

Forum on Advocacy in the Classroom

Introduction

Political scientists often develop personal opinions about the subjects they teach. It would be unusual if this were not the case. We are, after all, both citizens and scholars.

As a citizen, I believe “The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996,” ending America’s 60-year commitment to provide cash assistance to single-parent, poor families, will harm more poor people than it will benefit. In my Introduction to Social Policy class, which deals primarily with poverty and welfare, should I try to convince my students that this law is wrong-headed? I’ve been curious how other political scientists handle the dilemma of whether to advocate their own personal positions in the classroom. My curiosity led me to organize a panel on “Advocacy in the Classroom” for the 1997 Midwest Political Science Association meeting. The four essays that follow are shortened versions of the papers delivered at the Midwest meeting.

Two insights from the collective wisdom of my forum colleagues stick out in my mind. Whether teachers should advocate their personal positions in a classroom is not a simple yes or no proposition and there are many paths to achieving what all of

us agree is the most important goal of education—the development of our students’ capacity to think critically about the world.

Mark Weaver, in “Weber’s Critique of Advocacy in the Classroom,” analyzes the issue of advocacy in the classroom by using three ideas from Max Weber: the power differential between student and teacher, the different roles of teacher and political leader, and the importance of developing independent thinkers. Weaver concludes that the critical thinking model of instruction is consistent with Weber’s ideas about advocacy.

In “Teaching at its Best: A Passionate Detachment in the Classroom,” I explain my belief that teachers should keep their personal views about subject matter out of the classroom. I describe a social policy course in which students study competing perspectives on poverty and welfare. While teaching that course, I make a conscious effort to stay above the fray and encourage my students to do so as well. I tell them that detachment, not allowing personal preferences to influence assessments or decisions, is a way to channel a passion to know into a means of knowing.

Ellis West, JoAnne Myers, and Joan Tronto believe that advocacy in the classroom cannot be avoided. In “Some Proposed Guidelines for Advocacy in the Classroom,” West argues that the absence or presence of coercion distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate advocacy and that coercion can be reduced if teachers make their classroom advocacy explicit, back their positions with good faith and sound reasoning, allow students to challenge the instructor’s position, and ensure that they and the students express their views in a civil and respectful way.

Myers and Tronto, in “‘Truth’ and Advocacy: A Feminist Perspective,” contend that the “question of advocacy itself must be reformulated before it can be answered.” Toward this reformulation, they argue that everyone is an advocate and the failure to explore background conditions perpetuates bias. Reformulation of the question of advocacy, says Myers and Tronto, leads to teaching that requires students to “think critically about assumptions they may not have known they held.”

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