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ABSTRACT

The question of why only English teachers and their students study Herman Melville's novel, "Billy Budd," is raised in this paper. The book offers insights and fundamental social questions for students in secondary school social studies. Suggestions are offered as to how social studies teachers (with their perspectives, concerns, and curriculum goals) could design and conduct teaching and learning using "Billy Budd" for secondary school students in history, law, sociology, and other social studies curriculum contexts. It describes a collaborative staff development experience that used the drama form of "Billy Budd" for discussion and for Internet and library research. The paper states that the teachers gradually focused upon the most meaningful linkage to their students' life space. The discussions are focused on four separate social studies approaches to the study of "Billy Budd": (1) taking a stand; (2) taking liberties; (3) taking offense; and (4) taking action. Each lesson is based upon a "mega-question" linking Melville's story, the social studies curriculum, and students' life concerns. Each lesson is taught "authentically" with students constructing their own meaning using disciplined inquiry and prior knowledge. The four approaches are described in detail. Contains a figure and 16 references. (BT)

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Teacher Exchanges: Teaching "Billy Budd" as Secondary School Social Studies.

by Rodney F. Allen

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Teacher Exchanges: Teaching “Billy Budd” as Secondary School Social Studies

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Teacher Exchanges: Teaching “Billy Budd” as Secondary School Social Studies

“Then, as the ship’s company looked on,
Billy Budd was hanged.”

--Herman Melville

Billy Budd plunged from the yardarm and died. Melville’s novella about Billy Budd, written between 1885 and his death in 1891, was never completely finished by Melville himself. The 340-page handwritten manuscript was discovered hidden away in an attic trunk in 1919 by his granddaughter – a century from his birth in 1819. Billy Budd, Foretopman was published in 1924, and went through several “definitive versions” over the decades.

Melville’s tale of Billy Budd, a guileless seaman from a distant time and place who stood accused of fabricated crimes, endures over the decades. The story draws an audience, and the book remains in print. In 1951, the Princeton University Press published Louis O. Coxe and Robert H. Chapman’s play--Billy Budd: A Play in Three Acts. Also in 1951, Benjamin Britten created the opera, Billy Budd: An Opera in Four Acts, with the librettists E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier. A little over a decade later, Peter Ustinov directed the feature film, Billy Budd (1962), which quickly became a classic. Melville’s view of the collision of good and evil is presented in its starkest form in Billy Budd. The power of his tale, its symbolism and its theme keeps an audience’s reoccurring attention--be it to

the book, the play, the opera, or the film. As Melville observed:

To produce a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on a flea, though many there be that have tried it (Fern 1998, p.1).

Almost all classroom attention to Billy Budd, like Melville's Moby Dick, comes from teachers of English. They like the Christ allegory, built upon the age-old conflict of good and evil. They like open-ended discussions of Melville's conception of society as a corrupter of humankind, with Billy as Christ figure or as Adam before the Fall, in contrast to the evil John Claggart, Master-at-Arms, a serpent Satan in Eden tricking humankind out of its God-given innocence.

But why should English teachers and their students dominate the study of a book so very rich in deep insights and fundamental social questions for those of us in secondary school social studies? Captain Vere's decision to hang Budd for the unintentional killing of the villainous Claggart represents the triumph of law over compassion. In the pantheon of relevant values, the highest among them from Vere's perspective is the preservation of social order. Budd is hanged; society is preserved. Authority and order are fundamental concerns in civic education. Melville's court martial dialogue reveals the arguments on all sides of the enduring questions of social justice in ways that inform our reading of today's newspaper. Questions about the

appropriateness of laws, the intentions of actors, and the fairness of penalties, including capital punishment, are embedded in Billy's story and are especially perplexing in current community life.

Social studies teachers are not English teachers. They have their perspectives, concerns, and curriculum goals. Given the opportunity, how would they design and conduct teaching and learning using Bully Budd for secondary school students in history, law, sociology, and other social studies curriculum contexts?

A Collaborative Staff Development Experience

Recently, I had the opportunity to work collaboratively with experienced teachers and mature novitiates in a staff development program. After two open discussion sessions on teaching Billy Budd in social studies, we elected the play over the film, opera, or novel. Participants continued reading the play (Coxe and Chapman, 1951), discussing its meaning, historical context, and links to the social studies program. Visits to the Internet and the public library complemented our discussions with others' perspectives.

While our exchanges centered on the teachable uses of the play in social studies, both the Internet and the library offered few ideas for social studies. Together the teachers developed their own ideas. Is it educationally useful to contrast the court martial process with civilian court procedures? Might we test our belief in the right to a fair trial against Vere's sense of urgency about wartime order?

The pros and the cons of capital punishment, then and now? Do police entrap citizens by fabrication? What is the role of Claggart-like intimidation, psychological violence, and fear in American law enforcement, especially for people on the margins?

Staff development participants rejected any thought of centering the study of Billy Budd on his court martial or upon the entrapment of innocent persons, since the teachers considered these issues better taught elsewhere in their curriculum. For reasons of their own, they rejected the theme of capital punishment. Interestingly, they also rejected any analysis of the moral debates in Billy Budd, using Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg 1981) or Carol Gilligan's (1982) levels of moral deliberation.

Gradually, they focused upon the most meaningful linkage to their students' life space and the discussions narrowed to four separate social studies approaches to the study of Billy Budd: *Taking a Stand*, *Taking Liberties*, *Taking Offense*, and *Taking Action*. Each is based upon a **mega-question** linking Melville's story, the social studies curriculum, and students' life concerns. Each is to be taught "authentically" (Newmann and Wehlage 1993) with students constructing their own meaning, using disciplined inquiry and prior knowledge to construct that meaning. Each is to culminate in a **performance**. A major concern was to ensure the engagement of students in their learning and having that be rewarded intrinsically as well as in their civic communities.

Taking A Stand

The only social studies use of Billy Budd was in the Harvard University Public Issues Series' Taking a Stand (Oliver and Newmann 1967) booklet. I shared a newsprint copy of the booklet and teachers' guide. This booklet was designed to introduce students to the examination of public policy issues. The authors included a well-written case study of the Billy Budd story, as an exemplar for training students to identify issues – the central public policy issue and the associated conflicts over fact-explanation questions, definitional disputes, and moral value questions. In addition, the authors structured the use of Billy Budd so those students might begin to understand and overcome the pitfalls of coffeehouse or seminar style discussions of public issues. Students decided when, in a discussion, persons were unloading feelings, persuading others to their point of view, or working on problem solving. Students learned to clarify or justify a position on the issues by using analogies, evaluating evidence, and carefully defining terms (Oliver, Newmann, and Bane 1997).

This approach impressed all participants. These were truly important, highly transferable skills in the civic education of adolescents. As the examination of this material continued, I provided outlines of two approaches to the analytical study of public policy issues –Recitation Analysis and Socratic Analysis (Oliver and Shaver 1966). The teachers compared the two approaches and, between our in-service sessions, several tried one or both approaches with their students.

Teachers thought that the most important, but very difficult, skill was to construe the issue—what we at the moment call “framing the issue” and what the Public Issues Series called “identifying the central public policy issue.” This skill was not satisfied by a mere query on the specifics of the case – “Should Vere have hung Billy Budd?” Rather, the skill demanded that students seek out and learn the enduring conflict embedded in the case study – *the mega-question*.

In their quest for the mega-question students have to wade through a story rich in specifics and conflicts. The sense of urgency borne of wartime and prior mutinies come into play. The specific demands of the Mutiny Act and the Articles of War raise Captain Edward Fairfax Vere’s concern for maintaining order and preventing chaos. He had good cause to fear rebellion in the ranks and the threat of mutiny throughout the Royal Navy. Accused of planning mutiny, Billy strikes John Claggart in a fit of stuttering, killing the Master-At-Arms. Immediately, Vere calls for a “drumhead” court. The ship’s surgeon momentarily challenges Vere’s decision, but Vere dismisses the surgeon’s misgivings and, in his urgency, bullies the drumhead court into convicting Billy. “We do not deal with justice but the law.” The circumstances and the intentions of the actor (Billy Budd) count for naught; what is vital is the solitary act itself.

Vere’s court martial is particularly gripping because most of us learned what Oliver Wendell Holmes called “a mechanical jurisprudence,” or syllogistic reasoning wherein

judges are seen as simply applying the law to the facts. In this mistaken view, judicial decisions are seen as “objective” and citizens are taught that objective justice is good because, like the many marble statues outside or above courtrooms, it is blind, that is, impartial. But Holmes inveighed against this simplistic thinking, arguing that behind the logical form lies a value judgment about the relative worth and importance of legislative grounds and judges’ duty to weigh considerations of social advantage (Mabe 1987). For Holmes, different judges make different judgments, applying the same law to the same facts, because their underlying value judgments differ.

Jurisprudence is not as “objective” as many imagine. Captain Vere guides Budd’s trail in Holmes’ simplistic reasoning, and Budd is sacrificed to the law. First, Vere cites the demands of the Mutiny Act, but the body of laws falling under take title apply only to the army. Second, Vere repeatedly refers to the Articles of War, but these Articles do not require the *immediate* drum-head court martial and the *forthwith* hanging of Budd. It might well be argued that Vere should have awaited a general court martial, called by a commander of the detachment, squadron, or fleet, as implied by the Articles of War.

Early in the drama, Vere observed (Coxe and Chapman 1951):

I talk of justice, and would turn the law gentle for those who serve here; but a Claggart stands in my shadow, for I need him. So the world goes, wanting not justice, but order (p.21).

But later, of course, it was Vere who was possessed by urgency, called the court together, and bullied it to convict Budd. Why the eagerness to hang Billy Budd?

The enduring conflict is between the need for *order* and the desire for *justice*. Obviously, we would prefer justice with order and order with justice. In circumstances where we may not have social order with justice, may we sacrifice justice to sustain or create the necessary social order?

Captain Vere found his answer in wartime codes and the urgency stemming from recent mutinies. In our own time, others found their answers in “national security.” Yet others among us today would risk social disorder to do justice in the very ways suggested by members of Vere’s court.

Teacher-participants decided that *student performance* at the conclusion of their study of Billy Budd should engage the school principal in dialogue on matters of due process of law when handling student conduct code violations. Is the process “objective”? Can it be “objective”? Are there times when matters of urgency or expediency, regarding order in the school, influence decisions? Many constitution rights cases involving schools recognize the primacy of instruction in schooling and thus the need for an orderly environment for children and youth. Rights in schooling are restricted by fears of disorder. Children are viewed as not fully functioning and responsible adults. Interestingly, this is Edward Fairfax Vere’s perception of his crew, pressed and volunteers.

Taking Liberties

Billy Budd is “pressed” into service on a warship at a time of war between nations in an Age of Rebellion. Most sailors in the Royal Navy were pressed into service. Mutinies in the Navy –a “commotion” at the Slithead in April 1797 and a more ominous rebellion (“The Great Mutiny”) at the Nore, in May 1797, raised serious concern about the trustworthiness of seamen in wartime. Discontent was, in large measure, the direct result of the practice of impressment. A social class tension existed on all Royal Navy warships between the top officers and the volunteer and impressed crew. This aristocratic-democratic tension is evident in Captain Vere’s demeanor and behavior. Vere is well borne but modest. Never overbearing, he is resolute, never willing to tolerate any infraction in discipline. Vere knows his place and realizes that for the social system to work (on board and off), he must play his role to keep his underlings not only in their places but believing in (or at least accepting) their lot in life.

The seamen were sailors, not men. Vere reminded all within earshot that every sailor was “not on this ship as a man, but as a function of the ship.” The seamen were not citizens, but were objects. What are the rights of merchant sailors and seamen on naval vessels? In wartime the naval elite did not broach the question.

In the class structure of the ship are seamen, volunteer or impressed, citizens or objects? The *mega-question* here

may be “Does national security in wartime justify using persons as objects, without regard for their rights and needs as persons?”

[insert Figure #1]

A social scientist, Herbert C. Kelman (1975, 1989) has a theory setting forth three means employed to shape attitudes and, therefore, behaviors. One means is to use *power* over others to force compliance. Another is to use attractiveness of a person or a message to obtain identification—others behave in the desired manner to model the message or to feel akin to the messenger. The third means is to make the message *creditable* to the receivers so that they will internalize the message, believing in its validity. On board the vessel, there are great imbalances in power. Students can provide examples of the use of power to obtain compliance, the use of attractiveness to gain identification and the use of creditability to achieve internalization. For example, First Officer Seymour says of Claggart: “He’s a valuable man, one we hardly can do without, as things stand now (p. 20).”

Claggart wields the power to obtain crew compliance. A fearful and suspicious Captain Vere constantly reminds his officers of their rank and social class obligations that they accept and do his bidding. First Office Seymour asserts: “We must serve the law, sir, or give up the right and privilege of service. That is how we live (p. 20).” Even in the ultimate scene before Billy’s death, Vere and the crew act out their conditioning. The crew surged forward, but

quickly yielded to Vere's discipline. The crew yielded to the authority that was imposed and had been learned, exactly as Vere predicted. Earlier in the drama, Vere spoke to this human propensity to accept imposed routines (Coxe and Chapman 1951) :

Live? Oh, you're right. Below this deck are men who at a call skip on the hurling spars against the wind, at Beat-to-quarters run as if they willed it. Yet each of us steps alone within this pattern, this formal movement centered on itself. Men live and die, taken by pattern, born to it, knowing nothing...(p. 21).

During the trial, Vere speaks again to argue that the crew has a native sense – they will expect the law to be applied. To their comprehension of the law, Budd's act will be “a flagrant act of mutiny.” Thus, the court martial must sentence Budd to hang, if for no other reason that to satisfy the sense of the law which had been taught to the crew.

Student *performance* to conclude this study of Billy Budd might involve a public policy study of codes of student conduct to achieve and maintain order in schooling with mandatory attendance. Do such codes of conduct involve any “taking of liberties” from students? Are these “takings” justifiable? How are they to be justified? In addition, students might reread Billy Budd, using Kelman's three attitude formation strategies to see how each is used to shape the beliefs and performance of officers and crew on the ship. These might be compared and contrasted with

school-related practices, such as a sports coach's strategies for building team unity and enhancing team performance.

Taking Offense

The British feared radical French republican ideas. This was especially true in the Royal Navy where officers represented the interests of a privileged elite, and they knew that French ideas had an appeal to the less fortunate. The ideals of the French Revolution could wreak havoc upon the *status quo* at home and at sea. The value conflict here is between *continuity* (the *status quo* and its benefits to the British elite) and *radical change* which, presumably, might well benefit average Britons. Captain Vere clearly saw the dangers to British conservatism posed by new French revolutionary sentiment. War with French was nothing new, but war with a powerful European enemy holding such antithetical ideas which fueled the French Revolution was new and especially threatening. In Chapter Three, Melville (1962) observes:

...bluejackets, to be numbered by thousands, ran up with huzzahs the British colors with the union and cross wiped out; by that cancellation transmuting the flag of founded law and freedom defined, into the enemy's red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt. Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames (p. 22).

Throughout the play, the ships' names symbolize the tension between the old British world-view and the new radical equalitarianism of the French. Vere is eventually killed in a battle with the French ship, "The Athee." Athee comes from the root for our English word atheist [from the Greek atheos meaning "without god."] Her Majesty's Ship "The Indomitable" (in the play, or the "Avenger" and "Bellepotent" in various editions of the book) presses Billy into service from the merchant ship, "The Rights of Man." Billy lost his rights moving from the merchant marine to the Royal Navy. Captain Vere reminds his officers of their special place in the social order (as well as the chain of naval command), as Seymour proclaims "We must serve the law, sir, or give up the right and privilege of service. It's how we live (p. 21)." These words had a double meaning – how we live on ship and how they lived in England itself. In Act Three, Scene One, Vere speaks to Wyatt about the duty he received as a part of his social and naval position to which he now was called to conform (Coxe and Chapman 1951):

The kind of judgment I ask of you is only this, Wyatt: that you recognize your function in this ship. I believe you know it as well as we, yet you rebel. Can't you see that you must first strip off the uniform you wear and after that your flesh, before you can escape the case at issue here? (p. 50)

To Edward Fairfax Vere, the officers were now tested to prevent chaos (French republicanism) and to preserve the

English order of things of which they were a part and a great beneficiary.

The teachers decided that *student performance* on this theme should engage students in reflecting upon the fear of ideas in contemporary society. What are the conventional beliefs about the social order, and who holds them? What are the threatening ideas and where do they come from? Whose interests are represented in policy proposals such as national school standards and testing? School vouchers? Welfare reform?

Taking Action

In social situations, as in society, imbalances in power exist which foster abuse of power and the oppression of the less powerful. In free societies, citizens in community must create laws, institutions, and social norms to control the most powerful and to protect the meek. Given power imbalances as a fact of life, just how to control power and to protect the less powerful is the *mega-question* for this section. Students shall see bullies, victims, bystanders and collaborators.

The envious and clever Master-At-Arms, John Claggart torments Billy Budd, the “Handsome Sailor,” until his false accusation lead to a charge of treason against Billy, and ultimately to the death of both men. The villainous Claggart preyed upon Billy. Claggart is aided by his minions, each one a collaborator seeking small favors and recognition. Is Vere a collaborator too? “ I talk of justice, and would turn

the law gentle for those who serve here; but a Claggart stands in my shadow, for I need him. So the world goes, wanting not justice, but order....” Then, how did Vere respond earlier to the initial accusation? Is Vere “with-it”? Does he know what is happening between Claggart and Billy? That Claggart is a bully of the meanest sort? Does he believe Claggart? Does he pick a proper course of action? Vere sets up a secluded confrontation between Billy and his accuser, Claggart. It is meant by Vere to test Claggart, not Billy –but Billy strikes Claggart and both die. Earlier, Vere had decided (Coxe and Chapman 1951): “I will let him have his head until some act puts him squarely counter to the law, then let the law consume him (p.20).” To which Seymour replied: “Why trouble the natural order to no purpose? Shouldn’t we let it be? (p. 20)” A prudent, aged Dansker was no idle bystander as early on he warned Billy of Claggart’s designs: “Jemmy Legs is down on you” (p.85).

The use of Claggart to control the crew stands, today, in strange contrast to concern for workplace harassment and domestic violence, and even bullying at school. Teachers in staff development felt that students should identify instances of bullying Billy and other crewmen by Claggart and his collaborators. Bullying is abusive treatment, including verbal violence as well as physical cruelty. Intimidation and harassment are bullying. Any behavior meant to induce fear or a feeling of inferiority is bullying.

Several options were suggested for *student performance*. First, a useful distinction is to separate out statements in the

play which are “put-downs” – words or body language meant to hurt, embarrass, or belittle another person. Students might try to explain why persons in Billy Budd employed “put-downs” in comparison to the reasons persons use them today. Who gets picked on? How did crewmen respond to the “put-downs”? Who were the bystanders and how did they respond to seeing this behavior? How effective were the victims in warding off the harmful effects of such statements? Today, how might we diminish such behavior? What are the obligations of bystanders? Students might do a presentation to the principal or school board, or before a faculty council.

Second, students might use the remaining portion of their list to examine bullying. Statements and behaviors of Claggart and his collaborators are especially insightful, but none more than Billy Budd’s message to Claggart—“No man can take pleasure in cruelty...you hate yourself.” Why do persons bully others? How do they “get away” with bullying? Why do persons collaborate with the perpetrators of bullying? For example, no officer intervened to address Claggart’s bullying. Why do the bystanders fail to intervene when they see such behavior? Why do persons seem to find bullying acceptable? What can we do in our institutions (e.g., schools) and communities to diminish bullying behavior? Students can use their insights from Billy Budd to design a school anti-bullying campaign for presentation to school officials.

Conclusion

One reason for working collaboratively with thoughtful teachers is that these teachers know that their students live and learn in a context –within time and social webs. They know from experience that to be effective education must break through the artificial compartmentalization of “school” and “real world.” While subject matter experts write national standards and while educational authorities prepare the curriculum, teachers working with students make decisions together that breathe life into learning. Skilled social studies teachers, knowing their students well, connect the government’s curriculum to their students’ lived experience in all its richness and variety. Students soon know their social studies helps them to make meaning of their lives, has intrinsic value, and is of value beyond the mere achievement of school success. Not surprisingly, these teachers echoed the view of the National Council for the Social Studies (1994):

The more accurately the K-12 social studies program addresses the contemporary conditions of real life and of academic scholarship, the more likely such a program is to help students develop a deeper understanding of how to know, how to apply what they know, and how to participate in building a future... (p. 5).

My staff development experience with Billy Budd and social studies teachers also confirms the wisdom of Smylie (1995) who observed:

We shall fail to improve schooling for children until we acknowledge the importance of schools, not only as places for teachers to work but also as places for teachers to learn (p. 92).

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Three Routes to Shaping Attitudes and Behaviors

POWER.....COMPLIANCE

ATTRACTIVENESS.....MODELING

CREDITABILITY.....INTERNALIZATION

Figure #1: After Herbert C. Kelman (1975, 1989)



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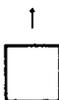
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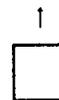
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