



teaching learning committee
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Pedagogy and Politics: Democracy in the Classroom

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Democracy in the classroom can mean many things. Here it means creating a learning environment in which students are participants, in which all positions are equally respected without necessarily being equally valued, and where the evaluation of varying positions takes place through critical, informed and knowledgeable dialogue. Additionally all participants in the dialogue should be willing to change or amend their points of view in light of new information and/or better and more persuasive arguments. This requires good listening skills, some ability to empathize or see things from another's point of view, and open-mindedness. The task of the instructor is threefold: (1) to bring relevant information and knowledge into the classroom as well as the tools by which students can acquire their own information, (2) to set the ground rules for mutually respectful dialogue, and (3) to provoke critical thinking among participants in the dialogue.

The idea of 'democracy in the classroom' can apply very generally to a broad range of subjects and courses with a variety of objectives across the knowledge-theory-praxis spectrum. It does not apply exclusively to courses with a more theoretical, abstract, or philosophical focus. Nor is it meant to be sufficient in itself to engage students in the discovery process of research and scholarship, as they might be either in courses with a more applied focus or those at the upper-level of undergraduate education. A 'democracy' model is simply one that provides the minimum conditions for collaborative intellectual engagement among students and dialogical engagement between students and teachers when these attributes are considered important to accomplishing the objectives of a particular course.

Everyone in the classroom, on both sides of the podium, arrives with a position. They speak to one another from a position. They challenge one another from, and to move from, that position. On a really good day, many of them will make an effort to see things from a position other than their own. It is always incumbent on the teacher to do so.

In a democratic classroom, positions matter. They matter because we need to be self-conscious of them, and we need to be willing to change them. One's position is grounded in one's identity,

but it is more. It is the sum of past experiences and past interpretations of experiences through which we uniquely view and interpret our engagement with the present.

By 'position' the sum of our perceptions, feelings, and interpretations of our life experiences "so far" and the way we bring these to bear on our efforts to make sense out of the world we live in, a world in which our own agency, our ability to act, is located. We do because we need to find useful ways of interpreting our current experiences, particularly those that confront us with choices. Our perceptions and feelings are in turn shaped by a complex network of human relationships that includes our families, friends, our own teachers, and as participants in civic organizations and communities of faith, for example. They are also shaped by our culture – those activities that produce and on which we draw social meaning. Most of us use a lot of shorthand to make sense out of our social world – generalizations, stereotypes, 'conventional wisdom' and various kinds of biases embedded in widely accepted elements of social identity, such as race, class, gender. And we bring a set of values about which we may, or may not be very reflective.

The question of how and whether politics influences pedagogy has to do with what the teacher does about the fact of his or her position. It is not, in other words, in my opinion a question of whether or not we have a position; it is a question of what we do about the inescapability of having one. Putting it in these terms also suggests that it is not only social scientists in general or political scientists in particular who have a position, though perhaps one's position may have greater significance in the pedagogy of the social sciences and humanities.

While the issue of positioning is important in a variety of academic classroom settings and not necessarily limited to the social sciences and humanities, it still has a particular relevance in those disciplines because their concern, their *raison d'être* is either the solving of human social problems or to provoke critical reflection on what it means to be human in all of his rich, variant, and complex historical, cultural, and social contexts. Most of us, in other words, whether in the natural sciences, social sciences, arts, or humanities, could benefit from being self-conscious about the question of position. It is not uniquely a political science or even social science, or even social science and humanities issue. I would be concerned about anyone in the authoritative position of the classroom instructor who is *not* self-conscious of her or his own position.

So an important element in creating a democratic environment in the classroom – an environment where all positions are treated with respect without assigning them equal value – is self-consciousness of one's position, and its corollary – the willingness to change it. What does it mean to say that 'a mind is like a parachute – it only works when it is open?' An open mind

means being willing to change one's position on an issue in light of new information, new knowledge, or a better argument. An open mind listens to others in this way – not by busying itself with constructing the argument to counter what is being said *as it is being said*, but by demonstrating a willingness to take others' points of view seriously and to treat them respectfully.

And in this, the teacher is a leader by example.

But the issue of democratizing the classroom is not quite that straightforward, especially in light of the fact that everyone who enters the classroom space brings a position with him or her. Is being self-conscious of our own position, constructing and maintaining a democratic classroom culture, and demonstrating our own open-mindedness enough? Do we have an obligation either to raise what we consider to be the unsettling issues, or conversely, to refrain from doing so because doing so will unduly influence students' points of view? And as I pointed out earlier, having equal respect for differing positions does not mean assessing them as having equal value. Aren't some ideas just *bad ideas*? Are there *always* two or more points of view?

The most obvious (and most frequently offered) example here is the Holocaust. Isn't Nazism or the reformist version of history known as "Holocaust denial" simply a *very bad idea*? Does making everything contestable include making something as patently offensive as the Holocaust the subject of a debate? And if so, where does one draw the line? Isn't racism in general a bad idea? Sexism? Isn't any ideology that diminishes human beings as human beings (as opposed to condemning individual human beings for their specific choices or actions) a bad idea? Who gets to draw the line? What sort of very bad idea could students be called on to evaluate in their role as citizens now or in the future?

Though few of us must confront something as starkly insidious as either Holocaust denial or arguments in support of Nazism, the discussion about whether and how to bring ideologically controversial topics into the classroom continues to generate controversies in both intellectual and civic discourse about the philosophy of public education. The most common issues around which these debates take place have to do with 'pluralizing' the classroom in support of cultural diversity and the perennial question of "educating for values" versus "value-free education." These topics are too important and vast to be either summarized or resolved here, but they should be noted.

The first is frequently encountered in when the classroom subject evokes questions like "whose history," or "whose culture" is being taught and when, as a consequence of attempts to pluralize education, those whose identities are embedded within the privileged versions of historical and

cultural narratives and representations lose the position of arbitrary privilege. Here the problem is very related to the question of position and those courses in which the objectives *include* exposing students to a variety of positions or perspectives on a subject – a course on international relations, Native American studies, or world history, for instance.

But why are such differences problematic for the democratic classroom? It is a problem (or potential problem) because there is of necessity an unevenness of power between the students and the teacher. Accomplishing our educational objectives requires, among other things, that we evaluate students, but the unevenness of power is also implicated by the fact that among other things, the teacher chooses the materials to be read, the content of assignments and the standards used to evaluate them, the topics to be covered – all of which involve the authoritative use of power. But where power is used it can also be misused and one question we ask ourselves is how and where to draw the line? One answer is that we can make a distinction based on the intent and ends for which power is used, between uses that serve to accomplish the objectives of the course and uses that serve to reward or punish students for taking particular positions or favoring a particular point of view. When students feel that the instructor understands or has drawn a clear line, they feel much more secure and open about expressing diverse points of view.

In the kinds of courses considered here – those where exposure to and critical thinking about a variety of perspectives or positions of political consequence are important to the accomplishment of course objectives, teachers often devise special means of creating and maintaining a democratic classroom environment. Some of the strategies used by who teach in such areas include:

- Finding ways of reiterating the idea that ethnocentrism is ubiquitous and has a both positive social functions such as creating and maintaining social cohesiveness as well as negative consequences such as inhibiting cross-cultural understanding or in the worst case, dehumanizing one another on the basis of cultural or identity differences;
- Using examples that illustrate both the positive functions and negative consequences from a variety of cases;
- Posing questions of intercultural misunderstanding and intolerance as pervasive, with concrete examples;

- Giving concrete examples of instances where overcoming intercultural intolerance has had positive outcomes
- Focusing on making questions of cross-cultural relations complex and variegated rather than reductionist and oversimplified
- Encouraging students to debate one another rather than the teacher; redirecting class discussion into student-student debates when possible rather than student-teacher debates (without presenting the teacher's position as uncontested, of course).

On the question of value-free education versus educating for values, my earlier comments lead me to conclude that a “value-free education” is neither desirable nor possible. Rather, the issues in this regard are (1) how the teacher’s own values influence what goes on in the classroom, and (2) how and whether students’ values are taken into account in the classroom.

The first can be handled in a variety of ways. Some teachers are more comfortable and successful with concealing their own values while provoking students to think through their own positions and the values that inform them more critically. I have also spoken to many teachers who have tried and given up this effort in favor of finding ways to “neutralize” the effects of bringing their own points of view into the classroom. Those who do the latter often cite the way that bringing in their own perspective enlivens classroom discussion, and brings the teacher into the discussion as a participant whose position is also contestable, enabling the teacher to engage students in the development of arguments that challenge the teacher as well as each other.

Some of the strategies they describe include:

- Making it clear to the students when they are imparting knowledge and when they are expressing opinions;
- Stepping away from the podium, which serves as a symbol of authority, when expressing an opinion;
- Formulating a written policy about “democracy in the classroom,” sometimes appearing in the syllabus;
- Taking the time during the course orientation session (usually the first class) to discuss the role of opinions in the classroom and to reassure students that diverse opinions are encouraged and valued.

However one addresses the issue, we should remember that all pedagogy takes place within an institutional setting and that the institution also has a responsibility to both protect the academic freedom that is the foundation of higher education, and assure that students are treated with respect in the classroom.

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Suggestions for further reading:

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