

Teaching as a Political Practice

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The day after the election I sat down and wrote a commentary for Tri-States Public Radio called “[Teaching Faith in Our Democratic Process](#).” I was unsure what I would find in my classrooms or what the atmosphere on campus would be, but I knew that I had to find real and focused ways in which to continue to promote activism and social justice in my classrooms and community. Although I see myself as an activist in and outside the classroom, I wanted to make sure I was mindful about approaching the social justice work I do as we moved into a new presidency and a new way of leadership in our country.

I was also reminded that there is continued work to do in talking about advocacy and leadership with other educators. After Donald Trump’s victory, NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) member Paul Thomas posted a link to his blog post, [Dark Mourning in America: “The world is at least/fifty percent terrible”](#) in one of NCTE’s Connected Communities (Teaching and Learning). By the end of the day, the post had received almost 50 replies, with some contributors explaining why the classroom is not a place for politics and why it’s important to keep politics out of professional organizations such as NCTE. On the other hand, there were some strong feelings about why the discussion of the election and recent events is important to address in our schools, classrooms, and professional organizations.

The discussion engaged educators and scholars at all levels, prompting NCTE President Doug Hesse to post a paragraph from the conclusion of the Presidential Address that he would be giving at the NCTE Conference in Atlanta later in the week:

The identity that brings us all to Atlanta today is that of teacher. What unites all of us is our commitment to our students, our belief in language, in reading and writing, in literate lives of possibility, in worlds enlarged through language to be more decent, humane, and peaceful. That holds us together. Of course, there are people in this room who hold different views on many things. I take those differences as things to be prized, shared, and explored—not as things to be regretted. We gather around our sacred common purpose.

Hesse’s words remind me of why I teach. For me, teaching has always been a political act. Following pedagogical thinkers such as John Dewey, Paolo Friere, and bell hooks, I work to create learning situations where students become self-aware, critical thinkers, and “agents of change.” As Freire argues, education is never neutral. We either continue to recreate the status quo or we challenge our world and valued knowledge.

We often recreate the status quo without realizing it. Or, do so even in our attempts to challenge it. The texts we choose for students to read say as much as those we ask them not to read. One way

that I have made an effort to engage students in the politics of education and teaching is through mindfulness. I am mindful about my choices of texts and explicit with students about not only my choices of texts in the class, but the texts I chose not to use and why. If I choose to just present my reading lists to students without discussion, I am doing no more to challenge valued knowledge—my valued knowledge—than someone who uses texts that I might be weary of teaching.

For example, in my Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools course, I share with students why I choose to use the texts of Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher as examples of teacher practitioners. We look at Kittle's and Gallagher's histories of writing and teaching and their approaches to their students and classrooms. In doing so, I am explicit about why I feel that Kittle and Gallagher approach teaching writing in the high school classroom in ways I find effective and inspirational. I also contrast them to other classroom approaches. We talk just as much about the classrooms Kittle and Gallagher create and the students they work with as we do their pedagogical approaches. I have found that the more explicit I am with students about my choices, the more open they are in talking about their own choices. I know that not all of my students have the same beliefs about teaching, learning, and politics that I do. And I don't pretend that they should, but I also believe that it is important for me to address my beliefs in the classroom in meaningful and constructive ways. I choose to do this through what I ask them to read as well as the ways I encourage them to write and reflect.

As a scholar who uses New Literacy Studies as a framework for most of my scholarship, I see literacy as social, cultural, and political. I believe that the writing I ask my students to do will either encourage them to think critically and examine cultural norms, or it will perpetuate the status quo. To this end, I try to encourage students to use writing as a tool of activism. We use writing to address what is taking place on campus and in our larger community. For example, we actively discuss what the nomination and approaching confirmation of Betsy DeVos¹ will mean for students who are choosing a career in public education. Students are asked to read and watch about what is happening with the confirmation hearing of Ms. DeVos and then write to their senators about the how they feel about the choice of DeVos as Secretary of Education. Although I can't require writing senators, I can engage students in a conversation about our current educational climate (something they care about deeply) and then encourage them to be active participants in the larger community. After our discussions, many students have said they have sent letters or called their senators with their concerns.

This semester I find that I am also spending more time encouraging students to look at historical contexts for current political actions. This semester I am using the rhetoric of our current political and activist cultures for discussion and analysis. As I teach a course on Feminist Activist Communities of Writing, I am introducing my students to the ways in which some of the current actions, such as the Women's March, echo what women's suffrage activists did during the 1913 March on Washington, what civil rights activists did during the Selma March and the March on Washington, what activists against sexual assault did during Take Back the Night marches and Slut Walks.

I see it as a continuation of what literacy scholars have proposed throughout the past five years of *Literacy in Composition Studies*. In the second issue, Gerald Campano addresses how theoretical and methodological orientations from practitioner researchers such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle,

and identity and experience theorists such as Alcoff, Mohanty, and Moya help him navigate his reading of *LiCS*. Campano presents the story of the writings of the performance arts and literacy group Dancing Across Borders where students use art and performance to present their narratives of schooling, asking “their audiences to take seriously their claims about schooling, particularly the ways in which the institution can exclude and perpetuate inequality” (80). It is work such as this that encourages me as I design experiences for my students that will motivate them to be active citizens and participants in our democracy.

LiCS has a history of addressing the political. Phyllis Mentzell Ryder argues for Malala Yousafzai’s counter-narrative where Malala controls the representation of her attack and her choices to not “justify revenge on the ‘bad Muslims’” (179). Mentzell Ryder presents Malala’s rhetoric of nonviolent action as a dismantling of the revenge narrative. Mentzell Ryder ends her piece calling on scholars to return to the work of Gramsci and Spivak and “focus on the potential agency of subaltern voices” (184). I have used Mentzell Ryder’s piece with students who have taught *I Am Malala* in the small, rural communities surrounding my institution. I have worked with one of our student teachers as she found ways to engage her rural farming community with Yousafzai’s text. Her predominantly white Christian students loved *I Am Malala*, and the discussions they had around language, religion, and acceptance helped her better approach discussions of the election as they unfolded in her student teaching classroom this fall.

We are entering a time in the United States where the current political climate makes it acceptable to other whole groups of people based on fears and concepts that others have fought against. But I would argue that much of this is not new. There is a deep history of –isms in American culture. There is also a deep history of activism and movement-based change. For me, what’s happening on campuses and in the larger public is a reminder that we cannot ever be complacent. We must continue to purposefully create classrooms where dialogue and activism are at the center, and students and faculty are both being mindful of the ways in which the classroom and literacy are political.

NOTES

¹ As of the writing of this piece, DeVos' nomination had not yet been confirmed.

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