RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Pedagogy of the Job Guarantee

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In the classroom, we frequently notice that students want to deepen their understanding of the way they live while thinking beyond the way social life is organized today. We see this desire as a quiet rebellion against structural critiques that tend to make capitalism, racism, and sexism appear inevitable. But at the same time, students tend to view capitalism as static and unchangeable. Our teaching unfolds in this tension between the desire for thinking beyond current institutions, on the one hand, and structuralist critique, on the other. In this context, we have developed a set of activities that enable students to imagine a set of institutions through which societies can eradicate the specter of unemployment.

A Job Guarantee (JG) program would create a legally enforceable right to work at a good wage with benefits, including healthcare, childcare, and paid vacations. As a right, JG employment is not limited in time, and there is no means testing. In addition, it would create a realistic alternative to low-wage high-stress environments by providing an exit option that does not marginalize people as "the unemployed" but guarantees their inclusion as productive members of society. There are numerous other advantages. For instance, when someone who brings indispensable income to the household engages in domestic violence, women—the primary victims of such violence—would be able move out and claim their right to a job with childcare. In addition, by providing a floor for pay, working conditions, and benefits, a JG would improve conditions for private-sector workers because their employers would have to match the JG package if they wish to retain them (Tcherneva 2018, 2020a, 2020b, Forstater 2013).

A JG would enable municipalities, school districts, NGOs, and other non-profit institutions to request workers, matching their skills with local needs, and potentially democratizing social life as assemblies or other democratic bodies could begin to decide about how to deploy JG workers (Kolokotronis 2018). A JG, for instance, could provide a much-needed supplemental workforce for infrastructure and education or for the myriad measures required to address and mitigate the effects of climate change. It would also boost consumer spending in economically depressed areas and stabilize businesses in these communities (Tcherneva 2020b). Even before the current pandemic, a large majority of U.S. voters supported the JG (Tcherneva 2018, The Hill 2019). Since then, unemployment has increased dramatically, and it is likely that even more people would be in favor now. For all these reasons, the JG offers a forward-looking paradigm to approach large-scale problems in the precarious world we inhabit, and to move beyond structural critiques of capitalism in undergraduate teaching.

We teach the Job Guarantee in an interdisciplinary social justice-oriented undergraduate program housed in a medium-sized public university. The Sanders presidential campaigns, enabled by movements such as the Fight for $15 strikes to raise the minimum wage, have reinvigorated critiques of capitalism. Such critiques can be especially appealing to students with a generational experience of insecurity that permeates their lives--from precarious employment prospects and thread-bare benefits to housing crises, all of which are deepened by the COVID pandemic. In this context, students are poised to be critical of systems of oppression but still struggle to imagine the concrete contours of potentially transformative government programs. In the following sections, we introduce a set of classroom activities we have developed to understand and collaboratively design large-scale policies. We discuss a set of activities that enables students to understand themselves as potential co-architects of social institutions as they grapple with existing proposals for a Job Guarantee.

Unemployment and the Job Guarantee

To begin classroom work about unemployment and the Job Guarantee, we use Freire's (2017:78) technique of "decoding" a representation of a situation that points to a fundamental social problem. For instance, the Walker Evans photograph titled "South Street, New York" (1932) depicts three Manhattan men in postures of idleness: one is sleeping, one is reading a newspaper, and one is staring at the camera. As Sekula (1995:127) has noted, this image represents the "world of work, pointedly indicated through its absence." Interrogating such representations enables students to articulate how they understand the situation of unemployed people, and recognize the fact that they, too, face the threat of unemployment. Alternatively, students can search for pictures, texts, or short videos about unemployment that are meaningful to them, and discuss ("decode") them with a partner or small group. Decoding a situation enables the group to begin with concrete experiences, not abstractions that do not resonate with students and can even invalidate their experience.

When they first talk about unemployment, students often do so in individualist ways, which is unsurprising given that parents and teachers often tell them to acquire skills that make them "more employable." Accordingly, some students see situations of involuntary idleness as the consequence of an inadequate educational "investment," or of a deficiency of some kind, including "laziness." Those students who connect unemployment to broader social processes tend to do so in a fatalistic way and depict it as a regrettable but necessary part of what they call the capitalist system, which they tend to imagine as static.

Decoding work occurs in a dialogue with students. The desired effect is for students to articulate their understanding of themselves in the world, and begin to problematize it. The initial decoding activity also provides a reference point for the remainder of the semester, and to gauge the distance travelled at its end. In addition, in keeping with Freire's emphasis on knowledge as a social practice, students' initial understanding is not an embarrassment to be erased from memory but an integral part of the process. An awareness of their initial understanding will, in addition, enable students to continue similar learning processes with people outside of the classroom.

Introductory Discussion of the Job Guarantee

Departing from the initial decoding activity, we then introduce the JG, asking students to imagine a government

program that would guarantee a job to every person in a community and that would match this person's skills with social needs. Students generally begin with objections. They often argue that people would stop working diligently if they were guaranteed a job. We then discuss the assumption that underlies this statement: That people are lazy, do not want to contribute, and will try to get away with not working. Throughout the semester, we rethink this assumption by asking students to consider how work is not simply about completing X number of hours and Y number of tasks during the working day. Work is a social relation between members of a community, and a cornerstone of people's self-worth and identity. Therefore, unemployment is a condition whereby some people find themselves excluded and marginalized. The idea of humans as inherently lazy limits possibilities for transformative change because it validates and naturalizes the threat of unemployment as necessary. When we start denaturalizing those ideas, students start to engage with the "untested feasibility" (Freire 2017:76) of a JG-oriented society.

It is critical to see the initial discussion of the JG, and the other activities we describe below, as more than a transfer of information from teacher to students. The threat of unemployment shapes most people's lives, and imagining its absence is a transformative act. When students question their understanding of unemployment and grasp possibilities beyond it, they rethink how they relate to an important part of the world they live in and can begin to think of themselves as political actors who become co-creators of institutions such as the JG. Ideally, they come to think of the classroom as a workshop in which they develop blueprints for a future society. To provide critical elements for imagining JG institutions, we assign Tcherneva's *The Case for the Job Guarantee* (2020b), in addition to videos and interviews that are available online,[1] and Forstater (2013).

In the next sections, we introduce a series of activities we have found helpful to further stimulate students' understanding of existing JG proposals, and to encourage them to creatively think about aspects of its institutional design.

Case Studies: How Would the Job Guarantee Change People's Lives?

The first time we taught the JG, students struggled with imagining the elements of a sweeping new program in abstract terms—i.e., disconnected from actual people's lives. In the end-of-semester evaluations, students suggested that concrete examples of people who would benefit from the JG would have deepened their engagement earlier on in the semester. In response we developed two examples, which students can use to imagine how JG institutions would operate. Class discussion includes considering how race, gender, immigration status, sexuality, place, and age shape the range of actions the person discussed in the example can undertake and, therefore, the JG's potential to transform people's lives. We leave the following examples unspecified so students and educators can raise those questions in class.

Case Study 1: A currently employed single parent who has little to no other local job opportunities.

Their supervisor regularly asks them to stay longer, sometimes without extra pay, and they have repeatedly picked up their children late from school, drawing attention from teachers and principal. They lack the time to supervise homework and the children are "falling behind." When the students have a day off but the parent doesn't, the situation worsens. The parent has almost no quality time with their children. Paid slightly above the national minimum wage, the wage is insufficient to meet living expenses, and the household relies on extended family to supplement it. The parent has substantial experience working with computers, small engine and bicycle repair, in addition to cooking skills.

Students decode this situation from the perspective of a JG future. Decoding could include the following elements: A JG job could use existing skills in various contexts, including teaching computer or engine repair classes, or working in a bicycle co-op. In addition, JG workers who work for the school district could provide assistance to the children. All this in addition to better pay, benefits, vacation, and childcare, and improved working conditions for friends and family who work in the non-JG sector.

Case 2: A prison guard who works in a juvenile detention facility.

They feel that what they do is harmful and want to drop the job. It is, however, the only one available that offers good health insurance, which is critical because they have a condition that requires substantial medical attention. In addition, their parents urge them to stay on the job to save money to go to college. They have considerable experience working in gardens and kitchens.

Students decode the situation, contrasting today's society with a Job Guarantee future. A JG office could connect this worker with employment possibilities in the Parks and Recreation department. They could also offer extracurricular cooking courses for the school district. But perhaps most importantly, they could exchange work they find harmful for a contribution they see as useful.

Decoding these examples is an ideal pathway for students to assemble elements of a possible JG future for various people. For instance, students with a migrant background are often interested in how a JG could help migrants regardless of their status. Decoding also helps contrast the neoliberal gig economy—characterized by low pay, precarity, and few benefits—with a JG future, even if some of the rhetoric that surrounds the gig economy (such as "flexibility") might be similar at first sight. First, within a JG framework, a job is a right, which contrasts with the gig economy's hire-and-fire practices. Second, expanded benefits and decent pay contrast with meager compensation practices in the gig economy. Finally, democratically decided and administered public-purpose work contrasts with production through undemocratic platforms geared toward only those who can pay. Similarly, these cases are useful for contrasting a JG sector with neoliberal workfare, which requires people to work for unemployment benefits. The JG is voluntary, does not replace existing benefits such as

unemployment insurance, and connects individuals' skills to local needs.

This activity helps students imagine how a JG might unfold in actual people's lives. In the next activity, students critically address the pros and cons of a JG through in-class debates. These debates turned out to be an effective path for students to become articulate advocates of a JG or its informed and constructive critics.

Debating the Job Guarantee

After we first taught the Job Guarantee, a student suggested that it would be useful to hold student debates between those in favor and those critical of a JG. In response, we developed the following debate, set up as a contrast between the JG and another social policy (in this case, the Universal Basic Income). After brief and timed (about 2-3 minutes) opening statements from a member of each group, the debaters go back and forth. At the end, both groups address audience questions. The activity needs to be adapted depending on class size. In a class of thirty students, for instance, there were three "pro" and three "con" groups of five students each.

Experience suggests that holding two or more debates does not mean that they will be repetitive—rather, groups emphasize and critique different aspects of the topic. This is in part because, while the "pro" groups primarily draw from class material, the "con" groups research different criticisms of the JG. Also, students have found it helpful to participate both as debaters and as audience members because they realize that they are not alone in feeling their way through the material, and the process of understanding and transforming the world becomes a more collective, concrete, and potentially democratic process. At the same time, as they prepared for and participated in the debates, some students found it challenging to defend policies and programs they recently had begun to understand. In the process, they understood gaps in their knowledge, which we took as points of departure for deepening the understanding of the JG after the debate.

The debates are not merely about the pros and cons of a given program but about students learning to imagine themselves as leaders who creatively think about society as an open-ended game whose rules remain to be written. Generally, whatever their position about the JG at the end of the semester, thinking through it enabled students to begin understanding economic life as a set of changeable institutions, which in turn enabled them to challenge mystifying abstractions such as "the market."

In the final activity, we approach the JG from yet another angle: Students conduct interviews with residents and leaders to investigate how a Job Guarantee could change lives in the local community.

What We Can do for Each Other: Gauging Local Possibilities

Students begin by contacting local leaders and residents, and asking for permission to interview them to assess the potential for change through a JG. This project should come after several weeks of collective grappling with the JG through decoding situations, lectures, readings, and classroom debates. If this assignment is done too early, students will find that they attempt to explain the JG to others without sufficient preparation.

Students choose one of two tracks: Track 1 students interview leaders of non-profit institutions such as NGOs, local government agencies, or the school district. Track 2 students interview residents who would be eligible for a JG position. We split the class 50/50 between Tracks 1 and 2, but students can also work in groups and interview both a resident and local leader. The interviews focus on how JG workers could address unmet needs, including those needs people are not voicing in the current institutional conditions. Based on these interviews, students write up reports and present them in class (for guidelines and the interview protocol, see the Appendix).

As they interviewed individuals in an economically depressed area, several groups reported that it became easier for them to empathize with people who might need a JG. Hearing directly from community members who desperately need employment drove home the urgency of a public option for jobs, and some students who had voiced skepticism before the interview project now saw the JG in a more positive light. They came to see it as more than a policy but an opportunity for an entire community to reconstruct itself. For instance, students reported about a homemaker who runs a daycare service out of her home, who in a JG context would now be able to use her skills, but with regular working hours, better pay, and benefits. Taking the example of this person's life as a starting point, they then pointed out that the JG could stabilize the community as a whole.

In addition, the interview process has emancipatory effects because the interviewer-interviewee interaction considers all people, including those who are currently unemployed, as productive members of society not as deficient individuals in need of help. By design, the JG framing sees people as already-competent, and unemployed people as an asset not a burden (Kaboub 2012:307). Although we have not implemented this aspect, in a future class we will ask students to share the report they wrote based on their interview with the interviewee, and ask them for feedback, to which they will respond in a second report.

Through the interviews, students also identified potential obstacles to a successful and inclusive JG program. For example, one group of students said that their interviewee wanted to know more about how racial and gender discrimination would be dealt with by JG institutions. What kinds of recourse would people have if the local JG office operates in a discriminatory manner? Another group wondered how long it would take for their interviewee to find a job that would fit their skills. Such questions and concerns indicate that students started thinking of themselves as potential co-architects of large-scale programs, and that they came to see the JG as an open-ended project that requires ongoing vigilance about the oppressive patterns it is designed to combat.

Students also provided feedback about the interview project itself. In one class, students voiced the need for follow-up interviews: Since grappling with the JG is a transformative process for the interview partners just as it is for the students and the teacher, they stated that they would have liked to conduct a follow-up interview. We plan to include this suggestion in future iterations of the class, but we also take it as an indication that students value the three-way knowledge loop that emerges as they reflect upon unemployment with community members and teachers.

The three parties routinely swap roles: teachers become students within the broader community, community members teach, and students lead. For example, students reported that they learned from community leaders about past job programs not mentioned in class, such as the CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). They also deepened their knowledge about the lives, potential, and contributions of local community members. For us teachers, student reports made visible the interests and desires of the surrounding community, and thus deepened our understanding of how the JG could unfold as a place-based policy. In sum, distinct from empiricist data-gathering, this investigation generates knowledge and social relations that bear transformative potential.

In the next and final section, we address a common objection to the Job Guarantee framework.

But How Would We Pay for it?

The projects and activities discussed in the previous sections prepare students for a critical understanding of monetary institutions. This may sound like a surprising statement given that this article has so far focused on people and their contributions, not on cash and credit. But taking people and what they can do for each other as starting points can open up a set of questions about money and its transformative possibilities.

We ground the investigation of monetary institutions in an example taken from the current moment, characterized by an absence of a JG program, and by austerity as the default impulse of politicians and policymakers. Take the case of a child who receives occupational therapy through her school district. As local tax revenues decrease in a context of crisis, such services are often cut. This is a tragedy for everyone involved: In the case of occupational therapy, the child's well-being and development will suffer unless the family can pay out of pocket. For the now unemployed provider, it is also tragic: They might lose their sense of being a productive member of society and the meaning derived from helping others, all of which, in addition to the loss of income, will impact members of their household. Both in the child's and the provider's family, austerity has ripple effects. From the perspective of society as a whole, the investment in training someone who can help children is lost, for the time being, and the provider may even lose some of their skills during the period of unemployment.

As they decode this example, students begin grappling with a concrete-yet-general situation: Like the child, they might find themselves in a situation where their needs could

be met but are not. Like the occupational therapist, they might well have something precious to offer but there are no financing mechanisms that enable it. This is an example where needs and resources remain unchanged but politicians and policymakers are likely to cut ties between people (in this case, the child and the occupational therapist) by invoking financial constraints.

To begin problematizing their understanding of money, students articulate how they understand currency and credit. We invite students to do a quick write that addresses (1) their definition of money and (2) where they think money comes from. If students have difficulty formulating answers, they are invited to put together a response by using texts, including online resources, that resonate with their knowledge. The themes that emerge become starting points for a class discussion. Typically, students consider money from an individualistic standpoint centered on how they acquire and use it individually (to save, to exchange, to assess the value of a good or service). They might also mention money's imagined origins in barter ("individual actors invented it to facilitate exchanges between them once they found that barter had become too burdensome") or point to an origin story grounded in gold: "at first, everyone agreed on gold as a medium to make exchange easier, later, people substituted paper."

We then introduce a distinct understanding of money as a governance mechanism. To this end, we assign a short text by Desan (2017). Desan shows how money emerges in the relation between public authorities and populations. A government's desire to mobilize resources (for instance, to build infrastructure) leads it to create a class of tokens it wants a population to accept. To do so, it makes these tokens tax receivable. And because an authority has promised to accept them in payment of taxes, they become valuable to all those who owe taxes, and individuals start using it in private exchanges. Money, in this view, is not something pre-existing that needs to be collected. It needs to be spent by a government before it can be taxed. This view of money, which has become known as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) in recent years (Kelton 2020), shifts the emphasis away from financial constraints while emphasizing real resources and skills: To return to the example above, the question is whether or not a society has produced enough occupational therapists to be able to hire them without causing inflation (see, for instance, Kelton 2020:41-74 and Kelton 2017).

Students often ask: If the federal government can create money, why do we need to pay taxes? Public levies exist to make a government's money widely accepted. Governments impose taxes in order to create a demand for money: Because most inhabitants periodically have to pay taxes, and because almost everyone may incur fines and fees they have to discharge, a specific category of pay tokens becomes accepted within a given community. Taxes thus serve the purpose of making money accepted. People who are forced to pay taxes will have to offer their labor or goods and services to those who pay money. The government has money and provisions itself by buying what it needs from its people. In addition, governments use taxation to discourage behavior they might deem harmful,

such as polluting (Wray 1998) and to reduce socially unacceptable income and wealth inequalities.[2]

Desan (2017) calls the institutional choices that shape the creation and distribution of currency and credit "monetary design." A given monetary design empowers and enriches those authorized to create money, along with those it often reaches first in relation to those who are further removed from money creation processes (Desan 2017:126). Students—including the advanced economics majors who have attended our classes—are typically surprised when they learn about monetary design. Because it highlights the mechanism through which money enters circulation such a focus is distinct from discussions of distributive inequities. From this perspective, a JG would alter monetary design by guaranteeing access to money through work.

After this engagement with money, the class returns to the example of the occupational therapist and the student. If money is a governance mechanism to mobilize resources and connect people, it becomes difficult to invoke a "lack" as a reason for cutting links between people. Similarly, on a larger scale, the JG is no longer constrained by a "scarcity" of money—instead, it is a way of making a fuller, more democratic, and more inclusive use of the public power of money creation.

Conclusion

The JG lens is a transformative framework that challenges the dehumanizing idea that people can be superfluous, useless, a threat, or a burden. Even today, even before JG institutions have been established, it gives "the oppressed," as Freire referred to those who are dehumanized, practical tools to begin redefining themselves: They can articulate themselves as useful people equipped to do things for each other. If realized, the JG framework enables entire communities to democratize social relations while opening pathways for the abolition of a range of dehumanizing institutions and practices. Freire, and Fanon before him, referred to such transformative actions as humanization: they break in action, thought, and expression with dehumanizing practices, and simultaneously attempt to craft a new way of being in the world. People struggle for what Freire (2017:30) called "the right to be human."

The set of activities we presented in this article help students deepen their understanding of the Job Guarantee. Activities such as the interviews also create links between the teaching institution, students, and community members. In addition, the decoding activities, case studies, debates, and interviews help students grasp broader possibilities: What they had understood as fragmented realities to be fought in isolation (e.g., unemployment, underfunded schools, social isolation) become a series of interconnected problems that can be overcome as they participate in designing institutions. Students start thinking of collaboration and creation institutions as a habit, and they learn to take stock of what people can do for each other.[3]

Appendix: Interview Questions and Guidelines for Reports

Track 1 Interview Questions (for students who interview people in leadership positions)

1. Interviewers introduce themselves and the project. They clarify that it is a class project, that the material will not be used outside of the class, that they will not disclose the interview partner's identity, and that they will remove identifying information from their notes.

2. Interviewers discuss the purpose of this interview: To better understand possibilities/challenges for a Job Guarantee future in the local community.

3. Interviewers explain what the Job Guarantee is. Key points to cover: guaranteed unconditional employment, meant to provide additional workers, not meant to replace permanent staff, use idle skills for local needs, federally funded public-service employment. Good benefits, healthcare, childcare, 15$/hour. It is useful to share a short reading about the Job Guarantee with the interviewee before the interview, and use this reading as a starting point.

4. Please tell me about your work history. Was there a time when you could have used a Job Guarantee position?

5. Tell me about the key challenges local residents face (e.g., food, housing, education, jobs, drugs).

6. Which of these challenges does your organization address and how?

7. How could Job Guarantee workers help your organization address these challenges?

8. If other NGOs, educational and government institutions could request Job Guarantee workers, and guarantee jobs that fit their needs to all residents, how would the community change? If respondents don't address one of the following, follow up (1) for the workers? (2) for the organizations? (3) for those who benefit from the (now expanded) services of the organization?

9. Which challenges do you anticipate for workers, organizations, or the community at large were a Job Guarantee to be implemented?

10. Which thoughts about the Job Guarantee do you want to add?

11. Interviewer asks additional question(s) in case one occurred to them during the interview or if they need clarification.

12. Ask if the interviewee is available for a follow-up meeting. Explain that it is often useful to return to the same questions after the interviewee has had some time to consider them.

13. Thank the interviewee, let them know that you will write a report based on this interview, that you can share a copy, and are available for questions.

Track 2 Interview Questions (for students who interview residents)

1. Interviewers introduce themselves and the project. They clarify that it is a class project, that the material will not be used outside of the class, that they will not disclose the interview partner's identity, and that they will remove identifying information from their notes.

2. Interviewers discuss the purpose of this interview: To better understand possibilities/challenges for a Job Guarantee future in the local community.

3. Interviewers explain what the Job Guarantee is. Key points to cover: guaranteed unconditional employment, meant to provide additional workers, not meant to replace permanent staff, use idle skills for local needs, federally funded public-service employment. Good benefits, healthcare, childcare, 15$/hour. It is useful to share a short reading about the Job Guarantee with the interviewee before the interview, and use this reading as a starting point.

4. Please tell me about your work history. Was there a time when you could have used a Job Guarantee position?

5. If you could apply for a Job Guarantee position, which of your skills do you think might be useful to other residents?

6. Tell me about the support services local residents are most in need of. What could you (or other potential Job Guarantee workers) contribute to meet these needs?

7. [If currently employed in the private sector] What might motivate you to move from the private to the Job Guarantee sector? What might motivate others?

8. Which challenges do you anticipate for workers or the community at large were the Job Guarantee to be implemented?

9. Which thoughts about the Job Guarantee do you want to add?

10. Interviewer asks additional question(s) in case one occurred to them during the interview or if they need clarification.

11. Ask if the interviewee is available for a follow-up meeting. Explain that it is often useful to return to the same questions after the interviewee has had some time to consider them.

12. Thank the interviewee, let them know that you will write a report based on this interview, that you can share a copy, and are available for questions.

Guidelines for Writing the Report

1. Introduce the individual or organization, then address the following questions.

2. What did you learn about the local community and the challenges its members face, particularly those in disenfranchised groups?

3. Based on the data you collected, how would a Job Guarantee change community members' lives?

4. Would a JG help humanize society? If so, why? If not, why does it fall short?

5. How have the interviews changed your perspective on the Job Guarantee, especially (1) its feasibility and (2) its potential?

6. How would you improve the interview protocol?

Notes

1. See for instance, https://wecanhavenicethings.com/nice-things-we-can-have/federal-job-guarantee/.

2. See https://denison.edu/academics/economics/feature/12184 for a project in which Fadhel Kaboub teaches about monetary institutions through community service.

3. This article is inspired by the Modern Money Network's Job Guarantee Teach-In in 2019. Thanks to Sherry Reson, Scott Ferguson, Alexandra Moore, and Dirk Ehnts for reading and commenting on drafts. We would also like to thank a former student, Jessica Flores, for her suggestions about how to teach the Job Guarantee. The usual disclaimers apply.

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