

Exercising Judgment in Teaching Politically-Charged Topics in the Classroom
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More on Academic Freedom & Opinions

1. You have both the right and the responsibility to determine course context. **The ideal mindset is that you have authority and it is your responsibility to exercise your authority with care and judgment.** Instructors do have power and legitimate authority; it is built into the structure of the university. Acknowledging the structural power and internalizing the sense of authority and self-confidence can help you to respond to student challenges and concerns in a way that is respectful and open to learning about the concerns of your students while still retaining authority.
2. You can intentionally structure your course to emphasize a distinction between facts and evidence on the one hand and interpretations of the meaning of the facts or their policy implications on the other. It also can be helpful explicitly to explain the distinction between descriptive facts (e.g. trends in the crime rate over time) and causal explanations (why crime fell), and how scientific research is relevant to causality even as there is more room for scientific dispute in understanding causes than in measuring descriptive facts.
3. Teach the course content the students signed up for and you described at the beginning of the term. Although brief digressions into personal issues can humanize you and improve the educational atmosphere, it is inappropriate to subject a captive audience to the self-indulgence of long digressions that are irrelevant to the content of the course.
4. If events lead you to feel that support for your students or your moral responsibility requires that you speak out about something, take care to do this thoughtfully and in a way that respects the needs of your students.

Campaigning, Lobbying, Religion

1. It is illegal to campaign, lobby, or advocate religion in the classroom and it is wise to avoid giving the appearance of any of these. If your course content involves analyzing elections, current issues, or religion, it is helpful to providing a clear statement of what you are doing and how it is germane to course content.
2. It is not illegal to discuss controversial topics, to provide facts relevant to elections or issues, or to express your opinions, although it is your professional ethical obligation to do your best to distinguish matters about which there is sociological evidence from ethical or moral values and to give students tools for thinking through their own positions as they weigh evidence and consider values. You can provide a model for this.
3. Students are not prohibited from giving their political opinions or even from campaigning, but letting discussions get too one-sided can be problematic.

Think about pedagogy.

1. Teaching difficult topics always involves overcoming resistance, whether it is mathphobia or learned helplessness for technical skills or students' prior beliefs about social issues.
2. Remember variability in students' background and experiences and think about teaching to diversity of prior knowledge, background experiences. Explicitly tell students (and yourself!!) that you know they are not all the same as each other. Remind

yourself that the class is not homogeneous and that a few outspoken students do not speak for the whole class.

3. Teaching students is more about helping them learn to think critically and less about trying to indoctrinate them or beat them into submission when they disagree. You are in charge, you are the one who decides what the right and wrong answers are for the purposes of your class, and we certainly hope they will come to have respect for evidence and logical reasoning, but you cannot actually control the thoughts of your students. Nor should you want to control their thoughts. Remember that influence and intellectual development take time. Students who resist information initially may often (but not always) shift their thinking over time if given the opportunity to digest new information and work out their own thoughts.

4. Teaching strategies that allow students to voice multiple perspectives on issues and to consider both/all sides of controversial issues promote learning.

5. Your ability to influence students' thinking is enhanced if you connect with and build on what they already think/know (or think they know). Everyone resists if their core identities are challenged.

6. Remember: The most common form of student resistance is disengagement.

Respect the human dignity of all students and insist that they respect each other's dignity.

1. Insist that you be treated with respect and that students treat each other with respect. Treat your students with respect, even when they have done something stupid or said something outrageous. Again, this is true in all classes, regardless of topic.

2. Avoid demeaning students for any reason, including but not limited to, political or social positions. Avoid demeaning categories of people for any reason.

3. Recognize that speech that does not seem demeaning to you may seem demeaning to others, so be prepared to acknowledge that a student might be offended by something you say. And remember that a student may not have meant to offend you or a fellow student.

4. Teach tools for managing disagreement and staying civil and respectful in the face of disagreement or unintended insults.

5. Practice responses for maintaining civility, dignity and an authoritative stance when you feel disrespected by a student. This can be especially difficult if there is flagrant disrespect, when it is important that you not respond in a way that could be actionable. You do not have to just swallow it, but lashing out can get you into trouble. If it is an insulting email, do not reply. If it is an insulting face-to-face interaction, or you find yourself getting upset, get out of it as quickly as possible saying as little as possible. "This conversation is over for now. We can talk more later." Even if you are upset, do your best to put on a front of retaining your sense of authority and self-control. And then report the interaction to your supervisor or chair or a colleague, do NOT just let it eat at you. There is a student code of conduct and you may be able to ask Student Affairs to intervene.

6. If you are worried about something "blowing up" in class, plan ahead for a response.

Perhaps: I would like everyone to take out a sheet of paper and first write your own personal opinions about what just happened in class. Then think about what concepts we have been studying might help to understand this conflict.