

Contribution to “Forum on Radical Teaching Now,” *Radical Teacher* 83, 2008:

“From Editors’ Introduction”

“What are the conditions for teaching radically in 2008? For opening students’ minds to left, feminist, anti-racist, and queer ideas? For stimulating them to work for egalitarian change? How do opportunities for progressive teaching vary with the ages, genders, populations, and classes or students? What pedagogies have the best chance of helping students become radicals?”

Gerald Graff

I think it’s immoral for teachers to try to get students in their classes “to work for egalitarian change,” as you put it. What right do we have to be the self-appointed political conscience of our students? Given the inequality in power and experience between students and teachers (even teachers from disempowered groups), students are often justifiably afraid to challenge our political views even if we beg them to do so. Pick on somebody your own size!

Making it the main object of teaching to open “students’ minds to left, feminist, anti-racist, and queer ideas” and “stimulate” them (nice euphemism that) “to work for egalitarian change” has been the fatal mistake of the liberatory pedagogy movement from Freire in the 1960s to today. It puts the cart before the horse when teaching American students, many of whom are alienated from political discourse, unfamiliar with its vocabulary, and inevitably likely to feel coerced into agreeing with the radical teacher?

What teachers can and should do is introduce students to political issues by representing the spectrum of arguments on the Left, Center, and Right, thus drawing them into political debates. This gives radical views a fair hearing, and presenting them in dialogue with opposing views makes it more likely that students will understand those radical views as well as not feel pressured to agree with them.

You reply that you do exactly what I recommend—not bullying your students, but presenting them with controversial political issues and letting them make up their own minds. I believe in many cases that’s true. But if so, such a practice should be called “teaching political debate,” not “liberatory’ education,” “critical pedagogy,” “teaching for social justice,” and other terms that inevitably suggest an effort to convert, if not indoctrinate.

Teaching political debate doesn’t mean teachers have to be neutral and never take a stand, though neutrality is preferable to bullying. The more you fairly represent viewpoints strongly opposed to yours in the reading list, the more legitimate it becomes to push your own view. You can do that even more aggressively, though, if you invite colleagues who hold opposing views into your class, a tactic that also gives your students a model of how you can be

disagreed with.

There needs to be more clarity, then, about the goals of the “radical teacher”: is it to turn education into a branch of political organizing and proselytizing, or is it to draw students into controversial political debates that they have a stake in as citizens? The second path runs the risk that students will become (or stay) Republicans rather than revolutionaries, but since they may do that anyway, this is a risk that has to be taken. If you believe in your ideas, you should have faith that they’ll win out in a fairly structured classroom debate.

*I have developed these and other arguments more fully in “Teaching Politically Without Political Correctness,” *Radical Teacher* 58 (2000): 26-30; <https://geraldgraff.com/>*