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The Politics of Classroom Engagement: Practicing Nonpartisanship in a First-year Writing Classroom

By Maria Geiger

At the start of the spring semester, a simple writing ice-breaker opened my eyes to the unflattering ways in which students view instructors who share too much, too soon. For an engaging topic sentence refresher, students were required to expand upon sentences from a list, with one topic being, “I love/hate it when my instructors...” I expected students to share mostly “I hate when instructors give a lot homework” or “prohibit cell phones in the classroom” type responses. While there were a few of those, much to my surprise, three quarters of the class (15 of 20 students!) wrote that they *hate* it when “instructors tell us what to think.” In the ensuing conversation, students confided that it is not unusual for instructors to share their personal political views at the start of the semester; one student claimed that in doing so, instructors hold students “prisoner” by forcing them to listen to one-sided lectures.

According to a 2017 study by UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), “35.5 percent of incoming college students aligned themselves with liberal or far-left ideology, while 22.2 percent considered themselves conservative or far right.” While recent studies reveal that less than 10% of college instructors identify as conservative (“Professors and Politics: What the Research Says”), the January 2017 Gallup Poll reveals that the majority of Americans identify as conservative (“U.S. Conservatives Outnumber Liberals by Narrowing Margin”). Taken together, these percentages offer a cautionary tale of why (in addition to moral principles and common courtesy) instructors best serve their students when they are mindful of appearing partisan.

The groundwork for democracy in action starts in our own classrooms, giving students a model to follow as participatory citizens. Instructors should strive to create student-centered learning environments that invite each and every student to confidently contribute to classroom discussions. To foster engagement from the start, instructors best serve students when they leave out their own political leanings (students don’t always look beyond what they might interpret as moralizing). Aside from creating an uncomfortable learning environment, instructors who share too much risk driving students to wonder whether they were fairly graded due to contradictory viewpoints (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner). First-year students especially have enough to deal with during the college transition process without also worrying about political leanings that might conflict with those of their instructors.

While noble intentions might inspire instructors to share their personal views (we want our students to be informed participatory citizens!), in doing so, there is much lost from a student’s point of view. An instructor who shares personal political leanings is treating students as followers incapable of thinking for themselves. When unintentionally silencing students, writing instructors, the ultimate champions of free speech, lose credibility (which is difficult to reclaim once relinquished). Teens in particular have zero tolerance for perceived hypocrisy, and let’s not forget that students in a first-year composition class are often as young as 18 years old. Learning environments that encourage all

students to participate without concern for political leanings strengthen both the student/instructor relationship and the learning community at large.

Though instructors might believe that it suffices to proclaim that “all views will be respected in our class,” it does not. Academics such as Dr. David Gooblar advise that we promptly let students know that political views will not “get in the way of your mission as an educator,” but our new students don’t yet know or necessarily trust us. The natural dynamics of the class (and especially so for first-year students) propels students to view instructors as models of classroom ethics. As such, we are responsible for leading the way as we exhibit what respectful, unbiased listening looks like from the start. While we don't have to present ourselves as “human Scantron machine[s] with no views at all” (Gooblar), being mindful of sharing our opinions on sensitive political views is judicious. The first few weeks of the semester lay the groundwork for what is to come, leaving little room for negative impressions from our scrutinizing students.

Every college student should embark on a self-directed journey that leads to meaningful learning. Instructors must remember that they did not wake up one day with deeply held convictions they felt confident expressing as first-year college students. While casual political discussions can and should occur later on in a student’s academic career (indeed, such perspective-broadening discussions are part of the appeal of campus life), in a first-year, first semester writing class, most students are struggling to find their physical classrooms, let alone their voices! It is our duty to guide students toward this self-discovery; we are supposed to welcome and encourage participation, not turn students off before they take their first steps on a wondrous learning journey meant to last a lifetime.

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Maria Geiger is an online educational technology instructor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and an adjunct writing instructor at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, NJ. Maria's interests include argument/research writing, blended/flipped learning, digital communication, and integrating media/web tools into the curriculum to better facilitate student engagement. Her work also appeared in the Spring 2018 edition of the *New Jersey English Journal*.



“Sunflower Finger” by **Kendal Shirvan**, a senior at Northern Highlands Regional High School. She first started drawing and painting when she was 11 years old and continued all throughout high school. She plans to continue art in college and into her professional career, whatever that may be. At school, she is most involved in a community service club, Highlands Cares, taking part in Relay for Life Event Leadership for the past four years. She is also a dedicated member of National Honors Society and a Highlands Ambassador with the Boomerang Project, an initiative that helps incoming freshman adapt to their new school. As she gets ready to graduate and go off to college, she plans to utilize the skills she's learned in high school, from academic to artistic, as she navigates through the next chapter of her life.