

Fair and Balanced to Death: Confronting the Cult of Neutrality in the Teacher Education Classroom

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Abstract

Contemporary conservative discourse has provided a different sort of challenge for the teacher educator. Teacher education students often mask their discomfort with class discussions and assignments that center on ethnicity, social class and gender by asserting the triple-threat values of neutrality, “individual responsibility” and “equal-time” viewpoints. These status-quo values are the yardstick for acceptability and “balance.” My job as a teacher-educator is to re-politicize these values and bring them out into the open in my foundations classes. This paper fuses teaching strategies with an analysis of student writings to examine not only how to recognize the many guises of neutrality, but how to confront and disarm it. Neutrality (and to a lesser degree centrism and irrationality) is a formidable obstacle for the leftist educator. Because it poses as the “official” discourse of teacher education, it must be faced head-on. Simply taking in student viewpoints from a position of objective detachment is not acceptable.

Introduction

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This paper fuses teaching strategies with an analysis of student writings to examine not only how to recognize the many guises of neutrality, but how to confront and disarm it. Neutrality (and to a lesser degree centrism and irrationality) is a formidable obstacle for the leftist educator. Because it poses as the “official” discourse of teacher education, it must be faced head-on. Simply taking in student viewpoints from a position of objective detachment is not acceptable.

My first task as a foundations teacher is to dispel the myth of neutrality. I strongly feel that unless I break through the defensive veneer of neutrality, nothing else we study in class will sink in. Because of my recent work in teacher education, I’ve come to realize that much groundwork has to be prepared before students are able to recognize and ultimately reject neutrality. This is especially pertinent in our current era, with professional and social pressures placed upon educators to adopt conservative policies and become part of the neoliberal agenda, aptly illustrated by Barajas (2004).

I was interested in seeing how the ideologies of neutrality, centrism, and irrationality played out in student work so I began collecting copies of response writings from my philosophic foundations class. I was also interested in what other teacher educators experienced when covering controversial material, so I located research articles that incorporated an analysis of student writings. The relatively new website, NoIndoctrination.org was a subject of curiosity on my part. This is a site where students can anonymously submit reports of “bias” they experienced in a college course. The schools’ names, course numbers and professors are identified in these posts. Although the site says it is non-partisan, the tone of the posts was overwhelmingly conservative. I was interested in comparing these posts to student writings to see if there were any common threads related to the themes of neutrality, centrism, and irrationality.

It is important to mention that my teaching situation might be different than that of other teacher educators in the United States. For one thing, I work in a program that grants a masters degree plus certification. Consequently, I do not teach “traditional aged” undergraduates. Most of my students are older, live independently, have families, work during the day, and are looking for a career change. The simple fact of having life experience under one’s belt might be why the expression of overtly

conservative views isn't as common as some of the teacher educators describe in their articles.

What is apparent, however, is the ideology of neutrality. As Valerio (2001) and Nast (1999) point out, just the mere mention of controversial issues like race or social class can lead to an instant reaction of defensiveness on the part of students. For teacher educators who have regularly experienced such defensiveness, this can be a double-whammy because we have to guard against anticipating the worst from our students and becoming defensive ourselves! It is easy to become leery of students who often see "maintaining order and stability as more important than transforming the status quo" (Titus, 1999, p.32).

We have to realize that when we critique social injustice in a centrist/rightist culture, the very act of doing so can translate into student suspicion, that we lack "objectivity," and can't be taken seriously because we have an "agenda." This is complicated when the teacher educator also happens to be a member of a minority group or female (Smith, 1999; Titus, 2000). As Chomsky (in Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995) pointed out in an interview in the *Harvard Educational Review*:

If you simply talk about the world in the accepted ways, that would not be called politics, that would be being reasonable. It becomes "ideological" or extremist when it deviates from the accepted patterns... If you repeat the clichés of the propaganda system, that's not ideological. On the other hand, if you question them, that's ideological and very strident or anti-American" (p.143).

Adding to the complication is the entrenched neoliberal ethos that "the customer is always right," where students have come to see the professor as providing a service that they pay for and being offended is not an option (Nast, 1999). And we can't forget the fact that "because these popular notions of authenticity, tradition, and nature offer a sense of identity, belonging, and normalcy, people often desire what is oppressive... and resist anti-oppressive change" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 67). These combined notions build student expectations of what "good" teaching is and what "good" teachers do.

The Problem of Centrism

“Fair and balanced” is big these days and, as usual, liberals are running scared. It is intriguing to me how the right has suddenly developed an interest in equity, particularly when it comes to issues of representation. To hear news personalities talk, one would think that good, old-fashioned American values are under imminent threat of extinction by a powerful leftist front that has taken over the country. Even National Public Radio is scrambling to find guests to fill a point/counterpoint format (not less than six months ago David Horowitz was on) and the newly founded Air America Radio was delighted that they shared similar views with guest Pat Buchanan! I suppose the sheer “shortage” of conservative viewpoints has captured the concern of liberal groups not wanting to seem biased, so they are doing their part to pitch in and help make things right--literally.

As educators, we need to be aware of the right becomes center phenomena because it redefines what our students (Democrats, Republicans, or Apathetics) think of as “common sense” (Apple, 2000). Rampton and Stauber (2004) explain how Republicans have adopted the strategy of including a variety of factions with competing interests into their party, and then packaging themselves as “moderate.” Democrats, on the other hand, have excluded the leftists within their ranks, joining with Republicans on most issues, particularly economic ones: “The pattern of conservatives pushing from the right versus Democrats moving toward the center has had the effect over time of steadily redefining the “center” further and further to the right” (p. 207).

In the right becomes center-ville of teacher education, we can see powerful hegemonic forces at work in the figure of Rod Paige, Secretary of Education. Couching standardized testing in the “equal opportunity” language of the civil rights movement, Paige manages to deflect criticism from both his self and Bush administration No Child Left Behind policies onto detractors he labels “whiners.” Because Paige and other neoconservatives in charge of educational policy within the U.S. have defined their values as common sense or even neutral and just, the implication is that any and all critics must have an “agenda.” The language of high-stakes testing, accountability and results seduces many liberals with its centrist disguise. In fact, Paige’s so-called “Texas miracle” turned out to be an egregious form

of institutional racism (dropouts were deliberately underreported so that the rates would take on miraculous proportions) requiring the whistle-blowing of a brave Houston assistant principal (Capellaro, 2004).

Teacher educators are often perplexed to find that the same students who describe themselves as “liberal” often hold contradictory conservative views when it comes to classroom practice. Many of these practices are labeled “common sense” or even “reality.” Students are quick to appeal to an almost universal sense of moderation, especially when we talk about directly confronting injustice. Yet the call for moderation does not seem to happen when it comes to the marketplace: there, the sky is the limit and we should dream big (or at least it is fruitless to try to stop what is happening).

The major problem with centrism is that it “denies the structural oppression at the core of U.S. society; it obscures this country’s long history of brutality and genocide; it lumps popular movements that fight oppression and supremacy with those that reinforce it” (Berlet & Lyons, n.d., para. 2). When students perceive U.S. society as being generally reasonable and any examination of injustice as extremist, public debate is stifled. The implication is that one should be grateful to even live in the U.S. as it is today; in other words, the “love it or leave it” mentality. Ross (2000) describes this mindset as “accepting the lines as drawn,” where “conceptions of the roles of teachers and students in schools and the conventional goals of education must remain unchallenged” (p. 50).

Stanley Fish (2004b) personifies the liberal/centrist viewpoint in higher education when he writes: “Marx famously said that our job is not to interpret the world, but to change it. In the academy, however, it is exactly the reverse: our job is not to change the world, but to interpret it” (para. 2). While he admits the impossibility of totally avoiding politicizing the curriculum, he feels that educators should “engage in politics appropriate to the enterprise they signed onto” (para. 6). In other words, don’t make waves. His final injunction is to “look to the practices in our own shop, narrowly conceived, before we set out to alter the entire world by forming moral character, or fashioning democratic citizens, or combating globalization, or embracing globalization, or anything else” (para. 12).

Graff's (2000) "balanced" approach as a teacher within the academy is to be a "Leninist one day and a Milton Friedmanite on the next, depending on my sense of the ideological tilt of the students" (p. 26). Objecting to Freire's pedagogy ("it generally doesn't work, though I would have serious problems with it even if it did"), Graff feels that if the left believes in its cause, it should "have faith that students will recognize these merits in the give and take of debate" (p. 27). His version of counter-advocacy is not to "muzzle or softpedal these convictions, but to open ourselves more publicly to the convictions of counter authorities" (p. 28). In other words, as teachers we should present *The Bell Curve* or *The End of Racism* as viable theories of educational psychology and sociology, just to test our mettle?

Fish's and Graff's views are troubling because they imply that there is an equal distribution of ideas and power. All the student has to do is make a choice, free of influence from the teacher. Leftist educators are therefore no better than fascists if they attempt to teach with conviction. I wonder if centrists are aware of the extensively funded and marketed agenda of neoconservatives and neoliberals (Barajas, 2004; Frank, 2004; Greider, 2003; Hightower, 2004; Hill, 2004; McClaren, et.al., 2002; Rampton & Stauber, 2004)? As part of the "lunatic fringe" of teacher education, my stepping back and embracing neutrality or equal-time viewpoints without commentary doesn't seem to be a viable option.

Centrism in Student Writings. In my nearly seven years working with teacher education students, I have noticed that the call for centrism can take many forms. Most commonly they are: a) all points are equally valid, b) you have to present all sides of an issue (usually without critique, so the student can "make up their own minds"), c) don't focus only on the negative, and d) if I don't experience it (namely oppression), then it doesn't exist.

In my students' writings, the notion of all points of view having an equal say is quite strong. When responding to the question of how to ensure that outside groups have limited coercive powers over schools within a democracy, one student wrote: "I think it is possible to achieve if everyone gets involved. This would mean including several different groups on the school boards to share in the development of what should be taught." Another student continues the theme: "These individuals should be taken from administrators, teachers, parents, politicians, religious leaders (from any

denomination that wants to be involved in public school content), and other community members.”

Closely related to universal validity, centrism’s mantra of fair and balanced requires that one present all sides to an issue, and, more importantly, that the teacher not interfere by asserting his/her views, which would disrupt the ideal centrist climate of the classroom. This was a common protest in the NoIndoctrination.org postings, as seen below:

The Souls of Black Folk and Black Boy were emphasized the most. These two books represent opinion and not factual history. If the professor had wanted to use first-person narrative in substantiating his account of history, then he should have provided both sides of issues (entry #203).

One of my students gave an example of how to limit coercion yet teach about war at the same time:

I feel that it is important to explain the sides of other countries, have the students understand that there are other perspectives and not everything we do is right. Once all the different perspectives have been presented, I feel it should be left up to the children to decide who was right, and hopefully see that many times it isn’t a black and white situation.

Here we find no room for an outright condemnation of war or other acts of national aggression in the name of capital.

The integration of contradictory beliefs is probably the greatest challenge to maintaining the veneer of “balance.” Goodburn & Ina (1994) describe an assignment for students to collaborate on a social issues research paper. The hopes were that they would challenge each other’s views and do a reflective essay about this process, in addition to presenting the research. What they found, however, was that students were more concerned with maintaining group harmony and consensus. In addition, by framing their research as “personal opinion” they were attempting to keep the teacher from evaluating their work, because how could one give a fair grade for a belief? One of the resulting research papers presented viewpoints that advocated both placing limits on and an extension of gay rights, with no author challenging another and all views presented as equally valid.

The curious phenomenon of finding the positive counterexample takes on the form of a quest for many students. My students often point out that my class can be depressing, but I typically reply that some issues are not subject to an upbeat “P.R.” campaign. Berube (2003) relates how one of his students complained that “there were no good white characters in the novel” they were studying (p. B7). He managed to confront the student by sending him an e-mail explaining that “we are not in the business of pursuing reductive identity-politics enterprises like looking for positive images in literature, regardless of what group images we might be talking about” (p. B7).

The demand for a positive example is closely related to the notion that all opinions are valid and that there is a level playing field in terms of power. We educators just have to play right. If a teacher decides to look at the minimum wage issue, for example, he/she is being overly negative, especially if there is a focus on the workers’ perspective (for a change). This implies that the employers’ perspective hardly gets any press, and the workers’ view is being unfairly privileged. This post from NoIndoctrination.org provides an insightful glimpse into how students view balance: “When she speaks of America, her tone of voice changes dramatically. She points out only the negatives, and tries to make us look worse than places where people are tortured and killed” (entry # 196).

Combating Centrism

In my philosophic foundations course, I have found that it is crucial to set the groundwork early on, never assuming that students have a familiarity with a classroom that seeks to interrupt centrism and its attendant values (Butterwick & Selman, 2003; Kumashiro, 2000; Valerio, 2001). Ignoring Ellesworth’s (1989) warning against using “rationalistic tools” like dialogue and reason (p. 313), we start the semester by looking at what discussion and dissent really mean.

To counteract the “with us or against us” climate of the times, I created a handout entitled *It’s Time for the Polarization Polka*. In it, I review on the first night of class the roles of dissent and critique in classroom dynamics, using a conversational prose. We also talk about how what appears neutral is actually a reinforcement of the status quo. For example, I mention in the handout how teachers who displayed flags up to

and after the Iraq invasion were “going with the flow,” yet teachers who put up peace signs or anti-war materials were “politicizing” the classroom. I pose the question, why is the first act not political and the second commonly considered as indoctrination?

I also feel it is essential that students break the habit of labeling a position as “___” bashing just because an author happens to analyze or question what is going on. The media has done an excellent job of making any sort of in-depth reporting as “picking on” the person under question. In philosophy, we have to move beyond the notion that Ivan Illich is “picking on” schools or that Carol Gilligan “picks on” men. The Fox News approach where polarization sets a future shouting match in motion has no place here.

In addition to the handout, students also receive a copy of Carol Trosset’s (1998) article about a study done at Grinnell College concerning student response to open discussion and critical thinking. We review the article’s findings, such as students not seeing discussion as useful unless consensus is reached or someone changes their viewpoint (pp. 44-45). The article also addresses the common fallacy of personal experience being the only source of legitimate knowledge. While students should be encouraged to share their experiences in the classroom, the notion that one’s own isolated situation trumps social justice issues needs to be questioned.

Another key finding of the Grinnell study was that students felt they had a right not to be challenged. One student commented on their survey that they had the right to “say what I believe and not have anyone tell me I’m wrong” (p. 47). Radical relativism, where everything becomes reduced to an “opinion” is another common misconception about what should happen in a discussion (p. 48). The fact that 84% of freshmen students chose the statement “it is important for the college community to make sure all of its members feel comfortable” over “people have to learn to deal with being uncomfortable” demonstrates the mindset we often face as educators (p. 49).

This was the first semester I used both the handout and the article. Because we dealt with these topics from the start, students seemed to feel more confident in participating in discussions, writing opinions down during group work, and challenging each other. We also had a fruitful conversation about how we had experienced open discussion in the past. Many students talked about negative

situations where the teacher, under the guise of setting up a point/counterpoint debate for “multiple viewpoints,” allowed a few dominant students to attack others, using “below the belt” language. This created a *Lord of the Flies* climate that, ironically enough, is the format most American news viewers prefer (News Audiences Increasingly Politicized, 2004)!

Because students are quite concerned about grades (despite my best efforts), I feel it is valuable to include a brief statement in my syllabus that ensures that quality of work, not one’s opinions, are what is being evaluated. I echo Valerio (2001) in that this is a way to assure students that while we might be engaging in some difficult topics with each other, grading based on “what I might want to hear” is entirely unethical. This does not mean, however, that I will not address something I might find troubling in their writings or what they say in class (Berube, 2003; Gibson, 2000, para. 5-7).

Irrationality as Perpetual Argument

Another feature of contemporary conservative discourse is the perpetual argument, where the idea is to not look at fact, but to adhere ever more tightly to irrationality. Apple (2000) describes the success of rightist ideology in convincing the public that progressives have invaded education. Then, figures like William Bennett, Alan Bloom, and E.D. Hirsch emerge on the scene to cut through the wilderness of such craziness, with a mission to bring “common sense” back to education. Ann Coulter provides a more public example of irrationality in action as she thanks her publisher for having the “courage” to print her book *Treason*, a work that attempts to undo McCarthy’s “unfair” reputation (Rabinowitz, 2003).

McClaren (2003) outlines how irrationality functions in the Bush foreign policy doctrine of pre-emptive strike, which is essentially endless war and a highly irrational act: “... its results can never be achievable... the means- attack by the most powerful military ever known- are no longer proportionate to the ends- eliminating evil doers” (p. 27).

In a similar vein, No Child Left Behind, with its goal of all students reading at a “proficient” level, is a statistical impossibility. The goals cannot be met- it is an irrational policy! Like perpetual war, No Child Left Behind promises a need for

perpetual remediation- “lifelong learning”- where workers can be “compelled to work at any job, at any age, and under any conditions that the employer saw fit” (McClaren, 2003, p. 27). Indeed, Bush’s answer to the problem of poverty is the retraining of workers for an “ownership” economy. Just who will own what (or whom) remains unclear.

Many classrooms feature a lone wolf- a pioneering sort who seeks to introduce and sustain the perpetual argument. Bolstered by irrationality, the lone wolf typically positions his or her self as spokesperson for the masses who are too intimidated to speak up, due to the intolerance and political correctness of leftists. This provides the perfect platform to then introduce conservative notions of presumed consensus about how things should be. Goodburn and Ina (1994) include an excerpt from a student-written assignment:

I was trying to be a voice for the thousands of heterosexuals on campus who are sick and tired of the university giving special treatment to these immoral people. This is how the majority of people feel about this issue, whether you accept it or not (para. 2).

Goodburn and Ina point out the interesting fact that this student positioned himself as representing a majority viewpoint, yet in class discussions he viewed himself as a lone dissenter, later remarking that, “while everyone seemed to be agreeing during discussions, I took it upon myself to stimulate and educate by giving a different viewpoint” (para.34). The instructors also noted how this student’s stance and comments served to intimidate the rest of the class.

The lone wolf persona is a problem for the teacher educator. As Berube (2003) explains,

If I asked John to cool it, then, he would undoubtedly feel silenced, and I would be in the position of validating what was perhaps, for him, a stifling liberal hegemony over classroom speech; if I failed to silence him, I would in effect be allowing him to dominate the class, thereby silencing the other students who’d taken the time to speak to me about the problem (p. B7).

Part of the difficulty in diffusing the ideology of the lone wolf is that it often includes an irrational form of reversal tactics based on co-opted leftist language. Fish (2004a) relates recent efforts by David Horowitz to use an “Academic Bill of Rights” to

ensure that enough professors with conservative viewpoints are hired on campus to promote “intellectual diversity” (para. 5). Fish talks with concern about other conservative proposals such as conducting intellectual diversity reviews and monitoring tenure decisions for political discrimination (para. 27).

Still another example of reversal tactics is played out in the science classroom. Entire articles are written concerning how to handle the delicate balance between teachers’ and students’ religious views and evolutionary biology, implying that religion has to be considered in the same disciplinary category as science, so as not to appear narrow minded or intolerant (Meadows & Doster, 2000). Rampton & Stauber (2004) describe D’Souza’s *The End of Racism* where he argues that Jim Crow laws were based on Christian paternalism and meant to protect blacks by segregating them from hostile citizens and sheilding them from tasks they weren’t capable of doing (p. 77)! In 2003, the unending coverage of corporate “pro-war” rallies (most with paltry attendance) for the Iraq invasion while large-scale protests worldwide received virtually no attention from the mainstream news networks were instances of classic reversal tactics at their finest!

These same themes play out in a corporate media that has an increasingly large audience. The Pew Research Center recently released a comprehensive survey related to news viewing habits and found that of all the cable news networks, Fox News has gained the most American viewers, up 25% in 2004 from 17% in 2000. Even in light of the heavily promoted misinformation leading to the Iraq invasion (i.e. links between Hussein and Al Qaeda, weapons of mass destruction, yellowcake uranium, etc.), Fox’s believability ratings have remained steady both overall and within partisan groups (News Audiences Increasingly Politicized, 2004)!

Adding to this polarization effect is the fact that fewer young people (those aged 18-24 years) regularly read a newspaper, preferring instead to be “news grazers” who patch together a series of headlines by watching cable news, logging onto the Internet and maybe checking out talk radio. Younger viewers are not engaged with hard news, and most Americans (55%) prefer seeing pictures or footage showing what happened vs. reading or hearing the facts about the same events (News Audiences Increasingly Politicized, 2004). Considering that both cable news and many commercial Internet sites are owned by major corporations who are also financial supporters of both

Republican and Democratic parties (the most popular internet news sites are AOL and Yahoo, according to the Pew survey), we have to wonder just what kind of information students are getting to begin with!

Irrationality in Student Writings. As soon as issues of social class take center stage in the teacher education classroom, students typically assert the marketplace ideology of “personal responsibility” and its twin sibling “choice.” As Apple & Whitty (2002) explain, “Unleashing the free market will be the solution. If the poor are still poor after this society is radically transformed around ‘the private’ then we’ll know that they got poor the old fashioned way; they earned it” (p. 74). Titus (2000) describes how an attempt to analyze poverty in terms of structural forces that create and sustain it often result in students continuing to blame poverty on individual failings. Differences in social class are attributed solely to hard work, with one’s wealth and possessions a measure of one’s industriousness, or at least the occasional “good fortune.”

The danger in this hyper-individualism is that any obligation to the collective good has gone out the window:

Our very idea of democracy has been altered so that democracy is no longer seen as a political concept, but an economic one. Democracy is reduced to stimulating the conditions of ‘free consumer choice’ in an unfettered market (Apple & Whitty, 2002, p. 74).

The tendency of students to “deny that social problems are fundamentally structural” (McLaren, Hill, Cole, & Rikowski, 2002, p. 278) is echoed in this

NoIndoctrination.org post:

The professor made you feel embarrassed if you were brought up on more than minimum wage and had more than a single mom to support your household. She further would automatically turn a deaf ear on any one that had a capitalist view on welfare or other government-funded programs. It was as if your opinions were completely negated because we weren’t 16 year olds with 3 kids from 3 different problems... All classroom discussion had the same moral: it is America’s fault that people are impoverished and they are therefore the victims. Those who work for the steady, middle-class paycheck are privileged to be able to work. I love being privileged and waking up at 5:30 a.m. every morning (entry #3).

The implication, of course, is that low-income people are personally irresponsible, immoral, and lazy (i.e. they don't hold "good" middle-class jobs like the poster does).

Another manifestation of individualism is "choice." On the surface, personal choice sounds like a democratic concept because it makes it seem as if individual volition creates freedom: all you have to do is choose. One of my students wrote, "... you can choose not to rob a bank, you can choose to study your texts. You always have a choice between good and evil; good and bad." Another explained, "The United States has social classes, but you have choices to leave the status of the social class if you choose to."

One student who was initially taken off guard by the writings of Illich, later decided to read some of his works and changed her views about schooling. At the time the following was written however, she was trying to integrate her beliefs about choice with the structural inequalities of society:

Illich, however, faults the school system, maintaining that schools mislead these people; he totally ignores the influence and impact of cultural values toward education on their children's successes... and with the widespread availability of student loans, the opportunities for post-secondary education... are an option for virtually every student. The operative here is, once again, choice.

Another variant of individualism is the notion that no one should generalize or talk about issues in societal terms.

Students discount any universality, often proclaiming that it is just one person's perspective... their tendency here is to focus on exceptions, particularly that of themselves and their own assuredness that they are not sexist (or racist...), claiming a personal exemption for themselves (Titus, 2000, p. 29).

The unwillingness to examine social groups makes it impossible to mobilize for change, a key problem with using postmodern philosophy to examine educational issues. Excerpts from two response writings by the same student illustrate this refusal to engage in any form of generalization. I was taken aback by the demand for me to show her how to adapt rather than how to change things:

Every person is different and an individual. If you were to treat them according to the information presented in the book, you would be stereotyping and perhaps treating the

person inappropriately.

There are problems and horrible injustices, but that is what happens in life... they [books] don't give us instructions on how to fix it [the world] or an acceptance of how things are.

Interrogating Irrationality.

Irrationality cannot be fought by conventional means. As the 2004 election demonstrated, even when presented with a crumbling economy, zero chances at ever having health care, troubled schools, outsourced jobs, and a phony oil war, a significant portion of the American population chose to go with another Bush term. Neither revealing facts nor hands-off pedagogy will do. Logic alone does not work nor does celebrating irony in postmodern fashion.

Oftentimes students are perplexed when I show skepticism at the notion of non-interference and the “turn them loose” variety of hands-on curricula. After all, they ask, isn't Dewey about active learning and student-centered classrooms? I feel it is important to explain to students that just because something is called “hands-on” it doesn't automatically make it oriented to social justice. As Spring (2005a) points out, Dewey's ideas have been watered down to the point that consensus, not critical thinking, is a primary goal. Self-selected learning is highly problematic, no matter its form.

Kumashiro (2000) points out that

repetition... is often a comforting process because it tells us that we are smart or good. In contrast, education (especially the process of learning something that tells us that the very ways in which we think and do things is not only wrong but also harmful) can be a very discomfoting process (p. 6).

Because education often means discomfort, the teacher has to step in and sometimes push students to a place they might not like to be. If I were to simply stand back and let students “make up their own minds” with zero input from myself or other classmates, what would prevent the reinforcement or repetition of irrationality or status-quo ideologies? This is a decidedly non-postmodern way to view the role of the teacher, but one I find necessary, especially considering where most students find the

so-called information needed to “arrive at their own conclusions” (i.e. corporate-owned cable news).

The postmodern approach of using non-interference or some phraseology such as “enjoying the silences” is not only irresponsible, it is dangerous. As Apple (2000) argues, unless educators honestly face powerful rightist tendencies in a tactical manner, we will not be able to build the counterhegemonic alliance necessary to confront the total marketization and rightward direction of education. Berube (2003) defends the necessity of his intervening, writing about a student in his post 9/11 literature class: “for all I know, John might be able to craft a lie in which he can deride African-American ambivalence about integration and defend Japanese-American internment camps without ever confronting anyone who disagrees with him” (p. B7). In short, I cannot afford to have students come to their own conclusions prematurely.

When students have a chance to approach a problem using reputable research sources, they are often surprised to discover that income inequality, for example, really does exist. Their resistance to this information tends to decline when they “happen upon” a fact or two about the stratification of our society, rather than my just presenting the information in a lecture, even if that lecture were of a point/counterpoint nature (Titus, 2000). This is different than total hands-off learning because I serve as a guide, not as a neutral observer.

One example of this guided discovery approach happened in a social issues course I taught last fall comprised of experienced classroom teachers. Instead of simply showing charts and graphs to make the usual points about income inequality, I had the students go to the real estate values section (which included school district information) of an internet search engine (www.yahoo.com), enter their home zip code and then compare the resulting demographic information to another zip code less than 20 miles away. The students were shocked to see large differences in figures like per-pupil spending, household income, house values, etc. They quickly noticed how high home prices correlated quite nicely with the “good schools” and that it isn’t just a matter of “choosing” or working hard enough to live in a certain neighborhood. Students soon realized that what was happening in the public schools amounted to

income segregation where families were literally priced out of certain school districts (Spring, 2003).

When doing methods such as this, I still think it is critical that we regroup as a class to talk about what just happened as well as share our reactions to the information. Short activities like the one mentioned above are best used as a lead-in to an informational lecture, reading, or group discussion. Even the most avid supporters of free market ideology in my class become quite concerned with the “unfairness” of school funding based on property taxes, or the fact that soft drink bottlers can tell school administrators how much pop they have to sell so their schools can receive much-needed revenue. In the face of readily available data like real estate values, they can see for themselves that the status quo doesn’t happen by “accident” and must be challenged.

I’m a big believer in group work, but with some interventions on my part. The typical small group scenario has the teacher distributing questions and telling the groups to appoint a “note-taker” in order to facilitate the process as they answer the questions. My past results using this method were watered-down, consensus-oriented brainstorm lists, no matter the level of controversy or the openness of the questions. I soon realized that the topic and questions weren’t the problem, it was the expectations and methods of the group work to begin with.

One simple thing I now require is that each person in the group write their own notes as they go over the discussion questions. This way, there is a conscious understanding that both group and individual are important, and that consensus isn’t the goal. When a group only tries to reach consensus, often important issues go unexplored, for fear of rocking the boat. Students end up hiding behind their silence- and sometimes irrationality- as audience members. The missed opportunity to challenge each other’s opinions can lead to the kind of resentment that teachers never saw coming (Butterwick & Selman, 2003).

As Valerio (2001) asserts, “the classroom is not a safe place” (p. 24). Students have to realize that one’s opinions do not exist within their own protected sphere. While they might become used to the teacher asking probing questions, it is a lot riskier for them to do the same with each other. After changing the expectations for group work, I

observed (from a distance) several small groups in progress where individual group members began to challenge each other's statements. Because they could use their individual group notes rather than generating a consensus list, they felt more confident asking each other to clarify their position on an issue.

Neutrality as Hegemony

Neutrality is a powerful ideological tool that is used not only within the classroom, but in society at large. It forms our sense of "reality," often in the guise of common sense. The irony of neutrality, especially in a neoliberal vein, is that it is not at all "amoral," but espouses a particular kind of morality, what Apple (2000) describes as a "thin morality" of individualism (p. 236). Freire (1998) takes this analysis one step further, arguing that the forces of neutrality (which scaffold a neoliberal agenda) are not "destiny" but "immorality" (p. 93).

Spring (2005b) outlines the functioning of neutral knowledge and how it supports the textbook and test publishing industries. Neutrality creates an aura of legitimacy, as when government officials report test scores in local newspapers (as opposed to providing information on the context of learning). Even if the public has little idea of what these scores actually mean, "everyone concerned must act as though there really was such a uniform body of knowledge" (p. 187). Educators, the public, government and even students are playing out what McMurtry (2001) describes as "the big lie," only this time substituting "benchmarks" for "war against terror."

As Ross (2000) explains, the ideology of neutrality serves as a way of creating a passive, or spectator-oriented, citizenry. The ultimate aim of neutrality discourse, particularly in social studies curriculum, is to keep the status-quo intact. If the electorate, for example, decides to turn out (particularly in African-American precincts), the media responds by holding its breath, as if the limits of democracy have been exceeded, or there exists the omnipresent threat of "mob rule." When citizens choose to act outside of the electoral process (as in the Seattle protests), then "we have not democracy, but a 'crisis of democracy'" (p. 55). The neutral social studies curriculum is "constructed to ensure that the population remains passive, ignorant, and apathetic" (p. 56).

Working through neutrality, the status-quo curriculum indicates that there is a sustained dichotomy between simply relating facts and reality itself. As Shor and Freire (1987) point out, “the school command of words only wants students to describe things but not to understand them”(p. 135). The very act of educators taking students beyond the overwhelmingly superficial quality of official school curriculum is a direct threat to the dominant class (Hill, 2004). Notice how even the term “critical thinking” has been reduced to thinking more efficiently in the service of business and industry:

On the one hand capital requires educated and flexible Workers, but on the other hand it cannot countenance Workers thinking fundamental critique for themselves Or coming across it in schools, vocational education or Universities. So free thinking, and oppositional thinking, Has been chopped, curtailed, circumscribed (para. 59).

Any Franklin Covey store at the local mall can sell you an array of posters with upbeat messages that hint at confined rebellion, like “think outside the box.” The best way to stop a dangerous idea is to co-opt and market it.

Another way neutrality operates is illustrated by how controversial information is handled. Zinn (2003) discusses the tendency of historians to downplay atrocities such as U.S. imperial actions, for fear of being “biased” and “thinking out of context.” Describing how a particular historian used the term “genocide” to talk about Columbus, Zinn rightly points out that the historian “mentions the truth quickly and gets on to other things more important to him” (p. 8). The message we give to students by introducing racism or worker exploitation with the words “on the one hand... ” suggests that while these things are reprehensible, we should move along and “get over it,” or worse yet, “there are two sides to every story.”

Neutrality in Student Writings. It is quite common for teacher education students, when they encounter controversial topics in their coursework, to bring up the issue of “relevance” (Nast, 1999; Titus, 2000) Kumashiro (2000) describes how his students had no problem with learning about different cultures under the touristy guise of multiculturalism, but they did not want to learn about their own privileges in working towards an anti-racist pedagogy. Their job as future educators would be to teach students academics, not disrupt racism. One of my own students had a negative

reaction to a class reading about anti-racist pedagogy, and brought the issue of relevance to her response writing:

The information I learned in this book was not helpful. I don't think I will use any of it when dealing with kids. The best way to learn to deal with kids is to go out and do it... I don't know why we have to make life so complicated by breaking down groups and analyzing how to react and think about them... I think people forget that we are all human beings and need to be loved, not studied.

Students strongly feel that the classroom teacher should be a neutral presence. It is important to mention that the word "bias" can have different meanings to students. For some, bias means intolerance while for others it means the expression of any viewpoint other than their own. When educators do choose to critique dominant ideologies with a sense of conviction, students often report that the teacher didn't allow for disagreement, whether this was the case or not (Titus, 2000)! Indeed, several NoIndoctrination.org posts espouse this conspiratorial position:

It is totally wrong for her to tell us her opinion in a way that makes it seem like it's fact. It is totally her opinion and she plays it off as being the right and logical view. It's like anyone who disagrees with her is not critically thinking like she is. The way she does it is really well done. She doesn't seem like she was stating her opinion, but she gives one side of the story and then tries to tie her opinion in a seemingly clean way to the lecture. It's horrible (entry #202).

When my own students grapple with the impossibility of being a neutral teacher, their writings often reflect an imagined liberal ideal. Some feel that if teachers were neutral, then the effects of students being negatively coerced by school could be reduced. This view brings an almost affirmative action flair to the table:

I think it's good that everyone is taught the same curriculum in schools so everyone has the same chance to be successful or to choose what path they should take, not have it chosen for them or tracked into a certain path."

Another student felt that if a teacher could not maintain neutrality, they could be "aware of his or her coercive powers but practice the democratic principle of allowing everyone who wanted to have a say in class discussion and sometimes even in class content." This echoes Yob's (1994) assertion that one can avoid bias if one also includes the values of "fairness, tolerance, honesty, and objectivity" (p. 235).

The primacy of personal experience is hard to confront in the classroom. Titus (2000) relates that “Both males and females angrily resent any suggestion that their perception of the world is incomplete or that their own individualistic experience is not sufficient to nullify a social pattern” (p. 25). Postmodern feminists have made much progress with the phrase “the personal is political,” so much so that students come to think that if they haven’t experienced oppression, then it must not exist!

One of the most troubling expressions of this theme was from a student of mine who wrote, “There are problems and horrible injustices, but that is what happens in life. It doesn’t make these things right or wrong, they just are and they just happen. And people have to deal with them.” When a student isn’t able to identify hegemonic practice, they often invalidate or even try to rationalize what they see around them, in an attempt to adapt to the situation.

Conclusion-Starting With the Teacher

Freire’s (1998) stance against neutrality is quite clear:

I cannot be a teacher if I do not perceive with ever greater clarity that my practice demands of me a definition about where I stand. A break with what is not right ethically. I must choose between one thing and another thing. I cannot be a teacher and be in favor of everyone and everything (p. 93).

Teaching involves the risk of a certain amount of openness (Smith, 1999). Teacher openness can become an instructional method itself, and a particularly useful one for building “counterhegemonic common sense” (Apple, 2000, p. 226). Part of the problem of teaching authentically is that teachers often desire to see their students embrace the same philosophies and approaches as they themselves advocate (Liston, 2000; Kumashiro, 2000; Smith, 1999). Though written from a postmodern stance, Liston (2000) hits the nail on the head when he states that teachers “want them [students] to love what we find so alluring” (p. 74). Indeed, it can be a difficult moment bordering on despair when we realize that students have rejected a pedagogy centered on social justice.

Students are keenly interested in teachers having a viewpoint of their own (or at least they maintain interest until this viewpoint contradicts their own held views!). As addressed earlier, one of the problems of teaching is how, as an educator, to handle

revealing one's views? Concerning the question to reveal or not reveal, one student in my philosophic foundations course wrote in his individual group work notes: "Once, a history teacher of mine stressed discussion with the purpose of students discovering 'truth' by themselves not being told what truth is. I liked the discussions, but remember wanting to know what the teacher thought was right/wrong."

Admittedly, I'm not as comfortable with the day-one-here-I-am-so-deal-with-it mode of introducing my position on a topic. I prefer a more subtle approach, revealing my viewpoints (typically in the form of probing questions or related commentary during lecture) in a process-oriented manner, but will not hesitate to answer student questions if they emerge spontaneously. I also want students to see the process I used to come to the conclusions that I reached. I didn't just pull these ideas from the air, so I try to make my answers as detailed as possible, but in a respectful manner. If controversial issues are brought up and the teacher goes beyond the sterile point/counterpoint format, students will end up discovering the teacher's position rather quickly.

The danger of revealing one's opinion without critical commentary is that students can interpret the reveal in either of these ways; that the world cannot change (i.e. if I express a cynical opinion without explaining the context) or that we have reached the pinnacle of society as we know it (i.e. that it's the best we can do, be grateful, others are worse off, etc.). While I tried to introduce readings and examples of ordinary people fighting injustice, I wasn't sure that the message was sinking in. Something more direct needed to happen.

This semester I decided to try to first actively address neutrality in an activity I called "mirrors." To introduce this activity, I created and reviewed a handout that explained the impossibility of neutrality on two fronts. First, since a teacher could not possibly address all views within the classroom, one could not be neutral, because one had to make a conscious decision what to edit out for the sake of time. Second, even if a teacher decides to not teach anything controversial, he or she is still violating neutrality because they are consciously deciding to leave certain topics out. All of my students could agree to these points.

I went on to explain that our task as teachers now becomes one of refusing to hide behind the myth of neutrality and this only occurs when we begin to take a stand. For

example, students often like to say things such as “we need to focus on the basics” or “we just don’t have the time for multiculturalism.” What do these statements really mean? Through this activity I argued that teachers have to state a reason why they don’t approve of teaching controversial subjects rather than retreating behind the safety of neutrality. The same students who talk glowingly about freedom of speech are the first ones to become offended when they hear of a teacher or pupil who refuses to say the Pledge. I want them to take the risk and express why they are offended rather than assuming that the Pledge is apolitical but the refusal is not.

After introducing the activity, I had the students circle from a list of deliberately value-laden statements I created on the last two pages of the handout. I explained that they could change or add words or even create their own statements, but the key was to start somewhere. After everyone circled their statements, I had each student pick up a mirror and, in unison, they recited their statements at their reflection. Needless to say this was difficult for them to do and rather strange to witness!

The final stage of the activity involved them finding four people to share their statements with. I introduced a challenge in that two of the four had to be people they felt held the most polar opposite views from themselves. The other two could be anyone they happened to find. When we regrouped after twenty five minutes, their responses were quite insightful. One conservative student remarked that she thought she held rock-solid assumptions about education, yet upon talking to others, she took a step back and looked at things she had not yet taken into consideration. She stated that the process of dialoguing with others was more effective in causing her to rethink her views.

All of the students were initially nervous about taking the risk and reading such value-laden statements to each other, not knowing what the response would be. But all agreed that once they took the plunge and refused neutrality, it became easier to explain their position and begin to formulate their own philosophies of education. There were several instances of more liberal students finding they held several notions about education in common with more conservative ones. By getting the hindering presence of neutrality out of the way, at least for an hour, we could begin to get down to the business of dialogue. The other strength of this activity was that students could

discover contradictions as they read their statements out loud and others would catch them. Now we have the opposite of neutrality: the demand to make a choice.

While this activity was a success, I still realize that there is a long way to go. The more difficult task is creating an alternative vision together with students, one that does not revolve around capitalism or markets. Just getting students to become aware of how economic issues inform education is a certain kind of victory but I become frustrated with the realization of being perpetually stuck in the “awareness groove.” Confronting neutrality, while a worthwhile start, has to lead to something more or else in the face of no viable alternatives, retreat becomes inevitable.

Notes

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