Last semester at the Roman Catholic college where I teach, pro-life fliers appeared one day in the dormitories and classroom buildings around the campus. The fliers announced the formation of a new advocacy group designed to promote a cause that obviously falls in line with the moral and political position of the religious order that governs our college.

The fliers caused quite a stir, however, because they were not signed or attributed to anyone, which raised suspicions that the group had achieved a favored status within the administration -- or, as one of my students joked, that the fliers had been posted by God. As it turned out, neither explanation was correct. The group was new and unfamiliar with the regulations for posting signage on the campus; its members subsequently apologized and made their presence and position clear.

Never one to let an opportunity for intellectual debate die easily, I decided to revive the controversy this semester in my "Argument and Persuasion" course, a second-level writing class designed to develop students' skills in reasoning, conducting research, and writing essays. A few times each semester I assign readings on a controversial topic, and we hash it out in class, usually in preparation for a paper assignment.

So my first assignment asked students to write a letter to the editor in response to one of the many arguments that had appeared in the campus newspaper on the controversy last fall. In preparation for that assignment, I posed this hypothetical question:

"Should a pro-choice group that wished to inform the college community about the pro-choice position, and host events and speakers to debate the abortion question,
be granted equal status and funding as the pro-life group on a Catholic campus?"

One way to think about the question, I explained, would be to consider whether a religious college should grant financial support to a student group that promotes a position directly opposed to its teachings. Is that a fair use of the student-activity fees of students who have chosen to attend a Catholic college?

But there's another way to think about it, I continued. Debate and discussion about moral issues constitute a fundamental pillar of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Is the church's rationale for opposing abortion too weak to tolerate voices of dissent? Could voices of dissent perhaps inspire the church to more clearly articulate its own position? Shouldn't an institution of higher education welcome all arguments and positions to the table, if they are offered reasonably and respectfully?

Then I paused and made one last comment.

"I want to be clear to you," I said, "that you should assume nothing I say in this class to reflect my own position. My job is to inspire you to think more clearly. I will question all arguments, and might seem at times like I am supporting one side or another, but you should never assume that I speak from my personal perspective."

When the debate was over (and it was a lively one), I walked back to my office feeling uneasy about my opening statements -- unconvinced by my neutrality disclaimer, as I have been just about every time I have offered one.

However much I may strive for objectivity on the issue of abortion -- or on any similarly controversial matter -- I don't feel neutral about it. I have an opinion, and I am certain that my opinion colors how I run the debate. Sometimes I think it would be best to state my position upfront but then advise students that I still expect clear thinking from both sides. If they argue for the position I hold, it won't earn them better grades.

Or maybe I should go a step further and openly advocate for my position, encouraging students who disagree with me to sharpen
their arguments and requiring those who agree to articulate their own, distinctive reasons.

The "Argument and Persuasion" course always brings the neutrality issue to a head for me. But it will do the same for any faculty member who teaches a subject about which reasonable people disagree -- whether it is an anthropology course in which a professor presents competing interpretations of a cultural phenomenon or a political-philosophy course in which the instructor opposes foundationalism and pragmatism.

In other words, the issue of whether to remain neutral in the classroom will eventually arise for just about anyone who teaches college courses, even courses seemingly far removed from controversial topics like abortion.

For example, when I teach Lord of the Flies -- as I was doing at this same time in my "Contemporary British Fiction" course -- should I nod thoughtfully while the students bandy about the allegorical readings of the novel that they learned in high school (i.e., Simon as Christ figure, and all that)? Or should I argue my conviction that such allegorical readings divorce the novel from its historical context and ignore the way it reflects British society and its anxieties in the immediate postwar period?

Which pedagogical tactic will inspire our students to become better thinkers? Presenting ourselves as impartial judges, and letting them slug it out while we act as referees? Or presenting ourselves as participants in the debate, but open-minded ones who are willing to put aside our personal convictions to help them hone their own positions, and develop their intellectual skills? Or presenting ourselves as open advocates of the positions we hold -- but advocates who invite our students to sharpen their thinking against ours?

By a happy coincidence, while I was pondering those questions, I happened to be reading Michael Bérubé's What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts? Classroom Politics and "Bias" in Higher Education (Norton, 2006). I had picked up the book at the MLA convention back in December.
Bérubé, a professor of literature at Penn State, has published several books on the state of higher education and literary studies, and on the place of those enterprises in American society. He also wrote a memoir about raising a son with Down syndrome, an experience that has led him to work in disability studies as well.

What’s Liberal About the Liberal Arts? approaches the questions I was asking myself, though it comes at those questions from a different angle. Frustrated with conservative criticism of the so-called liberal biases in higher education, Bérubé combines cultural and political analysis with personal descriptions of his own teaching to probe the limits of advocacy and neutrality in the college classroom.

Fascinated by the descriptions of the debates in his own classroom, and hoping to extend his insights into my own -- and yours -- I asked him to help me sort through this issue on a more general level. Do certain courses or classroom situations invite advocacy?, I asked. Or should we always strive to remain neutral and impartial to our students?

I’ve learned in my academic life that the best answer for just about any complex question is usually "it depends," so I shouldn't have been surprised when Bérubé responded in kind: "There are courses and situations in the classroom that invite advocacy," he wrote to me in an e-mail, "but the classroom situation you describe here doesn’t appear to be one of them."

The situations that invite advocacy, he argued, occur in courses like my "Contemporary British Fiction" class: "In some matters," Bérubé explained, "student opinion just doesn’t count as much as the work of a scholar who’s devoted much of his or her adult life to the study of a subject. . . . Professors with well-grounded positions on punctuated equilibrium or climate change should absolutely bring those positions into the classroom, and explain why those positions are well-grounded, in the course of explaining what counts as a 'well grounded' position in their fields."

So I should not hesitate to point out the flaws of reading Lord of the Flies allegorically, or to draw connections for my students
between the seemingly unreal situation of schoolchildren stranded on a desert island and life in England in the years following World War II.

In that case, I owe it to the students not only to present my position, of course, but also to help them understand why I hold it. I should say to them, "Here's the process by which I came to these conclusions, and here are the scholarly tools I used. Now take them and build a position of your own."

"The debate about abortion is much trickier, of course," Bérubé continued, "because it's not the kind of thing that is going to be settled by recourse to the archives of settled fact," or by my expertise in any particular field. And experts in a variety of fields that touch upon, or inform, the morality of abortion obviously may reasonably disagree.

Here, Bérubé suggested, "students are probably best served if you confine yourself to the role of devil’s advocate."

Openly advocating for my own position in that context "could appear to some students (especially the excessively timorous ones, who always pose a problem in this regard) as an adversarial model in which the adversary is actually the judge, the guy giving out the grades."

True enough, and precisely the reason I have always tried to present myself as neutral on the topic.

Bérubé pointed out the challenge of taking the other tack, and remaining neutral, which requires a full knowledge of both (or many) sides in a debate: "To be an adept and convincing devil’s advocate, after all, you have to be well acquainted with the devil in all his details."

But doing so has a distinct pedagogical advantage: "In occluding your own position and offering the most plausible counterargument to every student’s argument, you actually acquaint students with the range of potential arguments; and by embodying them, so to speak, you demonstrate by example that the best arguments are those that imagine and address the most
compelling opposing arguments from other minds."

"Which is to say," Bérubé concluded, "you teach."

He offered a compelling opposing argument to my discomfort at adopting a neutrality I did not really feel in my "Argument and Persuasion" course, though I have not yet managed to shake my uneasiness.

Should I continue to resist and explore that feeling, with the suspicion that it is telling me to present my convictions more transparently, or should I write it off as a disconnect between my private convictions and my teaching persona -- a disconnect that may be an inherent feature of life as a teacher?

Let's discuss.

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