
Teaching Politically Without Political Correctness¹

BY GERALD GRAFF

Two imperatives have dominated recent educational writing on the American academic Left: the need to make classrooms more democratic and less hierarchical, and the need to bring political issues out of hiding and explicitly before students' view. Both these imperatives are ones I identify with, but problems seem to arise when we try to reconcile the two. Both conservative and liberal critics of "political correctness" have savagely attacked radical Leftist educators for promoting and carrying out a kind of indoctrination campaign disguised as educational empowerment. These charges infuriate Leftist educators, who feel (often justifiably) that dialogue and empowerment of students, not indoctrination, is what their classes are about. Furthermore, the anti-PC critics rarely acknowledge that Left educators themselves—to their credit—have become increasingly concerned with the challenges posed by the problem: how can teachers bring their political commitments into class without reproducing the pedagogical authoritarianism and bullying they want to overcome?

I want to argue here, however, that given the claims made by liberatory theorists, it is reasonable enough for their critics to suspect that bullying and indoctrination is what radical pedagogy is after. Furthermore, I want to argue that this problem is insoluble in the terms in which it is usually posed, which set up an inevitable double bind. If, on the one hand, the radical educator pursues his or her agenda aggressively in the class, students who aren't already disposed to that agenda are indeed likely to feel coerced or silenced. If, on the other

hand, the instructor backs away from his or her agenda in order to avoid such coercion and silencing, the class loses its claim to be particularly radical or oppositional. Politically committed pedagogy, then, either tends to be coercive or it ceases to be politically committed.

Let me say before I go on, however, that, like most questions about teaching, the question of how to bring political issues into classrooms is contingent on specific local contexts. Debates about whether "to politicize or not to politi-

next, depending on my sense of the ideological tilt of the students. And in classes where students themselves are politically divided (i.e., most classes I have taught), I often put on one party hat or the other by turns (as well as many intermediate positions), depending on the ebb and flow of the discussion. In what follows here, I will be assuming such an ideologically mixed student body, but I will also be assuming a student body that tends not to see its experience in ideologically well defined terms. In fact, this lack of a clear picture of ideological categories on the part of most American students is a key premise in my argument against standard models of radical pedagogy.

My view is that if we hope to make classrooms more

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open and democratic, we need to rethink what it means to "teach politically." More specifically, we need a different model of political pedagogy than the advocacy pedagogy that emerged from the 1960s and that has been most influentially advanced by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and subsequently elaborated by Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and others.

The most telling objection to "the pedagogy of the oppressed" is that it generally doesn't work, though I would have serious problems with it even if it did. I have no statistics, but I suspect that for every student who is "transformed" by a liberatory classroom, more students are driven into resentful silence or pushed further to the Right. Arguably, the least effective way to radicalize students is to try to radicalize them. But it seems especially counterproductive to try to radicalize students who do not feel part of a political con-

size" the classroom too often take place on abstract levels of discussion, as if all classrooms were everywhere the same and there were one correct way to bring our political commitments into our classes. In practice, however, whatever our programmatic intentions, we often find that the ideological direction we give to a class varies greatly depending on where the students are intellectually and socially. If you see your job as teacher as one of challenging your students, you will tend to steer toward a devil's advocacy politics in class, opposing whatever is the dominant mindset of the students, which you may not have been able to predict.

That is, given a student body far enough to the Right, I and many other teachers would be driven to take radically Left positions in class. In my own teaching, (and I don't think I'm atypical), I find myself being a Leninist one day and a Milton Friedmanite on the

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versation in the first place. Like most Americans, American students tend to be not conservative so much as alienated from political discourse, whether of the Left, the Right, or the Center. Both sides in the culture war have got so caught in the battle between Left and Right versions of intellectual culture that they forget that for most American students the problem has always been intellectual culture *as such*.

These students do need to be exposed to radical political ideas, which, as Chomsky and others point out, are rarely represented in the popular media. But for these radical ideas to be meaningful, students need exposure to the broader political conversation that gives such ideas meaning. Such a conversation is hard to piece together when students are exposed to it in fragments and glimpses as they move from course to course.

In the absence of any conversation across courses, students experience what should be a connected political debate as a series of isolated course-monologues. In such conditions, students become like a person trying to make sense of a phone conversation by listening at only one end. Or they become like volleyballs, bounced back and forth between disparate or clashing political and philosophical assumptions that never come together to clarify where they differ or converge.

When students go from one class, for example, in which it's taken for granted (and therefore not even said) that the Western tradition is benign and unproblematic to another in which it is taken for granted (so left unsaid) that Western culture is compromised by domination and inequality, students don't necessarily recognize the conflict between the two classes. On the contrary, since the classes don't communicate, there is every inducement for the students to compartmentalize the two political perspectives and give each teacher whatever they presumably "want" even when it's flatly contradictory.

To me, then, a truly democratic curriculum would, first, bring the political debates that now lie buried and muffled in the curriculum out into the open. Second, it would expose students to these debates in a way that would not try to predetermine the outcome, giving them space to make up their

own minds about where they stand. If the Left believes in the merits of its case, it needs to have faith that students will come to recognize these merits in the give and take of debate. This means that progressive instructors should engage in open classroom debates with conservative colleagues, "teaching with the enemy," as it were, and if not with the enemy in the flesh, then at least with its texts or its email communications in the reading.

This of course means accepting the risk that the Left might lose some of these debates. But recent left educational strategy has been largely defensive, aimed at not losing rather than risking the gains in public recognition and influence that can be made in a public forum. Thus I've heard Left educators argue that we should not give legitimacy

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to patriarchy and racism by engaging critics of women's or black studies programs in those programs. After all, professors who preach free market economics don't invite their critics into their courses to debate, so why should we? Furthermore, this argument runs, students already are saturated with conservative and liberal ideology in other courses (not to mention in the media), so why give those ideologies even more air time? Better to circle the wagons around minority studies classes and programs and tune out the hostile critics outside. The trouble with this kind of defensive strategy is that, since it's a given that those hostile critics hold the balance of power out in the world, failing to engage them amounts to letting them win by default. Then, too, when progressive academics speak mostly to the like-minded, they get little practice persuading people who don't already agree with them.

An objection I often hear to this argument for "teaching the conflicts" is that

it naively assumes a neutral marketplace of ideas in which debaters occupy a level playing field of equal power and authority. This objection misses the point in several ways. First, though it is true that the playing field of debate is far from socially level, this fact itself would figure to emerge as a central and explicit theme in any debate in which a democratic spectrum of positions were represented. Second, the objection leaves us with only two options, both of them bad: either sterile and rarefied neutrality on the one hand, or coercive advocacy on the other.

But the alternative to coercive advocacy is not neutrality, but *counter advocacy*. That is, the way to avoid bullying our students with our political convictions is not to muzzle or softpedal those convictions, but to open ourselves more publicly to the convictions of counterauthorities. The point, again, is to give students a shot, for once, at figuring out what is at stake in the ideological differences that swirl around them and thus to enter the conversation themselves. To me such a model of counter-advocacy is more democratic in principle than Freire's celebrated model of classroom dialogue.

Freire's goal in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the laudable one of empowering oppressed students by helping them make political sense of their experience and become active agents of their liberation. Accordingly, Freire argues that teacher-student dialogue needs to replace what he calls the "banking" approach to education, in which knowledge is seen as a kind of deposit students passively receive from an authoritative teacher and eventually cash in when they give it back for a grade. Real education for Freire is not a set of fixed answers dropped into student brain-vaults, but a "problem-posing" experience that generates independent critical thinking.

Freire could not be more insistent in warning radical educators to think of liberation not as something bestowed from above on the oppressed, but rather as a condition they enable the oppressed to achieve on their own. "The pedagogy of the oppressed," he writes, "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed...in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity." [33] Freire consistently

attacks quasi-Leninist educational models in which elite revolutionary leaders impose a teleological blueprint on students, merely giving the banking model a different content instead of discarding it. "Liberation education," he writes, "starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people." [118] In a Freirean classroom dialogue, then, instead of imposing their own "thematics" on the people from the top down, liberatory educators "re-present to the people their thematics in systematized and amplified form. The thematics which have come from the people return to them—not as contents to be deposited but as problems to be solved."

One can readily understand the appeal of this pedagogy to a generation of American teachers predisposed since the 1960s to student-centered forms of teaching. And up to a point, Freirean pedagogy is grounded in a sound pedagogical premise that goes back to Dewey: that for any teaching to be effective, it has to be internalized by the student; and it probably won't be if it's imposed from the top. Then, too, Freire's assumptions and methods seem defensible when used with groups like the Brazilian peasants who, I presume, invited Freire and his team to teach them. The problems arise, however, when Freire's methods are transplanted to mixed classrooms in the USA, where even students whom most of us would regard as oppressed don't necessarily see themselves that way, and where some students are less interested in fighting the power structure than joining it.

The problem is that, no matter how open and dialogical the liberatory classroom tries to be, the political deck is inevitably stacked in favor of the teacher's political perspective. Though Freire is obviously sincere in wanting the oppressed to decide for themselves what their transformation will look like, it is clear from his account that the oppressed are free to decide only within limits. However much Freire insists on "problem-posing" rather than "banking" education, the goal of teaching for Freire is to move the student toward what Freire calls "a critical perception of the world," and there seems little question that for Freire only Marxism or some

version of Leftist radicalism counts as a genuine "critical perception." As Freire puts it, the critical perception of the world that the student acquires amounts to "a correct method of approaching reality..." [103]. It constitutes "a comprehension of total reality" [99]. And Freire leaves little doubt that he and his associates have the correct line on "total reality."

Richard E. Miller has recently made this point about the inherent dogmatism of Freire's approach. As Miller puts it, Freire

presents the recipients of his pedagogy as coming to their own conclusions, as learning to think for themselves. He doesn't linger over the fact that all this self-motivated thinking leads his students to think exactly what he would like them to think.

Freire, adds Miller, doesn't "imagine that, possibly, his students are mouthing pieties, silently collaborating in the production of the desired public transcript and then sneaking back home where they are free to question his lessons or force others to accept them or forget them altogether." [19]

So the outcome of the Freirean pedagogical "dialogue" is already predeter-

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mined, with the oppressed being free to arrive only at Freire's own conclusions. Freire assumes that oppressed students will naturally see themselves as oppressed, as if who the oppressed and the oppressor are is given and undebatable and not a question teachers and students might disagree about. As Kathleen Weiler argues, "while Freire's work is based on a deep respect for students and teachers as readers of the world, the conscientization he describes takes place in a relatively unproblematic relationship between a liberatory teacher and the equally abstracted oppressed." [2]

Nowhere in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* does Freire imagine the possibility that students might end up deciding that they are *not* oppressed or that for them authentic liberation is getting a job with IBM, making lots of money, and moving to the suburbs. In Freire's no-lose scheme of things, such decisions could only be the result of false consciousness and ideological brainwashing. For as Freire puts it, the "oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his way of life." "The oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressor, to imitate him, to follow him" [49]. It follows, then, that any resistance students put up to the pedagogy of the oppressed needs to be taken seriously by teachers only as a symptom of false consciousness, not as a defensible intellectual position that the teacher might help the student to defend more effectively. Needless to say, the possibility never arises that such a student might persuade the radical teacher that it's he or she who suffers from false consciousness.

In short, Freire never considers the unpleasant possibility that what "the people" authentically prefer might conflict with the pedagogy of the oppressed. Operating on existentialist premises, Freire assumes that beneath the layers of social and ideological conditioning lies an authentic self that naturally must rebel against authoritarian rule. Deep down, in our authentic selves, we are all existential Christian Marxists—or we would be if the overlay of socially imposed mystification could be stripped away. The very sincerity of Freire's commitment to dialogue seems to prevent him from recognizing how deeply undialogical his rhetoric must sound to those who don't share his political assumptions, and even to some who do.

A phrase like "the pedagogy of the oppressed," for example, leaves no rhetorical room for the many Americans who, rightly or wrongly, need to have the pervasiveness of oppression demonstrated, not assumed as a given. This coercive rhetoric recurs in the writings of latter-day Freireans like bell hooks, who off-handedly refers to American society as "this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," as if everyone agrees that this is what the thing is and the only real question is what to do about it.

The problem of student resistance—or cynical capitulation—to the pedagogy of the oppressed is never mentioned in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or *Education for Critical Consciousness*, which are still the most influential of Freire's works and still the most frequently cited as guides to classroom practice. In fairness, Freire acknowledges the problem in his later work, in which he addresses the specific situation of the American classroom and the conservative mood of the post-sixties. In conversations with Ira Shor in their jointly authored *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, Freire concedes that radical educators have to respect resistant students who want to use education “just to get jobs and be happy with that....” Even in making such concessions, however, Freire still implies that a student's consciousness is “authentic” only if it ends up according with the superior liberatory politics of the teacher. Nevertheless, Freire does grant that such teachers must help students acquire the knowledge needed for social survival even as they try to make students critical of the terms of that survival [2].

As Freire and Shor have come to acknowledge student resistance to radical pedagogy, so increasingly do other critical educators, who do often argue for classrooms based on open debate rather than on predetermined conclusions. In an interview in *Border Crossings*, for example, Henry Giroux states that in his classes, “I don't care what positions the students take. I want them to be able to justify whatever position they do take so they come out with a clearer sense of what they believe in and what effects that might have.” [16]

At other times, however, this admirably democratic injunction to help students “justify whatever position they do take” morphs into a very different rhetoric that implies that students are already predisposed toward social rebellion and need to be helped only to articulate it. Hooks, for example, tells us that the students she encounters are “adamant” that “education should be liberatory.” Her implication is that, like “the people” in Freire, hooks' students inwardly yearn for political liberation and are only waiting for her to lead the way.

This implication, which betrays a kind of wishful thinking in liberatory educational writing, is often conveyed by a euphemistic employment of words like

“help,” “allow,” or “opportunity” [19]. The radical educator, that is, merely “helps” “allows,” or provides “the opportunity” to students to express a radicalism that is presumably there waiting for encouragement. Thus Freire writes of “helping” the people to “enter the historical process critically” [16] and to “facilitate their intervention into the historical process,” [44] as if “the people” were already groping in some inchoate way toward a Freirean historical consciousness and just need a little help from their friends. Similarly, Giroux,

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even as he warns against “idealizing and romanticizing” students, urges teachers to “allow” students the “opportunity” to resist the dominant order, as if students were straining at the leash to storm the barricades.

Giroux adds that the school curriculum “should *allow* students not merely to take risks but also to push against the boundaries of an oppressive social order” [141; emphasis added]. Students, says Giroux, “must be *given the opportunity* to engage in antiracist struggles in *their* effort to link schooling with real life, ethical discourse to political action, and classroom relations to a broader notion of cultural politics” [141; emphasis added]. According to Giroux, radical pedagogy “*opens up the possibility* for students to reclaim their voices as part of the process of empowerment,” in order to struggle “against all forms of power that subjugate and exploit” [138; emphasis added]. And again, students must “be *given the opportunity* to engage and develop a counter discourse to the established boundaries of knowledge” [30; emphasis added]. Lest anyone worry that radical teachers might exert pressure on students to “push against the boundaries of an oppressive social order,” and so forth, Giroux's formulations reassure them that these are the students' own desires, or would be with assistance from the friendly radical teacher. It is not surprising that the unconverted see this pedagogy as coercive and undemocratic.

I have been trying to show why it has been difficult to reconcile the imperative to create democratic classrooms with the imperative to teach from a radical political perspective. What we've seen, I think, is that liberatory educators vacillate between a rhetoric of democratic “dialogue” and uncoerced classroom outcomes on the one hand, and a rhetoric that assumes predetermined political outcomes on the other. This equivocation seems related to the institutional conditions I mentioned at the outset, in which instructors teach in isolation from each other and are therefore able to preach to the converted while tuning out unwelcome critics. The facile use of formulas like “the pedagogy of the oppressed” or “this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” assumes that the audience being addressed already agrees with us. Though such conditions may be an understandable relief to Leftists who feel beleaguered and disrespected these days, they arguably represent the worst possible training for academics who hope to make a wider impact on the culture.

So I come back to my argument that creating a democratic public sphere of debate in the curriculum should come before any liberatory classroom agenda. How can this be done? Clearly, exposing students to intellectual and political debates will not change anything if students are spectators to a ping-pong match between their instructors rather than active participants. But there are alternatives. Donald Lazere of Cal Poly University in San Luis Obispo, California, describes a course he organizes around the clash of Left, Right, and Centrist economic and social theories. Lazere is careful to structure the assignments in the course so that students gradually move from summarizing different positions to articulating their own and arguing it before the class. Deborah Meier in her 1995 book *The Power of Their Ideas*, describes the charter high schools she helped develop and run in Harlem, which are organized around “community-centered debate” [82]. Meier writes that in these schools, the “adult debates” of the staff “are not hidden from students” [58]; rather students and teachers join in “arguing over...what constitutes ‘our’ canon, hearing each other out on words like ‘Eurocentric’ and ‘Afrocentric.’” [118].

In a master's program I directed from 1996 to 1999 at the University of Chicago, we experimented with incorporating academic conferences into our lone required core course, "Contested Issues in the Humanities," and we used such conferences throughout the year to give focus to the contested issues. I believe that with suitable modifications undergraduate courses and curricula have much to gain by the injection of this academic conference format—with students and instructors presenting the papers and sitting on the panels. I've elaborated these suggestions more fully in my 1992 book *Beyond the Culture Wars* and in a series of "Critical Controversies" text books, co-edited with James Phelan, on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and recent debates about its treatment of race and other issues, and most recently on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

An objection I often hear to my emphasis on debate is that it is all too binary and reductive, encouraging the kind of simplistic thinking to which media-saturated American students are already too prone. Some recent critics of my work (e.g., Jeffrey Whalen, *Closed Encounters*) argue that the culture war debates that I urge teachers to bring into classrooms are mostly *bad* debates, filled with misleading polarizations, dichotomizations, and reifications, with a pseudoleftist multicultural identity politics often opposing a stereotyped traditionalism.

It is certainly true that much of the current culture war debate is *bad* debate. It is also true, however, that to clarify complicated issues for students, teachers often have to be willing to be binary and reductive, at least at the start. One needs to start with the binary opposition of Left vs. Right, for example, if one is to problematize the opposition down the road. I'm a believer, in other words, in the pedagogical value of *bad* debate, which seems to me preferable to the silence and avoidance of controversy that now marks the curriculum. It is easy to stand back from the crudity of the culture war and wince at its reductive polarizations, especially if you don't address the problem of how intellectual issues are to be clarified for students. Once you take this problem of clarification seriously, I think you have to recognize the need for reductive simplifications, if only as a first step toward more complicated and nuanced formulations.

It's been said that to change education the point should be not to try to make something completely different happen, but to draw out "what might be happening in what already happens" [Jon Cook, 139]. What I call teaching the conflicts is one kind of attempt to draw out what might be happening in what already happens, in contrast to saying "Now for something completely different," the message of liberatory pedagogy. In a sense, educational institutions are *already* teaching the conflicts, every time students go from a conservative teacher at ten o'clock to a liberal or radical one at eleven. But we teach the conflicts badly when we fail to engage the conflicts publicly where positions and differences can get clarified. In so far as this failure keeps students outside the political conversation buried in the curriculum, it perpetuates an undemocratic form of education in which a small minority of the students become intellectuals and the rest do not.

In closing, then, I submit that we need a different idea of how to teach politically from the advocacy pedagogy advanced by recent critical educators, which at its best creates a kind of liberated zone in the curriculum rather than the public sphere debate that is needed. In short, bringing students into the culture's political conversation should take priority over liberating them.

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a talk at Colorado College, Colorado Springs, CO, in the spring of 1999. A response to the paper was given by Stanley Aronowitz. Portions of the essay are based on material in two earlier published essays: Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff, "A Critique of Critical Pedagogy," in Michael Berube and Cary Nelson, *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Gerald Graff, "The Dilemma of Oppositional Pedagogy: A Response," in Karen Fitts and Alan France, *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995). Also some passages in this essay were written in collaboration with Donald Lazere.

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