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From rationalization to reflection: One teacher education law class

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Abstract: This paper describes the struggles of a teacher educator to acknowledge and honor her own liberal bias along with her students' more conservative perspectives as these emerge in an education law class for preservice teachers. It illustrates the author's ongoing transition from rationalization to reflection, as she considers both her students' responses to class assignments on speech and expression rights and end-of-course evaluations, and reflects on the possibility that generational and experiential differences, rather than "resistance," may be behind students' reactions. The author concludes that transparency on the part of the teacher educator is critical to allow (re)consideration of our beliefs in more reflective ways.

Keywords: teacher education, reflective practice, education law

It is probably typical for many university faculty, especially newer professors, to struggle with how far they should go in "encouraging" students to reconsider strongly held beliefs, and to wonder whether there is a slippery slide towards turning students off entirely or blurring the lines between *inculcative* (socializing students into existing norms and values) and *liberal* (fostering self-determination) frameworks for teaching (Warnick, 2009). After more than three years of teaching required social foundations classes for teacher candidates at a rural Midwestern university, I find myself routinely struggling with questions about how to encourage them to contemplate the implications of their beliefs and to promote critical thinking about education-related issues without "push[ing] them to the point of resistance" (Ahlquist, 1991, p. 164).

I am a child of the sixties, raised in an era when challenging authority was the coin of the realm. In second grade, I questioned a nun who loaned my show-and-tell book to another student without asking. I remember as an eleven year-old hearing a teacher's description of being in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention and desperately wanting to see the protests for myself. In high school, I seriously considered investigative journalism as a career, inspired—no doubt as many others were—by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward and their Watergate reporting. For better or worse, I remain strongly "liberal" when it comes to rights and freedoms, while students today are shaped by September 11, 2001 and other threats; the limitations many Americans are willing to accept in exchange for a feeling of safety often make sense to them.

Despite, or perhaps because, of this, I believe it is important to challenge students who have grown up in different times to consider the shift that has occurred. I believe it is crucial for students to understand the implications of legal and policy decisions that affect K-12 students' rights, especially through a historical context, particularly because it is very difficult to reclaim rights once they have been restricted.

Research focusing specifically on young adults' beliefs about speech and expression rights after the September 11 attacks is lacking, but there have been survey data reporting that this group expresses less willingness than earlier generations to give up civil liberties to achieve

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security from terrorism (American Pew Research Center, 2011; Halpin & Agne, 2009). It should be noted, however, that Pew and Halpin/Agne reported 37% and 25% of respondents, respectively, *did* agree that restricting civil liberties was an appropriate tool to achieve security. The Knight Foundation found that three-quarters of surveyed high school students in 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2011 either didn't know what they thought about the First Amendment or took it for granted; almost half the 2006 and a quarter of the 2011 respondents thought the First Amendment overall went too far in the rights it guaranteed (Dautrich, 2011).

Imber (2008) reported that less than half of the teachers in his education law classes were able to correctly answer questions about student rights, concluding that "teachers are not only uninformed about student rights but burdened with a great deal of misinformation" (p. 93). In particular, he believes that many teachers do not support or understand constitutional rights for K-12 students (see also Dautrich, 2011). Significantly, Imber suggests that teachers tend to see themselves more as "surrogate parents, entitled to act with broad authority based on their judgment of how best to promote the educational interests of their students and school" (p. 93), rather than as representatives of the state, subject to the limitations the Constitution places on government actors in their interactions with citizens.

And so, my approach to the topic of student speech and expression rights in the education law class I teach seemed clear: It was critical to encourage my future teachers to support *their* future students in understanding and practicing their rights, especially in light of the increasing limits being imposed by courts on student expression.

It is unclear, however, whether my efforts have resulted in the desired outcome.

As an essential aspect of my class, I ask my students to consider their own beliefs about speech and expression rights in the context of current and historical trends. I encourage them to express their ideas verbally and in written assignments, acknowledging that some topics we explore (e.g., religious expression in the classroom) can provoke strong feelings. The tension between my own desire to prepare teachers to advocate for speech and expression rights—and indeed to practice these rights themselves—bumps up against my concerns that "demanding a certain degree of open-mindedness can be equated to pushing a liberal agenda" (James, 2010, p. 626). My dilemma: How do I sustain my commitment to demonstrating the importance of the "marketplace of ideas" while avoiding coercive pedagogy? Is such a thing possible? Alternatively, are identification of and transparency about the pedagogy choices we make as teacher educators perhaps the best we can do, as Hess (2005) suggests?

This paper is an account of the path I have taken, as I have slowly come to learn through reflection that I must own my own liberal bias, honor my students' differing values, and continue to work to find productive room for both in the classroom, honestly and respectfully. It is based on my reflections on three plus years of teaching a ten-week education law class to teacher candidates, prompted by student responses to course assignments and to the course itself via end-of-semester evaluations. These data will illustrate the challenges that have surfaced for me in trying to engage and challenge students while wrestling with the complicated feelings these efforts seem to provoke for both of us.

I. Struggling with Disclosure.

Before turning to my own reflection, it is helpful to have some sense of the context of the role of the teacher educator vis-à-vis his or her students' beliefs and values. Hess (2009), among others (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; James, 2010; Parker, 2003), argues that schools are critical sites

for developing civic awareness and providing opportunities for students to engage in "dialogue, debate, and action" (Feinberg, 2008). Teacher educators, to her, have a particular responsibility to develop K-12 educators who help their students "to encounter, to speak, to hear, to critically evaluate" (Hess, 2009, p. 173). It seems logical that it would be difficult to encourage such responsibility without teacher candidates themselves reflecting deeply about their *own* assumptions and beliefs.

While the American Association of Colleges and Universities argues that students' "ethical, civic and moral development" should go hand-in-hand with intellectual development (AACU, 2009), "The goal of producing ethical, moral graduates raises legitimate questions about the role of college professors in […] shaping students' values" (Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009, p. 343). DelFattore (2010, pp. 23-24) notes, "Students […] have no constitutional right never to hear ideas that they do not like […] [but] the students' obligation to learn the course material does not extend to sharing the instructor's view of it." A large body of literature examines the resistance of teacher candidates to multicultural classes (see Vavrus, 2010); no such literature exists for education law classes, despite controversy (religion, segregation, ethics) being an undercurrent throughout. These types of foundational classes pose special challenges that methods and content classes do not; by their very nature they ask students to "learn from viewpoints that may be starkly *different* from what they hear elsewhere" (Hess, 2009, p. 173).

A. Teacher Stance.

The tension, for me, comes out of how hard to push students to consider the implications of their views on constitutional rights for their future students and for our society. I am aware of the perception that "liberal" college professors seek to sway their students on social and political issues (Gross, 2012), though recent studies have shown that this perception is not well grounded in reality (Gross, 2012; Smith, Mayer, & Fritschler, 2008; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). Especially in teacher education programs, there is ongoing controversy over the idea of compelling particular "dispositions," including inclinations for "societal transformation" and social justice (Cunningham, 2009; Misco & Shiveley, 2007; Will, 2006; Wilson, 2005).

There are differing perspectives regarding what, if anything, a teacher should reveal to students about his or her own beliefs in class environments where opinion is relevant (as opposed to, say, lecturing students about presidential candidates in a physics class). While the National Council for the Social Studies' (NCSS) teacher standards are written for K-12 teachers, they provide a perspective on teacher stance that leans towards discretion. These standards encourage teachers to avoid "promulgating personal, sectarian, or political views" and to "encourage recognition of opposing points of view" (NCSS, 2002, p. 13). Clearly the notion of academic freedom on college campuses allows for much more latitude on the part of instructors, though there *is* evidence that faculty overall skew liberal (Gross, 2013), and legitimate concerns can be raised about the possibility that true debate and dialogue cannot be achieved if there is not enough diversity to support them (Long, 2013).

Kelly (1986) and Hess (2005) describe teacher "stances" that are similar in terms of approaches to controversial issues. They both argue that controversy, handled appropriately, is critical for student development. Kelly (1986) goes further in arguing that we are fooling ourselves if we believe true neutrality is possible; that teacher perspectives should not be excluded from the classroom; and that students can benefit from observing an adult role model

addressing issues thoughtfully and responsibly while encouraging critical thinking. This preferred approach to controversial issues is called *committed impartiality*:

> First, teachers should state rather than conceal their own views on controversial issues. Second, they should foster the pursuit of truth by insuring that competing perspectives receive a fair hearing through critical discourse (Kelly, 1986, p. 130).

This is a challenging stance and one that takes practice, skill, and time to hone. Whether this stance, practiced well, is enough to mitigate the possibility entirely of students feeling pressured or coerced is an open question.

II. Reflection Framework.

Day (1999) and Hess (2005) both argue that without engaging in deliberate and systematic reflection, educators cannot fully identify and monitor their own taken-for-granted assumptions and motivations infusing their work. "Reflective practice" and "self study" are two frameworks that can be utilized to organize such efforts. Loughran (2002) notes that reflective practice can mean different things, from the simple act of thinking about something, to a more formalized practice that has associated activities and data collection techniques geared to promote insight. Either way, he maintains that "Reflection is effective when it leads the teacher to make meaning from the situation in ways that enhance understanding so that she or he comes to see and understand the practice setting from a variety of viewpoints" (p. 36).

Self-study approaches call for sustained and critical reflection as a means of professional growth, and as a field has increasingly grown more rigorous in terms of methodology (LaBoskey, 2012). It should be acknowledged that self-study is not always deliberately anticipated and planned. As Berry (2008, p. 18) writes, "[Learning] problems may present themselves as "surprises" encountered in the course of [teachers'] work, or they may be the result of a teacher educator's deliberate decision to investigate a particular area of practice." She reminds us "Self-study is not a straightforward process" (p. 20).

Sharing one's self-study can mitigate professional vulnerability by publicly inviting others to become part of the reflective process. In this case, my struggle has become the basis for a series of conference proposals, presentations, and manuscript drafts over the last few years. The reflection and revisions for these, along with the critical feedback I have received, have resulted in an evolution—from work that targeted the limitations of my students and in hindsight was a "rationalization" (Loughran, 2002, p. 35) for seeing the problem outside myself, to this current paper that puts the onus more squarely on me. My focus, as well, has evolved from an emphasis on speech rights in a democracy to an examination of my own reactions to student responses and the evolution of these reactions over time (fueled, for example, by journal reviewers who pointed out that my work was better suited as self-study—at the time, something of a revelation). As it turned out, the sharing of a new paper revision with a colleague ultimately pushed me to deeper understanding and a reframing of the dynamics of the dilemma, as I will discuss later.

While accelerated by the scholarly work above, my thoughts were also captured in my own notes to myself, recollections, and formal reflections for tenure and promotion documents (referred to as "formal reflections") required by the university for each semester of teaching. As I struggled with my initial belief that the goal was to get students to understand why they should perceive things as I did, and I tried to move past this uncomfortable realization, my emphasis evolved from rationalization to reflection (Loughran, 2002). Thus, this is not a textbook example

of self-study, particularly as such research is conceptualized today, and is not meant to be taken as such—though it does authentically reflect the sometimes sloppy, meandering nature of examining practice.

A. Student Data as Trigger.

The impetus for examining the classroom dynamic was prompted initially by student comments in my end-of-semester evaluations. These evaluations always trigger comments from students that refer to my bias. Despite my assurances—spelled out in the syllabus and reiterated frequently in class—that all perspectives are welcome if thoughtfully defended, students' end-of-semester evaluations, while favorable on the whole, always feature comments that target my "personal bias" ("She gives out bad grades becase [*sic*] she is so biased and only likes to hear what pleases her").

As is typical, evaluations are collected during the last weeks of class and are anonymous. Professors in my department are rated on seventeen criteria (ranging from quality of oral and written communication skills to availability to students to preparation for class) using a Likert scale, and there are three open-ended questions asking for feedback about the most and least valuable aspects of the course and suggested improvements. The comments about bias may be a minority perspective (ranging from 5-15% of students, but typically about 10% each semester) but they are offered with heartfelt conviction, and their appearance has remained consistent over time.

After the first semester of teaching the law class, I began to look more closely at topics (e.g., the teaching of evolution, the rights of the minority) and assignments that seemed to elicit, however subtle, viewpoints that differed from mine. I have asked students to respond to varied prompts, including a case featuring a student wearing a provocative political t-shirt to school (the "terrorist t-shirt" vignette) and a journal question about schools' jurisdiction regarding student rights ("How much/what kind of control, in terms of speech and expression rights, should schools have over students?"). Though I cannot definitively link student responses and the beliefs I assume they represent with course evaluation responses, such a connection does not seem implausible.

III. The Education Policy and Law Class.

My university is located in a rural, economically stressed area of the Midwest. Its teacher candidates are primarily white females who are majority Christian, mirroring national demographics (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), coming mostly from rural towns or suburban areas. The program requires all candidates to take an education law class; the course description notes that we seek to "allow students to critique contemporary debates concerning educational policy, law, and ethics [and] examine the tension between competing philosophical theories and the construction and function of educational policy in a democratic state." The vast majority of students are seniors moving on to student teaching. A significant section of class is devoted to the Constitutional rights of K-12 students (and teachers as well). As resources, we utilize case studies, videos, and scholarly and mainstream media articles that describe iconic Supreme Court cases and contemporary dilemmas, so as to consider education law and policy from multiple perspectives.

Many of my students struggle with my expectations for critical thinking and reflection about education-related issues. There is palpable discomfort about these expectations, which tends to emerge most strongly after they review my written comments on drafts of written work. The discomfort may have something to do with the homogeneity many grew up with (often revealed as they share perspectives about educational issues based on their own schooling experiences), or with their thwarted anticipation of less ambiguous assessments, such as quizzes (reported as more typical in other courses).

As a prelude to exploring student speech and expression rights, we discuss ethical and moral thinking in the contexts of school and society; we use a school law text, lecture materials, and relevant readings to examine the complexities of educational dilemmas in both policy and practice. For the student rights section, we trace the trajectory of legal rulings from the Tinkers' black armbands (1969) to the 2007 *Morse v. Frederick* "Bong Hits 4 Jesus" case,[2] examining how speech and expression rights have been narrowed over the years (Strossen, 2000/2006).

The faculty who teach this class have agreed on the importance of case studies/vignettes and reflection (Warnick & Silverman, 2011) as avenues for assessing students' understanding of the theory and application of ethical, moral, and legal thinking in education. We transitioned the course's capstone project from a personal philosophy of education to a paper that incorporated reflections on education policies and dilemmas. After this change, I noted in my formal promotion/tenure reflections:

> This transition may have contributed to some uncertainty about the difference between opinions and reflections again; I know some students had a difficult time understanding why they were being pushed to go beyond immediate reactions to think more deeply (for example, asking students to reflect on what responsibility they had to the profession at large was a difficult question for many). (September, 2011)

The tension regarding my role as teacher has been prompted by student work on the speech and expression rights of K-12 public school students. It appears that for many, the marketplace of ideas is less compelling than maintaining civility and security. The first time I used the t-shirt vignette as an assignment, I informally coded student responses and found overwhelmingly strong themes around avoiding offensiveness and around safety concerns, both offered as a rationale for limiting students' rights in public school classrooms. I have continued to find these themes through subsequent coding for both assignments, in approximately 200 responses to the t-shirt vignette and approximately 375 responses to the student rights prompt, over three plus years of teaching. While not specifically examined here, support for the right to privacy for K-12 students also appears to be qualified; there is consistently a defense of drug testing and random searching of public school students by a significant number of my students, primarily as a means of keeping schools safe. The belief that "If students have nothing to hide, they shouldn't get upset about searches or drug tests" is very common.

A. The Terrorist T-Shirt Vignette.

The first semester I taught at the university, as a temporary instructor, I used a student t-shirt vignette as an essay question, and asked how a public school student who refused to remove a

[2] *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969) led to the Supreme Court reinforcing students' constitutional rights in public schools after Mary Beth and John Tinker wore black armbands to protest the Vietnam War. *Morse v. Frederick*, 551 U.S. 393 (2007) expanded schools' rights to suppress student speech that appeared to promote drug use.

politically charged shirt should be handled. The answers alarmed me. The vignette was based on the case of *Bretton Barber v. Dearborn Public Schools*. Barber was a high school junior in Dearborn Heights, Michigan (a community with a large Muslim population) who in 2003 wore a t-shirt to school that bore then-President George W. Bush's picture and the words "International Terrorist." He was ordered by a school administrator to take it off, refused, and was sent home despite no evidence of any disruption to the school day. He contacted the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which sued on his behalf, alleging violation of his First Amendment rights, and won his case in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan.

The scenario given to my students changed some of the details (e.g., a teacher reported a few minutes discussion about the shirt in a calculus class; an administrator is told by a student that he needed to "do something" or there would be a problem). My students were asked to describe what they thought the ethical and legal issues were, and how they might handle the situation if they were the decision maker.

The first time I used this vignette, I had no expectations of students returning anything resembling sophisticated legal analysis. I did have expectations that the *Tinker* decision (which held that even unpopular student speech that did not cause substantial disruption was protected) had made at least some impression, along with, perhaps, our discussions around what constituted disruption and what might present "teachable moments." However, students then—and afterwards—tended to focus on the need to maintain control and order.

Student responses. Close to two-thirds of students, over the semesters, have indicated that the "International Terrorist" t-shirt was disruptive simply in the wearing; many of them identified the offensiveness of the t-shirt's sentiment as a rationale for forcing its removal. Students have had two main reasons why the student should take off the shirt or face stiff punishment. Some simply argued that if an article of clothing offended someone, the wearer should be compelled to remove it.

> What I have concluded from these pieces of information is that although student free speech is protected, the second somebody else is affected by the conduct, it becomes an issue [...] He should understand that [...] he should not bring things into the learning environment that can be considered controversial and/or cause a problem with other students and their learning environments.

Other felt safety concerns were a legitimate reason for forcing removal of the shirt. Roughly half of my students have indicated that the possibility of danger—some concerned about an escalation into "chaos," "anarchy," or "terrible consequences"—justify asking the vignette's high school student to remove a t-shirt labeling then-president George W. Bush a terrorist. A few students have expressed concerns for the t-shirt wearer; one student wrote, "[The student's] safety is an equal right to his right to free speech." Another described a broader concern, echoed by many:

> Also, the shirt can cause a great deal of violence. The school is racially divided. It is more than likely that the Arab population of the school agrees with the t-shirt. However, there may be Bush supporters in the school as well. This can potentially start conflict.

Many students clearly absorbed, on some level, the finding of the *Tinker* Supreme Court decision that "substantial disruption of or material interference with school activities" (393 U.S. at 514, 89 S.Ct. at 740) needed to be evident or reasonably forecast to limit speech or expression, and concluded that the t-shirt had disrupted the school environment. The brief discussion in the calculus class provoked misgivings:

> […] it is clear from the description of the Calculus class that the shirt sparked a debate, which interrupted the lesson that was planned for that day.
>
> The t-shirt was obviously causing a disturbance in many classes and with many students.

Reflections. The first semester I used this case study, I scuttled the scheduled topic for the day when I returned papers and initiated (perhaps demanded) conversation about the responses. I referenced *Tinker* and again described how "disruption" has been interpreted by the courts. I expressed concern that many students seemed to feel that as soon as someone is (or might be) offended, speech protection went by the wayside. I questioned the perception that "many" students at the fictional high school were offended, upset, or otherwise actively or negatively impacted by the t-shirt in a way that disrupted the educational process. I later jotted down on my working syllabus that "students think ACLU is great to help them when teachers screw up on Facebook, but not for kids' political views."

It is hard to know whether my comments had much impact; I remember the discussions as perfunctory, and student evaluations at the end of the classes were not required as I was a temporary instructor that semester. In retrospect, it is safe to assume that students felt scolded rather than enlightened. I am reminded of what one of my colleagues wrote after I later shared this experience and sought advice about channeling my impatience in more productive ways:

> I can still remember the first semester: I came into the classroom like a bulldozer with all my baggage of leftist righteous theories hammering students about social justice…and they hammered me back. In that particular moment, I did not engage in conversation with my students, but I engaged in confrontation, trying to convince them of my position. (personal communication, August 12, 2009)

My next few formal reflections continued to position students as somewhat resistant, however; for example:

> It is important to strike a balance between appropriately challenging students and making accommodations that result in stronger engagement and understanding of the material. I believe that students come in expecting […] assessments that involve their responding to short response or multiple-choice questions about particular laws, and instead they are asked to think about ethical and political issues related to education law and policy, using cases and critical thinking. (January 2010)

I used the t-shirt case for four semesters and eventually moved on to other assessment options, including a newly required reflective journal, which I turn to now.

B. The Student Rights Prompt.

Class assessments include varied journal prompts meant to elicit students' reflections on educational policies and challenges. It is unusual to have students who have much knowledge of areas like school funding, school choice, teacher evaluation, or tenure, based on the responses I get to my initial inquiries. Half my classes, therefore, introduce students to these topics and related policy choices and implication, and are more lecture-based than interactive. I am left to conclude that it is the discussions of student rights (due process, drug testing and privacy, religious and political expression) that trigger stronger feelings, and that these feelings remain on the front burner since these topics figure significantly in final papers. One reflective prompt focuses on these rights, asking my students to consider what sort of control public schools should exercise over students' speech and expression. Students write drafts, I supply feedback, and they turn in their final reflective journals after the class is over.

Student responses. Again, while there are students who describe schools as important places to learn about the responsibilities of citizenship in a safe and orderly environment, over half of my students each semester responded to the prompt with an endorsement of the school's right to maintain strong control over student speech and expression on school grounds. Safety and offensiveness remain the primary concerns:

> It is a hard thing for schools to try and keep order and safety with all of its students without stepping on the toes of the students Amendment Rights. I feel however schools should be obligated to break some of these rights in order to keep the school a safe learning environment.

> Because of what happened on 911 [*sic*], the schools need to do a better job of regulating and documenting what students wear and what behavior is expected of them when at school during school hours.

Some drew boundaries around where and when students had more or less rights; many noted that once outside the school students could do as they pleased:

> I do believe that students should be able to express themselves, however if it is offensive in any way, then it should not be done on school property. When students are outside of school they can express themselves all they want.

Others felt that the adult world imposed restrictions similar to the ones mandated by court rulings, and they argued that learning to adapt to such restrictions would ultimately serve students well:

> Our jobs are to educate students so they grow up to be responsible adults in which they need to act accordingly so I don't think it's to [*sic*] much to ask of them to follow a few simple rules in school. In the future, most will be told how to dress and act so we are really just setting them up for what they will experience down the road.

Reflections. My primary opportunities to provide feedback present as either verbal prompts in class about relevant information or resources or via written comments to individual students on their drafts. For example, I might remind students in class that the article we read about a science teacher struggling to teach evolution in a class of evangelical students is a good reading to keep in mind when considering religious rights and ethical teaching. On papers, I might ask a student who suggests that teachers should always remain "neutral" how they might handle a student who walks into class wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt, or how they would respond to a student who asks why it is necessary to take a drug test to play tuba in the school band. It is difficult to tell, though, if these generalized in-class comments or the more private individual feedback come across to students judgmentally or not. I noted in another formal reflection:

> There is feedback from some students about their opinions not being valued, which is not a new complaint but one I continue to try to figure out how to address. Like the multicultural class, ed law has as its focus real-world issues and dilemmas […] and as a result there are going to be strong feelings […] One goal is to be more conscious of the written feedback I provide to students on their journals; to be aware that my comments may seem appropriate to me but may feel more critical to students and to figure out ways to challenge them without discouraging them. … (September 2011)

C. End-of-course Evaluations.

In reviewing evaluations, I focused on one of the Likert scale items, along with the comments. The item (*The instructor was respectful of all students*) is the most relevant for self-examination. Over eighteen sections of the education law class, on a 5.00 scale, the lowest mean for this item has been 3.38 and the highest 4.82. The vast majority of students rate me, on average, between 4.25 and 4.75. As noted, the percentage of comments that focus on my perceived bias in some way average out at about ten percent of students over the semesters.

Comments like "she pushed her opinions on us a little too much" leave me wondering whether this particular writer really *is* expressing the viewpoints of multiple students. Comments that reflected an emotional reaction to perceived pressure, such as "I was honestly scared to share my opinion and thoughts because of how much of a complete dictator she is," while rare, are disconcerting. The belief that work is assessed based on how closely it aligns with my perceived opinions leaves me troubled, trying to understand what triggered students to write, "I belive [*sic*] you cannot ask someone for their opinion and the [*sic*] look for a specific answer that matches your specific opinion" and "if you didn't give her opinion, then you're wrong."

Reflections. While student evaluations at my university may not have as much weight for promotion and tenure decisions as they can at other colleges and universities (Franklin, 2001), they *are* collected and submitted; if for that reason only, it is difficult not to ruminate on the less positive perspectives that are offered. Despite the fact that the vast majority of comments are positive, these opinions leave me wondering: How many students felt coerced and simply didn't write that down? Did I make a difference in terms of encouraging students to re-consider long-held beliefs, or did I force them to go underground?

I have frequently taken suggestions and critique from students' evaluations and used these to make changes, but it is easier to adjust the number of quizzes than it is to intuit students' reasons for feeling pressured. Sometimes it seems that regardless of how carefully I choose my words or tone of voice, there is no avoiding some pushback from students. The formal reflection done in September 2011 suggests this:

> I reflect each semester about how to teach more effectively and find ways to make connections between students' lives and experiences in order to make the courses more meaningful for them. I do not want to revert to a quiz a week or two tests a semester to determine students' grades, so I am somewhat resigned to the fact that evaluations are always going to be likely to reflect at least some student frustration. However, this does not let me off the hook for continuing to search for ways to mitigate that as I can.

IV. Self-Critique: I *am* Pushing a Liberal Agenda.

Truth be told, it was not until I shared an earlier draft of this paper with a younger colleague, Susan (a pseudonym), that I began to feel like I could really step outside of the dialogue in my own head and think about this tension in a more productive and hopeful way. For quite a while, my reactions were framed by an education law lens—meaning, alarm at how often students were endorsing the limitation of rights for reasons that seemed overblown. I even presented a paper at a law conference that illustrated my struggle with developing "teachers who understand just how critical their role is in preparing future citizens and in maintaining essential liberties" (Feinberg, 2008).

What I discovered was that I could not see the forest for the trees. I was guilty of what I had always cautioned my students to avoid—assuming that everybody else saw the world through the same lenses as they did. Ironically, I was playing the role of surrogate parent that Imber (2008) discussed, although in service of activism, rather than caution. After all, I had written in my very first formal reflection (and espoused in my syllabi):

> I try hard to remind my students that they can and should play roles beyond simply "teacher." They are citizens, potential future parents, and certainly taxpayers, and will be *activists* and policymakers by virtue of the choices they make as educators. (January 2009, emphasis added)

A. Competing Values.

What are teachers supposed to be, in terms of their roles as educators in a democratic society? My bias is grounded in a scholarly perspective (Hess, 2009; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Parker, 2003) that positions teachers as role models who create democratic classrooms and foster the kinds of discourse that reflects a marketplace of ideas. Others, however, believe that teachers overstep their boundaries when they go beyond teaching the content they are responsible for (Fish, 2008, is the most articulate spokesman for this stance but focuses on higher education; the argument is relevant nonetheless) and/or encourage dispositions beyond character traits such as respect, responsibility, and the ability to get along with others.

I would not have wanted my own children to attend a school that would suspend a student for a politically oriented t-shirt, and as a parent I would have been thrilled to hear more often of moments that allowed them and their classmates the opportunity to debate, discuss, and honor diverse opinions about varied issues. That is *my* perspective, however—and I wonder, does this perspective make it more difficult to tolerate students' differing outlooks? Given research that has shown college professors as more critical of colleagues' work that contradicts their own beliefs (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006), it is not a stretch to presume that the same dynamic could be in play with students.

As Susan helped me to recognize, there is value in both my students' and my perspectives. She pointed out, "You are getting push back from students not because they don't believe in our essential liberties but because they have learned a different set of values growing up. More conservative values" (personal communication, September 24, 2012). This is really not surprising; as inexperienced educators, teacher candidates are particularly concerned with classroom management and maintaining control of students; for them, "fair" often means no one gets hurt, and "safe" means no one is offended. There is nothing inherently wrong with being worried about student safety; everyone is entitled to learn in a safe environment. There is nothing inherently wrong with being worried about offending someone; it could be argued that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction when we consider the current level of discourse in our politics and media. These were the values taught to Susan, who grew up in a rural community very much like the ones surrounding our university. They are values that have taken on added importance for many after September 11—despite the potential for unintended consequences around the surrender of rights (Walsh, 2006).

It is hard to believe that students born in 1990 or later would have an understanding of how things "used to be" (for example, boarding a plane without going through a scanner—let alone walking a traveler to their departure gate!) unless their families or teachers went out of their way to engage them in discussion about American civil liberties. So, really, why would they

recognize the slippery slope I worry we embark upon when we banish a student's political t-shirt or mandate drug testing for any student who wants to participate in extracurricular activities? As I peel off the cloak of rationalization, I have begun to understand that students' perspectives may reflect profound generational or experiential differences, rather than resistance.

B. Where to Go From Here?

While is can be argued that the importance of recognizing students' values and life experiences should have been obvious earlier, it appears that rationalization (Loughran, 2002) is alive and well in teacher education, especially in social foundations courses. Lowenstein (2009) writes persuasively about the preponderance of "deficit views of White preservice teachers" (p. 164) she uncovered in her comprehensive review of the literature on multicultural teacher education, and caustically concludes that "teacher educators face the task of somehow rescuing teacher candidates from their lack of knowledge or from their misconceptions" (p. 178). As an alternative, she argues that these students be seen as active learners, who bring useful resources to their learning experiences.

What I can do to help that along is publicly acknowledge that perspectives—including mine—are filtered through one's personal historical contexts, and that understanding those contexts allow us to (re)consider our beliefs in more reflective ways. If I own my experiences—and the biases they have helped create—I give students permission to own theirs. A "good grade," it must be made clear, is not based on students' parroting my positions—that is not education, after all. But it is important to help students understand how experiences and contexts shape our perspectives and help or hinder our ability to reflect and deliberate about issues big and small—and I cannot do that with them, if I am not willing to do that in front of them. Is this "committed impartiality" (Kelly, 1986)? I believe it is at least an important part of its foundation.

This being said, it must be considered that it is impossible to avoid negative reactions in a class that is meant to encourage critical thinking and discussion. Sherman & Cohen (2002), among others, found that people who do not have a solid sense of self-worth are more likely to "allow their beliefs to bias their evaluation of new information" (p. 119) and adopt a defensive posture in response to such experiences. Students, particularly traditional undergraduates, are certainly more likely to be in the process of navigating challenging experiences and forming identities as they move through their teacher education programs, and may be more likely to dismiss alternative perspectives as agenda-laden or biased. While it is important to keep this in mind, it is not enough to abandon discussion of controversial topics.

It is ironic, of course, that my belief in the "marketplace" of the classroom could end up persuading students of an agenda meant to trump their values and beliefs. James (2010, p. 619), in her account of theological certainty and its effects on discussion in the university classroom, argues

> One consequence of [the] lack of public political discourse and engagement is increasing partisanship–certainty if you will—about the rightness of one's position, and less desire (or ability) to find common ground (Schkade, Sunstein, & Hastie, 2006) […] In such a political climate, teachers who are committed to and capable of preparing students for democratic citizenship are vitally important. It follows, then, that teacher educators who can help prepare teachers for their roles as democratic educators are equally important.

How easy it is to fall into the trap of rationalizing one's own position via the "student resistance" lens, inadvertently reinforcing the partisanship James speaks of in the classroom. The

opportunity for a marketplace of ideas in our schools via exposure to multiple perspectives has always been crucial; it is even more crucial now; and teacher educators have a special responsibility to help teacher candidates become comfortable with this framework. This cannot be accomplished, however, without acceptance of how past experience shapes all of us, as well as recognition of how current experience has the power to do the same. It is my hope that this reflection illustrates a transparency (Hess, 2005) about pedagogical perceptions, choices, and tensions that helps other educators consider their own practice and the choices they make as well.

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