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Pedagogy Seminar [1]

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In the fall of 2002, I plan to reinstitute my weekly pedagogy seminar in the CU-Denver Political Science Department. For three years in the mid-1990s, I facilitated discussions among mostly non-rostered faculty about what was working or not working in their classes. The format was free-flowing, and the results seemed positive. We learned from one another's successes and failures, trials and errors. Both new and continuing part-time faculty and T.A.'s felt that the Department cared about their development as teachers and that this process provided a kind of collective mentoring for them.

The pedagogy seminar occasionally attracted other rostered faculty (one in addition to me came regularly), as well as faculty from cognate disciplines such as history and anthropology. At least five participants subsequently won teaching awards, so at least the seminar didn't mess them up too much! Attendance at this weekly one-hour brown bag is entirely optional, and light refreshments are provided. I might add that facilitating these meetings is a minor consideration in my work responsibilities under the contractual agreement I reached with the Department and College upon leaving my long-time chairing position.

Community of Learning

My PTS project is a continuation of my efforts to create a community of learning in my Intro. to Pol. Sci. course, where I have been facing the challenge over the past decade or more of the increasing age gap between my ever younger students (CU-D is getting a steadily higher ratio of "traditional" college students) and the ever older me.
I expressed various parts of this pedogogy in an e-mail to you last year, and you asked whether I'd be willing to be interviewed about it by someone from (I think) Silver and Gold. So far I haven't heard from the reporter, but I did some further tweakings of the course again this spring.

The course enrolls 60-70 students, and the basic formula combines:

1. Initial readings of two books that (a) investigate the power and authority dynamics experienced by young people in middle and high school (Patricia Hersch's A Tribe Apart), and (b) dramatize such key course concepts as power, authority, socialization, rebellion, and change (Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest)
2. Interactive mini-lecturing with the whole class
3. Smaller discussion classes of 30-35 students faciliated by my T.A. and me
4. Small-group exercises and/or media presentations (especially music and film) on specific political topics
5. Two required one-on-one conferences with either my T.A. or me (WARNING to

instructors: these can easily double your contact time with students)
6. Dynamic guest lecturers with perspectives dramatically different from my own (and from one another's)
7. Required reading of a daily newspaper (15 minutes)
8. Weekly quizzes that are easy for students who have done the reading but impossible for those who haven't
9. A single comprehensive exam combining 15-20 short-answer essays and one longer essay question from a larger study list provided two weeks ahead of time--the exam being administered 2-3 weeks before the due date of the final assignment, which is
10. A policy-recommendations paper hypothetically submittable to government officials and making three persuasive cases for policy and/or law changes in three different issue areas at three different levels of government (total of only three recommendations, not nine or 27!). All students are required to address some aspect of
    a. youth problems and
    b. growth-versus-environment conflicts, but each student also chooses
    c. a third issue that is especially important to him or her.

To make this daunting set of requirements palatable or at least tolerable, I reduce the required reading (from my traditionally high levels) and spend most of Class One trying to hook students on the inspirational and practical value of such a course to citizens of a democracy. But I also try to scare away chronic slackers with my THREE-WORD-MANTRA warning about "what leads to success in life and in this course: DO...THE...WORK." I add something like, "If you do the work in a timely fashion and are still having problems, I will be your best friend. If you don't do the work, I won't judge you moralistically but I will administer logical consequences."

What I'm really trying to do in this course is to get students to construct knowledge individually and collectively, by exposing them to some suggestive materials and keeping them on the same page (with the quizzes) as they digest them but then use them as a springboard for creating something new and relevant to their lives and the world.

It has been important for me to detach myself from a need to get an overall A evaluation from the students in this course. For one thing, lots of students get F's on one or more of the weekly quizzes, though much less frequently after the first two weeks. For another, the students usually evaluate the course shortly after getting back their comprehensive exams, on which their marks are often a full grade below their course average up to that point. Although I can usually pull a B average, and a majority of students often give me an A, a few unhappy campers typically deflate the average. So Zen detachment is in order (subtly different from self-serving rationalization?).

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President's Teaching Scholars Program

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