

Teaching Difficult Topics

Many of us are clumsy about learning and teaching because we have not thought about how we learn. Students only learn when they are ready to learn. To teach a difficult subject requires that we first make them want to learn about the subject. The problem may begin with the student believing that they already know the answers to what we are teaching. Why are people poor? The student already has the answers

Most teachers adhere to the pedagogical paradigm that teachers take responsibility for what is taught and students are dependent and must be taught what and how the instructor chooses to teach. In andragogy, the assumption is that students need help to become increasingly independent and self-directed as they mature as thinkers. While there needs to be a balance, we need to not only direct students, but also help them direct their own inquiry.

We need to acknowledge not only our own ethnicity, wealth of life experience, background, ethnic heritage, upbringing, and knowledge to the learning situation. The ability to tap the experiences of our students combined with our own can lead not only our students, but for us as well, to reflect upon and develop deeper understandings of difficult topics. We must be willing to help students come to a different understanding of their life experience, rather than being satisfied with the role of being the expert conveyor of information. We need to instill a need to learn as a motivating factor. Students, ideally, come to us with a desire to learn, because they have experienced a problem, because they have a curiosity or a concern, and not just have to fulfill a requirement by taking our course. A personal need to learn requires us as instructors, to give up our notions that we are solely responsible for designing, structuring, implementing, and evaluating the classroom experience. If I am teaching a classroom of mostly combat veterans about PTSD, I would draw heavily on their experiences, but if I am teaching a group of eighteen year old traditional freshmen, I would look for them to contribute more as those who might have responded to others with PTSD rather than to their own experiences. Teaching about issues of military families to students at West Point might focus upon issues that will actually face the students in the future while the same topic at a seminar may focus upon support strategies. While many of us have rigid syllabi and do not value student input into course design, structure, and implementation, it is certainly worthy of consideration to remember that allowing students to be a part of the process gives them a greater commitment to what occurs in the classroom.

While it is a question as to whether pedagogy and andragogy are mutually exclusive. Clearly, we recognize that some topics are best suited for pedagogy and others for andragogy. If there is a particular problem such as an inappropriate song causing a fraternity to be dismissed from campus or sexual assaults on campus, what is seen as difficult topic will change dramatically over time. As professors, we do not have the answers, but we can encourage students to try to see the issues from different perspectives, to use their sociological imagination to better understand views other than their own.

Difficult topics should not be avoided. Shielding our students from life does not protect them. By creating a "safe space" to discuss difficult topics, the instructor is able to provide a greater feeling of control among students. Maintain open lines of communication. Be sure that everyone is involved and understands what is happening. Be sure to keep the analysis at a sociological level with focus upon structural components, cultural differences, values, ethnic and racial components, ethical issues, and policy impacts influence on the topic. While the instructor may be liberal, moderate, or conservative, or whatever, his or her values and opinions are not relevant to the discussion. Our job is not to indoctrinate, but rather to help them learn to think, use reason, and to develop problem-solving

techniques. Do not be impatient with their ability to come to rational conclusions about difficult topics, it takes time to develop such skills. Your patience will allow them to develop deeper thinking and more thoughtful analysis of the topic.

We are not entirely responsible for educating our students about difficult topics, but we are responsible to teach them ways to approach their awareness and thoughts about difficult topics. It is not so important that a particular difficult topic be discussed, but rather that we provide a framework for approaching difficult topics to our students. Often, society presents confusing and contradictory information, views, and facts about difficult topics.

As a child in the bland 1950s, in what most see as a bland decade, I remember it as a time of violence, war, racial discord, urban crime, delinquency, drugs, Communism, rock and roll, Sputnik, and the failure of our schools to prepare children for the future. Much of the alarm about the future proved to be misplaced. Clearly, many of the problems and issues confronting us today will not be as significant as ones that we have ignored or considered to be less important. Topics that are difficult tend to be those about which we have less knowledge. As first year teacher, I was asked by my principal to tell one of my fifth grade students that his father and my friend and hero had died. A very difficult topic and task for someone who was barely twenty-one years old, and who had never given a death notification to anyone. I was determined to learn how to do a better job in the future. I later taught police officers, teachers, medical personnel, clergy, and others about how to tell people about serious harm death to loved ones. To be able to teach about difficult topics, we have to know about those topics. Before we bring up a difficult topic in class, we need to have knowledge to prevent gross misinformation or invalid thinking to dominate the discussion and conclusions.

Fear is also an important aspect of discussing difficult topics. Many, if not most, of our fears are unfounded. Is our very existence being threatened by the Tea Party, President Obama's policies, Iran's nuclear program, Hillary Clinton's personal e-mails, Republican obstruction of President Obama's programs, "Obamacare," or terrorism, or whatever. Each generation seems to think that their issues threaten their very existence, No other time in history has faced what we are facing! We have always felt that our schools could and should be better, that a particular event in another land is a threat to us, or that the misbehavior of other people threatens us and our children. Elvis, the Beatles, LSD, heroin, abortion, and so forth will destroy our future. We, as instructors must not fall into the trap that the issues that we discuss in our classes threaten our very existence, Teaching our students to be filled with fear is not responsible. While we must respect the fact that we may be hit from an object falling from space, mugged or robbed while walking down the street, murdered while shopping in a mall, kidnapped by terrorist in another country. or any number of other possibilities, chances are quite good that it will not happen to us. For more than a century, we have been told to worry about our schools. We are still educating successful people and failing others and have for more than a century. This does not mean that we do not need to be concerned with our schools, but we need not fear the future with such dread. We need more education to get better jobs. Schools do need to do a better job of preparing students. No matter how great our schools are, students cannot learn everything, It will always be true that students should work harder, teachers should be more demanding, and some schools are better than the ones that our children attend. There is no real evidence that schools worse than in the past. While I may remember how hard my teachers made me work, my children will likely see that they also worked harder than their children regardless of the truth. We view education as the path to success, and yet we tell our students that they should worry about finding a job because of our fears about the world around us. Unfortunately, scaring people works! Lawmakers who want their bills or programs to be a priority for passage and/or funding must make a compelling case so that others will listen and support their

proposals. One of the best ways to do this is to make their claims so alarming and urgent that others feel the need to support their position. Unfortunately, many instructors use the same tactic when teaching to get their students to listen to their ideas. Scaring people works. Our integrity requires that we present the truth about poverty. Examination of structural causes of poverty are not exciting, but they are real. Looking at choice theory, educational issues, environmental causes, governmental decisions, geographical issues, and cultural causes may not always excite our students, but the truth should win them over in the long run.

We must teach our students to critically analyze why people are poor, to examine the social processes involved in causing poverty, to avoid simplistic explanations to complex problems, and to understand that no one who explains the causes of poverty to them has seriously considered the real causes. Reasoning itself can be abused and distorted as a way to manipulate people. As educators, we must avoid such traps. We need to teach our students to become skillful people who have¹ the ability to think and communicate, to make a persuasive case for their positions, and to have them not think in terms of winning and losing when discussing social issues. Poverty is not a game! Discussing why people are poor honestly and fairly may be the best that we can offer our students and to ourselves in our quest for personal development. While liberal is not a positive word for many in our society, sociology is part of a liberal arts education. As such, it is a field that should care about truth, goodness, and beauty. It is to care about making connections with what is lastingly valuable in the story of civilization and to test our own lives by the question of whether we are participants or just hitchhikers in those chapters of the story that makes up our own personal journey.

In discussing poverty, language is a tool for honesty or for manipulation. Terms like the undeserving poor, the culturally disadvantaged, welfare queens, and so forth are value-laden terms. Language is a very useful tool. As educators, we must avoid using language or terms that are value-laden. There is a strong relationship between language and meaning. Language is mediated by the context in which the argument is occurring. We should use clarifying, not manipulating language when we teach. While we want our students to believe what we tell them, we want them to be just as critical in responding to what we teach as they are to what others are saying. While the destination of our journey might be to create change in attitudes, meaning, and belief about the causes of poverty, we must develop an atmosphere that fosters a commitment toward belief of parts of your argument, lessens disagreement, and opens thinking to new ways of seeing or analyzing the causes of poverty. Creation of meaning should be tied to standards of truth. Acceptance of arguments should be based upon acceptance of truth. Acceptance of ideas, meaning-making, and processing ideas is cognitive. We all process information differently. Our teaching methods will not reach all students in the same way. Some respond to verbal presentations, others to visual, others to hands on and so forth. We should try to incorporate different teaching styles into our presentations to allow the various learning styles to flourish.

Discussing the causes of poverty allows us to help students to learn about homelessness, feminization of poverty, social class, social structures, income inequality, power, race and ethnicity, family composition, life chances, social mobility, PTSD, veterans, drugs, alcohol, mental illness, and a host of other social issues. In short, there are many avenues to open the discussion of the causes of poverty. Have fun!

