

Some Useful Practices for Avoiding “the Indoctrination Effects”

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Partly a response to this article: <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-Is-Indoctrination-/245729>>

1) Ground the course and hold everyone accountable to the normative commitments of our institution:

- “personal growth, justice, community, and service”;
- “academic excellence, intellectual and personal integrity, and participation in community life”;
- “A community that through its size, diversity, and programs fosters lively intellectual and social interaction among persons of different origins, experiences, beliefs, accomplishments, and goals”;
- “A program that does not discriminate with regard to religion or creed, gender, sexual orientation, national or ethnic origin, physical disability, age, or economic status”;
- “A faculty that acknowledges teaching, sustained by active commitment to professional growth and development, as its primary responsibility”;
- “A student body of committed learners, actively involved in the programs of the college and in service to the greater community”;
- “A climate of civility and respect that encourages free inquiry and the open expression of ideas”;
- “A non-sectarian education that fosters the exploration and development of values through an awareness of the world’s religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions.”

2) Help students distinguish between assumptions and claims appropriate for different roles we play — and be transparent about when you’re playing and/or asking them to play each of those roles. The roles that need to be distinguished regardless of your field include

advocating a particular evidence-reasoned position/interpretation *as a scholar*, on a matter in which there is no consensus in the discipline and/or over which scholars can reasonably disagree;

VS. arguing *as a scholar* on the basis of a position/interpretation on which there is consensus or mostly-consensus within the discipline;

VS. arguing *as a citizen* trying to convince fellow citizens about a position — this applies more generally, i.e., one member of a normatively bound community arguing with other members of the same community.

3) Be transparent about which arguments/perspective you’re presenting or emphasizing, which ones you’re omitting or de-emphasizing, and what your reasons are for doing so. For instance, if it’s the perspective you find compelling, explain why you find it compelling and acknowledge, in good faith, the case for why others find an alternative perspective compelling. If you aren’t incorporating historically marginalized perspectives, explain why you aren’t.

4) Be honest with yourself and transparent with your students about your own normative assumptions and commitments that inform statements you make. Whether we should do something about climate change and whether our society ought to uphold gender and racial equality and whether Western political thought is (or is among) the “greatest” that humankind has ever produced are *moral* issues — not empirically neutral ones. (See Nathan Robinson, “The Necessity of Social Philosophy,” Oct. 2016, <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2847526>)

5) Guide students in understanding that having the right evidence/facts is not enough for responsible participation as a member of a community — it’s also necessary to help one’s interlocutors to feel heard and to be able to reason based on shared values. (For some recent research on this, see Brian Resnick, “Most People Are Bad at Arguing. These 2 Techniques Will Make You Better,” Dec. 26, 2018, <<https://www.vox.com/2016/11/23/13708996/argue-better-science>>.)