

Practicing What We Preach: Approaching Praxis Through Classroom Governance

Peter J. Balint
George Mason University

ABSTRACT

This article recommends techniques for matching course management practices in graduate public administration programs to the content of the curriculum. In developing these recommendations, I draw on the revolutionary ideals of alternative education for the disenfranchised in society and the equally ambitious goals of recent reform movements in public administration. Both visions assert that improved institutional performance can facilitate positive personal and social transformation. Under the assumption that these aspirations are relevant for the graduate classroom as well, I recommend the application of course management practices based on the principles of transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness. These practices can move public affairs education toward praxis—reflexive, active, transformative pedagogy.

In considering the current state of education in graduate public administration programs, Feldman and Khademian (1999, 483) highlight the contradictions inherent in conventional teaching practice. They write,

The traditional classroom structure based on hierarchical authority teaches students one way of making decisions. When public managers used hierarchical authority in their organizations in much the same way that the professors used it in the classroom, then what students were learning from the implicit model was appropriate to their future context. In recent years, however, there has been a divergence between

these two settings. Increasingly, public managers are finding that hierarchical authority is rarely sufficient and often inappropriate. Our students as future public managers need to learn different ways of managing an organization. Traditional classroom structure deprives our students of one way of learning the skills required.

To realign teaching style and course content, Feldman and Khademian recommend that the public administration professor, following the case method of teaching, consider addressing the classroom dynamics that emerge during the course itself as a case for discussion and analysis (see also Gilmore and Schall, 1996). Yet the authors attach a caveat to their recommendation of using the class as a case in this way (Feldman and Khademian, 1999, 483):

We also are not convinced that this approach is indeed the best way to manage every classroom where future public managers are trained. It might very well be the case that in order to learn (especially at an introductory stage) the basics of public management, a more traditional pedagogy is required.

The logic of coordinating course management processes and course content in MPA programs is compelling. The approach has the potential both to model relevant professional skills and to foster a more dynamic, engaging classroom environment. But to achieve these goals, as implied in the caveat cited above, professors need classroom management techniques that can be applied in the full range of courses, whether introductory or advanced and whether typically taught through lecture, discussion, case analysis, experiential learning, Internet-based instruction, or some other method. Moreover, these techniques need to be broadly relevant to the range of governance frameworks that scholars have identified as contrasting with traditional hierarchical bureaucracy—e.g., new public management (Lane, 2000), digital-era governance (Dunleavy et al., 2006), third-party governance (Salamon, 2002), governance through networks (Agranoff, 2007), governance through self-organized collective action (Ostrom et al., 2002), governance in the context of international development (Batterbury and Fernando, 2006), and so forth.

In this article, I suggest that the principles of transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness can serve this purpose. I suggest further that applying these principles in course management will generate benefits beyond aligning course management processes and content and beyond modeling and promoting any particular skills of public administration. Transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness can begin to move the public affairs classroom toward praxis—reflexive, active, transformative pedagogy.

In offering this proposal, I refer to the literatures of pedagogy and public administration. I also draw on lessons from my own diverse teaching experience. For 23 years, I taught English in Albany, New York's inner-city alternative public high schools. For the past eight years, I have taught graduate courses in policy analysis and research methods, and I am currently a faculty member in an MPA program housed in a university political science department. The first part of this career introduced me to the ideals of praxis in alternative education for the socially marginalized. The second part taught me that these ideals are also relevant for graduate students in conventional university settings.

I begin this article with a brief discussion of the origins and broader implications of praxis. I then make the case that course management practices based on the principles of transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness can be effective tools for bringing transformative pedagogy to public administration programs. Finally, I offer some examples of how these practices can be implemented in the MPA classroom.

PRAXIS: TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY FOR THE UNDERCLASS

Two books influenced me as a young teacher working in Albany's Street Academy: *Death at an Early Age* by Jonathan Kozol (1967) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970). Kozol's book documented his experience 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. Most Street Academy 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 a more detailed guide for action. Freire, a Brazilian writing primarily for the developing world context, drew from 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 applied the term "praxis" to signify informed and transformative action and argued for a "problem-posing" pedagogy that would incorporate 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), that

[t]he 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....

I adopted the ideals expressed in these two books. In teaching style, I learned to be empathetic, 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. In preparing lessons, I worked to incorporate readings relevant to the context and activities that encouraged the students’ own creative self-expression. I learned that the processes of classroom management, and the student engagement that would follow if I managed effectively, were as important as the coverage of any particular content. This approach to teaching built on attention, engagement, and relevance helped students strengthen basic academic skills, build self-esteem and self-discipline, and, more generally, give education a chance.

BROADER RELEVANCE

Deficiencies of teaching and learning extend well beyond the problems affecting the marginalized 1960s populations that Kozol and Freire described (Glass, 2001; Orr, 2002). Researchers note ways in which contemporary schooling in conventional, first-world, university settings may also be disaffecting and anesthetizing for students and instructors (Fernández-Balboa, 1998; Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003).

Leftist scholars apply the language of Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, and social constructivism to frame their critiques of the role of conventional pedagogy in maintaining the hegemony of existing power structures (McLaren et al., 2004; Hill, 2005; Hastie et al., 2006). In this context, extending Freire’s ideas, they advocate pedagogy based on praxis as a weapon to raise political consciousness and to attack entrenched hierarchies.

Yet mainstream academic groups—clearly nonrevolutionary fixtures of the establishment—are also concerned with the uneven quality of teaching and learning at the university level. Publication of the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*

reflects the importance that the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration attaches to these issues. Many other organizations, including, for example, the National Science Foundation, the American Political Science Association, and the American Society for Public Administration, convene annual conferences aimed at invigorating university education in their subject areas.

At these conferences, the revolutionary ideals of praxis, although rarely explicit, are often not far in the background. A recent ASPA teaching conference, for example, included sessions on reflexive and imaginative practice, creativity, critical thinking, experiential learning, and civic engagement. Participants in one panel discussed the role of the teacher as “wise mother,” “servant,” “composer,” or “wise physician” (ASPA, 2007). In a similar vein, O’Hare (1996) has observed that the teacher can be seen as a “manager”—in the positive sense envisioned in public administration reform movements.

Public administration reformers argue that institutional shifts toward transparent, participatory, accountable, and responsive governance practices have value for the objective improvements in social outcomes they can be expected to produce and for the subjective benefits that accrue to citizens governed by fair and open institutions (Sen, 1999; Volcker et al., 1999; Kettl, 2000). Reformers argue that process matters. Volcker et al. (1999, 2-3) write, for example, that “how government acts is often as important as what it does, that good government is measured by process as well as purpose.” Sen makes 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 argue here that these concepts apply in the graduate classroom as well. That is, while students are likely to learn more in a course managed in a way that is transparent, participatory, accountable, and responsive, they are also likely to experience significant affective gains. In my experience, these gains are reflected in heightened levels of commitment and responsibility. Although perhaps not attaining the level of transformative praxis, such positive changes in attitude and behavior contribute to an active, engaged, reflexive, and collaborative classroom environment.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

The application of simple, practical, graduate public administration classroom management techniques based on transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness can help strengthen the match between course management practices and course content and, at the same time, enhance student engagement.

No universal template for effective classroom governance exists, and the suggestions below are offered as examples rather than prescriptions. I recognize that,

depending on each instructor's own experiences and preferences, some of these suggestions may seem obvious, while others may appear unorthodox and risky. In more than 30 years of diverse teaching experience, however, I have found that the benefits of experimenting with student empowerment and devolution of authority outweigh the risks.

Transparency and Participation

Students clearly deserve transparency in all aspects of course requirements and procedures. Beyond easy access to clear syllabi and handouts, 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. Various methods of demystifying the grading process before an assignment is due, during evaluation, and in returning grades may be used.

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 often 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.

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 compared to their peers. A person who earns a B+ in a graduate course, for example, is likely to be curious about whether that is a good grade, perhaps in the top third of the class, or a weak score nearer the bottom. Faculty members can use various convenient ways to let students know confidentially how they are doing in comparison to others. Presenting descriptive statistics with a brief discussion of the distribution of grades, for example, can let students know where they stand and simultaneously can model analytic skills that are part of the larger curriculum. Some students, however, prefer not to compare themselves to others. To accommodate different preferences, I post a link to summary information about grades for each assignment and exam on the course Web site so that students can access it as they choose.

For routine assignments—such as data analysis homework, for example—self-grading is valuable, because it promotes students' participation in their own learning. For these assignments I suggest detailed solutions with a clear indication 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 and open forums for students to offer feedback and input on teaching style and course management processes during the semester.

Maximizing transparency and facilitating participation are powerful ways of promoting trust, confidence, and a sense of ownership. In a classroom management environment that uses these tools, 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 students and instructors. To a considerable extent, the grading process builds in accountability for student performance.

The purpose of preparation, whether for the course as a whole or for an individual class session, is to facilitate student progress toward 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 planned. As a graduate student in public policy, I heard the following joke:

Question: Why are elevators in the policy school so slow?

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

At least two implicit assumptions in this joke are 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. A certain amount of truth underlies both of these assumptions, particularly for tenure-track and tenured faculty whose first priorities are often research and publishing. Thus, although many universities and departments offer incentives for good teaching, the fundamental impetus for accountability in the classroom is often essentially self-imposed. Yet students will recognize and respond positively to thoughtful preparation.

Along with preparation, the instructor's responsiveness can also be an important contributor in strengthening student engagement and responsibility. Responsiveness that promotes students' participation and commitment can take a variety of forms. Here I mention several. First, the instructor should learn, and use, students' names. This takes some concentrated effort and practice, but assuming the class size typical of MPA courses—say, 30 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. Although occasionally a particular student may tend to monopolize class discussion or send emails 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 taken as an opportunity for a private meeting and gently worded constructive criticism.

A responsive course management style aimed at promoting student engagement can also include 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, MPA students, who are often working profession-

als, 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 to, and accept greater ownership in, the course's success.

CONCLUSION

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 reform movement in public administration of the past several decades 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 that improve conditions and opportunities for all members of society. Both perspectives emphasize the importance of processes as well as outcomes, and both are progressive and idealistic in that their proponents aim at profound, positive change.

Various scholars offer the compelling argument that course management practices and course content in graduate public administration programs should be more closely aligned. Many observers of educational practice more generally note that conventional pedagogy often leaves students and professors detached and disaffected. This article makes the case that course management built on transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness can address both concerns. Such practices foster the emergence of a reinvigorated classroom environment characterized by deeper engagement and more effective learning.

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Peter J. Balint is assistant professor in the Department of Public and International Affairs at George Mason University. His research focuses on understanding obstacles to success in community-based natural resource management, a policy approach designed to integrate conservation and community development in rural areas of poor countries. He has published articles on this topic in journals including *Energy Policy*, *Environmental Management*, *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, *Geoforum*, *Society & Natural Resources*, and the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.