the classroom and, indeed, the indirect findings of how local administration in emerging markets can sometimes operate.

In the public administration of Kaliningrad Oblast there are layers of administration which can best be represented by concentric circles. Knowledge passes from the centre represented by the *Regional* Governor of the Oblast to the outer circles of power, and vice-versa. Those on the same ring, however, communicate between each other only where absolutely necessary since the less they divulge no matter how ordinary the information might be, the less chance of something unexpectedly coming back to disturb them. Other political institutions such as the *Federal* States Statistics Service have their own circle of power relationships, with their centre being with their head office in Moscow. Much to-ing and fro-ing will occur before different circles of power will cooperate with each other. It can take someone in overall charge to bring different political and institutional circles together. These are all multi-layered findings which support students’ understanding and learning.

Then there is YYY (2008) which concerns how police forces are funded in England and Wales. The process of public funds being disbursed to police forces is actually quite complicated based on an econometric model of predicted crime rates of each of the 43 police forces for England and Wales. For example, readers who look up the publication will see the correlation between the natural logarithm of bar density and violence against the person and sexual offences (per 1,000 of population) in a particular Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP).

The relationship between various environmental characteristics – such as the percentage of single parent households, the proportion of long-term male unemployed under the age of 25, the proportion of households made up entirely of students, to give three examples – is casually related to crime outcomes such as domestic burglary, serious violence against the person, fear of crime etc. It is important to emphasize that this model is not saying income support claimants, for example, cause violent crime – the vast, vast majority are law abiding; the model is saying that the use of this variable acts as a good proxy for the underlying complex causes of crime and so enables a more accurate estimation of crime levels in any particular force.

It indirectly illustrates that administrative issues identified in Kaliningrad are not the preserve of emerging markets. How so? The police allocation formula is only one of several formulae which are used to assist in the distribution of funds to other services such as Fire and Education. Each individual service with its own allocation mechanism is integrated into the whole of local government funding through the work of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). With all of these diverse stakeholders, satisficing becomes difficult: a pure research project to discovered the fairest way to divide up the pie amongst police forces, becomes distorted as methodological changes that appear reasonable to researchers working on the police funding formula are assessed by DCLG in terms of the impact they will have in other areas of local government funding.

The findings of XXX (2014c) shed new light on a recently re-emerged debate about the professionalization of policy makers and what that means for public debate. It showed that leaders today are more experienced than their predecessors but that the experience is almost wholly grounded in elite politics. In addition to the results of this research which quantified the ‘real world’ experiences and the ‘political experiences’ of leaders, the indirect implications of the article surrounded managerial skillsets required by those who make policy and determine the direction of public services. If Public Administration programmes develop managers, then it is these professionals who ultimately have to respond to the environment created by policy makers who are perhaps only professional in the arena of politics itself.

There are parallels here with YYY (2013) a very different study of the status of women under communism, and during the transition to market-style economies.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the main features of this examination and conclusions is that the economic role of women was and is inexorably tied up with their social and political situation. However, this can surely be extended to many other areas and not just that of the status of women. In discussing the economic situation in a country or in any specific sector of an economy or government, we increasingly recognise that institutions are important; that economic models while useful to a degree, should only be considered as part of a broader look at how society operates.

For both of the authors of this paper, there is an increasing recognition that the economics profession should return to what the founders of economics referred to themselves as: political economists. This should inform our approach to teaching in the classroom at least where the economy meets the institutions of the world. Even for non-economists, the question should be posed: how does my specific discipline intertwine with other disciplines, and how is that to be reflected in my teaching?

**Thematic Value**

Having finessed and developed existing concepts of the value of research, this next step extends these ideas to demonstrate what we term the ‘thematic value’ of research in creating the sort of reflexive learners discussed by Quinn (2013). Both authors have observed this phenomenon in the classroom and seek to better define it here through illustration. Since it involves the practical application of what otherwise might be thought of as theory, it gives ammunition to defend against pressures identified by Jones (2010) among others to be explicitly orientated towards the workplace. The case we make is that underlying research themes are directly transferable to the experiences of students, particularly when they have some experience as public managers, often irrespective of the intentions or findings of the work.

While barely mentioned in the text, an implicit theme running through XXX (2014 a,b and c) can be identified as a tension between what might be called *efficiency* and *legitimacy*. It is found in the debate about whether we rely on expert appointed parliamentarians or ‘amateurs’ with the mandate of the people; it is inherent in the discussion around stretched practices to make decision making work which have been designed by no-one; it can be found in question of whether we want policymakers with broad experience of the ‘real world’ or a professional class or elite. To what extent are we prepared to give up either efficiency in decision making for legitimacy, or vice versa? When introduced to students, this thematic quality can be seen to have a real learning value. Reflexive students, who bring their own experiences to the classroom are able to lift such a theme from the research and reapply it to their own work based problems which in turn find their way back into assignment submissions. The question of efficiency versus legitimacy, presented by the research, has taken on a new lease of life the handling of which has helped develop students as professional public managers. Here the thematic value to teaching is not one that was identified by the author in the production of the research. The value, in this sense, comes from the students’ own handling and interpretation of the article. This is a departure from the ‘harder’ use of either learning from the process of doing research or absorbing direct and indirect findings. Instead, the research acts as a ‘softer’ springboard for reflexive learners. Our experience is that the specifics of such value is difficult to predict in any given publication but that all types of academic research have the capacity to stimulate thematic discussion and reflection when introduced to the classroom; particularly when the students involved have professional experience. In turn that reflection moves from the theoretical into developing better managers.

The point is further illustrated with a return to YYY (2006) and the establishment of an all-Kaliningrad household survey financed by EU money; established through work with a local university; overseen by a project committee with strong Regional Administration support; and with lukewarm interest from the Federal Statistical Office of Kaliningrad. Lukewarm from the latter organisation as they saw such a survey as their “territory” and so such a move by a European Union project threatened their domain of gathering statistics. Full cooperation with the Federal Statistical body was never fully achieved. However, neither was the stakeholder input from the Regional Administration entirely without issues. In drawing up the questionnaire, both the project manager and the representative from the local university wished to ask the respondents their ethnicity. This was strongly opposed by the Administration with no real explanation given at the different committee meetings held to discuss these issues. Only outside of the formal meetings would one insider let slip the real reason that the question wasn’t included since as he stated in hesitant English: “Don’t trouble troubles, until troubles trouble you”.

Again the issue of legitimacy versus efficiency surfaces and this key thematic issue can be brought to the classroom. The EU project manager knows that the main Russian stakeholders are keen to progress the project to access the benefits of EU funding and to demonstrate to their superiors in Moscow that they can do this. And so it may be thought the project manager has the upper hand. However, equally the Russian stakeholder is aware that the private sector consultancy firm which employs the project manager is under pressure to complete the project from Brussels from whom it won the tender; a failure in this project would not bode well for the winning of future tenders. Both sides then need each other; if the project fails, both parties are impacted negatively. As such the efficiency of a fully-rounded questionnaire along with other (relatively) minor aspects of the research project are sacrificed in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of all stakeholders, both in the field and in the respective centres where the projects are first conceptualized. There are other themes too, for instance the discussion about the negotiation of professional territory, which allow students to reflect and make connections.

A final example: As well as distilling economic policymaking and the nature of the market shortly after the financial crisis, XXX (2009) teased out criticisms of dogmatically pursued monetary and fiscal prescriptions. Is the market always the most efficient way of allocating resources? What is the moral hazard of policymakers interfering with what goes on? The underlying theme, however, is perhaps more valuable; something which has become more apparent with the passing of time and the growing dissatisfaction in many European countries with governing arrangements. That theme is essentially the questioning of existing assumptions. There is perhaps further material here in XXX & Meyer (2011) which identifies dysfunction in established Transatlantic governance relationships and makes practical recommendations for change. The revelation that things that have always been done in a particular way must always be done that way, or that what heretofore were considered as managerial limits need not be, can be intellectually liberating for students and result in more curious and reflexive coursework which in turn makes for better public managers.

**Conclusion**

Research of all kinds has a powerful role to play in public administration teaching. By viewing the process through the prism of the research itself, this article has sought to finesse existing ideas of its value in terms of learning from the experience of doing research and learning from the findings. It has then extended these ideas to make the case that the (unpredictable) thematic value of research can help to create reflective learners.

What then of research informed teaching and what are the main ‘messages’ to convey to the student as regards research? The researcher is not a David Attenborough type figure, who, ensconced within his hide, observes the world around him; makes notes; and draws conclusions. Rather researchers, as part of the society around them, have to interact with that society in order to take the research forward. That interaction will play a role in determining the qualitative nature of the research generated. The preceding should not be confused with conscious manipulation of data or of research findings themselves. Instead, as researchers go about their everyday business, the construction of the research framework along with the manner in which the research is conducted within that framework will lead to outcomes which will be qualitatively different had the various interactions with her surroundings been of a different character. In some cases the order of magnitude of this qualitative difference will be slight, in other cases not so slight.

For the student setting out on the research road objectivism is something which is fine for the introductory textbooks but should be recognized as being something which will never quite be attained since objectivity is relative to the individual’s perspective which in turn is fashioned, to a degree, by the context in which the research is carried out. This should be acknowledged in the research work the more so to make an assessment of the research, by others, more objective! Students can naturally gain from the direct results of research but more than that it is perhaps the indirect findings that enable them to learn and it is here that research can inform their wider learning. The thematic value of research can be unpredictable and can represent a departure from the intentions of the researcher. Nevertheless, when employed in the classroom, it can facilitate reflection and reapplication in learners.

Table 1

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| Publications |
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1. Oblast – region. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Market-style, since some transitions proved more successful than others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)