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# Citizenship Education and Speech in the College Classroom: What’s the *Real* Problem?

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HARRY BRIGHOUSE

Visit the website of any major selective American university or college and you’ll see promises not just to make students more economically productive, but also to make them into better citizens. Harvard College aims “to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society. We do this through our commitment to the transformative power of a liberal arts and sciences education” (Harvard 2021). Princeton’s motto is “In the Nation’s Service and the Service of Humanity” (Trustees of Princeton University 2021). My own institution, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, calls itself “a public university guided by public service.” The civic mission of higher education traces back at least to the 1862 Morrill Act, which established the land-grant universities, but is periodically reinforced, at least rhetorically, by politicians and college leaders.

Some might think that higher education shouldn’t have a civic mission: pre-K through 12 education, which after all is free and universal, should have taken care of ensuring that young people are good citizens (Martin 2021). If all democracy required was citizens who vote their interests then, conceivably, high schools could

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take care of that. But for democratic institutions to survive and thrive requires a critical mass of citizens who can, and are inclined to, engage thoughtfully and respectfully with one another across sometimes quite wide differences of opinion and belief; who are disposed to be magnanimous when they prevail in elections and to be gracious in defeat (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The pertinent skills and dispositions don't develop organically and can easily atrophy. They need to be fostered well into adulthood.

The task would be daunting in the best of circumstances. And we are not in the best of circumstances. U.S. politics are highly polarized, and the U.S. population is politically fragmented into echo chambers and epistemic valleys. The politically active (including elected politicians themselves) are increasingly disengaged from those with whom they disagree, and opposing sides increasingly see themselves as battling against, rather than thinking with, one another. Although in the country as a whole the national vote is fairly evenly split, with Democrats normally getting just small majorities in aggregated national vote counts, counties are increasingly solidly Republican or solidly Democratic; when people move, they tend to move to places where their political affiliations are widely shared. Alarming, whereas racial, religious, and cultural tolerance have all increased markedly over the past fifty years, tolerance of supporters of the opposing party has declined dramatically. A poll asking adults whether they would be "disturbed" if their child married a member of the opposing political party in 1960 found that fewer than 5 percent of supporters of either party would be; in a similar poll in 2010 33 percent of Democrats and 40 percent of Republicans answered yes to the question (Pew Research Center 2014).

These outcomes, though in a sense shocking, should not be too surprising. The deliberative infrastructure, as we currently experience it, is not optimally structured. Social media seem to facilitate, and possibly encourage, false belief (about relevant empirical facts) while simultaneously discouraging calm, engaged, reasonable discourse. The incentives built into the political process, especially (but not exclusively) in a voting system designed to ensure that only two parties can realistically compete, are to emphasize rallying the base over winning hearts and minds. The design of state legislatures combined with the low quality of the politicians they currently (and, for all I know, always did) attract does little to facilitate responsible public deliberation. An anecdote might illustrate: a friend who spent exactly ten years in a state legislature told me that, during that decade, deliberation—that is, a debate in which any legislators entered the room either open-minded or open to having their mind changed—occurred *exactly once* in the chamber. The issue debated on that occasion was one about which members of neither party had a fixed view and about which the unreflective prejudices of many legislators failed to give a determinate answer.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For the interested reader, the issue was whether to legalize the sale of raw milk. According to my friend, Democrats were torn between their loyalty to small farmers and their enthusiasm for health and safety regulation, whereas Republicans were torn between their loyalty to corporate agriculture and their enthusiasm for free markets.

In the face of such a background, we shouldn't think of education as *the* solution: the multiple structural and cultural causes of polarization and fragmentation are beyond the control of schools, colleges, and universities. But optimists think that colleges and universities can do *something*, thanks to various distinctive characteristics. When students attend a selective college, they usually enter a more socioeconomically, racially, religiously, and even politically diverse environment than they experienced in high school or at home. Whereas in most countries college involves studying just one academic discipline (or, sometimes, two closely related disciplines), in the United States students take numerous breadth requirements, ensuring that they have classroom contact with students whose interests diverge considerably from theirs, and study far outside their immediate interests. And most large universities, even if they are public, are considerably insulated from the market forces that drive the media and the short-term need to satisfy particular constituencies that constrains politicians.

The trick is to harness student diversity, especially, though not exclusively, in those courses that touch on politically and morally inflected issues, to foster the skills and dispositions required for high quality democratic engagement. In the ideal scenario, students would aspire to exchange, and evaluate, reasons. Some of those reasons are empirical, some are moral. They would offer those reasons to one another in a spirit of cooperative deliberation. Once a reason, or an argument, is on the table, they would scrutinize it, using their common powers of reason and bringing to bear their diverse experiences and perspectives. They would seek contradictions, knowing that when they have found a contradiction they have found a falsehood (though not necessarily what the falsehood is). They would give special scrutiny to those claims they suspect of being dogma, or of being self-serving, or about which they know that epistemically well-placed people disagree in good faith. The person who offered the reason or argument would also scrutinize: she would be eager to find the flaws in her own reasoning.

Many readers will suspect that this ideal is not always met in our college classrooms. I agree. But the main attempts in public discourse to address failures to meet that ideal are, I think, somewhat misplaced, as I'll explain.

According to a recent Intelligent.com report,

52 percent of all college students say they always or often withhold views on political and social issues in the classroom due to potential consequences. Conservative students are more likely to suppress their opinions, with 55 percent admitting that they continuously or frequently keep quiet about policy or societal matters. Fifty-two percent of moderate students and 49 percent of liberal students also avoid sharing points of view out of fear of consequences. The most common concerns among respondents are losing the respect of professors and classmates, social ostracization, and jeopardizing their grades. (Intelligent.com Higher Education Team 2021)

I teach on a liberal campus, where many of my students, in personal conversations *and* in anonymous surveys, confirm that they at least sometimes withhold ideas for fear of being negatively judged by classmates or by the professor. And it's not only conservative students. Students who identify as liberal, progressive, and left-wing say the same thing. For all the students from religious families committed to public service who say that they were silenced by a comment that Christians are insular, or racist, there are others who say that they felt inhibited from expressing pacifist views in a class about World War II or from correcting a classmate's mischaracterization of Mexican-American culture. Obviously, if students, left or right, are inhibited from expressing and exploring ideas, this makes it difficult to harness their diversity for civic education.

The phenomenon highlighted by the *Intelligent.com* report is sometimes framed as a free speech issue. But it is not. If you'll forgive a truism, the First Amendment protects whatever the First Amendment protects. On public campuses that's a lot; on private campuses much less. All institutions have compliance mechanisms ensuring that the law is followed almost all the time. Actual violations are, unsurprisingly, rare. And, frankly, a good deal of speech that is protected by the First Amendment should never be uttered anywhere, certainly not in a college classroom.

That is because college classrooms should not be forums in which people say whatever they want to say. They are places of learning. The First Amendment protects anyone in America expressing support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but if a student utters that support during a classroom lesson the purpose of which is to explore the economics literature on the effects of high-commitment charter schools on low-income students, something has gone wrong. If, in that same lesson, another student utters his opposition to (or his support for) the Affordable Care Act something has (probably) gone wrong again. The First Amendment doesn't just protect offensive speech: it also protects irrelevant speech. It equally protects boring, distracting, timewasting, rambling, and unconsidered speech. Wanting to minimize those kinds of speech (and genuinely offensive, though protected, speech) in her classroom does not make a professor an enemy of free speech; it's just a symptom of her taking student learning seriously.

Conversely, the First Amendment does not call on anyone *actually to speak*. It just protects (some of) what they say when they do. If a student thinks, but does not say, that test score growth may not fully capture the benefits or otherwise of charter schools, no First Amendment violation has occurred. But, again, something has gone seriously wrong in the classroom. (Though this scenario is better than the scenario in which nobody even has that thought.)

Another framing of the problem invokes intellectual diversity. "Intellectual diversity" is really a code for *political* diversity. Faculty, especially in more selective institutions, and especially in the humanities and social sciences (those who teach courses that are more likely to deal with politically and ethically inflected issues),

overwhelmingly identify as “liberal” or “left.” A recent study, for example, showed that for every history professor registered as a Republican, 33.5 are registered as Democrats (Langbert, Quain, and Klein 2016). Some call for diversifying the faculty politically—maybe by implementing some sort of affirmative action in hiring for conservatives.

I would welcome a more politically diverse faculty and don’t doubt that it would lead to a better professional environment around the teaching of politically and morally inflected issues in the classroom. But I resist this framing of the problem for two reasons. The first is that I don’t think it is actionable, at least in any reasonable time-frame. Discriminating on the basis of political outlook would (and should) be illegal; and even if we could devise ways of systematically attracting more conservatives into academe, the pace of hiring means that it would take decades before real diversity were achieved. The second, though, is more fundamental: political diversity, though it might improve things, would not address the most fundamental problem.

If it’s not free speech, or intellectual/political conformity among the faculty, what *is* the fundamental problem? I think it is simply this: faculty teaching politically and ethically inflected issues lack needed skills, and a professional ethic concerning what their aims should be.

Let’s start with the skills. In *general*, we have good reason to suspect that teaching in higher education is suboptimal. The reasons are simple. First, teaching well, even at college and university, is *difficult*, requiring not just knowledge of one’s discipline, but understanding of how students think, the mistakes they commonly make, and how to induce them to work hard in the ways that will result in their learning. The good teacher is a mind reader, and, to make things more difficult, she is trying to read numerous minds at once, and, to make it even more difficult, to read how they are interacting with each other. Second, most faculty members, particularly at selective colleges, were not trained to teach; they were hired for their success or potential as researchers, not teachers, and they lack both incentives to become better teachers and an infrastructure through which to do that. No science can tell us what an optimal level of teaching skill would be, but given the way college teachers are prepared, socialized, and incentivized, and given that teaching is difficult, it would be astonishing if we currently enjoyed optimal levels of skill (see Brighouse 2022 for a much more detailed elaboration of the argument in this paragraph; see also Brighouse 2019 for personal account of how to undo the socialization and resist the incentives mentioned here).

To make things more difficult, the teaching we are focusing on is not teaching of any discipline, but teaching the skills and attempting to induce the dispositions that will prepare students for responsible citizenship. Faculty are not well prepared to teach their disciplines, but they are *really* not well prepared to teach students how to deliberate carefully and responsibly together about morally and politically inflected current issues about which reasonable and morally decent people are bound

to disagree, such as whether abortion is morally permissible, how education and healthcare should be distributed, or the extent to which and ways in which governments should regulate and mitigate the effects of markets in the economy. Nobel Prize-winning physicist turned educational researcher Carl Weiman observes: “The most basic principle that every teacher should know about teaching ... is that the brain learns the thinking that it practices, but little else. To have students learn to recognize relevant features and make relevant decisions more like an expert in the field, they must practice doing exactly this. The longer and more intense the practice, the greater the learning” (2019, 56).<sup>2</sup> In some disciplines problem sets and labs go some way to facilitating the necessary practice. But when it comes to the skills needed for democratic citizenship, reading, or listening to someone talking about those skills is not *practicing*. At best, it is just *observing* an expert. When students are learning the skills needed for respectful and engaged deliberation across disagreement, there is no substitute for discussion.

But for discussion to do the work of developing the skills, it must be well-structured and well-moderated. Lacking the skills required to make controversial discussions productive, instructors often fall back on their own talk, as Derek Bok explains: “Teaching by discussion can also seem forbidding because it makes instructors uncomfortably aware of their shortcomings. Lecturers can delude themselves that their courses are going well, but discussion leaders know when their teaching is failing to rouse the students’ interest by the indifferent quality of responses and the general torpor of the class. Trying to conduct a discussion with apathetic students is much like giving a bad dinner party” (2008, 125).

As I said, I do believe having more political diversity in the academy would bring about improvements. But without changes in the preparation and professional development of faculty, conservatives would be just as ill-prepared for this task as liberals.

The skill deficit is compounded by another problem. Despite the institutional promises in mission statements and on websites, and the high ideals to which most faculty would happily sign on, relatively few faculty teaching morally and politically inflected issues participate in ongoing professional deliberation about the aims and purposes of instruction. Conservative political entrepreneurs sometimes claim that left-wing indoctrination is rife on college campuses. Although I am certain that a few professors enter their classrooms determined to recruit students to their political and moral viewpoints, we don’t have evidence that this is widespread.<sup>3</sup> And in this case an absence of evidence really might be evidence of absence: social media

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2. Charles W. Eliot, in his inaugural address as president of Harvard, said, “The lecturer pumps laboriously into sieves. The water may be wholesome, but it runs through. A mind must work to grow” (qtd. in Bok 2008, 123).

3. Casual conversations with students who have been subject to this treatment suggests that it is rarely successful.

makes it very easy to complain loudly about this sort of practice, yet complaints are quite hard to find. Much more common, I think, are professors who have not thought carefully about how, and whether, to separate their own personal viewpoints from their professional practice, and who inhabit professional communities that are, themselves, echo chambers. The professor who teaches that standardized testing is a racist practice is not, usually, indoctrinating, but he is also not nested in a healthy professional community that has developed a professional ethic that understands and incorporates the proper democratic aims of higher education.

To summarize the challenge I have identified: We inhabit an unhealthy democracy in which citizens lack key skills and dispositions that the public deliberative infrastructure does not enable or encourage them to learn. Undergraduate programs at colleges and universities have various features that can, and I think should, be harnessed to support the development of a critical mass with those skills and dispositions. But instructors, individually, lack the skills and, collectively, lack the professional ethic, needed to ensure their development.

So what is to be done? Being an academic, I am much better at diagnosis than at treatment. But here are three concrete steps that administrators could take.

First, putting resources behind the development of high-quality professional development resources, and creating large incentives for faculty to use them. On my campus several hundred teachers have taken The Discussion Project, an intensive training in discussion facilitation in which they learn techniques for inducing all students to participate frankly and productively in classroom discussions. Here is its mission statement:

Engaging discussions are one of the most rewarding and memorable activities that students and faculty alike can experience in the classroom. Recent research shows that classroom discussion deepens learning, creates community, and helps students form an academic identity.

At the same time, classroom discussion is a challenging pedagogical undertaking. It requires the instructor to orchestrate learning among a group of students who likely do not know each other, come from a diversity of backgrounds, possess a range of political commitments, arrive with varying levels of familiarity with the course material, and have different levels of comfort speaking in class.

Inviting students to discuss also comes with some risk, because we don't know what students are going to say. That unknown means that the instructor will have to be ready to follow one student's interesting and unexpected line of thought, correct another's misunderstanding about the material, and also be prepared to respond to any number of possibly off-topic, inappropriate, hostile, or naïve comments. (The Discussion Project 2022)

In addition, many programs have introduced training for first-year teaching assistants to speed up their skill development. And instructional coaches observe teachers,



helping them to solve problems and giving feedback on their practice. Such programs require a serious investment of resources—The Discussion Project took a year to select and train its staff, and has been continually improving its curriculum. And campus leadership has to communicate to faculty the programs’ importance through words and deeds (which should usually include financial incentives for faculty to make use of them).

Second, campus leaders and, importantly, leaders in the disciplines, can communicate their expectations concerning the contribution of the classroom to the development of democratic skills. All the incentives are for leaders to talk in clichés: anodyne statements with which nobody could disagree. In this case, more detail would be helpful—being very specific that they expect faculty to welcome and learn how to induce the full range of reasonable viewpoints to be engaged in their classrooms, and that “the full range of reasonable viewpoints” includes many conservative and many left-wing viewpoints, as well as perspectives from students from immigrant, religious, international, rural, urban, racial minority, poor, working-class, and middle-class backgrounds. It would also help if, amid the enthusiasm that leaders of successful organizations must show for their employees, they would acknowledge that the task of teaching citizenship skills and dispositions is difficult, and success requires continual improvement.

The first two measures are institutional. The third is what a mentor of mine called “guerrilla” activity. Colleges and universities are notoriously conservative institutions, and his advice was to campaign for change but not wait for it to happen. Tenure gives faculty a great deal of freedom to do what they want to do. On a campus near a state capitol, one can invite legislators into one’s classrooms. You don’t have to wait for your campus to create its own version of (or contract with) The Discussion Project. You can work with colleagues interested in improving their own instruction; instigate departmental discussions on what the aims should be for courses with politically and morally inflected content; host regular workshops on how best to achieve those ends; and consult with students themselves about what does, and doesn’t, seem to work.

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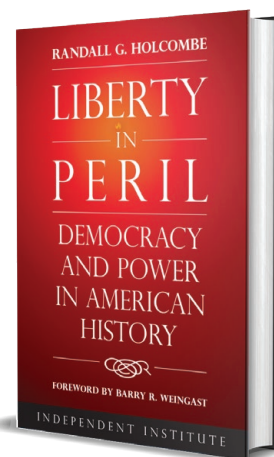
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