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Adrianna Meredith

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# Plea to Professors: A Passionate Approach to Controversy in the Classroom

**Adriana Meredith**

Brigham Young University

## **Abstract**

Scholars have warned of a student-driven movement to turn campuses into comfort zones free from any material that may be seen as controversial (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Despite this movement, the notion that professors ought to shelter their students as opposed to exposing them to challenging ideas is anti-intellectual and counterproductive to the development of critical thinking (American Association of University Professors, 2014). If the goal of education is indeed to foster critical thinking, it is crucial for professors to be willing to discuss controversial subjects (Schneider, 2013). Such openness in the classroom requires students to analyze the origin and value of their own thoughts as well as the origin and value of opposing perspectives (Osborne et al., 2009). Students are more open to and appreciative of opposing opinions once given the opportunity to engage in academic controversy (Gervey et al., 2009). While professors may face pressure to strip the classroom of all controversial material, those who model how to think critically as well as how to appropriately engage with those who espouse opposing views may be more effective in helping students develop the ability to think critically.

*Keywords:* critical thinking, emotion, higher education

## **Plea to Professors: A Passionate Approach to Controversy in the Classroom**

In a 2010 article titled “Why I Like Being a Professor,” Marybeth Gasman, a renowned professor at Rutgers University, described the many factors that drew her to the world of academia as well as the most rewarding aspects of her career. She explained that the one thing that makes the exhausting long hours, cutthroat academic pressure, and often subpar financial compensation worth it, is the relationships she is able to build with her students. She helps them grow into their intellectual selves and take on a scholarly identity (Gasman, 2010). Such personal investment in students and their futures is not unique to Gasman but rather speaks to a widespread attitude held by a majority of university faculty.

Despite noble intentions on behalf of both parties, this traditionally strong relationship between professors and their students is especially at risk in higher education. In a well-known article, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) spoke of the primarily student-driven movement to turn campuses into comfort zones that lack potentially provoking thoughts, conversations, and questions. The American Association of University Professors (2014) released a statement to explain that while these attempts to clean up the classroom might appear to respect student sensitivities and wishes, “the presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual” (p. 2). Educators are being asked to shield their students from any content that could possibly make the students feel uncomfortable. Coddling the collegiate mind in this way creates an educational environment where people are afraid to speak up because there is such a high risk of offending someone or being seen as insensitive. The goal of education is to foster critical thinking as a means of preparation for life outside of the classroom (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). A common definition of critical thinking involves identifying assumptions, making logical deductions, and evaluating the source of information (Ennis, 2011). While these are crucial skills, critical thinking also involves the uncomfortable experience of questioning beliefs and ideas and as such critical thinking must be an integration of both thoughts and feelings (Osborne et al., 2009). One way professors can assist in the development of critical thinking is to be willing to discuss controversial subjects and venture into topics that might be uncomfortable and could cause some tension for their students (Schneider, 2013). While professors should always

look to respect their students, learning to navigate discomfort is important to intellectual development.

The development of critical thinking is centered around the often uncomfortable but necessary process of questioning the contestable beliefs and opinions of oneself and of others. The purpose in discussing controversial topics is not to decide which ideologies to accept or reject but rather to understand how differences come to be (Osborne et al., 2009). To attempt to teach or discuss controversial topics without requiring students to examine their own ideas, understand where opposing ideas are coming from, and appreciate the fact that those differences exist, can create an environment of intolerance and ignorance (Osborne et al., 2009). Sensitivity is not likely to be sufficiently developed in a sterile classroom. Openness in the classroom can foster an environment in which students can be exposed to different opinions and are required to go through the mental work of evaluating the merits of views that are not their own.

Professors should not act merely as a facilitators. To simply teach methods and principles is insufficient. Instead, professors are to be role models in which they demonstrate to students how to critically question others and oneself (Oppenheimer, 2004). As they model how a successful thinking mind approaches controversy, their students can find the courage and incentive to do the same (Oppenheimer, 2004). This particular model for the development of critical thinking may at first resemble the general theory of critical pedagogy but differs in its focus on the educator's need to actively model effective critical thinking for students, rather than simply participating in it. These professors prepare their students to prosper both inside and outside the classroom as they show students how to properly question themselves, and attempt to understand others.

While professors may realize the positive impacts of this bold pedagogy, they face many challenges in creating such an environment. Fear of poor student evaluations, accusations of microaggression, along with various university policies can be enough to persuade any passionate professor to take a step back. Despite this mounting pressure faced by faculty in higher education to shelter students from challenging material, passionate and authentic pedagogy in a collegiate setting can help students learn how to better navigate a world of conflicting voices and opinions. Professors who embrace this style of teaching can effectively

show students how to think critically as well as how to appropriately engage with those who espouse opposing views.

## **Modeling Critical Thinking**

The educational world looks to foster critical thinking, a skill often talked about but too often misunderstood. If classrooms strive to be “comfort zones,” an over emphasis on censoring challenging material may stunt students’ intellectual and emotional development. While critical thinking does involve dissecting beliefs and ideas, an under-recognized, but equally important aspect is the ability to integrate thoughts and feelings in the process. Students who can think critically know how to analyze and understand concepts as well as how to allow their feelings to appropriately inform their thoughts rather than determine them (Osborne et al., 2009). Having the ability to experience both the intellectual and emotional elements of critical thinking in a classroom setting helps students appropriately reflect on the merits of an idea. This reflection is necessary in helping students decide what ideas are or are not worth believing (Ennis, 2011). Professors’ attempts to stifle the expression of their own opinions sets a precedent that feelings can be felt but cannot influence thoughts. By nature, critical thinking requires both mental and emotional work (Osborne et al., 2009). This work can seem daunting to students, but as professors show this kind of mind at work, their students are more likely to step into uncomfortable spaces where they have the opportunity to better understand and expand their perspectives.

## **Comfort Zones and Emotionality**

In order to further explore how professors can help students step out of their comfort zones and create an environment that fosters the development of critical thinking, it is important to understand the nature of education. Niemi and Niemi (2007) wanted to understand the influencing effect of teachers’ expressing their opinions, or lack thereof, had on students. Even though this particular study was carried out among 11th and 12th graders, the results may have implications for collegiate classrooms as well. Niemi and Niemi (2007) spent many months observing six high school governments and politics classes. Most of the teachers expressed a strong desire to keep discussions neutral and even went as far as to announce to their classes that they would not disclose their personal opinions on

some subjects. One of the teachers stood out from the others, claiming that he was willing to share his opinions in class but that he would not tell his students how to think for themselves. This teacher stated, “You can’t pretend you don’t have an opinion” (Niemi & Niemi, 2007, p. 41). As Niemi and Niemi (2007) further analyzed these classrooms, they found that even the teachers who had said they would withhold their opinions failed to do so. While at first glance their words might have been neutral, they actually exposed their opinions as strongly as the teacher who made no effort to mask his (Niemi & Niemi, 2007). This study reaffirmed the assertion of Freire (2000) that education can never be neutral. Even honorable efforts to create a neutral classroom fail to do so. Educational theorists such as Goodlad et al. (1990) have also suggested that education is a moral endeavor, further emphasizing how necessary it is for educators to create intellectually challenging environments where students can practice stepping out of their comfort zones. Being able to appropriately address and discuss contestable issues may help students more effectively process and develop their own thoughts and opinions.

How can professors foster the kind of environment where students understand that emotions and learning come hand in hand? Professors must model how to appropriately allow feelings to influence thoughts. This necessary aspect of critical thinking can come about as both students and professors learn to genuinely express, apply, and question their emotions (Titsworth et al., 2010). As students and professors struggle to suppress strong emotions while only expressing those deemed socially acceptable, such underlying feelings may fester (Sorić et al., 2013). The suppression of emotion and opinion tends to be unhealthy and counterproductive to the development of critical thinking (Boostrom, 1998). Since critical thinking involves asking hard questions, students are likely to experience strong emotion. Students must learn how to allow their emotions to guide thoughts rather than control them and should not be sheltered from hard topics that stir up emotion (Osborne et al., 2009). Professors become more effective teachers if they can authentically express emotion and opinions while allowing students to do the same (Frisby, 2019). Remaining inside students’ comfort zone may be tempting, as it appears to mean a classroom is free of conflict, when in reality the absence of conflict can lead to greater emotional polarization and an inability to think critically (Gayle et al., 2013). Boostrom (1998) posited that when critical thinking is the goal, professors should learn how to manage conflict rather than stamp it out. As students are encouraged to confront, respond to, and challenge their

own ideas and emotions, they refine their ability to think critically (Boostrom, 1998). Professors who successfully model the relationship between emotional and critical thinking can create an environment where students are able to evaluate and think critically about their own ideas and emotions.

## **Student Feedback**

In order to learn how to think critically, students must at times experience the discomfort of questioning beliefs and teachings, yet many professors are evaluated on criteria that distracts from efforts to create such environments (Schneider, 2013). A large part of professors' professional evaluations comes from their student evaluations. Schneider (2013) took an in depth look at the issues surrounding professor evaluations as they are presently carried out. He found that evaluations often report a professor's likeability, willingness to grade easily, and efforts to avoid controversial topics. With their careers and reputation on the line, professors often find themselves in a position where they have to succumb to practices that adhere to students' comforts rather than challenge their students intellectually. This trend is discouraging because past research on student experience in the classroom has shown that professors' who are willing to dive into hard subjects provide some of the best facilitators of student learning. Schneider (2013) pointed out the irony because, while an easier pedagogy might appear to appease the crowd in the short run, it hurts student satisfaction in the long run. The educational world would greatly benefit from student evaluations that focused on the professor's role in the development of critical thinking as opposed to being evaluated on short-term reports on accounts of likability and easiness. Schneider (2013) suggested a list of alternative student evaluation questions to better emphasize the role of critical thinking in the classroom as opposed to professor likeability (see Appendix). Students often express that in hindsight they prefer professors who give easy grades, avoid hard conversations, and are generally likeable. However, research suggests that in the long run, students show great appreciation for professors who challenge them and push them out of their comfort zones. With that being said, few professors currently have access to long-term evaluations that could help paint a better picture of student growth and experience. Evaluations that ask students to report on criteria, such as those proposed by Schneider (2013), that are more closely related to critical thinking,

could be a step in helping incentivize professors who rely on positive short-term evaluations to not back away from teaching challenging subjects.

Educators may be able to help students understand the emotional aspect of critical thinking by giving them lectures that take away the comfort zone. Gervey et al. (2009) showed support for this idea while testing a debate-centered teaching model in various classrooms. They had students rate their initial reaction to the introduction of a program that would require them to pick a stand, formulate an argument for that point of view, and present it for the whole classroom to debate on instead of having a traditional lecture. Even though the goal of this trial was to teach critical thinking, the students initially reacted negatively. Despite poor initial reactions, most students later reported high degrees of satisfaction with the course and higher levels of comfort when approaching hard topics (Gervey et al., 2009).

Professors can and should push students by challenging the way they look at the world (Leib, 1998). While reporting on his own experiences as well as his research in the classroom, Leib (1998) stated that as students confronted difficult issues and differing opinions, they were better able to examine and understand their own core beliefs. Professors should aspire to foster critical thinking by modeling the positive integration of thoughts and emotions experienced when faced with the necessary discomfort of challenging material. By doing so, students may be better prepared to navigate real life experiences (Oppenheimer, 2004). Being challenged and confronted with difficult ideas can be uncomfortable, but what makes students uncomfortable in the short run can ultimately make students stronger. Professors who go forward with a bold, challenging, and impassioned pedagogy can successfully prepare their students for the real world by helping them develop the ability to think critically.

## **Engaging with Opposing Views**

When speaking of passionate and opinionated teaching, people often fear that professors will only show students one perspective: their perspective. And as a result, be coerced into supporting someone else's opinion rather than developing their own. A professor expressing his or her opinion and being passionate about that opinion does not necessarily mean they are teaching one-sidedly. It is important for students to not only learn about controversial issues but also to learn how an opinion is formed and how one ought to engage with those who



may disagree (Oppenheimer, 2004). While being passionate and opinionated, professors need to be humble enough to allow their students to disagree with them. Unfortunately, the media rarely portrays appropriate and respectful disagreement, so seeing healthy, productive disagreement in the classroom can help students develop these necessary skills (Cargas, 2016). Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) asserted that education may fail students who enter the real world unable to learn from those who espouse any views but their own. This ability to learn from those with whom one disagrees is a form of humility that Oppenheimer (2004) explained is crucial to real world functioning. If the professor's example can set a precedent for respectful and open communication in the classroom, then the students can learn the skills needed for healthy disagreement.

The goal of education is not to produce graduates that all think the same, but rather to teach students critical thinking in a way that prepares them to ask important questions about themselves and about others. With this objective in mind, it is important to clarify that learning to understand another's views does not mean that those views have to be accepted (Osborne et al., 2009). Ignorance can be avoided as students learn to identify the origins of their personal beliefs as well as the beliefs of others. This sort of understanding allows students to appreciate the fact that different views exist and be able to approach controversy in a productive manner (Osborne et al., 2009). Gervey et al. (2009) supported this theory during their study of debate-centered classrooms. As part of this program, students were required to research a particular perspective of an issue and formulate a debate. Later during class, a more formal debate was held, and students were given the opportunity to listen to and present the various sides of a controversial issue. When listening to well-researched arguments, students were able to better understand where each perspective came from. This study replicated what many other studies have found to be true: students can be more open to and appreciative of opposing opinions once given the opportunity to engage in academic controversy (Gervey et al., 2009). Avoiding controversy in the classroom, as opposed to approaching it, typically fosters ignorance and belief polarization (Osborne et al., 2009). Professors can invite and manage healthy debate in the classroom as they are transparent about their development of their own beliefs (Leib, 1998). Following the example of their professors, students are better able to advocate for their own opinions while still appreciating the perspectives of others (Bull, 2007). Avoidance cannot be an option in the

classroom if students are to grow and develop into strong members of society who can confidently add their voices into these crucial conversations.

One the other hand, passionate and opinionated professors should not adopt the doctrine of laissez-faire by simply introducing controversial discussions and allowing them to take their natural course. Looking to understand effective ways to approach hard topics in the classroom, Gayle et al. (2013) conducted an experiment with students enrolled in courses specifically meant to address controversial topics such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Prior to diving into course material, the classes collectively created rules of communication. Some of the most recurring rules were that everyone should feel comfortable sharing their opinions, people should feel free to ask questions without the fear of offending, and everyone must agree to listen to and attempt to understand where others are coming from. With these rules explicitly laid out, the classes began their discussions of these controversial topics (Gayle et al., 2013). These rules did not allow students to remain in their comfort zones and avoid controversial subjects. Instead, they created a safe environment wherein people were willing to say hard things, be corrected, listen, and ask questions without the risk of offending someone. Students reported that while such an environment was not always comfortable, it allowed them to analyze their own ideas, identify points of prejudice in their own thoughts, and correct those weaknesses through dialogue (Gayle et al., 2013). Professors who explicitly define and model effective rules and habits of communication can best create an environment where students can effectively participate in respectful debate.

## **Conclusion**

It seems as though everyone has their own ideas of what makes an effective professor. The fact that those differences exist is important, because students benefit from different styles of teaching at various points in their lives (Leib, 1998). Teaching is a dynamic experience that allows both student and professor to realize intellectual potential (Gasman, 2010). People do not become professors for the glamorous paychecks or the easy hours, they become professors because they are passionate about their fields of study and more importantly, they are passionate about their students (Gasman, 2010). This passion is what draws people to education, yet professors are constantly pressured to strip the classroom of emotions and opinions. The guiding roles of passion, emotions,

and opinion in critical thinking must be protected if students are to grow and develop the skills necessary to go out and make an impact in the world.

The world is not a sterile environment. If students graduate and enter the workforce having never experienced confrontation, controversy, and opposing views, education will have done them a great disservice (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Life outside the classroom will require students to interact with people who harbor differing views or even, at times, incorrect views. If students have not experienced some level of idea inoculation, they will be unprepared to meet the challenges of the professional world. On the contrary, if professors can successfully model critical thinking, then students can be prepared to engage in productive conversations with all people, even those with whom they may not agree (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). The uncomfortable moments that are bound to occur when discussing hard topics will prepare students by giving them opportunities to practice critical thinking.

Students will likely find that the critical thinking habits they develop in the classroom trickle down into all aspects of their lives. The ability to think critically is not a neutral process but rather a sort of thinking that requires emotional processing as well (Osborne et al., 2009). As critical thinkers, students are better able to allow emotions to guide their thoughts as they reflect on their experience as well as that of others in an inquisitive, open-minded way (Ennis, 2011; Osborne et al., 2009). Students who practice this form of critical thinking may be able to better understand their own thoughts, emotions, and beliefs while effectively engaging with those who may disagree.

Critical thinking lies at the center of education, but professors cannot instill this behavior in their students by simply talking about how to think critically. The true pedagogic role of a professor is to act as a role model, exemplifying what it looks like to be passionate and opinionated. (Oppenheimer, 2004). As students are able to interact with and learn from a professor who models these skills, they are better able to brave tough conversations and are better prepared for life outside the classroom. The role of a professor is not an easy one, but the influence that they can have on the lives of their students is augmented as they

are true to those passions that brought them to the classroom in the first place. Students need professors who are willing to be open, passionate, and opinioned.

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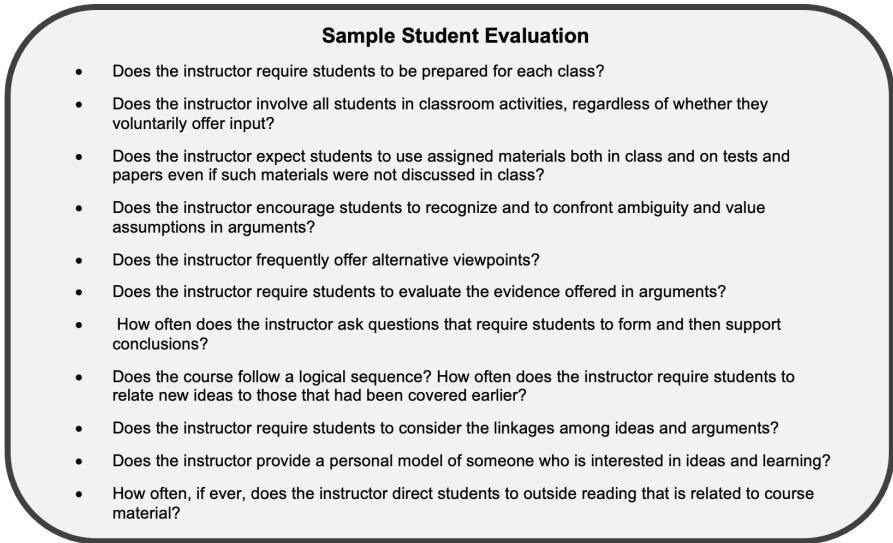
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## Appendix

Figure 1.



*Student Evaluation Questions that Highlight Critical Thinking. Adapted from “Student evaluations, grade inflation and pluralistic teaching: Moving from customer satisfaction to student learning and critical thinking” by G. Schneider, 2012, Forum for Social Economics, p. 133.*