

fight about sex education and school prayer. They will be contests of ideals struggling for hegemony.

These contests will also have the same character as the fights about teaching virtue. We can see this by seeing how the teaching of national history works in forging national consciousness. A child learns moral lessons by reading stories of moral deeds — deeds of courage and physical valor, of intrepidity and persistence against odds, of strength of character and integrity in the face of temptation. When such stories are drawn from national history, however, they connect a child to moral deeds in a special way: these were the deeds of *his* forefathers and foremothers. The child's social identity, not just his character, is formed in relation to these stories.

Thus, for young children anyway, there are things history cannot be if it is to be a vehicle of patriotism. It cannot be "debunking"; there have to be forefathers and foremothers worth admiring and emulating, and moral enterprises in which pride can be taken. Nor can it be "objective" where this means introducing the full complexity of all the issues surveyed. Just as teaching the virtues must start with simple rules, teaching national history in order to develop civic attachments must start with simple (and thus selective and distorted) accounts of the course of national development. So, once more, the quest for traditional American values leads to controversy.

Tradition and Controversy

It is not surprising that the quest to inculcate traditional values spawns controversy. The surprise would be if it didn't. Must we be dismayed that the controversies are deep and not easily dispelled? Perhaps not. After all, incessant controversy is itself a great American tradition! It's the genius of American political institutions that controversy contributes to our stability rather than our instability. The ideological struggles

are valuable resources from which we sharpen our own self-understandings of our relationship to community and country, and they do not divide us to the point of political breakdown. Our political and legal practices allow controversies to be talked to death. To the strategies of insulation and domination, mentioned earlier, we have to add one more: the strategy of exhaustion. No one wins big and no victory is long secure. So controversy does not undermine civic education: it is the best part of it, since the lesson the democratic citizen needs to learn is to be able to live with controversy without taking alarm. Perhaps, then, we can end on an up-beat, positive note, after all. That, of course, is itself an American tradition.

This is one way to picture the fruits of controversy. But can we really take pride in a system that dampens and defuses and defrays controversy, co-opting every vital and vibrant dissent? Should we teach our children that the most important thing is to temper their ideals to the exigencies of co-existence and not to trample on the values of others, no matter how pedestrian or banal they may be? Should our democratic civics lessons teach future seekers after Truth, Beauty, and Justice to trim their sails so as not to unsettle what H. L. Mencken called the great "booboisie"?

The real question I mean to pose by these remarks is this: do we perhaps buy the taming of controversy and a stable social peace at a greater cost than we think? I pose this question not because I seriously want us to rethink American institutions but in order to deflate just a little bit that final American tradition — the propensity to pat ourselves on the back.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

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Teaching as Politics

The purpose of a liberal education is not to make students well-rounded individuals, who can speak intelligently on a range of acceptable topics at mixed cocktail parties because they have learned a little of this and a little of that. The purpose of a liberal education is to create liberals—or persons, if you like a different rhetoric—creatures who are in a position to guide their lives by their own lights and who can respect others in doing the same. Put bluntly, the proper function of college education is to save students from their parents,

their religion, and twelve years of state-mandated indoctrination into the ordinary. This end chiefly entails two educational tasks for which the philosophical teaching of public policy issues is especially well suited—one methodological, one substantive.

The first is to develop students' intellectual skills to appraise policies and practices so that one's beliefs become freely chosen and appropriated as one's own. The other is to attack petrified social norms so that one can come to see alternatives, which then might be tested

as being suitable to oneself. Education should provide, to the extent that words can, Mill's prerequisites for self-realization: freedom and a variety of situations.

Teaching Critical Thinking

My sense is that critical intellectual skills are more likely to be developed in applied philosophy classes than in courses specifically labeled "critical thinking" or "informal logic"—the courses that unfortunately are increasingly the bread and butter that sustain philosophy departments in the face of enrollment-driven financing. These courses thrive on the clever example and tend to trivialize the power and importance of critical thinking. Since it is really the formalism that is being taught, course names notwithstanding, content simply gets lost. For the rote-learned rules to apply and fifteen fallacies neatly to be discovered, the content of such courses has to be simplified to the point of distortion. The result is that these courses generate a certain glibness about thinking—just apply the right rule to the cute example and you can think critically and carefully about anything. In a way the courses become a denial of the very ambiguity that they are carefully trying to get their students to be able to discern. Thinking has been reduced to a parlor game.

The importance of discerning ambiguities in arguments is more likely to be noted and remembered by students if, for instance, in the course of debate on abortion, one points out that the slogan "right to life" is ambiguous than if they're taught a limerick on rare rubies and rare steaks. And in public policy courses the point about ambiguity turns out not simply to be the negative one: avoid using ambiguous terms as the middle term in syllogisms. The point becomes a positive one, that we make intellectual progress when we are able to make relevant distinctions. If one believes that there is a right to life where that means merely a right not to be killed unjustly, that will commit one morally to one thing; if, on the other hand, one believes there is a right to life and means thereby a right to sufficient means for continued biological existence, that will commit one to something quite different. Not only is glibness avoided if critical reasoning is taught in practice, it is only there that it has its full import.

Offering Alternatives

The other educational function for which the philosophic teaching of public policy issues is also uniquely suited is pedagogically more sticky—the provision of a variety of situations. For the way to do this is to push a specific line and to push the line that is, most often, at odds with the received opinions of our culture, the ones students most likely already have. In teaching public policies this means that the classroom will be politically highly charged.

One needs to push a line in order to be intellectually honest and to do what philosophers indeed do. It would be odd, after teaching in critical thinking classes that it's worth arguing about arguments, to find in the end that all arguments are equally good, equally bad

or mere dilemmas, paradoxes, and antinomies. If we are to teach students how to think, we must be willing to show them how to draw conclusions. One does that by playing out some line of argument to its end. In classes that are allowed to be all discussion and no conclusion, cynicism holds the reins while skepticism rides shotgun.

Further, if we wish students to have access to a variety of life situations, it is not enough just to discuss classical liberalism as a general philosophical position, though it is useful to point out what its commitments are. One must also persuasively introduce students to specific positions contrary to the ones they likely hold, otherwise the old ways will win out by default. The balancing of views, touted by some as a way for all sides to be equally heard, results again in a skepticism in which none of us actually believes. Such balancing ought to occur rather against the general cultural background. When this is done one is able both to argue for a specific position and yet have all sides be aired for the sake of fairness.

This means arguing for positions like the right to abortion, gay rights, for pornography, euthanasia, and affirmative action and against the death penalty. All but

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the last are going to actually affect the way people in the class live and are issues where feelings run deep. Further, rudimentary arguments on these issues have been bruited about by The Right and to a lesser degree in the popular press, so students may not only feel strongly on these matters, they may also think they know what they are talking about. Set against explicitly politicized teaching, the combination can be explosive. Most teachers take a safe course and try to avoid potential, soul-saving controversy. Like a Rogerian psychiatrist, they just let students talk their minds, themselves not plumping for one side or another. The result is usually what my C-minus students claim when they complain at course's end, having missed its entire point: "I thought it was just an opinions course." After all, nothing matters.

Alternatively, for lack of courage professors will back whatever position will for them least rock the boat politically. Courses end up being politicized this way, too, only insidiously so. Yet assuming one has the requisite courage, there are a number of precautions one can take to enhance the prospects that explicitly political teaching will nevertheless be fair to students. Mentioning some of these might encourage others to

take the plunge and teach explicitly political courses.

Six Guidelines

First, be forthright about your prejudices. This likely involves waving some of your privacy, but as in electoral politics such a loss comes as part of the job. Students should be told up front what one's general political orientation is, what one's religious beliefs are generally, what one's sexual orientation is, what sort of political and social organizations one belongs to. This is not to get chummy with them, and there should be no expectation that they should reciprocate; indeed that generally should be discouraged. The reason for such disclosures is the same as for high-level politicians putting their finances in blind trusts: so that one cannot manipulate the affairs of an unwitting public for one's own benefit. The effect of such disclosures is to assure the students that nothing is being pulled over on them. There are no hidden agendas; the cards are on the table.

Second, offend everyone. Anyone with appropriately strong enough opinions to be teaching adequately should have no problem with this. A classical liberal position which argues strongly for individual rights especially against government, but also sees a role for

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government in enhancing the circumstances in which and out of which independence may be realized, will usually offend everyone in the right degree. Those who but for boredom and ignorance would be Nazis will be offended by the degree of individual choice advocated in this view. Commies—there are always a couple—will think that government has not gone far enough on this model and possibly will attack the very notion of individual rights as a bourgeois conspiracy, while libertarians—there are usually a couple Randians in class, too—will think that the state has gone too far. Now, it's hard to offend everyone equally, but if people see all others getting shot down now and then, they will realize that one is not playing favorites.

Third, provide students some time to express their opinions, though don't indulge views that are clearly off the wall (students are surprisingly sensitive to this and are unhappy if you let it eat up much time). I find a pseudo-socratic method or directed discussion works best for me. Both argument and objection are expounded by asking students questions. They in turn get to ask questions and raise objections along the way. Straight lecturing, though it makes for cleaner exposition of arguments, tends to leave them brittle, and it fails to engage students, fails to pique their curiosity—at

least beyond the point of wondering whether this is going to be on the examination. Too often, teaching is like inquisitorial torture: it tries to get at the truth but instead simply gets the victim to say whatever the perpetrator wants to hear.

I call my method socratic, for when a student advances a position, by advancing a series of contrarily leading questions I will run the position through the standard philosophical gauntlet to see how it stands up. Sometimes admittedly the student feels badgered or bulldozed. If that occurs, it is useful to summarize how the position or argument has been clarified or elaborated in the testing of it. In this way, the examination is shown not to be mere browbeating or one-up-manship. One can try to strengthen the student's own position by indicating on its behalf distinctions, principles, and connections which the student has failed to note, but such a move, even when carried out in good faith, will as likely as not be viewed suspiciously as a sleight of hand. To a degree the suspicion is justified. I call the method "pseudo" for there is no pretension that I, the questioner, don't have a position that I'm advocating.

Fourth, admit failure and ignorance. Teachers are supposed to be authority figures, or so we are told. And we are supposed to be the teachers, not the students, chiefly because we know more than they do. As far as it goes, this is true. But many teachers over-generalize and act as though they know everything or at least think it too embarrassing to admit failure as somehow undermining their authority. The good teacher admits error when he finds he has made a mistake in an argument or when a student correctly points out that he has just contradicted something he said three weeks ago. Even in response to a largely irrelevant query after some factual matter, an admission of ignorance is to most students a breath of fresh air. It shows that the politicized teacher, as pushy and self-assured as he may appear, is not speaking *ex cathedra* but honestly believes, as he has been claiming all along, that there are better and worse arguments and better and worse reasons.

Fifth, take the argument one more step. If you're teaching an article with which you basically agree, it is helpful if you can tease out some problematic feature that hasn't been fully worked out in the piece but which nevertheless does have a solution within the general framework it assumes. This strategy is especially effective in dispelling skepticism and cynicism. For it shows that there can be progress in ideas. The political teacher is not committed to final solutions; he claims only that there are better positions and worse ones, and what better way to show this than to show that positions can get better and better.

Sixth and finally, don't grade politically. Be sure to have enough graded assignments early on so that students can be assured that they aren't being judged by their degree of conformity to the teacher's views, but on how well they can argue for a position, whatever position it may be. The student must be allowed to

advance his own position in exams and papers; don't degrade your students in the name of efficiency by giving them multiple choice, true/false, or short answer exams. This is a terrible thing to do normally, for such an exam assumes by its very structure that students have nothing worth saying, and it is intolerable in a politicized class, for the student is then left entirely to second-guess the professor's motives in so-called objective questions.

With these dogma-dispelling safeguards installed in classroom controversies, one can at least feel confident

that one is doing the best one can in handing out to students the palm of liberty.

—Richard Mohr

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Children's Television

Afternoon in America, and millions of kids are sprawled on the floor watching television. On one station, the Masters of the Universe (available from Mattel at \$4.97 each) triumph over the forces of evil; on another, the Defenders of the Universe (sold separately for \$3.97 apiece) do the same. Turn the dial, and an animated rubber Gumby figure (in two sizes: \$2.99 and \$1.50) attempts to tug on viewers' heartstrings ("If you've got a heart, then Gumby's a part of you"), his adventures punctuated by commercials for Circus Fun cereal (featuring chocolate-covered marshmallow animals) and Snickers bars. It's hard to resist the conclusion that commercial children's TV is a wasteland.

Yet children aged six to eleven watch an average of twenty-seven hours of television a week, for a total of 1,400 hours a year; preschool children watch even more. By the time the average American child graduates from high school he will have logged more hours in front of the TV than in the classroom. How worried should we be about what our children are watching—and about what's being sold to them as they watch? And should we be trying to do something about it?

It's Not What You Watch

It seems obvious that it is better to have children learning their alphabet on "Sesame Street" than watching shoddy, violence-packed cartoons. But against this it has been suggested that the medium of TV itself dominates any message, for good or ill, it might seek to convey.

Cedric Cullingford, Dean of Educational Studies at Oxford Polytechnic, argues that it doesn't matter what children watch because, "even at its most intense moments," television "can appear as little more than background." Children "associate the pleasures of television with a mild form of boredom," which they

nonetheless turn to fondly because "boredom is so little trouble." Like adults, kids watch TV for "entertainment without demands," and what they watch makes very little impression on them, emotionally or intellectually: "Of all the information that children will have seen over an evening's viewing, of all the hours of action, children remember very little. They know that they have *seen* the programmes but can say almost nothing about them." Thus Cullingford turns a skeptical ear to stories of TV's supposed great dangers to the minds and hearts of youth: TV doesn't *matter* enough to pose any real threat.

Marie Winn, author of *The Plug-in-Drug*, agrees that it doesn't matter what children actually watch on TV, but for the opposite reason: not because watching TV is so harmless, but because it is so harmful. Winn sees television watching as essentially a passive experience, a "one-way transaction" that induces in children a zombie-like state: "The child's facial expression is transformed. The jaw is relaxed and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth. . . . The eyes have a glazed, vacuous look. . . ." Winn also claims that TV, far from powerless, is addicting. She concludes that it doesn't matter what children watch any more than it matters whether an alcoholic drinks Jack Daniels or moonshine. In fact, Winn goes so far as to say that the interests of children are better served by simply broadcasting junk, "since conscientious parents are more likely to limit their children's television intake if only unsavory programs are available." How children of less conscientious parents would fare under unrestrained industry indifference Winn does not say.

The most vociferous advocates of improved content in children's programming have targeted two key areas of concern: on the positive side, the educational potential of television; on the negative side, its pervasive