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Teaching in the Age of Trump: Trickle-down Assaults on the Truth

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Teaching in the Age of Trump: Trickle-down Assaults on the Truth

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It's different, teaching in the age of Trump.

It's not that there are more Republicans in the college classroom. I don't poll students about their political affiliations (what professor would?); I have no idea who votes which way and no idea of how their parents vote. That information is irrelevant to my job, which is to teach them media studies and journalism and to evaluate their mastery.

What is relevant is that increasing numbers of students over my last 8 years at a private university in Wisconsin (where I no longer teach) became noticeably emboldened to celebrate their ignorance publically as a desirable character trait and demand that it not be challenged in the classroom.

Since this openly contradicts the point of education, this problem is one with which I do engage.

Distrust of new information

Over the last few years or so, markedly since Trump declared in 2016 that he would run and certainly since his election and subsequent Tweetstorming, some students appear in the classroom with belligerent attitudes about the very reason people come to campus in the first place. These students espouse beliefs that college should protect them from exposure to any idea they have not already had by the seasoned age of 18. They react with anger to new information. They bellow with outrage at research, experience, and facts that suggest perspectives and realities outside of their backgrounds. They appear unschooled in how to encounter information, consider it critically, evaluate the source, take in what is useful, and set aside what is not—in short, they appear to scorn the process of learning.

I am speaking of only a segment of students, not the entire body of college-age humans. My personal experience is drawn from one Wisconsin university, and my anecdotal experience is drawn from colleagues who teach all over the country, encountering similar attitudes from small groups of students. Four years ago, I organized a cross-college, interdisciplinary faculty meeting about working with “resistant students” and was unpleasantly surprised by how many faculty showed up and by how very unhappy and frustrated they were.

Empowered resistance to diverse perspectives

These faculty colleagues reported students who protested studying aspects of American history that were inclusive of people of color, indigenous peoples, and women; students who openly insulted and refused to work with female and/or LGBTI teaching assistants and instructors, and,

perhaps most uniformly across all disciplines, students who insisted they had a right to never be confronted with course content that made them uncomfortable. Discussions of social problems, civil rights issues, and challenges of modern society were considered by these students to be attacks on their right to never face these issues.

For example, in my large lecture course on media's role in culture, a small group of white men (resistant students are almost always men and almost always white) spent much of the semester muttering and grumbling about what they labeled "white bashing" and "male bashing" in course content. The course includes examinations of how media depict, reflect, and form ideas of ourselves and of others. Noting the relative lack of diverse voices in media production and the sexist imagery of women in ads is not bashing whites or men—these are provable, well-researched facts backed up by multiple studies. However, being exposed to these facts felt, to these white males so unaccustomed to having to consider any perspective other than their own, like personal attacks. Either because they felt so insulated by their privilege or so unaware of it, they felt quite comfortable complaining to nearby female students and students of color. In turn, those students noted in their course evaluations that they would have spoken up more in class had they not felt these white male students would shame them and argue with them. So, the problem of resistant, reactionary students is twofold: their education suffers, and their behavior affects the education and sense of security in the classroom of other students.

In February 2016, I reported these two conversations with students in an article I wrote for *U.S. Catholic* magazine (Nettleton, 2016).

A business major about to graduate asked me why our media and culture course had to include discussions about how advertising often objectifies women. "I just don't see it," he shrugged. "That's not something I agree with, so I don't want to hear about it."

I explained that how advertising portrays women and men is a measured phenomenon. "It's not really something you need to agree or disagree with," I said. "These are research findings from many scholars over many years."

"I don't like it," he said. "I don't see why we have to talk about it."

Another young man asked me why he had to hear about how media represent homosexuality. "I don't think I should have to listen to that. I just don't believe in it."

"You don't believe homosexuals exist?" I asked him.

"I guess they exist," he said. "But I don't want to think about them."

Facts aren't facts

Despite provable, well-researched evidence of, say, misogyny in advertising images, resistant students dismiss inconvenient truths as the personal beliefs of someone they can also dismiss, such as their professor. Resistant students conflate the professor teaching a course with course content they don't like, and conclude that courses are being used to advance personal political agendas. They complain that reading Stuart Hall, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Howard French is "white bashing." They complain that watching films by Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz is "male bashing." They conflate ideological differences with personal ones, and mount resistance as personal attacks.

One student created a Facebook page to discuss how "The feminism in Comm 1200 is getting out of hand." Another wrote a complaint to a dean that feminists should not be allowed to teach in our university. I have a minor in feminist studies and am certainly a feminist, but Comm 1200 is a communications course about media, not a gender studies course. In it, I do not teach feminism; the feminism being protested was having to consider how media affect and depict women. Resistant students misuse the term, following the lead of many a conservative media outlet and politician in assuming widespread acceptance that "feminist" is a pejorative.

Social media harassment of me and my TAs by students, some of it anonymous and some of it not, include:

- "Nettleton is a massive cunt" [sic].
- "Comm 1200 is against America."
- "Comm 1200 can suck my dick but that would be sexist."
- "Comm 1200: the only place where men are inferior to women."
- "She has no right to shove her views down my throat."
- "I love spending 3 hours a week [sic] to be afraid to right [sic] what I believe in a paper because if I don't talk about how the white man is oppressing everybody (and I mean everyone) I will fail."

Making resistance to learning into a teachable moment

When a graduate student teaching assistant came to me in tears about postings that had been sent to her, I made a slide out of them, blacked out the students' names, and added them to the next class's PowerPoint. That presentation already included Twitter and Instagram gaffes that had cost professionals their jobs, so it was a teachable moment. I told (and still tell) my students that they should think critically about every course they take, including mine, and should think critically about every instructor they have, including me. They also have every right to complain and grouse about their lives and their teachers, and since a lot of that kind of communication happens in social media, I'm okay with it. Then I point out that employers and clients may not be as tolerant, and that hate speech they publish now in social media can come back to haunt them later as they apply for jobs and run for political office, so they need to get smart fast about what they go on record saying, even whilst in college.

I'm an experienced teacher, and I enjoy teaching young adults. I'm an experienced mother, and a mother of white sons, as a matter of fact. My teaching philosophy is not that silent students should blindly accept whatever I say. I expose students to as many different voices and points of view as I can manage in a semester, introducing them to sources I hope they continue to visit online or in a library long after they have left my classes. I welcome intellectual push-back, challenges to the canon, questioning of sources. In fact, I request it in class and encourage it in my syllabi. I am not easily intimidated by recalcitrant or balky young people. I do not have thin skin and I can handle a fair amount of lively debate from students. What I am finding in the classroom during the Trump era is not teenage ennui or adolescent grumbling or intellectual questioning. This is different. Resistant students are arguing for the right to believe fictions rather than learn facts. This is not good news for democracy, regardless for whom you vote.

Connecting political culture to classroom culture

When GOP strategist Steve Schmidt, campaign adviser to George W. Bush in 2004 and John McCain in 2008, resigned from the Republican party in 2018, he cited the scapegoating of minorities and the party's "assault on objective truth" as contributing reasons (Chokski, 2018). In an MSNBC interview, Schmidt was concerned that "40 percent of the country has surrendered their intellectual sovereignty to Donald Trump. There is for them no such thing as objective truth anymore. What is true is what the leader says is true (Schwartz, 2018)." If this thinking can permeate that large a percentage of adults in the nation, it surely must trickle down into college age students.

Resistant students are not steadfastly defending their well-buttressed arguments or even their partially formed opinions. They are attacking anyone with other points of view, and also attacking the right of others to hold and voice those views. It's a type of bullying in the classroom, and as a professor, that I cannot allow.

I cannot call this intellectual arrogance, because there is nothing intellectual about it. It arises from an emotional place and is easy to recognize as fear. What Susan Faludi identified in *Stiffed* (1999) is alive in young male students today: white men are angry that their privilege is infringed upon and challenged, and students yet to enter the workplace are angry that their privilege is interrogated or even recognized.

Trump-era student resistance to scholarship has changed my teaching.

Teaching in the Trump Era

Early in every course, I assign several readings that define facts, opinions, biases, and the differences between each. In my large lecture course, TAs lead small group discussions with students about these readings; in my seminar courses, we discuss this as a class. Still, resistant students take issue with reading that their opinion is not as valid as a provable fact. Given the current political and social climate of these Trump years, why shouldn't they take issue? There are examples all around them of politicians and pundits who appear to create personalized

realities through sheer willpower and misuse of language. Throughout the semester, we return again and again to the fact v. opinion concept; repetition is required. I tell students that I don't want chocolate to make me fat, yet if I eat too much of it, it does, no matter how much I want that fact to be untrue. I write into every syllabus:

"Thinking critically means understanding the difference between fact, opinion, and bias. It means challenging assumptions, checking facts, asking perceptive questions, forming coherent, logical, and fact-based arguments, and presenting them clearly in discussion, in papers, and in life. Question everything, even your teachers, especially your teachers. And then search for facts, for research, for as much truth as you can find."

I reorganized the way I teach media ideology, and before we discuss race, gender, sexuality, and nationality we discuss how media comment on, reflect, and help form ideas of masculinity. I teach masculine ideology in media first so the men in the classroom feel heard and tended to before they are asked to consider the ways in which other ideologies are constructed. Sometimes I wonder if I am babying the immature thinkers among them, but on the other hand, it does illustrate hegemony and set the tone for other identity politics discussions.

When a resistant student makes an offensive, inappropriate comment in class, I try to model behavior that protects other students. I want to engage him with firmness and honesty, but I don't want to shame him. This is not because I fear him, but because I hope that some year in his future, he may remain open to a light bulb turning on in his thinking. I don't want to break the bulbs before they get a chance to light up.

Sometimes I say something like, "You know, Frank, I just want to commend you for bringing that up right now. It can be risky and even scary to try to directly engage with how we feel about races and sexualities that aren't ours, and you are giving us a chance to take a look at that."

Sometimes I try to help a student recast his discomfort or disagreement as being something more productive, such as an early stage of mastering new information. When a student announced, "Ads don't treat women any differently than men. Women have it so good in our society!", I was standing at the podium in front of a 12-foot screen projection of the Dolce Gabbana ad campaign depicting a gang rape of a scantily clad woman by a group of men. Trying to be wise on my feet (something I do not always succeed at achieving), I said, "John, good for you for taking on this idea. It sounds like it's uncomfortable for you to think about, yet you are thinking about it! Give yourself credit for being a guy who is willing to wrestle with this." And then I turned the discussion to the larger idea of how resistant centers can be to recognizing the perspectives of the margins.

Making resister thinking more rigorous

If these students were in math class, they couldn't dismiss an algorithm they didn't like as being a non-algorithm, or dismiss it as a personal algorithm agenda of their math professor. But if

they don't like research showing that violence in video games affects young children, resistant students try to wish it away. A wish is not a fact or an opinion. It is a mere wish, perhaps even a delusion, and it will not serve them well in the marketplace. I try to help them see that.

But it is harder to do now than it used to be, because the world they are entering as professionals doesn't hold adults accountable to factual truths.

There are pragmatic reasons to try to intervene with these students. Their magical thinking will not help them lead companies, run organizations, or work collaboratively with colleagues. Yet they cling to it, and they receive support for clinging to it from nothing less than the White House, conservative media sources, and many a politician who appears to be an adult. The dichotomous thinking of our current political climate supports the complete dismissal of unpleasant facts, which does nothing to train young minds in solving the challenging problems of our time. No need to engage with actual issues—just pretend they no longer exist. Poof! No more global warming, immigration challenges, racism, or violence. Just pretend people you disagree with made that stuff up, and ignore it.

I type this at the top of each of my syllabi: "If you aren't shocked, startled, uncomfortable, and challenged twice a week in college, you're doing it wrong." I try to dismantle the outrage of a resistant student, reframing it as recognizing issues that are tough and beginning the process of thinking about them.

In the Trump era, teaching rational thinking, logic, and critical thinking is nearly a subversive act. It is certainly a patriotic one.

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