Manuscript

Submission Title: Freedom of thought

Abstract: My course, *Freedom of Thought,* is designed to shift the classroom environment focus from safe space to brave space for the purpose of deeper learning. Prioritizing understanding over agreement, students are not expected to lose themselves in order to find education, rather understand themselves by understanding who and what they are and are not.

There’s a growing perception among the general public that education and indoctrination are becoming synonymous with one another. In response, I designed a course entitled *Freedom of Thought* that is taught as part of Boise State University’s general education ethics and diversity sequence. This course addresses public perception by employing the point-counterpoint teaching philosophy to explore the ethics related to the inclusion of ideological diversity. This approach encourages students to consider counterpoints to their points of view, focused not on agreement, but understanding. The expectation isn’t that students change who they are, but get to know who they are at a deeper level, for deeper learning. Actively practicing our freedom of thought, we’ll cover a myriad of topics from a variety of opposing and conflicting perspectives. Students are cautioned before registering for the course that choosing to enroll means understanding that the classroom environment may not always be an emotionally safe space, but an intellectually brave space.

Inclusive pedagogy is my personal and professional passion, much of my recent scholarship has been in this arena. Namely, a) my doctoral commencement speech entitled ‘The Freedom of Thought: Intellectual Diversity’ (May 16, 2019), b) my point-counterpoint teaching philosophy presentation at the Third Idaho Education Task Force (July 29, 2021) in addition to the c) Center for Teaching and Learning Spotlight (September 14, 2021) building up to my recent d) invited keynote on ideological diversity and inclusion in higher education at the Eighth Annual Social Work Distance Education Conference (April 6, 2022). As tenure-track junior faculty, my research agenda is geared toward ideological diversity, inclusion, and empowerment.

*Freedom of Thought* covers seven (7) distinct topic areas (health, wealth, race, love, gender, sexuality, ideology) over 15 sessions. Each of these topic areas are taught with the underlying assumption that there is no “prevailing argument”. The context of these topics are taught within the point-counterpoint framework, assuming the concept that there is no “right answer”. This approach is theorized to prepare students for industry and life in general as they will likely encounter ideas and ideologies that differ from their own in their professional and personal lives. By analyzing ideas and ideologies different from their own in this course, applying the analysis to articulate several sides of an argument, the hope is that they will grow into reflective, self-motivated, learners-for-life.

There are several assignments associated with this course, the simplest of which is attendance and participation, worth 20% of students’ overall grade. Seven (7) 1-minute VLOG assignments (30 second point; 30 second counterpoint) aligning with the seven (7) distinct topic areas (health, wealth, race, love, gender, sexuality, ideology) make up 35% (5% each) of students’ overall grade. Students are asked to video record themselves on their phones authoritatively (citing at least one academic resource) arguing on behalf of one topic viewpoint thereafter recording themselves authoritatively (citing at least one academic resource) arguing on behalf of an opposing topic viewpoint.

The remaining 45% of students’ overall grade is determined by their midterm paper and final presentation. The midterm paper, worth 20% of students’ overall grade, requires students to read Willing to be Disturbed (Wheatley, 2012) and write an APA style reflection paper on how they intend (or don’t intend) to welcome ideas and ideologies different from their own, including rationale for their decisions. The final presentation, worth 25% of students’ overall grade, requires students to read Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces (Ali, 2017) and record a 5-minute audio-video PowerPoint presentation (usually mp4) where their slides are visible while their voice is audible, critically considering the pros and cons of safe spaces in comparison/contrast to brave spaces.

Student responses to taking *Freedom of Thought* have been generally positive, some quotes from recent student evaluations include, a) “this class and the utilization of the point-counterpoint method have helped me recognize how to better identify where I truly stand in my beliefs and ideologies,” b) “I believe that challenging my own beliefs will help me to strengthen my beliefs and help me understand people who think differently from me,” c) “I’ve learned to be more civil during debates and better empathize with those who I would normally never associate with.”

*Freedom of Thought* has already been picked up by Boise State University’s Honors College as a permanent staple every semester. For context, only 2 to 5 out of 45+ sections of the ethics and diversity sequence are designated exclusively for Honors College students every semester. Following some of my national exposure, I’ve been asked to serve as a consultant guiding migration toward inclusive pedagogy for programs across the country.

It's important to take into account social context in the development of any teaching philosophy, especially one aimed at “counter”pointing. In 1989, the ratio of liberal to conservative professors was 5:1, compared to 2017, when the ratio of liberal to conservative professors in New England was 28:1 (Sweeney, 2017; Abrams, 2016), indicating the rationale behind some public perceptions of higher education being geared toward liberal indoctrination (Shapiro, 2010) with some even suggesting that certain students strictly cannot be conservatives (Lerner, 2020). For context, the ratio of male to female professors is 3:2 (Flaherty, 2020) and the ratio of white to non-white professors is 4:1 (Davis & Fry, 2019), making conservatives a more marginalized group among professors than females and non-white people, warranting intentional social justice intervention. As a counterpoint, it’s equally important that professors not overcorrect for this leftward lean by aiming to indoctrinate rightward. Two wrongs don’t make a right, thus my teaching philosophy incorporates truly inclusive pedagogy, not just inclusive of students’ colors of skin, but their contents of character (King, 1963). Students are free to think for themselves without fearing the repercussions of not thinking like their professors.

I’ve been in higher education for almost a decade now, while there are majority trends among students and faculty, many who deviate feel unwelcome. I’ve yearned to create a course that is designed around ideological inclusion through a diversity of thought, a brave space for free thinkers to share their ideas and values while considering opposing viewpoints, as doing so can help us sharpen our own perspectives. In the name of ethics and diversity, this course explicitly encourages students and faculty to create a classroom environment geared toward deeper learning of ideological inclusion and the diversity of thought.

Ethics and diversity are not universally agreed upon concepts. What is ethical to one may not be ethical to another. This course challenges students’ values and ideas without intending to change them. Diversity is acknowledged to go beyond intersectional factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, etc., aiming specifically to speak to the diversity of thought. No argumentative winners or losers are declared during class, rather a brave space is created where students on different ends of different spectrums can speak candidly and learn from one another. Students are often surprised to learn how many people think like them, and think differently from them, a microcosm of the world at large.

*Freedom of Thought* is designed to teach students that the point-counterpoint practice skills are just as applicable to opinion-based topics as they are to more academic, fact-based topics. In fact, we’re living in a society today where the line between objectivity and subjectivity is becoming blurred. Persuasive skills are a core tenet of the point-counterpoint philosophy because we have to persuade ourselves to believe our opposition has as credible a point as we do, otherwise we are not truly counterpointing.

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