A Pragmatic Teaching Philosophy

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lence in teaching."

I would like to preface this discussion by noting that I am lucky enough to teach the capstone experience for the Masters of Public Administration Program at Southwest Texas State University (SWT). The capstone experience is a process that takes two semesters. In the first course, "Problems in Research Methodology" (POSI 5335), students find their research question, prepare a literature review, and present a prospectus. In the second course, "Applied Research Project" (POSI 5397), students write a formal prospectus, collect data, and write their Applied Research Project (ARP). The Applied Research Project class does not meet formally and is managed via the Internet. Students defend their paper in an oral exam before a committee at the end of the semester. The classes are small, usually with seven to 18 students per class. The two-semester format and small class size provide me with unique opportunities to give students individualized attention. Since 1992, I have supervised more than 200 Applied Research Projects.

I use the philosophy of John Dewey, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Jane Addams as the foundation of my individualized teaching philosophy. Since 1990, I have examined the works of these classical American pragmatists in my life as a scholar. When I began to discover that their ideas had application for the classroom, my teaching became more coherent and my students began winning awards.

Therefore, within the larger framework of Classical American Pragmatism,[1] I first approach teaching with a spirit of critical optimism. Second, I take as a point of departure that a research paper is a form of inquiry and that inquiry involves transformations. As a teacher, one of my jobs is to facilitate the transformations of inquiry by developing teaching tools. Third, I treat the class as a community of inquiry. Fourth, I focus on pragmatic consequences. Fifth, I broaden my own and the students' horizons by bridging dualities such as theory/practice. And finally, whenever possible, I open the class to the light of public scrutiny.

- the expansion of the oral exam committees to include faculty from other departments, university administrators, and practitioners
- oral exams moved to the state capitol and city hall
- the development of conceptual frameworks that organize the paper (see Table 1)
- a requirement that students develop tables linking their conceptual framework to the literature and to the modes of evidence collection.

When students write a large research paper, they are engaged in a form of inquiry. That simple insight propelled my teaching in new directions. I credit John Dewey's *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry* (1938) as the source of the insight. Dewey places purposeful human inquiry as a focal point of his philosophy. He defines inquiry as "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation (finding a research question, seeking an approach to addressing the research question)...into a unified whole" (completed paper). Both Dewey and Peirce stress that the transformations of inquiry are often triggered by doubt associated with the questioning of existing belief systems. Doubt is resolved through further inquiry and reflective thought. An effective way to communicate the value of the transformations of inquiry is a learning curve. Students are initially attracted to a topic and have a sense of "what is." They begin in a type of equilibrium. As they search the literature, their initial understanding is challenged (doubt stage) by the literature (disequilibrium). As their reading and note-taking proceed, they move up the learning curve. Eventually they reach a new equilibrium where their understanding contains greater complexity. Tools that direct their progress aid the journey of discovery.[2]

I have developed two tools that keep students on track—the *Step by Step* notebook method and micro-conceptual frameworks. The *Step* notebook helps the student stay focused by organizing their time, materials, and ideas. I developed this tool as a struggling assistant professor while doing my own research. I use the method today and credit it with my own limited success as a scholar. When I began teaching the Research Methods class[3] I introduced it

to students. Students praised the behind-the-scenes organization the notebook provided.

Nevertheless, the notebook was nothing more than an assignment. After reading John Dewey's *Logic*, I began to see it as a tool of inquiry because it brought order to the tangible world, allowing the student to focus more directly on the literature as well as the doubt, confusion, surprise, and critical thinking associated with the transformations of pragmatic inquiry.[4] MPA graduate Kevin Baum notes that the *Step* notebook method is a "practical approach to research that provides a critical forum for internal debate...and opportunity to write and think about what we have read"; and Sam Wilson found the *Step* method useful because it "stimulates fertile and productive thinking in a critical manner."[5]

The second tool I use to facilitate inquiry is more abstract. Using Dewey's *Logic* and James' *Pragmatism*, I now view theory as a tool. My job as teacher is to help the student find the tool that enables them to address their research question and help them engage in data collection and analysis. As public affairs practitioners they too should view theory as a tool that helped them be more effective.

The understanding of theories as tools began with William James' hotel corridor metaphor: "Pragmatism lies in the midst of theories like a hotel corridor. All the rooms open out to in and all the rooms can be entered. Pragmatism owns the corridor and the right to move freely from room to room" (1907, 54). Thus, there are many useful theories, and because the inquiring practitioner owns the problematic situation he or she decides which theory helps address the problem. In addition, James (1959, 4) views theory as a way for people to work smart because it takes "far less mental effort" to understand the complexities of the world. Like any good tool, theory makes life easier.

Early in the first course, I distinguish between the larger meta-theories that students learn in their MPA classes and the narrower micro-conceptual frameworks they will need to develop for their applied research projects. For years, I used traditional research purposes (explanation, description, and exploration)[6] as a mechanism for students to narrow their topic and refine their research question. After

Critical optimism (meliorism) "is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to work to improve conditions and it arouses reasonableness and confidence as optimism does not" (Dewey, 1929, 179). I apply the spirit of critical optimism to the student-learner and to the two courses. I am optimistic that each student has the potential to write a fine applied research project. There is, however, room for every student to improve and stretch as a professional. Courses that are founded on a spirit of critical optimism are constantly reviewed for improvements. Examples of improvements in the MPA capstone experience include

* the development of Web syllabi
* the use of a class list serve across courses

Table I. Classifying Micro-Conceptual Frameworks

Research Purpose	Research Question	Micro-Conceptual Framework	Research Technique/ Method	Statistical Technique
Exploration Anything Goes	What, When, Where, Who, How or any combination of above	Working Hypotheses	Case study is typical: structured interviews, documentanalysis, archival records, focus group. Anything goes—Survey, existing aggregated data Usually qualitative evidence	Anything goes - Any type of statistical analysis possible
Description	What	Descriptive Categories	Survey and Content Analysis	Simple descriptive statistics
Gauging	How close is process/policy to an Ideal or standard?	Practical Ideal Type	If generalizing to a group—survey and content analysis If generalizing to an agency, organization etc. —Case study.	Simple descriptive statistics If case study— qualitative data common
Decision Making	What is the best decision?	Models of Operations Research	Cost Benefit Analysis, cost Effectiveness Analysis, linear programming,decision tree analysis etc.	Quantitative techniques of Operations Research
Explanation/ Prediction	Why	Formal Hypotheses	Experimental and quasi experimental design (broadly defined) Survey, existing data	Correlation, t-test, Chi Square. analysis of variance, simple and multiple regression etc.

finding the topic their next step was to find a conceptual framework for their research question. Students always had questions about conceptual frameworks. What is a micro-conceptual framework? How is it identified for a particular research question? Where do I find the framework? How is it used?

I never admitted to myself that I could not really name what I was talking about. I was surprised to find that Dewey discussed conceptual frameworks in *Logic*. Somehow, I saw a connection between Dewey's insights and the student questions. I began to see that there were lots of different types of conceptual frameworks and that these frameworks grouped naturally around the research purposes defined above. Using the connection between framework and research purpose, I developed five pairs of purpose/micro-conceptual frameworks. They are exploration/working hypotheses, description/categories, gauging/practical ideal type, decision-making/models of operations research, and explanation/formal hypotheses.[7] (See Table 1 for the listing of these frameworks).

In *The Conduct of Inquiry*, Abraham Kaplan (1964, 268) points out that one of the most practical purposes of theory is that it helps organizes the collection and analysis of data.

Every theory serves, in part, as a research directive. Theory is useful because it guides the collection of data and the subsequent analysis, by showing us beforehand where the data are to be fitted, and what we are to make of them when we get them...without a theory, however provisional or loosely formulated, there is only a miscellany of observations having no significance.

With this insight, I was able to see that certain modes of data collection and even statistical techniques lined up with the purposes and micro frameworks. The material in Table 1 plays an important role at all stages of the first course because it allows students to work through their research question/purpose and then have a sense of how to proceed (write a successful proposal). Students are forced to specify their micro frameworks because I require that the student identify the micro-conceptual framework and link it to the literature and modes of data collection

at the proposal stage. With the micro-conceptual frameworks firmly in place, I am always consistent as the advisor because the framework allows me to see quickly what is going. Supervision takes far less mental effort!

One final note on conceptual frameworks—students are required to construct this tool from the literature. Sometimes they find a framework in the literature; other times they must construct their own. Dewey (1938, 36) maintains that

> There is the same sort of advantage in having *conceptual frameworks* manufactured and on hand in advance of actual occasions for their use, as there is in having tools ready instead of improvising them when need arises [italics added].

I have learned to relax and let these tools propel and strengthen the transformations of inquiry that occur during the ARP process. Most students see the value of the *Step* notebook immediately. On the other hand, micro-conceptual frameworks generally become highly valued when the students write the results chapter. Then the entire capstone experience makes more sense.

Aside from developing the tools of inquiry, I also try to create a community of inquiry[8] during the capstone experience. The point here is that I try to create a sense of interconnectedness. Ideally, students experience connections between each other, with me, with the authors of the literature they read, and with former students. Connections are enhanced through class assignments; presentations by former students, and, recently, a class list serve. The ARP-L (list serve) links the students within and between classes (5335 and 5397). The list serve gives me a way to communicate with the POSI 5397 students who meet as a group only once. One indication of how connected the students feel is their reluctance to get off the list after they graduate. Currently, 81 students are on the list serve. Approximately 60 graduates are still engaged as part of the community of inquiry through the list serve.

In the last few months, I have begun stressing in a new way the importance of community. I have noticed that the students least likely to finish their ARP, regardless of ability, are the ones that are most isolated from the group. Robert Boice (1990, 100), a respected scholar in the psychology of writing, notes that "most writing is, after all, a social act." He identified social skills deficits as contributing to writers block. He has found that effective writers "build social networks" (102). I explicitly encourage social networks in the capstone experience.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1958b) defined classical pragmatism by linking ideas and actions to their practical effects (or usefulness). So too I judge my teaching assignments, lectures, readings, list serve, etc., by their consequences. The first overriding practical consequence is for the students to write a paper that they can successfully defend (and therefore graduate). In addition, I encourage students to choose topics that their agencies can use.[9] Most students indicate that their organization and writing skills improve drastically while engaged in the capstone experience. As a result, many students are promoted or go on to more fulfilling jobs.[10] A surprising consequence of the notebook method is its application outside the context of formal scholarship. Former students have used the method to plan weddings, manage large-scale software development projects, plan and manage projects, request appropriations, testify before the Texas Senate, and organize mountain climbing trips.

One of the first articles I read about John Dewey had what I considered a most peculiar title—"Battling Dualisms."[11] It wasn't until I began to bridge dualisms like theory/practice; teacher/scholar; administrator/teacher in my role as a teacher that I was able to understand Dewey's insights. One of the first examples is the notebook method (*Step by Step*). At first the notebook was just a simple teaching assignment. When I began to see it as a source of scholarship, the method evolved into a workbook that is now adopted outside Southwest Texas State University. *Step-by-Step* evolved as I bridged the practice (teaching assignment) and theory (tool of inquiry vis-a-vis Pragmatism).

Bridging the dualism between administrator (MPA director) and teacher also improved the capstone experience. As administrator, I help to organize mentoring activities for students and alumni. Recently, I added a mentoring component to the capstone experience. Alumni practitioners have participated in oral examinations and have served as second readers. In this way I can pair students with experienced practitioners in their field. The student works with the practitioners and develops a relationship. The inclusion of practitioners also offers an opportunity to add some diversity to the oral exam committee. One example is Sabrina Wadley, an African American and a recent graduate. Martha Caxtex-Tatum, San Marcos' first African American City Council person, was Sabrina's second reader. Both women benefited from the experience.

Recently the MPA program has held several of the practitioner-filled oral exams at the Texas State Capitol. This setting gave a symbolic presence for the SWT MPA program in the seat of state government power. Course innovation invariably follows as I bridge seemingly unrelated dualities.

The pragmatic spirit of critical optimism leads me to lay much of my teaching open to the light of public scrutiny. First, applied research projects are bound and catalogued in the SWT library. Student papers improved almost immediately after this policy was enacted. Even the least motivated student does not want to be embarrassed by work with their name on it catalogued in a library.

Second, the process is also more transparent because a list of applied research projects (since 1992) and abstracts (since 1999) is posted on the SWT MPA Web site.[12] In addition, the Research Methods syllabus and the Applied Research Project requirements, deadlines, expectations, etc., are posted on the Web.[13]

Third, SWT faculty and administrators outside the MPA program serve on oral exam committees. Over the last seven years, vice presidents, deans, chairs, and faculty from departments around the campus have served on oral exam committees. Recently, committees have been further opened up to include practitioners.[14]

Fourth, I open my approach to teaching through publication. I have published an article in a book, a journal article, and the *Step-by-Step* notebook. I have also lectured extensively on the *Step* method.

Finally, I submit ARPs for awards. This allows the work of SWT students to be evaluated in light of work from peer institutions. Since 1997, a total of 10 students have won 12 national, regional, and local research awards for their capstone projects. Four students in five years were honored on the national level as Pi Alpha Alpha student manuscript winners. The look on a student's face when they learn of their award is a priceless reward of teaching.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Vince Luizzi, chair of the SWT Philosophy Department, for introducing me to these philosophers and for his role as mentor. Is there an award for mentoring faculty? If so, he is my nominee.
2. Aside from Dewey's Logic, Larry Hickman's (1990) *Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* was instrumental in my seeing the role of tools in inquiry.
3. I introduced the notebook method to students in 1989.
4. After seeing that the notebook was a tool that facilitated critical thinking and the transformations of inquiry, I began giving presentations on the process and eventually published a notebook, *Step by Step: Building a Research Paper* (New Forums Press, 2000). My students have been encouraging me to do this for years.
5. See the *Step-by-Step* Web site for more endorsements from former students—www.newforums.com/news_sbspage.htm/.
6. See Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 1998, Chapter 4, pp. 90-92, for a discussion of research purposes.
7. For a detailed discussion of each micro-conceptual framework, see Shields, 1998. To see examples of how the frameworks are applied to specific research questions, see the Pi Alpha Alpha Journal Web site, www.naspaa.org/initiatives/paa/journal/journal.asp. Each volume contains a SWT Applied Reserch Project that has been reduced to fit the size constraints of the journal. For Volume 1 see Carey Welebob; for Volume II see Shivaun Perez; for Volume III see Ana Lisa Garza.
8. Both Dewey and Addams are noted for their rich theory of "Participatory Democracy." The community of inquiry notion draws from this tradition. Further, I used their insights as inspiration for expansion of the community of inquiry within my classroom and within the list serve.
9. There are many examples of agency use. Pat Hicks' applied research project on Diversity Training and Management is being used by SWT to develop our Diversity Training Program. Gary Jiame's paper was used by the TAACB to develop a strategic plan. Dave McCabe's paper was used to develop legislation for auditing standards. Cindy Cavasos's survey of MPA alumni will be used as assessment data for an upcoming accreditation report.
10. Recent examples include John Urrbazo, the recently appointed chief of staff for a state senator, and Pat Hicks, the recently appointed chief of staff for the Texas Lieutenant Governor.
11. The article I am referring to is a chapter from the Flower and Murphy's (1977) *A History of Philosophy in America*.
12. See www.polisci.swt.edu/public_administration/public_admin.html/.
13. The POSI 5335 Web site is www.fac.swt.edu/shields/sy35fa99.html/. The POSI 5397 Web site is www.fac.swt.edu/shields/sy97fa99.htm/.
14. Titles of practitioners include city manager, chief of police, city council member, chief of staff (Texas Senate, Lieutenant Governor).

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