

## ON THE OTHER HAND: THE *OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS* SERIES AND THE APPROACH IT REPRESENTS

The *Opposing Viewpoints* Criminal Justice Series. San Diego: Greenhaven Press. \$11.95 per paperback.

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The *Opposing Viewpoints* series and its competitors are doing for many professors what we used to do for ourselves when copyright laws were more liberal and when the amount of information pertinent to any issue was more manageable. The series covers a variety of contemporary issues in criminal justice and related disciplines (e.g., the war on drugs and the death penalty) and offers some more general titles (e.g., *American Prisons* and *Crime and Criminals*), again with a focus on issues. Each paperback volume in the series presents a range of opinions on selected questions—for example, “Is the war on drugs necessary?” or “Should prisons be privatized?” Generally, these opinion pieces are heavily edited original articles or essays from professional, scholarly, trade, and mass market books and periodicals.

The primary question we address in this essay is not how well these volumes do what they are doing when compared with (say) how well other series do it or how well professors do it or used to do it. Our primary purpose is broader and more basic: it is to explore the approach to learning that is reflected in *Opposing Viewpoints* as a representative of the genre.

Our review strategy has been to examine, in some detail, samples of the offerings of this series and to reflect on the assumptions about teaching and learning that underlie such a series. We have talked with colleagues who use *Opposing Viewpoints* in their courses, and we have reflected on our experiences in using compilations of materials on particular topics. Throughout we have been guided by selected literature on the nature of education.

In presenting *Opposing Viewpoints* as a representative of a genre, we are making assumptions about the intended purposes and typical uses of these kinds of materials. In assessing *Opposing Viewpoints* we make a

number of presuppositions about desirable educational goals and corresponding qualities of instructional settings.

Our assumptions and presuppositions reflect our purpose in taking on this task and respond to the broad direction given by Michael Vaughn, the *JCJE*'s book review editor. Our purpose was one of discovery in its most modest sense: we wanted to see how far we could get in making sense of the objectives and methods of exposing our students to what are generally called critical, contemporary, or key issues in criminology and criminal justice.

The editors of the *Opposing Viewpoints* series declare that their objective is to inform readers by presenting a wide range of opinion on complex issues. On the back jacket of each book in the series, they state that their purpose is

. . . to help readers become more intelligent and discriminating consumers of information in our media-centered culture. The series uses magazines, journals, books, and newspapers, as well as statement and position papers from a wide range of individuals and organizations. The discussion activities are designed to help develop basic reading and thinking skills.

The purposes stated above are 1) to inform students of the range of opinion on selected issues, and 2) to assist in the development of "basic reading and thinking skills," which in turn will make students more sophisticated media consumers. The questions raised by this statement of purpose are 1) Is this purpose served effectively by the approach taken and the materials presented in *Opposing Viewpoints*? and 2) Is the purpose legitimate for criminal justice courses, especially for majors? In this essay we focus on the second question.

Here, the specter of sophomoric criticism emerges. Are we going to evaluate the *Opposing Viewpoints* texts in terms of educational goals that they were never explicitly promoted to serve? Yes—but we do not think that doing so violates standards of critical scholarship or fairness.

The texts in the *Opposing Viewpoints* series are advertised as supplemental books. Our impression, however, is that books from this series and its competitors are used most frequently as primary readers in upper level courses that focus on central issues and problems in the discipline.<sup>1</sup> If this is the case, how well do these books measure up to what should be the purpose of such courses? First, however, we must explore what we consider to be the central purposes of these courses and, more broadly, the purpose of higher education.

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<sup>1</sup>We know of one case in which a book of this kind was assigned as a primary reading in a PhD course. We do not know exactly how the book was used, however, and we are aware that there may be legitimate uses of such materials in PhD courses.

Jacques Barzun (1991) observes, after 40 years of study, that American higher education has become almost exclusively a means of furnishing credentials for higher earning power. He suggests that the majority of students end their undergraduate years remembering little more than the name of the football team (if it was successful). Very little real learning or professional preparation takes place in contemporary colleges and universities, and little respect or appreciation for learning develops. Barzun asks "Why then expect that the survivors will show 'respect for learning'?" He or she has never come into prolonged contact with it" (1991:207).

The kind of learning Barzun has in mind is broad, deep, and (yes) practical—practical in the sense that is useful or valuable in enriching one's life after graduation and that it spawns continued learning. This is similar to the mode of learning Mortimer J. Adler (1982) calls the enlargement of understanding<sup>2</sup> and to Howard Gardner's (1991) concept of deep, genuine, or disciplinary understanding. Because our discussion is taking place in a specific disciplinary context, perhaps Gardner's notion of disciplinary understanding is most relevant.

According to Gardner, the ultimate purpose of education should be to develop disciplinary understanding because "the understanding of the disciplines represents the most important cognitive achievements of human beings. It is necessary to come to know these understandings if we are to be fully human, to live in our time, to be able to understand it to the best of our abilities, and to build upon it" (1991:11). Disciplinary understanding is embodied in the "disciplinary expert," whom Gardner characterizes as

an individual of any age who has mastered the concepts and skills of a discipline or domain and can apply such knowledge appropriately in new situations. Included in the ranks of disciplinary experts are those students who are able to use the knowledge of their physics class or their history class to illuminate new phenomena. Their knowledge is not limited to the usual text-and-test setting, and they are eligible to enter the ranks of those who "really" understand (1991:7).

Gardner (1991), Barzun (1991), and Adler (1982), as well as countless others, tell us that the understanding acquired in school is only the beginning. Real learning in any discipline is a lifelong venture characterized by openness and change. But if courses in college do not at least move students toward disciplinary or deep understanding, they diminish the chances that the students will acquire such understanding later in life.

So far our discussion of the goals of education and the benefits of deep learning has been fairly abstract. Criminal justice is a practical discipline, as some see it, which appeals to undergraduate majors with instrumental

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<sup>2</sup>Adler is referring to secondary education, but much of what he argues is relevant to higher education.

motives. How will deep understanding translate into enhanced performance on the job in the system? What is the return on investment besides the enriched personal life of one who has cultivated an "educated mind"?

Disciplinary understanding may have important effects for individual job performance and the operation of the criminal justice system. Some of the students we teach may be required someday to study and make decisions concerning a number of issues that can affect many lives; thus, the importance of a mind that has been educated to grasp the complexity of problems is obvious. If we want to help our students avoid relapsing into the naive, often stereotypical views and models to which many subscribed before college, we must take steps to increase their exposure to and understanding of sophisticated disciplinary thinking. According to Gardner, regression toward more naive or more intuitive models that do not capture the complexity of the world or reflect the state of the knowledge in a discipline is common to students in the sciences, the humanities, and the arts. It may, however, pose more of a problem in criminal justice, a discipline in which simplistic views are often presented to students as the way things are in the "real world" and a field that encompasses matters about which every Tom, Dick, and Mary feels competent to express an opinion.

One way to help students acquire deep understanding and avoid regressive thinking is to give them the opportunity to see how those who possess disciplinary understanding think about criminal justice issues. To discover the process by which different authors reach different conclusions about causes of crime or crime control policy, for instance, the typical criminal justice major must read a considerable amount under the direction of a knowledgeable and helpful professor. Involvement by both the professor and the student is required. Involvement in turn depends in part on enthusiasm—a quality that is mentioned consistently in the pedagogical literature as an important component of effective teaching (Weimer 1993).

The kind of enthusiasm that engenders involvement is elicited by important issues on which the most thoughtful, creative, and literate members of the discipline have something to say. Important thinking on such issues usually appears in books, monographs, or series of related articles.

Issues that merit our involvement are usually complex, and they require time and space to define and explore. For the reader, the excitement is generated by the process of discovery as the author describes it. At its best, we take a journey of discovery with the author. We experience the ideas with the author as they emerge, evolve, and are tested. Three edited pages on why the death penalty is reprehensible or five pages on the educational value of punishment do not elicit the same kind of response.

We believe that the way to a deep understanding from which students are unlikely to regress to more primitive, less effective modes of thinking requires full immersion in issues. The juxtaposition of short edited pieces presenting contrasting views is the equivalent of standing on the deck of the

pool and watching the swimming instructor demonstrate strokes. It may have some limited instructional value, but inevitably it is pretty dry stuff.

We are not advocating a sink-or-swim approach in which the instructor assigns undergraduates book-length treatments of important topics and leaves them on their own to write a book review, which they submit on the last day of the semester. That is the equivalent of throwing them out of a boat in the middle of the lake as a method of teaching them how to swim. Novice swimmers need instructors to hold them up in the water, and they require flotation devices to gain confidence and practice techniques. Students who have read little more than textbooks and collections of edited articles need support or "scaffolding" (to use the more contemporary educational term) in actively reading a book that reflects disciplinary understanding. A certain approach must be promoted, or certain conditions must be met, if students are to benefit from the kind of reading we propose.

Many of these conditions have been described with characteristic style and insight by Hans Toch (1990) in his essay "On Falling in Love with a Book," which has been a major influence on our thinking. We recommend that you treat yourself to this essay which appeared in an earlier issue of JCE. Here we focus on appreciation, which according to Toch (1990) is a key element in learning from books. Appreciation requires a more open and less critical approach than is usually promoted in college classrooms. To learn what an author has to say, one must grasp and, at least temporarily, accept his or her purpose and point of view. One must be willing to play what Peter Elbow calls the "believing game," as opposed to the more familiar "doubting game" (Kalamaras 1994:40).

This game is not easy for anyone. It is especially difficult for undergraduates, who often study for tests rather than reading for understanding. It is also difficult when one is asked to read and compare two or more edited pieces that represent opposing viewpoints on specific issues. We are inclined by nature and education to select the piece that resonates most closely with our view, and to judge the others accordingly. This approach is a serious impediment to deep or disciplinary understanding when the view in question is simplistic or based on stereotypes. Such an outcome is almost guaranteed when one combines undergraduates who still hold naive views of the issues in their discipline with short readings that include pieces from the popular press which contains similar views.

The kind of learning we are recommending as the goal of criminal justice education requires a certain instructional setting, namely a seminar with a relatively small number of students. Such classes have become a luxury where most of us teach. In view of this reality, it is neither uncommon nor unreasonable to settle for less than disciplinary understanding as a course objective. For introductory classes, of course, we would not expect our students to possess disciplinary understanding by the end of the semester, but we should keep it in mind as a long-range goal.

Often, introducing our students to a broad range of opinion on important issues and teaching them the basics of critical thinking is a satisfactory course objective. In the remainder of this essay we discuss how well the *Opposing Viewpoints* series meets this objective. Certainly, we recognize that the assigned reading in a course is only one factor in education. The combination of an exceptionally talented teacher, creative course projects, and intelligent and motivated students can produce learning with virtually any assigned readings.

One concern in reviewing a series on critical issues in a discipline is the depth and breath of coverage. *Opposing Viewpoints* covers a broad range of contemporary topics. In addition to the volumes clearly intended for criminology/criminal justice,<sup>3</sup> the series includes others that are closely related.<sup>4</sup> New titles and revisions of existing titles are always on the horizon.

Each volume is organized around a set of questions about the main issue. When instructors fashion their own course materials, the instructor's disciplinary understanding guides the analysis of that issue. The questions one chooses to raise about the war on drugs, for example, have everything to do with the students' learning experience—how they frame the issue, what they understand it to be, which of the several subissues deserve sustained attention. Reasonable people obviously disagree about this implicit analytical framework.

It is unreasonable to expect any commercial venture to stray far from the mainstream. The *Opposing Viewpoints* volumes generally raise an appropriate set of questions. *American Prisons*, for example, examines the purpose of prison, the effect of prisons on prisoners, overcrowding, privatization, and alternatives to prison. Potentially, however, coverage can be too homogenized. Is it reasonable, for example, that a volume on American prisons would not include issues of race or gender in its table of contents or index?

Let us turn now to the selections themselves. Reasonable people clearly may disagree about the merits of particular selections. As a starting point, however, we believe that some sources present informed opinion and stimulate thinking better than others. We should offer students well-considered, well-argued selections that span the continuum of opinion and represent current or classic works.

The *Opposing Viewpoints* series must receive high marks for the timeliness of the materials. Most selections are quite recent—within two or three years of the volume's publication date. The series also uses selections

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<sup>3</sup>Examples include *America's Prisons*, *Child Abuse*, *Crime and Criminals*, *Criminal Justice*, *The Death Penalty*, *Violence in America*, and *The War on Drugs*.

<sup>4</sup>Examples include *Abortion*, *Euthanasia*, *Poverty*, *Racism in America*, *Civil Liberties*, *AIDS*, *Chemical Dependency*, and *Censorship*.

from many different types of source materials<sup>5</sup> and from many thoughtful scholars. In some volumes, however, the selections are weighted too heavily toward newspaper, newsmagazine, and popular magazine articles. Given the reader's novice status and the popular misconceptions about criminological issues, we question the wisdom of presenting so much material from the popular press.<sup>6</sup> The *Opposing Viewpoints* books also fall short in epistemological and methodological coverage. Articles that present empirical findings and describe the methods used to generate them are included infrequently.

What about pedagogical aids? The series editors have provided the texts with more than the usual amount of structure. Each chapter begins with a brief preface that orients the reader to the question under discussion, and each selection begins with a brief summary and two or three thoughtfully developed questions to guide the reading. Each chapter also contains a critical thinking activity and a periodical bibliography. Every volume concludes with a bibliography of books and a list of relevant organizations that students may wish to contact.

The *Opposing Viewpoints* series is to be commended for the variety of pedagogical aids it uses. Some are well done; for example, the selection summaries and study questions are well focused. Others are awkward attempts to incorporate elements of contemporary educational trends.

Critical thinking activities are particularly relevant to the series and to contemporary undergraduate education. Weimer (1993), for example, echoes much contemporary thought about teaching when she observes that content-based teaching "simply cannot keep up with the growth of knowledge" (p.88). Currently we place considerable emphasis on teaching our students how to evaluate the content of what they read.

Unfortunately, the critical thinking activities provided in the series are often disappointing (and are very similar from one volume to the next). For example, one exercise requires students to classify statements drawn from the readings as provable, unprovable, or too controversial to be proved to everyone's satisfaction. Another instructs students to classify a series of statements taken from the chapter selections as either fact or opinion. These kinds of activities teach an impoverished form of critical thinking in which students take facts out of context and miss the point that all facts, to some extent, are determined by paradigm, theory, or perspective. The result, as Gardner sees it, is that

students posit a radical disjunction between facts, on the one hand, and opinion, on the other. Such a dichotomy interferes

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<sup>5</sup>The editors also summarize the authors' credentials, and supplement the main selections with cartoons and brief boxed excerpts from yet other sources.

<sup>6</sup>Certainly students could do worse than reading the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post Weekly Edition*, *Psychology Today*, and *Ms.* These, however, are not typically outlets for core disciplinary writing. (And certainly one may question the wisdom of excerpting *Reader's Digest*—twice—in the *Crime and Criminals* volume.)

with an appreciation of the far subtler interplay between what is selected as a fact, how it is stated, and which underlying assumptions, goals, and perspectives have governed the selection (1991:193).

On balance, what can we conclude about the *Opposing Viewpoints* series and its contribution to educating our students? It appears to be well intentioned, and it is certainly convenient. It also presents some solid scholarship by some thoughtful and literate scholars. In our opinion, however, the series does not promote disciplinary understanding or offer sufficient depth or breadth of coverage.

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