1988

An Essay on Student Resistance

Richard Joanisse
Grand Valley State University

Jacqueline Johnson
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol3/iss2/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
An Essay On Student Resistance

There are seventeen students in the class. Although it is a class in sociological theory, it could be any class whose subject matter is abstract and whose focus is on great thinkers, social-political interpretation, and ideas.

Five of the students have assigned themselves to the front row. They complete the daily readings. They actively engage in conversation with us and with one another. At times, they chastise others in the room for their apparent disengagement. Their chastisement is not kindly received.

The remainder of the students crowd toward the back. They are variously bored, resentful and hostile about works assigned. They argue with us daily about assignments—their difficulty or their relevance. They can barely contain themselves when the allotted class time has finished. This is the resistance. They constitute the majority.

What are the sources of student resistance at an institution like our own, a regional state college, where students are working class and the first generation of their families to attend college? How do we value student resistance? What are the responsibilities of those of us who teach in general education to overcome it?

The student resistance we explore in this essay entails a reluctance to learn. It involves an unwillingness to actively read, discuss, or challenge ideas presented by classmates or instructors. Student resistance is characterized at times by passivity, at times by hostility. It includes an inability to let go of the taken-for-granted world as a way of critically scrutinizing it.
Resistance is communicated verbally. We hear it in the complaint that a book or lecture is boring, repetitive, too difficult, not relevant. We sense resistance in the dialectic of classroom interaction, when students exchange snide comments and disparaging looks with one another, but cannot be goaded into dialogue or participation. We read resistance on student essays, in which the student has given up before beginning, in which the student refuses to grapple with difficult material and strives only for a minimally acceptable grade.

Student resistance is most apparent, we think, in classes that deal with abstraction and ideas as opposed to fact and example, and in classes that are designed to examine values. It is this resistance that we consider here.

The students we teach are, almost without exception, working- and lower-middle class. The majority are the first generation of their families to receive a college education. They have enrolled in college to earn a degree, but not necessarily an education. They believe this credential will provide them with job security and social status that is higher than that of their parents. Their resistance to learning derives from a clash of cultures, theirs and the academic world; from their immediate social histories; from their specific goals and objectives; and from the abstract, theoretical subject matter they encounter in courses like ours, courses that deal with values and ideas. It is reinforced by the counter-resistance they meet in their instructors and augmented by the organizational imperatives of institutions of higher education.

Others have noted the immediate antecedent experience of students in the high school classroom as a source of resistance. (McNeil's work provides the best example.) Here, teachers are preoccupied with classroom control. In exchange for their students' cooperation, teachers promise to simplify course content so that it can be grasped with minimal effort. Thus, the secondary school experiences of our students are characterized by simplification, reductionism, and preoccupation with "facts". Their prior academic encounters do not include the ability to handle a multiplicity of explanations for one event or the treatment of issues in-depth.

The single most significant source of resistance at our institution, however, is the clash between the students' working-class culture and the values of the academic world. Working-class students perceive the world of intellect as effete. Working-class culture dichotomizes mental and physical labor, and differentially values the two. To working-class students, the intellectual world is, by its nature, frivolous, and, therefore, not valuable. (Paul Willis documents this for male working-class students. While it seems likely the perception may be similar for females, we know of no empirical evidence to support this claim.) Students enroll in college for a specific, particular reason—to elevate their social status by achieving a good job. Their motivation is vocational;
they seek a degree first, an education second.

Courses that deal with values, ideas and abstraction do not provide the immediate pay-off such students are seeking. The connection of these classes to the student's successful future is, at best, tenuous. To actively engage oneself in the materials of such a class or to identify with or become attached to the instructor is to renounce both the culture in which one resides, one's own sense of personal motivation, and even, for male students, one's masculinity. Moreover, working-class students do not have the luxury to intellectualize that their upper-middle-class counterparts do. For example, many work twenty or more hours per week to finance their college degree.

Student resistance in liberal arts majors like our own, sociology, derives also from the fact that these are majors of last resort. Rejected by professional programs such as nursing, business, education, and physical therapy, which have secondary admit criteria to satisfy outside credentialing agencies, students find themselves academically adrift in their junior or even their senior year. They have already invested time and money in their education. They are, in addition, psychologically and socially committed to attaining a degree. They feel compelled to graduate in something...anything. And, they arrive at the door of the least restrictive liberal arts majors. Their choice of field can barely be called that. They are, at best, minimally engaged; at worst, they are openly hostile to their chosen area of study.

At private institutions, where the liberal arts are viewed as having historic and intrinsic value, this is less a problem. The difficulty is exaggerated at schools like our own, whose clientele believe in the value of attaining a bachelor's degree, but only as a vehicle to a job. The convergence of vocation/avocation is less a part of the antecedent experience of our working-class students than it is of their middle-class peers. The few students we teach who have purposely, actively chosen sociology as a major, do so against the advice and to the consternation of their families.

Student resistance is fostered by at least two other, independent dimensions. Teaching faculty in the liberal arts have, themselves, actively developed a response to a situation that they collectively (sometimes quietly) define as reprehensible. Again, taking our own regional state college as an example, we encounter a liberal arts faculty demoralized by declining majors, increased mandates to provide service for professional programs for which they have little regard, and labor conditions (overcrowded classrooms; additional advising and teaching responsibilities) that, even more significantly than salaries, indicate the teachers' true value to the institution and to the society.

Faculty resistance is exemplified in the attitude of disdain expressed for students in general. It is expressed in the open disregard many of our colleagues have for the majority of students they encounter in their classrooms. As one instructor said, "I teach to 25%...occasionally I teach for 5% of my own. That the remaining 70% are important, well..."

The organizing principle for student resistance in our school is the profession, encoders. Students who have exceeded the limits of classes. Rejected by professional programs such as nursing, business, education, and physical therapy, which have secondary admit criteria to satisfy outside credentialing agencies, students find themselves academically adrift in their junior or even their senior year. They have already invested time and money in their education. They are, in addition, psychologically and socially committed to attaining a degree. They feel compelled to graduate in something...anything. And, they arrive at the door of the least restrictive liberal arts majors. Their choice of field can barely be called that. They are, at best, minimally engaged; at worst, they are openly hostile to their chosen area of study.

At private institutions, where the liberal arts are viewed as having historic and intrinsic value, this is less a problem. The difficulty is exaggerated at schools like our own, whose clientele believe in the value of attaining a bachelor's degree, but only as a vehicle to a job. The convergence of vocation/avocation is less a part of the antecedent experience of our working-class students than it is of their middle-class peers. The few students we teach who have purposely, actively chosen sociology as a major, do so against the advice and to the consternation of their families.

Student resistance is fostered by at least two other, independent dimensions. Teaching faculty in the liberal arts have, themselves, actively developed a response to a situation that they collectively (sometimes quietly) define as reprehensible. Again, taking our own regional state college as an example, we encounter a liberal arts faculty demoralized by declining majors, increased mandates to provide service for professional programs for which they have little regard, and labor conditions (overcrowded classrooms; additional advising and teaching responsibilities) that, even more significantly than salaries, indicate the teachers' true value to the institution and to the society.

Faculty resistance is exemplified in the attitude of disdain expressed for students in general. It is expressed in the open disregard many of our colleagues have for the majority of students they encounter in their classrooms. As one instructor said, "I
immediate
student's
materials of
renounce
ation, and
nts do not
rts do. For
degree.
also from
grams such
admit
is academi-
rested time
and socially
riors. Their
lelled; at worst,
and intrin-
ure our own,
only as a
the antec-
class peers.
has a major,
ations.
Teaching
a situation
ain, taking
ernmental
sional pro-
classrooms;
stantly than
society.
for students
ave for the
or said, "I

Thus, faculty meet student resistance in kind. Sometimes passive, often indifferent, occasionally hostile, they reinforce the gap between the students' culture and their own. That they do it unwittingly in no way lessens the effect. Faculty resistance is an important part of the classroom dialectic.

The organization of the college itself must be regarded as further augmenting student resistance. The institution operates autonomously, driven by its own organizational imperatives, without regard for the daily substance of instruction and classroom encounters. As an example, on the final day of fall registration, when enrollments have exceeded anyone's expectations, the least concern of administrators is the dynamic of classroom instruction. What is critical is finding space for the 500 unexpected students who have arrived at the college's doorstep. Individual or collective attempts of faculty to devise instructional means of overcoming student resistance quickly fall by the wayside, as more immediate "management" concerns take precedence.

While the student resistance we encounter is, in part a representation of the student's own determinations, it is not predicated solely on this variable. Rather, student resistance is a complex, multi-dimensional product: it is born of social class and social history; it is nurtured by the resistance of faculty themselves to their labor conditions and by the institution's own organizational imperatives. It is, in short, a socially structured response to or reading of the situation disenchanted students and faculty encounter.

What, then, is the responsibility of the general educator in overcoming student resistance? The revival of interest in general education in this decade entails a commitment to just that: the general education of the new clientele of higher education. These students are different from their counterparts a decade ago. The fact that they are unclear about what to expect from a college education and that their educational goals are far too narrow does not lessen our disciplinary and general commitment to engage them in inquiry and the life of the mind.

We are sociologists. Many of the courses we teach are in general education. These courses involve social-political interpretation of values and ideas. They require students to develop the ability to read and comprehend abstract ideas. Our specific charge is to enable students to step outside the limits of their own culture and social institutions, hold these up for scrutiny, and examine critically taken-for-granted assumptions about social reality. It is our responsibility to move all of our students from their private worlds of discourse and morality to the public sphere; to encourage students to recognize that private problems collectively experienced are a matter for public discussion, scrutiny and resolution; and to motivate our students in such a way that
the dichotomy between the world of ideas and that of vocation is minimized. The fact that most of our students resist this education does not alter our responsibility.

It is unfortunate that the decade's national reports on higher education/general education have, for the most part, ignored the dynamic, processual aspects of learning. They have, moreover, failed to discuss the structural variables—e.g., autonomous organizational imperatives; social class; and labor conditions—that affect the success or failure of particular general education programs. And, they have omitted consideration of student and faculty "agency."

Our purpose in writing this essay is to draw attention to these factors as they commingle to affect student resistance. Recognizing such resistance as a "product" is, we think, the first step in refining curriculum and in devising instructional means to overcome it. It is, furthermore, a precondition to redefining organizational structure in such a way that we approach an ideal classroom community in which faculty are freed to develop means to minimize student resistance.

Works Cited
