

Taking Sides in the Classroom

By Timothy G. Hill

I called a student's remark un-American last week. It was current-events time in my introductory American-government class, and he brought up the controversy over the so-called "Ground Zero mosque." That is a topic about which I believe there is only one morally defensible position. The student's morality, unfortunately, pointed in the other direction. So after explaining the various reasons why I couldn't see the protests against the mosque as motivated at their base by anything other than bigotry, I averred that such expressions were, well, you know.

Here is the thing: I never do that.

In nine years of teaching, I have always obeyed a strict policy of checking my own political views at the door. My philosophy has long been that students should just be told the facts; it is up to them to formulate whatever conclusions they wish to reach on the basis of those facts. And while I believe my own political positions are based on the firmest data and logic (don't we all?), I never assume that my conclusions must be everyone's.

Moreover, ever mindful of the power differential between professor and student, I have always viewed even discussing my own beliefs in the classroom as out of bounds. In my own college career, my academic adviser was a government professor whom I liked a great deal. Nevertheless, simply knowing he was a Republican—an affiliation, I should point out, that he never evangelized in the classroom—made me hesitant to critique his party in tests and papers. That fear was very likely misplaced. But in my own teaching, I have opted to avoid the matter entirely by simply remaining outside of politics when I walk through the classroom door.

And yet in the past few years, I've found myself re-evaluating that position, culminating in last week's little outburst. Specifically, what I keep running up against is this question: What is a professor supposed to do when the facts themselves are "biased"—that is, when a controversy exists in society, but the evidence falls overwhelmingly toward a single position? And where are the precise boundaries between fact, which a professor may legitimately discuss in terms of right and wrong, and opinion, which does not lend itself to such binary discussion?

Much has been written lamenting how our media and political environment allow individuals to pick their own facts—but, of course, that isn't really true. A large portion of the public may be convinced that health-care legislation will lead to "death panels," or that the president is secretly a radical Muslim, but the popularity of such beliefs does not make them true. And yet denouncing such notions as the fantasies they are risks undoing a professor's hard-earned reputation as an evenhanded broker of the facts.

That's not a matter only for those of us who teach in hot-button fields such as politics and religion. Skepticism abounds in this country regarding topics on which experts have reached an evidence-based consensus, such as climate change, vaccine safety, and the religious views of the Founding Fathers. In every case, those are matters of scientific or historical record, and in every case, attempts to teach our best understanding of the facts can be construed by misinformed partisans as an attempt to ram an ideology—usually liberal—down students' throats.

No doubt this column will seem like useless hand-wringing to some. I have known plenty of professors who have no problem informing their students of the "correct" answers even to legitimate controversies. Others view the classroom as the intellectual equivalent of a gladiatorial arena, with the instructor in the role of the lion. In that view, part of the educational process is to learn how to push back against the professor and defend one's views, even though the attacks come from on high. I understand those approaches, and I envy their adherents' level of moral certainty. But as an introvert, I also sympathize with the students who find such environments paralyzing rather than challenging.

So I keep my own views to myself, which leaves me continually evaluating how to deal with situations in which a set of facts is generally accepted among the experts but is met with doubt in the larger society.

My conclusion is that all points of view are not, in fact, created equal. One of my central obligations as an instructor is to teach students how to separate the wheat of evidence-based claims from the chaff of those that lack substance. Whatever it may do to my reputation for evenhandedness, then, I cannot pretend that certain ideas are valid or rational when they are not, because when I do, I am not modeling the behavior I want students to learn. Under this new understanding of what it means to conduct an ideology-free class, I can (for instance) talk about the existence of anthropogenic climate change as fact because that existence is what the overwhelming

weight of the evidence indicates, regardless of the popular debate.

If the conundrum ended there, it might be manageable. Unfortunately, whether one intends it or not, allowing such ex cathedra pronouncements, even in areas of fact, is on the edge of a slippery slope—a slope, I should hasten to add, that is precisely where we as instructors belong.

And that brings me back to my outburst about the Islamic-center protests. Having come to the conclusion that there are not always two scientifically equivalent sides, I was now faced with an issue in which the positions were ethically unequal.

I should note that my conclusion was not simply a gut reaction; I thought and read much before deciding that the issue was stark enough that I could not in good conscience hold my tongue about it in class. And while I publicly apologized to the student involved for any embarrassment I may have caused, I do not regret making my stand, nor even its admittedly extreme wording.

I still believe that such righteous anger should be reserved for those few instances when the ethical contrast of the controversy is absolute. But just as there are times when facts compel us to take sides against ignorance, no matter how prettily dressed it may be, there are times when reason and conscience compel us to call indecent behavior by its proper name.

In those rare cases where every datum directs us toward the same moral conclusion, we can only conclude that the facts are biased, and we should conduct ourselves accordingly. Abandoning truth in the name of balance only deprives students of an essential life lesson: When forming opinions—even in an area as slippery as that of ethical behavior—demagoguery and sleight of hand are no substitute for evidence.

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