

Distilling the Concrete From the Abstract

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of how the implications of abstract principles and other intellectual concepts can be rendered more apparent to students in the classroom. People commonly express normative values without appreciating their individual and social consequences. The author provides a number of classroom experiments he has employed as a professor of law. They are offered not as specific models to be followed by others, but to encourage a broader use of methods of transcending abstract thinking.

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“Ideas have consequences.” –Richard Weaver

Anyone going into a classroom to teach should do so with Richard Weaver’s words (Weaver, 1948) firmly in mind. A common shortcoming in the learning process arises from the failure to distinguish intellectual abstractions from the reality they are intended to represent. Alfred Korzybski’s now classic observation that “the map is not the territory” (qtd. in Wilber, 1977, p.41) is a reminder that the world, and our *thoughts about* the world, never precisely coalesce. The word “water” will never quench one’s thirst, nor will there always be agreement as to its meaning (e.g., does “watered stock” in a corporate setting have the same significance to a rancher with his “watered stock” of cattle?).

Given the nature of our minds, it is probably inevitable that a fuzziness will always exist around the words we use to describe the world. Our learning – whether from direct experiences with the world or from secondary accounts – is inherently subjective in nature. It is continually filtered through lenses of our own creation that are fashioned with the assistance and direction of others. We organize

our thinking around concepts and categories that have no existence outside our minds. We attribute qualities, and interpret words and events, according to meanings fashioned by our thoughts. This separation between the abstract world of our thinking and the concrete world in which we live is at the base of so much of the political and social conflict in which mankind has long been submerged. It is also a challenge, to those of us who teach, to help students transcend this epistemological difficulty: to help them become aware of the unavoidable limitations of abstract thought. I am continually trying to develop exercises that take ideas out of the realm of abstraction and bring students face-to-face with the implications these ideas hold for their own lives. My purpose in doing so has far less to do with the subject matter of the examples used than with helping them discover that the advocacy of any idea carries with it unforeseen consequences.

In his book, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, Bryan Caplan (2007) inquires into “why democracies choose bad policies.” He illustrates how voting is marginally cost-free to individual voters who, consequently, make choices they would likely not make were they to pay the full costs of their preferences. Along this same line, I have used the example of the beauty pageant contestant who, when asked, “if you had but one wish, what would it be?” robotically responds “for peace and brotherhood for all mankind.” Her reasons for giving such an answer, I suggest, is that she knows she does not have a wish; that her statement is cost-free to her. I hope that such inquiries will help students see the importance of considering the long-term costs of present thinking and decision-making.

One of the best teaching performances with which I am familiar occurred in a high school history class in Palo Alto, California, during one week in 1969. Students in the class could not understand how after World War II most German people could maintain that they had been unaware of the atrocities practiced by the Nazi government. In a subsequent class, the teacher – Ron Jones – began conducting exercises designed to foster such values as “strength through discipline” and “strength through community.” The sense of discipline was reinforced by students having to maintain perfect posture, being punctual, asking or responding to questions in a prescribed manner, and otherwise behaving in a uniform manner. A sense of community was generated by the class taking the name of

“The Third Wave,” and having a salute with which class members – along with the teacher – would greet one another.

Another value Jones stressed was “strength through action,” with students being responsible for reporting the names of classmates who did not comply with the aforesaid rules. The Wave members were also to solicit new members from outside the classroom, and to design a “Third Wave” banner. Yet another value, “strength through pride,” was introduced as part of his effort to help the students understand that they were part of a national political movement designed to revivify America. A noted political leader would appear, via closed-circuit television, at a rally to be held in the school auditorium, and the Wave members were assigned the task of assuring a large turnout. When the teacher turned on the television set at the rally, the students were greeted with a filmed speech by Adolf Hitler, surrounded by German teenagers not unlike themselves. Jones directed the entire experience – which was excruciatingly painful to both students and Jones – back to in-class statements that had been made about the Germans’ declared innocence concerning Hitlerian tyranny. In his comments to those assembled in the auditorium, Jones pointed out what the students had already learned experientially: they, too, had become part of something vicious and destructive. “We have all tasted what it was like to live and act in Nazi Germany. We learned what it felt like to create a disciplined social environment. . . . [to] replace reason with rules.” They had experienced the consequences of the idea that a “special society . . . demands a strong leader and discipline to preserve social order” (Jones, 1972). As Jones later observed, no one thereafter was willing to acknowledge their presence at this rally!

My own classroom experiences have produced similar – albeit less dramatic – results. Shortly before the first day of class in my Property course, one of my students – a middle-aged physician with a very successful medical practice – came to my office to announce that he was a Marxist. When class began, I turned to him and said “Proudhon declared that ‘all property is theft.’ You would agree with that, would you not?” Predictably, he answered “yes.” I then went over to his desk and picked up his new copy of Black’s Law Dictionary – a weighty book that had cost him at least \$50 – and took it to the front of the classroom.

“Where are you going with that?” he asked.

“With what?” I responded.

“With my book,” he replied.

“*Whose* book?” I queried. “I thought you didn’t believe in the private ownership of property, so I have just ‘liberated’ this book in the name of ‘the people.’” I then opened the book and grabbed a handful of pages as though I was going to tear them out. “Who wants the first thirty pages?” I asked.

After class, this student came up to me and said, “I have to admit, you got me.”

“No,” I replied, “you ‘got’ yourself by advocating an idea that you could not live with.”

An exercise I used to employ on the first day of law school – before any of the students had gotten to know one another – involved putting all forty of them in a hypothetical lifeboat. They were adrift at sea, the ship on which they had been passengers having just sunk. Only one lifeboat was available to them, and it would hold only twenty persons. If more than twenty got into the boat, it would capsize and all would be lost. I told them they had twenty minutes to decide who got to remain in the lifeboat and who would be left to drown. I then left the room, allowing these future lawyers to get to know one another in a desperate situation.

When I returned, I asked them what their decision was. I was particularly curious not so much as to the *substance* of their decision, but *how* they made it. Whenever I have done this, someone – usually a male student – has always announced that he volunteered to go overboard to save the life of another. The example of the beauty pageant contestant is recalled here.

“Why did you do that?” I ask.

“It was the noble thing to do,” is the usual response I get.

“In other words,” I go on, “there was no real *cost* to your gesture, was there? It was all *benefit* to you, by appearing to be a ‘good guy.’ Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell all of you that those who ended up as lifeboat survivors will get five raw points added to their final exam grades. Do any of you wish to reconsider your decision?”

Again, the students learn that the advocacy of an idea or behavior might not be as cost-free as it first appears. This is a lesson of particular importance to young men and women desirous of having careers in law.

Another variation on this theme is provided by a practice I occasionally engage in on the first day of class, before the students know anything about me. Prior to doing or saying anything else, I

hand out a questionnaire containing a number of statements, to which they are to “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” Many of the statements are fairly innocuous, but sprinkled amongst them are such statements as:

“It is better for people to cooperate with one another, than for each to pursue his/her separate interests.”

“Because the principle of ‘equality’ is so important, we must act to further it whenever we have the opportunity.”

“A person who is better off than his/her neighbors should share his excess benefits with those who are less well-off.”

“A person should regard the interests of the group as being more important than his/her own personal interests.”

I collect the completed questionnaires and tell the students how the course will be graded. “We will have an alternative system of grading for the course, from which each of you is free to choose. One option will be the traditional, *individually* determined grade: whatever grade you get on the final exam will be your grade for the course. If you get an ‘A’ on the exam, you will receive an ‘A’, and if you get a ‘D’ on the final, you’ll get a grade of ‘D’ for the course. The other alternative is a *group-averaged* grade. For those who select this method, your final exam grade will be put into a pool and averaged with others selecting this option. Thus, if three of you select this method, and you receive final exam grades of ‘A,’ ‘C,’ and ‘F,’ your grades will be averaged and each member of the group will receive a grade of ‘C.’”

I then hand out to the students a “contract for grading” form to sign, with each of the two options clearly spelled out. The form explicitly states that the student may, at any time prior to the last day of class, revoke the agreement and opt for the other system. They then sign the contract and turn it in to me.

I take the questionnaires and contract forms and calculate the results. The general pattern never fails. As far as the above referenced statements concerning the greater importance of “group” rather than “personal” interests, I find anywhere from 40% to 60% of the respondents expressing agreement with group priorities. Regarding the alternative grading contract, however, I have never had more than one student choose the group method. I take these results to class with me the next day and express my puzzlement: “Half of you voiced agreement with propositions that elevated group interests above your own, yet when you had the opportunity to give real-world

expression to these sentiments, you failed to do so. Why?" Once again, I take the time to explore with my students the problems associated with expressing support for abstract ideas and practices with whose consequences they are unprepared to live. "If you are not prepared to live according to your stated values, you had better think twice about advocating them."

Another exercise I have developed – again, employed on the first day of class – involves voting. "It is time to elect the leader of a great nation," I tell my students, and hand out a ballot containing two choices: candidates A and B. A brief biographical sketch of each candidate appears on the ballot.

Candidate A is identified as follows: "A well-known critic of government, this man has been involved in tax protest movements, and has openly advocated secession, armed rebellion against the existing national government, and even the overthrow of that government. He is a known member of a militia group that was involved in a shoot-out with law enforcement authorities. He opposes the gun control efforts of the present national government, as well as restrictions on open immigration into this country. He is a businessman who has earned his fortune from such businesses as alcohol, tobacco, retailing, and smuggling."

Candidate B is described this way: "A decorated army war veteran, this man is an avowed nonsmoker and dedicated public health advocate. His public health interests include the fostering of medical research and his dedication to eliminating cancer. He opposes the use of animals in conducting such research, however. He has supported restrictions on the use of asbestos, pesticides, and radiation, and favors government-determined occupational health and safety standards, as well as the promotion of such foods as whole-grain bread and soybeans. He is an advocate of government gun-control measures. An ardent opponent of tobacco, he has supported increased restrictions on both the use of and advertising for tobacco products. Such advertising restrictions include (1) not allowing tobacco to be portrayed as harmless or a sign of masculinity; (2) not allowing such advertising to be directed to women; (3) not drawing attention to the low nicotine content of tobacco products; and (4) limitations as to where such advertisements may be made. This man is a champion of environmental and conservationist programs, and believes in the importance of sending troops into foreign countries for the purpose of maintaining order therein."

The students are then asked to vote, anonymously, for either of these two candidates. I employ this exercise only once every few years so that students will not have been told to expect it. Over the years, the voting results have given candidate B about 75% of the vote, while candidate A gets the remaining 25%. After completing the exercise and tabulating the results, I inform the students that candidate A is a composite of the American “founding fathers” (e.g., Sam Adams, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, et al.). Candidate B, on the other hand, is Adolf Hitler, whose advocacy for the identified programs can be found in such works as *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Proctor, 1999) and *How Green Were the Nazis?* (Bruggemeier et. al., 2005).

In one of my classes a few years ago, we were discussing the *Schechter* case (*A.L.A. Schechter* 1935), in which the United States Supreme Court struck down the cornerstone of the “New Deal,” the National Industrial Recovery Act. I was explaining to the students how this legislation had transformed American commerce and industry into a system of business created, but government enforced, cartels. I also pointed out to them the popularity of fascist/socialist systems throughout much of the world at that time, including Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, and Roosevelt in the United States.

I then informed my class how Winston Churchill had, in 1938, praised Hitler, as had such luminaries as Gandhi, Gertrude Stein (who, for whatever reason, nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize), and Henry Ford (who was pleased to work with the German leader). One of my students could take it no more. “How can you say that so many people could support such an evil man as Adolf Hitler?” she pleaded. “You tell me,” I responded. “Just two weeks ago 78% of you in this class voted for him!” Some twenty seconds of pure silence settled into the classroom before we moved on to the next case. While this exercise has not always produced such dramatic responses in other classes, it does generate thoughtful discussion, particularly when I relate it to the aforementioned ballot exercise, and use Richard Weaver’s insights for focus.¹

¹ In what may be an encouraging note, the last time I used this exercise in one of my classes, Hitler’s popularity had fallen off to “only” a 52.3% margin. During this latter vote, one of my students wrote on his/her ballot, “leaving blank, or writing in a socialist candidate if one exists.” At the following class session, I read this notation aloud, telling the students that a socialist *did* appear on the ballot in the

These are but a few examples of how instructors can help students transcend the limited nature of abstract thinking by experiencing the personally relevant implications of policies and practices that lie hidden within concepts. Some may object that such exercises amount to little more than tricks played at the expense of students. There *is* trickery involved here, but not for the purpose of classroom teasing or to reinforce some warped sense of pedagogical superiority. Our highly structured, institutionalized culture is grounded in abstractions that, by their very natures, are riddled with uncertainties, fuzziness, contradictions, and mystery. What field of study – be it law, economics, medicine, engineering, business, communications, or other professions – is not bound up with the use and interpretation of abstractions? We are all familiar with the works of George Orwell and others who have demonstrated how political systems thrive on the manipulation of language, allowing people to internalize such contradictions as “freedom is slavery,” “war is peace,” and “all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” Our problems with words and abstractions are not limited to such obvious efforts to deceive, but inherent in their natures. Helping students *experience* the contrariness and elusive qualities upon which our thinking is grounded, generates an understanding that conceptualization alone cannot accomplish.

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