



English Teaching: Practice & Critique

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Peter Smagorinsky, Andie Brasley, Rebekah Johnson, Lisa Shurtz, (2017) "A letter to teacher candidates at the dawn of the Trump Presidency", English Teaching: Practice & Critique, Vol. 16 Issue: 3, pp.319-330, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-05-2017-0084>

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A letter to teacher candidates at the dawn of the Trump Presidency

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Letter to
teacher
candidates

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Received 17 May 2017
Revised 8 September 2017
Accepted 9 October 2017

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe a letter written to undergraduate students before their enrollment in a required foundations course, Service-Learning in English Education, taken before admission to the English education program at [the university]. The course, offered in the spring of 2017, came on the heels of Donald Trump's election to the US Presidency, an event that followed from a campaign that raged against "politically correct" social developments that respect the dignity of people historically marginalized in US society.

Design/methodology/approach – The letter lays out the perils of teaching a diversity-oriented course in an era of disdain for diverse people and cultures. The letter explains how the course design attempts to give all interpretive authority to the students through their selection of course books and the book club design of promoting discussion outside professorial surveillance.

Findings – The paper includes the comments of three students regarding their response to the letter and course, and concludes that teaching a politicized course in a tempestuous time is risky yet possible.

Originality/value – This paper looks at one teacher educator's approach to introducing diversity-related ideas in a Red State during an anti-diversity presidency.

Keywords Critical literacy, Donald Trump, Multicultural education, Service-learning, Book clubs, Diversity education

Paper type Viewpoint

The transition in the US from President Obama to President Trump at the beginning of 2017 represents perhaps the most dramatic political turn the USA has ever experienced. The fear and anger stoked during the campaign did not abate with the election; the validation of racism, xenophobia, misogyny and a politically conservative form of Christianity led to a contentious, ferociously asserted rejection of people from outside the Trump base.

University faculty became concerned about their teaching. If teaching is inherently a political act (Berchini, 2017; Hess and McAvoy, 2014; Thomas, 2012), then faculty politics suddenly became visible targets for opposition. My university's administration felt compelled, for the first time I can recall, to issue faculty a memorandum regarding the role of politics in instruction, saying in part that:

We respect the rights of our employees to share their own views on political issues. It is important, however, that they do so only in their personal capacities, and that it is done in a way that does not interfere with work, does not involve improper use of state resources, and does not create the appearance that the employee is speaking on behalf of the University System of Georgia or its institutions.

The memorandum also urged care in sharing our political perspectives during class, particularly those that might come across as an endorsement of one party or ideology over the other, with liberal opinions the tacit object of this imperative for tact and restraint.



Service-learning as a site for diversity education

My own teaching at The University of Georgia (UGA), I realized late in 2016, might become a site for student resistance of the sort I have outlined. Georgia (GA) has been steadfastly conservative for much of its history. As an original colony in the Deep South, it instituted slavery and fought on its behalf in the Civil War, and imposed Jim Crow laws on its citizens in its aftermath. In 1968, when given a choice between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey in the presidential race, the GA voters preferred Alabama's arch-segregationist Governor George Wallace. The state is now firmly Republican and conservative, with all branches of government representing the interests of affluent White men.

I have taught an undergraduate course, Service-Learning in English Education, since 2010. (The syllabus is online at <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/SL/>; for more detailed accounts of the class and its development, see Smagorinsky, 2011, 2014; Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b). For the record, I'm an old White guy with an enduring interest in culture and a record of advocating for a variety of civil rights issues in public education via education blogs and other media forums. I developed this course as a way to help our often-affluent and privileged, mostly White and heterosexual students learn about people who are very different from themselves. Although not all of our students are wealthy and White, as our state's namesake university, UGA overwhelmingly admits students who have gone through school in honors, gifted, AP and other advanced classes and thus have been isolated from students of color and working class students, who tend to be discouraged from such enrollment. Many of them have envisioned teaching careers that resemble what they know from their own high school days, giving learned, professorial lectures to college-bound students who are motivated by grades and other school rewards to pay attention and do school as their teachers intend. However, their first teaching assignments will more likely give them the leftover assignments after the senior faculty members pick those elite classes clean.

I designed this course to provide them an experience with diverse students before admission to the program. For a number of years, I taught this course as an elective, but worked to get it established as our English education program's required foundations course. Within one year, Donald Trump was elected president. The anti-liberalism that accompanied his election was a cause for concern, given the democratic, civil-rights-oriented themes that my class explores and that Trump has explicitly rejected. A second concern was the fact that the course was now required. As an elective, it enrolled students who generally embraced diversity as a starting point. But required courses enroll everyone. What, I wondered, would be the impact of having students take the class as a prerequisite at a historical period in which the citizenry was being rallied to speak out against inclusion and mutual respect for one another's rights and dignity, and take it in a state that has been engrained with political conservatism from inception?

As the election results sank in, I thought long and hard about these questions. I decided to address them frankly with the students before they showed up in January. In late December, I drafted the following letter introducing them to the class and laying out the challenges ahead. My goal was to put all my cards on the table, so they understood who I am, why I designed the course, and how they might respond if they objected to its emphases. The letter was sent via email to each student about a week before the first night of class. It explained both how the course has been designed and is intended to work, and how the current political climate provides a context that makes the issues explored potentially explosive. I have trimmed it here to fit the contours of the space provided for this article.

Dear Students in LLED 3461, Service-Learning in English Education.

Welcome to what I hope will be a stimulating class. My name is Peter Smagorinsky, and I will be your professor. But the class is designed to be primarily run by you, the students. I'll talk to you in detail about how the class will work on opening night, and briefly in this letter of welcome. Mostly, though, I'll introduce other aspects of the course.

If you're wondering what service-learning is, the UGA Office of Service-Learning has developed a nice, short introduction at https://kaltura.uga.edu/media/t/1_ncwp76e6. In essence, service-learning gives you an authentic community context (for us, the alternative HS in Athens, Classic City HS) in which you both serve (providing tutoring and mentoring for their students) and learn (in this case, learn about the lives of people who are very different from you, in anticipation of teaching classes across a typical school's tracking system, as you are likely to do). More on all that later.

Personal introduction

First, let me introduce myself. I have written a few autobiographical papers that will acquaint you with my life up to this point, or at least a few years ago. The most personal essay concerns my life in a family characterized by Asperger's Syndrome, obsessive-compulsiveness, chronic severe anxiety and mild Tourette's, all of which are part of my own makeup. Much of my career is detailed at <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/vita/vitaweb.htm>. At this online cv, you'll find this memoir at:

Smagorinsky, P. (2011), "Confessions of a mad professor: An autoethnographic consideration of neuroatypicality, extranormativity, and education", Teachers College Record, Vol. 113, pp. 1701-1732, available at: www.petersmagorinsky.net/About/PDF/TCR/TCR2011.pdf

A second personal essay, this one describing my professional pathway, is here:

Smagorinsky, P. (2011), "NCTE & Me: Reflections on the Council's role in one teacher's life", English Journal, 101(1), 111-116, available at www.petersmagorinsky.net/About/PDF/EJ/EJ_Sept2011_Smagorinsky_NCTE&Me.pdf

If you, too, are anxious or depressed or take medication to achieve a better balance, or are otherwise considered "abnormal" or "mentally ill" or anything else, you're okay here. Meanwhile, it's incumbent on everyone else to be understanding and to not stigmatize you for not following their norms. In other words, the classroom environment is designed to honor and respect and support each of our differences. That goal is not always easy to achieve, but in my view, it's an important disposition for an educator to achieve, and a critical component of any classroom that enrolls diverse students – that is, just about every classroom.

If I may reduce this goal to a statement of value: I hope that one outcome of this class is that you learn to take other people's perspectives and at least try to understand the world from their point of view, both among classmates and at Classic City HS. There, you will engage with youth who did not fit in either of the two "regular" public high schools in Athens and so have enrolled in this alternative school. Most students who have taken 3461 have used the word "eye-opening" to characterize their experiences at Classic City HS. These kids are not like the students in the honors, AP, advanced and other high-end classes that so many of you took throughout your education. School didn't fit them, and they didn't fit school. Learning why they hate school is among the most illuminating things you'll learn this semester because you will teach a lot of kids who feel this way.

General course description

I'll explain the class more clearly on the first night. The syllabus is available at <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/SL/> and can give you a preliminary idea of how 3461 operates. For the most

part, students have enjoyed the approach of using student-run book clubs because it gives them an opportunity to begin thinking of themselves more as teachers than students. You also have a different set of obligations in this class. You are at least as accountable to one another as you are to me. If you show up to book club discussions without having read the book you chose, then you will be under peer pressure to get yourself in gear and be more responsible to them. So I'm not the primary person you need to impress in 3461. You need to be accountable to your classmates, who are likely to follow you through a series of classes in the next year or two, and with whom your relationships will be extended and important.

I always tell students that this class potentially will be the best class they have ever taken. Not because I'm a great teacher, but because the class is as good as you want to make it. If you want to make it a great class for yourself and others, then make good book selections, read them and be prepared to talk about them in the book clubs and then with all of your classmates, take your tutoring and mentoring at Classic City HS seriously and try to learn about teaching from developing a relationship with a student who is substantially different from yourself, and challenge yourself to think hard as you produce the course project you choose from the menu on the syllabus.

There's something about being in charge of your own learning that motivates many students to want it to be a great experience. I hope that we have such a group this semester.

The current political climate, political correctness and mutual respect

This letter will prepare you for other things you should know about the course, especially in this political climate that many people characterize as being complicated by the well-documented "raw emotions" following the recent presidential election. Given that this course fulfills your "foundations" requirement, its purpose includes attention to why the broad range of cultural types enrolled in your classrooms have differences in perspective, ideology, needs, social practices, ways of learning and communicating and other areas of diversity. In other words, our faculty considers it foundational to know the range of human types who attend public schools, to teach in ways that are equitable and inclusive to the widest range possible.

These issues of diversity have been at the heart of the high emotions that are implicated in 2016's voting decisions, with some believing that diversity strips the nation of a national identity and singularity of purpose, and some believing that diversity is central to equity and the ongoing growth of the nation. The beliefs of you and your family may be quite strong in either direction. My purpose is not to make you agree with my values, but to provide an environment that allows you to articulate and refine your values as you undertake a career as an educator.

At <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/SL/SLBookClubs.html>, you'll find information about the book clubs that you'll form to discuss the readings you select. In other words, there are no assigned readings. Rather, you will select three books for your book club to focus on for the semester, first with your book club of four to five class members, and then when you lead the class in a discussion of your book. The schedule shows how the class is structured for these discussions. Your engagement with these issues may challenge your understanding of people you may only know of through media images. At the same time, you might realize through the semester's work that you disagree with the goals of diversity education and wish to remain where you were when you enrolled. Your trajectory is entirely in your hands and minds[. . .].

Please take a look at the list of topics, which is designed to address an array of what is known as "diversity" issues in the education business. I encourage you to choose books that take you out of your comfort zone and into new areas of understanding. Classrooms tend to

enroll people from across the human spectrum, and few of us know a whole lot about the many demographic and neurological types that they will need to teach effectively. You are not required to select from any particular category. You and the others in your book club may decide to focus all of your reading in a single area, or may explore a different topic in each book. My advice is to think ahead and anticipate what you need to know more about to teach all of your students in ways that advance their learning[. . .].

Like a lot of courses in a College of Education, this one runs the risk of being accused of “political correctness”, which President-elect Donald Trump has opposed openly throughout his campaign. It’s possible that many of you share his views, and that you view college campuses as liberal echo chambers – a concern among some liberals as well as conservatives.

I should state a few things about myself, not to try to convert you to my politics, but to let you know where I stand. I think it’s only fair that you know where your professors are coming from, as long as you are then not obligated to adopt, or pretend to adopt, those views for the purposes of surviving the semester in good academic stead.

If you can respect the possibility that I come by my beliefs sincerely and honestly, then I can respect your ideology, no matter how different it is from my own. I hope that, given how hostile the nation has become over the last year to political differences, we can navigate a range of political orientations so that our purpose is to understand one another, rather than to defeat one another in a great battle of ideology. Just yelling “I’m right and you’re wrong” won’t work here, even though it seemed to serve as the primary means of persuasion throughout the presidential campaign. I hope that we are better than that.

So, just to let you know where I stand, I voted for Mrs Clinton in both the primary and general election. If you are old enough to vote, and have voted, then you have done your civic duty and it doesn’t matter to me which candidate you supported. I also rooted for UGA to beat Georgia Tech in football last fall, and my team lost that one too[. . .]. I hope that we can all live with one another’s perspectives, no matter how wrong we might think someone else in the room might be. To me, this accommodation of diverse beliefs serves as a principle that our nation was founded on, even if competing beliefs have proven to be contentious from the Founders to the present.

President-elect Trump, throughout his campaign, argued against something called “political correctness”, the idea that we should find respectful ways of referring to people different from ourselves. I think that “political correctness” is not the nation’s most pressing problem. I think that respecting other people’s dignity is something to strive toward, not reject. But you may disagree. I’ll list a couple of short essays I’ve written on this point below, along with a radio program I was invited to participate in following the AJC essay’s publication. If you’re interested, you may read them and decide for yourself, although they are optional.

Smagorinsky, P. (2015), “Political correctness and the future of society”, Journal of Language and Literacy Education, available at: <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/SSO-September-Peter.pdf>

Smagorinsky, P. (2015), “To be or not to be politically correct: What was that question?”, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, available at: www.petersmagorinsky.net/About/PDF/Op-Ed/PoliticallyCorrect.html

WABE (NPR) 90.5FM Atlanta: College PC Culture: It’s Not About Offending But Respecting.

The good news is that you will decide what you will read and talk about this semester, no matter which candidate you supported. You will also talk with the other book clubs about their selections. And so the course structure prevents me from doing any political

persuading or recruitment. *The content and process of how we talk about difficult social and ideological issues is entirely in your hands.* Your grade will NOT be based on whether or not you and I agree on human diversity, as it intersects with school. It will be based on your participation in the book clubs, tutoring at Classic City HS and course project. All of these components are detailed on the course syllabus.

A caution

So now is a good time to begin seeing yourself as others see you, and moderating your social media presence to exclude references to alcohol, partying, sex and other aspects of your personal life – in addition to strong political views that may raise suspicions about your judgment and ability to accommodate diverse students. Administrators who make faculty hires may learn of your social media posts and use them against you. A nearby teacher was recently fired for posting a photo of herself drinking a glass of wine in Europe over her summer break, even though it was posted to a password-protected part of her Facebook page. It's not fair, but it's life in the current era. So beware.

Our work together

A friend of mine at another university teaches a class in race consciousness and has been accused on evaluations of “shaming white people and not giving enough perspective to the other side”, given the course's emphasis on inclusion and her critique of power relationships in society. I am not in the business of shaming people, so I hope that you do not view discussions in which other people's worldviews and experiences are honored as something you should feel ashamed about. Keep in mind that you and your classmates will run the discussions; I play a less overt role (but beware: I often forward news stories of current educational events to the class listserv). So how we talk is a collective decision. As long as you listen to your classmates, give your selected readings a fair hearing and treat other views as sincere and informed, you will be fine.

I have high hopes for this course, and hope you do too. I have always found 3461 incredibly stimulating and uplifting, in large part because so many of the students make it that way for me. I designed this course nearly a decade ago to help prepare our high-achieving students for their work in regular school English classes where the students might lack the same degree of investment in education as a goal to a better future and where the students do not take schoolwork as seriously as you have to get into your state's finest public university. As an indication of my great satisfaction in offering this course, I'll let you know that I hold a rank, Distinguished Research Professor, which is held by few who teach undergraduate courses voluntarily. Most people with this distinction only teach graduate students, preferably doctoral students. I teach them too. But I wouldn't trade this course for anything.

If you wish to share this introduction with your parents or others, especially if they are likely to be opposed to my endorsement of political correctness as a matter of respecting other people's dignity (see the short essays I link above), please do so. I've got nothing to hide about who I am or what I believe. I hope that you become comfortable and confident in your own disposition both through and beyond this class, whether you think like me or not.

See y'all soon.

Peter Smagorinsky

Class context

I adopted the book club approach for a variety of reasons. I knew from Cindy O'Donnell-Allen (O'Donnell-Allen, 2006, 2011) that book clubs can serve as both compelling class

formats and as models for preservice and practicing teachers of alternative ways of teaching. For the service-learning class, they enabled me to meet my goal of having the students engage with challenging texts, often politically driven, without forcing my own opinions on them. I wanted this class to be as inductive and open-ended as possible. I have learned that colleagues in teacher education who impress a liberal agenda on students from conservative families can experience backlash and anger, and can have the effect of intensifying and entrenching opposing beliefs. The book club approach allows me to put the choice of reading and content of discussion entirely in the students' hands. I would rather have them use their own opportunities to explore topics without professorial interference than to use my lectern as a bullhorn for my own beliefs.

I have also found that by opening the semester by sharing that according to doctors I am mentally ill, students feel less shame and stigma in their own points of difference. Typically, students become more matter of fact about themselves, with students coming out as gay or lesbian for the first time, discussing such delicate matters as irritable bowel syndrome and how it affects their lives, acknowledging depression and anxiety and other conditions that more typically produce feelings of shame and stigma, and making known a range of personal traits that they typically keep to themselves. On the whole, I think, this somewhat confessional aspect of the class helps to humanize difference and allow vulnerability and humility to create empathy for others. Allowing vulnerability also appears to enable students to extend understanding to people from the various demographic groups that they choose to learn about through their book club selections.

The book club selections

Drawing from the topic and book menu at <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/SL/SLBookClubs.html>, the six book clubs in the class for whom I wrote this letter chose the following books to read, discuss and share with their classmates. The book club numbers are arbitrary, simply to categorize the clubs and not to present them hierarchically.

Book Club #1

Alvermann, D.E. (Ed.) (2010), Adolescents' Online Literacies: Connecting Classrooms, Digital Media, and Popular Culture, Peter Lang, New York, NY.

Englander, E.K. (2013), Bullying and Cyberbullying: What Every Educator Needs to Know, Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA.

Jones, S. (2006), Girls, Social Class, and Literacy: What Teachers can do to Make a Difference, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

Book Club #2

Bausch, L.S. (2014), Boys Will be Boys? Bridging the Great Gendered Literacy Divide, Sense, Boston, MA.

San Antonio, D.M. (2004), Adolescent Lives in Transition: How Social Class Influences the Adjustment to Middle School, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.

Stossel, S. (2014), My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind, Knopf, New York, NY.

Book Club #3

Emdin, C. (2016), For White folks who Teach in the Hood [...] and the Rest of y'all too, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Suskind, R. (2014), *Life Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*, Kingswell, New York, NY.

Willingham, D. (2009), *Why Don't Students Like School?*, John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco, CA.

Book Club #4

Hornbacher, M. (2009), *Madness: A Bipolar Life*, Mariner Books, New York, NY.

Milner, H.R. (2010), *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms*, Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA.

Whitlock, R.U. (2014), *Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Place*, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, NC.

Book Club #5

Baron-Cohen, S. (2008), *Autism and Asperger Syndrome: The Facts*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Kim, Y. and Hinchey, P. (2013), *Educating English Language Learners in an Inclusive Environment*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, NY.

Watson, V. (2012), *Learning to Liberate: Community-Based Solutions to the Crisis in Urban Education*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Book Club #6

Gerson, K. (2011), *The Unfinished Revolution: Coming of Age in a New Era of Gender, Work, and Family*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Kayesen, S. (1993), *Girl, Interrupted*, Random House, New York, NY.

Taylor, D. and Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988), *Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner-City Families*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

These selections cover a wide range of issues: neurodiversity, race, urban education, immigrant experiences, LGBTQ issues, whole-range gender issues, popular culture, bullying and more, with the range of topics allowing for consideration of intersectionality across topics. These books are not, for the most part, written for undergraduates, especially the younger students who enroll in this preprogram foundations course. They are often written scholar-to-scholar, and many are research-based, or research reports in book form. Students also often pick memoirs, a genre in which a lot of neurodiversity information and empathy are available. I have often heard from teacher educators that education students do not like to be assigned difficult and challenging books; that they want how-to manuals and other highly pragmatic texts, and nothing more. This class, for whatever reason, has always moved students to rise to the challenge of broadening their minds beyond the foundations of their original thinking.

I'm reminded of research on video games and the youth who play them. [Smith and Wilhelm \(2002\)](#) found that teenaged boys who are dedicated gamers scoff at easy video games. Boys do not want to play games that anyone can play; their status comes from their ability to play through the higher levels of the most difficult games. Less challenging games are kids' stuff and unworthy of their attention.

Similarly, the students in this class have, since it was first offered, sought out books that have challenged their intellects and moved them well out of their comfort zones. In an incident I've recounted for my students annually since it occurred, one book club went off the list and read a book that one of them had seen its author discuss on Oprah Winfrey's

afternoon talk show. They began leading their class discussion with a disclosure that they had found it very fluffy and disappointing, and would not recommend it for personal reading. After rising to the challenge of their previous selection, they felt let down by the lack of substance in a popular press book written for the general public. This value on challenging reading has pervaded the class year after year, and is a great source of satisfaction to me.

Because the class has since consistently relied on books that stretch their thinking and place demands on their intellects, the discussions are always fascinating for me to follow. The class meets on Mondays from 4:40 to 7:25 p.m. The book clubs work according to three cycles of identical structure. For each of three books, they spend one week in a general discussion just among book club members. The second week, also strictly within the book club, involves both discussion of the book, and planning for how to lead their classmates in a discussion of its main ideas. In the third and fourth weeks, each book club has 40-60 min to lead their classmates in a discussion of the book for that cycle. With one week for the semester's introductory class, one week when I'm off to the AERA conference, and a week at the end for a social gathering at my house, the three four-week cycles occupy the semester.

Even though the class structure has remained very durable, no two classes are ever the same. I thus remain highly engaged and involved, even though to an outside observer, it might appear that I do very little. I do play a role in the whole-class discussions, but mainly procedurally or to add information that helps a discussion move along. For instance, in this semester's class, the first whole-class discussion relied heavily on a very informational presentational software lecture of the sort that typifies school instruction. I suggested that instead of the slides providing information that did not invite discussion, each slide should be prepared with the intention of posing questions. Over the course of the semester, the students took this suggestion to heart and their use of presentation software changed dramatically, serving as stimulus more than report.

Finally, as the list of books selected by this semester's students illustrates, the students inevitably select books covering a wide range of compelling topics. Perhaps my own acknowledgement of being on the Asperger's spectrum encourages more autism selections than they would otherwise choose. But in general, the class itself settles on a broad range of diversity topics without getting redundant about any one, given that even books on the same general topic are treated differently by their various authors and the book club members.

Student responses to the opening letter

During the semester beginning in January 2017, about a third of the way through the course, I asked students if they were interested in contributing statements about how they responded to the letter to this article. Was, I wondered, the course itself meeting its own goals of promoting diversity knowledge without preaching my liberal/progressive values? I held this offer through the end of the semester, and three of the students contributed what follows. Undoubtedly, the demands of finishing their many academic requirements for their slate of courses limited how many students could participate.

I make no claim that these perspectives are representative of how the whole class processed the letter, although the course evaluations were very favorable: With 21 of 22 students responding, each item on the end-of-course evaluation averaged 4.7-4.9 out of a possible high mark of 5.0. The three students themselves might be considered atypical: one was a few decades older than the rest and was becoming certified as a midlife career change; one was in his[1] late 20s and was the class's only transsexual person; one was a more traditional student in terms of her age, gender and race relative to the demographics of those

who enter teaching (about 20 years old, cisgender heterosexual female, White). I next share their statements, submitted toward the end of the semester.

I read the introductory letter out loud to my parents before the class began because I was so excited about how interesting my professor sounded. I was not disappointed! Dr Smagorinsky faithfully kept bias out of the classroom, while still facilitating hard discussions. I would discuss some of the concepts we discussed in class with my family and friends and it would often spark different conversations. It was helpful to be able to process with a variety of people.

At the end of every presentation my group gave, I would find myself saying that “the most important thing to remember if you teach one of these students is to have compassion”. I did not really plan this; it just always made the most sense to throw in at the end. That is what I have learned in this class that I plan to take with me into my teaching career. Each student, each adult, each person is different, and in order to see them for who they are, we must have compassion as the loudest part of our interactions. – Rebekah Johnson

I don’t often receive communication from professors before a semester begins. If I do, it’s an email to tell me which book we’re going to read first or a list of preparation work to complete before coming to class.

When I received your letter, I loved reading it. I found it so refreshing, open and honest. I even read it to my husband and daughter because it was so interesting. Our family discussed the topics you included in the letter, your challenges, the course and politics.

During my first time attending UGA, I don’t remember the election. I was very aware of it this time. Coming from the typically Republican business world, it was interesting to be on a liberal college campus during such an emotional and controversial election. Unlike the stories you mentioned in your letter and website you referred us to, I found UGA professors to be amazingly unbiased in the classroom. One was visibly disappointed in the results but did not let it impact his teaching, his students or class discussions and grades. As a matter of fact, we did not discuss it at all. Another professor shared her support of Hillary Clinton and disappointment with the election results. However, she also stated that the election was over, Trump was President, and she would support him in office since the American people voted for him. It was her duty as a US citizen. Then, the conversation was over, and we moved on to the teaching subject at-hand. Professors, including you, have adeptly kept your views out of the [university’s] classrooms and have ensured that students were comfortable regardless of our political views.

I wanted to comment on the section of your letter that shared your challenges and the impact it had on our class. I often thought of the phrase “confidently vulnerable” when reflecting on your letter and our class discussions. Because you were open and honest with us, we felt comfortable to be open and honest in class. As you are aware, we had students who were transgender, gay, married, single, depressed, anxious, older, rich and poor. Not one student seemed to feel guarded about their lives or their views as we held class discussions. We also felt comfortable challenging each other or at least disagreeing and sharing our points of view. No one took those situations personally. This tone was set by you. Your openness allowed us to be open. It allowed us to be ourselves and know that we would be accepted. It allowed us to accept each other without applying stereotypes or preconceived notions on each other. It created a special environment.

I will take the idea of being “confidently vulnerable” into my classroom when I teach. I firmly believe that it opens up dialogue between educators and students, and it creates a dynamic in the classroom that becomes special.

Thank you for the letter, the honest and the support this semester. – Lisa Shurtz

Primary conceptions of social and ideological nature are embedded into educational settings throughout the USA. Every individual aspect that affects schooling, from material in textbooks to the qualifications of educators, is affected by such conceptions. Under the premise that students in K-12 schools in the country are required a public education at the cost of the government and taxpayers, it makes sense that everyone desires to add their own spin on what is appropriate to be taught.

However, under free appropriate public education (FAPE)[2] guidelines, such desires should be second to the preparation of the students for academic and life success. The issue I continually return to is a question that seems simple: What is the “correct” way to educate students for a well-rounded education that provides them with FAPE? “But of course,” may be the initial thought, “teach XYZPDQF (insert own socio-political-economic ideals here)”.

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer; imagine every person you have ever met, and come up with a clear picture of them all in your mind. Now, what if I said that every one of them has a stake in education? They have been through school, some have children, but all of them have an individual in their life that is in public school. Many of these people will be in public office, or PTO’s, even on the school board. What do these things have in common? A lack of methodology, pedagogy, instructional strategies, teaching experience?

Think bigger. These people all fall on a different part of the political spectrum, the socioeconomic spectrum, the diversity spectrum; they all bring these pre-conceived notions to the table instead of a breadth of evidence based practices, experience and deference toward biases. Education is at odds with society, and should remain so; without instruction on ethnicity, race, politics, social constructs, government and more, the population of future generations will fall to lamb-like idiocy, blindly following the leaders of society.

Policymakers, lobbyists and individuals that are outside of academia need stay there and not bend the curriculum toward the right, left, alt-right, far-left, etc. Through this class, through book club discussions that were student-led, I concluded that education is interfered with by individuals without any qualifications necessary for a teacher; yet, they (lobbyists/policymakers) continue to degrade education with their biases. Educators should have control over education because we have the experience, the methods and the desire to instill a desire for knowledge with the ability to discern the truth on their own. – Andie Brasley

Of course, I’m pleased to include these very favorable responses to the class in this article. It is possible that these three students were already ripe for a class centered on the sorts of hard issues available through the books they selected and discussed with their classmates; and that what I’m getting here is the sort of feedback I’d wanted to hear. It would have been interesting to have included perspectives of those who entered with more conservative political perspectives deeply appropriated from their home and community settings. However, I did not require all students to contribute; would not have been able to include all 22 perspectives within my space allocation; and might have invited disingenuous, teacher-pleasing pieties if I had insisted that every student provide a commentary. I am, thus, left with this smaller set of comments on which to evaluate the impact of the letter I sent to open the semester.

Conclusion

As I feel every spring at the conclusion of this class, I believe that these students rose admirably to the challenges of the course. This semester, as I often do, I quoted my friend Four Arrows, a Native American educator and activist, who will say at such times of great spiritual uplifting, “My heart soars” at a positive outcome. It’s hard to say just how much the letter I wrote contributed to their experience. But I am glad I made the effort to lay out for

them and for me how I saw the class's national context potentially degrading our intellectual pursuit. Their admirable degrees of professionalism and scholarship instead drove the discussions to impressively high levels. My heart soars.

Notes

1. Andie uses masculine pronouns.
2. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is an educational right of children with disabilities in the USA, which is guaranteed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

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