

AN ACADEMIC DOING COMMUNITY SERVICE TURNING INTO ACTION RESEARCH TURNING INTO ADVOCACY

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Abstract

Program faculty in Public Administration are increasingly required to engage in community service. This article presents a case about the author's involvement in a conflict between a small Dutch municipality, which was forced by a Dutch province to amalgamate with a neighboring municipality but refused to comply. This article shows that becoming involved as a scholar in such conflicting processes can be dangerous, especially for the scholar involved, and that it is wise to take precautions beforehand. Such processes can become conflictual in which rationality is absent, and power and interests dominate. Dilemmas are already visible from the start, continue to be bothersome during the process, and can haunt the academic even after the community service has ended.

Keywords: community service, action research, advocacy, dilemmas.

1. Introduction

Program faculty in degree programs of Public Administration and Public Policy are not only required to prepare students for public service and conduct scholarly research to advance knowledge and practice in the field, but they are also expected to engage in community service. One of the standards of NASPAA is that ‘Program faculty should engage in community and professional service related to public service because it promotes their personal accountability and commitment to the values they are expected to model and provides opportunities for them to connect theory and practice, to recruit students, and to place graduates’ (NASPAA, 2024, p. 6). The same applies, *inter alia*, to the other world-wide accreditation agency in Public Administration, ICAPA: one of its eight standards states that a degree program must combine scholarship, practice, and community service, and that ‘the faculty, administration, and students of the program are actively engaged through its teaching, training, research, and service activities with all of their stakeholder communities, from the smallest village or city neighborhood to the global community at large’ (UNDESA, 2023, p. 4).

Community service is work performed by a person or group for the benefit and betterment of their community, contributing to a noble cause. Most often, it is unpaid work intended to help people in a community or, in the case of public administration, to assist public institutions in solving societal problems. Notwithstanding all the supposed advantages, such community service can be filled with dilemmas, involving difficult and sometimes even dangerous decisions, where the preferred course of action is ambiguous and dependent on one’s position and perspective. Even community service that seems innocent at the start can evolve into an awkward process in which a cause seemingly noble at the beginning ultimately turns into a vicious political game, where power and personal interests dominate, and the scholar involved gets caught in the middle.

Through a case study of the author’s involvement in a conflict between a small Dutch municipality, which was forced by a Dutch province to amalgamate with a neighboring municipality but refused to comply, this article will show that becoming involved as a scholar in such conflicting processes can be dangerous, especially for the scholar involved, and that it is wise to take precautions beforehand.

In this case, the author was asked to become a member of a so-called mirror group, a group of three Public Administration experts who would monitor the process toward amalgamation based on criteria of justice, transparency, equity, and respect for due process, and provide advice to the parties if the process deviated from these criteria. The process had already been ongoing for more than two years and had hardened on both sides – on one hand, the province promoted the amalgamation, while on the other, the municipality resisted it. As expected, it soon became clear that both sides were using flawed arguments to make their points. Their reasoning was inconsistent, full of incongruities, and political tricks were employed to either advance the process or prematurely end it. Detecting these flaws, reporting them accurately, and encouraging the stakeholders to self-reflect transformed the role of merely being a member of the mirror group into that of a scholar

conducting a form of action research. This action research revealed the political maneuvers at play, the tactics used to patronize and belittle the other party, and the misuse of empirical data to support one's own arguments. The primary culprit turned out to be the provincial government—the very actor that had involved the author in the mirror group. This induced the scholar to shift from action research to advocacy research, assisting the municipality facing amalgamation in finding arguments to prevent it. The results of this action, and later advocacy research, were not particularly welcomed by the province, which had originally asked the author to join the group. Ultimately, the research and advice provided led to complaints from the governor to the university's rector, accusing the author of lacking scholarly integrity. Given that the provincial government funds the university, this naturally posed a tricky situation.

The goal of this article is to elaborate on and argue that such work—community service/action research—is rewarding but also dangerous. It will present the dilemmas encountered, where it remains uncertain whether the author made the optimal choices in each situation. The main question addressed here is whether the dilemmas in community service/action research, as mentioned in the literature, are also the ones encountered in practices where political conflicts dominate the process. To answer this question and to make the argument about the dangers of community service, consultancy work, and action research, this article will successively address the following questions:

- What is already known about the dilemmas involved in community service?
- What does the case study show in this regard?
- What questions and conclusions follow from this analysis?

The first two questions will be addressed simultaneously in the next section.

2. Dilemmas in this case

In 2019, the provincial executive of the Dutch province of Gelderland decided to prepare and initiate the amalgamation of two municipalities within its boundaries, Scherpenzeel and Barneveld. The former municipality has almost 10,000 residents, and the latter somewhat more than 35,000. The province was especially concerned about the viability of the smaller of the two. It argued that the financial and administrative capacity of that municipality was insufficient to continue independently. The small municipality itself opposed this view and resisted the proposed merger. The conflict between the small municipality and the province escalated to the point where the municipality refused to participate in the consultations required by national law before any decision could be made.

The law on municipal redivision stipulates an open consultation between all stakeholders about the desirability of amalgamation and alternatives, lasting at most six months (<https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0003718/2024-01-01>). In September 2020, after the redivision process had been at a standstill for over a year, the author was asked to become a member of a so-called mirror-group to consult with the potential members of the administrative consultation, providing feedback and advice on the current state of the research

and the further process. In fact, the request involved monitoring whether the consultations between the province and the two municipalities it wanted to merge were conducted according to legal requirements, e.g., openness, considering alternatives, and addressing desires and interests.

This posed the first dilemma, connected to the project's purpose or goals already mentioned by Møller (1998). Why did we decide to engage in joint collaboration? What questions had we decided to examine? What were our agreements when we started? How much flexibility is justifiable regarding the research questions (cf. Brock-Utne, 1979)?

Initially, this boiled down to the question of whether or not to accept such a role in the process. A pro of taking the role was that it represented a form of community service. The goal seemed noble, as the process aimed to optimize the performance and service delivery of local government, and advice from an otherwise independent academic seemed to be appreciated. The process was also of academic importance since research into intergovernmental relations is scarce, and this position would provide the author with insights into how such processes develop, information he would not otherwise have received. Membership in the mirror-group would also enable interviews with stakeholders who would otherwise be difficult to approach. It would allow observation of the meetings during the consultation process, including behind-the-scenes discussions, and grant access to all documents, even classified ones. For instance, as soon as the author accepted the role, a dossier with over 2,000 pages of information on the progress so far was provided.

The drawback of becoming involved in an amalgamation process, even as a member of the mirror-group, is that such a process belongs to the type of public sector processes that easily become politicized, as such plans tend to evoke serious resistance. Becoming involved in such conflictual processes inevitably results in eventually taking sides or being accused of doing so, thereby risking one's reputation as an independent academic scholar. Another issue is whether the expectations of involving a Public Administration professor exceed that person's actual knowledge. Scholarly research does not offer consensus on the merits of amalgamating municipalities. Some scholars argue that service delivery quality increases post-amalgamation, while others argue the opposite. Some scholars point to the negative effects of amalgamation on local democracy and public participation, while others claim that these effects do not occur, or that their occurrence depends on contextual factors (Fox and Gurley, 2006). So, what advice could be given objectively? A third issue was whether such community service was worth the time spent. When asked, the provincial representative assured that it would take at most five to six evening sessions.

Although readers may have valid reasons to make the opposite decision, the author accepted. Together with two former provincial governors and a national senate member, the mirror-group was formed. Nonetheless, even in hindsight, it is debatable whether this was the best decision.

The first issues arose at the start of the process. The 2,000-page dossier revealed that one of the necessary conditions for a successful project was absent: mutual trust. First, representatives of the small municipality refused to participate in the consultation proposed by the province and required by law. The municipality argued that it was not an open

consultation. In their opinion, the province had already decided beforehand that the two municipalities needed to merge, and only initiated the consultation because it was legally required, with the outcome predetermined.

Each side had conducted its own investigations into the need for and support of amalgamation. The outcomes of these investigations were immediately criticized by the opposing party. Research commissioned by the municipality supported its view in favor of continued independence, while research by the province consistently pointed to the need for amalgamation. For example, the province asked the municipality to prove its financial stability for the next five years. When the municipality succeeded in doing so, the province's only response was that this stability remained uncertain for the years beyond that. Any form of collaborative research was absent, and the refusal to talk and cooperate indicated a lack of trust.

The first task for the mirror-group was to ensure a more open consultation process and to get the three parties (the two municipalities and the province) to talk to one another. The province's request to the mirror-group was to convince the small municipality to at least have a conversation. This was accomplished, but when the municipal representatives arrived at the Provincial Government Building, the encounter went very differently than anticipated. The provincial governor simply asked the municipal representatives, 'So you finally agree to have your municipality merged?' When they replied that this was not the case, they were immediately dismissed. Within five minutes, the meeting ended, and the municipal representatives were sent home. This was not only embarrassing for them but also for the mirror-group, which had arranged the meeting.

This incident resulted in the second dilemma. The provincial governor's behavior, who had commissioned the mirror-group, called into question the group's purpose and whether it should continue its work. After this incident, trust between the stakeholders deteriorated completely, and the mirror-group was put in an awkward position, as its trust in the governor had eroded. The mirror-group decided to continue its work, after reprimanding the governor for his actions and the abuse of the mirror-group, and with a keen eye for details.

Again, readers may wonder whether continuing was the right decision, as there were good reasons to end the mirror-group's work. It had become clear that the process had devolved into a political battle between opposing parties, that the consultation would not be as open as legally required, and that trust among stakeholders, as well as confidence in the commissioner of the mirror-group, had vanished.

Keeping a keen eye for detail involved conducting a form of action research, attempting to determine whether the amalgamation was genuinely supported and necessary, while closely monitoring the interactions between the parties as they evolved. What began as a form of community service had unintentionally shifted into a form of action research, particularly with a critical focus on the clarity, soundness, and adequacy of the arguments made by the stakeholders, and the 'evidence' they provided to support their case.

Many more incidents occurred. The most critical happened toward the end. The mirror-group wrote a short report outlining the incidents, noting that both sides had made

mistakes, and concluding that the consultation process had not been as open as it should have been. Without informing the mirror-group, the provincial government altered the report, making it appear as though all the blame rested with the small municipality. For the mirror-group, this was the final straw. After a heated discussion between the mirror-group and provincial authorities, the alterations were reversed, and promises were made that the original report, as written by the mirror-group, would be included in the final report the province had to send to the national government for approval of the amalgamation. Shortly after, the mirror-group was dissolved.

However, the province did not keep its promise. The province ‘accidentally’ failed to include the mirror-group’s report as an annex, and in its own report, simply stated that the mirror-group had approved the process and that everything had been conducted with ‘total transparency’ and openness.

All these incidents shifted the author’s position. The action research had unintentionally morphed into advocacy research on behalf of the small municipality’s continued independence. The abundance of documents, interviews, and observations made it easy to demonstrate at a public hearing that the amalgamation proposal lacked valid arguments. At this point, provincial authorities became furious, and this inevitably backfired on the author. First, the province kindly drafted an invoice for the work done and asked the author to sign it. Once the author signed, they complained to the university’s rector that the professor was earning money in addition to holding a full-time position, and that the author had not objected to being introduced at the hearing as a professor from the university. The complaint was that this implied the author had spoken on behalf of the university when, in fact, he had done so as an individual. In other words, in the eyes of provincial authorities, the author had shifted from being an expert in Public Administration to a professor breaching academic integrity.

Although the province funded university research, the rector was brave enough to respond that the professor had simply done his job, had presented sound arguments, and was allowed the earnings, as this had been formally negotiated with the HR department years prior, and was thus no issue at all.

After half a year, the national government rejected the province’s proposal to amalgamate the two municipalities. It ruled that the suggested amalgamation did not comply with national regulations or the criteria outlined in a white paper on the issue.

The reader might think this is a classic example of ‘all’s well that ends well’. Not in this case. As soon as the small municipality heard about the national government’s negative decision, it ordered cake to celebrate the outcome at the upcoming municipal council meeting. However, a few hours before the meeting started, they received a letter stating that the provincial governor had decided to fire the mayor, as was within his power. Only three years later, in an interview with journalists from a regional newspaper, the governor – who himself had in the meantime resigned due to harassment complaints and an investigation – admitted that this dismissal had been malicious.

3. Discussion

In view of the foregoing, many questions remain. One obvious conclusion is that processes initiated to amalgamate municipalities can result in conflictual processes in which rationality is absent, and power and interests dominate, as seen in politics-based evidence instead of evidence-based policies. More importantly, dilemmas emerge when an academic scholar enters into what appears to be community service. These dilemmas are already visible from the start, continue to be bothersome during the process, and can haunt the academic even after the community service has ended.

Speaking about the issues encountered as dilemmas implies that, according to the author, there is no such thing as a ‘right decision’. Readers may think otherwise. They may have good arguments to claim that, although there are perhaps no right decisions, this case is exemplary of making wrong decisions.

It is for this reason that this essay is written: to be used in classrooms, during training sessions, and in courses about ethics in order to make readers think, reflect, and judge positions taken and to be taken during such processes. The author invites you all to do so.

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