Advocacy in the university classroom

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Should university professors advocate their views in their classrooms? Or should they remain neutral, neither endorsing nor dismissing any of the positions they and their students examine?

Certainly professors shouldn't waste their students' time by voicing their opinions on matters unrelated to the topic of the class. A professor's snarky remarks about Barack Obama or Stephen Harper steal time from Robert Browning's poetry or the hypothetical analysis of "could have done otherwise," or from whatever is the proper reason students and professor are gathered together.

That's not to mention that favouring a captive audience with contentious opinions without inviting responses is frustrating to students who disagree and is at least mildly contemptuous towards everyone.

Nonetheless, even here matters are trickier than they first appear. Topical references can help students to understand the course material better. Sometimes a professor means his snarky remarks to be funny—and, to adapt a saying from Bertolt Brecht, a classroom that can't be laughed in should be laughed at. Finally, sometimes a professor has to cut short class discussion of her comments because it has grown stale or just in order to move on.

Let's return to professors who try to get their students to believe the true—the true, that is, as they believe it to be. Take, for instance, a professor who believes that human activities are putting biological diversity at risk, and who wants his students to believe this along with him. Or, from my own discipline, take a professor who believes that free will is compatible with causal determinism, and who wants her students also to believe that it is.

Should the environmental studies professor attempt to inculcate in his students the belief that humans are depleting biological diversity? Should the philosophy professor attempt to inculcate in her students the belief that causal determinism doesn't preclude free action? Should the environmental studies or philosophy professor try to make his or her students care about the environment or whether they act freely?

Two things should happen in a university classroom, and anything that interferes with either of these two things shouldn't happen. Students in a university classroom should come to understand something about the material they examine, and students should acquire some of the skills and habits of thought needed to pursue on their own the questions that that material raises. That is, students should get something to think about and they should get some help in becoming able to think rigorously and productively about it.

So our question is whether a professor's desire that her students have the right views on the matter at hand interferes with their coming to understand things or their becoming competent researchers themselves.

Pretty clearly advocacy in the classroom does put at risk our two goals. The professor's desire that her students have the right views can undercut their appreciation of the wrong views (that is, the views the professor thinks wrong). It can prevent her students from acquiring the skills of impartial or dispassionate inquiry and evaluation. It can stymie their progress toward thinking for themselves because it can make them care more about having the right views than about having the right views for the right reasons.

Professors who advocate in the classroom positions they themselves hold might, in addition, sway their students away from candour and encourage them to dissemble. Better to pretend to go along, a student might think, than to invite a bad grade.

Advocacy in the classroom puts at risk the classroom goals of imparting understanding and creating intellectuals, true, but this is a risk that can be managed. It really depends on the skills and attitudes of the professor. That students know where the professor stands needn't interfere with their learning, so long as they feel free—indeed, feel obliged—to challenge their professor.

Of course, the ability to advocate a position in a classroom while at the same time signalling to the students that one is open to criticism, that one expects to be criticised, isn't an ability every professor has. Maybe it's not even an ability that any sincere professor could acquire. For some professors, keeping their views to themselves is not simply the technique they prefer, but the only way they should go if they're not to make a hash of things.

There is one strong reason why professors should now and again declare their particular views on the matter in hand and to explain, in their own voices, why their view is the best view. That reason is that doing so can model for students how one can be convinced of something and yet remain open minded about it and passionately concerned to hear and evaluate criticism. I suspect the best professors are those who can now and again let their students in on what they believe without appearing closed minded or hostile to vigorous criticism.

So should professors advocate their views in the classroom? Well, each should decide for him- or herself. (And each should be open to the possibility that he or she has decided badly.)

This answer follows from the proposal that nothing that goes on in a classroom should take precedence over understanding the topic and becoming a competent researcher. Not every professor and not every student would go along with that proposal, though.

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