



Business, Politics, Social Justice

***A life spent making mistakes is not
only more honorable but more useful
than a life spent in doing nothing.***

George Bernard Shaw

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FACULTY INTENSIVE

Days 5-365

We never directly addressed business, politics, or social justice during our faculty intensive. But as you can imagine, these things were embedded in many of our earlier conversations, and they regularly came up on their own when we returned to our normal academic lives.

We spent the last day of the intensives talking about what we might do the following year. Our agreement was that we would put what we'd learned into practice in our classrooms, introducing controversial topics, trying new techniques, collecting evaluations, and reflecting on the experience in ways that would be helpful to our colleagues. We also agreed to plan and present at least one intramural workshop or public event related to a difficult dialogue. The agreement was vague as to what controversies we should tackle or what techniques we should employ. The important thing was simply to engage, and then to come back together after a year and share what we'd learned.

Some of us dove right in and started trying stuff in our summer classes; most waited until fall, or even spring. Some of us worked alone, others collaborated, and a few involved students in planning and presenting events. We held inter-campus screenings of provocative films, led public discussions following student theater performances, and convened forums on culture, politics, sexual identity, and the war in Iraq.

It would be nice to say that all these events were completely successful, but it wouldn't be the truth. Collaboration came with its own challenges. Logistics consumed more time than anyone had expected. One organizer spent weeks trying to find a faculty panelist willing to speak in favor of the war in Iraq, only to have him come down with laryngitis on the morning of the event. Theater audience members were more interested in congratulating the student actors than discussing any of the big issues of the play. *Tortilla Curtain* author T.C. Boyle charmed a satisfyingly large audience with an entertaining public reading, but remained steadfastly neutral with regard to the politics of immigration, the privilege of class, and his own point of view.

Other events went much the way we hoped they would. The public discussion on the war in Iraq was a model of civil discourse on a highly charged subject. A discussion of the role and ethics of corporations was spirited, informative, and very well received. A forum on politics in the classroom brought faculty and students together in an open discussion of a topic about which there is considerable disagreement. These and others engaged, and showed us what we can do if we ourselves engage.

Public Events

An Inconvenient Truth. Facilitated discussion following screenings of the film.

Caught Between Two Worlds. Student forum on the experience of living in individualist and collectivist cultures.

The Corporation. Panel discussion following film screening.

Granito de arena (Grain of Sand). Open discussion following film screening.

Issues of Race, Class, and Culture in Alaska's Public Schools. Public forum featuring Jonathon Kozol.

Perspectives on Iraq. Panel discussion featuring peace activist Kathy Kelly.

Politics in the Classroom: What is Appropriate? Faculty/student forum.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down. Paperback chats at new student orientation.

The Tortilla Curtain. Community discussions, plus public reading by author T.C. Boyle.

What Do I Call You? What Are You? Discussion forum on gender and sexual identity.

The Women of Lockerbie. Post-show dialogues following selected performances of the play.

BUSINESS

Corporations: Angels or Demons?

Corporations are among the most powerful institutions in modern public life. Some are wealthier than many countries, more powerful than many governments, and their actions impact our communities, environment, economies, and cultures in ways we may not even realize.

Are they beneficial or destructive? Ethical or immoral? These are the questions posed by the documentary film *The Corporation*, which two business colleagues—one from each university—presented to an inter-campus audience of fifty or so participants one Saturday afternoon in November. The film has an unmistakable point of view: corporations are bad for democracy. They destroy our environment and amass resources from the poor for the rich. The presenters hoped to use the film as a starting point for a community conversation about the proper role of business in today's world. Seeking to present balance and a wide array of voices, they invited other faculty colleagues and community members to lead discussions after the screening.

The event was successful, as evidenced by high ratings from participants. The post-film discussion was spirited but civil, as the presenters hoped it would be. But ironically, it was the difficult dialogues that were—or should have been—generated by the presenters themselves in planning and staging the event that lingered in their minds afterwards. In the following conversation, they reflect on their experience and the lessons they learned about planning a successful community discussion.

Using Film to Spark a Community Discussion: Lessons Learned

Dr. Bogdan Hoanca

*Associate Professor of Management Information Systems
University of Alaska Anchorage*

Dr. Tracy Stewart

*Associate Professor of Leadership and Strategy
Alaska Pacific University*

Bogdan: The first lesson was in learning to work together. We knew we had much in common: both of us teach in business programs, and we had developed a good chemistry over the intensive week. But we had no idea how well we would be able to cooperate on this joint venture.

Tracy: This is true. We knew very little about each other and were trying to orchestrate this relatively large event. In many circumstances (new jobs, arranged marriages), people are placed together to perform a task and they get to know each other while the work is being done. In this endeavor, time was short, we were committed to collaboration, and no one was the boss. We learned the nuances of trust, communication, and compromise very quickly.

Bogdan: We also had some lessons to learn about logistics. We didn't know how to estimate the size of our audience. We had no idea if we would have ten people or two hundred, and since it was a public event we couldn't really request RSVPs. We built as much flexibility as possible into our planning, with overflow rooms and a backup DVD, in case the auditorium was not large enough to accommodate the crowd.

Tracy: Right. But I think we also should have planned for more discussion time and provided some kind of food. We underestimated how long people might be willing to remain for discussion. In the future, I would try to ask a sample of potential attendees about possible timeframes and formats to broaden my thinking. The food is really a no-brainer. Providing a snack would have given people a needed boost and allowed for some unstructured discussion time.

Bogdan: We had two very different views of how to manage the audience interactions following the film. Tracy wanted to have small breakout groups to talk about various themes, such as environmental, legal, ethical, and labor issues, with facilitators to manage small group discussion. I wanted to have a panel discussion, with a duel of opposing viewpoints to get things rolling, and then audience participation in the form of questions to the panel and each other.

Tracy: I didn't think we would need to fuel the debate; I was pretty sure it would bubble up on its own. And I'm not a big fan of panel discussions. I think the format risks narrowing the discussion to the dominant viewpoints represented by the selected panelists. My goal was to involve a wide range and number of faculty from both campuses taking part in the controversial dialogue. In hindsight, I think I should have articulated this desired outcome more clearly. It might have helped us if we'd had a difficult dialogue about our own goals while planning the event.

Bogdan: We decided to plan for both approaches and use the breakout groups if the audience was big enough and the panel discussion if it was not. The mistake was that each of us invited people with a view for their preferred format. Half of the colleagues we invited were eager to facilitate discussions on their favorite topic or area. The other half thought they'd get to debate a topic with one or more opponents. Panel participants tend to be people who like to talk, and who were focused on getting their message out. Discussion leaders are better at listening and facilitating.

Tracy: That comment about panelists is precisely why I have concerns about using a panel. I wanted other participants to have space to get their messages out as well. We did invite our colleagues in different ways, but I think it mattered less whom we invited than how we invited them. The APU faculty members weren't necessarily better small group leaders or listeners and facilitators. They were asked to volunteer to serve in that role, so they came expecting it. Many of them would have gladly sat on a panel to present and strongly defend a particular perspective. In fact, one of them graciously stepped aside when more panelists than expected showed up and no others were willing to relinquish their chairs. This very conservative, pro-business colleague deferred to three UAA

Our intention was for the discussion to be fair and balanced, yet the film itself has a clear and well-known message against business and for the environment.

professors and two community activists in the interest of not having the panel overwhelm audience participation.

Bogdan: On the day of the screening, faced with an audience of about fifty people, we decided to offer both approaches. We set up small rooms with the breakout group topics indicated on the doors, and a larger room where we located the panel discussion tables. At intermission, we announced that people could vote with their feet by joining either the larger panel discussion or one of the smaller groups. We encouraged people to move about from room to room as they found it most appropriate for their interests.

We repeated this announcement at the end of the film. To our surprise, an audience member immediately countered with an alternate suggestion. “Why don’t we all go to the panel discussion,” he said, “so that everybody gets to hear everybody else?” The entire audience seemed to agree and moved en masse to the panel discussion room, where we proceeded with a very heated discussion about the film. The facilitators for the breakout groups made sure there were no people interested in the small group discussions (there were none), and then joined in with the panel discussion group.

It is interesting to walk away from the same event with two different impressions of what occurred, yet this is often the source of difficult dialogues.

Tracy: I was both impressed with and concerned about these group dynamics. The suggestion for everyone to attend the panel so that all could be heard had some logic. On the flip side, with a relatively small group and what we know about group dynamics, it would have taken a very strong person to say “no” and request not to follow the suggestion.

Bogdan: Regarding content, our intention was for the discussion to be fair and balanced, yet the film itself has a clear and well-known message against business and for the environment. The audience it

drew seemed to be rooting for the same side of the debate. Two of the panelists represented activist groups, and they insisted on speaking to the audience from this point of view as well. We had invited an oil company executive to represent the opposite point of view, but the invitation was declined (partly because of very short notice). “What did we expect?” commented one of our business colleagues. “Business people may have better things to do than talk about a film; they’re busy out there, in the real world, making money.”

Tracy: Clearly the film’s point of view aligned with some audience members’ passions, but I disagree that it drew a biased audience. The panelists represented a range of views, pro-business to anti-business. I was not surprised that those representing the activist groups insisted on an activist perspective or that the economist presented an economic perspective. The UAA professors represented a range of pro-business points of view. This goes squarely back to my earlier point about the need for us to have worked out our objectives more clearly beforehand. If we had consciously identified balance as a primary objective at the outset, we could have planned to show a second, clearly pro-business film as a counterpoint. We could also have used facilitation to raise other perspectives or critique the perspective presented.

Bogdan: To me, the discussions seemed far from balanced. The topics followed the main threads in the movie, leaning principally toward social justice issues, and against corporate interests. The business faculty panelists were the only voices in the room to make the case for corporations. On a positive side, this allowed for more time to discuss opinions that everybody in the room embraced. On a negative side, most people in the audience had their point of view confirmed or reinforced, rather than challenged and expanded. Rather than a difficult dialogue, this was actually a fairly easy one.

Tracy: It is so interesting to walk away from the same event with two different impressions of what occurred, yet this is often the source of difficult dialogues. I was initially disappointed that the entire group chose to attend the panel, but I was very gratified by the outcome of the discussion. I had a very different experience than Bogdan on the balance of perspectives. I heard a wide continuum, and not just from the panelists. This was not a homogeneous audience. Our facilitator, Libby Roderick, ensured both civility and balance. No one voice dominated the discussion; all who wanted to express themselves were heard. The discourse was limited, not by homogeneity, but by time. A major lesson for me was how to create sufficient time to allow for the civil discourse on difficult topics.

Bogdan: Another area where we could have done better was in the follow-up after the event. Several people in the audience were interested in taking a more active role, united as a group. We collected contact information from participants and distributed the list to participants, but we did not lead any effort to bring them together again. As far as we know, nobody in the group initiated any follow-up efforts to bring the group back together.



A few tips for using a film to generate a community discussion.

Do

- Choose a film with rating and length appropriate for the audience.
- Plan for time at the beginning to introduce the film, and frame a few questions for consideration.
- If the film is long, plan for a break, and announce it at the start.
- Allow for a break at the end of the film, transitioning to the discussion.
- Announce the discussion time in advance, for those who have already seen the film and only want to show up for the discussion.

Don't

- Don't show a film that is longer than two hours.
- Don't forget about people with disabilities. Turn on captioning, if available. Check lighting conditions, screen size, and seating.

Tracy: Very true, but I would add that Bogdan and I should have had our own follow-up as well. After the screening, we more or less went our own separate ways again. I know I could have learned an immense amount by post-processing this more thoughtfully with my colleague.

Bogdan: Tracy is right about the difficult dialogues we avoided between ourselves. We did focus more on the event and less on having our own difficult dialogues in the planning and follow-up stages. As in the classroom, we teach best when we model what we want our students to learn. We can use these lessons in shaping future events.

Tracy: Overall, I appreciated the respectful, collegial experience we had. We accomplished something of value. The fact that it was a joint event between our two universities, that it was a civil discussion of many different difficult topics, and that we learned so much from the experience feels successful. I still dislike panel discussions as a format, but I can honestly say I see their value as one form of catalyst for difficult dialogues. I walked away reminded that there are many different paths to the same end.



For another example of using a film as the basis for community and classroom discussions, see page 194.

Emerging controversies lend themselves to fruitful analysis precisely because so little is known about them. Students can approach these questions with fresh thinking and fewer emotions, and they may be more willing to explore multiple considerations before choosing their own position. This essay explores a few emerging areas of controversy in business and technology that are likely to influence our lives in the years to come.

Emerging Controversies in Business and Technology

Dr. Bogdan Hoanca

*Associate Professor of Management Information Systems
University of Alaska Anchorage*

There are many controversies in the world of business and technology that most people, including most undergraduate business students, just aren't aware of. At first, when I introduce topics like net neutrality, key escrow, and statistical discrimination in my classes, I am met with mostly blank stares. Say what? These topics don't sound threatening or push any one's buttons. Controversial? As one student pointed out to me this year, "It's not like we're discussing abortion."

Yet these topics, and many others, are hotly debated in Internet business circles. And they will affect our way of living whether we are aware of them or not. Technology has changed the way we live, in both obvious and subtle, even insidious, ways. The abundance of e-commerce options may be obvious, but the new ways for companies to collect data, mine it, and use the results for price research and discrimination are less well known. E-commerce is here to stay, with positive effects on consumer choices and negative effects on neighborhood stores. Price discrimination, on the other hand, is still in the future, and we may have time to stop it from occurring, if we so decide.

We are more familiar with certain controversial topics because of the intense human emotions they trigger and the way they tend to polarize audiences. These are what you might call the "classics:" evolution versus creation; cultural, racial and gender issues; the right to life versus the right to choose. On most of these questions, most of us have already taken a side. And most of us probably feel pretty passionately about the side we've chosen.

Some of the emerging controversies in business and technology are so new that students do not even realize their full implications. In many ways, this makes them ideal topics for exploring how we react to controversy. Because tempers are less likely to flare, it is easier to explore these topics in the classroom and manage the discussion. The result can be more powerful learning, both about the topic as well as about the debate process itself.

Cognitive stages

When students explore emerging business and technical issues, they may go through four cognitive stages of controversy. Teachers who introduce emerging issues may wish to consider the cognitive progression described below.

At first, we're not even aware that a controversy is out there. This corresponds to the cognitive state known as unconscious ignorance. We don't know that we don't know. When I bring up a topic like net neutrality or key escrow, at first my students are just blank. They don't know what these

topics are or what's at stake. They don't perceive the topic as controversial; they may not even see much difference between the two sides.

A little information can bring us to a second stage known as conscious ignorance. We know that we don't know. This stage can be motivating, spurring us on to ask questions, do the research, and learn even more about the topic. Understanding grows as each new piece of information comes in, and with it comes a tendency to lean toward one side or another. I can watch this happen in the classroom as students begin to express lukewarm preference for certain points of view over others. This is

a natural progression, almost as if we are "assigned" a side, not because we chose it, but because the first arguments we heard or the people we happened to interact with were people who are on that side.

As we learn even more, we may get to a third stage of conscious knowledge, knowing that we know, and being able to apply that knowledge when we focus our attention on it. This is the point when the divide becomes apparent, as we encounter and explore opposing points of view, comparing those ideas to the first ones we developed, and focusing our attention, with conscious effort, on each side in turn or both sides at once.

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The fourth stage, ideally, is unconscious knowledge, when we are able to apply the learning automatically, without a need to focus our attention on the task at hand. Finally, we may learn how to transcend the gap and to leap seamlessly from one side of the debate to the other, understanding very well when and why we so choose to leap.

Technology and business issues may be ideal topics for exploring the cognitive stages of controversy. Because the emotional baggage associated with these issues is often much less than for other controversies, this fourth stage might be less of a leap, allowing students to experience duality in less threatening areas of their lives.

Example

An example might be in order here. One topic we explore in my Management Information Systems class is known as personalized pricing. The question is whether businesses should be allowed to use information systems to collect data about customers, in order to price items as high as customers would be willing to pay. By collecting transaction data over time, an online business can actually determine a customer's willingness to pay or to haggle—to save money or to save time—and may be able to optimize the offer price to maximize the amount they can get from a given customer. The issue is complex enough and novel enough for many students to encounter it at the first stage of cognition: they have no idea whether this personalized pricing should be allowed or not. Many students have just never even considered the possibility.

Topics like personalized pricing work very well for in-class debate assignments. Students sign up for topics in teams of two. They can research the topic together, but they will end up arguing on opposite sides of the debate. Because they don't know in advance which side they will be called upon to argue, they need to prepare equally for both sides of the question. We toss a coin to determine sides at the beginning of the debate.

At first, students naturally gravitate toward issues that are relevant to them. Some tend to see the question as an issue of free markets' right to set prices. Others will see it as a fairness issue. During their research, students will uncover arguments for both these positions and notice examples of how these forces are already shaping our lives. As the debate and discussion progress, students seem to grow more willing to see the other side; a few even switch sides or grow equally comfortable with both.

Implications

In exploring emerging controversies, students may realize that they have the power to make changes to policies and conditions that directly affect their lives. Between evolution and creationism, the choice is one of belief in what's already happened. Technology controversies are still on the drawing table, on par with controversies in economic planning or legislative action. These difficult dialogues not only lead to a better understanding and tolerance of alternative opinions, but also may lead to better decisions and outcomes.

We move from the first stage of not even knowing about controversies, through knowing one side, knowing both sides, and finally to knowing how to leap back and forth between the two. In the process, we learn which side we want to choose, not just because of our peer group, but with a deeper understanding of the whole issue. We explore both alternative opinions and also alternative futures depending on which side we choose. We can then make educated choices to influence legislation, technology development, and social forces to determine the future of our choice.

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For more on developing propositions and staging classroom debates, see page 53.

POLITICS

Fall 2006 was election season in Alaska. Incumbent Governor Frank Murkowski was defeated in the Republican primary by former Wasilla Mayor Sarah Palin. Palin went on to defeat her Democratic opponent, former Governor Tony Knowles, in the November general election, becoming Alaska's first female governor.

Election politics found their way into the classroom as well, sparking a conversation that began in the UAA campus newspaper and eventually spilled over into a student-faculty forum on whether and when politics are appropriate in the classroom. It began with a letter to the editor in which a student complained that he'd "had it" with politically biased professors at UAA. The newspaper took a similar position in a follow-up editorial, noting instances of what it called "political discrimination:" students feeling forced to adopt a professor's politics for the sake of a better grade.

From five pages down to less than one page. I had been disciplined—a faculty member, subjected by a student to the rules of a discipline not my own—and everyone who read the response knew it. I could have broken off my participation at that point, but a key aspect of the *Difficult Dialogues* project for me has been to remain engaged even when offended in some way. The point was not so much to convince the editor or readers to my perspective—although that would be nice—but to remain *engaged in the discussion*.

Dan Kline
English

English professor Dr. Dan Kline took exception to what he perceived as the inaccurate and stereotypical thinking of this response and wrote his own letter to the editor. His five-page single-spaced response laid out the necessity for free speech in an academic context, argued that the classroom is "always already" a political space, asserted the faculty member's right to control course content, and critiqued the newspaper's citation of an American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) report as an unreliable source, itself motivated by partisan political purposes. Following a respectful dialogue with the student editor in which the words "length" and "established guidelines" appeared more than once, Dan's response was edited down to a few tight paragraphs and published in the December 5th edition.

In the spring, English professor Dr. Patricia Jenkins organized a broader public forum featuring the letter-writer, the editor, the English professor, and two other panelists. Each panelist spent a couple of minutes sharing his general perspectives on politics in the classroom before responding to two hypothetical situations designed to highlight the potential flash points in politically charged activities on campus.

The next few pieces include the letter that sparked the debate, the newspaper editor's response, the English professor's full counter-response, an analysis of the forum, a reflection on student freedom of speech from the newspaper's faculty adviser, and a further reflection from the professor who organized the forum. Together, these six pieces summarize a local instance of a larger conversation on politics in the classroom that has implications for our academic freedom and our students' right to free expression.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR OCTOBER 24, 2006

Partisan politics have no place in classrooms at UAA

I have had it with politically biased professors at UAA. My first encounter with this bias was when a professor said, “The more educated you become, the more liberal you become.” Next, in an upper-division political science class, students spent an hour bashing Gov. Frank Murkowski. At the end of class, I said, “This is ridiculous, and even worse, it’s not educational.” The professor replied, “I thought it was educational.”

These are just two examples, but I have more. Look, if I wanted to hear Murkowski-bashing, I would talk to Tony Knowles, Sarah Palin, or the like. In college, a student’s job is to think, right? A professor should present both sides of an issue, kick it around, and then allow the students to decide for themselves. They should not promote any ideology. I am not partisan, but I am fair. I just wish our professors would be too.

— John H. Roberson III

EDITORIAL RESPONSE NOVEMBER 7, 2006

With the upcoming vote, the controversial war in Iraq, and the other political events facing our nation, political discussion naturally occurs in classes around campus.

College is a time for many young men and women to find themselves, their beliefs, and their values. The problem is that some students feel as if their opinions cannot be shared during class discussion for fear of being looked down upon or ridiculed by their professors.

Last week, our Seawolf Snapshot question was, “Do you vote?” Shortly after one of the interviews, one of the students came into the office and asked that we not publish her comment. Her reasoning: She knows that her professor has a differing opinion and thinks her grade would suffer because of it.

A November 2004 report, “Politics in the Classroom,” reveals that nearly a third of students at 50 top U.S. universities thought their grades were affected by political bias on the part of professors, according to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. The report found that 29 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “On my campus, there are courses in which students feel they have to agree with the professor’s political or social views in order to get a good grade.”

While research of this sort has not been conducted at UAA, the situation has the potential to become a problem. In politically focused classes, it is understandable for students to have varying

views and opinions. In fact, good debate is a necessary component for learning in these classes. But what about English, history, or even math classes where politics get brought into the picture?

Some of *The Northern Light's* staff members have seen what could be considered political discrimination on campus, such as a liberal arts professor who made his political views perfectly clear, explicitly saying that conservative students don't really belong in his class. Or a history professor who continually went off on tangents ridiculing a political party, and if a student who identified with that party tried to make a reply, that student would get a sarcastic rebuttal, a criticizing speech, and a quick return to the actual lecture. Or an A student who suddenly got a C after writing something against the professor's political view.

At Duke University, a history professor on the first day of class made a joking remark about having prejudices against Republicans, not even considering that some of his students might take

offense, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The Feb. 13, 2004 article goes on to mention that many conservative students feel a kind of isolation and discrimination on campuses that seem dominated by professors with outspoken liberal views.

Even if professors' personal views don't influence their grading of students, it is easy to see how students could get the impression that their political views may affect their grades. A recently published letter to the *Northern Light* from John H. Roberson III, a student government senator, expressed his concerns about political bias in the classroom. "I have had it with politically biased professors at UAA," he wrote. "In an upper-division political science class,

students spent an hour bashing Gov. Frank Murkowski. At the end of class, I said, 'This is ridiculous, and even worse, it's not educational.' The professor replied, 'I thought it was educational.'"

If a professor brings a political conversation into discussion, especially in a class where such a topic is not specifically relevant, all students should be entitled to their own opinions without fear of repercussions. Discussing an issue in class should be a learning experience for students in which all sides of an argument can be fairly represented without fear. It should not be an exercise in political indoctrination by professors who consider their classes a personal soapbox.

We are paying to sit in class and learn. We are not paying to have our professors scare us into conformity in an effort to get a better grade. Our grades should reflect the work we all do for our classes, not how well our views mesh with our professors'.

Even though most professors will say they don't let personal views interfere with students' grades, continually bringing up one's political views in class will certainly give the appearance of political bias, which can only have a stifling effect on students' self-expression.

Again, this is not a widespread problem at UAA, yet. But we live in politically volatile times, and there are strong opinions on all sides of the issues. To keep it from becoming a problem, professors prone to spewing partisan digressions should keep to the lecture at hand and leave their political speeches and jokes at home.

The *Northern Light* editorial was based on the firsthand experiences of our staff. We used the ACTA report to support our findings, but we in no way took up their cause or viewpoint. We wrote our own viewpoint and then were happily surprised to find out we weren't the only ones feeling this way.

Aaron Burkhart

Aaron Burkhart
The Northern Light

FACULTY RESPONSE

An edited version of this essay appeared in the Northern Light on December 5, 2006. The following is Dr. Kline's complete response.

Free Speech, Academic Responsibility, and Politics in the Classroom

Dr. Daniel T. Kline

*Associate Professor of English
University of Alaska Anchorage*

Readers of the *Northern Light* should be aware of the partisan nature of the editorial “Partisan Politics Have No Place in the Classroom” and of the partisan rationale underlying many of the specific comments. I’m afraid to say that, in the guise of arguing on behalf of students, the *Northern Light* has uncritically taken sides in a developing political battle over higher education curriculum. The editorial rests upon several mistaken assumptions concerning the management of the higher education classroom, the role and authority of faculty, and the nature of the educational interaction. It also mobilizes faulty logic and scare tactics to vastly inflate the extent of the problem.

First and most importantly, free speech is the essential condition of any higher education classroom. University of Alaska President Mark Hamilton affirmed this in no uncertain terms in a letter to faculty and staff, dated 13 March 2001, written in response to several politically controversial events in the UA system:

A number of recent events has convinced me [to] take the unusual step to state clearly and unambiguously what all of us would take as a given — The University of Alaska acknowledges and espouses the right to freedom of speech....What I want to make clear and unambiguous is that responses to complaints or demand for action regarding constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of speech CANNOT BE QUALIFIED [emphasis Hamilton’s]...Opinions expressed by our employees, students, faculty, or administrators don’t have to be politic or polite. However personally offended we might be, however unfair the association of the University to the opinion might be, I insist that we remain a certain trumpet on this most precious of Constitutional rights.

President Hamilton is to be applauded for his uncompromising support for freedom of speech, especially in a time when many universities are rolling back, constraining, and otherwise curtailing free speech for students and faculty and when other schools are considering the institution of draconian measures to monitor, police, and otherwise constrain faculty prerogatives in the classroom.

Second, there is no distinction between free speech and impolite or impolitic speech (that is, speech that one might disagree with or even find offensive). This is crucial. One should not confuse the right to free speech with the desire not to be offended, challenged, or countermanded. One who speaks freely should instead be ready with a response to an opposing viewpoint. Mr. Roberson, who was offended by an hour-long discussion concerning Gov. Frank Murkowski in an upper-division political science class, did indeed have the right—and took the opportunity—to state his opinion about that discussion. Mr. Roberson seems to have mistaken being offended with being silenced, humiliated, or somehow harassed, but from the brief coverage in the *Northern Light*, he appears to

have exercised his right to free speech. If Mr. Roberson, or any other student, disagrees with anything a faculty member or another student says, that student has every right (and I would argue, even the personal responsibility) to speak up and articulate a differing viewpoint. Although I do not think that many faculty members set out to deliberately offend anybody, every student has the right to be offended in the classroom and to speak up if and when they disagree. This is qualitatively different

There is no distinction between free speech and impolite or impolitic speech (that is, speech that one might disagree with or even find offensive). This is crucial. One should not confuse the right to free speech with the desire not to be offended, challenged, or countermanded.

from saying that faculty or other students should be silenced if one disagrees with them.

Third, managing the classroom, facilitating discussion, and creating an educational environment are the faculty member's responsibility; it is not a student's right to determine what is taught in the classroom nor is it a student's responsibility to decide how the material is presented. Faculty members are selected by their peers on the basis of their disciplinary expertise and suitability for the departmental mission. In Roberson's example, the faculty member in question believed the discussion concerning Gov. Murkowski to be educational; Mr. Roberson disagreed. This is as it should be. Evidently, other students in the classroom who carried on the conversation found it to be beneficial, and the faculty member agreed. This too is as it should be. It is the faculty member's prerogative to pursue discussion as s/he sees fit.

The *Northern Light's* thinking about class content and conduct is muddled at this point. The editorial states that "In politically focused classes, it is understandable for students to have varying views and opinions" and opines that "good debate is a necessary component for learning in these classes." Yet the writer summons as its only UAA example a student who was offended by discussion about a politician in an upper-division political science course? It seems to me that an upper-division political science course is exactly the place where a politician could be profitably discussed.

Put bluntly and impolitely, the classroom is under the purview of the faculty member, and a student has no more right to hijack the discussion than a faculty member has to create a harassing environment. That Mr. Roberson disagreed, complained, and wrote about the incident clearly indicates that he was in no way "indoctrinated," and nothing in the letter indicates that the faculty member created a harassing atmosphere. In fact, in registering his dissent, Mr. Roberson proved the importance, and exercised the freedom, of free speech in the classroom. By the same token, simply because a student has an opinion about a subject does not mean that that opinion must be granted the same weight in the classroom.

Fourth, and closely allied to the previous point, the editorial states somewhat peremptorily, "What about English, history, or even math classes where politics get brought into the picture?" The implication here is, of course, that politics have no place in these courses. There are several problems with this narrow view of politics and of academia.

Every discipline has its own history of development that is, by definition, politically fraught; each discipline develops through disagreement, often vehement and impolite disagreement. In other words, the classroom is already a political space, a fact that may be well known to faculty but transparent to

students. It doesn't make any more sense to say that faculty should leave their political opinions at the door than it would to require students to keep their mouths shut if they disagree.

Disagreement and dissension are often as important to educational development as placid acquiescence or simple concurrence. Generally, the sciences have the scientific method to confirm fact and control quality (and the scientific method is not democratic or politically correct), while the humanities have reasoned argument (sometimes passionate argument both pro and con). What that means is that a faculty member may use examples from current politics, popular culture, political analysis and many other venues to illuminate some aspect of a course topic, whatever the course. While it may not be immediately evident to a student what the purpose of such a comparison might be, it is as much the student's responsibility to ascertain the connections as it is the faculty member's to make and clarify them.

In other words, learning is often hard work, and in contrast to the *Northern Light's* assertion that "We are paying to sit in class and learn," simply sitting in class is not the same thing as learning (the "bank account" model of education). One doesn't have to agree with a faculty member or fellow student to have learned from either of them, and one can often learn as much by disagreeing and exploring the reasons for that disagreement. That does not, however, require that a faculty member do that thinking for the student. Sometimes the classroom is as much a crucible of fire as it is an oasis of plenty—ask any law student who is pushed to the limits under Socratic questioning in court, or any medical student who is pressed for a diagnosis and prognosis during rounds, or any number of undergraduate majors who have to pass a high-stakes exit or professional exam to get their degrees.

Fifth, the *Northern Light* glibly summons the American Council of Trustees and Alumni's November 2004 report, "Politics in the Classroom," as evidence that one third of American students (at 50 top universities) believe their grades are influenced by their professors' political biases. What the editors fail to reflect upon is the political agenda of ACTA, allied associations like Students for Academic Freedom, and David Horowitz's so-called Academic Bill of Rights. By citing ACTA's "study" as if it were neutral and authoritative, the *Northern Light* has already taken sides in an ongoing national political effort (whether knowingly or not) that has caused significant further disruption in university classrooms across America.

An example of ACTA's activities will illustrate the overall political aim of this group founded by Lynne V. Cheney (wife of Vice President Dick Cheney). ACTA issued a report after 9/11 entitled "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America," written by Jerry L. Martin and Anne D. Neal. Calling academia "the weak link in America's response to the attack," Martin and Neal decry the "shocking divide between academe and the public at large," deprecate those who did not "follow the President in calling evil by its rightful name," and condemn those who "pointed accusatory fingers, not at the terrorists, but at America itself." The opening denouncement is then followed by more than 100 quotations, many by name, from American academics who question, with varying proportions of analysis and vehemence, American



For more on ACTA, Students for Academic Freedom, and the Academic Bill of Rights, see page 206 and the following websites:

<http://www.goacta.org>

<http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org>

<http://www.FrontPageMagazine.com>

<http://chronicle.com>

<http://www.insidehighered.com>

complicity in the events leading up to the 9/11 attacks. Martin and Neal's conclusion: "Indeed, the message of much of academe was clear: BLAME AMERICA FIRST."

Their solution is to reinvent American education in a specific, politically loaded way:

"We call upon all colleges and universities to adopt strong core curricula that include rigorous, broad-based courses on the great works of Western civilization as well as courses on American history, America's founding documents, and America's continuing struggle to extend and defend the principles on which it was founded. If institutions fail to do so, alumni should protest, donors should fund new programs, and trustees should demand action."

ACTA's aim is therefore to reduce freedom of inquiry, especially when it's impolitic or impolite, in favor of a politically approved curriculum that institutionalizes a specific view of American history and culture.

Finally, despite my dismay with the rampant misunderstanding and my disappointment with the flawed logic of the editorial, I do agree with one specific overriding concern. Students who believe

Students who have a complaint against a faculty member can and should pursue the matter: first through informal contact with the faculty member and then, if necessary, through official institutional channels.

they have a complaint against a faculty member can and should pursue the matter: first through informal contact with the faculty member and then, if necessary, through official institutional channels. Much more often than not, faculty members are more than willing to discuss student concerns and accommodate reasonable requests. They are no more interested in picking a fight or making their students unhappy than the students are with parroting views they don't agree with just to please a teacher.

If I were to stoop to the kind of fear-mongering that the editorial uses when it suggests "this is not a widespread problem at UAA, yet," indicating that the liberal professor bogeyman is out there just waiting to pounce upon unsuspecting and innocent conservative students (as David Horowitz and his allies suggest), I'd say that external political intervention into the higher education classroom isn't

a widespread problem at UAA (cue ominous music now)—yet. But it could be if people other than faculty begin to decide what faculty can say and how they can say it. At UAA, the faculty has control over the curriculum: we propose it, we review it, we interview, hire, and promote those who will teach it. Peer review is the heart of the academic enterprise, and I don't know a faculty member who is not committed to this principle.

I am in no way dismissing harassment or hostility, which is clearly defined and fairly dealt with here at UAA. Students who feel harassed or otherwise threatened in class have clear and reasonable options for dealing with those behaviors, in the same way faculty have resources to deal with hostile or disruptive students. But active disagreement in the classroom, even when keenly felt, is in many ways something to be recognized rather than feared and channeled rather than censored, for as President Hamilton's letter states: "Attempts to assuage anger or to demonstrate concern by qualifying our support for free speech serve to cloud what must be a clear message. There is nothing to check into, nothing to investigate."

Free speech must remain the hallmark of higher education, and if the *Northern Light* cannot support that principle, then I submit that its priorities are misplaced and its concerns misguided. More than nearly any other institution on campus, it seems to me, a newspaper ought to support free speech in all forms.

STUDENT/FACULTY FORUM

Professor Jenkins organized a structured discussion between faculty and students about the appropriateness of teachers expressing their political and religious views in the classroom. This essay is a reflection on the planning, execution, and outcome of that event.

Fostering Understanding through Faculty/Student Dialogue

Dr. Patricia Jenkins

*Associate Professor of English
University of Alaska Anchorage*

In the spring semester, in response to the issues raised by the letter, the editorial, and the rebuttal, we held a faculty/student discussion on whether and how we should bring politics and religion into the classroom. Announcements went out over email and the university's daily electronic newsletter, posing several questions for participants to consider: Do professors have the right to make their political positions clear in class? What about classes where politics is not the overt content? Is there no place for politics in classes like math and English?

We convened a five-member panel to present a range of viewpoints. Daniel Kline, Aaron Burkhart, and John Roberson were joined by Assistant Professor of Aviation Technology Michael Buckland and Dean of Students Bruce Schultz. The two students were leaders of student government and media. The two faculty were openly political (their political biases no secret to their students) but from opposite sides of the spectrum. Bruce served as a mediating force, someone who functions as a spokesperson for both student and faculty rights in the classroom.

We sent out two discussion scenarios ahead of time, asking participants to think about the issues these stories raised and to be prepared to discuss them in the forum. The first scenario described a hypothetical English professor who expressed her left-leaning politics overtly in the classroom and who used her own editorial on the war in Iraq as the basis of an in-class discussion. The second described a hypothetical science professor who expressed his religious beliefs in the classroom and who, in the week before final exams, led an optional after-class meeting entitled "Evidence of God in Human Physiology."

At the beginning of the forum, one of the moderators read a statement asking everyone present to behave respectfully and considerately:

During the discussion tonight, statements may be made that you deem offensive. Please be respectful of others and agree that you will not deliberately offend. While it is certainly acceptable to state your opinions and to disagree with others, we ask that you try to respond in a manner that will not offend, intimidate or disparage others, and we ask that you try not to interrupt others or insult anyone personally. If, in fact, your manner causes offense, we encourage you to apologize.

We sent out two discussion scenarios ahead of time, asking participants to think about the issues these stories raised and to be prepared to discuss them in the forum.

Each panelist delivered a two-minute prepared statement, followed by a brief reaction to one of the scenarios. Next, the audience formed dyads to discuss the scenarios or panelist comments among themselves. Finally, panel members and audience participated in a moderated discussion, with the two moderators asking questions, prompting responses, and providing conversational guidance as necessary.

Scenario #1: Politics

English professor Dr. Irene Crenshaw is openly political. She has an Amnesty International sticker on her office door, next to bumper stickers reading “No Millionaire Left Behind” and “Bush’s Last Day: 01-20-09.” She has spoken out in class against the No Child Left Behind program, and she had a commentary published in the *Anchorage Daily News* on the anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, she helps to organize peace demonstrations and was recently seen waving a poster on the corner of Lake Otis and 36th Avenue, just down the street from the western end of the university campus. Clearly, she is opposed to U.S. involvement in Iraq. Clearly, her politics lean to the left.

As an assignment in her English 311 (Advanced Composition) class, Dr. Crenshaw has asked her students to evaluate a U.S. policy, issue, or action. Here is an excerpt from the assignment:

The focus for this assignment is on evaluation—that is, on deciding about the quality of an existing policy, issue, or action. When writers offer an evaluation of something, they are offering an analysis and basing that analysis on criteria. Generally speaking, in your essay, you are answering one or more of the following questions:

- *Is something beneficial or harmful?*
- *Is something good, better, or best?*
- *Should it stay or go?*
- *Should it be revised?*
- *Should it be avoided?*
- *Should it be experienced?*
- *What is the value or significance of something?*

More specifically, you are telling the audience not only that something is beneficial (or whatever), but you are also telling the audience why something is beneficial (or whatever). The “whys” are the criteria.

At the start of class on Tuesday, Dr. Crenshaw described her recent experience organizing and participating in the peace demonstration. She made several references about wishing she could move to Canada, and she asked the class if they liked the new sticker on her door about Bush’s last day. The class was scheduled to discuss their ideas for the essay that day, and Dr. Crenshaw had them practice their evaluation skills by discussing the merits of her recent editorial on the war in Iraq. She believes—and has made this clear to her students—that in a course like this, it is her job to challenge students’ thinking and to mold responsible citizens who participate in the political process.

Discussion of Scenario 1: Politics

For the first scenario, discussion focused on the assignment and the instructor's behavior in the classroom rather than her political activism outside the classroom. Some felt that the assignment was a problem, given the overtly political classroom context she so regularly provided. Others disagreed. A faculty member commented that she probably didn't welcome divergent opinions. Another suggested that students should take risks and engage in the battles offered by such situations.

But taking a risk with a teacher like this, said several students, could mean sacrificing their grade point average. For some, this wasn't acceptable:

- *"If a student doesn't care about their grade, that's one thing. But for a good grade, we will agree with the teacher."*
- *"Taking a risk is detrimental to students. It's better to fall in line."*
- *"How many of these battles do we have to fight? Grades do matter. We want to go to grad school. Sometimes it's just better to shut up and get an A."*

A faculty member wondered if teachers like the hypothetical Dr. Crenshaw might shut students down in class, contributing to their lack of trust and thus fear of speaking up during class discussion. Students made it clear that this was indeed a possible consequence:

- *"Power relations have to be considered. The student with an opposing opinion won't want to speak out."*
- *"The professor doesn't realize how easy it is to drive students away. Even when teachers say they won't be biased, I don't trust them."*
- *"Going up against a professor like this could be a problem."*

Overall, we got mixed reactions about whether or not this professor crossed the line. Technically, perhaps, she didn't: she didn't insist that students represent particular viewpoints. But everyone smelled the potential for trouble.

I think the participants—particularly students—valued a panel that included faculty members from both ends of the political perspective. Many expect all faculty members to be liberal and are surprised to discover that a conservative faculty member even exists.

Scenario #2: Religion

Dr. Dexter Snicknej, an assistant professor of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation at Wasilla University, directs its Human Performance Laboratory. He also teaches exercise physiology, his specialty, to graduate and undergraduate students and supervises research problems and theses.

Dr. Snicknej occasionally refers to his religious beliefs during instructional time, remarks that he prefaces as “personal bias.” Some of his references make clear his understanding of the creative force behind human physiology. In the context of these discussions, he has commented negatively on the mandatory teaching of evolution in public schools. When asked how he handles the academic stresses of research, publishing, promotion, and tenure, Dr. Snicknej has suggested to students that his religious beliefs are more important than academic production, and that’s what helps him cope. He never engages in prayer, reads passages from the Bible, hands out religious tracts, or arranges for guest speakers to lecture on religious topics during instructional time.

Dr. Snicknej is regarded as an excellent professor and was recommended for early tenure. Course evaluations demonstrate he is a capable teacher. He also has an excellent record of publishing, having authored or co-authored more published articles in journals related to his academic discipline than any other assistant professor in the area of health, physical education, and recreation at the university.

Near the end of last semester, he organized an optional after-class meeting for his students and other interested persons during which he lectured on and discussed “Evidences of God in Human Physiology.” Discussion covered various aspects of the human body including the complexity of its design and operation, concluding that man was created by God and was not the byproduct of evolution. The meeting was attended by five students and one professor.

Students complained that the timing of the meeting before final exams created the possibility of a coercive effect. Attendance was voluntary, however, and did not affect grades, as the professor used a blind grading system. Nevertheless, students brought their complaints to the department chair, who brought it to the dean, who drafted a memorandum instructing Dr. Snicknej to refrain from “1) the interjection of religious beliefs and/or preferences during instructional time periods and 2) the optional classes where a ‘Christian perspective’ of an academic topic is delivered.”

Dr. Snicknej’s efforts to have the order rescinded were unsuccessful. The university, upon the advice of counsel, advised him that, as owner of the teaching facilities, the university has the right to establish curriculum and that it had not improperly interfered with academic freedom. The order remains in effect, and Dr. Snicknej has complied with it.

Discussion of Scenario 2: Religion

The second scenario did not generate as much discussion as the first one. Most participants felt that religion didn’t belong in the classroom, but many also thought the hypothetical university overreacted when it instructed the professor to refrain from discussing his religious beliefs in or out of class. The voluntary nature of the after-school meeting and the fact that the professor used a blind

review for evaluation were seen as mitigating factors in this case. Someone remarked that he wasn't surprised the university would take action against this particular professor since conservative Christians are not politically correct in the university setting. Others felt that religion was a grayer area than politics, more difficult to understand, and easier to misconstrue. As one participant put it, "There's much more at stake with religion."

The teachers seemed less uncomfortable with the thought of religion in the classroom, particularly when it is the student who introduces it. One said that a student's religion can be a way to connect with that student. Another talked about featuring Plato's seven core virtues in a lecture. Both seemed to suggest that religion—and values associated with religion—have an inevitable presence and that this can make for teaching moments, not necessarily opportunities to proselytize or shut down those who think differently from the professor.

Evaluation of the Forum

By all measures, the forum accomplished our primary goal of fostering understanding among faculty and students about the role of politics in the classroom. The evidence comes in the form of participant evaluations as well as several follow-up conversations. Five things stand out as being particularly important to the event's success.

Selection of Panel Members. Even though the overt sharing of political views was neither a requirement nor a feature of the forum discussion, I think the participants—particularly students—valued a panel that included faculty members from both ends of the political spectrum. Many expect all faculty members to be liberal and are surprised to discover that a conservative faculty member even exists. I think some came to this event expecting the discussion to be about conservative students vs. liberal faculty members, but Professor Buckland's participation defused that tension and gave us a necessary balance that allowed the conversations to go deeper. Furthermore, the panel included student leaders who had already made themselves heard on these questions. The representative nature of the panel reinforced several key messages: 1) multiple voices do exist at UAA, even among faculty members; 2) these multiple voices can and do respect one another; and 3) student voices matter as well.

The discussion was able to move beyond simple venting to address larger concerns, and it suggested to faculty members that students may be keeping some very important thoughts to themselves.

Opportunity for Audience Participation. Participants welcomed the opportunity to voice their opinions and to engage in discussion with the panelists and each other. To make sure that all voices had the chance to be heard, we used a modified Critical Incident Questionnaire on our evaluation form, asking participants to respond in writing to two questions:

- Was there a moment or incident during the forum that stands out in your mind as particularly significant or engaging? Please describe it, and tell us why you feel this way.

- Do you care to make a comment to any panel participants, members of the audience, or moderators, perhaps a comment that you did not think of during the forum or a comment that you did not share during the forum, but would like to share now?

I was surprised at the degree to which students believed they had to give instructors what they want in order to get a good grade. In the end, despite my protestations that I tried to create a classroom where political differences were recognized, encouraged, and seen as a fruitful means of fostering dialogue, I found that many students simply were intimidated by the prospect of having to articulate a position and defend it against other students or, especially, a faculty member—even if that faculty member was simply playing the devil’s advocate.

Dan Kline
English

Preparedness of Panel. Our strategy of asking panelists to reflect on the scenarios ahead of time resulted in an articulate panel that audience members appreciated. Panelists were able to frame the questions effectively as preface to a substantive, meaningful discussion among all participants.

Respectful, Safe Atmosphere. Participants valued the respectful, safe atmosphere of the forum, achieved in spite of political differences and the sensitive nature of the topics. Students willingly admitted to practices their teachers would find disappointing (such as pleasing their teachers by adopting their viewpoints), and faculty members challenged them about doing so. Participants were able to move the discussion beyond simple venting to address larger concerns, and faculty members learned that students may be keeping some very important thoughts to themselves.

Timeliness of Topic. Both faculty and students expressed an interest in this topic, both before and after the forum. It was covered in the campus newspaper and I also consulted with members of the UAA Union of Students who felt that this was an important and much needed discussion. Before the forum, I emailed some faculty members, asking them to encourage their students to attend. I received quite a few responses

from them about how much such a discussion is needed. The timeliness provided an incentive for attending, but it also provided a purpose for the forum.

It is clear from evaluation forms that the majority of participants found the event to be successful. All but one participant agreed or strongly agreed that the forum helped to foster understanding about the issue of politics in the classroom. Virtually everyone agreed that it would be worth holding again. My own criteria for success included the requirement that all voices should be heard. Accordingly, three types of opportunities were provided for participants to be heard—small group discussions, large group discussions, and the evaluation form, where participants were encouraged to make anonymous comments. If anyone left who did not feel heard or understood, then, for me, the forum would not have been a success.

As I reflected on it later, however, other questions seemed worth considering. What did participants learn? Did anyone change his or her mind? At least one person felt the forum was not a success, and I wonder if this person was hoping for a different kind of resolution. Perhaps this person was a faculty member who wanted students to change their behaviors and attitudes toward overtly political moments in the classroom. Perhaps it was a student who wanted teachers to change *their* attitudes and behaviors and stop being overtly political in the classroom. Because the evaluation forms were anonymous, I'll never know.

My own opinion is that discussions can be successful even if they don't necessarily resolve anything, that satisfaction comes from being heard and, perhaps, understood. Students were challenged to see politics in the classroom as a learning opportunity rather than a threat or a reason to fall in line with the professor's politics. Professors were made aware of the resistance students have to taking risks in the name of a learning opportunity.

Did anyone change his or her mind? Probably not, but that's OK, at least from my professor's perspective. Participants were honest and sincere. A lot of opinions weren't just voiced—they were also heard.



Student/Faculty Forum

A strategy for engaging multiple voices on an issue of mutual concern.

Selecting Panelists

Try to find people who are already engaged in, or experts on, your topic, and who represent different constituencies and points of view.

Ground rules

Clearly state the purpose of your discussion and your ground rules for participating in it. Participants should agree to be respectful of each other, and not to insult, intimidate, interrupt, or disparage others.

Opening statements

Give each panelist a few minutes to make an opening statement.

Hypothetical scenarios

Describe a hypothetical scenario, and ask each panelist to respond to it. Give them the scenarios ahead of time to ensure thoughtful responses.

Audience participation

Break the group up into dyads, and invite participants to react to what they've heard. Then bring them back to the larger group and lead a facilitated discussion. Provide opportunity for anonymous written comments as well to be sure that all voices can be heard.

STUDENT MEDIA ADVISER

Most professors would defend their own freedom of speech in the classroom, that almost sacrosanct space faculty should be afforded to present ideas, political or otherwise. But what about the student media? Do students, including student journalists, have (or should they have) the same freedoms of expression as faculty members on college campuses? Are these freedoms at risk? And if they are at risk, what is the student media's role in engaging in difficult dialogues on college campuses? This essay explores the role of a student media adviser in light of recent Supreme Court and appellate court rulings, especially the 2005 *Hosty v. Carter* and the 2007 *Morse v. Frederick* cases.

You are Free to Reject my Advice

Paola Banchero

Assistant Professor of Journalism and Public Communications

Faculty adviser, the Northern Light

University of Alaska Anchorage

The letter to the editor of the *Northern Light* and the subsequent editorial and response served as an example of the generally respectful relationship between UAA's student newspaper and the students, staff, faculty and administrators they cover. Too often, in other cases, college media become a source of controversy, and powerful people on campus are sometimes threatened enough to try to turn off the spigot by regulating the expression of students and student journalists.

John Roberson's letter to the editor prompted a discussion in the newsroom. Roberson was a well-known, politically conservative student who would later become student body president. Some *Northern Light* staff members agreed with him that instructors inappropriately voiced political viewpoints in their classrooms, and several thought they also marked students down for disagreeing with them. Others had seen no evidence of this. But enough editors thought Roberson's concerns had merit that Executive Editor Aaron Burkhart and another staff member set about to write an editorial maintaining that a professor's political bias could create a hostile environment. The whole staff read the editorial, and it ran with no strong dissension. Unsigned editorials are supposed to represent the consensus views of the paper's editors, but they rarely do so perfectly.

The commentary from Dr. Kline arrived soon after. The piece was approximately three times longer than the standard American Op-Ed piece of about 750 words and about six times longer than the typical letter published in the *Northern Light*. The editor had the option of publishing it as a Soapbox submission, which exists as a forum for anyone in the community—faculty, legislators, citizens, etc.—to publish lengthier commentary. But he chose not to, based on his desire to reserve Soapbox for opinions that hadn't yet been aired in the paper. He then worked with Professor Kline to shorten the piece, waiving the usual 350-word limit on letters to the editor.

This was editing, not disciplining, and an appropriate way to manage the space reserved for news and opinion in the paper. I might have allowed Professor Kline's piece to run as a Soapbox commentary myself, but it would still have needed editing. I backed the editor's choice and position. The *Northern Light* wants diverse commentary, but it also wants pieces that are manageable in length. This is a policy consistent with any newsroom.

Advising Student Journalists

This incident is typical of my relationship with the campus newspaper. The students employed at the *Northern Light* decide the what, when, where, how, and why of its content. As their faculty adviser, I provide ideas, suggestions, and even reprimands when I spot holes in coverage after the paper has been published. But it's up to the students to come up with the content and set editorial policies. The newspaper is not a classroom, but even if it were, I would not read or edit articles prior to their publication without a student journalist making content decisions. My role is to advise, nothing more and nothing less.

I support students' First Amendment rights by having no direct say on content. Advisers to newspapers and broadcast outlets at public universities are guided by the established standards of our profession, expressed in the College Media Advisers' Code of Ethics: "Student media must be free from all forms of external interference designed to regulate its content."¹ Our common refrain is "You are free to reject my advice." Sure, we'd like students to follow through on our suggestions. But we also expect the student media to provide a forum for the expression of opinions and points of view that may be in opposition to established university or administrative policy and even at odds with the opinions of the paper's or the station's own staff. Students (at public institutions at least) must have sole responsibility for a publication's content because the student media are essential to a university community in a democracy.

I support students' First Amendment rights by having no direct say on content.

Student Rights of Free Expression

These issues—student rights of free expression and the responsibility of student media to provide public forums on college campuses—are by no means settled in law or the courts. A recent example is the 2005 U.S. Court of Appeals decision in *Hosty v. Carter*, which said subsidized student newspapers could be controlled by school administrators—a framework that has applied to high school papers for 20 years. It's not just a case about newspaper censorship, though. Any school-sponsored student expressive activity—ranging from student-selected speakers to theatrical productions to the press—could be subject to censorship under the standard set by the Seventh Circuit. That's part of the reason the Illinois Legislature recently passed a law that prohibits school officials from exercising prior restraint—the ability to view content and censor it before it is published. *Hosty* is just one in a series of court rulings stretching back more than 20 years that have frustrated the First Amendment rights of students at the high school and college levels. The Illinois law is just one example of a response to what advisers and journalism educators see as a slide in the rights afforded college students.

A high point in freedom of expression for students came in the 1960s. At the height of the Vietnam War, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of high school and junior high school students to wear black armbands to school to signal their opposition to the war. The majority opinion stated that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gates." Since then, however, several court rulings have narrowed the rights students have to free expression and speech.

¹ <http://www.collegemedia.org>

Those who advise college media are waiting for the case that tests whether the Supreme Court upholds the right of public university students to decide their papers' content, or goes down a path that restricts student freedom of expression. A clue to the worrisome way in which some judges think surfaced in the opinion of Associate Justice Clarence Thomas in *Morse v. Frederick*, the 2007 case also known as "Bong Hits 4 Jesus."

For those who don't remember, in the spring of 2004, the Olympic torch was relayed through the streets of Juneau, Alaska, on its way to open the Games in Salt Lake City. Juneau/Douglas High School Principal Deborah Morse released students to watch the event from across the street. As the

torch went by, a group of students including Joseph Frederick unfurled a large banner that read "Bong Hits 4 Jesus," hoping the provocative but nonsensical statement would get them on television. When Principal Morse directed them to take the banner down, Frederick refused. Morse confiscated the banner and later suspended Frederick. The school superintendent and the school board upheld the suspension. Then Frederick sued, alleging the school board and Morse had violated his First Amendment rights.

When the case made its way to the Supreme Court, five of the nine justices sided with the school district. Justice Thomas went even further with the following observation: "In my view, the history of public education suggests that the First Amendment, as originally understood, does not protect student speech in public schools." His argument looks nostalgically on the period when "teachers taught, and students listened. Teachers commanded, and students obeyed."

Stanley Fish, a law professor at Florida International University and a former college dean, endorsed Thomas' position in his *New York Times* blog last year: "Not only do students not have first amendment rights, they do not have any rights: they don't have the right to express themselves, or have their opinions considered, or have a voice in the

evaluation of teachers, or have their views of what should happen in the classroom taken into account. (And I intend this as a statement about college students as well as high-school students.)"

I find that last statement most disconcerting. If the views of Thomas and Fish prevail, we are all in trouble. I can't train future journalists if they are unable to be full members of our democracy and to act responsibly in executing their First Amendment rights of free expression at a student-run news organization. And if journalists don't have freedom of expression, then future generations of citizens will be saddled with an impoverished understanding of both governmental power and public affairs.

EXCERPT FROM THE CODE OF ETHICS OF THE COLLEGE MEDIA ADVISERS

"Student media must be free from all forms of external interference designed to regulate its content..... In public institutions, the law is quite clear on guaranteeing broad freedom of expression to the students. In private institutions, media advisers should aid in developing governing documents and working with administrative guidelines which foster a free and open atmosphere for students involved in campus media work, if such freedoms do not currently exist."

College Media Advisers
www.collegemedia.org

Journalism, Objectivity, and the Classroom

Professors are sometimes accused of trying to indoctrinate students to conform to their political beliefs. What strikes me is how closely that mirrors the accusations leveled at the news media: they, too, are often dismissed for having an unmistakable—read liberal—bias. This kind of public mistrust tends to neuter both professors and journalists, placing largely unfounded suspicions against our genuine efforts to teach and inform.

When media critic Walter Lippmann called his fellow journalists to task for generalizing about people based on cultural and personal biases, he was trying to professionalize journalism. He wanted journalists to remove their blinders to examine issues critically. Objectivity didn't mean that journalists were to give credence to any and all viewpoints. In fact, it has less to do with journalists and much more to do with their work habits. Journalism, Lippmann wrote, should adopt "a common intellectual method and a common area of valid fact." In other words, he wanted journalists to emulate the rationality of the scientific method in their reporting.

Nearly a hundred years later, we live in a time when the most polarizing of figures hold the national spotlight, and when those who practice journalism objectively, in the mold of Lippmann, find their audience narrowing. We live at a time when Michael Moore can present as fact a highly biased and superficial film like *Fahrenheit 9/11* and it can be called a documentary. We live at a time when David Horowitz can attack academic freedom with a campaign of manipulation, buying advertising space in college newspapers, filling it with provocative content such as "Ten Reasons Why Reparations for Slavery is a Bad Idea," and then watching student journalists squirm. If they run the ads, they'll have outraged readers crying for apologies; if they don't run them, they'll be attacked for their own "assault on free speech."

Professors and journalists both trade in ideas, in knowledge. But people often make up their minds before they gain knowledge. Thus, both professors, who are charged with developing students into citizens, and journalists, who are charged with helping citizens better understand their world, should remember that they are bound to come in for criticism when they try to expand their respective audiences' perspectives. Relying on our biases in the classroom or in the press hurts our cause. Some truths will upset our audience, but we must promote an atmosphere in which discomfort can give way to real understanding. An atmosphere of free expression is the best—indeed, it is the only —place for that.

I can't train future journalists if they are unable to be full-fledged members of our democracy and to act responsibly in executing their First Amendment rights of free expression at a student-run news organization.

It may not be desirable—or even possible—to find professors without ideology or classrooms without politics. But it is possible to hold those ideologies and politics in respectful tension, and to create classrooms and campus events that are safe places in which those ideas can be discussed. This essay outlines a few considerations for creating such spaces.

Making Our Classrooms Safe for Ideas

Dr. Patricia Jenkins

*Associate Professor of English
University of Alaska Anchorage*

Aside from the items on our office doors, the buttons we may wear, the letters to the editor we may write, and the after-school activities we may participate in, some teachers among us are also openly political in the classroom. We are “openly political” when we make known our place on the general continuum of conservative to liberal and when we speak openly from this position about ideas, issues, public figures and events, and social and intellectual trends.

The opportunities for being openly political in the classroom abound: through our assignments, in our written and oral responses to student work, and during class discussions. Many of us, in fact,

see just about everything we do as necessarily political, even if it doesn’t always seem so to students, as for example when our viewpoints and positions align themselves with mainstream values. For some of us, much of what we do as teachers is enhanced by the values and ideas that place us somewhere on the general continuum.

When I say that some of us see virtually everything we do as necessarily political, I’m speaking from the perspective of a social-epistemic rhetorician who believes that we cannot know reality apart from language. While reality exists apart from language, it is language—a human construct—that allows us to interact with it. Language does not record reality, nor is it a referent for it. Language is not a transparent medium or a signaling device separate from reality. Language is reality.

Furthermore, language is always already ideological. In other words, when we use language, we are inevitably political. It isn’t always obvious because what we say may support the dominant ideology and so may seem natural and normal rather than a particular version of reality.

If language is always ideological, and if we use language when we teach, it follows then, as James Berlin puts it, “that a way of teaching is never innocent.” In other words, we teach not only a particular subject matter; we also endorse ideas about the nature of things. Some ways of teaching

Some students claim that they feel intimidated by openly political teachers, and so they align themselves with our viewpoints and positions because they feel that their grades are at stake.

are more self-consciously aware of their ideology than others. If some do not seem particularly ideological, it is most likely because the ideology of the class endorses widely accepted values. These are the classes that might seem innocent or neutral.

Regardless of whether students can figure out the ideology of our classrooms, it is clear that many do not find our way of teaching to be innocent. This is especially true for those of us who might be considered openly political. Some students consider politics in the classroom as off topic, irrelevant, and just plain not educational. Others feel intimidated by openly political teachers, aligning themselves with our viewpoints and positions because they think they have to in order to get a desirable grade. As one student put it, disagreeing with the professor is just too risky. As another has said, “I find it frustrating when professors grade my idea instead of how I present it. It makes me hesitant to present ideas that are contrary.”

An Internet search easily provides evidence of how many university students nationwide feel the need to expose and demonize openly political teachers. A quick read of the website *Politics in the Classroom*¹ makes it clear that students see openly political teachers as having intentions to indoctrinate them and perhaps bully them in the process. This website, started by a student in 2004, describes itself as a place where students can anonymously document political comments and actions of professors. Its site administrator claims that opinionated political commentary in nonpolitical classes is often “a deliberate and clear attempt by the teacher to encourage and mold the political minds of the students. Afraid to rebut the teacher’s positions, many students remain silent to protect both their grade and their reputation in the eyes of the teacher.”

A recent posting caught my eye. The student was praising an otherwise “absolutely wonderful” teacher who would “not stop spouting his political rhetoric.”

I suppose if you agree with him you wouldn't mind. My biggest problem with his bias was that he resorted to name calling about those who might not agree with him. What he didn't know at the time was that he was referring to 1/2 of his class. Believe me, we spoke about it after each class. He began every class by reading newspaper clippings and mocking those in the article or those who would dare to disagree with his opinions. He would have been one of my favorite teachers if he would have just stepped down from his “bully pulpit” and simply taught the class.

Yes, some openly political teachers do cross a line and may perhaps need to become acquainted with their institution’s policies regarding harassment-free learning environments, as did the teacher in the posting above. But those of us who do not cross that line—that is, those of us with good educational intentions—need to take this seriously before we find ourselves on hiring committees that must consider a candidate’s place on the general continuum rather than his or her fit with our departments.

We don't bully or intimidate students. We don't name call or disallow contrary opinions. We don't ask that they think as we do. We just ask that they think.

¹ <http://www.politicsintheclassroom.com/>

I am among those who believe that the goal of a university education is to provide a liberal education that enables students to think critically and creatively; gives them an understanding of the core ideas that shape the physical, social, cultural, economic, and political world in which they live; enables them to see the connections among seemingly disparate things; and equips them to be life-long learners. This goal may be at odds with other, more practical (read career-related) ideas about the purpose of a university education, many of which are subscribed to by students.

Paulo Freire and the Banking Concept of Education

Paulo Freire, a native of Brazil who taught many sugar cane workers to read and write in the early 1960s, believed that education could transform illiterate citizens into people who could change society—but only if educators change their teaching styles and use more of what we now refer to as active learning methods. The widely anthologized second chapter of his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* criticizes the typical student-teacher relationship as a passive one in which the teacher tries to fill the students with information as if they are empty containers, an image sometimes referred to as the banking concept of education. In the passive learning model that he decries, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.”

I am also among those who believe that by providing students with a liberal education we are serving society. As educator Stephen Rosenstone put it:

“Civil societies are served by universities that produce citizens who think and reason, who raise questions, who can critically evaluate alternative arguments and proposals, who are deliberate and reflective. Civil societies are served by citizens whose minds have been opened to multiple points of view and who are prepared to engage in thoughtful debate.”

Many of us, then, feel that it’s OK to be openly political in the interests of providing a liberal education and serving society. We feel that students and society benefit not so much from our particular views but rather from knowing how and why we arrived at them and how they connect with our discipline and our identities (as a professor of English, for example). We don’t bully or intimidate students. We don’t name call or disallow contrary opinions. We don’t ask that they think as we do. We just ask that they think.

Given the concern for the wrong sort of politics in the university, the kind that would require political balance in departments (see also discussion of ABOR, page 206), I would like to suggest several things so that we can make our classrooms safe for ideas.

Consider our audience. Young students may be clinging to beliefs handed down from their parents and communities; their viewpoints and positions may be underexposed and still forming. Others may not be

comfortable with active disagreement; it might feel disrespectful for them to disagree with the professor or each other in the class. Some may have completely different ideas about the purpose of a university education, and many probably expect what Paulo Freire refers to as the “banking concept” approach. Furthermore, most of them may be largely unaware of the histories, agendas, scopes, and methodologies of our disciplines. We shouldn’t assume that they share our understand-

ing about and passion for what we do and why we do it; nor should we assume that they understand that disciplines have different ways of making knowledge. Our ways may be a new world order for them.

Think—and teach—differently about facts vs. opinions. Americans tend to have a bad view of opinions and a good view of facts. Many go so far as to claim that opinions have no place in argument at all. You can sometimes stop a conversation cold just by saying, ‘Well, that’s just your opinion.’ The implication is that opinions aren’t very important: facts are verifiable and belong to everybody, while opinions are unverifiable and belong only to individuals. Ancient rhetoricians, however, valued opinions and understood them as shared by many members of a community. We also might understand them as shared values rather than features of a person’s identity. This understanding makes opinions both important and valid, though obviously still open to challenge and to change. Argument becomes a matter of challenging the dominant opinion or defending the minority opinion, not by attacking or defending a person’s personality or character but by questioning or asserting values, beliefs, and practices of our communities.

Contextualize our viewpoints and positions. If we teach that opinions represent values shared by members of a community, then we should contextualize them. In other words, when we decide to be openly political, we could also openly connect ourselves to a particular community. I may speak, for example, as a woman who grew up in a Catholic household during the 1950s or as a member of an academic community that rejects creationism as science. Rather than saying, “Politician X is a big fat idiot,” I might say, “As a member of a labor union and strong believer that unions are necessary, I feel that Politician X’s labor policies make the workplace more dangerous. He’s a big fat idiot in the eyes of labor unions!” We should also show students how they can connect their own opinions to community values. This may push them to think on a deeper level — to understand what values they are espousing and rejecting by holding the opinion they do. When placed in the context of shared community values, our openly politically behavior may feel less like a put-down of those who do not agree with us. Students may come to feel that disagreement is less of a personal attack and more of a matter of clashing community values.

Separate the how from the idea. Some students feel that we don’t separate their idea from how they make their arguments. While it may be difficult to consider these two things separately, we can consider what they write or say in a way that privileges the how over the idea. My recommendation for responding to papers and presentations is that we first describe their idea and what they do in their paper or presentation (e.g., “In your paper, you argue x on the basis of x, y, and z. You use thus



The Questions and Categories exercise is one way to reveal the values that underlie our opinions.



The Identity Groups exercise is one way to make visible the variety of groups individuals may identify with.

and such to make your case.”). Then we tell them what their oppositional audiences will react to, construing the audiences in terms of communities. Finally, we suggest what they may consider doing to make their argument effective. This is the difficult part because they may be arguing, in effect, that the sky is purple and the earth is flat. OK. We can tell them what their ideas imply (the sky is not blue and the earth is not round), and we can tell them what they need to establish in order to make that argument.

When we decide to be openly political, we could also openly connect ourselves to a particular community.

Take measures when possible to prevent others from crossing the line. In the spring of 2003, after the U.S. invaded Iraq, several tutors in our Writing Center confided in me that quite a few students broke into tears during tutorials because their English composition instructor had voiced strong opposition to the war during class. The students felt silenced and criticized. As the writing program administrator, I felt compelled to say something to instructors, to tell them that they were out of line somehow. I was torn, however, because I shared their view. I asked myself, how can I tell these

people to shut up already and teach? I needed to strike a balance between their right to freely express their opinions and their obligation to respect all student voices. I decided it was most effective to speak as a community member to other members; this allowed me to speak to values we share. Once I set up the rhetorical situation this way, I was able to write a memo that pointed out their crossing of the line without attacking anyone personally.

Have difficult dialogues about difficult dialogues. Faculty/student forums outside the classroom can shed a lot of light on what’s at issue for students and teachers. After our own forum on politics in the classroom (see page 177), many participants commented that they appreciated most that this conversation took place, which suggests to me that this meta-talk probably does not occur often enough.

MEMO: TO ALL FACULTY TEACHING FIRST YEAR COMPOSITION

I am writing in response to some student complaints: Some students have revealed that they feel uncomfortable in classes when instructors discuss their opposition to a U.S. invasion of Iraq. I do not know which classes or teachers these students have complained about, and I don't plan to find out. I also know that students sometimes misconstrue what we say.

I am not asking you to refrain from expressing your opinion openly, but I am asking you to keep in mind your responsibility to maintain a harassment-free learning environment. According to the *Student Handbook*, "The University of Alaska Anchorage is a community that cherishes the free and open exchange of ideas in the pursuit of knowledge. Maintaining this freedom and openness requires the presence of safety and trust; it requires the absence of coercion, intimidation, and exploitation." Upholding these values can be especially challenging when we feel strongly about something.

My purpose here is not to tell you what to teach, how to dress, or when to speak, but to consider providing an atmosphere in your classrooms defined by tolerance and the free exchange of ideas.

Some teachers have allowed students to write a one-minute anonymous reaction at the end of class as a form of Critical Incident Questionnaire. Here are some example prompts:

- Is there something you would like to add to today's discussion?
- Is there an idea that was not addressed in class today that you feel ought to be heard?

This technique may allow students who feel silenced to speak out, and it may allow you to monitor your ability to maintain a classroom atmosphere defined by tolerance and the free exchange of ideas.

Patricia Jenkins
English

SOCIAL JUSTICE

“Teachers don’t have time to be activists!”

You spend a whole year developing new skills and preparing yourself to engage controversy more effectively, and still it’s possible to be derailed by a point of view you hadn’t considered or a voice you didn’t expect. In the spring, two Education colleagues collaborated on a public presentation of the Mexican documentary film *Granito de arena* (*Grain of Sand*). Their intent was to engage students, faculty, and community members in an exploration of the impact of globalization on public schooling around the world. Although they knew these issues might be controversial in some circles, in this situation they were expecting a thoughtful discussion with a sympathetic audience of like-minded education professionals. Instead, they were blindsided by an audience response that was confrontational and dismissive of the film’s major issues and relevance to public education in the U.S. In this essay, the two discuss their reactions to this event. One of the pair later showed the film to her class of undergraduate students where she got a different response altogether.

A Grain of Sand in Alaska

Dr. Virginia Juettner

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*Assistant Professor of Adult Education
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Throughout our *Difficult Dialogues* training, we were encouraged to think globally but act locally: to help our students connect regional, national, and global issues to their everyday lives and the future of their local communities. Two of us decided to present the documentary film *Granito de arena* (*Grain of Sand*) to prompt a discussion of the impact of globalization on public schooling around the world.

The film tells the story of a decades-long teacher resistance movement in Mexico. As the blurb from Las Americas Film Network puts it: “For over 20 years, global economic forces have been dismantling public education in Mexico, but always in the constant shadow of popular resistance. *Granito de arena* is the story of that resistance—the story of hundreds of thousands of public school teachers whose grassroots, nonviolent movement took Mexico by surprise, and who have endured brutal repression in their 25-year struggle for social and economic justice in Mexico’s public schools.”

The film tackles an array of tough issues, including poverty, the impacts of free-trade agreements between the United States and Mexico, the role of transnational corporations in public schooling, and governmental control of the workforce via privatization of the school system and high-stakes testing. It explores these issues through the lens of public school teachers acting as political activists and advocates for change. We hoped it would serve as the starting point for discussion of education in the United States, the impact of globalization on curriculum and educational outcomes, and the role of the community in shaping the education provided in schools.

The event was scheduled for a late Friday afternoon on the UAA campus, a time when classes are few and parking is easy. It was advertised to the two campus communities via various electronic mailing lists. Colleagues were asked to share it with others who might find it of interest. Despite the email reminders and an advance polling of the education faculty regarding their interest and the most convenient time, fewer than 10 people showed up. The audience included one faculty member, two alumni, several graduate students, and two Anchorage school teachers, both active members of the Anchorage Teachers Union. The lecture hall was large enough to seat 75; the handful of people in attendance scattered themselves throughout the room, two near the back, two near the front, a couple on the left, one or two on the right.

The Lights Went Up.....

When the film ended, we invited the audience to respond. We were hoping for a substantive discussion on globalization and education, but we got something else.

“How do you intend to use this film?” one of the teachers challenged us. “You’re not planning to show it to pre-service teachers, I hope.”

The other teacher agreed. “This is not a good film for pre-service teachers. It will give them the idea that protest marches are the thing to do. But they’re not. They don’t work. They just piss people off.”

Another audience member suggested that because the film was about Mexico, it had no relevance to public education in the United States. “I’d like to help those people down there,” she said. “But our experiences here are completely different.”

Another audience member seemed to sum up the group feeling. “Teachers don’t have time to be activists,” he said.

Our Reactions: A Dialogue

Virginia: Even though I thought I was prepared for controversy, I was stunned by these reactions, especially coming from veteran educators familiar with the issues. After almost two semesters of actively engaging in civil discourse in my classrooms, I lost my objectivity in an instant and became

Even though I thought I was prepared for controversy, I was stunned by these reactions, especially coming from veteran educators familiar with the issues. After almost two semesters actively engaging in civil discourse in my classrooms, I lost my objectivity in an instant and became defensive.

defensive. I replied to the second responder that the civil rights movement successfully demonstrated peaceful protests as a tool for social change. I knew I had lost my stance as an objective moderator, but I just couldn't resist arguing with comments I felt were intended to shut down our discourse. I was especially concerned for my graduate students in the audience, all new pre-service or what I would call 'emerging' teachers. What were they thinking after hearing these opening statements about the film?

Diane: I was embarrassingly at a loss on how to proceed. The reactions were totally unanticipated. I watched Virginia try to turn the tone of the dialogue to a positive note. Despite her thoughtful and articulate redirecting of the comments, the audience was unwilling to engage in a substantive

discussion of either the film or the global forces impacting public education. They did not see the Mexican experience resonating with their own. It seemed neither relevant nor credible to them.

The greatest lesson for me was that I was still the teacher in this space and I should have spent time preparing the audience to engage in discussion.

Virginia: The discussion went on in a similar vein for about 30 minutes, with neither Diane nor I able to turn the tide or draw out any deeper thinking. The strong comments at the beginning had effectively shut down the possibility of going anywhere else with that group. I went home believing that I hadn't succeeded in conducting a deep and rich discussion on this important film and wondering why veteran educators would suggest censoring it, i.e., restricting its use to practicing educators. It wasn't until much later

that it occurred to me to wonder if one difference between me and them was my participation in this *Difficult Dialogues* project. Perhaps I had become open to a possibility that they had not.

Diane: Upon reflection, I attribute the lack of substantive discussion to my unexamined assumptions about facilitating difficult dialogue in a public venue versus in my classroom. In the classroom I anticipate that students will hold divergent views, and I prepare for discussions accordingly. But I assumed that a public event, being voluntary, would attract like-minded people. My wise APU colleague suggested that we use a brief writing exercise to help participants gather their thoughts after viewing the film, but I overruled that suggestion, and we simply opened the floor instead. I did not prepare questions in advance to prompt dialogue, naively assuming the audience would be in agreement that global forces were undermining the democratic ideals of public education. I thought we would simply have a great and agreeable discussion about the similarities between the two countries and the role of teachers to counteract the global forces.

My second assumption was that people at a public event are time-conscious and anxious to get to the film or the speaker. In the classroom I intentionally devote time to activities that foster positive relations among students and try to create a space that feels safe for open discussion. I assumed the public audience would have little interest or patience for activities to get to know one another or to set the tone of the space. I always ask my students why they are in my class and what they hope to learn. The public group was small enough to have taken time to introduce one another and briefly state our interest in the film and topic, but I didn't do that. If this had been my class, I would have asked students to move closer together. I believe sitting in closer proximity and introductions would

have helped to foster a more civil discourse when the film ended. But again, I didn't do that with the public group.

Third, the opening comment from the audience was fairly aggressive and definitive. It left no room for the kind of discussion I was anticipating. The speaker was in the back row, at the exit, and difficult to see. It occurred to me afterwards that I assume that I have more directive authority in the classroom than in a public event. In the classroom, I exercise it.

Virginia: I, too, assumed that the film would be well received by our audience of professors and practicing teachers, who would easily see parallels between the Mexican education issues and our own No Child Left Behind policies. I assumed that the audience would foster a critical stance and intellectual discussion and that this event would be a safe place for a deep discussion of provocative issues among like-minded colleagues. After all, I knew all but two of the participants. Yet none of these assumptions turned out to be true. I am still not sure why my thinking was so far off base.

Diane: The greatest lesson for me was that I was still the teacher in this space, and I should have spent time preparing the audience to engage in discussion. This could have been done as Virginia suggested with reflective writing, or with dyads or other small group discussion techniques. I should have spent time engaging the participants before the film to get a better sense of who they were and why they had decided to attend this session. When I think back on it now, I wonder if our audience (all educators themselves) had expected us to prepare them for discussion, and if the fact that we did not contributed to the unexpectedly negative response. I still like to think they came willing to engage and open to be engaged in the topic.

Virginia: In the classroom I never begin a difficult dialogue without practicing some reflective writing and/or artistic response exercises first. Giving students a chance to respond before the discussion begins enhances both their thinking and the quality and depth of the discussion. If I could go back in time, I would ask the participants to form groups of three and write two-minute notes to each other. This strategy would allow each participant the opportunity to write and respond to two other group members before discussion. Perhaps grouping students with practicing educators would have resulted in a more personal sharing of written viewpoints and set the stage for a successful discussion.

I will never again assume that I know the audience and be unprepared for the unanticipated response. I will attempt to prepare for redirection and reframing after listening to the audience and acknowledging their responses. I did not acknowledge or honor the initial comments. Acknowledgement might have modeled the critical stance I hoped would characterize the session.

In the classroom I never begin a difficult dialogue without practicing some reflective writing and/or artistic response exercises first. Giving students a chance to respond before the discussion begins enhances both their thinking and the quality and depth of the discussion.

Classroom follow-up

Within a week of the public event, Virginia held a follow-up discussion with the APU graduate students who had attended the showing. In the safer, more comfortable environment of their shared classroom, these students were able to engage in the discussion both professors had been hoping for. They made thoughtful connections between education in Mexico and the U.S. without suggesting that U.S. teachers need to wage protest marches. Most of the discussion focused on the differences and similarities between the two educational systems and the potential of outside agencies like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization to impact public education.

One student reflected on the film in a final course assignment, a portfolio that illustrated her learning, experiences and reflections for the semester.

The value of engaging difficult dialogues in the classroom, however, was affirmed using techniques that foster trust, deep thinking, and discussion with peers after careful preparation. The written comments of students clearly exemplify the kind of reflective thinking needed to enhance civil discourse.

“This film visually illustrated the struggle of teachers in Mexico who advocate for adequate support of public education; pointing out the impact of our global economy and the influence of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (in this case, undermining the public education system in Mexico). The ideas of protesting and advocating for community control to let people shape their own destinies was thought provoking . . . our discussion on localizing to Alaska and issues around rural versus urban teaching; standardized testing; and the No Child Left Behind initiative seemed to draw parallels and left me pondering the question: What is most important to teachers?”

Curious about how other pre-service teachers would respond, Virginia also showed it to her junior-level undergraduate Literacy and Communication class. When the film ended, before discussion, she asked students to complete a quick writing exercise. This group of students had been exposed to *Difficult Dialogue* methods, including quick writes, for two semesters. They

also practiced weekly reflective writing in response to readings and classroom activities, usually as a prequel to discussion. Samples of student written responses to the film are below.

- *“My initial thought was that what I was seeing was not even comparable to the lack of funding that we often complain about in the United States. Then, it occurred to me that the struggle to fight for equal education ultimately lies within us, regardless if it’s fighting for money, materials, buildings, or opportunities. What is happening in Mexico is happening all over the world—even in rural areas or small areas in Eastern Kentucky or in New York. The similarities are overwhelming.*

- *“When we watch TV and see Ford, Coca Cola, and all of these other corps. building schools we think “Yes!” But now I realize this is just a way of privatizing schools. These things that happened in Mexico are happening here! They withhold our funding until we improve our scores so our people fit the mold they have set! When we allow this to happen we take the importance of wisdom away from education. We have to stop looking @ our world as a fractured surface with walls separating us and begin to see it as 1 world, 1 people who all have a right to a free and informed education. It’s not about \$ or politics. It’s about making the lives of every person better, safe, free, and worth living!”*
- *“The video validated how governmental and political influences affect people of all diversities socially, economically, spiritually, and environmentally. The struggle that the teachers faced is all too common to the oppressed and indignities of others before them. In teaching, there is and has been a struggle over issues involving the intents, interests, and decisions imposed onto the communities. Greed and domination play a big part in how the effectiveness of an institution burdened a people to achieve their agenda.”*

These students—undergraduates, novices—uncovered many of the issues that we had hoped to discuss in the public showing. They recognized that the film exemplifies issues and needs occurring in many countries (including their own), connected it with their evolving philosophies of education, and wondered whether they would be able to follow their own beliefs in the classroom. They recognized similar power struggles in the U.S. and discussed why the teachers in Mexico have been gathering to protest while teachers in the U.S. seem more accepting of these influences on their classrooms and teaching practices. They not only got it, but they were able to talk about it as well.

Shared Writing

A reflective writing technique that encourages personal reflection, provides opportunities for all voices to be heard, and leads to deeper, more thoughtful conversations.

Set it up.

- Divide the class into groups of three or four.
- Provide a prompting question, and ask students to write an initial response for two or three minutes.

Pass it around.

- Ask students to pass their paper to the next student in the group, read what the first student wrote, and write a response for two or three minutes on that same piece of paper.
- Repeat the procedure until each student has responded to all the others in the group.

Start talking.

- Return the papers to their originators, take a few minutes for everyone to read the written discussion they find there, and then open up the question for oral discussion.

This technique was adapted from Harvey Daniels.

Final Thoughts

The differences are striking: between public event and classroom discussion, between giving participants the time and space to respond on their own and just diving right in to the discussion, between shutting down a conversation and opening it up.

The public event was presented to a mixed group of students, professors, and community members who had never worked together before. Audience members did not know one another. We did not take the time at the beginning to set ground rules for civil discourse or otherwise prepare them for the film, so when some individuals had strong reactions the conversation became limited to those reactions. The first comment was aggressive, and we were not able to turn it to a more positive note and substantive discussion.

In contrast, the APU undergraduate students were a cohesive group characterized by trust, friendship, and a common mission of completing the education program and becoming teachers. They had been exposed to *Difficult Dialogues* methods, including quick writes and reflective responding, for two semesters. They were familiar with the techniques, vested in the process, and enjoyably engaged in both the writing and the discussions that followed.

Public events with disparate groups of participants are high-risk activities for entering into controversial discussion. There is no time to establish trust, no time for thoughtful reflection, and not many reasons to share your deepest thoughts with strangers. The value of engaging difficult dialogues in the classroom, however, was affirmed using techniques that foster trust, deep thinking, and discussion with peers after careful preparation. The written comments of students clearly exemplify the kind of reflective thinking needed to enhance civil discourse. We will continue to use these techniques in our classes to grow good thinkers, reflective writers, and socially conscious citizens and teachers while improving our ability to take on difficult topics in public forums.

Criminal justice issues are rarely, if ever, decided based on research and empirical evidence alone. Public opinion and public policy are also based on moral beliefs, values, and assumptions about human nature that may or may not correspond to the evidence. This essay discusses the need to acknowledge and confront underlying assumptions in the process of engaging controversies in criminal justice.

Controversies in Criminal Justice

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As a field of inquiry, criminal justice is replete with inherently controversial issues: the death penalty, gun control, marijuana legalization, prostitution decriminalization, and the balance between due process and crime control, to name just a few. Beyond these public policy debates are differences in explanations of why crime happens and why some people commit crime or become offenders. At the heart of these theoretical discussions are fundamental questions about human nature. Are we born with a propensity for evil that must be socialized out of us? Or are we born essentially good or as blank slates, as people who only do bad things because of bad environments and disparities in society?

In the field of criminal justice (like other social sciences), knowledge is derived from two sources: facts and evidence generated through the research process; and values and assumptions about human nature and how society should be organized. Controversies also arise from these sources. When a discipline has amassed enough empirical evidence about a particular question (assuming the evidence is fairly univocal), the issue is no longer controversial, at least to most professionals or experts. But students and large segments of the general public may lack the experience, knowledge, and skills to look at these issues in the same kind of depth; what is controversial to them (e.g., the death penalty) may be pretty much nondebatable for criminologists, whereas issues that are controversial to criminologists (such as criminal careers and crime specialization) may seem uninteresting to students.

It is the nature of social science research that there are competing claims and ambiguous findings. The layperson's or introductory-level student's inability to evaluate research on criteria such as sample, reliability, validity, appropriateness of statistical tests, and so on makes them vulnerable to persuasion from other sources. For example, mass media coverage of crimes committed by sex offenders, particularly those who victimize children, focuses on extremely rare incidents, such as the Polly Klaas and Megan Kanka cases. Both of these victims were sexually assaulted and killed by sex offenders who had been released from prison but were under correctional supervision in the community. The fact that the overwhelming majority of children who are sexually abused by adults are victimized by family members or friends is glossed over. Similarly, it is known by criminologists that

sex offenders have among the lowest rates of re-arrest, yet the average person on the street probably believes the opposite. If they think of the typical sex offender as a child molester who abducts young girls from their bedrooms at night or as a deviant with uncontrollable urges, it's not surprising that they might see mandatory sex offender registries as important mechanisms to increase community safety. Most research, however, has not supported the efficacy of these registries; they don't seem to reduce recidivism or increase public protection. Nevertheless, few public officials are willing to

speak against them because of their widespread emotional and public support.

What seems to happen in many classrooms is a clash between acknowledgment and respect for expert authority and the naïve assumption of the equality of ideas.

Ought professors to encourage discussion about criminal justice issues that have been resolved empirically? If there are no grounds for debate other than moral beliefs and ideology, is it even appropriate to address the matter in a social science classroom? We argue that it is especially important to focus on these issues because so much public opinion—and public policy—is shaped by moral beliefs, values, and assumptions about human nature. In many decisions about criminal justice policy, facts derived from rigorous research and policy analysis are trumped by unsupported beliefs about what causes crime and how it

can be best prevented. How else to explain policies such as Megan's Law (sex offenders' registries) and "Three Strikes and You're Out" mandatory sentencing? The former is based on faulty assumptions about sex offenders while the latter assumes harsher punishments to be a deterrent against serious and violent crimes. In both instances, shared public beliefs, amplified by the media, are used to justify policies that lack evidence-based support.

If students lack the skills to evaluate claims empirically, they also seem reluctant to take the word of those with some authority to advise them. The proliferation of blogging and social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube has made it possible for even the most ill-informed and asinine ramblings to be elevated to a footing nearly equal to that of the measured opinions of specialists and experts. We should not find it surprising, then, that students question assertions of their professors and texts. On the one hand, skepticism is something to be nurtured; a questioning citizenry is the foundation of a good democracy, after all. On the other hand, it is troubling if this skepticism is fueled not by a careful weighing of the evidence supporting a particular view, but by an assumption that all views are created equal and thus are equally likely to be valid.

This troubling assumption derives from the point of view that everyone is biased and everyone has an agenda, therefore any opinion is as good as any other, and we're each entitled to our own. While it is certainly the case that scientists and scholars are frequently not as objective as they purport to be, this is not an adequate reason for the discounting of authority and devaluing of expertise that seems increasingly prevalent among university students and the general public.

What seems to happen in many classrooms is a clash between acknowledgment and respect for expert authority and the naïve assumption of the equality of ideas. Professors may presume their statements and perspectives will be granted a more privileged position by virtue of their greater knowledge. They are likely to value the gradual accumulation of evidence, and the expertise and skill of those who conduct the research to produce this evidence. They are also likely to accept that some people know more than others, and that there are answers, even if not absolute.

Many contemporary students, on the other hand, seem not to value the slow, disciplined efforts necessary to understand complex or technical issues. Little in contemporary popular culture reinforces the importance of knowledge mastery. Many students seem actually to reject the value of knowledge, questioning whether it really matters much if you do not know. As one student stated, “I had to read this twice and I still don’t understand it all...I really think this is unnecessarily difficult.” Couple this resistance to studying complex academic material with a subtle anti-intellectualism and a declining attention span in the culture at large, and it becomes a challenge to orchestrate informed discussion of controversial issues. The acceptance of anti-rationalism in public discussions, such as the demand to include intelligent design in science courses, only strengthens the assumption that facts are superfluous and belief is all you need.

The view that everyone has an agenda and is biased to some large or small degree is arguable. But the naïve or cynical adoption of this view, to the exclusion of other perspectives, allows one to easily dismiss the messenger no matter how credible or above reproach. This perspective goes beyond the cynical interpretation of or skeptical reaction to news reports or research results; indeed, it alters students’ views of real-world problems and helps them avoid wrestling with controversial issues. A classroom incident illustrates this point. We showed our Justice Policy class the film *Dead Man Walking* (and the Frontline documentary about the book on which it is based) about Sister Helen Prejean’s work with death row inmates. Some students questioned her actions, claiming that she was doing what she was doing as a way to get attention, to receive rewards, and so on. We find it hypercritical and judgmental to believe that everyone, even a Catholic nun who opposes the death penalty and has taken vows of poverty and obedience, is working an angle, has an ulterior motive, and is acting always in his or her own self-interest.

Dismissing the messenger as a self-serving opportunist allows students to ignore the more distressing issues about the implementation of the death penalty presented in the film. Similarly, evidence that points to racial or ethnic bias in sentencing seems to generate little outrage and few calls for change. A cynical and skeptical filter of all information coupled with the ignorance or dismissal of evidence has a way of diffusing controversial issues of their substance. What used to have the power to shock and surprise is now perceived as normative and nothing to get excited about. These attitudes lead inevitably to apathy, i.e., “That’s how it is, how it always has been, and always will be.” With this world view, nothing is controversial. Certainly nothing is controversial to a degree that change or intervention may be required.

If you rely only on sweeping assumptions about human nature or the natural order of things, you will be unlikely to try to improve the situation. If you are cynical, you are never surprised, and if you are skeptical, you are always suspicious. If you respond with apathy when presented with an example of injustice, it is a small step to conclude that there is no reasonable solution. If there is no solution, there is nothing to worry about and no reason to interrupt the endless pursuit of our own pleasures and personal concerns.

A cynical and skeptical filter of all information coupled with the ignorance or dismissal of evidence has a way of diffusing controversial issues of their substance.

What is the solution to the subtle anti-intellectualism and cynicism we see all around us? We offer the following points for consideration.

- Focus on the assumptions embedded in the various positions surrounding a controversial issue, especially those students may unknowingly make as they express their own views on the same issues.
- Use structured discussions that explicitly identify the ground rules for engaging in civil discussion.
- Distinguish what is controversial: is the debate over the empirical findings of research or the values and ideologies of advocates?
- Consider using course readers that are specifically designed to present more than one side of a particular controversy. Remember that there are frequently more than two sides.
- Debate the issues, using the forms of structured in-class debates detailed in Chapter 2.
- Be willing to experiment. Consider bringing in first-person narratives, guest speakers, even a book by a compelling author. These strategies may seem unscientific to many professors; after all, the plural of anecdote is not data. Yet if our goal is to break through students' cocoons of indifference, perhaps we ought to put a human face to statistics and theory.



For more on staging classroom debates, see page 53. For a strategy based on the *Justice Talking* radio show format, see page 64.



As I read the preceding essay, I was reminded of what Paulo Freire called “critical consciousness” and what City University of New York Professor Ira Shor calls “critical pedagogy,” which he defines as “[h]abits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath the surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root cause, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.” Students who achieve critical consciousness no longer say, “That’s how it is, how it always has been, and always will be” as they have done in the Criminal Justice courses described by Drs. Everett and Chamard. They believe that things can be changed—and that they can make a difference.

The Justice students may be experiencing what Shor calls forms of false consciousness: ways of thinking and being that predispose people to accept society as unproblematic and unchangeable. Shor identifies several categories of false consciousness, including:

- Reification: A belief in a fixed and unchangeable social and economic system and the inability to see systematic wholes. The pursuit of human solidarity would be considered a waste of time. Material acquisition provides fulfillment as opposed to doing things—particularly with others—to change the system.
- Pre-scientific thinking: A belief in a fixed human nature and an acceptance of unverifiable reasons to explain things that happen (e.g., the belief in luck or pure chance). If something is wrong or bad, well that’s just human nature. If someone has become famous or has achieved status and wealth, that person is considered lucky.
- Acceleration: The fast pace of everyday life allowed by machines and technology, some that help us go faster and some that entertain us. This results in sensory overload; critical reflection becomes less important than keeping the pace.
- Mystification: Responses or “truths” that obscure sources and solutions to problems. They include responses based on forms of bigotry (e.g., Single mothers on welfare are lazy and don’t want to work. That’s why they have their babies in the first place.)

To encourage critical consciousness, teachers may need to teach some basics about their discipline, including its assumptions about human nature and how knowledge is made. That would include what is researched, how it is researched, what counts as evidence, and how the evidence is used to make arguments. Social scientists might try modeling how they would evaluate a claim from a non-social sciences community. The point would not be that other claims are incorrect or far-fetched, but rather that they are incorrect or far-fetched according to the way a social scientist makes knowledge.

It isn’t easy to get students to think in a different way, but at the very least we can teach them that

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE

Throughout this handbook, several references have been made to individuals and organizations that claim to speak on behalf of academic freedom but are considered by the mainstream of university academic organizations to be instead violating its spirit. In the spirit of the Encircled Circle technique (see page 84), we invite you to consider these ideas and ask yourself what's at stake here.

The Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR)

The Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR) is a manifesto written by David Horowitz, president of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture and the author of *Left Illusions: An Intellectual Odyssey*. Horowitz believes that what he refers to as “academic and educational values” have been threatened by “the unwarranted intrusion of faculty members’ political views into the classroom.” According to Horowitz, the ABOR emphasizes intellectual diversity and “enumerate[s] the rights of students to not be indoctrinated or otherwise assaulted by political propagandists in the classroom or any educational setting.” Claiming that “you can't get a good education if they're only telling you half the story,” Horowitz proposed in 2002 that universities adopt an ABOR. His ABOR document became the foundational piece for a public advocacy group called Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), established in 2003.

The ABOR sounds well intentioned. Consider its opening paragraph on the mission of the university:

The central purposes of a University are the pursuit of truth, the discovery of new knowledge through scholarship and research, the study and reasoned criticism of intellectual and cultural traditions, the teaching and general development of students to help them become creative individuals and productive citizens of a pluralistic democracy, and the transmission of knowledge and learning to a society at large. Free inquiry and free speech within the academic community are indispensable to the achievement of these goals. The freedom to teach and to learn depend upon the creation of appropriate conditions and opportunities on the campus as a whole as well as in the classrooms and lecture halls. These purposes reflect the values—pluralism, diversity, opportunity, critical intelligence, openness and fairness—that are the cornerstones of American society.

However, a number of educational and public interest groups (including the American Federation of Teachers, American Association of University Professors, American Library Association, National Coalition Against Censorship, The National Association of Scholars, AFL-CIO, and Source Watch) have spoken out against the ABOR, charging that the bill is itself a threat to academic freedom. The opposition focuses on phrases such as the “appropriate conditions and opportunities” in the passage above as well as other passages suggesting that “appropriate educational policy” would include required readings on more than one side of a political controversy. The key word in both passages is “appropriate.” The implication is that the institution should decide what will be taught, not the professor.

The ABOR also presumes that student rights are the primary academic freedom issues, and that a way of teaching can be innocent and free of ideology. These presumptions are at least uninformed (see also pages 3-11 and pages 188-193), and many critics suggest that they are unethical as well: that, in fact, David Horowitz and the Students for Academic Freedom are true enemies of free thought and free speech, that feeling victimized by academic freedom, they have fought back with a somewhat disguised agenda.

However, as several writers in this collection have noted, no one is victimized by academic freedom. They may be offended perhaps, but they are not victimized.

Students for Academic Freedom (SAF)

Students for Academic Freedom is a public advocacy group established by David Horowitz in 2003 with the stated intent of protecting students from attempts at political indoctrination by some professors. It considers itself as a national coalition of independent campus groups as well as a movement. According to its website, its mission is to “restore academic freedom and educational values to America’s institutions of higher learning.” Through the adoption of the Academic Bill of Rights by university chapters, it seeks to regulate faculty behavior and to prescribe course content, claiming that professors violate their professional obligation if they endorse a particular political viewpoint. It construes academic freedom as student access to a diversity of viewpoints, and it considers the pursuit of knowledge as necessarily disinterested.

American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)

Founded in 1995 by Lynne V. Cheney, former Governor Richard D. Lamm of Colorado, Senator Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut, social scientist David Riesman, writer Saul Bellow, and others, ACTA describes itself as the only national organization to “support liberal arts education, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives a philosophically-balanced, open-minded, high-quality education at an affordable price.” To achieve these ends, ACTA endorses a back-to-basics view of education and calls for a national core curriculum for higher education. Reacting to a perception of politicization of the classroom, it redefines diversity in terms of politics instead of race, class, or culture and argues for what it refers to as “intellectual diversity” in the higher education curriculum. The organization provides reports, speeches, testimonies, and a newsletter to advise alumni and donors, trustees, and state leaders about its views on academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability. It also offers services for these groups so that they can effect change at their institutions.

DIFFICULT DIALOGUE LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

As some of us learned to our chagrin, planning only takes you so far. Once you put your plans into practice, it's a whole new ball game. Anything can happen, and usually does.

In designing and presenting our faculty intensives, we learned a lot from experience. The first one we held was especially rocky; this group was the test case for much of what we would later refine. Admittedly, too many of the presentations were static rather than interactive; the language referred too heavily to one university over the other; and our own expectations for engaging in difficult dialogues within the group were not fully met. Nevertheless, we didn't expect as much kick-back as we got. The first group challenged almost all of our choices, from the textbook to the agenda to the presentation styles of the guest speakers.

This surprised us. We had worked very hard to design and present the week's activities, and we expected our learners to understand and appreciate our efforts. We thought they would work with us a little more, forgive us a few little lapses in presentation, and empathize with the fact that their colleagues were test-driving a newly created curriculum. What happened instead was that they acted a lot like students, expecting us to have our act completely together all the time, to honor the multiple and often conflicting learning styles and concerns of all of them, and to give them what they had signed up for, which in this case was a safe place to explore with their colleagues on equal footing the great issues of our time.

We learned from that experience. The second time the presentations were much tighter, the exercises more interactive, and the facilitator more keenly aware of the hidden power dynamics in the room. And, as so often happens in the classroom, the overall personality of the group was completely different; where there had been firestorms in the first intensive, there were relaxed, languid discussions in the second.

The third time was even better. We actively recruited more people of color and intentionally nurtured minority points of view all throughout the week. We introduced new strategies to surface critiques of our own methods and intentions. We also spent time planning for and engaging in our own difficult dialogue within the group. The group itself selected the topic, one that arose organically from other conversations during the week: should we require our faculties somehow to be trained in Alaska Native ways of knowing? We were surprised—and pleased—that the third group chose to take on this topic, and we attribute it to the level of trust they achieved and the willingness of the majority to entertain and be deeply affected by a different perception of reality.

With these experiences we relearned a seemingly obvious truth: controversy is everywhere. It's in science and religion and culture and class and identity and power and politics and language. It's also in our communities, our departments, our classrooms, our families. We learned to expect it everywhere. And we learned to be ready.

START TALKING

Questions for Discussion:

How can you prepare a public audience for productive discussion?

When, if ever, is it appropriate to reveal your political positions to your students? How can this information lead to a learning outcome?

How should you respond if you realize that students are giving you what you want in the interests of getting a good grade?

How much should academic freedom concern itself with students' rights of free expression versus faculty members' freedom of speech?

What are appropriate responses to charges of political bias or discrimination in the classroom?

How can you create a balanced discussion of a film, book, or performance with an explicit political position or purpose?

How do you bring current events into your classrooms? Intentionally, with a particular teaching purpose in mind? Or spontaneously, as they arise?

