

FROM *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* TO GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is a reflection on lessons learned over a thirty-year teaching career, a career that took an unusual turn about two-thirds of the way through. For twenty-three years, I taught English in Albany, New York's inner-city alternative public high schools. For the past eight years, after a return to graduate school and a job change, I have offered graduate courses in research methods and environmental policy, currently as a faculty member in the Master of Public Administration program at George Mason University.

The practical experience gained while working with troubled urban youth at the high-school level has been surprisingly relevant to public affairs education at the graduate level. While the philosophical foundations of my approach to teaching shifted during the transition, I have found substantial overlap in the practical implications for the classroom across the progressive, activist literature that shaped my early views and the rational, process-oriented emphasis on good governance that I now use as a guide.

The essay is organized as follows. I begin by introducing these two distinct perspectives. I then present some practical suggestions for course management at the graduate level that follow from this discussion. I close with a brief appreciation of the unexpectedly similar implications for the classroom that the two quite different but equally idealistic visions suggest.

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

A group of Catholic nuns started Albany's Street Academy in 1970, recruiting their first small group of students in the city's housing projects from a list of young people who had dropped out of the regular public high schools. In 1973, the year I joined the school as a beginning teacher, the growing program moved from a storefront into a disused neighborhood elementary school in the downtown area. In 1975, the Albany City School District incorporated Street Academy, by that time serving about 75 students, into the public system as a largely autonomous alternative high school.

During the early years, the program was infused with activist ideals. While Albany is a relatively small city, it had, and continues to have, a sizable, entrenched black ghetto where young people typically have limited opportunities and low expectations. At the outset most of our students came from these neighborhoods. As teachers, we worked to expand their general knowledge and strengthen their basic academic skills. As a community of students and teachers together, we worked to build self-esteem and self-discipline and to understand and address the social inequities that contributed to the inner-city community's constrained circumstances.

Two books influenced me as a young teacher: *Death at an Early Age* by Jonathan Kozol (1967) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970). Kozol's book documented his first year as a teacher in Boston's inner-city elementary schools. In it, he publicized what he described as the traditional school system's racism and moral bankruptcy, accusing it of the "spiritual and psychological murder" of African American children. I felt that my students, in their late teens and early twenties, were older versions of Kozol's fourth graders with all the predictable problems linked to social dysfunction and educational malpractice fully realized. Many of Street Academy's students came to the program barely literate, broadly ignorant of the wider world, already in trouble with the law, already parents, already habitual victims of—or practitioners of—intimidation and violence, and already deeply alienated from broader social norms and institutions.

Compared to Kozol's outraged narrative in *Death at an Early Age*, Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provided a broader theoretical vision and more detailed guide for action. Freire, a Brazilian writing primarily for the developing world context, drew from both Marxism and leftist Catholicism. His book promoted a system of education for adults from the disenfranchised classes in which teachers and students collaborate as partners, each learning from the other through dialogue in an atmosphere of full mutual respect. Freire aimed explicitly to raise political consciousness and trigger social change. He asserted that, to be relevant, education for the poor and marginalized must encourage students to understand and attack the social injustices that oppress them and thereby wrest control of their own futures. Freire applied the word "praxis" to signify informed and transformative action and argued for a "problem-posing" pedagogy that would promote such praxis. In Freire's model, students must be agents and actors in their own education and in social improvement generally rather than merely passive objects into which detached teachers, following the traditional system of "educational banking," deposit dry knowledge perpetuating the status quo. He wrote, for example (1970, 67-68):

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object. The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students ...

Kozol in his book (1967, 3) offered a stark example of what Freire labeled banking education. As he described it, the teacher who taught art to his fourth graders would begin her lesson by posting on the blackboard drawings done in the past by white students from other schools:

The art lesson, in effect, would be to copy what had been done before, and the neatest, most accurate reproductions of the original drawings would be the ones that would win the highest approval from the teacher. None of the new drawings, the Art Teacher would tell me frequently, was comparable to the work that had been done in former times, but at least the children in the class could try to copy good examples. The fact that they were being asked to copy something in which they could not believe because it was not of them and did not in any way correspond to their own interests did not occur to the Art Teacher, or if it did occur she

did not say it. Like a number of other teachers at my school and in other schools of the same nature, she possessed a remarkable self-defense apparatus, and anything that seriously threatened to disturb her point of view could be effectively denied.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued that an educator, in sharp contrast to Kozol's art teacher, must abandon manipulative paternalism and engage students with love, humility, hope, and faith in their creative powers. Yet Freire also asserted that such an approach does not require the teacher to remain naïve or to relinquish criticality. While facilitating students' full participation and engagement in their own education, the teacher must be a leader challenging fixed patterns of thought and action and aiming towards the goal of positive personal and social transformation.

In my teaching, I adopted the ideals expressed in these two books. In preparing for classes, I worked to find material relevant to the context. Through trial and error, I learned the value of centering lessons on African American history and literature. It was a revelation, for example, to discover the power in this context of writers such as Langston Hughes (1974; 1976; 1990). Though Hughes wrote about life in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, his descriptions of the ways people navigated the separate but overlapping black and white worlds still rang true to my students in the '70s, '80s and '90s. As we read his stories aloud in class, students would shout out animated and often amusing and profane advice to Hughes's characters as if they were real people, and then compete to recount their own similar experiences. I learned that the students would pay attention to more conventional high-school English content if it were presented as a kind of travel writing exploring exotic cultures. I also discovered the positive effects of encouraging creative self-expression through autobiography, fiction, and poetry. The chance to tell their own stories was a pathway for many into the otherwise unappealing world of reading, writing, and interpretation.

In teaching style, I learned to be confident (at least outwardly), empathetic, respectful, alert, and fully engaged. Classroom dynamics were volatile and patterns of behaviors could swing unpredictably. If I slipped away from constant personal interaction—using names, giving eye contact, moving around the room—the fragile order could quickly collapse. Of necessity, I developed finely tuned antennae warning of wavering attention and imminent outbreaks of rapidly escalating instigation to chaos. I learned to know moment by moment who was with me and who was losing concentration. While over the years there were only a few examples of obvious profound personal transformation among the young people I worked with, this approach to teaching built on respect, engagement, and relevance appeared over time to help many of the students give education a chance.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

In many ways, an alternative high school classroom and a graduate public affairs classroom are separate universes. Unlike the young people at Street Academy, for example, the students I work with now are almost always mature, respectful, and eager to achieve. Many are already successful professionals. Certainly they long ago internalized the norms of appropriate behavior. No thrown objects, charged insults, or angry fights

interrupt class activities. I never have to send anyone to the department chair's office or call security for help.

The social context is sharply different as well. Graduate programs in public affairs aim to enhance professionalism and competence rather than provide rescue and remediation. The George Mason University MPA website describes our program as follows:

The Master of Public Administration is designed to build the knowledge base and skills of people who play, or aspire to play, a leadership role in organizations that develop or implement public policy.

In its subtext, this generic language takes as given a stable world of legitimate aspirations and real opportunities. It assumes that students already have the social space and personal confidence necessary to succeed. The assumptions I carried with me to work at Street Academy—that the students were handicapped by entrenched, widespread bigotry and by their own internalization of society's disparaging stereotypes—are not relevant in this context. In the MPA classroom, the goal is to provide current and aspiring public administration professionals with the capacity to improve institutional performance rather than to fight the immediate and personal implications of institutionalized injustice. Nevertheless, I have found that these students also appreciate and respond positively to personal attention, recognition of the stresses they face, and focused efforts to engage them.

In the alternative school classroom, I attempted to model fairness and promote empathy and self-respect. In the MPA classroom, I work to model the general tenets of good governance that we hope our graduates will implement in their careers. The notion of good governance in this sense emerged from the global reform movement of the past 25 years that aims to improve public management practices in both developed and developing countries and at all levels from the national to the local (Kettl 2000). Within this framework, quality of governance is measured broadly by (1) the extent to which public institutions focus on activities “that are the legitimate province of government” (Volcker et al. 1999, 2), and otherwise collaborate with or defer to civil society, the private sector, markets, and other actors; and (2) the extent to which public institutions, in addressing their appropriate tasks, are transparent, participatory, accountable, and responsive.

Scholars and practitioners assert that good governance has value both for the objective improvements in social outcomes it can be expected to produce and for the subjective benefits that accrue to citizens governed by fair and open institutions. In a report entitled *A Government to Trust and Respect*, a panel of the National Association of Public Administration wrote, “The panel further believes that how government acts is often as important as what it does, that good government is measured by process as well as purpose” (Volcker et al. 1999, 2-3). In his book *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen made an even stronger case for the importance of process in governance, arguing that the expansion of what he calls substantive freedoms, nurtured by transparent, accountable, and democratic institutions, “is both (1) the *primary end* and (2) the *principal means* of

development” (Sen 1999, 36, emphasis in original). In other words, people gain from good governance independent of its likely positive impact on socioeconomic indicators.

I believe these concepts apply in the graduate classroom as well. That is, while students may learn more in a course managed in a way that is transparent, participatory, accountable, and responsive, they are likely to experience internal affective gains even if their performance on assignments and exams is no better. Moreover, as mentioned, adhering to the tenets of good governance in the MPA classroom has the added benefit of practicing what we preach.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Good governance in course management takes many forms and certainly does not conform to a particular preset template. Here, at the risk of occasionally stating the obvious, I offer a few practical examples of ways to apply transparent, participatory, accountable, and responsive processes in the graduate classroom. Of course there are many possibilities beyond those mentioned. Also I acknowledge that I have not conducted controlled studies to test the value of these suggestions. Yet they match the expectations of the good governance movement, reflect findings from student-centered education research (e.g., McCombs & Whisler 1997), and, not incidentally, have emerged as hard-won lessons from my own thirty years of diverse teaching experience.

Transparency and Participation

Students clearly deserve transparency regarding all aspects of course requirements and procedures. Beyond easy access to clear syllabi and handouts, however, students are often particularly concerned about transparency in grading. They want to know—and within a good governance framework have a right to know—the details about how they will be evaluated. There are various ways to demystify the grading process, both before an assignment is due, during evaluation, and in returning grades.

In the run-up to an assignment or exam, along with describing the grading criteria that will be applied, it is useful to provide students with annotated examples of high-quality completed work or detailed suggested solutions for similar assignments and exams from previous semesters. Such efforts to clarify requirements and expectations in advance do not preclude surprises in assignments or on exams. But in a transparent environment, the instructor should be clear in advance that surprises may be coming and should incorporate opportunities to practice responding to surprises as part of the ongoing classwork or homework. The same logic applies to time pressure in testing. It may be reasonable in some circumstances to examine students in part on how well they respond to time constraints. But if an exam or other assignment is likely to create time pressure, the students should be aware that this will be part of the testing environment, and coursework leading up to the test should provide opportunities to practice performing in such conditions. In other words, the ability to demonstrate mastery of course content and related competencies is different from the ability to perform well under time pressure. It can certainly be appropriate to test performance under time pressure or on unexpected challenges, but tests should test what has been taught and practiced.

In my own teaching, I choose not to test performance under tight time constraints. I see the three-hour exam as an artifact of the academic tradition rarely replicated in professional life. Instead I give exams in take-home format and provide a time limit for completing the exam that is about twice what I estimate a highly competent student will need to complete it. Students do not have unlimited time, but a well-prepared student will not feel rushed.

Transparency also means that the process for grading assignments and exams should not be a black box. An A, B, or C delivered with minimal explanation, rather than motivating students, is likely to create frustration and disaffection. Moreover, an evaluation delivered without adequate explanation has limited instructive value. In the absence of detailed constructive feedback, students will have difficulty understanding and acknowledging their weaknesses and working to improve. Instead, the professor should give a response to each assignment for each student that at a minimum is sufficiently specific and precise to justify the grade and point the way toward improved performance on future assignments. For similar reasons, graded assignments and exams should be returned promptly, before the opportunity to learn from past performance fades.

Instructors should also implement a grading process that is, and is perceived to be, fundamentally fair. Blind grading, where practical, can contribute to an atmosphere of objectivity. To this end, unless it is impractical for a particular required task, I ask students to identify themselves on the assignments and exams they submit by identification number rather than by name. In such a system, students have some assurance that their work is graded in an unbiased way. Moreover, I find that I am able to comment more freely and provide more detailed constructive criticism when I do not know the student's identity during grading.

An additional component of transparency in grading relates to the way grades are returned. Students are certainly interested in their own grades, but many also want to know how they are doing relative to their peers. A person who earns a B+ in a graduate course, for example, is likely to be curious as to whether this is a good grade, perhaps in the top third of the class, or a weak score nearer the bottom. There are various convenient ways to let students know confidentially how they are doing in comparison to others. Presentation of descriptive statistics accompanied by a brief discussion of the distribution of grades, for example, can let students know where they stand and simultaneously model analytic skills that are part of the larger curriculum. Some students, however, prefer not to compare themselves to others. To account for differing preferences, I post a link on the course website to summary information about grades for each assignment and exam so that students can access it as they choose.

For routine assignments—such as data analysis homework, for example—self-grading is valuable. It promotes students' participation in their own learning. For these assignments I provide detailed suggested solutions with clear indications of how many points each question or section is worth so that students can score themselves before coming to class on the day the assignment will be discussed. This process acknowledges the students' maturity, enhances their independence and self-respect, and facilitates self-teaching

targeted to individual areas of weakness. Additional opportunities for participation include self-selection of topics for projects and papers where appropriate and open forums for students to offer feedback during the semester on course processes, procedures, and content.

Maximizing transparency and facilitating participation are powerful tools for promoting trust, confidence, and a sense of ownership. In this classroom management environment, students are more likely to see the course as a mutual effort toward a common goal.

Accountability and Responsiveness

Accountability in the classroom applies to both students and instructors. To a considerable extent, however, the grading process builds in accountability for student performance. Here I consider accountability as it applies to the instructor, focusing primarily on preparation and responsiveness.

In terms of preparation, whether for the course as a whole or for an individual class session, the ultimate purpose of planning is to facilitate student progress toward achieving the curricular objectives. To this end, successful preparation for the course requires an effort to see the prepared materials, including the syllabus and other handouts, through the students' eyes. Materials and activities that are not clear, and clearly linked to the stated course objectives, are likely to be counterproductive. Consideration and empathy in smaller things can also help create a positive environment. Instructors should keep in mind the cost of required course materials, for example, and give plenty of notice for any changes in assignments or due dates as the semester progresses.

Similarly, the classroom activities themselves should be well prepared. As a graduate student in public policy, I heard the following joke:

Question: Why are the elevators at Policy School X so slow?

Answer: So that professors have time to prepare their lessons.

There are at least two implicit assumptions in this joke relevant for the question of accountability. The first is that professors have more important things to do than prepare for their classes. The second is that they are unlikely to face significant repercussions if they are poorly prepared. There is a certain amount of truth underlying both of these assumptions, particularly for tenure-track and tenured faculty whose first priorities are often research and publishing. Thus, while many universities and departments offer some incentives for good teaching, the fundamental impetus for accountability in the classroom is often essentially self-imposed, derived from the internalization of two value systems: professional ethics and customer service.

Thinking of university teaching as customer service may require a change in mindset. Instructors tend to think of themselves as supervisors rather than service providers. Yet for the university, department, and instructor, students are also paying patrons and valued clients. For professors, balancing these sometimes conflicting roles—evaluator and service provider—is a difficult task. But internalizing the role of service provider emphasizes instructor accountability and thereby promotes effective teaching.

It follows from the ethic of customer service that good course governance includes being responsive to the students. Responsiveness can take a variety of forms. Here I mention several practices related to responsiveness that can enhance the learning environment and strengthen student engagement. First, the instructor should immediately learn, and use, students' names. This takes some concentrated effort and practice, but assuming the class size typical of graduate courses in public affairs (say, thirty students or fewer) it should be possible to learn everyone's name within the first couple of class sessions. Second, within reason, instructors should encourage questions and comments from students in class and reply promptly to emails and telephone calls outside of class. While occasionally a particular student may tend to monopolize class discussion or to email with annoying frequency, those who speak up in class or contact the professor outside of class are generally demonstrating their interest and deserve a quick response. Moreover, the case of an overly demanding student can be seen as an opportunity for a private meeting and gently worded constructive criticism.

A customer service ethic also highlights the value of adaptability and flexibility. Many instructors enforce strict adherence to deadlines and other details of assignments. This may be useful in reinforcing to students the importance of being responsible and meeting commitments. On the other hand, graduate students, who are often working professionals, are likely to respond positively to appropriate levels of flexibility just as they would in the workplace. Indeed, if a professor is flexible both parties may benefit. The instructor may be relieved of much of the policing responsibility that conventional course management entails, and students, treated as adults, may become more committed and accept greater ownership in the success of the course.

CONCLUSION

These practical suggestions for teaching that follow from the two distinct perspectives described at the beginning of this essay—the view from the 1960s and 1970s that education is a weapon in the political struggle for social justice and the view from the 1990s and 2000s that good governance is an essential pillar both of institutional effectiveness and of individual human flourishing—are surprisingly congruent. Freire urged educators to engage students fully as true partners in mutual learning. Modern principles of good governance encourage managers to be responsive and accountable to the clients and citizens they serve. Both perspectives emphasize the importance of process as well as outcomes and value openness and participation. Moreover, while the underlying ideological assumptions about the social context vary, both traditions are progressive and idealistic in that proponents intend to facilitate positive personal and social change.

Freire, through his notion of “praxis,” emphasized that pedagogy must be transformative to be meaningful. By educating—in the broadest sense of the word—those at the margins, he intended ultimately to overthrow the rigid hierarchies and entrenched injustices of the larger society. The good governance movement has similarly radical ambitions. It aims at the creative destruction of “rule-based, authority-driven” management (Kettl 2000, 2-3) and its replacement with institutions and processes that

improve conditions and opportunities for all members of society. Both of these attempted revolutions work to undermine traditional authority with the goal of enhancing wellbeing more broadly. This can be a useful strategy in the graduate school classroom as well.

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