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Teaching *The Wire*: Integrating Capstone Policy Content into the Criminal Law Curriculum

Roger A. Fairfax, Jr.

When I first proposed teaching a seminar on *The Wire* at the George Washington University Law School in 2010, I encountered very disparate reactions. Those unfamiliar with the show generally wondered whether the law school curriculum was any place for a course with the name of a popular television drama in the title. Those who had heard glowing things about, but had not seen, *The Wire* typically professed their intention to watch the show but shared the skepticism of the former group on its suitability as the focus of a law school course. Finally, those who had viewed the series were—to a person—wildly enthusiastic about using the series in some way in the law school classroom.

The fervor of my fellow *Wire* devotees notwithstanding, I remained a bit ambivalent about designing a course around the show. While it certainly would be enjoyable to engage each week with students about one of the most critically-acclaimed television dramas in history, I did not relish the idea of using some of my precious teaching bandwidth on what many outsiders might consider a “fluff” course. Not only do I teach several other courses that I consider vital to the law school curriculum,¹ but my sense of professional obligation and pride made me wary of associating myself with the kind of course that could be used by critics as fodder for denouncing modern legal education.

Given my reservations, I decided to experiment with the pedagogical approach and focus of the course. I first taught it as a “reading group”—a one-credit, pass/fail pilot course that met six times during the semester. The students were required to view assigned episodes from the first season of *The Wire* outside of class, to complete assigned readings related to dominant themes

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1. At GW, the basic teaching package is nine or ten credits, which generally translates into three courses or seminars per academic year. Each year, I typically teach Criminal Law, Adjudicatory Criminal Procedure, and a generic Criminal Law and Procedure Seminar, the focus of which varies from year to year. Topics have included, “The Grand Jury,” “White-Collar Investigations,” and “Criminal Justice Reform and *The Wire*.” I also occasionally have taught Criminal Procedure, and a skills-oriented course entitled Legal Drafting—Criminal Litigation.

from those episodes, and to draft two- to three-page papers synthesizing their thoughts on the episodes and the readings. During our two-hour class meetings, each student spoke briefly on the themes highlighted in their papers and then we engaged in what was typically a lively class discussion. The class conversation usually meandered among criminal justice policy, constitutional criminal procedure, and substantive criminal law issues depicted in the episodes.

I was pleased with the students' level of engagement with the readings, the viewed episode, and the class discussions. The papers typically were thoughtful, with students finding angles most had not previously considered. For example, one student who also was enrolled in Corporations that semester wrote one of his weekly papers on "Corporate Social Responsibility as Exemplified by Stringer Bell's Management Philosophy." Likewise, my students who had majored in literature never failed to impress me with their cogent analyses of the "text" and the many parallels they found between *The Wire* and classic literary works.

However, I was most satisfied with the fact that my students, many for the first time in their formal educations, were given the opportunity to grapple with issues of criminal justice policy. The professional training law school provides falls short in the area of preparing future criminal law practitioners to analyze the criminal justice system they will be responsible for administering. To be sure, students seeking extensive training in empirical methods and inquiry in criminal justice probably belong in a criminology graduate program rather than in law school. However, for better or worse, many criminal justice policy making and administrative positions in the real world are occupied by lawyers. Law students planning to practice in the criminal justice field should have the opportunity to obtain at least some exposure to criminal justice policy as part of their legal education.

Since that pilot, I have adapted the course to a traditional two-credit graded seminar and have enhanced the policy focus of the seminar. The topics covered in the seminar include urban decay and crime, the "war on drugs," informant culture, juvenile crime and justice, policing and democracy, re-entry and re-integration of ex-offenders, lawyering and ethics, race, gender, and socioeconomics, and mass incarceration. In addition to viewing the first season of *The Wire*, students read selections from two edited books²—as well other essays and articles I provide. Criminal Procedure and Adjudicatory Criminal Procedure are prerequisites for the seminar, which ensures that all students have a foundational understanding of the background doctrinal issues when engaging in the policy discussions during class.

Although the course—like all my courses—is an ever-evolving work in progress, it has reaffirmed for me how pedagogical innovation and risk-taking can lead to the adaption of new and creative tools for the important task of educating and preparing our future lawyers and policy makers.

2. CRIME AND PUBLIC POLICY (James Q. Wilson & Joan Petersilia eds., 2nd ed. 2011); THE WIRE: URBAN DECAY AND AMERICAN TELEVISION (Tiffany Potter & C.W. Marshall eds., 2009).