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3-2016

# Developing Policy by Understanding the Political Culture and Power: The Relevance of Doctoral Level Assignments for School Leaders

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## NSUWorks Citation

Ross, David B., "Developing Policy by Understanding the Political Culture and Power: The Relevance of Doctoral Level Assignments for School Leaders" (2016). *Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles*. Paper 238.  
[http://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse\\_facarticles/238](http://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_facarticles/238)

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**Developing Policy by Understanding the Political Culture and Power:  
The Relevance of Doctoral Level Assignments for School Leaders**

**Overview and Different Philosophies of Instruction**

This paper is based on an anecdotal philosophy of teaching an advanced school policy class to school leaders in an educational leadership doctoral program. Like most classes, there are course documents (i.e., syllabi, manuals, expectations, rubrics) as well as instruction (e.g., lecture, dialogue discussion) to assist students to meet their specific course learning outcomes. Kerr (2014) covered many phases of student learning through instruction: (a) presentation of information, (b) student guidance, (c) learner involvement, and (d) evaluation of the learning process. Rosenshine and Stevens (as cited in Kerr, 2014) mentioned in order for students to acquire skills, strategies, and behaviors, there must be a strong emphasis on the teaching and learning process. The professor must create an atmosphere of organization and structure, provide opportunity for learning with corrective feedback, and offer sessions throughout each semester where students may ask questions. Ross and Exposito (2014) felt that students needed time dedicated for question and answer sessions as “debriefing sessions should be held immediately after the participants’ experiences to discuss any instructor feedback and/or direction for another phase” (p. 15).

In addition, each professor should distribute a set of their own expectations, assessment and rubric requirements, and methods of instructional delivery, whether the course is a face-to-face or online format (Alessi & Trollip, 2001; Kerr, 2014). It is the student’s responsibility to

review and understand their specific professor's philosophies; this will help guide them to success. In the first orientation of *Brockett and Hiemstra's Personal Responsibility Orientation Model*, the *process* is when "a learner assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 24).

Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) stated the second orientation, which is the *goal*, emphasizes "a learner's desire or preference for assuming responsibility for learning" (p. 24). If a student has any concerns regarding an assignment, discussion topic, and/or any feedback, there should be an opportunity to contact the professor. However, the student should also seek the knowledge and understanding; having a passive learning approach can decrease performance (Kerr, 2014). Once students have a better understanding of the course curriculum, they can apply it in the real world, making their learning relevant.

Having a diverse philosophy of adult education, I tend to use the progressive, behaviorist, humanistic, and radical approaches to transfer knowledge to my students. The reason for these approaches is my belief that every student is an expert in their specific area and has a wealth of knowledge to contribute to the team (i.e., entire class). In my experiences, I have found it beneficial and even necessary to adopt an eclectic approach to most things, including my own personal philosophy of teaching. An eclectic approach allows flexibility for future change, as well as provides the opportunity to borrow the best practices from different existing philosophies. It is inherently limiting to adopt a single philosophy. It would be true to say that a professor should be a *philosophical mongrel* in the best sense as they could be more adaptable.

In today's environment with its increasing diversity, having a flexible and eclectic personal philosophy within a constantly changing is even more beneficial. This is not to say that certain core beliefs and values should be subject to change. The application of one's personal

philosophy under different circumstances can allow the adaption to different circumstances without sacrificing one's most sacred values, and this is the beauty of an eclectic personal philosophy. Effective blending of many philosophies in the classroom requires experience and awareness of the learning outcomes and expectations of the course, as well as an appreciation for the inherent abilities of the students.

The educational aims of each and every philosophical system have merit and are useful in any educational setting. Education must begin with certain facts. Based upon this foundation, true development of the mind can begin through experiences, which allows for individual potentiality and self-actualization. Although people have the potential to improve their environment through education and knowledge, there will always be external forces that may impact one's vision.

Through radicalism, with its dialogue and problem solving and humanism, with its self-direction and intrinsic motivation (Boone, 2013), teamwork and facilitation provide the best possible learning environment. I have confidence in the humanism approach as active learning becomes intrinsic; the teacher, in turn, benefits and learns from his or her students. Education can be far too elitist; the emphasis of educational content should be to *build on people's life and basic skills, experiences, and needs*. In this case, I would call myself a *progressive humanist*, a real mongrel because this contributes to relevance, autonomy, and self-actualization (Boone, 2013).

Education should be relevant to a student's life, since the goal of education is preparation for the world outside of the classroom. I believe that students must engage in realistic exploratory learning situations because they will encounter them outside of the classroom. I utilize my instructional time to focus on students' needs in a relaxed environment, which gives

every student an opportunity to reflect and discuss views on each topic. I also emphasize student's creativity to empower them when they face the real world.

### **Planning Policy Development**

One of the most critical aspects of policy making revolves around political culture and power. It is imperative for policy makers and committee members to know their political and school's culture to be effective and responsive when creating, updating, and/or enforcing and debriefing personnel about policy rules and regulations. When planning any revisions and/or new policy changes-updates, policy stakeholders should know their present position and where they plan to go; therefore, plotting a course. Once these stakeholders have a clear picture, as well as knowing why their organization exists, then they must find out what other powerbrokers seem to be achieving with their policy changes.

Since the external environment is always shifting, policy leaders must select the right people to help create and implement the organizational policies. I believe that communication, collaboration, and critically thinking as futurists are a few characteristics needed to create a learning environment for policy change. There are many other characteristics, but it is also important to understand the obstacles facing organizations. Most organizations reflect on the past and implement policy or change for the present, and at times for the near future. However, it is imperative to adopt several new initiatives and policies to foster a culture reporting and raising awareness of the events in the organization's future; know the issues and plan. The organizational policy team should gather intelligence of this external environment, looking for obstacles and changes that may impact (i.e., positively, negatively) the organization.

As educators, it is imperative to understand major types of power and their sources. Comprehending and analyzing potential or existing policy, power, and its sources are critical as

one becomes involved in policy development. More importantly; however, is the issue of ethics. Policies must be scrutinized to be sure that bias and/or special interests are eliminated. Individuals cannot always plan for every event, but sound policy development and implementation is a starting point. Power, authority, and control are all part of policy development. How a system uses all three separately or in conjunction determines how enlightened, ethical, and transparent it will be (Fowler, 2013).

Policies at the local level should begin with the question, “how will or does this policy influence student learning as well as its impact on the organization?” Good policies are the result of being inclusive. Since opinion, culture, and constituency all have impact on policy development, the more groups and individuals involved is more beneficial. Once policy is developed, a clear map should be created because the difficult part is its execution. If people feel involved in the process, then implementation will be smoother. The team that wins is not the one with the best plan; it is the one that can execute their plan the best.

### **Assignments and Relevance**

The three assignments created for this online class gives students the autonomy to report on many aspects to policy development, while being relevant to their work and other studies. Moore (as cited in Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) mentioned the perception of an *autonomous learner* who can identify their learning when a problem exists. In addition, the learner is able to articulate, implement, and evaluate the essentials of goals, objectives, ideas, and skills to resolve problems for successful achievement. “The learner judges the appropriateness of newly acquired skills . . . and the quality of his new ideas and knowledge” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 23). Song and Hill (2007) stated that there is little amount of research on self-directed learning within higher education, including the online learning format. There is an advanced level of self-

direction when learners have prior knowledge and experience in their area. Based on the increase of online courses in higher education, self-directed learning is an important component. Students who are given personal autonomy over the learning and instructional process feel a sense of moral, emotional, and intellectual management; this creates an environment where learning occurs (Song & Hill, 2007).

The assignments cover *Policy, Power, & Politics: Power and Collaboration; Policy Proposal*; and *The Communication Process and Policy Analysis*. The assignment on power and policy illustrates many ways to generate policy development, planning, communication, and compromise which are extremely important to move policy to its implementation stage. Policy is usually created and implemented based upon power and politics, money, or mass of people. Students are to conduct research *only* for personal awareness of legislative issues. Students will see how some legislature originated from only a few individuals to a mass group in many states, in addition to the power involved from money as well as the involvement of politics. Having this awareness will help policymakers create and/or revise policies for their organizations. This helps policymakers become more proactive than reactive.

Students must research any policy, not a law case, which was created and carried through to its implementation stage. Students should reflect upon research and their personal expertise as it relates to *compromise* and the *willing to make a deal* with policy development with all stakeholders. Although this course deals with policy development, it also shows how any institution (i.e., educational, public, private, profit, non-profit, etc.) operates based upon adverse situations or decisions. The importance to this assignment is to keep in mind that teams are based on whether *power* is used as *control* over others, or is used as *influence* with others (Dawson, 2011; Levi, 2014; Ross & Exposito, 2014).

In this paper, students must (a) give an historical overview of the policy, (b) illustrate the elements of power used, (c) determine the key power players, (d) determine the level of compromise between the players, and (e) include a conclusion to discuss perspectives from a leadership point of view.

The second assignment is a Policy Proposal Paper, which is designed to show the relevance from the students' learning experiences in this course as well as their own expertise in policy development. Students are given the task to *create* a new policy or *revise* an existing policy for their educational institution. Students will examine the procedures to establish a proposal-recommendation for this new or revised policy and submit a proposal or resolution to be considered for this policy. The following points must be discussed:

1. Give a brief summary of the proposal-recommendation and reason for its submission (what is the need for this policy);
2. Proposed details for exact policy proposed (e.g., instructional, influence of daily operations, diversity, ethics, demographics, equity, equality, compromise);
3. Positive aspects (strengths) of implementing proposal-recommendation; Negative aspects (limitations-obstacles) of implementing proposal-recommendation;
4. Provide a brief financial analysis (i.e., costs and benefits) of the proposal-recommendation (if applicable); and
5. Recommended implementation date and logic for selecting this date.

The final assignment for this advanced school policy class gives students the ability to write about The Communication Process and Policy Analysis. For this assignment, students are to look at two areas regarding communication and policy development: (a) internal, and (b) external. These two ways of communicating policy to the employees of the organization and to



the public are very important. The role of communicating policy is extremely important, whether from a proactive or a reactive position. Failure to transmit policy or any instructions can have a negative impact in regards to an organization. If people fail to educate or inform their people of a new or revised policy, many stakeholders and the organization could be faced with unlimited consequences (i.e., ethical situations, diversity, accountability, transparency).

With this understanding of communication, students write a paper on how the *human resources department* should handle communicating policy to the internal entity of the organization. No matter the stage of policy development, everyone responsible for the policy must be informed. This section of the paper should cover the procedures and responsibilities of human resources department and any other sub-departments that *are necessary* (e.g., training, professional development).

The second area is how students feel a *public relations office* should communicate to the public. When communicating to the public, policymakers should always keep the public aware of how business is conducted by keeping a *favorable image*. This is usually a proactive position. However, when faced with a *crisis* and when policy was not followed, policymakers or designated individuals must communicate to the public and to the media. These groups could be the organization's best advocates or they could be the worst opponents. One should never want them to be against the agency, since news is consistently broadcasted on a daily basis, especially with all the cable news coverage and social media. This section should cover procedures and lines of communication to the media and the public that *are necessary* (e.g., television, radio, newsprint, interviews).

## **Conclusion**

Strategic planning and the need for lifelong learning are needed to survive in our

changing world. “The importance of fostering professional growth of teachers, to embody and model the ideals of a lifelong learner, has become a new key component of strategic planning of school officials” (Ziemke & Ross, 2014, p. 34). I always suggest that students stay current with topics on a regular basis because they must be informed of the external environment; it is always shifting and can impact any organization at any time. An organization’s vision is its “future landscape.” I am a believer in being "proactive" rather than being "reactive," and remove the idea of “we have always done it this way.” Be that leader who sees the future by creating a learning organization with the right people to accomplish the right things in the right way; always know the obstacles and create a clear map.

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