

To Teach Politics or Not? Reframing this Question in the Interest of Getting Real

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The 2016 presidential election has resulted in a very specific set of questions that seems to have consumed my English teacher education students: *Should we teach about politics, and if so, how?* These are valid questions. I also grapple with these and similar issues as I reflect upon my own practices, as in my case, experience has not made the answers to these questions any more accessible.

A Google search of the term “teaching politics in the classroom” produces more than sixty million hits on the topic, validating concerns about whether and how to teach about politics in these inhumane and anti-intellectual times. A range of headlines offers perspectives and reflections about whether and how to engage the aftermath of the 2016 election and other political events. For a few examples, an article in [The Guardian](#) highlights the polarization of the Brexit and Trump results and asks whether teachers should talk about the events at all, ultimately advocating for a “balance[d]” approach with students. A piece posted to the PBS “[Teachers’ Lounge](#)” draws connections between Trump’s rhetoric and classroom rules, and highlights questions that encourage students to consider how the president’s rhetoric and conduct contradict notions of acceptable classroom behavior. A lengthy [Huffington Post blog](#) that aired a few months before the election deconstructs a New York City Board of Education “little enforced New York City regulation requir[ing] that teachers remain politically neutral when performing official duties,” and ultimately argues that teachers have the legal right to state their views. The piece concludes by encouraging teachers to consult with their administrators if they have questions about whether and how to initiate classroom dialogue about politics.

For a final example, [an NPR interview](#) that aired more than a year before the election takes up other recent events (e.g. the Supreme Court’s ruling on gay marriage, the policing of minoritized communities, nuclear weapons, etc.) and pointedly asks, how much [classroom engagement with politics] is too much?

Whatever the approach or topic taken up in a given article, they all have one thing in common: The articles—as a whole—seem to perpetuate the idea that teaching, lessons, topics, and discussions that do not explicitly take up politics or political events are not also deeply political choices.

The preservice teachers' questions I highlight at the outset of this piece—*should we teach about politics, and if so, how?*—are consistent with the approach to teaching about politics taken up in the media, and is the issue at the heart of this essay. Teachers' questions about whether and how to teach about politics are questions that presume that *all* choices about what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach politics are not also political choices—regardless of whether their choices are situated in the context of an election cycle or other explicitly political events. From my perspective, preparing preservice teachers to become teachers who understand that *every pedagogical decision they make* is a decision embedded in “teaching politics in the classroom” is where some, if not most of the work of teacher education is located.

All Teaching is Political

Perspectives in critical literacy help to frame this argument by highlighting that literacy teaching is an inherently political project. For example, Shor (2009) argues that, no matter a teacher's philosophy or stance, “no pedagogy is neutral, no learning process is value-free, no curriculum avoids ideology and power relations. To teach is to encourage human beings to develop in one direction or another” (p. 300). In other words, beliefs that literacy can be taught sans politics, and that students can be engaged with neutral, apolitical practices is also a political stance. For Morrell (2007), “[t]here's no denying, from a Freirean perspective, the politics associated with literacy education. Though we may not be explicit, all literacy educators make political choices that carry with them significant social, economic, cultural, political and psychological consequences” (p. 54). In sum, to teach literacy is to teach politics. To teach “standard English” and “grammatical correctness” is a political choice. To choose F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* from a list of curricular options that also includes Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a political choice. Designing a multiple choice exam to gauge what students memorized about a given chapter, literary device, or part of speech is a political choice. Enrolling students in a remediation reading class because their “Lexile Levels” are

lower than desired (i.e., a district's political choice to use a metric informed by *someone else's politics*) is a multi-layered political choice that teachers and administrators make regularly.

My own practices are not exempt from scrutiny. For example, I remember how one component of my graduate studies required a sustained focus on working with preservice teachers on how to teach Shakespearean texts. I went along with this requirement without batting an eye, or even asking "why?" My silence was a political choice; that I required my students to follow suit with a Euro-centric curriculum was a political choice; that I chose to ignore the irony between teaching a course that purported to prepare preservice teachers for "the world of the early twenty-first century English classroom" (syllabus) and the sustained focus on teaching Shakespeare was a political choice (see Berchini, 2014 and 2017 for a longer discussion about these and related ironies). All of the choices I describe above are political and made regularly, and—strikingly—without mainstream concern for whether, how, or when to make these choices.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that teacher educators dismiss questions from their students about teaching politics generally, or teaching about and through the aftermath of a given election specifically. These are important questions to address and there is no simple answer. I have also turned to colleagues, media, and scholarship for perspectives on these and related questions. However, the issue of teaching politics goes far deeper than the events narrating a given election cycle. To conclude, I propose that teachers – all teachers – also come to terms with how they already teach politics in the classroom by first examining their beliefs, choices, and practices.

Coming to Terms With Political Pedagogies: A brief discussion of three key areas

The purpose of this discussion is not to offer solutions to the predicament of whether and how to teach about politics in the English and literacy classroom. Rather, it is to suggest that teachers are already teaching politics in ways not necessarily having anything to do with the turmoil of a given election cycle. We merely have to step inside of our own classrooms, lesson plans, relationships, and school and district policies to examine how we are *already* teaching politics, and how to come to terms with the

implications our politics have for students' learning and identities. I briefly touch upon language, literature, and identity as three key areas in which to explore our *already* political pedagogies.

Language

It hardly needs mentioning that students enrolled in English and literacy education courses will eventually become teachers required to teach grammar and writing. Beyond admitting to apprehension about how to teach interesting grammar lessons or how to grade essays in a reasonable amount of time, I have not encountered preservice teachers concerned with whether or not they might teach grammar and writing in ways that are culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012). Meanwhile, traditional grammar and writing lessons have long been identified as exclusionary and “regressive” (Shor, 2009). To this end, the *Conference on College Composition & Communication* (1998/2016) argues for students' rights to their own language, thereby insisting on adequate training and knowledge about Ebonics—the sort of development that might encourage educators and school officials to support students' linguistic-cultural heritage and racial identities while challenging institutionalized stereotypes about linguistic diversity.

Educators, then, have a responsibility to come to terms with the politics of their language instruction, and particularly when their politics are exclusionary. As the *CCCC Statement on Ebonics* argues,

Like every other linguistic system, the Ebonics of African American students is systematic and rule governed, and it is not an obstacle to learning. The obstacle lies in negative attitudes toward the language, lack of information about the language, inefficient techniques for teaching language and literacy skills, and an unwillingness to adapt teaching styles to the needs of Ebonics speakers.

Thus, the obstacles to inclusive literacy practices are often embedded in individual and also school-wide politics. Choosing to refuse and reject students' rights to their own language in the interest of prioritizing school-based discourses is a political decision. What might it look like to come to terms with such politics—by way of a syllabus, a footnote on an exam, or a

letter home to parents and community members—highlighting and getting real about pedagogies, lessons, and other mandated school-based discourses that refuse and reject students’ rights to their own language?

Literature

As I mention above, choices about literature curriculum are also political decisions. Gangi (2008) argues that, “Since children must be able to make connections with what they read to become proficient readers, White children whose experiences are depicted in books can make many more text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections than can children of color” (p. 30). Gangi’s observation sheds light on the importance of youth being able to locate themselves and their experiences in the literature they read, as well as the need to engage with opportunities to learn about other cultures through literature (see Berchini, 2016, for an extended discussion). Coming to terms with the politics of literature selection might foreground how not all students in our classrooms are given the same opportunities to read as an “extension of self” (Kirkland, 2011, p. 206). Gangi (2008) has thus argued that “[l]ack of equity in representation places an unbearable burden on children of color” (p. 34). I have taken this argument further in my own research by illustrating how teachers might examine the contexts within which they teach literature to come to terms with how “inclusion of literature by authors of color in any curriculum does not necessitate that the creative abilities and talents of our highly educated teaching force is being honored or that the needs of our racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse student populations are being met in meaningful ways” (Berchini, 2016, p. 61). In sum, in what ways are English and literacy teachers structured to participate in the politics of curricular exclusion? An exploration of how literature is re/presented in mandated curriculum materials might reveal insights into the politics underlying curricular choices.

Identity

Finally, the current administration has rescinded protections for transgender students, subjecting them to legalized harassment and discrimination in their schools. One way to come to terms with whether and how we support and affirm students whose gender identities and expressions are not recognized by law is to investigate how our classrooms,

teaching, and content explicitly attend to supporting these students. In what ways do our practices deny some students access to a safe, affirming, and inclusive learning environment—an issue about which the *National Council of Teachers of English* (2017) takes a clear stand? In what ways do our schools support (or not) our efforts to affirm our students and promote equity?

One accessible way to address these questions—here again—is to explore the options for literature that exist in schools and classrooms. As Dodge and Crutcher (2015) argue, literature has the potential to provide a mirror into students' identities: "The human condition is not represented through a single story, and teachers enacting social justice pedagogy incorporate texts important to students' lives that reflect the experiences and identities of *all* students" (p. 95). With this argument in mind, teachers might ask the following of their literature selection: Who is represented in the literature that teachers are required to teach, and that students are required to read? How are diverse identities represented? Which sort of relationships are supported? In sum, who is included and who is excluded, and how do my pedagogies support inclusion and/or maintain exclusion?

To close with Shor (2009), "In fostering student development, every teacher chooses some subject matters, some ways of knowing, some ways of speaking and relating, instead of others. These choices orient students to map the world and their relation to it" (p. 300). *All* pedagogies, on some level, have the potential to do real harm. What matters, I think, is how we, as teachers of language and literacy, contend with the politics of this reality—notwithstanding the events comprising a given political climate. Investigating how pedagogical choices and practices are already and always political might be a way to reframe, explore, and get real about the many ways that politics are already taught in the classroom.

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