

Teaching political activism at a university

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 26 January – 1 February 2011

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Dalhousie university recently approved a course, IDS 3102, in which students are taught how to protest (“These marchers deserve credit,” *Chronicle Herald*, Sunday 12 December 2010). The course, according to its syllabus, is for students who want to know how to change the behaviour of contemporary institutions. It was created in response to a demand from students seeking ways “to communicate their disapproval to people in power.”

Courses such as IDS 3102 raise the vexed question of the relation between academic study and political activism.

Academic study is about understanding the world. Political activism is about changing it. The worry is that when activism comes first, and gets right into the point of the course, understanding will come second, if it manages to make an appearance at all.

IDS 3102 is hardly unique in advertising itself as about how to change the world. Take a look through any university catalogue and you will find a sizable minority of courses and programs that state that their mission is to promote social justice, to foster respect for diversity, to protect the environment, or otherwise to instil in students the right attitudes and to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to right the world's wrongs.

The case against courses that take a side or promote activism is that taking a side and promoting activism are inconsistent with the university's mission to educate its students.

A student taking a course at a university should acquire knowledge of facts and theories in the subject matter of the course. She should also gain some of the skills needed to gather new facts and to construct her own theories. In short, each course in a discipline should help her to become a competent participant in that discipline.

When a course takes a side with regard to some live issue, it cheats students out of the experience of investigating the matter dispassionately, open-mindedly, with a concern to appreciate various perspectives on the matter. Or at least so goes the objection to courses about changing the world.

So, while a university course might well take as its subject matter the condition of women in Canadian society, or public policy with regard to worries about climate change, or, in the case at hand, the phenomenon of public protest in democratic nations—its sources, its tactics, its successes, its failures—it is no business of that course even to get students to care about gender equity or government action on climate change, let alone to prepare them to protest effectively in support of what they care about.

The objection to this view of university education is not that courses need to be relevant to real-world concerns if they are to be attractive to students. There's nothing more exciting than

dispassionate inquiry, as all serious students will discover. And the objection isn't that creating people passionate about justice or the environment, and who have the correct views on these matters, is more important than stuffy old academic rigour. There's nothing more likely to help us identify the messes we're in and then to help us to get out of them than academic rigour.

No, the real objection is that university education is also about judgement, about drawing conclusions. Being a competent participant in a discipline of study involves being able to form evaluative opinions. A professor of women's studies is doing what he should be doing when he pronounces that the plight of women in poverty will (or will not) be alleviated by some particular policy. A professor in an environmental studies program is doing what she should be doing when she endorses (or criticizes) nuclear power as a response to global warming.

Students need, one might argue, to learn from the example of dispassionate researchers who, on the basis of their studies, come to practical conclusions about how things are and what should be done. Seeing their professors draw conclusions will show students how to weigh evidence and evaluate theories so that they might come to a reasoned conclusion, while nonetheless remaining open to the possibility of contrary evidence and criticism.

The point is well taken. An educated person is not afraid to come to a conclusion and to propose a course of action whenever her research leads her to a conclusion and suggests a course of action.

And yet, the worry about the infusion of politics into university courses persists. It persists because a student's being educated consists in her coming to conclusions intelligently, not dogmatically. That is, she should come to them as a result of inquiry, not as a result of her prior commitments or, worse, of pressure from the professor. Many courses and programs, though, give the impression that dogmatism is the order of the day. Many give the impression that conclusions that students might freely draw from their investigations are, instead, basic presumptions that students in the course must accept if they're to do well.

IDS 3102, the course on how to protest, certainly gives that impression. The instructor says he is trying to change perceptions and bust stereotypes. But which perceptions need changing and which generalizations are debilitating stereotypes is part of what a course on protest should investigate. It seems that the course begins with conclusions rather than reaches them.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with a professor being a committed activist, or even with a committed or activist professor who takes pride in the commitments or activism of her students. But education must come first and nothing should be allowed to get in its way.

Open-mindedness, circumspection, the ability to weigh evidence and reasons, the ability to notice when one's conclusion is sound and when it is speculative, the ability to admit that one's conclusion is merely speculative, and, above all, the ability to seek out and appreciate criticism of one's views—these are qualities a university professor must be concerned to instil in her charges. She cannot allow anything else she might want, including saving the world, to get in her way.