

From: "James P. Crutchfield" <chaos@cse.ucdavis.edu>
Subject: [dynlearn] Violence against nonviolence
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To: Dynamics of Learning Group <dynlearn@lists.cse.ucdavis.edu>



Dear All,

Most of you have seen Friday's pepper-spraying incident on campus:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmJmmnMkuEM>

The first thing to say is that I apologize.

Pepper spraying peaceful, nonviolent protesters is inexcusable and deplorable, here and anywhere else in this country. That it happened in California, at UC, and at UCD is saddening. Permit me to give you my take.

This weekend many people are debating the facts and (il)logic of the incident. In time, a clearer picture may emerge.

The YouTube video speaks directly, however, short-circuiting any fact-finding task force.

My own reaction? Well, it is rather emotional. Moreover, I don't feel compelled to argue over details.

The police actions and administration authorization of force deeply anger me.

Concretely, I feel less safe on campus, around police, and have lost confidence in UCD leadership.

Yesterday, my thought was to let that anger die down, but I woke up this morning unconsolated.

As expected, more facts have surfaced:

<http://boingboing.net/2011/11/20/ucdeyewitness.html>.

More fodder for debate, but none provide an excuse.

Rewatching the video and rereading our Chancellor's Friday and Saturday emails, brought up feelings of the same intensity.

Why? I wondered.

The answer is pretty simple: The incident reflects on me professionally and personally.

You may feel similarly.

After a rather long time living a checkered relationship with large institutions, I am again inextricably part of one. UCD administration decisions and UCD's reputation speak for us here, whether we agree or not. The YouTube video now stands as public and permanent record that we pepper-spray students. This new reputation is made only worse by the fact that they were clearly nonviolent and expressing legitimate and broadly held grievances. What happened at UCD contradicts an educational mission that encourages innovation, debate, and constructive criticism. These---even and especially when inconvenient, costly, unsanitary, ...---are not to be suppressed, let alone with physical harm.

That's the professional part. What has taken me aback, though, is a deep-seated personal reaction.

My family has been in California for almost a century. I was born in San Francisco. Due its

unique culture California has played a dominant role in guiding modern social, political, scientific, and technical life across the globe.

A central part of this culture has been UC and California's commitment to access to world-class education.

No surprise, my family and I benefited tremendously.

An uncle received his degree in Geology from UCB in the 1950s. My father was trained at what is now UCSF. My brother graduated from UCD. And, I've been at UC for 40 years---first undergraduate at UCSD and at UCSC, graduate at UCSC, post-doc and research faculty at UCB, and now UCD for the last seven+ years.

UC means a lot to me and I try in my own modest way to repay that debt.

This history frames Friday's event for me.

As for the incident itself, I am not a stranger to the complicated issues of policing and protest.

On the one hand, a life-long friend of my father's was Chief of Police of San Diego. His son and I were best buddies in high school. I know from the inside the life of a police family---their difficulties, their humanity, and their dedication.

On the other, a cousin was hospitalized by a police beating that he received at UCB in the late '60s. This occurred during his last Spring before graduation. He was not protesting, he was walking between classes. He eventually healed, but never returned to complete his Bachelors.

That wasn't the last time police brutality affected my family. A Spring many years ago, while I was at UCB Physics, relatives came to visit. The shift from Winter weather had brought on the occasion and, also quite predictably as folks used to joke, protests. We dined at the Durant Hotel, a block south of campus. The restaurant is on the first floor, raised above the street level. We sat in a booth, with large windows looking out over the street. A police line appeared and began pushing protesters up Durant from Telegraph Avenue. As the crowd surged around the restaurant, another phalanx of riot-gear police appeared from a side street, pinching the crowd to move right in front of our view. Unexpectedly, the police line separated and a cop on a motorcycle drove through, jamming the kickstand down and jumping off his bike. He ran into the crowd of protesters, drawing his night stick. Then, down in front of us still seated with our dinners, he began striking one of them in the head, until blood covered the sidewalk. His goal accomplished, the fellow was down and not moving, he walked to his bike and rode his way back through the police line.

The injured protester was carried off. I looked for news to find out how he'd fared, but never found out.

The beating made us sick.

I've seen both sides. Protests and the use of physical force to suppress them are not new.

What's the answer to such complex situations---situations that different sides see differently and that lead to escalating antagonistic behavior?

In all the mess, one principle is simple: No one escalates such situations via the use of physical harm.

This simple principle was forgotten on Friday.

It fills me with regret.

We are seeing that circumstances are tense yet again.

It's not by chance that Friday's incident occurs in a larger setting: These are trying times.

Whether the social contract or the technical functioning of the markets, the fabric appears to be fraying. An older, fearful generation passes along dispiriting future prospects and much that teeters on instability. (The mechanistic reasons underlying these trends are addressed in <http://csc.ucdavis.edu/~cmg/compmech/pubs/focs.htm>.)

What happened Friday may affect you, too.
I'd be happy to discuss these issues further with you.

Jim

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