

Clarifying a Conundrum in Activist Teaching

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Kathy Hytten addresses a compelling question in this engaging paper. “Is it possible,” she asks, “for activist teachers to take moral stances in the classroom, and to frame curricula and design pedagogical activities around social justice values and commitments, without at the same time stifling genuine inquiry and implicitly forcing students to share their beliefs?” Hytten’s response to this question is affirmative. She concludes: “while our pedagogical work is inherently activist, it is not at the same time inherently indoctrinating.” Hytten acknowledges that activist scholars and teachers risk incurring institutional costs, particularly in the academy. Nonetheless, teaching students to interrupt gender, racial, ethnic, class, and sexual inequities can help them learn to think critically and also can help them connect their learning to democratic values. Activist teaching thus is not only possible, but also vital for a healthy democracy.

I am deeply sympathetic to Hytten’s position and thank her for wrestling with the issues that she takes up in this article. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that she doesn’t quite see her most interesting insights and questions. In my response, I will try to clarify what I take to be Hytten’s exciting contribution to debates about activist teaching.

The question Hytten poses turns on the following conundrum. On the one hand, activist teachers should encourage genuine inquiry by “exposing students to multiple perspectives and creating opportunities for students to defend a range of viewpoints on any issue.” Learning to weigh various positions (including, presumably, positions with which one disagrees) both entails and develops critical thinking. It also serves what Hytten calls “broadly shared democratic values,” including “freedom of conscience and choice, respect for diversity, defense of individual freedom and rights, and commitment to common goods.”

While Hytten wants teachers to help students weigh a range of positions, she also wants teachers to help students understand that positions are not equally weighted. Some favor and perpetuate marginalization and privilege; others identify and challenge inequities. The fact that positions are differently weighted with respect to social justice is not especially problematic, Hytten observes. While teachers can provide students opportunities to interrogate injustice and adopt stances that promote equity, teachers can’t force students to do so or tell them what to think.

But the challenge for activist teaching runs deeper than this. The key issue stems from the fact that students and teachers do not and cannot weigh different positions from afar. Human beings are unavoidably located in social situations that are always already imbued with values and political interests. People thus always have a position, whether they realize it or not. Teachers, accordingly, do not transmit ecumenical or neutral information. Instead they necessarily make choices that engage particular

interests and promote certain values. Given that social situations are freighted with dynamics of power, the presumption that teaching is neutral actually supports an unfair status quo, “reproduces the [unjust] social order” and models moral apathy, passivity, and habitual disengagement.

Activist teachers choose to interrupt the status quo, interrogate privilege, and promote social justice. While this position certainly may include the choice to make a range of perspectives available to students, some perspectives clearly will be out of bounds. For example, homeless shelters, medical clinics, and food cooperatives are legitimate sites for activist service learning; foreclosure agencies, “concierges” medical services, and agribusinesses are not.

In short, some positions do not promote equity and may be unacceptable. It is this situation, I believe, that leads Hytten to wonder: “when does such explicitly partisan teaching become indoctrination?” Even if teachers explicitly invite students to articulate and share their own views, some students may feel that they cannot disagree with their teachers. Others may simply model their teacher’s position without critically thinking through their own stance.¹

Activist teachers thus face a difficult challenge. They must enable unforced critical thinking about a range of issues. At the same time, they must avoid seeming to be ecumenical or neutral. On the contrary, activist teachers necessarily endorse certain positions and rule out others. But in so doing, they must avoid indoctrination. To navigate these waters, Hytten counsels teachers to “be aware of the political posture and stance we take both [in the classroom] and in the world beyond the school walls.” We must own up to our choices, Hytten argues, by “reflecting on disciplinary content (including seemingly shared knowledge bases and dominant discourses), exploring a range of alternative perspectives on that content, and considering why and how that content might matter to how we live our lives.”

I agree that reflection is important and that teachers must honestly and clearly acknowledge their choices. But reflecting on one’s choices does not mean that teachers stop endorsing or eschewing particular positions. Teachers may become more thoughtful about their decisions and actions. But reflection does not dissolve position (positionality). Reflection does not absolve activist teachers from deliberately working with students to interrogate injustice and expose policies and practices that seem even-handed but in fact systematically privilege some people and marginalize others.

Indeed, I would argue, unless teachers actively work to help students recognize structures of marginalization and privilege, even the most “radical” vision of social justice teaching can end up perpetuating the very injustices it aims to challenge. Many schools have service-learning requirements that students can fulfill by participating in rallies, lobbying state legislators, and writing (or blogging) editorials. Simply engaging in these activities, however, is not sufficient to help students learn to challenge injustice. Privileged students may feel better about themselves because they have done these things. They may rightly feel that they are “doing their part” to make life better for those who do not enjoy the benefits they take for granted. But unless teachers explicitly help students learn to recognize and acknowledge how they

are unavoidably complicit in structures that make their efforts on behalf of social justice necessary in the first place, education will not serve to challenge inequities, despite teachers' best intentions.

Hytten's paper touched me, because it eloquently argues that activist teaching is vital for a healthy democracy. I encourage her to embrace this position and not be derailed by the question, "when does such explicitly partisan teaching become indoctrination?" (3) Instead, I hope she will consider how explicitly activist teaching may be *necessary* to strengthen democratic values and promote critical thinking.

This approach to activist teaching requires us to carefully parse two sets of terms. The first set of terms includes the following words: "advocacy," "partisanship," "indoctrination," and "dogmatic." Hytten's paper tends to conflate these ideas. I suggest disentangling them. One can be a partisan advocate for social justice without necessarily promoting dogmatic indoctrination. Indeed, advocacy may be necessary to expose positions that seem to be open but instead work to hide domination. Scholars such as Sandra Harding² and James Banks³ distinguish advocacy from indoctrination in connection with scientific and educational research. I encourage Hytten to develop this distinction in the context of activist teaching.

Second, we need to analyze the meaning of the term "critical thinking." This term means two different things in Hytten's paper. On the one hand, "critical thinking" means learning to think for oneself by considering different perspectives and positions. On the other hand, "critical thinking" refers to exposing inequitable structures that seem to be natural. Many people assume that these two senses of "critical thinking" are antithetical. But, as Barbara Applebaum shows, while these two definitions differ, both are required if we are to expose inequity and imagine possibilities for a more just society.⁴ I believe that Hytten's paper begins to explore a similar line of scholarship. I hope she will continue working to distinguish these two senses of critical thinking and to examine why they may not be opposed but, rather, are related.

In sum, Hytten's discussion of activist teaching articulates a conundrum that has vexed me and I suspect has confounded many of us. Reading her paper has helped me see that advocacy is distinct from indoctrination and that advocacy may be necessary for developing the two senses of critical thinking that her paper invokes.

1. See William J. Talbott, "What's Wrong With Wishy-Washy Teaching of Political Philosophy?" (paper presented at a special session on neutrality, objectivity, and viewpoint diversity in the teaching of political philosophy, American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting, Portland, OR, March 23, 2006).

2. Sandra Harding, "Re-thinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?'," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3. James Banks, "The Lives and Values of Researchers: Implications for Educating Citizens in a Multi-cultural Society," *Educational Researcher* 27, no. 7 (1998): 417.

4. Barbara Applebaum, "Is Teaching for Social Justice A 'Liberal Bias?'" *Teachers College Record* 111 no. 2 (2009): 376–408. See especially pp. 391–398.