Editorial Perspectives

When the Real World Enters the Classroom

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Co-Editor

Not a day goes by without some political pundit, education expert, or pop culture or academic article bemoaning the sorry state of education in America. More often than not, the laments are directed toward public schools, primarily K–12 schools. These commentaries and articles decry a situation in which students do not know certain historical facts, cannot do math, cannot write, do not know how to speak well, and quite simply cannot think. The solutions are to mandate more standards, test more frequently, or incentivize teachers and schools with either bonuses or, more likely, threats of dismissal or closure if their students do not make the grade.

Similar criticisms are increasingly being echoed when it comes to college and university education, and the solutions fall roughly along the same lines in terms of mandating more requirements to meet and exams to take for students, and more tasks to perform for teachers. Higher education has become about numbers to reach; it looks more and more like an assembly line along which students are customers, professors are producers, and curriculum is the product that is sold. The corporatization of higher education, as examined in Volume 19, Issue 2 of the Journal of Public Affairs Education (JPAE) is on its way to becoming a reality, and it threatens the integrity of public affairs education as well.

JPAE has published an ample supply of articles criticizing the state of public affairs education. Many have followed the same thread as elsewhere, whereby specific skills, bodies of knowledge, or analytical or cognitive processes are lamented as deficient and said to necessitate remedies in terms of new NASPAA standards or curricula. These criticisms raise cogent concerns. But tying together all of the criticisms regarding public affairs teaching and learning is really a simply question: What should our students know?

Too often we forget something really fundamental about education and learning, and that is the fact that both should be fun and student-centered, and that what is taught should include topics that our students find interesting and engaging.

I think of why I majored in political science and philosophy as an undergraduate; it was because I was interested in the topics. In the case of political science, I had a passion for politics. I was interested to know more about what presidents do, what the political parties stand for, and why nations go to war. I was a student in the mid-1970s, and what I wanted

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to discuss were current affairs topics—about Watergate, Nixon’s possible impeachment, the reasons America went to war in Vietnam, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the Cold War. I studied political science because I wanted to talk about these topics, not just in the university cafeteria, but also in class. The study of politics and political science was the way my friends and I could discuss what we cared about and what we were interested in. The best teachers knew that, and they brought a discussion of what was happening in the real world into the classroom.

I write this introduction to *JPAE* at the time of a confluence of several major events in the news. The most recent is the murder of several individuals in a prayer meeting at a historic Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015. It was an event that brought to national attention a major debate about the persistence of race and racism in America, spurring also a national debate regarding the legitimacy of continued display of the Confederate flag—not just atop state capitols or on public grounds, but in public anywhere. The events of Charleston tragically followed stories of police use of force in Ferguson, Missouri; Cleveland, Ohio; and a host of other cities across the country. All of these incidents raised questions about race and racial profiling, police officers’ use of excessive force, gun control, and a multitude of other policy and social questions.

As I was writing this introduction, the Supreme Court issued two major decisions. The first upheld the payment of subsidies to individuals participating in health care exchanges run by the federal government under the Affordable Care Act. Had the Supreme Court ruled the other way, millions of individuals would probably have lost their health insurance, and the Affordable Care Act would have collapsed. The other Supreme Court decision ruled that the U.S. Constitution protects the right of same-sex couples to marry. For my students, this was perhaps the most important ruling of their generation. It was one of the few Supreme Court cases they really cared about, and it was too bad the decision came in the summer, when classes were out, because I am sure I would have spent an entire period discussing it with my students.

I mention the above examples of current affairs because these are the topics that actually engage students. They are events occurring in students’ lives, and students want to make sense of them—to understand why police shoot racial minorities and apparently get away with it, why Confederate flags still fly, why we do or do not have gun control, why same-sex couples cannot marry, and what the Affordable Care Act means to them. Too many of my colleagues complain that students seem uninterested in what is discussed in class. This is a complaint that places onus on the learners, labeling them unmotivated or lazy. But perhaps the issue is in part that as public affairs professors, we are not doing something important—we are not discussing public affairs.

Teaching public affairs is more than instruction in statistics, policy analysis, cultural competency, cost-benefit analysis, and social equity, at least at the abstract level. It is more than service learning, internships, or flipped classrooms. Real high-impact learning, to borrow a trendy buzzword, is engaging students in discussion of the real world around them. It is talking about real public affairs, the events and stories of the news, the topics that our students care about, and using those subjects as vehicles for learning. Knowledge is not just a technique or set of analytical tools. Nor is it a bunch of dead facts. Real knowledge and learning comes from bringing together analytical tools and applying them to specific topics, thus teaching students how to make sense of the world they experience.

I raise these points because several months ago, the editor of this issue’s symposium contacted me and said that he wanted to edit a symposium in which public affairs professors examined how we discuss current events in public affairs courses. Dramatic events were happening in the world, such as the events in Ferguson and Cleveland, and he thought public affairs programs needed to confront these events in class. And *JPAE* needed a symposium that
talked about how to talk about current events in our classes.

We cannot ignore the world around us. Classrooms cannot be indifferent to real events that dramatize questions of cultural competence and social equity. I made a similar point at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio, in June 2015, at the recent Teaching Public Administration Conference.

What I hope for all public affairs teachers is that we should not forget that our students are naturally curious. It is not that they are uninterested in the world, but that some topics, especially current events, particularly capture their interests. We need to remember that like us, they want to study topics they care about; they want to engage in issues that matter to them; they want to make sense of the world around them. Learning should be fun. For my generation, we railed against what singer Paul Simon called “all the crap we learned in high school.” The “crap” may or may not be important, but to engage students, we need to find topics that will stimulate interest and learning. The profession's preoccupation with standards, testing, assessment, and innovative techniques should not distract us from making learning fun, and that starts by talking about current events.

This issue's symposium, “Impediments to the American Dream: Democracy and Men of Color Living in the 21st-Century United States,” was inspired or aroused by the shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. The symposium's guest editor, Richard Gregory Johnson III, approached me and said that JPAE needed to publish some articles that discussed how to teach race as real public affairs or current events. We agreed that talking about race in the real world, and not just from some abstract perspective, was something that needed to be undertaken in the public affairs classroom.

This is what this issue's symposium does. Johnson provides an overview of the topic with his editor's introduction, in which he also summarizes the four articles that are part of the symposium. These are “From the Barrio to the Public Sector Executive Suite—Where Are the Roadblocks?” by Espiridion A. Borrego and Vicky J. Borrego; “America’s Problem of Race: The Black and Latino Man Divided by a Common African Ancestry,” by G. L. A Harris; “Intersectionality, Stereotypes of African American Men, and Redressing Bias in the Public Affairs Classroom,” by Richard Gregory Johnson III and Mario Antonio Rivera; and “Inequality: Underrepresentation of African American Males in U.S. Higher Education,” by Lorenda A. Naylor, Heather Wyatt-Nichol, and Sam Brown. Collectively, these four articles challenge professors to think about how we teach and discuss race and gender in public affairs courses. They also encourage us to integrate current events in our classrooms, as a means both to excite student interest and to bring to the fore an intellectual discussion of what happens in the real world.

This issue of JPAE also features three additional articles and a book review. Hybrid courses are increasingly popular in that they seek to combine the interaction of traditional in-person or residential courses with the convenience of online or distance learning classes. The challenge to hybrid classes is ensuring that they stimulate student engagement. In “Hybrid Course Design: Promoting Student Engagement and Success,” Jennifer Shea, M. Ernita Joaquin, and Meg Gorzycki discuss the current literature on designing and offering hybrid courses and assess the unique challenges that are faced. They then describe several activities that they have employed to encourage student participation, discuss their review of these activities, and offer some important lessons regarding what they have found to work or not to work when it comes to fostering student learning and engagement.

Cultural competency persists as a popular topic among JPAE's readers and authors. But exactly what the concept means and how to teach it remains a matter of debate. Vanessa Lopez-Littleton and Brandi Blessett offer important guidance in “A Framework for Integrating
Cultural Competency Into the Curriculum of Public Administration Programs.” They use a model drawn from health-related academic programs, introducing a diversity and inclusiveness framework with six interdependent components that make it possible to integrate cultural competence into and assess how it is situated within a public affairs program’s curricula.

Many public affairs students enter school wanting to become public servants or work in government, yet abandon that goal as they progress through their classes. The question is why. Leonard Bright and Cole Blease Graham Jr. confront this question in “Why Does Interest in Government Careers Decline Among Public Affairs Graduate Students?” They broadly survey public affairs students in 26 master’s-degree programs using a higher education socialization framework. Their research examines degree program, individual background, professional community, and personal community characteristics that could explain students’ decreased interest in government service. The authors reveal compelling findings that should be of interest to anyone teaching public affairs classes.

This issue concludes with Alexandre Couture Gagnon’s review of American Public Policy: An Introduction by Clarke E. Cochran, et al. This 11th edition of a core public policy book is given high marks by Gagnon as maintaining the standards that have made it one of the most enduring and best introductory books in the policy field.

Overall I hope this issue of JPAE offers readers a real magazine of choices. It delivers a host of engaging topics, with perspectives ranging from the more traditional academic to the more personal. The articles offer many terrific suggestions regarding ways to improve teaching and learning. But perhaps the main point these articles make is that our classes should be relevant, fun, and engaging.

As always, I encourage you to contact me with suggestions for symposia or specific articles, suggestions for how to do our job better, or topics you would like to see in JPAE.

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