

Occupy the Classroom: Teaching Contemporary Events, A Reflection

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Abstract:

Teaching contemporary events can be a significant challenge for university instructors. This reflection discusses some of the many challenges I faced when teaching on a particular contemporary event, the Occupy Movement. I consider some of the difficulties associated with teaching this topic and explain some of the ways I attempted to address these challenges, with varying degrees of success. It concludes with a consideration of the tremendous opportunities and rewards created by teaching contemporary events, for both students and instructors, despite the many challenges.

Key Words:

University teaching, challenges, rewards, assignments, contemporary events, the Occupy Movement.

Introduction

On October 30, 2012 a sign outside a classroom at Mount Royal University (MRU) in Calgary, Alberta read: "GNED 1303 is cancelled because of Hurricane Sandy." Students and faculty members passing the sign stared aghast at the message: how could a hurricane pounding the east coast of the United States force the cancelation of a course at MRU, thousands of kilometers away? I was also dismayed at the impact that a distant storm could have on my class here in Calgary, but I had planned a unique experience for my students that day that could not happen because of the devastation in New York City. My class, one section of a shell course titled Conflict and the Social Context, was exploring the Occupy Movement, and I had arranged with a participant in the movement to take my students on a live, interactive, virtual tour of the important sites associated with the protests in Manhattan. However, with the city under water, and our tour guide stuck on Staten Island without transportation, all of our careful planning quickly

collapsed, and I was forced to cancel class. This was just one of the many challenges that I faced in teaching a course on a contemporary and still evolving movement.

GNED 1303, Conflict and the Social Context, was first offered at MRU as a pilot course in the winter semester of 2012. It is one of the foundation level courses offered by the Department of General Education, which provides a multidisciplinary, well-rounded liberal education to all students at the university. Students are required to take one course at the foundation level from each of the four clusters (Numeracy and Scientific Literacy; Values, Beliefs and Identity; Community and Society; and Communication), and Conflict and the Social Conflict offered them a new option in Cluster Three (Community and Society). The course is intended to provide students a way to gain a greater understanding of society through a multi-disciplinary examination of a single conflict. The calendar course description reads:

Conflict, whether personal, domestic or international, is one of the defining forces of society. Through an interdisciplinary framework, students will engage multiple interpretations and be introduced to multiple ways of thinking about the world that they live in through an examination of a conflict in its social context.

Two sections of the course were offered in Winter 2012: one on the oil sands and one on the Occupy Movement. More sections and topics were offered the following semester, including courses on contested bodies, Calgary's Ring Road controversy, and the Rwandan Genocide. I also offered two more sections on the Occupy Movement. The course has since been officially approved and is now a permanent part of the Cluster Three offerings.

I chose to use the Occupy Movement as my particular conflict somewhat spontaneously. My research interests focus primarily on historical social movements in Canada. As such, I had initially planned to use a past example of social activism as my core conflict for the course, maybe the Sixties student movement or the Global Justice Movement. However, when the Occupy Movement exploded in Fall 2011, I became quite intrigued and excited and thought it might prove more engaging for students to study this contemporary and immediately relevant movement rather than a more distant and remote historical example. Yet, while I did consider some of the challenges that might emerge, I did not fully contemplate the difficulties that would arise when teaching an event that was essentially still happening as the course commenced.

These challenges were numerous. The first I faced is that I am by no means an expert on Occupy. My expertise is in the field of social movements, and I paid fairly close attention to media reports of the events happening in New York City and around the world as they were occurring, but Occupy was far too recent for anyone to be considered an expert. As a historian I was particularly reluctant to make claims about something for which we had no time for reflection or hindsight.

The second challenge related to the amount of information on the Occupy Movement. On the one hand, there is far too much information on the topic. Supporters, opponents, and commentators produced innumerable images, videos, tweets, blogs, manifestos, news reports, statements, editorials, and more over a few months of intense activity and the following months of reflection. It would be impossible to filter through all of this material in order to present my students with some overall interpretation of the

movement. On the other hand, there is far too little information on Occupy from an academic perspective. When I first taught the course in Winter 2012, there were almost no scholarly articles or books published on the movement since it takes a significant amount of time to publish academic work. I did assign a textbook, *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, but it did not provide much in the way of scholarly analysis. By Fall 2012, when I was teaching the course for the second time, there were more academic articles and books on the topic, including a book by Todd Gitlin that I had my students review for one of their assignments, but these were still limited and often seemed rushed for publication.

I tried to deal with these two challenges explicitly, with mixed results. Perhaps most importantly, I decided to treat the course as a research project that the students and I were undertaking together. At the beginning of each semester, but especially the first time through the course, I informed them of the limitations and restrictions of my own knowledge and the source materials available. I structured the course so that I would provide the context, background, theoretical grounding, and secondary literature, but together we would try to link this specifically to Occupy. Through classroom discussions, as well as assignments such as a media analysis, an image analysis, and a social media analysis, we would work in tandem to sort through the enormous amount of material available on the movement and develop our own understanding. In some ways this worked quite well, and the students were able to make insightful connections between the existing scholarly literature and the specifics of Occupy. As just one example, they very successfully analyzed some of the similarities and differences between Occupy and other historical social movements by linking their growing understanding of the former with scholarly studies of the latter. However, this was not entirely successful. We were only able to examine a small proportion of the sources created by the Occupy Movement in our four months of classes and ultimately based our analysis on a small fraction of materials on the movement. A much more extensive exploration of the primary sources would have been necessary to truly understand the movement. As well, the readings I assigned were often only tangentially related, and students frequently struggled to make the connections with the Occupy movement.

A third challenge was that the movement was constantly evolving as I was teaching the courses. When we began in January 2012, it was still unclear what would happen to the movement following the recent eviction of activists from most of the public spaces they were occupying. In fact, it was still uncertain what would happen with Occupy when we began the Fall semester and approached the first anniversary of the initial occupations. While, this uncertainty was part of what made the course exciting, engaging, and interesting, it also created enormous challenges. For instance, it made it very difficult for me to decide on a particular structure for the course, especially since I am a historian and tend to rely on narrative and chronology. It also made it tough for the students and I to truly understand what had occurred and what was still happening.

I tried to address this challenge directly, again with mixed results. In both semesters I implemented an "In the News" component, where students were expected to follow the Occupy Movement in the media (including social media) and consider what was occurring on a daily basis. At the beginning of each meeting, we would discuss what had happened since our last class. This was often the best part of our classes; students

became very engaged in current events and would raise a wide range of issues and events related (and sometimes not) to the Occupy Movement. It made it difficult, though, to prepare other course lectures and activities since I would never know how long each of these “In the News” discussions would take. That said, this component worked very well to help us follow the evolution of Occupy and discuss the various aspects of the movement.

Another attempt to address the constant and unknown evolution of Occupy failed dramatically. In the second semester one of the assignments students had to complete was a timeline that would chronicle the events related to Occupy from its first anniversary to the end of our semester (we completed a timeline of the first year of the movement together in class). I thought this would help students follow the ongoing evolution of the movement and link it to developments the previous year. It was a complete disaster. While I would argue that the movement is still relevant, and activists are turning their attention to a wide variety of social problems and issues, the Occupy Movement itself was almost entirely inactive or at least largely invisible by this time. There was a celebration to mark the first anniversary of the movement, but few events specifically connected with Occupy occurred after this date. As such, students were unable to include very much information in their timelines, and I was forced to abandon the assignment. Perhaps this still helped students understand the evolution (or lack thereof) of the movement, but it caused enormous problems in terms of my assignments and evaluation for the course, and students were legitimately frustrated and confused by the assignment.

Moreover, I decided to structure the course thematically rather than chronologically. This also reflected the multi-disciplinary focus of the course, as each unit examined the Occupy Movement from a different disciplinary perspective. We began with a general overview of what we already knew about the movement, including a timeline of the major events. We then turned to an examination of economics, including a discussion of capitalism and an evaluation of claims regarding economic inequality and the 1% versus the 99%. Sociology came next; we discussed the various social movement theories and considered the ways that the Occupy Movement fit (or did not) with these theories. The following section explored the historical context of Occupy, trying to analyze its similarities and differences from other past social movements. This was followed by a discussion of politics that included a consideration of Occupy’s critiques regarding the influence of money in the political system and their proposed alternative decision-making structures. We also examined the legal, moral, and ethical aspects of Occupy and considered the rights accorded to citizens to protest and the limitations placed on those rights by various authorities. Our final sections examined the geography of the movement, including the structure and spread of camps, the cultural influence and representations of the protests, and some of the issues associated with diversity and exclusion within Occupy, including those related to class, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Overall, while students sometimes struggled to make the connections across the various units, this structure worked quite well when dealing with the ever-changing nature of the movement, as well as its complexities and nuances.

Teaching a course on the Occupy Movement posed a number of important challenges for my students and for me. Perhaps my training as a historian limited my

ability to adequately respond to the immediacy of the topic, or perhaps Occupy itself caused some of the difficulties, but I believe that it is difficult to examine any contemporary event in a university classroom. It is challenging to create a course outline that establishes the structure of a course when the topic under study is constantly shifting and evolving. It is also very difficult to assign readings and examine a subject with academic rigor when there are few secondary sources on that topic. Furthermore, the overwhelming amount of primary source material created by and about current events and a lack of hindsight on them limit our ability to effectively analyze these topics. In some ways I handled these challenges well, including the use of various assignments that helped create awareness about current events and filter through the vast amount of information on the topic. In other ways these challenges limited our ability to fully analyze and understand the Occupy Movement and social conflict more broadly.

Yet, despite all of these challenges and failures, or perhaps because of them, these courses were among the most rewarding experiences of my career as a university professor. Having to remain flexible and responsive to the subject and my students throughout the semester helped me develop my own teaching style in important ways. In particular, I had to reconsider my desire to control the classroom and the course and my tendency to view lectures as formal and structured events. The lack of secondary sources and the vast amount of ephemera related to the Occupy Movement allowed me to integrate primary sources into my course in a way I had never imagined possible and forced me to rethink how I use such sources to explain and analyze various topics. I had to give students more control over the interpretation of such sources, which aided their learning dramatically and taught me a great deal about the topic and the process of academic study. Students also became engaged in current events and the various problems in our world to a much greater extent than I had ever been able to manage in previous courses. This was a tremendous accomplishment, given that this is one of my main goals as an educator. Furthermore, these courses effectively created a community of scholars; the students and I were truly learning together, and we all contributed equally and in substantial ways to the exploration of this particular movement and of social conflict more broadly. Thus, while it can be incredibly challenging to teach on contemporary issues and events, I believe it can be a tremendously rewarding opportunity that can greatly improve the educational experience both for our students and for us.