

## The Classroom without Reason

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A few years ago I was asked by the instructor of a philosophy class, then titled “Roots of War,” to discuss with his students the culture of the U.S. military community. After identifying myself as a former career military officer, I discussed my impression of our military’s culture. When I was done, a young woman who had been glowering at me and holding her arms tightly across her chest raised her hand. When called upon she vehemently said, “I don’t agree with you. I don’t think it is anything like that. You have just been brainwashed by the military.”

“OK,” I said, “what do you think our military’s culture is like?”

“Well, certainly nothing like that,” she sputtered. I could see some heads in the class nodding in agreement.

I asked, “Could you share with us your experience in or around the military?”

“I haven’t had anything to do with the military,” she indignantly replied.

“Have you extensively studied the U.S. military or worked with current or former members of the military?”

“No,” she angrily said.

“So where have you gotten your impression of the military’s culture?” I tried to ask softly.

“I am entitled to my opinion, and I think you are a Nazi!” was her voracious reply. The class was clearly enjoying her attack on me at this point and the philosophy professor sat smugly satisfied.

I decided to end this ridiculous exchange: “So let us review. You have no personal experience or knowledge of the military. You have not studied the military. You cannot explain why you disagree with me. And you think you

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are entitled to your opinion. Well, I agree with you on one point. You do have a right to an opinion, and I have a right to point out that yours is an ignorant opinion—ignorant because by your own admission it is not based on any facts, education, research, or experience. Your opinion is apparently based on nothing more than simple ignorant prejudice.”

The class was silent for a moment. The young woman began to sob and yell at me, “You can’t say that to me!”

I replied, “Yes I can, because it is the truth.”

The now visibly upset philosophy professor said, “Doug, you are being a little harsh on her.”

“No Ron, I am just stating the truth.”

“Well Doug, you have to respect her feelings.” Much of the class was nodding in agreement while attempting to soothe the young woman who was now obviously enjoying the attention.

“Gee Ron, I thought this was a university where we discussed subjects rationally using facts and logic.”

“A lot of us feel the same way she does,” the philosophy professor responded, as if that were justification for her ignorance and her personal insults.

Fed up with the charade, I walked out of the class.

Later, I sat in the campus office of a friend, relating the story. He smiled and occasionally laughed as I recounted what happened. “Of course you were right Doug, but you can’t say that here. Where do you think you are, America?” We both laughed, while knowing that it was no laughing matter.

My friend calmly pointed out what I had already surmised. The philosophy professor wanted the young women to believe what he believed. He had played upon the students’ ignorance and on their feelings, fears, and prejudices to ensure that they felt the way the young woman did. He expected me to be attacked and did not anticipate my defense. He objected to my reply to the student because my words might have had the effect of breaking the spell he had woven, and perhaps would cause his students to reconsider their indoctrination. Rational discussion was not that professor’s goal.

Not very long ago a student approached me, pointed at my office door, and announced, “You can’t say that!” She was pointing to some articles taped to the door that challenged the foundations of global warming theory.

“I believe the arguments presented in those articles are scientifically sound, and I am not at all convinced that human-caused global warming is occurring,” I replied.

Much to my surprise her outrage suddenly faded and, smiling, she said, “Yes, but if people don’t believe in global warming they won’t stop polluting.”

Quickly recovering from my initial shock, I replied, “So *the end justifies the means*? You would lie to people just to advance your agenda?”

She smiled sweetly and said, “Well, people don’t know what is good for them.”

As she departed, I turned to a colleague standing across the hall who had overheard the entire exchange. “Can you believe that?” I sputtered.

“She is right Doug, and you should take that stuff off your door before you get in trouble,” he replied as he turned, walked into his office, and closed the door.

It was suddenly very obvious to me why that young woman believed that “people” could not be told the truth and that *the end justifies the means*.

California’s annual budget crisis is now a well-known issue. Last May, a student approached me at the end of class and perkily said, “I missed class last Monday because I was at the rally in Sacramento for more funding for the universities.” She was obviously fishing for an excused absence.

Instead, I asked, “So just where will that additional money come from?”

“What? Um, well they can take it from the prisons,” she stuttered.

“The prisons are overcrowded and facing federal mandates. Do you want them to release felons back on to the streets?” I responded.

Stunned, she burst out, “No, of course not, but you don’t understand, I have to graduate. I need my classes.”

“So this is about you—your personal needs—not the efficacy of the educational system or the greater good,” I suggested.

Her smile disappeared and a dark countenance fell across her face as she said in a low, angry voice, “So do I get an excused absence?”

Where does such thinking in university students come from? The answer is that it comes from the university itself. As further evidence I offer the following example. Recently, I completed a required program of instruction that was intended to improve my teaching. Among the required readings were two particularly disturbing books presented as critical to our personal and professional development. The first, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, by Stephen D. Brookfield, stated that our job is “to increase the amount of love and justice in the world” and “change the world.”<sup>1</sup> Brookfield described faculty with an “anti-collectivist orientation” as “obstructionist dinosaurs standing in the way of desirable innovation and reform” (249).

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 1. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically within the text.

Love, justice, and changing the world—these sound like qualities that describe a social activist rather than an educator committed to increasing knowledge; providing skills; encouraging logical, sequential, and critical thinking; and preparing students to be functioning professionals.

Brookfield attempts to lure the reader into accepting a set of assumptions upon which he wishes them to base their teaching. Without providing evidence, he insists on the existence of a grand *conspiracy*, specifically that all society is a victim of oppression and conspiracy:

The subtle tenacity of hegemony lies in the fact that, over time, it becomes deeply embedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. We cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify any particular group or groups of people actively conspiring to keep others silent and disenfranchised. (15)

Here he admits that the conspiracy cannot be proved, but demands that we accept it as the foundation and the purpose of our critical reflection on teaching.

Now that Brookfield has set the stage by insisting we all believe, on faith, in the existence of a conspiracy causing oppression and mass disenfranchisement and that all things are not as they seem, he tells us that the nonspecific *they* are overworking us, demanding unfair accountability and forcing us unfairly to respond to market and economic realities. Brookfield advocates for what he calls a “critical pedagogy” (208), whose foundations he credits to *Karl Marx*, as “a means by which students are helped to break out of oppressive ways of thinking and acting that seem habitual but that have been imposed by the dominant culture” (209). Brookfield goes on to assert that education cannot be practiced in a capitalist economic system—implying that universities need a collectivist environment to function properly and that the foundation of the conspiracy is capitalism itself. Finally, he encourages faculty to take the role of “agent provocateur” and urges readers to develop “tactical astuteness and cunning” (41) instead of honesty and candor. Brookfield’s fantasy conspiracy and his goal of increasing the amount of love and justice in the world now become the justification for engaging in an actual conspiracy and dishonesty in which *the end justifies the means*.

The second book, *Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, by Parker J. Palmer, was no better.<sup>2</sup> Palmer tells us “to correct

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<sup>2</sup>Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically within the text.

our excessive regard for the powers of intellect” (6). He goes on to attack all philosophies that insist on the primacy of the *rational thought process*, and he blames *rational thought* for totalitarianism, violence, and every social ill imaginable. Palmer tells us that we must put our *feelings* on at least an equal—preferably—dominant position to logic and rational thought processes.

The obvious problem with this is that when feelings are emphasized over logic in problem solving we cease to think rationally and instead devolve to rationalizing our feelings. Feeling and emotions are natural, but should flow from the rational examination of facts. Then the resulting feelings are justified and may even be called logical and worthy of respect. Education should be the triumph of facts, logic, and reason over unsupportable emotions.

When we teach students to place their emotions above intellectual analysis, above logic, and above reason we are disarming them from competing rationally in the marketplace of ideas; and we place them at risk of falling prey to charlatans and the self-serving activists who seek to lead them with appeals to their emotions and passions instead of their minds.

In reflecting upon the experiences related here and on the Brookfield and Palmer books, I see why too many of America’s colleges and universities produce graduates who are unprepared to challenge demagogues and their illogical positions rationally. If these books are widely accepted and influential works on teaching, it should not be surprising that all too often vicious name-calling has replaced rational debate and that indoctrination has replaced education.

What are the core responsibilities of college and university educators? Are we to teach students *to think* or *what to think*? Are we simply free to expound our opinions or are we obligated to teach students how to research, analyze, and develop rational opinions of their own? Should we do both? Can we do both? Are they compatible? If you think that the answers to these questions should be obvious, consider the following account.

In 2001 I participated as a panel member in a public university forum entitled “A Critique of Political Correctness.” One topic that arose during the panel was the appropriate roles and responsibilities of a university professor. Much to my surprise, I found myself entirely alone among the panelists in advocating that a professor is professionally obligated to present equally well all sides or interpretations of an important issue being discussed in class. My supporting argument was that only by being equally informed of all positions

and their supporting rationale can students apply logic and reach their own rational conclusions on important issues and problems.

I was stunned by the fierceness of the opposition from other faculty members, both on the panel and in the audience. One professor accused me of attacking the very notion of academic freedom. I particularly remember one older member of the sociology department who indignantly proclaimed, "I am a professor, and my job is to profess my viewpoint. For another viewpoint they can go elsewhere." The chairperson of one academic department later told me privately that "there is no place in the university" for my kind of opinions. This kind of confidence in the "right" to use class-time to promulgate only personal viewpoints inevitably stifles the free exchange and critical analysis of ideas and opinions. Such an attitude naturally leads to the politicization of the classroom.

I offer yet another true story. Just before the last presidential election, at the beginning of a course on business planning, a student asked me in front of the entire class why I had not told the students which candidate I supported. I responded, "Politics is not the subject of this class. We have enough material to cover to fill our class time. Besides, on principle, I will not use class time to impose my political opinions on you. If outside of class any of you seek my opinion of the candidates, then I will be happy to share my thoughts."

The reaction of the class surprised me. A few students were nodding their head, others were smiling humorously at me, and a few were laughing and gossiping about my response. Somewhat peeved, I asked, "What is so funny?"

One student said, "You might as well tell us who you think we should vote for, because all the other professors already have." Other students chimed in to support that student's claim and mentioned specific faculty members who had turned their classes into campaigns for their presidential candidate. Undaunted, I proceeded with the subject of the class. However, after class a young woman and a young man came forward to thank me privately for sticking to the course subject. They also expressed weariness with being bombarded by "anti-American" and political propaganda in their classes.

I respectfully suggest that the philosophical and ethical foundations of both the United States and the modern American university are being undermined by the ideology of collectivism, with its dogmatic hatred of Western civilization and individuality, and, most serious, its hostility to

rational debate. The quintessentially American acceptance of the right of individuals to come to their own educated conclusions, and then to speak and act according to these conclusions and their own conscience, is under siege by collectivist rules and a repressive group mentality.

Many faculty discourage, if not outright punish, those who wish to express ideas and opinions that diverge from the politics or propaganda of the mandarins of political correctness. Today, all too often rational thinking is opposed as dangerous, and the mission of the academic has been reduced to advocating specific cultural, social, and political paradigms. All this and more has been done in the cause of the *greater good* by people who do not think that other people can determine what is good for themselves.

If Aristotle was right that “Man is a rational animal,” it seems unlikely that these efforts to turn higher education into exercises in ideology can ultimately prevail. They run against something basic in human nature, even as they take advantage of human weaknesses, such as vanity. But such optimism as I can summon is for the very long term. The point at which students demand that their teachers once again take their rational capabilities seriously has not arrived and isn’t even on the horizon. What do we do in the mean time? We support the organizations and individuals who resist the irrationality. We do our best to keep alive the hope that one day teachers will be able to teach and students will be able to learn in an environment free from coercion and deceit, and that civility, rationality, and the open exchange of ideas and the virtues of tolerance will be returned to their rightful place.