

Running Head: Engaging Students in Discussions of Sensitive or Controversial Policy Issues

**Engaging Adult Students in Discussions of Sensitive or Controversial Policy
Issues in the Classroom or Online Environments in the Trump Era**

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Abstract

The first years of the 21st century reveal critical international discord along with wide political and social differences domestically. The election of President Donald J. Trump has exacerbated both international concerns as well as widened the divided domestic opinions splitting the country into opposing camps. Many students, particularly new graduate students who may or may not have had direct public work experience; and, must now learn to engage in discussions of controversial or sensitive policy issues without expressing excessive severe emotional involvement. This is part of the public policy, political, and social processes endemic to certain public policy or political degree programs; and, careers. Students seeking a career in public service, as well as other public venues, must learn to engage in difficult debates on critical issues in the public sector without taking offense or creating a more hostile environment by use of inappropriate language or overt attitudes and actions. This is essential to the development of mature professionals in professions such as public administration, public health, health administration, social services administration, criminal justice (courts and the police), education, and to those majors leading to future corporate leadership positions, etc. It is incumbent on professors teaching today to prepare a future cadre of calm, level-headed, clear thinking public servants.

Introduction

In higher education, one predictable aspect is that students are unpredictable. All professors face each course they teach from two directions: one, they can work to maintain students in their collective “happy place” in an effort to be both popular and maintain the highest potential possible for high ratings in the student evaluations of their performance; or two, they can take the road that forces students to confront the current policy and political realities regardless of consequences. This is obviously the less pleasant road and the one far more risky to the professor’s career; particularly adjunct instructors who are so easily dismissed at the first sign of student dissatisfaction.

Psychologists have stated that adults are fairly hard wired in their personalities and world views by the time they reach their mid-twenties. Given the fact that the average adult student in U.S. colleges today are over 30 with many in their 40’s, 50’s and even older; it is almost expected that students have hardened personal world views and there will be significant tensions in the classroom as these world views are challenged by the revelation of new information. The result will often be tense discussions in the classroom with the potential for open hostility and resentment toward the source of this new information which is the professor and/or the textbook selected by the professor or the university. Adults do not modify their views lightly and will often argue vehemently the position they have held for many years even in the face of overwhelming evidence challenging their strongly held beliefs.

“There is ample evidence that the beliefs of students affect the ways in which they receive curriculum and instruction,” Posner (1982) illustrates this reality with examples from cognitive

psychology. From critical theory, Apple and Weiss (1983) point to the “contestation and resistance that students exert on curriculum as their perspectives meet differing value systems embedded in the curriculum,” (Schubert, 1987, p. 101).

What are some of the topics that typically lead to potential tension in class discussions? Significant issues include; abortion, partial birth or late term abortions, capital punishment, profiling by law enforcement officers, poverty and welfare issues, health care rationing, gun control, prison systems and incarceration, low income housing, homeland security policies and procedures including surveillance protocols; and virtually every public policy currently in existence or under consideration. This is just a truncated list of potentially offensive topics that can lead to chaos in the classroom. Whether one is liberal or conservative, emotions run high on issues of what government does or does not do toward correcting perceived social problems.

Many arguments center on whether government is doing too much or not enough depending on where any student stands on the political spectrum. Rarely do uninformed citizens/students consider the cost of what government does in response to the demand for social justice. Once an idealistic plan for public action is actually considered objectively from a public program cost standpoint, students are frustrated when their selected policy solution for a problem is blown up by the reality of public cost.

The key objective or overriding goal of education is to deliver to society an informed and disciplined individual as a finished product to serve in a variety of capacities whether in the public sector or the private sector. However, all students in higher education face potential world view altering information based on the many new things they will learn that will conflict with the old things they have held dear having been taught in their homes, schools, churches, and in general, their observations of life as they have experienced it. But, their experiences may not

have been disciplined, informed, or introspective. Once they are exposed to new ways of thinking and disciplined analysis; a new reality emerges based on disciplined thought and evidenced-based research. Their world view could be, and often is, seriously challenged and emotions run high as tensions rise in response to new information that does not agree with the beliefs they came to school with in the first place. In reality, most students come to school not expecting this kind of change in their lives.

The question for university faculty and administrators becomes; are we doing students a disservice by purposely avoiding the tensions created by new information thus avoiding hostility and resentment in the classroom with the real possibility of student grievances and potentially poor evaluations from students who perceive themselves as offended by discussion of challenging new paradigms in the classroom? This is where the “courage to teach” becomes a profound reality instead of a cliché. Professors can either actively avoid controversy by staying on safe ground or actively engage students in the important and relevant controversial issues that pervade the particular discipline being taught.

Today, students themselves have an unusual and maybe unhealthy level of influence on the curriculum being taught in higher education. According to William H. Schubert, in his classic text, Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility (1987); ...one can identify small groups and individual students whose attitudes carry considerable weight...at all levels, power wielders (the “power elite” according to C. Wright Mills, 1956) form interlocking directorates...they move easily from power positions in one domain to another...educators at all levels should be aware of the intricacies of power” (p. 99).

Students will use their newfound power, particularly economic power, in working against the professor and/or the university if they feel that their world views are being challenged. They are

clearly very well aware, that the university wants their tuition dollars and will work diligently to keep them satisfied with their classroom (or online) experiences maybe even at the expense of curricular content that may leave students uncomfortable with the status quo. Further; dissatisfied activist leader students can lead the more passive and reasonably satisfied students to share in the discontent expressed by the student leader.

This is especially challenging in the new marketing era of education in which the student is considered the customer and classically, the customer is always right. In reality, in education, the customer is not always right if the customer has not been well informed in the past and the new realities are thrust upon them as they enter higher education often for the first time and are faced with strong conflicting challenges to what they have held previously as true and right, and absolute.

Indeed, if the true customer of higher education is really not the student, but rather society; as it is society that will be served by students as the products of educational services; as well as the beneficiaries. Then, it is a disservice to graduate students who will enter into community service either in the private or public sector that have not been armed with both the latest information available; but, also training in how to think critically in a disciplined manner. It seems that both the student specifically, and society generally, can be harmed by faculty action or inaction in the mission of training students to be effective servants in their chosen careers. Taking the high road to student happiness and satisfaction may serve the short run interests of the professor and the university, but not the long term impact of higher education in society's expectations.

In essence, students have to grow up, according to Charles J. Sykes (1992) in his book, A Nation of Victims. Professors have to develop the courage to teach; and universities have to develop the moral fiber to support their professors in light of potential student complaints about

things they believe are offensive as they are discussed in both the classroom and in the reading assignments. Indeed, even the words *offensive* or *offended* often becomes “hot button” language frequently used by students as it could be actionable in litigation. But, it is far better for the occasional student to quit their university education (although this would be a rare reaction—students often threaten to quit and rarely do since only a limited number of credits will transfer and they came to school because they need that degree in the first place). There seems to be a better alternative than for a generation of students being sent forward uninformed about how the world works.

Preparing Students for Controversial Discussion Topics

Initially, professors should have a strong grasp on the topics that may have the greatest emotional impact on students; and, preparation should be both in writing in the syllabus (consider offering students a duplicate statement written on a separate sheet of paper requesting a signature indicating they understand the class policy on civility). Further, in the initial course introduction conducted during the first session of any new course, tell students what to expect, drawing their attention to the section in the syllabus where civility and critical thinking is discussed; and, then engage in a frank and open discussion in class (or online) in the first class session to be sure students understand what to expect in the course.

This planned preparation procedure is unlikely to eliminate all potentially hostile moments; but, it should serve to minimize emotional intensity during discussions of controversial issues. If students are desensitized to offensive comments, then it is beneficial that they also be sensitized on how to handle offensive comments or commentary since the classroom is not the first or the last they will hear of them. This is a fact of professional life in many public and private sector

careers so where better to begin the learning process on how to manage conflict than in the classroom.

Another important practice of civility in the classroom is the discipline that only one person speaks at a time with the professor acting as the moderator of the discussion. Too often events spin out of control because many student voices are being expressed at the same time and no one is listening because everyone is talking, and small groups of students sitting next to each other start talking and drift away from the mainstream direction of the topic under discussion. Students may become angrier because they cannot get their views expressed calmly, so they begin to raise their voice and this escalates emotions to a point where no one understands what anyone is saying—at this point, they have even stopped listening to the professor; but, often they are also now angry with the professor.

As a particular discussion or debate begins to wind down, professors should ask the class if everyone has had their voice heard and emphasize that every voice is important. Sometimes this moment is when one of the quiet students may want to express an opinion; but, was less aggressive in jumping in when the discussion was more dynamically active. It also expresses to the class as a whole that the professor is interested in every opinion being heard which deflects potential hostility that the professor is professing a particular position on an issue under debate. However, it remains important that professors reasonably play Devils' Advocate to stimulate the debate rather than play a passive role to avoid debate altogether. And, in homogeneous classes, groupthink takes over due to the commonality of the students by gender, race, religion, etc.

Professors who ask open ended questions on examinations may also be questioned by students as to how their opinions will be scored. Obviously, all essay answers will be scored with some modicum of qualitative subjectivity despite having detailed rubrics to follow. Professors

should be honest in their descriptions of how an essay question will be scored. Make it a point to inform students that you are less interested in their conclusions on an issue than on how they defend their positions. This is also critical for students to begin developing the discipline of being able to arrive at conclusions with a defensible critical thinking process usually by using one of the available models of critical analysis presented in the course.

One problem with adult students is that they are accustomed to rendering their opinions as though they were verifiable fact. A key point to be made in class is the difference between “opinion” and “informed opinion” complete with citations from the authoritative literature regarding the topic under discussion. Students preparing for public careers should understand that when they are just shooting from the hip on important issues, they will get caught by the media “fact checkers” and their public credibility will be jeopardized.

Preparing Students before the Class Period in which Controversial Issues are Expected

This involves reminding students again the reasons for such discussions; and, their responsibilities as adult learners and future degree prepared professionals in their fields who will be expected to engage in the policy debates of the day both in public and within their work units. Remind them again that this is one of the reasons they chose to study and work in the discipline they are currently in; and, what is expected of them in terms of intellectual maturity. Remind them again that the classroom is a safe place for expression; and, a haven of learning, where everyone is free to express their voice on critical issues of the day. Professors should prepare students before beginning the discussion or debate, and should never incite a debate on a controversial issue just to get a rise out of the students. Who would want to do this anyway, but it happens since professors can sometimes experience frustration if a class group is not participating—then the professor is inclined to “light them up” rather than enlighten them.

Use Models to Deflect Opinions from the Professor to the Issue and Policy Process

It is critically important wherever possible to deflect or neutralize the professor's opinion while in the role of facilitating the controversial or sensitive discussion. One best way to deflect hostility away from the professor is to always direct the discussion along a disciplined path using one or more models to frame and focus the policy issue. Each discipline in the social sciences has a series of models that are used to help explain events, phenomena, and processes. Professors should be proficient in how these models operate and teach the models prior to their use as an illustration of any particular policy, and then insist that the models be used both in class discussion, in the examinations, and in the assigned research papers or case studies. Opinions without reasoning should not be allowed; and, if expressed; ask the student to reframe the opinion into a model in order to explain it more clearly to the class.

Thomas R. Dye's textbook, Understanding Public Policy, 12th edition (2008) is formatted excellently for preparing students for what is to come later in his book. The first three chapters are extensive coverage of Policy Analysis, Models of Policy, and the Policy Making Process. In the first weeks of class, the professor has the opportunity, with the support of the textbook, to thoroughly prepare students to approach critical and controversial issues from a focused and disciplined foundation. Professors should make sure that students are well grounded before moving to Chapter Four; Criminal Justice: Rationality and Irrationality in Public Policy since

this chapter begins to significantly challenge student's opinions and perceptions on how the world works compared to how the world really works. Many will not like it.

Dyer then moves on despite the potentially shattered emotions of students to address Health and Welfare covering issues of poverty, welfare, welfare reform, homelessness, and health care including health care access and reform. The author then moves directly into Education including "No Child Left Behind" and "Diversity" in education; these are debate starters for sure especially since many adult students are also parents. Then he moves on to cover Economic Policy, Tax Policy, Elite-Mass Conflict, Environmental Policy, Civil Rights (Elite and Mass Interaction), Defense Policy (major debates given our current position in the Middle East); and, Homeland Security with particular emphasis on the classic struggle between security and liberty, and it goes on. By the end of the course, students have definitely broken a sweat; probably have lost a few nights sleep, and maybe hate the professor!

Regarding use of the analytical models currently popular in public policy; one is the General Systems Theory Model that can be used to help explain both political and economic phenomena in terms of inputs, processes, outputs, and Hoosian outcomes along with the impact of feedback and intervening variables common in open systems, and the source of these event modifiers. The GST Models also illustrate policy life cycles as the feedback loops continually force a reassessment of policy and the potential for existing policies to be changed if the inputs are strong enough to overcome the inertia to not change policies.

The Elite Model can be used to explain political processes (power politics) related to policy development and implementation given the tenuous relationship between the nation's elites and the largely uninformed masses. Students are surprised when told that as graduate students they are entering the ranks of the elites—those decision makers who make things happen while others

wonder what happened. The words elite and elitist in modern usage have had such negative connotations that elite is difficult to comprehend in its use in a public policy model. Calling a graduate student an elitist is tantamount to calling him a Communist; although more students than ever are self-professed socialists even though they often do not know what that term means.

It is also surprising how many card-carrying Democrats hold the opinions so similar to that of Republicans, and don't know it and react with shock when called on it. It has been maybe factiously said that Republicans are just Democrats mugged by reality. Adult students are temperamentally unpredictable since they often hold opinions for which they cannot explain analytically and do not fully comprehend or fully understand. Once their world view is named; and, it is not flattering under the harsh light of analytical objectivity, the adult student can go off on a snit. However, they cannot avoid their status as a member of the elite in society if they earn a graduate degree and seek to serve in a position of leadership in the public or private sector. In reality, professors exist to prepare them for that new status-hood; call it advanced citizenship.

Further, students are thinking less about "killing the messenger" (the professor) as long as their attention is focused on using an analytical model to explain a policy reality whether or not they support the policy that emanates from the model. The use of objective analytic models serves to reduce emotions. Indeed, students should be conditioned to study issues they are uncomfortable with in terms of understanding the origin and operation of the issue; and, how it is being developed and implemented by political, economic, and social systems. The focus should not be on undisciplined emotional reactions to a particular policy when the focus should be on the process along with perceived cause and effect relationships. You don't have to agree to understand.

Professors should not take it for granted that students actually understand how the world works even their own government. What they may remember is what they were taught in a long ago eighth grade civics class; and, that is often either too oversimplified or simply not true. Now, 30 to 40 years later, a professor is rocking their world by challenging everything they had believed all these years. They will be angry; and, they will likely complain about the professor's teaching style to the appropriate university authority. Since customers certainly know that if you are not satisfied, ask to speak to a supervisor; the dean or department chair!

If the university views their students solely as customers; and students' commitment to getting an education is solely based getting a degree to get or keep a job (rather than intellectual enlightenment); and, the university is solely interested in receiving a tuition check for next term, then professors are unlikely to expect much support from university administrators when confronted with student complaints that the professor is challenging their world views and making them uncomfortable in the classroom.

Robert Grudin writes, "Teachers go out of their way to avoid embarrassing, insulting, overworking, or otherwise vexing their students." But, they will still frame their inevitable complaints self-servingly. Once I was accused by one student of being inappropriate and wasting their valuable time in class by spending the entire evening talking about golf, but when complaining to the dean, the student failed to mention that the current assignment that night was a case study from the textbook on the golf industry!

Dr. Bernie Zilbergeld in his 1993 book, The Shrinking of America writes, "We want and expect far more than ever before...almost everyone seems to feel entitled to all sorts of successes, adventures, and joys right now, without having to make any great sacrifices to get them." But, countering that opinion, Lee Bash in his 2003 book Adult Learners in the Academy

makes frequent references on the sacrifices made by adult students to juggle jobs, families, and demanding academic schedules to obtain a degree. He also states though that “not all adults are happy about feeling forced to pursue college-level studies and so some approach their situation with resentment” (p. 91). Of course it might help if professors confessed to students that they also struggled with jobs, families, and demanding academic schedules to obtain degrees. Bash continues that they may get the degree; but, will do so only begrudgingly; and, by following the path of least resistance (like don’t work me too hard, I have a busy life but I demand an A since I paid for it). Some universities and their professors are more than happy to accommodate that path to encourage continued enrollment. Professors know well that to keep their job, they must keep the students happy as reflected in faculty evaluations. One advantage to universities in relying solely on student feedback is that they can forego the expense of hiring professional Faculty Evaluators to enter classes and formally evaluate the teaching staff to either validate or invalidate student complaints.

Patricia Cranton (2002) in her article; *Teaching for Transformation*, observes some facts related to reactions from adult learners. Students must pass through a critical self-reflection stage in questioning and examining assumptions, being open to alternative viewpoints, engaging in discourse, weighing evidence, revising long held assumptions and perspectives, and acting on revisions; and thinking, talking and working in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives (p. 66). This is where the psychological friction occurs—the tectonic plates rubbing together causing the potential emotional earthquake but one that is not measurable on the Richter scale; rather it appears on faculty evaluations from students.

This is a common reaction that not just professors should account for, but also university administrators when they are hearing complaints from students erupting over issues developed in

the classroom and/or the textbook. In another example, a few years ago, I was chastened by a university dean that complaints were reported over my discussion of partial or late-term abortions in a graduate class on public policy. The issue was raised by me since during that very same week that the discussion ensued; the issue was being debated before the United States Supreme Court and was being aired on National Public Radio. Two students found it an offensive topic to discuss and I found it offensive that the university would criticize a policy debate in the classroom particularly in light of its currency in the news media. I suggest that some students should reassess their decision to enter the public sector and I believe universities should do more to support their professors and the reality content of the curriculum.

One other problem that exacerbates faculty support from universities that really is the topic of another paper is that increasingly programs are managed by managers who are not terminally degreed and have little or no knowledge of the discipline being taught so they have little or no frame of reference related to the student complaint. Anyone with a degree in public policy or public administration and who actively understands the discipline of public policy would probably have taken no particular notice of the student complaint on an issue before the Supreme Court regardless of its nature or content.

Conclusion

What should be done today in light of the new dynamics in higher education including the rapid growth of online education and the huge numbers of adult learners going to school either for the first time or returning to school after a prolonged absence? Too often, they arrive both academically and emotionally unprepared for the university experience and the challenges they face are frightening to them. What makes matters worse for these students is the presence of a well-educated professor who in class or online factually disagrees with their stated long held

opinion on some subject related to the course. How the student responds is clearly related to that student's emotional maturity and self-esteem; when positive, it is acceptable to them to be wrong while learning a different worldview; when negative, almost everything is taken as an offense; and often the learned response as a customer is to complain to authority.