

Community Dynamics and the Ethics of Learning: Russian and American Models

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How does a sense of community influence the way in which post-secondary students learn? If you are a product of an American school system, you have likely embedded certain communal assumptions about learning. Strive and you will excel. Excel and your excellence will be reflected on report cards and standardized tests. Such scores, coupled with a record of achievement and skills and formatted into an impressive resume, will attract the notice of job recruiters. Or, if your goal is academia, documented undergraduate excellence opens the door to a graduate program, where the process ultimately repeats until at last the achieving student finds herself on the other side of the desk, cultivating the next generation. Each class, in effect, is a meritocracy, a pushing forward of strangers who have managed to perform in the system more successfully than others.

It comes as a shock then to an American scholar abroad running up against a somewhat different set of embedded assumptions. My own experience here derives from a 1996 Fulbright in Russia, specifically at the Karelian State Pedagogical University (KSPU) in Petrozavodsk. I am an English teacher, and the KSPU invited me to lead courses in language and literature. I worked with students who had already been studying English for 9 or 10 years. I met with each of my 8 courses once a week and in that time, often felt like Alice through the looking-glass. What I'll reflect on here is the sense of difference, not just of facilities or students (there's really very little difference in students!), but of how the givens about Russian higher education, stemming from a broader Russian ethos of community, contribute to a different set of ethical problems that both educators and students face.

At the core of this difference is the Russian system of grouping (or tracking) students in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in college. At the KSPU, like everywhere in Russia, students are sorted out in groups. The students of English I encountered were groups of twelve, and in all other departments, students were grouped as well. In the first year of the five year program, the mixture is not quite random, but better students and poorer ones are intermixed. Starting with second year, students are grouped according to ability and there they stay - through courses in pronunciation and lexicography, in literature and linguistics, in philosophy and political science. First group students are the stars - their reputations precede them and, as many instructors admitted to me, members of this group are

treated far more gently than the others. The second group students contain a few disgruntled people who feel they have been overlooked, along with a number of less talented students. The third groups, by and large, are less talented still.

Where did this system come from? V. Prozorov (personal communication, January 3, 2002), pro-rector of the KSPU, explained to me that the system of organizing students into stable groups is traditional in Russia and the idea was likely borrowed from Germany at the time of Peter the Great's reforms. The idea itself is medieval: an artisan or a scholar surrounded by a circle of apprentices. Prozorov went on to say that while the system predated Soviet collectivism, the system of groups turned out to be a «perfect fit» for Communist Russia - cadres working together to achieve a collective goal. Of course, he pointed out, this model is the operative one in a large number of countries today, in Europe, in South Africa, and elsewhere.

A. Remikov (personal communication, January 2, 2002), a senior professor of linguistics and my colleague at the KSPU, gave me a sense of the advantages that such a system afforded. Hand in hand with a regimented set of student groups comes a rigid curriculum:

The permanent groups system guarantees that everyone has to take the same courses and in the same succession. [For instance] I read the theory of language. It consists of several courses, which are placed in the curriculum in logical order, that is, more specialized and more difficult courses follow introductory and easier ones. Thus, second year students take Introduction to Linguistics - where they learn the basic concepts, terms, etc. Third year - English Semantics, which they would not be able to understand if they had not had the first course. Then fourth year - Theory of Grammar -[a] most difficult advanced course, impossible to understand without the basis of previous courses (and without the basis of other courses that are read by others - like the history of the English language).

Several teachers added that from a managerial standpoint, the group system with its set curriculum, is both easier and more economical to manage than the American model: no need for advisement, no need to select courses, no under-enrolled classes. Early specialization means a minimum of general education requirements, these too mandated by the authorities. In addition to certain social science courses, all students study one course in anatomy and one in nursing. These are a carryover from an earlier curriculum, the presumption being that KSPU students would, on short notice, be prepared to play a part in their country's military efforts (I should add here that the large majority of English students are female). Physical education, namely calisthenics, was formerly required - a very unpopular course because, as one student explained it to me, the purpose of the course was to generate statistics about the physical conditioning of Soviet young men and women. Now, aerobics and what Russians call «shaping» (what we call body building) have been substituted. Religious science is also a requirement now, replacing the pre-glasnost required course in atheism. At Petrozavodsk, the same instructor taught both courses.

The image, then, that I arrived at was one of a productive confinement. This lockstep curriculum, I learned, was uniform across Russia, a coordinated effort to maintain a firmly structured community of learners. Students of English attending pedagogical universities in Moscow, Rostov, Novosibirsk, and

Kazan follow the same sequence of courses. The commonality of courses was seen as a distinctive benefit by all instructors with whom I spoke. If you knew, for instance, that a student had completed the first semester of fourth year, you could safely assume that she would have studied American literature, most likely works by such Russian favorites as London, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. The purposefulness of everything - the planned curriculum - was jarring and uncomfortable to me. Prozorov framed this sense of dislocation for me:

The system looks strange particularly to Americans because they assume that Freedom of Choice is the basic principle [of education] and this is still not the case in this country. Young people who come from high school take the current system for granted because for them it's [a] continuation of the secondary school and they don't know anything different.

Yet if I sensed at the KPSU a productive confinement, a patterned 5-year plan to create future educators, I also recognized that it was frequently a congenial one. Such regimentation created a sense of solidarity within the group. Students socialized with their groupmates, studied the same course materials with them, and kept in touch with them long afterwards. While in Petrozavodsk, I attended a birthday party of a forty-something woman, one of my colleagues. Eight of her ten former groupmates showed up to celebrate, something I, as a much-traveled American, found remarkable. In Russia it is less surprising: mobility is an American virtue, not a particularly Russian one. And at another birthday celebration, this time in one of my classes, the sole boy in the group returned from the cafeteria with a large tray, bearing a cake and cups of tea. «Dima takes care of all of us,» one the girls sweetly explained. One's group becomes one's defining circle, apart from one's family.

Such a system is not without cost, however. The collective mentality, such a strong piece of Russian heritage, reinforces an evening out, a disincentive to display excellence. If under the Soviet system equality was a professed goal, one was not supposed to stand out from the crowd, but rather to help lift the crowd to achieve quotas and production goals. In Stalin's Russia, of course, the last thing one would ever want to do is attract attention; no good could come of this. Even today, with the advent of the New Russian and the growth of venture capitalism, the practice of thinking in communal terms remains. Like many visitors to Russia, I have been amazed at the divide between the public Russian and the private one, and in this, perhaps, is the subtext to groups and the way they work. I spot a Russian friend on the street. He is dressed in dark, conservative clothes; he wears a mask of emotional imperviousness, an impersonal neutrality. He sees me and his face lights up. Only in private conversations, that is to say, within the intimacy of the family or the group, does an emotional expressiveness emerge. (The corollary to this of course is American indiscriminate good nature, democratically extended to all strangers. In America, Russians are frequently confused by the casualness of American friendships, the social smiles and the phatic «How are you's?» «What is wrong with American people?» one disgruntled Russian asked me. «Are they constantly in need of meaningless affirmations?»)

But back to Russia. One way this emphasis on group dynamic plays out in Russian colleges is in cheating. An instructor gives an assignment and all students collaborate to complete it - regardless of the instructions. Students openly copy one another's work and feed one another answers to oral questions. Russian instructors, long used to this practice - and, of course, it was their own as well when they were students - seem embarrassed by such cheating, at least when in the company of Americans, but resigned to it. Return-

ing Fulbrights had warned me about it and vented their frustration. In my classes I asked the students to pretend they were Americans, taking an American quiz, say, and as such, responsible for their own work. I can't say that the results were stunning, but the students made an effort: 5 minutes of individual work before the exchanging began.

And what of grades? At The College of St. Scholastica, I am like most other professors, taking into account a student's day-to-day performance and his overall achievement, sometimes reflected through a final exam grade, sometimes through a summative essay. At the KSPU, I found myself frustrated by patterns of absenteeism. How do you grade on performance if there is none? «Why does Slava never come to class?» I complained to my department chair. «Iskat i rugatsa («Find him and curse him out), she said. «Don't worry, it will all come out on the exams,» she added. Since no grades are assigned during the semester; everything appeared to ride on the finals.

So in June, I sat as an examiner. Russian examinations are generally oral. At the literary analysis exam I participated in, each student entered a large classroom at her appointed time and drew a number out of a hat. The number corresponded to a passage from a work that had already been studied: selections by Hemingway, Wilde, Maugham, and so on. The student then had one hour to study. When the oral examination began, the teacher asked for a summary, posed questions, and gave a grade from 1 to 5. My own task was slightly different. My class had been studying Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, so I asked each student a question and a few follow-ups, gave each a numerical grade, and shared my evaluation with my Russian counterparts. I would get students to articulate their thoughts on the Loman family and evaluate them as I would my American students - on form and content.

I questioned one young first-group woman who rarely attended class and rarely participated when she did. «Is Willy Loman a good salesman?» I asked her. «Yes, I believe he was a very good salesman,» she replied. «Explain why do you believe that.» «He is able to give his family such luxuries,» she responded, but she had little else to say.

After the student left the room, I jotted down a 3, the lowest grade that anyone ever gave a fourth-year student, and showed it to Valentina, my fellow examiner. She was shocked: «She's a very good girl though. She's a good student.» «But she didn't read the play,» I maintained. A bit shaken by the 3, Valentina headed out into the corridor and returned a few moments later. «Yes, yes, she says she has read the play. So we'll give her a five.»

So what really matters, I wondered, in-class performance or examination? I came to conclude that it was neither, and I later had my impressions confirmed by other teachers who told me that the group system, in their opinion, lent itself to softer performance demands. By fourth year, a student's reputation, for better or worse, is firmly established. Students work or not as they please. The plaudits they receive or the onus they work under has been firmed up long before the course begins. The community, in other words, knew who this «good girl» was. At the same examination session, I also watched as Kate, one of my most diligent students, received first a scolding, then a four for failing to recite what I silently regarded as a very reductionist interpretation of a Hemingway short story, one the professor insisted upon. «No, no, don't you see,» loudly demanded Valentina, pointing to the text.«

Here, here, this is irony!» Afterwards, I mentioned to Kate that I appreciated the work she had done for me and that I thought that she had been roughed up in the exam. Her response was unhappy but unsurprised. Kate, in the estimation of most instructors, had been a disappointing student, a first-grader who underachieved, in some way a reproach to the teachers who had placed her there. So despite the pose of objective testing - the drawing of numbers and such - the test results had been communally predetermined. The sense of grouping that governs a student's performance is reinforced in several ways on a faculty level. The KSPU has two English programs, one for students majoring in English and a second for students majoring in French, German, or Finnish. Although faculty of the two departments are trained identically, they teach two different curricula and see little in common with their counterparts in the other department: another classic division of *nash and vash*, *ours and yours*. The material shortages of the Russian educational system add to this sense of group unity on a faculty level. Since there are no individual offices, each department assembles in its departmental office early in the morning to drink tea, eat cookies, and exchange gossip before heading out to meet students. It makes for a friendly (though claustrophobic) daily convocation, a time to reunite as teachers in a group.

The sense of the group is tied still tighter than this. «In America,» Russians say, «parents train children to leave home. In Russia, parents train them to return.» Upon graduation, American students are encouraged to test the waters, to apply a college education to the world outside. Correspondingly, American universities tend to observe a taboo against hiring their own graduates. Inbred faculty, according to a 1980 survey, devote less time to research than non inbred faculty (Clifton, 1982). Furthermore, they tend to reinforce the system they graduated from, for better or worse. Although the mission of the KSPU is to educate secondary school teachers, the brightest and the best are offered positions in the two English faculties. In fact, as the pro-rector explained to me, «We would never dream of hiring from the outside. Why would we hire someone whose abilities were unfamiliar to us?» Such a program, while ensuring that the level of instruction is excellent, tends to seal off innovation and to enshrine the practices of the past, to keep the community intact.

The greater context for much that I am describing is Russian poverty. Many of the givens of the learning environment are conditioned by deprivation. Academic budgets only allow for salaries and utilities. There are no erasers, in some rooms, no blackboards. Chalk is kept in the office of the woman who hands out classroom keys. On a few days when classroom space was limited, I taught classes in the departmental office with the secretary typing in the background. It goes without saying that there are no individual faculty offices. When I commented to Professor Reznikov that I had met many dedicated teachers in Petrozavodsk, he pointed out to me that a teacher has to be because you don't do it for the money. In a country where paychecks are unknown, salaries travel north from Moscow in cash, stopping first in St. Petersburg. When the remainder of the money reaches Petrozavodsk, that is, on payday, faculty queue up before a window an hour and a half in advance, then receive a voucher for their pay. This, they exchange at another window, for the cash sum. Unfortunately, there is no assurance that they will be paid even their measly salaries in full. In 1996, professors received their full checks in March, half in May, none in June.

Hence, the invisible economy by which poorly paid teachers - and all other Russians - make ends meet, a form of trade both illegal and clearly understood by everyone. Drakulic (1996), in an essay on life in her native Croatia, describes a situation that Russians would find familiar:

We have brought with us into our new [post-Communist] system the mentality of forced labour: you work, but you get nothing out of your job; no promotion, satisfaction, pride, respect - or money. So you do not invest your energy or hope in your job. On the contrary, you try to spare your energy, ideas and knowledge to use elsewhere, if possible in a second job, preferably performed during the working hours of your first job. (p. 66)

Like the Croatians that Drakulic describes, many Russians feel dispirited by their dead-end jobs and discouraged at the opulence of the New Russians they see in the street. University professors are perhaps more fortunate than most Russians for two reasons: 1) first, as I mentioned, the teachers I met derive satisfaction from the work itself; and 2) second, one area of lucrative second employment open to them is tutoring aspiring high school students. In fact, teaching at the University, it often seems, is designed to establish a tutor's credentials and so lift his fees: who, after all, would be better placed to offer expert tutoring than an esteemed university professor? I heard one department chair complain that none of his faculty want to pick up courses that needed to be offered - they just wanted to devote themselves to independent lessons.

The ethical dynamics grow problematic when these same students sit for entrance examinations with the very teachers who have been tutoring them, a situation that is very common. These tests are oral, and tutored students are invariably admitted into the very competitive programs. All associated with the university, indeed, all Russians, seem to accept such inevitable corruption as the price of living in a cash-poor country. They speak about arrangements like this as an example of *blot*, a crude slang term meaning pull or connections and carrying connotations of shamefulness. *Blot* governs much that happens after the student is admitted as well. For instance, professors, in effect, draft students to be in their first-year groups, and the special relationship continues. Those who come in privileged, i.e., who have supplemented the university professor's salary in the past, are often billeted for success. Have we anything comparable to this in American higher education? If anything, the sense of partiality and favoritism resembles the old boy network that characterized American graduate school admissions in decades past, yet without GREs or any other impartial manner of screening. Russians, it seems to me, respect achievement no less than Americans do, and admire America for its emphasis on success through hard work. (They believe that Americans work much harder than they do). Though they are not proud of their reliance on personal connections, Russians think it nothing strange that who you know will dictate your academic and professional advancement.

Last year a story was making the rounds at the KSPU of a teacher who had accepted a bribe. Once an examination, this time written, had begun, the student asked permission to visit the women's room. Waiting in the women's room, the teacher in question met the student and coached her on the answers to the test questions. When I asked why the teacher would do something like this, something so dangerous and demeaning, so opposed to communal norms, I was told, «To buy butter, milk.....»

In recent years, however, there has been a far more sanctioned form of buying your way in. Since my stay in 1996, the KSPU has been accepting paying students, who would be unable to pass the entrance exam, and now as many as one-third of the students come into the university in this way. They

mix in and «find their buddies,» as I was told, but this practice has created some tension lines. Where it was rare for upper-level students to receive grades less than 4, paying students receive and remain in school with 2s. They are also expelled more often - after all, it is not the instructors who are benefiting from the tuition fees. The Russian Constitution declares the right to a free higher education - those who can pass the entrance tests may matriculate for free. Yet their places are being taken by those with money. In the opinion of non-paying students I have spoken with, this tends to work against group unity in that it creates a two-tier system and what is more, it waters down the level of instruction.

The group dynamic in Russian higher education remains a durable tradition. It is an extension of the Russian mir, the traditional European education system, and the Soviet collective. More and more, however, there have been demands for educational reform and even measured responses to these demands. Since 1991, the influence of Western practice has found its way into Russian universities, and curious Russian instructors have experimented with the tried and true. One, for instance, who I know, uses multiple choice examinations; another uses breakout grades, that is, so much for class participation, so much for exams. My own school has contributed to the East-West cross-pollination. All of the English teachers at the KSPU have studied at St. Scholastica, either by participating in the summer language camp we sponsor or by attending regular classes in Duluth each winter. Moreover, St. Scholastica has sent three Fulbrights to Petrozavodsk to teach English, communication, and computer science.

One notable academic exchange St. Scholastica has helped to create has been a yearly exchange in which Russian students mix with their Duluth counterparts to debate timely issues in English according to Oxford Union rules, and this has been taking place for half a dozen years. It's an exciting event where college students of both countries work together, make friends, and gain understanding of cultural assumptions. In Petrozavodsk, I was fortunate to attend such a debate, but in this case, it was one in which Petrozavodsk students joined Moscow students to address the topic: «Resolved: the Russian University system should institute major reforms.» Co-coached by American and Russian faculty, the students on the affirmative side drew attention to a series of ideological and pragmatic shortcomings of the way Russian colleges did business. After the presentations, the audience, largely made up of students, voted a strong affirmative.

Perhaps the greatest threat to Russia's tradition of educational groups comes from the sense of opportunity talented students see outside of the system as they challenge the confines of the collective «we.» As one of my Russian students who had studied at St. Scholastica explained to me, «Education is one's individual responsibility. It is your own task to gain knowledge. But look at Russia. In the past equality was the goal and one wasn't supposed to stand out. Members of a group rose and fell together - if the group achieved a certain level, everyone received a bonus. Even now,» she added, «all of the seats in the University are at shared tables.» (A. Ahmetova, personal communication, February 21, 2002). So - furniture as a reflection of national ideology. Someday, however, there will be money for new furniture.

Confessional afterthought: As an undergraduate, I delighted in the professional purposelessness of the courses I took. I no more planned my curriculum than I would plan a trip to the record shop or the book store, in fact, a lot less. I drifted through a series of tentative majors, and I elected courses from

professors whom I believed had something important to teach me. Intentionality, a word that I am now hearing more and more in my capacity as a college administrator, seemed then to betoken a lack of imagination. To be free of course requirements was to be truly American.

It is only when I began plotting this presentation did it occur to me that the new vocabulary of American undergraduate education - the learning communities, the small group work, the integrated learning - strangely reminded me of the system that younger Russians are slowly pushing away from. Whether to increase retention or to improve learning, the system of grouping students is gaining a distinct vogue in America. Viterbo University includes «Community Skills» in its list of student learning outcomes, and many general education programs throughout America are working to develop students' sense of interpersonal and civic interconnectedness. If American higher education is emphasizing the intentionality of learning through cooperative effort towards well-defined and measurable learning outcomes, perhaps the Russian experience can be cautionary to us. Or else, years after the end of the Cold War, perhaps the Soviet Union's ultimate revenge on America is that we will become it.

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