Teaching the Tough Topics

a presentation by
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First... A Little Background

• I have a JD and PhD.
• I teach Political Science and Law.
• Teaching at universities and law schools in the US since 2004.
• Taught at four institutions of higher learning in the US.
• My teaching touches on contentious and emotional topics.
• Ex. race, sex, LGBT rights, religious freedom, the rights of criminal defendants, reproductive rights, and firearms rights.
What Have I Learned?

• My student reviews almost never contain criticisms of me for partisanship or political ideological bias.

• My reviews have never criticized me for showing bias against students for their beliefs or identities.

• I have achieved this by using the following techniques when I design and teach my courses.
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Set the Proper Tone

- Learning is a journey.
- You are the students’ guide on the journey.
- Students will benefit from the journey because they will either:
  - End it with greater confidence in their beliefs, or
  - End it with new beliefs based on better information.
• Assure students that they will not be evaluated based on their opinions.

• Stick to grading them on:
  • Their knowledge of facts and demonstrated skills.
  • Participation in class activities.
Encourage Respectful Communication

- Assure students that disagreement with others’ opinions is ok.
- They will not be mocked for their opinions or questions.
- Demand that they show respect for each other in class.
- Encourage them to be respectful to each other outside of class.
- Keep cool when the unexpected happens.
• Make sure that students understand that no idea or concept is beyond challenging.
• Questioning an idea or viewpoint is not an attack against the person’s character or intelligence.
Dealing with Students Who Challenge Your Presentations
• Here is how I handle it:
  • If I can readily demonstrate that the student’s comment is mistaken or incomplete in some way, I do so, and use it as a teaching opportunity.
    • I try never to do this in a demeaning way. Never talk down!
  • If I don’t have a ready answer to the student’s comment, I study the issue outside of class, and I address the issue via announcement to the class or in a later lecture.
    • This assures students that they are being taken seriously.
  • If a student becomes argumentative, I generally don’t use class time to argue with them if the argument will seriously derail the lesson plan.
    • I ask them to meet with me at a separate meeting or via email/Zoom, to discuss the issue.
• I am not interested in what students believe.
• My interest is in whether they can demonstrate knowledge of facts and mastery of skills.
Teach Students About Evaluating the Quality and Credibility of Sources

• Examples:
  • I post videos about how the media select what to cover.
  • I tell students about framing and priming.
  • I give students sources that categorize different media sources by type, ideological stance, and accuracy.
  • I discuss the differences between types of sources
    • Ex. Wikipedia, scholarly articles, newspapers, blogs.
Example of How I Talk About A Tough Issue: Affirmative Action

- I talk about the history of race discrimination and segregation in the U.S.
- I talk about the history of the idea of affirmative action.
- I talk about different views of fairness and equality.
- I ask whether you can remedy the effects of centuries of race-based discrimination without taking race into account.
- I discuss the case law on the subject.
- I constantly reassure the students that I merely want them to have the facts, think about the issue, and then formulate their own opinions.
Thank You for Your Attention & Good Luck