

CONVICTION IN THE CLASSROOM: INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

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Every student at Oak Grove High School is familiar with the experience: asking a teacher for their personal beliefs on a topic, especially of a political nature, and being completely dismissed with a reference to their neutrality.

This pervasive unwillingness to speak of personal political beliefs in any manner is by no means universal but still seems to have become almost a matter of policy for the majority of teachers at Oak Grove. There are pressing reasons to consider that students may become angered and offended by a teacher's opinions, but there are much more fundamental reasons not to support this practice.

It rests on the idea that information in the social sciences, humanities, and even sciences can be presented in a completely objective way. However, the myth of complete objectivity teaching is one of the most pervasive and dangerous in our school system.

It is vital we understand why this objectivity is impossible, why the pretence of it is harmful, and why openness is truly the most educational policy.

When teachers enter the classroom, their job is to convey information to students as ef-



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fectively as possible. This information is more often than not contained in some set of curricular standards.

This is where the first tendrils of subjectivity breakthrough.

Textbooks and course standards are written by people with opinions and viewpoints of their own. This simple fact is at the heart of the issues with the veil of “neutrality”. Textbooks forgo mentioning certain things and include others for reasons that are partially shaped by the beliefs of their authors.

Similarly, teachers choose to either emphasize or deemphasize information on the basis of their beliefs about what matters and what does not, which are shaped by their ideology. Time constraints placed on teachers – class length, semester length, less days lost to testing – may cause trade-offs to occur. Teachers may default to their own sense of values, what matters and does not, to make decisions. To the detriment of students.

When students are not given the opportunity to contextualize the information they are given, they will invariably believe most of what is taught with no strings attached. The authority most teachers have, and the respect most students have for them, guarantees it. This leads to students internalizing highly politicized information as fact. In America we call this teaching, in Iran, we call it indoctrination.

Thus, this practice places everyone between and rock and a hard place. Teachers will either be perceived as blank slates – conveying pure unstained knowledge, or they will be seen as foaming-at-the-mouth extremists. Both of these can devastate the proper exchange of ideas by reducing the frankness of teaching.

Fortunately, the transition would be simple.

Teachers would only have to answer questions about their beliefs in an open and polite way. There would be no need for long monologues about the justifications they have for their beliefs. They would just provide students with a meaningful level of context by granting a level of insight into their views.

I understand that we worry about brutal Trump vs. the world arguments breaking out, but I also think we should have faith in our teachers' abilities to maintain decorum in the classroom – allowing for what could be meaningful conversations.

Only by discarding the false idol of neutrality can we truly educate. Our reliance on neutrality rests on a false assumption about the nature of knowledge and teaching. It harms teachers and students, and does so for little reason.

We want to hear a voice of reason, understanding and conviction – not one of obscurantism, indoctrination and fear.



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