

Title: Helping Students Understand Abstract Ideas

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Summary: Across disciplines and degree programs, instructors work to help students grapple with complex material. Understanding how best to facilitate that process is an important goal. This portfolio considers one approach to help students understand abstract ideas in the context of a graduate public management course offered in Fall 2012 and offers insights that emerged following the implementation of a new instructional tactic. Recommendations for future adaptations are also developed.

Background

Human Resources Management (PUAD 834) is a graduate-level public management course offered in the KU School of Public Affairs and Administration. The course considers the context and practice of effective human resource management (HRM), with special emphasis on the political, legal, historical, and ethical dimensions of public employment. In this course students apply personnel management theories and techniques to contemporary organizational challenges to investigate the tensions inherent to balancing competing values and demands.

The learning objectives for the course include helping students:

1. Understand the historical, political, and legal foundations of personnel administration in the U.S. public sector
2. Identify key external and internal issues that affect the practice of strategic HRM
3. Comprehend core HRM functions and associated values in practicing HRM
4. Articulate the role of effective HRM in organizational performance specifically and public service generally
5. Be prepared to apply scholarly and practitioner resources to contemporary HRM challenges.

These goals are achieved through a variety of individual and team-based assignments. This portfolio focuses on the creation and implementation of a new assignment to address course learning objective #1.

The catalyst for a new assignment occurred in Fall 2010. That semester, I taught this course to a group of primarily in-service students (students who are employed full time and are working to earn a professional graduate degree to further their career and personal development). Student feedback solicited at the end of the Fall 2010 course indicated some dissatisfaction with the midterm and final exam testing methods. Upon reflection, I considered whether these approaches might be insufficient for helping students fully achieve the learning objectives for the course, including mastery of some abstract concepts. For instance, my midterm essay exam included a question that asked students to consider the development of the public sector merit system over time, including the ways in which the priorities of *administrative neutrality* and *political responsiveness* changed over time.

Both administrative neutrality and political responsiveness were (and remain) key concepts identified in class resources and discussions. The Fall 2010 midterm essay question asked students to essentially repeat similar points about these values without deeper consideration and application of these concepts. I considered how best to bring these concepts to life for the students and enhance the overall learning experience in my Fall 2012 class.

The Center for Teaching Excellence's Faculty Seminar introduced me to new resources and ways of teaching abstract concepts, namely inductive learning: "We understand new things in the context of things we already know, and most of what we know is concrete" (Willingham 2009, p. 88). The instructional response, says Willingham, is to expose students to varied aspects or versions of the idea. One way to do this, I learned, is by helping students relate new concepts to existing knowledge of which students are already aware. Even if students aren't familiar with the terms *administrative neutrality* or *political responsiveness*, they have certainly heard campaign speeches or read letters to the editor that criticize bureaucracy for placing too much or too little emphasis on these values.

In addition, the Faculty Seminar reminded me of the differences in degrees of understanding and also transference of ideas beyond the classroom. I thought about approaches to deepen student comprehension so that they would be able to diagnose the presence or absence of these and other values after the semester was over. Given the goal to achieve deeper levels of comprehension, it was clear that the Fall 2010 midterm exam question required a very shallow response: students could regurgitate lecture notes without additional analysis. The question for me became: *does this illustrate true mastery of the material?* From the Faculty Seminar I learned the importance of helping students see the "whole" of an issue, which also helps them to utilize the knowledge outside of the classroom.

To this end, I asked myself another broader question: *what is the point of teaching about these values in class?* First, it is important to provide students with a context for understanding the development of the merit system over time, including the inherent tensions involved with balancing administrative neutrality and political responsiveness and how those tensions shape different time periods. Second, and perhaps more importantly, students need to be able to use this information to understand the current climate better and consider what it means for the future of the merit system. This knowledge will allow them to communicate with various external and internal audiences about the implications of change. The point, then, is not just to understand—it is to apply that understanding to contemporary and future practical settings.

Implementation

I designed a team assignment to allow students to consider the competing values of administrative neutrality and political responsiveness “in action.” As noted in the exercise, these values connect to and contrast with one another: each can be prioritized at varying points in time. In class, students consider the historical and political developments that contribute to changing attitudes about these values, including the growing complexity of public programs on the one hand (leading to a desire to exercise administrative neutrality) and perceptions of increasingly insular public organizations on the other (leading to a desire for enhanced responsiveness to political direction). I tasked students with considering the contemporary balance of these values by “taking the pulse” of the concepts using a variety of information sources. The end goal was a written team report that assessed the contributions of these values and answered the question: *which is the dominant value?*

To prevent information overload, students were directed to narrow their focus to a particular public sector domain, such as economic development, education, energy management, environmental protection, food safety, health and human services, homeland security, justice, law enforcement, public works, transportation, or other selected relevant contexts. I gave the teams discretion to study the value balance at the local, state, and/or federal levels. Teams had to collect a total of 10-15 sources of information, with at least three sources in each of the following three categories: history, politics, and society.

For the history category, students could draw upon news stories, publicly available data/documents, and other resources that speak to the key events that shape the evolving role of the bureaucracy. For the politics category, teams looked for messages and/or directives from elected (or campaigning) officials at the federal, state, or local level. For the society category, teams could examine media posts, blogs, or utilize social media analysis tools to identify trends in community dialogue. They could also conduct brief interviews as appropriate. The expected end goal was a cohesive story about the value balance in a selected public context. To help the teams get started, I offered a presentation of the value balance in the context of climate change science.

Student Performance

The team reports examined neutrality and responsiveness in a variety of contexts, including environmental protection, food safety, education, and health care. The resulting reports were well balanced, and students effectively utilized a variety of evidence sources to support broad points. As mentioned above, I directed students to consider the value balance in each of the following three categories: history, politics, and society.

Beginning with the *history* lens, this excerpt comes from the team paper on environmental protection:

The first major federal legislation to address water quality was the Water Pollution Control Act of 1948, which created a comprehensive set of water quality programs. Less than 20 years later, the Water Quality Act of 1965 required states to issue water quality standards and authorized the newly created Pollution Control Administration. The Clean Water Act of 1972 went even further, prohibiting the release of toxic substances into the water supply. Major amendments were added to the Clean Water Act in 1977 and the Water Quality Act in 1987 (Clean Water Act EPA).

The Clean Air Act was signed into law in 1963, and it set emission standards while creating the U.S. Public Health Service to oversee air quality. In 1970, amendments to the Clean Air Act expanded regulations to include industrial sources of air pollution. It also established National Ambient Air Quality Standards, which address carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, and others; stipulated state programs; and set performance measures and benchmarks for improving air quality. The 1990 Clean Air Act increased the number of regulations for acid rain, added 189 hazardous air pollutants, included stratospheric ozone protection, increased enforcement, and expanded funding for research (Clean Air Act EPA).

The establishment of water and air quality standards has received criticism and resistance from private businesses (and the politicians who advocate for them) who view the legislation as restrictive and compliance as time-consuming and detrimental to profits. At its core, however, the various air and water acts are indicative of government action to address prevalent public concerns, as was the formation of the EPA by President Nixon, which combined multiple departments, services, and councils in order to most effectively address various health and environmental issues. Historically, the use of neutral expertise to ensure safety in a scientifically complex field has prevailed over responsiveness.

The next example illustrates the use of a *political* lens. This excerpt is from the team paper on education:

In the presidential election of 2000, the neutrality vs. responsiveness debate was illustrated by the vastly differing view on education expressed by the candidates. George W. Bush supported vouchers, charter schools, and increased student testing, while Al Gore wanted to invest in educational infrastructure, pre-Kindergarten, and raise teacher pay (Cooper, 2000). While a Gore victory may have led to more bureaucratic autonomy for educational employees, Bush's victory led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which renewed the spirit of the ESEA [Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965] by implementing a wide variety of programs intended to improve educational outcomes across the nation (New York State Archives, 2009). The NCLB again sought to respond to the vast inequalities in education across America, and mandated across the board standardized testing and set defined standards to measure which schools (and teachers) were not performing at adequate levels. By usurping front line educators' decision-making abilities and placing more power in the hands of the federal bureaucrats, the Act was another example that responsiveness was becoming the dominant value in education.

In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama spoke out against NCLB, stating the Act had, "...failed to provide high-quality teachers in every classroom and failed to adequately support and pay those teachers," ("Presidential Election," 2012). Since his first candidacy, President Obama moderated his view of the law somewhat, acknowledging its intent and not moving to strike it, yet neutralizing some of its provisions by offering waivers for states and districts implementing policies aligned with administration goals ("Education," 2012). Obama's initial support to empower the bureaucracy showed his desire for neutrality in education, yet his gradual acceptance of NCLB's intent showcased his response to the societal desire to end historical inequities.

In the current presidential campaign, President Obama (long a supporter of teachers' unions) has angered a portion of his political base while appealing to moderates by supporting charter schools and teacher evaluation programs (Feldman, 2012). Candidate Mitt Romney has identified teachers' unions, and teacher autonomy, as enemies of constructive reform, saying the president has been "unable to stand up to union bosses, and unwilling to stand up for kids," (Feldman, 2012). He has called to tie "federal funds directly to dramatic reforms that expand parental choice, invest in innovation, and reward teachers for their results instead of their tenure," (Feldman, 2012). If one accepts teachers' unions as protectors of the bureaucratic autonomy of educational employees, these attacks from both sides of the political aisle are a sign that responsiveness is very much the dominant value in modern day education policy.

Finally, this excerpt illustrates the use of a *society* lens. This example is from the team paper on food safety:

From the inception of the FDA and USDA, citizens have expressed strong opinions regarding food safety. The United States Department of Commerce reports that the US food industry is one of the largest sectors in US manufacturing. Furthermore, food imports from international sources are approximately fifteen percent of this industry. Increased urbanization calls for further industrial food dependence as fewer individuals are self-reliant producers. Consequently, more Americans are disconnected from full knowledge of their food sources. According to the Food Institute, there were 99 mergers and acquisitions among food processing companies in 2006 that have resulted in the consolidation of many food companies. The expansion of industrial food sourcing and production is perhaps what motivates so many Americans to be critical and inquisitive about food safety. Yet the complexity and opaque nature of the federal bureaucracy limited individual's ability to monitor and evaluate agency's shifting policies.

Technological advances in genetically modified products and an increase in food safety awareness through social media have shifted the informational imbalances and

created new controversial issues for people to discuss. Aggregate search engines, such as Monitter.com, provide immediate access to job postings, news articles and any other electronic content posted on the internet regarding food safety. Twitter, Facebook, and informational websites created by government agencies, universities, public/private agencies, and individuals have increased access to information and provided “real-time” awareness for consumers/citizens. Additionally, activist websites exist now that allow individuals to create petitions and leave comments, decreasing petition drive costs and increasing a disparate population’s ability to advocate and lobby. Perhaps in response to the increased visibility of consumer opinions through technology, the USDA runs a blog titled, “Found a Problem with Your Food? USDA Wants to Know About It.”

Additionally, mainstream news distribution sources like CNN and The Huffington Post frequently author articles related to salmonella or *E. coli* outbreaks, bringing more visibility to the issue of food safety and the role of government in regulating food safety. Examining these online sources shows an overwhelming consensus among commenters, activists, and researchers in regards to food safety and the federal government. The clear consensus is that the federal government consistently caves to industry demands and has woefully underfunded food safety initiatives. Distrust of producers and market forces also permeate these online discussions as can be seen in this post by Emily Dale of Florida: “Testing our vegetables for pathogens is of critical importance and should not be delegated to the producers themselves or the packing houses, both of whom have a financial interest in coming up with a negative result,” (see <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/514/566/980/>). A brief analysis of searches in Twitter for the term “food safety” reveals that non-corporate Twitter accounts focus their posts to stories regarding cuts to food safety programs, product recalls, and food safety tips.

Reflections

Several lessons emerge from this exercise. First, future students might learn better from interacting with examples as they prepare their own reports. Second, some students overemphasized one category at the expense of the other two: clearer details on how best to balance the three sections may also be appropriate. Third, some students struggled to identify the most relevant historical/political/societal developments: some additional guidance on filtering may be appropriate.

In addition to these potential adjustments, I will consider adding more opportunities for students to discuss their collective progress on this assignment in class. The teams may not have collaborated with each other as much as might have been helpful. The ability to learn from other examples might assist teams with their own reports. Specifically, it might be useful to consider the ways other teams found evidence of administrative neutrality and political responsiveness in separate contexts and then use those examples to inform the team's own information gathering and analysis efforts.

Also, I will consider new ways to implement this assignment. For instance, this is one of several team assignments in the class. Students may suffer a bit of teamwork "overload" as a result. To help minimize this effect, an idea emerged from the Faculty Seminar: consider restructuring the assignment to provide for team-based information gathering but individual analysis. For instance, teams may be assigned for the purpose of collecting evidence of the value balance for a particular public context, but students could individually assess the information and draft their own analyses of administrative neutrality and political responsiveness. This change would also have the benefit of fully recognizing individual effort and prevent any potential problems with "free riders" in the process.

Overall, I was pleased with this as an alternative to a midterm exam. I believe the students benefitted from the opportunity to gather information and make a contemporary values balance determination based on evidence. The goal of this assignment was to provide students with the opportunity to master and apply these concepts outside of the classroom. The hope is that they will use this knowledge to understand and shape the ways in which these values are prioritized and espoused in practice.

References

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