How to Politicize the Classroom

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Looking back over the years, I see a pattern among some of the situations I've mishandled as a teacher. Here are two examples.

Once a student came to my office hours to complain about how sharply I had critiqued his contributions to lecture. He told me he thought I was supposed to be supportive, to find what was good rather than bad in what he was saying, to be on his side. I told him it was not my job to be on his side; he stormed off.

Another time, I had a dispute with a student over missing classes due to his observance of Jewish holidays. He spoke to his academic advisor, who brought the matter to the dean of students. She asked me whether, to dispel the suggestion of anti-Semitism, I would permit her to tell the student that I was Jewish. "Absolutely not" was my indignant reply. He ended up switching out of the course.

In both of these cases, I think I did something right: it is in fact not my job to be on my students' side, religiously or in any other way. It is very important that I make it clear that my behavior towards them as a teacher is not underwritten by any kind of personal allegiance. But, being overzealous in making this point, I did not make it judiciously. I responded to the first student's demand to behave more maternally ("I thought you were supposed to be caring!") by being deliberately and unnecessarily cold, and in the second case I ought to have but did not follow up with the student to help him understand my reasoning.

Mistakes of this kind are not always fatal: the second student later took a different course with me, and performed brilliantly; eventually I advised his BA thesis; many years later, we are still in touch. The first student, however, checked out of the class after that day. My coldness and detachment cost him that educational experience along with however many could have followed it. That meeting happened a decade ago, and it still pains me.

Recently students across the country have called upon faculty to take a stand in connection with the nationwide protests against racism and police brutality; and I have personally been invited, in a variety of ways, to perform actions that would constitute displays of solidarity, with the cause and therefore with the students and colleagues who champion it. I believe it is quite important that I resist acceding to these requests, as I resist every other request for demonstrations of allegiance or team-membership.

But I also find something to fault in a response that construes the only alternative to "giving in" to such demands as "doing nothing"; connecting it to the other two cases, the pattern suggests a failure of leadership.

In his famous lecture "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber argued that the status of an academic as rational, scholarly and scientific is predicated on being apolitical, nonemotional and valuationally detached from one's proper activity in the academy: a disinterested, scientific presentation of "the facts."

Passionate investment gives rise to sticky beliefs—beliefs that are less responsive to evidence and argument, more susceptible to bias and framing effects. Such beliefs,

thought Weber, will be adjudicated by rhetoric rather than argumentation: speeches aimed at "canvassing votes and winning over others" will replace "scientific analysis." In such a context words "are not plowshares to loosen the soil of contemplative thought; they are swords against the enemies: such words are weapons."

Thus Weber thought apolitical self-restraint was necessary, above all for those teaching political subjects: allowing partisan political commitments to intrude into the classroom is like allowing the mother of the accused to stand as juror in his trial. He pleads with his students not to demand leadership from him:

You come to our lectures and demand from us the qualities of leadership, and you fail to realize in advance that of a hundred professors at least ninety-nine do not and must not claim to be ... 'leaders' in matters of conduct. Please, consider that ... the qualities that make a man an excellent scholar and academic teacher are not the qualities that make him a leader to give directions in practical life or, more specifically, in politics.

Weber may be right that professors are chosen not for their moral qualities but because they can facilitate a certain kind of rational discourse—but this is only a workable distinction insofar as we assume there are topics we can sensibly discuss dispassionately and apolitically. And there is no topic that does not at some point face the inescapably political question of justifying its own existence, and so no topic whose discussion might not at some point turn passionate and political. The Weberian ideal of the detached, disinterested arbiter—be he the juror, the journal referee or the sports umpire—applies only to the rationality of those in the comfortable position of being a cog in a larger machine. When you have bracketed every question of value—even the value of your own inquiry—rationality comes cheap. But when it becomes necessary to take thought for the whole, that is when leadership is called for.

I only realized something had gone wrong in my response to the first student when I got praised for it. Those to whom I told the story tended to read him either as a coddled "snowflake" who had been raised to expect nothing but praise from authority figures, or as a sexist who demanded nurturing from women professors specifically. They congratulated me for "giving him what he deserved," confusing my aloofness with indignation. That was when I realized the student must have done the same.

Indignation is an understandable reaction to sexism or entitlement, just as straight refusal is an understandable response to an unreasonable request—but these are the responses of a private citizen. A leader finds a way to transcend simple reactiveness to give people the help they did not know how to ask for.

When a student asks for allegiance, solidarity or team-membership—for proof that I care about them or about some issue that is dear to them—and I respond with Weberian detachment, that is not a way of doing my job. That is a way of refusing to do my job. It is not true that the only alternative to indulgent and unprofessional

acquiescence is indifferent and aloof apoliticality. That is an impoverished menu of options.

Instead of merely reacting—however understandably—to what they do, I can rise to the occasion and take the more synoptic viewpoint of a leader. And that means opening up a conversation. As a philosopher and an ethicist, it is my job to help students talk and think rationally about whatever ethical problems are on their minds. That includes questions about racism, about the role of police in our society, about the kinds of sacrifices—for instance, in public health—we should or should not be prepared to make in the service of justice. And it includes problems they are having with me.

Ideally, all democratic political leaders, from the president down, would understand their job as one of articulating a question, and guiding discussion of it in such a way that, whatever the group ends up doing, everyone in it understands *why*. They are not supposed to decide things for us; they are supposed to help us decide. True politics would somehow be insulated from the pressures that drive politicians to push agendas geared toward appealing to a subset of their constituency, and to ignore potentially legitimate points of view on the grounds of how few people espouse them, or how quietly they do so.

If true politics, and real leadership, is available nowhere else, we should at least make sure to offer a model of it in our colleges and universities.

If I am to do better, I cannot afford to indulge in despair. So I remind myself that sometimes I do get it right. Discussing the details of a case of sexual assault in a large lecture class last year, I found myself becoming emotional. I restrained myself and went on. Shortly thereafter, I noticed that a student was crying. I quickly looked away so as not to draw attention to her, and also so as to keep my own emotions in check. I finished the lecture, went back to my office and emailed her to ask if she was okay.

We had a brief email exchange. She thanked me, and said she felt my lecture helped her understand something she had gone through. I was proud of myself for having created a classroom in which students felt they could stay in spite of the pain they felt, a classroom in which they felt they could cry. If my classroom and office should be places where topics such as racism and sexual assault can surface, then they must also become hospitable to human emotion, personal histories and the worldviews and perspectives within which many of our stickiest beliefs are "stuck."

My students are not detached—not from their feelings, not from their values and not from the events happening in the world around them. If I am to be their teacher, I cannot be detached either. They want to talk about what matters, here and now, and that is the conversation I need to be in a position to facilitate. If I do it judiciously—with allegiance to none, with consideration for all—then perhaps some of the words that were once weapons can be transformed into ploughshares.

Rationality cannot be purified of its affective tincture, or "apolitically" detached from our shared project of pursuing the common good. After all, for us humans, rationality is an emotional and political achievement.

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