



Critical Teaching Column

Teaching Critical Criminology at Community Colleges: Notes on Stigma, Elitism, and Subversive Potential

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I am a tenure track professor in the Criminal Justice Program at CUNY's LaGuardia Community College. Such a status, I rapidly found out after obtaining my position in the months after defending my PhD in Sociology, does *not* play so well at cocktail parties nor in even the most progressive academic circles. The comments I've received by non-academics over the past three years have included: "You have a PhD and you're teaching at a community college? What's wrong with that picture?" "Oh, you **HAVE** a PhD?" "Well, you can look at working there as a stepping stone." Those in my academic circles have asked in hushed, almost embarrassed tones: "Don't you think being there will wreck your career?" "I've heard community Colleges are the *academic kiss of death*. Is that true? Do you think it will affect your career?" "Maybe you should wait for a better job to come along?" "You're *good*. So don't worry, you'll get out of there soon." A student, upon learning about the forthcoming publication of my book, asked "You'll be leaving LaGuardia then soon, Professor? Moving on *up*?" And among my colleagues with PhDs teaching in community colleges, there is the frequent confessional once trust is gained about looking for the nearest exit, relentlessly padding the publication ledger in order to land that plum, coveted, this-is-what-I-have-worked-so-long-and-hard-for tenure track job in a (preferably) SLAC in the NY Metro region, but if not, then settling for a position in almost *any* 4 year college.

As a sociologist, ample theoretical tools exist for me to cognitively understand how stigma functions to confer a "spoiled identity" in the context of community college students and professors. Goffman posits that stigma is an "attribute that is deeply discrediting," it is "a failing, a shortcoming," and is defined within the context of social relationships that condition our reactions. In other words, the attribute itself is constituted as stigma in relation to other socially constructed categories that confer normativity, status and privilege. Although more than half of all US college students have received some community college education, these students are widely perceived as having failed or lacking the intelligence needed for four-year college work, therefore "forced" to attend such "13th grade" type schools. (Indeed, typing "community college students are" into a google search yields two suggestions: "are stupid" and "are dumb".) For those of us who teach at 2-year colleges, we are likewise viewed as having failed in relation

to our SLAC tenure track or 4-year College peers. The pernicious aspect of stigma for those who are constructed as stigmatized, however, is that it is difficult to escape the emotional impact it confers, the feelings of *shame*. I can cognitively understand that stigma is socially constructed to shame those who do not attain the agreed-upon indicia of “real” success (usually delineating class status). It is another thing to try not to *feel* stigmatized. That feeling, I know, is no small part of what has led myself and my colleagues to relentlessly scour the job search digests.

There are several underlying, unvoiced implications behind the persistent notion that 2-year colleges are places of last resort or any kind of stigmatized “kiss of death” for those of us who are in graduate school or who have obtained PhDs. Many progressive academics would shudder to acknowledge or vehemently deny the degree of elitism that pervades, which informs our sensibilities of what a “good,” non-stigmatized academic job is, even in an era when tenure track jobs are becoming an elusive Holy Grail. There is an implicit message when we ask whether or not a community college will “wreck” our careers that the students in community colleges are *less deserving of our intellectual and affective labor* and our CVs are tainted by association. These students, who are disproportionately poor, disproportionately the first to go to college from their families, disproportionately from failed high schools, disproportionately of color, disproportionately immigrants and/or undocumented and in need of remediation *won't understand the brilliance of what we have to offer or do something with that brilliance that is worth the time investment we've made*. “I’ve worked so hard, I spent years in a PhD program. I didn’t do that to teach future cops!” one 2-year college professor quipped in frustration.

My purpose in writing this brief note is twofold. The first is to hopefully inspire introspection/reflection among critical criminologists on the question of what we consider to be a “successful” academic career and how this corresponds or conflicts with our theoretical, ideological, and political orientations which presumably are rooted in challenging existing configurations of power. Jock Young wrote that social scientists spend our time peering down, not up, the class structure. It has struck me that the *felt* aversion to becoming faculty at a community college is a kind of liberal/progressive voyeurism such as that Young described: an academic NIMBY-ism where we are willing to *study* the poor (particularly those of color) and their ‘problems’, to *study* inequalities, to devote our writings and lectures on denouncing racism and classism. But to mark our careers with time at community colleges in urban areas which are often ground zero for such inequalities – where the students’ lived experiences are *exactly* what we are writing about – is still a step many are hesitant to take. It is seen as a temporary fix, a Visiting Assistant Professorship of sorts, a placeholder to prevent the dreaded blank space in our work experience. I am not asserting this out of any position of moral superiority. I live every day fully in the contradiction that the work I do with my students at LaGuardia *is* praxis, is politically and socially important, much more important than that I would do with a classroom of primarily middle class or affluent students, but *feeling*, still, bougie stigma.

My second purpose is to propose that we critical criminologists “coopt” the meaning of community college – to embrace the community colleges for what they can be and what they are, to see these colleges as places for subversive potential in awakening political and critical consciousness among those most affected by mass incarceration. Indeed, the roots of the American community college suggest it is an ideal place for such an endeavor: the mushrooming of 2-year colleges across the country in the 1960s and 1970s was largely attributable to the

combined influence and pressure of progressive, democratizing social movements: the Civil Rights, Women's, and Anti-War Movements.¹

Critical Criminologists are desperately needed in community college departments, and particularly in their burgeoning Criminal Justice programs which are being fueled by the rapacity of the prison industrial complex. We are needed to set educational agendas that go far beyond vocational "cop shop" approaches which merely reproduce the institutional cultures of law enforcement. We are needed to challenge configurations of power and problematize the very system itself, exposing it as socially/historically situated and able to be changed. At LaGuardia Community College, the director of Institutional Research estimates that at any given time, 1 in 50 of our student population is formerly incarcerated, and 1 in 3 has a direct family member who has been incarcerated. 90% of them are of color, and most have family incomes below the poverty line. Many, many more have been directly affected by Broken Windows-style aggressive policing of minor quality of life 'offenses' in their over-policed communities. These students deserve the best critical analytical tools, pedagogical strategies, and research we can provide with which to understand their world. To study and objectify their communities, to write about their oppression but then stigmatize them as failed students, and show aversion to colleges they attend versus the colleges attended by the elite is the worst form of intellectual hypocrisy. We as critical criminologists must be the ones to strike the first blow against that stigma.

"Oppressors' [tranquility] rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it," Freire wrote in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (57). Transformative education affecting working class students who then will go on to work in criminal justice professions has the subversive potential of denying the prison industrial complex compliant, unquestioning, unreflective workers. It furthermore has the potential to, in a reciprocal process, affect critical criminological research and pedagogy, as the professor learns in a dialogic process from his/her students, and works *with* them to help delineate areas for study that are significant to the students, to involve them in research, to privilege the integration of knowledge. Freire continued, "What could be more important than to live and work with the oppressed? In this communion [revolutionary leaders] should find not only their *raison d'être*, but a motive for rejoicing!" I think for those of us drawn to critical criminology by a humanistic desire for transformation and for reducing the inequalities we study, the opportunity to work with community college students can indeed be thought of as perhaps a role that instead of being a kiss of death, is the one providing more lasting happiness and with more radical potential.



¹ See Chapter 1 in Mellow & Heelan (2008) *Minding the Dream*. NY. Roman & Littlefield