

Engaging Students to Connect Beyond the Text: A Reflection on the Value of Professionals as Adjuncts

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ABSTRACT

Learning from their shared experiences at the Teaching Public Administration Conference held in Frankfurt, Kentucky in 2009, three adjunct instructors give voice to the hundreds of practitioners teaching in the field of public administration. The authors articulate varying ways that adjuncts challenge students to move beyond the text and examine what it means to *do* public administration. Drawing from the work of Newman, Guy and Mastracci (2009), the authors argue how they are uniquely qualified to not only prepare effective, but affective, future leaders.

After a full day at work, or in lieu of a lunch break, adjunct professors are engaging their students in innovative learning opportunities that move them beyond the text and into the community. Whether they are seasoned professionals or community activists, adjuncts draw on their practical knowledge of what it is like “in the trenches.” Our first-person knowledge of the emotional ups and downs, the frustrations, and the shortcuts of *doing* Public Administration enhance what we can offer to students in the classroom.

Newman, Guy, and Mastracci (2009) have challenged the field of public administration to examine how we teach students about what it means to be an effective, or, rather, an *affective* leader. They propose that teaching students the skills of managing, budgeting, and organizing are not enough. Drawing on case studies and interviews, the authors highlight the often-ignored emotional and affective elements of working in public administration. In-depth understanding

of emotional labor, as it is coined, is at the heart of what a practitioner brings to the classroom.

Nearly half of the teaching staffs at universities are adjunct professionals (Delaney, 2001). Within the field of public administration, practitioner adjuncts are an important part of the teaching process. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) has recognized the role of practitioners in the classroom, as it requires the use of adjunct instructors in the *Guidelines for Local Government Management Education* (Banovetz, Levin, & McDowell, 2000). While the practical knowledge that practitioners provide is encouraged, few articles have been published that give a voice to the value of adjunct teaching, especially in the field of public administration (Milam, 2003).

Often seen as “second-class careerists,” adjunct professionals face numerous challenges, including limited access to university resources or minimal communication with departmental faculty (Delaney, 2001; June, 2009). Considering these barriers, it is important to recognize the benefits that these individuals bring to the field. While the adage often goes, “those that can’t do, teach,” we argue that the idea of “those who do, add value to teaching” is more appropriate. The authors aim to give a voice to many adjunct professors in public administration and highlight the unique or enhanced opportunities that practitioners provide to students as a result of their experiences.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

This article was first presented at the Teaching Public Administration Conference held in Frankfurt, Kentucky in 2009. Given the positive feedback from those attending, we as authors recognized the need to tell our stories. While each of us is at different points in our careers and come from various subfields, we found that the common thread in all of our work is that going the “extra mile” to engage students beyond the text not only enhances the classroom experience, but also prepares students for the “real world,” in hopes that they will be both effective and affective future leaders.

As the authors, we chose to interview each other and present each case as a separate and unique illustration of what an adjunct brings to the classroom. Collectively, the article describes the experiences of a retired public servant, a young community activist, and a career nonprofit manager. The stories that we shared with each other, both at the conference and in the following interviews, collapse our experiences and ideas into three short narratives. This article shares our insights.

Municipal Emeritus Builds Networks for Students

In addition to his work as a city attorney, Peter Letzmann teaches public administration. He has more than 40 years of experience to draw from and believes that universities should capitalize on adjunct faculty members, because

they have the “on-the-job training” needed to prepare them for teaching. Letzmann believes that adjunct faculty members who have worked in the field *are* teachers; they have taught their “bosses” — the legislative bodies for which they work — and their staffs/colleagues — in meetings. He believes that, if adjunct faculty are effective administrators, they have used many teaching techniques, and then some.

As Newman, Guy, and Mastracci (2009) have noted, *doing* public administration requires more than budgeting or managing tasks. Letzmann believes that experienced public administrators bring reality to the classroom by sharing actual experiences, (i.e., real case studies rather than the hypothetical case studies found in textbooks). As a bonus, he shares information so that the solutions proposed by the students can be evaluated against real-life experiences, rather than the proposed solutions noted in the teacher’s manual.

Public administrators supplement their teaching with personal experiences. Some call them “war stories,” but, as Letzmann has seen in his classroom, these experiences — the good and the bad — add value to the text and lectures, and enhance efforts to promote interactive learning. He notes that “this makes the class taught by the adjunct more inviting and as a result a better learning experience for the students.” Adjuncts often are able to provide the answers to questions such as “It’s in the textbook, but will it really work?” and can follow up on the whys and why nots.

Because public administrators have built extra-university relationships, they are able to provide networking opportunities in the outside world. Adjunct instructors also belong to professional organizations and are active in their communities. These can include local, regional, state, Federal, and even international associations. Letzmann believes that these organizations should be accessible to public administration students. “For the students, this may be one of the first baby steps into the real world of public administration,” he said.

When teaching his courses, Letzmann encourages students to attend professional organizations’ activities, conferences, and meetings. On one occasion, Letzmann was able to procure mileage and registration-fee reimbursement for four students attending the Michigan Association of Municipal Attorneys Advanced Institute. The Institute discussed legal issues that affect the operation of local units of government – ranging from animal control to zoning. Letzmann remembers introducing one student to several professional acquaintances within the field of administrative law, a course he routinely teaches. This student passed out business cards and had conversations with numerous attorneys in a professional setting. Although the student opted out of law school, a report back to the class was enlightening because it was visible from both the student’s and the adjunct professor’s eyes.

Engaging and encouraging students to network in such a manner enables the dissemination of what Newman, Guy, and Matracchi (2009) refer to as

“social wisdom.” Letzmann notes that the best contacts are made when a social connection is made. These opportunities give students a peek at the real world through the functions of their professional organizations. Adjunct faculty members then can assess the following: “Will students like it? Will they hate it? Will the student seize the opportunity to make professional organizations better and more inviting for other students?”

Adjuncts often have personal relationships with leaders from all levels of government, as well as in the local community. In addition to the personal stories one can share, knowing people such as city managers, municipal clerks, government treasurers, public attorneys or public works directors provides additional opportunities to enhance the classroom environment. Quite often, adjunct instructors have a “Rolodex” of contacts eager to share their expertise in the classroom. As guest lecturers or mentors, these connections help “put a face with the job.”

As the result of the numerous professional contacts established during his 40 years of municipal law work, when one of Letzmann’s students asked “What does the mayor really do?,” Letzmann had a real-life answer. He set up a meeting for the student with a professional acquaintance — the Mayor of Grand Rapids. The Mayor was gracious about inviting the student to a lunch meeting to discuss his questions. Good food, excellent discussion and personal contact with the Mayor paid off. During lunch, the Mayor described a scholarship/internship that he funded. Soon after, the student applied, and the rest is history. Letzmann not only taught the student, but also saw him graduate with the ambition of becoming a city manager.

Meetings such as these are foundational to how adjuncts teach. In addition to providing networking opportunities, meetings such as these provide a chance to engage students and other field professionals in conversations about leadership and how it feels to make challenging choices that impact hundreds, or maybe thousands, of people. By building mentor-type relationships, students quite often are better transitioned and more prepared to be socially responsible, humane leaders of the future.

Community Activist Challenges Students to Engage beyond the Classroom

Service is at the heart of public administration. Therefore, much of teaching in this discipline should be couched in a service-to-community pedagogy. Creating a classroom atmosphere that provides opportunities to invest in the community in a meaningful and sustainable manner is essential to attaining this goal.

Ashley Nickels, vice president of a statewide grassroots advocacy organization, works closely with local governments, community agencies, and activists across the country. Nickels also teaches part-time as an adjunct instructor for undergraduate students. As a community activist, Nickels has

gained tools from the field that enable her to use experiences from working in the community as classroom examples. She finds her teaching to be an extension of what she does in her professional and personal life, and states that “It is my responsibility to cultivate and foster relationships in our region and across the state. I am focused every day on building partnerships, mobilizing people, and fostering civic engagement and leadership.” Nickels draws from her passion for social change and activism to motivate and challenge her students.

Nickels has developed letter-writing campaigns, mobilized grassroots lobbying efforts, and chaired coalition task forces, and she contends that her teaching is enhanced by these experiences. It is the goal of any instructor in our fields to educate future public and civic leaders, and it is our responsibility to foster and grow the student’s sense of civic engagement. Nickels notes that students in her undergraduate public/nonprofit administration courses are interested in “making a difference,” but are not always sure what that means or how to go about it. To meet this need, Nickels weaves real-world advice and examples into her curriculum.

In her classes, Nickels goes beyond requiring her students to do a few hours of volunteer work, and instead challenges them to examine a community need or a pressing social issue. Students must work with others in the community, including both nonprofit and public agencies, to develop a response. Some students work with local nonprofits to conduct small-scale fundraisers, while others have conducted grassroots lobbying efforts on behalf of local organizations. Students develop practical skills that include learning how to conduct a community needs assessment, and working with a group. They also learn invaluable lessons about civic engagement and social responsibility.

Nickels’ students are challenged to scrutinize their service work in the community as agents of change. Students examine the impact of their work, and reflect on the role they played in “making a difference.” A key component of developing affective leadership through this process is accomplished by modeling the successes and failures of Nickels’ own work. Nickels instills in her students the need to recognize issues of social equity and diversity, especially as related to their own service experiences.

In all of Nickels’ classes, students must read articles related to power and privilege, and address implications of these concepts for the public and nonprofit sectors. Given her professional experience in facilitating discussions and action around issues of diversity and inclusion, Nickels is comfortable with walking her students through potentially difficult discussions. For example, the nonprofit sector — where most of the students engage in service — has had a large and positive impact on communities of color in the United States. However, the representation of people of color in these organizations continues to be a challenge. A 2004 Annie E. Casey Foundation study noted that 84 percent of nonprofit leadership is white, while only 42 percent of the nonprofits they

lead serve primarily white communities (Tempel & Smith, 2004). Given this information, students are led through a series of exercises aimed at challenging the status quo.

While topics such as diversity and social equity are not absent from public administration discourse, adjunct instructors with expertise and personal experience in facilitating these important dialogues add value to the discipline. As Dwight Burlingame (2009) noted in his recent *JPAE* article, schools of nonprofit administration know that teaching leadership is invaluable, but recognize that how and what to teach is challenging. As noted in the article, numerous studies highlight the need to build leadership development into the curriculum, but “we focus most on the silo of managing as technical skill-development” (Burlingame, 2009, p. 60). As an adjunct with years of experience in building the community around issues of social justice, Nickels believes she brings both the technical know-how of organizing and mobilizing, plus the ability to delve into deeper discussions of leadership — in particular the socially responsible leadership that motivates students to create change in their communities.

The authors of this article fully agree that, while reading texts and sitting through lectures can be valuable, students will retain more of the information when the concepts are applied to real-life experiences. Nickels’ students have articulated this when reflecting on their service work. One student wrote, “I enjoyed the projects and opportunities she gave to us. Even though it turned out to be a lot of work, these skills that we have acquired within the class are skills that will directly correlate to what we will be doing in the future. I was grateful for these opportunities.”

Students who are introduced to social issues and asked to examine them from a personal, group, and societal perspective will be better prepared to face these challenges in the future. In an effort to move her students “beyond cognition,” Nickels is committed to fostering socially responsible leadership, and what Newman, Guy, and Matracci (2009) would categorize as affective leadership.

Philanthropic Specialist Promotes Experiential Approach to Secure Community Grants

Similar to Nickels and Letzmann, Jennifer Stockdale believes that teaching public administration requires a sense of understanding and interest in conveying the realities of the field — beyond the textbook. There are many methods that professors use to disseminate information and engage students in the process of learning new skills. Stockdale believes that sharing the fruits of labor can and often does do a better-than-textbook job of offering insight into the emotional nature of the subject matter. Stockdale has found that she is able to share “inside tips” with students, as well as personal stories of what it is like to both succeed and fail. It is through these outside and emotional personal experiences — both positive and negative — that Stockdale is able to share with her students a wealth

of knowledge that goes beyond what any text can provide. In teaching, she builds on the guidelines proposed by the text, and shares a deeper explanation of the experiences and lessons learned.

Stockdale believes that successful adjunct instructors often provide linkages to community resources that would be extremely difficult to cultivate without connections to those who provide consistently active participation on boards and in community groups. Stockdale agrees with the research from Lyons, Kysilka, & Pawlas (1999) that “adjunct professionals are potentially invaluable, irreplaceable resources to the department.” Although communicating the basics found in the text is important, taking concepts into the field and applying them offers a more valuable and meaningful resource for students. As an adjunct with years of experience in reviewing grant proposals, Stockdale understands and shares with students the fact that writing grants requires more than preparing a well-composed proposal that highlights what the funder wants to see. Successful grant proposals often are written by passionate individuals with a vested interest in seeing the grant get funded. Stockdale is able to advise that finding the right fit can be frustrating, and being rejected can be hard to endure.

A typical grant-writing text highlights certain rules or practices used by nonprofit or other grant-making organizations. However, the ideals valued by the specific foundations of funding agencies frequently differ from one organization to another. Yet, the similarities of how we present our work and the energy we put into it often are emotionally driven. It is this emotional investment in a grant that Stockdale shares with students in the classroom. Drawing from her own experiences of working with Philanthropic Membership Organizations has enabled Stockdale to share from both sides of the fence — the proposal writing process, and the flip side of reviewing submitted proposals.

Quality grant-writing work can best be described through the process or action-steps taken. Starting with the specific form or application, every piece of the puzzle is critical to funders. However, Stockdale requires students to move beyond the traditional step-by-step approach to grant-writing, and challenges them to become knowledgeable about the funding source, and to become invested in the missions of both organizations. She encourages students to embrace their projects with passion, understand them, and to become well-versed enough to handle any potential questions. As the semester progresses and as students have more fully developed their grant proposals, opportunities to facilitate classroom discussions about the present-day realities of working in the field arise. Stockdale has found that these dialogues are enriched because her students are engaged with public agencies firsthand, and not hypothetically. Students begin to recognize the marriage of their work to the practical experiences that occurred during the learning process. As one student noted, “I learned what it will be like to work with nonprofits while writing my proposal; this goes beyond my expectations for the course.”

Stockdale often reiterates to her students that successful grant writers never give up. Through dedication, persistence and emotional investment in a project, one can acquire the support of the community. Learning how to develop relationships with the organization's staff and board members not only strengthens grant proposals, but also provides the students with invaluable community support and a network of contacts.

It is common misperception that grant writing is a technical and unemotional process. This is often the false notion that many students bring to class. Not to say that it is a "walk in the park," but students often are encouraged by Stockdale to understand that, after specific research and targeted engagement with an organization, grant writing can be fruitful and surprisingly engaging. Communicating the affective qualities necessary for developing a meaningful and fundable grant proposal to students unveils many unique opportunities to share knowledge at a level that moves grant writing beyond a skill-building workshop. As an adjunct, Stockdale is able to bring to the table many rewarding opportunities, which include lively and interactive class discussions that foster inquisitive minds and curiosity — beyond the norm.

Stockdale advocates that, without being emotionally invested or prepared for the affective component of the process of teaching, we are left with a text, a classroom full of students, and a serious lack of enthusiasm for realistic learning in the subject area. Lyons, Kysilka, and Pawlas (1999) suggest that, as we pursue the interests of teaching, we must be sure regularly to reflect on and clarify the goals and expectations of the specialties we teach. Stockdale personally has found that, after each semester, she gains a sense of great accomplishment for working in academia and learning from students. Her personal goals and expectations have risen after the end of each semester. The valuable rewards have generated renewed enthusiasm for her teaching position, due to fresh insights from students' evaluations.

CONCLUSION

Students gain an invaluable experience when in the classrooms of practitioners. Whether it is through building networks, providing inside tips, or engaging students in meaningful service, adjunct faculty members invest in the future of public administration students and the fields they will pursue.

Just as adjuncts bring unique rewards to the classroom, understanding their situations also can bring value to the literature. The scope of this article includes the unique benefits that three select adjuncts brought to teaching in our fields. However, based on our research, and on experiences from the Teaching Public Administration Conference, we noticed many disparities among the roles played, the educational attainment achieved, and the general support for adjunct instructors across the discipline. Further examination of how and why adjunct instructors teach should be assessed. In addition, many adjunct instructors are

doing double duty. Not only are they teaching, they are working full- or part-time as public and nonprofit administrators. Further examination of how teaching impacts the professional careers of adjunct faculty is another important issue.

Without the voice of the adjunct instructor, the field would be hard-pressed to fully examine the scope of what it means to teach affective, as well as effective, leadership to our future public administrators. While this article aims to give a voice to the hundreds of adjunct instructors teaching the field, we recognize that there also is much more to be learned from these practitioners, and the challenges and benefits of adjunct teaching.

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