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Pedagogy: Enlightenment, Advocacy, and Brick Walls

One of my main reasons for coming to OU for Graduate School was the opportunity to return to my home state to teach, to mentor young people from Oklahoma's small towns--students much like my younger self, who, knowingly or not, are engaged in a struggle for intellectual autonomy. So, the questions addressed in today's colloquium have both a professional and personal resonance for me. I do believe that advocacy is appropriate in the English classroom, but I'm not sure my definition of advocacy is the one most often assumed. Like many of you, I advocate critical reading and thinking. I encourage my students to examine their own beliefs, then question them. However, I try not to advocate a particular political or ideological stance. While I'm sure there is some ideological "leakage," I believe that my role should be that of facilitator. Partly as a result of conservative religious and political views, our students often come to us full of received opinions and accustomed to accepting "proof by assertion" from their parents, from their churches, from their schools, and from the media. I want to avoid adding one more layer of extrinsic ideology to their already overdetermined worldview. Our students will only retain what knowledge they create for themselves; if I attempt to insinuate my own beliefs and opinions I run the risk of alienating them, and, more insidiously, taking from them their right to think for themselves, and that leaves me as a teacher in the same category as the ideological apparati that I am trying to help my students resist.

What I do try to create in my classroom is a space where my students feel safe to be honest about their views, where they are inspired to critically examine their opinions and beliefs, and where they feel empowered to weave their own fabric of values, ethics, morals, politics and beliefs from the multiple ideological threads available to them. In order to facilitate my students' excursions into the magical forest of ideas, I do find it necessary to suggest, and often require, that they consider a question or an issue or a piece of literature from a different perspective than the one they brought in the door with them. When I taught British Literature to 1750, my students examined two issues that are interrelated and often in conflict: the literary representations and societal constructions of the roles of women and of religion in the years between Beowulf and Samuel Johnson. In the last three semesters of my 1213 composition classes here at OU, students have examined contemporary politics, the United States' role as a world power, terrorism, and civil rights. The first paper I assign in my 1213 classes is an analysis of the sources of disagreement between two articles. The students are not allowed to give opinions or make judgments in this first paper; instead, they must set aside their personal opinions, read the articles critically, ask questions about the rhetorical and ideological structures

in the articles, and write an analysis that's sole purpose is to provide a process narrative of the students' first forays into skeptical critical reading. Next semester, I am designing a class centered on readings on Work and Poverty in America, a subject which is particularly appropriate in Oklahoma.

I have two anecdotes I would like to share with you that exemplify my definition of success in the classroom. Last semester, a student came to his conference and repeated to me my most important classroom rule, that it does not matter if I do not see eye to eye with a student, but that it only matters that the student did appropriate research, honestly evaluated the evidence and questioned both their own preconceived opinions and the opinions of others before writing an essay. He then said that he hoped he didn't hurt my feelings with his essay. I was amused and pleased when he handed me a paper very close to my own political beliefs--and that he did not know for sure what political stance I took on the issue at hand. Another sign of pedagogical success for me has occurred often--at least 3 students last semester and 2 this semester came to their conferences and announced that their understanding of an issue and their opinions on it were opposite to the ones they had when they began the unit. I believe, as do many classical rhetoricians and the authors of our textbook, that argument is in large part a truth-seeking endeavor. I am most pleased with my pedagogy when I facilitate truth-seeking rather than get in the way of it.

In closing, I would like to say that I admire the Globalization class designed by Justin Young, Charlie Potter, and Regina Martin. It seems to me that asking students to challenge their conceptions of the world by engaging with it is a particularly powerful way to help them create intellectual autonomy. I only hope that my classes are as successful in achieving the same goal.