Teaching Generation Z Students About Politics: Optimism or Pessimism?

Mark K. McBeth,[1] Jonathan W.L. Blakeman,[2] Logan Kearsley,[1] Alyson Tyler,[1] and Emma Villanueva[1]

[1] *Idaho State University*
[2] *Brigham Young University-Idaho*

Received: 19 September 2022; Accepted: 1 November 2022

The scholarship of teaching and learning is primarily concerned with improving student learning. Of course, we want our students to learn our disciplines, we want them to become critical thinkers, and we want them learn to write. But this study looks at how learning impacts a student's optimism or pessimism. We believe that it is an important topic in today's world and provides an important new topic in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This study is co-authored by two team-teachers and three honors students. Using an Introduction to Politics course as case material, the study provides a pre and post-test measuring student optimism versus pessimism on a wide variety of political issues facing Generation Z students. Then we provide a content analysis of honors essays which were collected during the semester and interviews with our three honor student co-authors. We draw initial conclusions about optimism versus pessimism in teaching and argue that a larger research agenda around this topic would benefit the scholarship of teaching and learning literature.

INTRODUCTION AND THE PROBLEM

The scholarship of teaching and learning is primarily concerned with improving student learning (Prosser, 2008). This journal is dedicated to just that, providing an outlet for teachers to share research on their teaching practices and how they relate to student learning. Of course, we want our students to learn our disciplines (Coppola, 2011), we want them to become critical thinkers (Lloyd and Bahr, 2010), and we want them learn to write (Hojeij and Hurley, 2017). But this study looks at how learning impacts a student's optimism or pessimism. We believe that it is an important topic in today's world and provides an important new topic in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

It is not an overstatement to tell first year college students that they are "living in historical times." Indeed, around the world, this generation is facing problems and possibilities like, perhaps, no other in history. Democracy itself is under strain as authoritarian populism and nationalism has risen not only in the US but in other countries in the world (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021). In addition, the devastating effects of climate change are now regularly witnessed in flooding, drought, and other extreme weather (IPCC, 2021). Not to mention a global pandemic which has reduced life expectancy throughout the world, made millions seriously sick with millions of others dead (Wolff, Masters, and Aron, 2021). Yet, at the same time, there are more encouraging signs in the world in regard to the reduction of poverty, increases in literacy, and access to healthcare (Pinker, 2018). Additionally, there is evidence that the younger generation might be rejecting the politics of the past.

That is, younger persons are rejecting racism and inequality along with supporting global issues like climate change initiatives (Dalton, 2021).

Steven Pinker (2018) promotes the view that the world is getting better. Pinker's fundamental argument is that human reason and science produces a world that sees less violence between countries (less wars), less interpersonal violence, less poverty, better education, longer life expectancies, and generally a better quality of life. These positive changes are occurring, not just in advanced industrialized democracies, but throughout the world. Pinker contends that academics are inherently pessimistic. Somewhat ironically, he contends that political progressives are the most offended by his data showing human progress. Pinker also contends that the media feeds on pessimism. Furthermore, the advent of smartphones and social media make it all too easy to spread bad news. Of course, other research has demonstrated how media contributes to such pessimism. Sullivan (2020) reveals how economic crisis faces local news and traditional media outlets around the globe. Sullivan (202) argues that without these local news outlets, communities become less trusting of governmental institutions. Communities then instead rely on national cable news or talk radio. Finally, Mutz (2016) examines incivility among news media and how 24 cable news create an atmosphere of crisis and hatred. The larger point from Pinker, Sullivan, and Mutz is that the media plays a significant role in creating incivility, polarization, and pessimism.

But Pinker has his critics. These critics (e.g., Robinson, 2019) contend that Pinker ignores issues such as economic inequality, the destruction of non-human species, and incarceration levels. Critics also argue that he engages in confirmation bias and finds data that fits his "the world is getting better" thesis. Of course, a concern of activists is that Pinker's optimism can fuel complacency and that looking at the good progress in the world can make us ignore poverty, inequality, and other issues that still plague global society.

Our students are inheriting the problems facing the world and these problems are collective action challenges that are not national but instead are transnational. As political scientists, we know that collective action challenges are particularly difficult to solve and this generation has many, many problems to solve. We fear that we can overwhelm our students with pessimism about the future. We fear that in providing them with the immense political challenges facing their generation, they might shut down or give up. We fear that too much criticism of US democracy might make students give up on US democratic ideals. Thus, we contend that as social science faculty, we have to critically think through our approach to teaching politics to Generation Z students.

https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2023.17105

Optimism versus pessimism is well studied as a psychological construct (e.g., Sweeny and Sheppard, 2010; Chang, 2001) but as a pedagogical construct, the term seems inconsistently studied and is normally framed in terms of critical social theory (e.g., Mayo, 2006) or liberation (Freire, 2021). Yet, for those of us who teach political science or other social science courses, we have to regularly confront a continuum of optimism and pessimism in how we teach our students. In contemporary politics, however, critics of public higher education dichotomize educational practices contending that higher education has become nothing more than "progressive indoctrination" where faculty, not only indoctrinate students, but also make them "hate America." Continuing with the US, elected officials in some 35 states have convened such devices as "indoctrination committees" to study whether K-12 and public higher education institutions are indoctrinating students with Critical Race Theory, multiculturalism, and other concepts which the committee sees as anti-American (Alfonseca, 2022; Jones, 2021). Such a situation is, of course, not new, as detailed in earlier work by Condon (2008). This education debate is important as it shows the intersection of pedagogy and politics.

We know that instructional approaches are often highly contextualized to subject matter and learning outcomes. We reject the notion that faculty are indoctrinating students by pessimistically stressing problems. But yet, we are unsure whether social science faculty members necessarily have a well-defined pedagogical approach to how they teach political and social issues. Gunn, et al. (2021) and Condon (2008) start to address the concerns of teaching in a polarized political environment and we hope to continue to build in their footsteps.

It is unclear how optimism and pessimism play out in a social science classroom. For example, do US social science professors show our students the sometimes-brutal realities of institutional racism and US political history or do we focus on the significant strides the US has made in civil rights over the course of its history? Do we discuss US economic inequality or the fact that many people around the world still want to immigrate to the US because of the opportunities the country affords? Do we discuss with them the dire scientific predictions about climate change or focus on solutions to climate change that are popping up around the world? Of course, it is not an either or proposition. Instead, perhaps the best professors can both inspire students with idealism while also showing them the bold realities of racism and inequality.

Thus, the lead authors as political science/social science professors in the US, conducted a study of Generation Z students and their views of the politics of the future. The lead authors are joined by three undergraduate honors students who serve as co-authors as they provided critical feedback and information throughout the formulation of this paper. Our central research questions include: (1) Are students optimistic or pessimistic about the future?; (2) What are student expectations concerning how a college class should or does impact such views?; and (3) How should faculty approach teaching based on student responses to question one and two?

GENERATIONAL POLITICS AND GENERATION Z

Generation Z students and their predecessors (Millennials) have been studied in the political science literature. Dalton (2021) uses longitudinal survey data and concludes that the younger generation is more accepting of others, more concerned about others not only in the US but around the world, and more likely to think that the government can be a force to reduce everything from inequality to drug abuse to racism. At the same time, Dalton (2021) shows that young people are less trusting of government and less trusting of political institutions. Younger people are more likely to participate in politics through boycotts, protests, social media campaigns, and less likely to join a political party or work through institutional channels to promote change. As professors, if we want to be optimistic about teaching Generation Z students, we could conclude that such students are actively engaged in the problems of the world and want to learn. If we want to be pessimistic about teaching Generation Z students, we could conclude that public higher education is an institution and students with their anti-institutionalism could see higher education as merely a "jump through the hoops" endeavor. This pessimistic view could conclude that young people see higher education as a credential and not necessarily as a means for them to become educated to tackle the collective action challenges facing their generation.

Generation Z is the generation born after 1996 (Parker and Igielnik, 2020). While understanding the fragile mental status of the generation created by parenting mistakes and poorly designed institutions, some scholars have called the generation "coddled" and suffering from "safetyism" (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2019). Negative attitudes toward Generation Z are found in the anti-political correctness movement (see Timpf, 2019), where various pundits and scholars have been highly critical of Generation Z students (and their Millennial predecessors) and their efforts to thwart controversial speakers at universities. On the other hand, some question whether such a negative view of Generation Z is justified (Bollinger, 2019). Dalton (2021, p. 36) writes in defense of young people, "Older people typically castigate the young for not being like themselves—this has been true since the time of Aristotle—and seniors attribute negative political developments to the eroding values and poor behavior of the young."

There are some mixed depictions of Generation Z in the political science literature. McBeth, Belyea, and Perry (2021), for example, show that students are deeply concerned about issues of political polarization and while they want to think of their generation as less politically polarized, they also share many characteristics of their older counterparts. The study showed that, like a general population (see Mason 2018), younger people were not divided on policy issues but were divided when it came to how they viewed the political opposition.

What we do not know is whether students are optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the world. As a theme, we have discussed Pinker and his critics in courses the past few years. Pinker is interesting because while more politically conservative students might agree with his optimistic view of the world, they would also have to accept his promotion of science and modernization, and human reasoning that has brought such changes. Political liberals, on the other hand, might be drawn to Pinker's emphasis on reason and science but yet, they are also drawn to his critics, who view Pinker as an elitist and out of touch with the realities of racism, inequality, and environmental destruction.

Our teaching philosophy is based upon pedagogical assumptions, built upon cognitive science knowledge of how individuals learn (Eyler, 2018; Lang, 2016) and focuses on using the cognitive sciences to promote critical thinking (Van Gelder, 2005) and a hopeful pedagogy of critical thinking (Nicholas and Raid-

er-Roth, 2016). The assumptions of our pedagogical approach also promote learning with meaningful assignments (Anson, 2017) and use concepts (referenced throughout the course in different ways) as the building blocks of knowledge (Leamnson, 1999; Lang, 2016; Ambrose, 2010). Our pedagogical assumptions also rely on Eyler's (2018) cognitive based assumptions of learning and promoting student curiosity, use of sociality, the effective use of emotion to connect students to the material, authenticity, and helping students deal with failure when they struggle to learn new concepts or new theories. Sociality is particularly important in our course which consists of an even mixture of lectures, student only group or pair discussion, and faculty guided class discussion. Students are encouraged to bridge with other students in the class with the goal that every student in the class will have a chance to talk to every student in the class on several occasions throughout the semester.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

The Introduction to Politics and Critical Thinking course is designed to help students engage with politics and grapple with questions of optimism and pessimism. In the course, we deal with understanding cognitive bias and its role in political polarization. We also deal with political tolerance (Gibson, 2007), philosophical questions of political consent (Nathanson, 2001), and most importantly, the role of young people in politics (Dalton, 2021). We seek to help our students understand bias including their own and our pedagogical approach seeks to help students understand why and how we disagree about political issues. Such an understanding helps students break out of the dichotomized right versus wrong world of partisan politics. Students are instead confronted by the difficulties of thinking critically about politics, the different philosophies that underpin our beliefs, and the necessity of citizens in a democracy being civically engaged. Our pedagogical philosophy is not to teach the students fact but rather to help them see themselves as participants in a democracy and in solving future challenges facing the world.

The course is taught in at Idaho State University located in a politically conservative state in the US. Many of our students are working class and many are also first-generation students. The fall 2021 course had 25 students enrolled and 23 students completed the pre-test survey and 18 students completing the post-test. All the students completing both the pre-test and post-test were Generation Z students with an age range of 18-20 years old. All the students in the course were US citizens.

In fall 2021, the course was team-taught by two instructors. Before the class started, students were asked via email to complete a survey that dealt with various pertinent issues relevant to student optimism and pessimism including:

1. Based upon what you know about the current situation in the world, if you had a chance to be born in one of the following years, which year would you chose? (Students were given dates in 25-year increments starting in 1900 and ending in 2050 and they could make comments about their choice).
2. Based upon what you know about the current situation in the world, if you could choose to be born in a certain country, what country would you choose? (Students were provided with 20 countries to choose from and they could make comments about their choice).
3. How optimistic or pessimistic are you when it comes to a variety of issues (gender equality, racial equality, sexuality equality, climate change, affordable health care, democracy, affordable public higher education). (Students responded using a five-point Likert scale of very pessimistic, pessimistic, neutral, optimistic, very optimistic).
4. Do you view politics as something positive or something negative? (Students responded to a five-point Likert Scale of very negative, negative, neutral, positive, very positive).
5. How has the pandemic impacted your view of the future? (Students responded to a five-point scale of a lot more pessimistic, somewhat more pessimistic, no change in pessimism or optimism, somewhat more optimistic, a lot more optimistic).
6. How do you think this course will impact your view of the future? (Students responded to a five a five-point Likert scale of a lot more pessimistic, somewhat more pessimistic, no impact on pessimism or optimism, somewhat more optimistic, a lot more optimistic).
7. When you take a course what do you expect in terms of pointing out what is right or wrong with the world? (Students responded to the following options: help me see what is wrong with the world; help me see what is right in the world; help me see both what is right and wrong with the world; or none of the above).
8. When you take a course, do you expect that the course will make you more or less hopeful? (Students responded to the following options: the course will make me more fearful; less fearful; or neither).
9. What is more powerful emotion, fear or hope? (The options for students were hope or fear).
10. When it comes to your generation, do you think that young people (The options for students were: are not ready for the challenges that lie ahead in the world; are as ready or unready as any generation for the challenges that lie ahead in the world; are ready for the challenges that lie ahead in the world.
11. How pessimistic or optimistic are you about your generation and its ability to solve the world's problems? (The options for students were presented as a five-point Likert Scale: very pessimistic, pessimistic, neutral, optimistic, very optimistic).

At the end of the semester, all students were post tested using the same survey (with slight wording adaptations to questions to reflect the post-test nature of the survey). The survey is available upon request.

In addition to the survey, the honors students were asked to submit three additional essays during the semester. We content analyzed these essays to find broad themes. Finally, four months after the end of the course, three honors students (who are co-authors on this paper) were interviewed about issues related to optimism and pessimism and the course. The follow up questions they were asked were:

1. What do you see as a benefit and a downside to being taught with a perspective of hope, and why?
2. What do you see as a benefit and a downside to being taught with a perspective of fear, and why?
3. Do you tend to be influenced by the methods of teach-

ing an instructor utilizes? If so, do you believe that it has a long-term impact on your outlook of the world around you?

This final methodological approach provides a longitudinal dimension to our findings. The research was approved by the institutional research board of the university with an approval number of IRB-FY2022-6 (Idaho State University).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the pre- and post-survey data concerning the question of, if given a chance to be born at a different time and in a different country, where would the students want to be born? Sixty-one percent of the students in the pre-test and 67% in the post-test chose to be born in the year 2000 (when most students in the class were actually born). Fifty-two percent of the students chose to be born in the US in the pre-test and this increased slightly to 56% in the post-test. One of the consistent themes in the class was to not over-romanticize the past and also recognize the positive attributes of current society. Additionally, the course dealt with not only the problems facing the US but also US ideals of individualism, equality, and opportunity.

Some of the student comments from the survey described their choices. For example, one student described why they chose to be born in the late 20th century and why they chose to be born outside the US. In the pre-test, one student wrote, "The late 20th century has seen some of the largest technological innovation in recorded history, thus I would want to be born with all of the conveniences of modern life. I chose France because being in a relatively stable European country with a high quality of life, and many diplomatic opportunities would be very interesting and would open the gateway to many other cultures." Whereas another student explained why they wanted to be born in the US and born in the year 2000, "I chose the year 2000 to be born due to information being readily available to the public through the world wide web. I chose the United States to live in mostly due to familiarity and not enough knowledge to say I would prefer anything above it, though I also recognize government aid, individual freedoms and economic value to be substantial benefits." Though there were students who in the post-test did not embrace our current technology and in particular, social media. For example, one student commented that "I feel that in 1975 the world was a lot less complicated, without modern technology and social media life would be a lot simpler" and stated about their choice of country, I chose the United States because I feel that even with all of its issues it is one of best countries in the world and I am grateful to be born here."

Table 1. Student preferences of birth date and geographic location

Choice	Pre-Test	Post-Test
When to be born (2000)	61%	67%
Where born (US)	52%	56%

Note: Students were given dates in 25-year increments starting in 1900 and ending in 2050.

Table 2 examines the pre and posttest data concerning the percentage of students who were optimistic about the future and various issues. Most notably during the course of the semester, the students became more optimistic about (1) racial equality, (2) gender equality, (3) sexuality equality, (4) climate change (but are overall strongly pessimistic), (5) democracy (though they remain slightly pessimistic), (6) affordable higher education, and (7) economic prosperity. While there was little change in optimism toward economic equality and the students remained overall pessimistic, the students only became more pessimistic in regard to access to health care (and that was a 1% decline).

Table 2. Percentage of Students Who Are Optimistic

Optimism	*Pre-Test*	*Post-Test*
Racial equality	53%	61%
Gender equality	61%	76%
Economic equality	35%	38%
Sexuality equality	43%	61%
Climate change	9%	17%
Democracy	23%	49%
Access to health care	35%	34%
Affordable public higher ed.	29%	44%
Economic prosperity	43%	58%

Note. The data was collected using five-point Likert scales but collapsed for presentation purposes.

Of the nine issues on the survey, students at the end of the semester were optimistic with four issues and pessimistic with five but changes were overwhelmingly in the optimistic direction. As we will see in a later question, the course dealt both with "what is wrong with the world" and "what is right with the world" but our choice of a text book was optimistic in that Dalton (2021) argues that US democracy is not at risk due to young people and that instead young people are more likely to embrace equality and care about others throughout the world. We did not discuss all of these issues specifically, but our discussions of power, democracy, and political philosophy dealt with the allocation of resources and students overall moved in an optimistic direction as a result (while also staying overall pessimistic on five of nine issues).

One of the themes of the course is that many individuals believe politics is corrupt and immoral and that, as a result, individuals do not like politics. While the course dealt with how politics can be manipulative and used negatively, the course also reflected the notion that politics is "how you change the world." Lectures and readings stressed that politics has changed the world on everything from the formation of the interest group, Mothers Against Drunk Driving which changed our society's view of drunk driving to improvements in civil rights (Martin Luther King), to positive changes in how we do not accept sexual harassment in the workplace. In all of these and other examples, we stressed how individuals used politics to bring attention to problems and how they forged coalitions to overcome the status quo. Table 3 demonstrates that 48% of students in the pretest thought that politics was a positive force, and this increased to 67% in the post-test. Thus, we are comfortable concluding that our course led to students viewing politics as something that is potentially a positive force.

Table 3. Positive Politics

Choice	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Politics is positive	48%	67%

Note. The data was collected using a five-point Likert scale but collapsed for presentation purposes.

Table 4 presents the pre and posttest results for the remaining survey questions. Here, 30% of the students in the pretest indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had made them more positive about the future and this decreased to only 11% in the post-test. This likely had little to do with the course (though we discussed politics and the pandemic on a couple of occasions) and probably was more likely due to the rise of the Delta variant throughout the semester and the worsening of the pandemic as the semester progressed from August 2021 to December 2021. Seventy-eight percent of students also indicated in the pretest that in the past, social science courses had made them more optimistic whereas 83% in the posttest indicated that our class made them more optimistic.

Table 4. Outcomes of the Course

Question	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Pandemic has made you more optimistic	30%	11%
The course will/did make you more optimistic	78%	83%
Course expectations / What the course delivered (what is right and wrong with the world)	91%	94%
Hope is the most powerful	59%	56%
Impact of Course-Hopeful	30%	61%
Your generation ready	35%	33%
Optimism about your generation	52%	83%

Note. See the methods section for the questions and different choices presented to students on different questions.

Ninety one percent of students in the pretest indicated that they wanted a course that showed them what was both "right and wrong with the world" and 94% of students in the pre-test indicated that our course had done that. Our course did not shy away from discussions of continuing problems of racial or economic equality but at the same time, we always tried to provide possible solutions to these problems.

Fifty-nine percent of students in the pretest indicated that hope was a stronger emotion than fear and this declined a bit to 56% in the posttest. This could be the result of our discussions of how the power of negative political narratives leads to political polarization (though we balanced this with discussion of more positive narratives that bring people together). Yet, 61% of students in the posttest said that the course had made them more hopeful. This compares to the pretest where only 30% of students said that in the past, social science courses had made them more hopeful about the future.

There was little change in the question of whether their generation is ready to take on the challenges of the world (most students indicated that they believed their generation was as ready as any other previous generation but only 35% in the pretest and 33% in the posttest thought their generation was more ready than previous generations). However, reflecting the impact of Dalton (2021), optimism about their generation and their ability to solve the problems facing the world increased from 52% to 83%.

A qualitative analysis was conducted to provide an additional layer of understanding of the perspectives of the students. The honor students were asked to provide a short response to a series of questions throughout the semester. We examine three questions that are most relevant to our study. The responses were analyzed to find themes and common responses.

One essay question focused on a debate between whether we should view the world as getting better or not. Four students found the world to have gotten better, two were in the middle, and two were on the side of the world not changing for the better. Among those that thought the world was getting better, they all still argued that there was still a need for more positive change. Among those who thought the world had not gotten better, they likewise argued that there is much to fix in the world. This suggests that the students desire a better future and have hope for positive change.

A second essay question focused on the question, "When it comes to politics, what are the advantages and disadvantages of optimism versus pessimism?" The analysis of these responses showed that only one student focused on the advantages of optimism, three focused on the disadvantages of optimism, and two had a somewhat equal split. Even though there was a slight skew in the perspectives, the overall theme was that the students worried about the consequences of being optimistic. Although this may seem to suggest that the honors students in our course were pessimistic, there is more beneath these perspectives. In short, the students see that too much optimism can cloud the desire to progress through actionable work. Furthermore, the students suggest that although a healthy amount of optimism is good, it does not create a sense of urgency to better the world or the situation.

Lastly, the final essay question was worded as "When you take a political science course, do you expect to come away more optimistic or more pessimistic about the world?" This last question further supports the previous questions' responses for a balance of optimism and pessimism. The responses were five expecting to come away more optimistic and two more pessimistic. It should be kept in mind that a few of the students remarked that they were merely pessimists regardless of what was occurring around them. Nevertheless, the overall theme was that the students wanted to be optimistic in the end, but one student explained that "becoming more educated on issues around the world could lead to a more pessimistic outlook on politics and the future." This is true as many people that see or study the sorrows of the world can become pessimists and a bit jaded. Yet, one student puts it perfectly by saying "The pessimist is captured while the true optimist is free." This simple statement has some profound meaning as we can see that the students recognize the benefit in optimism, but also recognize the added benefit of having a sense of urgency that is provided by pessimism.

Four months after the end of the course, three students (who are co-authors) on this paper provides their responses to three questions.

> Question: What do you see as a benefit and a downside to being taught with a perspective of hope, and why?

Student Co-author #1:

> The primary benefit of teaching about the world through the lens of hope is increased morale. News cycles constantly reporting on negative events illustrate why this is the case. It is often incredibly demoralizing and even depressing to be constantly bombarded with negative commentary. I deleted my social media accounts for quite some time because of this. Even though I used these sites to spread the word about important problems and encourage people to donate to charity, the constant bombardment of crises and problems

> took a toll on my mental health…Unfortunately, there are also considerable problems with using a lens of hope. The largest problem, in my opinion, is creating complacency. If the world is made out to be largely good, that can create inaction…

Student Co-author #2:

> A benefit of teaching with hope is that the individuals being taught have an ability to believe in a greater future and a start in the actions needed to create that. I think human beings are naturally goal-driven, and teaching with hope helps inspire a greater goal for human civilization. However, there is a downside to being taught with a perspective of hope and that is the inclination towards naivety found in all of us. Human suffering and especially malevolence seem to be things we struggle to deal with..

Student Co-author #3:

> Being taught with a perspective of hope has the implicit benefit of an optimist point of view and allows individuals to become more motivated in order to work towards a goal. Hope provides a means of incentives for most individuals through the manifestation of religion, and through different mediums of proof, people are able to work towards something "greater than themselves". A downside with being taught with a perspective of hope may be the connotation of being naive…

As we just read, the student co-authors clearly see the advantages and disadvantages of teaching with hope. In essence, while hope provides students with striving for something "greater than themselves" and it might also lead to action, too much hope in the classroom can lead to a naive attitude among students and a false impression that the problems of the world are solved or being solved.

> Question: What do you see as a benefit and a downside to being taught with a perspective of fear, and why?

Student Co-author #1:

> As I see it, the benefit of being taught through a lens of fear is encouraging constant action. When we are always concerned about the state of the world, about our future, it is much more likely that we will act….Take climate change for example, constantly teaching about the impacts of climate change ensures that people are always working to address it. It may not change everyone's opinions on if climate change is real, but it does ensure it is a constant priority within many fields (e.g., government, science, technological industries). On the other hand, fear can create problems as well. If we only teach with fear that can significantly decrease morale, as I mentioned in the previous question. Being bombarded with constant negativity can increase anxiety and depression.

Student Co-author #2:

> A benefit of teaching with fear is that fear is by far one of the most motivating factors in human beings. Fear pushes them to do more and accomplish more than they often think is possible. The fear of a crumbling world could actually push students in a class to make the changes necessary in order to work towards accomplishing a mission to save the world or a country or a society. However, fear is also dark in its archaic nature. Fear crushes hope and can push people to believe there is no change possible in the world. They can feel lost and broken inside without any belief there is a way to change such feelings. This can stop them from living a meaningful life.

Student Co-author #3:

> With being taught a perspective of fear, there is an explanation for why people pursue certain actions or why they deter from certain actions, opinions, or ideologies. It may indicate the "truth" or actuality of a situation that society deems as "uncomfortable" or "taboo" and the perspective of fear could indicate why people made certain decisions or executed actions- to preserve themselves and/or a group of people. The downside to being taught with a perspective of fear is the possibility that students will not engage as much, as they will also fear the consequences of discussing certain topics, expressing personalized beliefs and values, or may not question the instructor in charge….

Similarly, as we just read, the student co-authors viewed fear as something that might demonstrate to students the problems in the world and make them recognize problematic issues that they would not otherwise recognize. On the other hand, using fear in pedagogy can also immobilize students as fear "crushes hope."

> Question: Do you tend to be influenced by the methods of teaching an instructor utilizes?

Student Co-author #1:

> I do not think that I am influenced by the methods of teaching that an instructor uses. I am often skeptical of the frameworks and literature that professors focus on because analyzing them critically improves my education. For example, I had a class where the book was written by an incredibly ableist and sexist author. These views showed through in the book. Once I realized this, I started only skimming the book for important terms that would be on tests so that I did not have that rhetoric placed upon me. It was a bad framework for teaching the class and could have instilled problematic ideals/rhetoric into the students. This proves why students should think critically about the teaching methods and materials an instructor uses and decide whether to ascribe to them.

Student Co-author #2:

> I think that methods of teaching an instructor uses can have a long-term effect on my outlook on the world, but only if they are teaching me in a way that causes interaction of thought and critical thinking. The method of teaching also has to help me see the correlation between class and the real world. I struggle with teachers who expect me to guess what is in their head or lecture without checking for understanding. The teachers who can help my attention hold with engaging discussion and a conviction to the things they are teaching help me feel inspired to dig deeper, on my own time, into subjects we cover in class.

Student Co-Author #3:

> No, I tend to not be influenced by the methods of teaching that an instructor utilizes. The only exception may be discussions or group activities, in which it has a long-term impact should I find the material applicable to a given situation. More specifically, I may remember a group activity that reminds me of a present situation, and makes me look at the world through the perspective taught in said activity.

Here, as we just read, the student co-authors were mixed about how teaching methods impact their long-term views. Students focused on critical thinking (including a student critiquing the reading assignments and other choices of faculty) and the importance of group discussions on long-term impact.

DISCUSSION

In this exploratory study we sought to provide some initial ideas of teaching politics to Generation Z students in what is arguably one of the gloomiest and conflictual periods in recent history. Since the fall of 2021 and the completion of the course, war has broken out with Russia invading Ukraine, there are wide scale economic concerns throughout the world, and while the pandemic has subsided in some parts of the world, the ultimate outcome is still unknown. Thus, even the most optimistic college instructor might find it difficult to teach optimistically.

Our central research questions were:

1. **Are students optimistic or pessimistic about the future?**
2. **What are student expectations concerning how a college class should or does impact such views?; and**
3. **How should faculty approach teaching based on student responses to question one and two?**

Are Students Optimistic or Pessimistic?

Our class, taught in the fall of 2021 during a global pandemic and at one of the most politically polarized times in US history, found that our students want to know both what is right and what is wrong with the world. At the end of the course, a slight majority of our students would want to be born in the US again if they had the chance and about two-thirds of our students would be born in the year 2000 (roughly the same time period that they were born). Our class made our students more optimistic about the future in several areas, though students remain pessimistic about some important issues. Our students see that the world is getting better (Pinker, 2018) but they also realize that there is a lot still to fix (Robinson, 2019). Our students understand the importance of optimism but worry that optimism can keep us from seeing problems. Students also recognize that education itself can make one more pessimistic as they see problems that they did not see before entering a university setting.

What are Student Expectations About a College Class (and how teaching influences optimism or pessimism)?

We did not find a small group of Generation Z students who were coddled or unthinking. Instead, we found young people first making their way in the world grappling with the privilege and burdens of education. Education is a privilege in that only a small percentage of the world has the opportunity for advanced education. Education opens our eyes and broadens our horizons. Yet at the same time, education can be viewed as something of a burden as young people find that the world is more complex and more troublesome compared to a smaller world they knew as younger persons. As faculty, we should always realize that our students are going through a transformation and that this transformation can be difficult and challenging for them. But overall, the student responses were mature and understanding of the complexities of the world. We think that our small group of students understand how the world has improved but also the serious problems that still remain. In fact, the most consistent finding across our survey, honors essays, and honors students' interviews was that social science courses must be balanced between too much optimism (which could lead to complacency and students turning a blind eye toward continuing problems) and pessimism (which could lead to students becoming cynical and not becoming involving in solving the problems that their generation faces). And, our students see their generation's role in helping to solve long lingering problems of inequality and newer problems like climate change. We don't accept Freire (2021) dichotomization that students either accept the hegemonic class or try to change it. While there are many questions left unanswered, our initial view is that the process is much more complex. Our students are more reformers than they are liberators.

How Should Faculty Approach Teaching?

At a time when higher education is under attack for no longer being relevant or for such criticisms as political indoctrination, we think that this tripartite methodological study co-authored with three honors undergraduate students is a good first step for a discussion among university faculty (with input from students) about their goals of teaching. We build upon Gunn, et al. (2021) and Condon (2008) in finding ways to teach controversial subjects and learn to deal with the complexities of teaching in a politically polarized world.

We ask faculty to think about what they owe their students in terms of how courses and faculty shape student views about the world and the future. We do not contend that our findings have answered the important questions that we want answered. Time and place matter and our course was taught at the time of a great pandemic in a conservative state in the US. We realize that social science faculty cannot generalize from our class to all classes. But we are starting a dialogue encouraging faculty to be more aware of the implications of their teaching on students. This dialogue is now starting on our campus. We realize that our study has other limitations beyond a smaller sample size. Despite one longitudinal element to our study, we don't how the long-term impact of our course on our students. Plus, with survey research we know that respondents sometimes provide answers that are socially desirable. Such social desirability can always be an issue when surveys involve professors surveying students. Additionally, by no means, do we want this future research to be confined to the US. Instead, comparative studies across the globe would be greatly beneficial. We hope that international social science and humanities faculty will join us as we continue this pedagogical research over the coming years.

CONTACT

Mark K. McBeth <markmcbeth@isu.edu>
Jonathan W.L. Blakeman <blakemanj@byui.edu>
Logan Kearsley <logankearsley@isu.edu>
Alyson Tyler <alysoncorgatelli@isu.edu>
Emma Villanueva <emmavillanueva@isu.edu>

REFERENCES

Alfonseca, K. (2022). Where anti-Critical Race Theory efforts have reached. *ABC News,* March 22. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/map-anti-critical-race-theory-efforts-reached/story?id=83619715 (accessed April 22, 2022).

Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W. DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C. & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Anson, I.G. (2017). "Audience, purpose, and civic engagement: A reassessment of writing instruction in Political Science." *Journal of Political Science Education,* 13(4), 389–403. doi:10.1080/15512169.2017.1340166.

Chang, E. C. (2001). *Optimism & pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice*. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/10385-000.

Condon, F. (2008). Dynamic complexity: Teaching, learning, and politics. *College Teaching*, 56 (2), 89-95, DOI: 10.3200/CTCH.56.2.89-97.

Coppola, B.P. (2011). "Making your case: Ten questions for departments and individuals building an argument for work in discipline-centered education," International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 5(1), Article 5. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2011.050105

Dalton, R.J. (2021). *The good citizen: How a younger generation is reshaping American politics*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Eyler, J. (2018). *How humans learn: The science and stories behind effective college teaching*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.

Freire, P. (2021). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gibson, J. L. (2007). Political intolerance in the context of democratic theory in Russell J. Dalton, and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds), *The Oxford handbook of political behavior.* Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270125.003.0017, accessed 14 Sept. 2022.

Gunn, L.H., Ghosh, S., Horst, E.T., Markossian, T.W., & Molina, G. (2021). Respecting opposing viewpoints through debate and discussion of controversial public health issues: A double-blinded active learning design. *College Teaching*, DOI: 10.1080/87567555.2021.1910477.

Hojeij, Z. & Hurley, Z. (2017). The triple flip: Using technology for peer and self-editing of writing, International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 11(1), Article 4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110104

IPCC. (2021). *Climate change 2021: The physical science basis. Contribution of working group I to the sixth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S. L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M. I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J. Matthews, B.R., Maycock, T.K., Waterfield, T., Yelekçi, O., Yu R. & Zhou, B. (eds.). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, B. (2021). Indoctrination task force shifts to higher education. *Idaho Education News*, July 29. https://www.idahoednews.org/news/indoctrination-task-force-shifts-to-higher-ed/.

Lang, J.M. (2016). *Small teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Leamnson, R. (1999). *Thinking about teaching and learning*. Stylus: Sterling, VA.

Lloyd, M. & Bahr, N. (2010). "Thinking critically about critical thinking in higher education," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 4(2), Article 9. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2010.040209

Lukianoff, G. & Haidt, J. (2019). *The coddling of the American mind: How Good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. New York: Penguin Books.

Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. University of Chicago Press.

Mayo, P. (2006). Critical pedagogy for transformative optimism. *Interchange*, *37*(3), 277-283.

McBeth, M. K., Belyea, J. & Perry, A. (2021). Dalton and Putnam: Teaching political polarization to Generation Z students." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *54*(4), 750-754.

Mutz, D. C. (2015). In-your-face politics. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Nathanson, S. (2001). *Should we consent to be governed?: A short introduction to political philosophy*. New York: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Nicholas, M.C. & Raider-Roth, M. (2016). A hopeful pedagogy to Critical Thinking, *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(2), Article 3. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2016.100203.

Parker, K. & Igielnik, R. (2020). "On the cusp of adulthood and facing an uncertain future: What we know so far about Generation Z." *Pew Research Center*,. May 14. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/ (accessed March 4, 2021).

Pinker, S. (2018). *Enlightenment now: The case for reason, science, humanism, and progress*. New York: Penguin.

Prosser, M. (2008). "The scholarship of teaching and learning: What is it? A personal view," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2*, Article 2. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2008.020202

Repucci, S. & Slipowitz, A. (2021). "Democracy under siege." *Freedom House*. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf. (accessed August 15, 2021).

Robinson, N.J. (2019). The world's most annoying man. *Current Affairs*, May 29. https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/05/the-worlds-most-annoying-man (accessed August 15, 2021).

Sullivan, M. (2020). *Ghosting the news: Local journalism and the crisis of American democracy*. New York: Columbia Global Reports.

Sweeny, K., & Shepperd, J.A. (2010). The costs of optimism and the benefits of pessimism. *Emotion*, *10*(5), 750.

Takayama, K. (2009). Communities, voices and portals of engagement, *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), Article 25. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2009.030225.

Timpf, K. (2019). The most absurd PC moments of the 2010's. *National Review*, December 31. https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/12/most-absurd-politically-correct-moments-last-decade/.

Van Gelder, T. (2005). Teaching and critical thinking: Some lessons from cognitive science. *College Teaching*, 53(1), 41-48.

Woolf SH, Masters RK, Aron LY. Effect of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020 on life expectancy across populations in the USA and other high income countries: simulations of provisional mortality data. *BMJ*. 2021 Jun 23;373:n1343. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1343. PMID: 34162598; PMCID: PMC8220857.