



Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

February-March 2017

Message from the Director



The advent of the Trump presidency has heightened controversy over “politics in the classroom” that has been building over the last few decades. To what extent should the political view of instructors be reflected in their assignments, lectures, and other aspects of teaching? Academic freedom suggests wide latitude in defining the parameters of individual faculty instruction, but it is not unlimited nor does sharing personal views necessarily constitute good pedagogy even if the boundaries are not breached. For instructors in some disciplines, such as math and many of the physical sciences, injecting political views into a discussion is usually not an issue and would in most cases be judged as inappropriate given the subject matter. In other disciplines, such as public policy and sociology, political discourse is central to academic inquiry. There, instructors might adopt three different approaches. One option is being explicit in one’s own political leanings and attempt to convert students to that viewpoint; this is very controversial and potentially undermines the goal of developing independent thinking by students. Another possibility is to be equally clear on personal views, but to encourage students to disagree and also ensure that grades are not affected by any arguments that ensue. However, a key drawback of this approach is that instructor-student relationships in such debates are far from equal on many dimensions and open dialogue and critical thinking are not optimized. Another alternative, perhaps a better one, is for instructors to do their best not to reveal their own political biases and encourage multiple perspectives on controversial issues, while not sacrificing standards of fact and evidence in discussions with students. This is not to say that political issues should be avoided, but rather as one recent study advocates – schools should be spaces for political discussion, but not partisan ones. To do otherwise invites controversy, especially for public universities, and perhaps more importantly assigns a role to universities that is beyond its instructional mission, and indeed might jeopardize it.

Upcoming Events

Faculty and Graduate TA Workshops

3/27 12-1pm Watch Out for Curves and Detours: Grading Scales, Extra Credit, and Other Concerns in Measuring Student Learning, with Dr. Paul Diehl. MC 2.410
RSVP at <https://eforms.utdallas.edu/ctl-measuring-learning-workshop-rsvp> by 12pm 3/23.

Research Into Practice

Last month, Betsy DeVos made news when she asserted that professors tell students what to think, and more specifically that liberal professors try to indoctrinate their students to adopt similar views. Research does not back up this claim. Conservative students report that their college experiences shape their conservative political identities, and even where they encounter largely liberal ideology, they feel challenged to clarify their ideas and values in a way they find both positive and beneficial. Simply being aware that professors’ views differ does not cause students to adopt or acquiesce to those views.

Additional research shows that students more likely to be bothered by perceptions of instructor bias are those who tend to be performance-oriented and have more consumerist attitudes (summarized here <https://www.eab.com/daily-briefing/2016/10/13/certain-students-more-likely-to-accuse-professors-of-bias>). What, then, should instructors do to promote the likelihood that students will learn to think for themselves? Budesheim and Lundquist (1999) assigned in-class debates in which students argued a position that was either consistent or inconsistent with their own expressed prior beliefs. Students arguing for their own position tended to become more confident that they are correct. Students arguing against their own beliefs were unlikely to strengthen their prior position and were more likely to adopt the position they defended. Consider asking students to prepare to debate both sides of an issue, or even argue one side orally and a different side in a written assignment. The main objective is to get students to consider more than one side of an issue and therefore become more open to different perspectives and evidence.

For more on this topic, see:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/27/research-confirms-professors-lean-left-questions-assumptions-about-what-means>

Budesheim, T. L., & Lundquist, A. R. (1999). Consider the opposite: Opening minds through in-class debates on course-related controversies. *Teaching of Psychology*, 26(2), 106-110.

Linville, D.L., & Grant, W. J. (2017). The role of student academic beliefs in perceptions of instructor ideological bias. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(3), 274-287.

Teaching Tip

In every discipline, students are likely to come into our classes believing common myths and misconceptions. Students may think, for example, that rest is the natural state of all objects, that roots allow plants to take in energy from soil, that people use only 10% of their brains, or that people can be right-brain or left-brain thinkers. What is more troubling, however, are the persistent findings that students often leave our classes with their incorrect beliefs intact. To overcome these misconceptions, it is not enough simply to present students with correct information. Instead, we must directly refute students' erroneous beliefs. Kowalski and Taylor (2009) compared the effectiveness of these approaches and found that not only was refutation far more effective than mere exposure to correct ideas, it was far more effective when presented in lecture rather than just in assigned readings.

For more on this, see:

Kowalski, P., & Taylor, A. K. (2009). The effect of refuting misconceptions in the introductory psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36, 153-159.

What the Students Say

There is a dichotomy in how students react to political discussions or references in the classroom. On the one hand, they crave the opportunity to discuss contemporary issues as this adds to the relevance of courses to their lives. On the other hand, they resent it when instructors try to impose political positions on them. Notably, however, students might perceive the latter is occurring even when instructors are presenting what they regard as valid evidence from research studies. Courses that deal with subject matter that is already highly politicized – e.g., Middle East politics, race and ethnicity – are especially prone to this misinterpretation. In addition, students might react negatively to comments or opinions on controversial issues from other students with whom they disagree. Both of these circumstances represent challenges to instructors who seek to promote balanced discussion of important concerns. It is vital, however, to listen to what students say as, right or wrong, their perspectives have a major impact on what or whether they learn.

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