

Maintaining Civility and Academic Freedom in Divisive Times

Instructors at colleges and universities world-wide are facing the challenge of teaching students who will in some way be affected by the consequences of war. In the weeks and (possibly) months to come, students will likely bring to the classroom their feelings of anxiety, worry, anger, or fear. What's more, interactions among students with widely divergent backgrounds, experiences, and opinions will assuredly become more volatile, both inside and outside the classroom. Given these factors, it is perhaps more important than ever to actively foster an environment of civility in the classroom, to ensure not only personal well-being and safety but academic freedom as well.

Academic freedom, the ability to pursue and discuss ideas without fear of censorship, repression, or recrimination, is no more relevant than at the university, where such freedom functions as a bedrock principle. In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill provided a concise and eloquent argument for the protection of minority opinions and the free exchange of ideas. He famously said, "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind." He gave several reasons for this, among them the ultimately fallible nature of ideas; the potential for silenced opinions to contain partial truths; and the importance of understanding the principles behind opinions, rather than blindly accept propositions as true.

Mill's justification for protecting intellectual freedom was utilitarian in nature. That is, the protection of these individual rights was seen as useful insofar as it produced a progressive society capable of generating greater knowledge and social welfare. But the freedom to voice one's opinions, and perhaps more importantly to have one's voice truly heard, can be justified from the point of view of moral freedom as well. For example, Immanuel Kant believed that all persons, as fundamentally equal, should be accorded respect and dignity; this entailed (in part) assuming that others are moral actors who know what is best for themselves. Accordingly, ethical action for Kant required not only that we allow others to express their beliefs, but also that we refrain from second-guessing their claims or taking them to be powerless

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President McCormick: "Dissent and Dignity"

In a message to the Rutgers community dated March 11, President McCormick called for maintaining the compatibility between "dissent and dignity." "Whatever the days ahead may hold, Rutgers University, with its long and proud history of encouraging discourse on controversial issues, must be a model of debate, dialogue, and education. This is a highly appropriate and powerful role for our institution. We must guarantee the freedom of all to express their beliefs and for each voice to be heard. There can be no shouting down of expression, no denial of debate by a blanket of noise or actions that suffocate our individual and collective rights.... At the same time, we at Rutgers must ensure that freedom of expression is not used to incite hatreds and demonize individuals and groups... A university is a place where the dignity of each individual must be affirmed by public actions that demonstrate tolerance and openness."

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Leading Discussions...

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victims. This principle of open and non-judgmental dialogue undergirded Kant's vision of a truly free, moral community.

All of this is to suggest that the free exchange of ideas is an ideal worthy of protection, even if those coming to the table will never agree. At the same time, if intellectual freedom is to be maintained, it is essential that we foster a supportive environment, where no one feels they will be dismissed, put down, or re-criminated against for their opinions. So what are some things college instructors can do protect academic freedom while maintaining an environment of tolerance and civility in the classroom?

First, if you sense that learning is being hampered by underlying tensions, it is probably a good idea to devote a few minutes of class time to covering the ground rules for civil classroom conduct. "Each member of this community is expected to be sufficiently tolerant of others so that all students are free to pursue their goals in an open environment, able to participate in the free exchange of ideas, and able to share equally in the

benefits of our educational opportunities...Free speech and the open discussion of ideas are an integral part of the university community and are fully encouraged, but acts that restrict the rights and opportunities of others through violence, intimidation, the destruction of property, or verbal assault, even if communicative in nature, are not protected speech and are to be condemned." (From the University policy against verbal assault, defamation, and harassment: <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~polcomp/gsnb.shtml>.)

If intolerance or incivility is occurring in a discussion setting, remind your students of the following: The purpose of a discussion is to share, challenge, and build on each other's ideas, not to "win" an argument; everyone should have the chance to speak, even if their opinions are unpopular; discussion benefits when participants challenge their own assumptions and entertain all perspectives; discussants can be critical of ideas without being critical of people; and finally, all members of the class should be treated with respect, so that at the end of the discussion, they should be on as friendly terms with each other as they were before.

It should go without saying that in no case should a classroom disagreement result in threats, personal attacks, or an overall feeling of insecurity. Unfortunately, in especially divisive times when

students are likely to voice opinions based on deeply held political, religious, cultural, or ethical beliefs, conversations can quickly and easily deteriorate into heated personal conflicts. The first line of defense against this tendency is the instructor's attitude: a clearly communicated intolerance for improper behavior coupled with a willingness to entertain any constructive idea will go a long way. You may also wish to actively break down stereotypes and misguided generalizations in order to head off attacks fueled by religious, ethnic, or racial prejudices. If all of this fails, however, and you feel that the safety of any of your students is at issue, do not hesitate to contact the professor in charge of the course, your department chair, or your dean for support and guidance.

Finally, if you plan to hold a discussion specifically about the war, make sure you, as the instructor and discussion leader, are well-informed about the issues. (Likewise, encourage your students to stay informed and to avoid speculation.) Make it clear that everyone will have a chance to speak if they wish, that no one will be persecuted for their beliefs, and that what they say will stay within the classroom. And remember, don't feel compelled to hold this discussion if your own beliefs and emotions are so strong that a productive discussion on the topic becomes impossible. For further guidance in leading discussions on the war with Iraq, refer to the TA Project website: taproject.rutgers.edu.

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Critical Thinking Series, Part III: Teaching Critical Thinking through Better Questions

Learning to think critically is a decidedly active process, that is, something you can learn only by doing. The job of the instructor in teaching critical thinking, then, is not so much to convey this skill to your students, as through a lecture, but to create a series of exercises for your students that will expand their cognitive abilities.

Experts disagree as to the best vehicles for teaching critical thinking, and arguments can be made that it is best taught through writing assignments, class discussions, group exercises, or problem-solving activities. But one thing that is generally agreed upon is the importance of questions. A student's answer will only be as good as the question asked by the instructor; we've all heard the saying, "ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer!" All too often we think relatively little about what we ask of our students and why, as well as how we go about asking it.

Recall Bloom's taxonomy of higher thinking, which suggests that knowledge (recall), comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are a set of progressively learned cognitive skills. Each of these cognitive activities corresponds with a distinctive line of questioning, as seen in the following examples. Questions that begin "who," "where," or "what," generally ask students to *recall* basic information; this is the lowest and

probably most common line of inquiry. Questions that begin with explain, interpret, or paraphrase ask students to demonstrate *comprehension* by putting ideas in their own words. To successfully answer a "solve" or "apply" question, students need to have enough facility with the information to use it independently.

Moving up from *application* to *analysis*, if you ask your students to distinguish between different ideas, "compare and contrast," or demonstrate, even greater skill is required in interrelating two or more sets of applied knowledge. Next, *synthesis* requires students to put information together creatively, as in questions that ask students to design, develop, or formulate something new. Finally, a prompt such as "justify" requires students to *evaluate* evidence, ideas, or arguments, an activity that incorporates many of the lower levels of cognition and that can be achieved only once other skills have been learned.

In the general design of your course, ask yourself the following: Are the kinds of questions you are asking appropriate to the level of the course? Why? What types of cognition does your course require? Are you asking your students to perform increasingly complex tasks once they've mastered the basics?

In designing specific tests

and assignments, think carefully about the levels of analysis that you are requiring of your students. A good test should require various cognitive skills, but should be geared appropriately for the course. Are you testing them with synthesis questions before they've mastered comprehension? Conversely, do all of your questions aim at recall, with little or no higher thinking required? Or, consider distributing a higher thinking schema, such as Bloom's taxonomy, and then ask your students to write questions that call on each level of cognitive ability. Link this activity to making them more aware of the differences between activities such as observing, fact-gathering, making inferences and assumptions, forming (reasoned) opinions, making arguments, and performing analysis.

There are many good formats for teaching critical thinking, but one element stays the same: students' cognitive skills, as reflected by the types of answers they are able to give, will only be as good as the questions they are asked.

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TAP Calendar

April 2	12:00 - 1:30 pm	Interviewing Skills in Academic Settings	Busch#
April 8	12:00 - 1:00 pm	Interviewing Skills for Corporate and Academic Settings	Busch#

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