

Encouraging Student Dissent in the Classroom

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Rather than being silenced, healthy dissidence should be taught and supported.

I was about to begin a class discussion on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* when one of my students, Sophia, abruptly derailed my lesson plan. "When are we going to get a strong female protagonist?" she asked. Her voice had notes of challenge, insistence, and frustration—she was appalled by the misogyny in the novel, and it represented the end, for her, of a long line of assigned books about men, written by men. In a larger sense, our reading of the book coincided with the Time's Up and #MeToo movements; Sophia had simply had enough of an English curriculum that failed to reflect the woman she wanted to become.

As a teacher, I was surprised, but also delighted, to witness a rarity in the classroom: a moment of serious intellectual dissent. Even in classrooms that welcome healthy debate, students are more often passive collaborators in a culture of conformity and compliance (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In introducing novel thinking, dissent is vital to the intellectual life of a classroom, just as it is to the health of a school, a school system, or a democracy. Dissent is, in its best form, a practical application of critical, independent thought and moral courage; surely it must be one of the end goals of a liberal education.

Raising Questions

For students, school is mostly about answering questions: multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, essay questions, and questions posed by teachers. School, in this sense, teaches students to be reactive learners rather than proactive ones, to be consumers of questions rather than producers of them (Nobis, Schulze, & Miller, 2019). Teaching students how to ask good questions is one of the first steps in encouraging dissent.

Janet Thompson (1990) asserts that good questions are often based on noticing apparent contradictions. Students can be uncannily adept at smelling out hypocrisy, especially where ends and means in school policy and curricula don't seem to line up. Some years ago, for example, our school began a "one-question" initiative. Students would submit questions, and a committee of students and faculty would choose one of those questions to become a schoolwide point of study for the year. Emily, one of my students, had her question selected as a finalist: "How can we maintain a passion for learning in a school system where a pronounced emphasis on achieving good grades has a tendency to reduce genuine interest in gaining a deeper understanding of subject material?" Emily's question was dangerously subversive, identifying a contradiction between what our school wanted (for students to maintain a passion for learning) and what it was doing (emphasizing the achievement of good grades). Powerful in its specificity, immediacy, and relevance (recall Sophia's question), Emily's dissent was a product of our question-focused work.

We can also teach students how to avoid simplistic-thinking traps in questioning, replacing closed questions (such as questions that begin with *Is*, *Does*, or *Do*) and false binaries with open questions that begin with *How*, *Why*, and *To what extent* (Rosenwasser & Stephen, 2011). In my classroom, discussions are driven by student-generated questions, and we are as likely to discuss the questions themselves as we are their answers.

Informing Dissent

Student dissent is less easily dismissed when it is supported by research. To support their voices, we can teach students how to use academic databases, like ProQuest and JSTOR, to find peer-reviewed journal articles and university-press books that substantiate their arguments. Students who are also familiar with library systems and their online catalogs are empowered as researchers. They will soon discover that, in an essay or presentation, a substantive references section turns an *argument* into an *informed argument*. Wendell Berry (2002) advises protestors to give voice to their dissent:

not with a sign or slogan or button, but with the facts and the arguments. A crowd whose discontent has risen no higher than the level of a slogan is *only* a crowd. But a crowd that understands the reasons for its discontent ... will have to be reckoned with. I would rather go before the government with two people who have a competent understanding of an issue, and who therefore deserve a hearing, than with 2,000 who are vaguely dissatisfied. (p. 84)

Students who know how to cite their sources in APA or MLA format are able to professionalize their writing; having a flawlessly cited argument is the equivalent of going before the government *in a suit*. Students who have done—and documented—their homework "deserve a hearing" and "will have to be reckoned with."

In my classroom, well-substantiated student essays *have* earned their hearing. Using argumentative-writing texts like Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say / I Say* (Yale University Press, 2003) as a foundation, I teach a unit on writing letters to the editor, where students deconstruct published examples, studying them for their conventions. I then show students my own published letters to the editor and explain how those letters came to be. All of my 11th graders submit letters to the editor. This year, 24 had their letters published in *The Washington Post*, and one student had her letter published in *The New York Times*. As my student Shan reflected after submitting his letter, "Regardless of whether it gets accepted, it was a neat experience—[it] felt like I was participating in a democracy for the first time."

Modeling Argument Culture

In healthy, vibrant schools, teachers' lunch tables, workrooms, and faculty meetings are places of spirited discussion, debate, and skeptical questioning. If we hide our professional disagreements from students, we are conveying that they should aspire to think convergently, that dissidents are not team players; students, then, learn to keep their questions and objections to themselves. Instead, we can model what Gerald Graff (2003) terms "the argument culture":

Teachers often brag that they urge their students to disagree vigorously with them. ... I have no doubt that these teachers are sincere, but they unwittingly send students the opposite message when they are content to stay sheltered from those colleagues across the hall or the quad who would be in the best position to disagree with them and provide a model to students of how to disagree in public. Students would be more prone to disagree with their teachers if they had more chance to see those teachers disagreeing with each other. (p. 76)

Here's an example from my own classroom. My student teacher recently presented a lesson to our students on college-level writing expectations. Earlier, I had encouraged the class to experiment with genre in their academic writing—they had written research papers as short stories, multi-genre pieces, and screenplays (see my article "Let Them Write Plays!" in the April 2018 issue of *EL*). But my student teacher spent a significant portion of *his* lesson warning them that such creative critical writing would not be welcomed by professors. We were in clear, public disagreement about what comprised college-preparatory writing instruction, but it was also clear that we respected each other. Rather than cutting him off or challenging him mid-lecture, I—along with my students—attended to his lesson and applauded him at its conclusion.

There are, of course, downsides to voicing dissent, especially as a teacher. I have published letters to the editor of *The Washington Post* critical of our district's policies on homework and grading, and in faculty meetings I have questioned the necessity of summer assignments and the wisdom of test preparation. These actions have not helped my popularity with administrators and colleagues. When I expressed concern that my department was remediating students based on inaccurate test data, an assistant principal—who would review my performance the following year—vehemently suggested that I teach someplace else. To dissent is to adopt a position of relative powerlessness.

And yet, to stay silent is to retreat to a supine form of powerlessness—one of submission and compliance that grinds at the soul longer and more deeply than unsought career advice. If the adults in a school don't value dissent, why should the students? If students don't value dissent, how can they bring about the very changes in the world that we hope they will make?

Studying Subversion

Reading fictional and nonfictional accounts of dissidence is another way to inspire and inform students. History and social studies classrooms are fertile grounds for examining the lives, writing, and speeches of famous dissidents, including Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Henry David Thoreau ("Civil Disobedience"), Frederick Douglass ("What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"), Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*), Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Elementary-level students can read Debbie Levy's *I Dissent*, a biography of Ruth Bader Ginsburg; and D.B. Johnson's *Henry Climbs a Mountain*, which chronicles Henry David Thoreau's decision to go to jail rather than pay taxes to a state that supported slavery.

Literature, by its nature, is rich with examples of dissenting authors and protagonists, including the poetry of Emily Dickinson ("Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church"), Joyce Miyamoto ("Asian American"), and Langston Hughes ("I, Too"); the short stories of Kate Chopin ("The Story of an Hour") and John Updike ("A & P"); the plays of Sophocles (*Antigone*) and Luis Valdez (*Zoot Suit*); and the novels of Mark Twain (*Huckleberry Finn*) and Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*).

Entire units—even courses—can be developed around the idea of dissent. Students, for example, might read King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and study the civil rights movement of the 1960s. What made this movement more effective than others? What lessons might be gained from it? To what extent could these lessons be applied, for instance, to the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong? What are the costs, risks, and benefits of speaking truth to power? Students might also compare a text (like Sophocles' *Antigone*) to a current event or person (like climate activist Greta Thunberg). What insights on dissent might such a comparison yield?

Cultivating a Culture of Dissidence

Perhaps the most important method in encouraging student dissent is to create a climate that welcomes dissent. This is not something that can be accomplished in a neatly packaged teaching unit, but it can be purposely worked toward over time. As Alfie Kohn (2004) notes, "Teachers can work with all students to create a caring classroom community, a place where everyone feels valued and supported and no one fears being laughed at for asking a question or proposing an idea" (p. 192).

Sophia's curricular challenge in my class occurred relatively late in the school year—she must have felt comfortable enough with her classmates and me to ask such a question. The way we react to questions like Sophia's, however, makes all the difference. Instead of dismissing her ("Go to the office!") or moving on with the lesson ("Well, Sophia, we'll talk more about that later, but right now we need to talk about *Things Fall Apart*"), I asked her to elaborate on her concern.

We talked, as a class, about how curricula are developed. I showed students the curricular framework I had been given for the course: Almost all of the texts were written by men and featured male protagonists. Even the assigned texts that were written by female authors (like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) tended to portray women as passive victims. I then took the class to our departmental book room, where we looked for books written by and about women. Instead of continuing with our initial reading syllabus, we chose to read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. Much of encouraging student dissent comes from seizing on teachable moments that

are the fruit of cultivating a safe space in the classroom. To quote again from Kohn (2004): "An openness to being confronted by one's students is more a matter of will than skill" (p. 193).

Dissent Beyond the Classroom Door

Student dissent is critical not only to the vibrancy of the classroom, but to the vitality of the school and school system. Adam Grant (2016) cites study after study of businesses whose reliance on convergent thinking led to their demises. The Polaroid company, for example, had a vice president in the 1980s who wanted to move in the direction of the digital camera but was dismissed by other executives. "Within the company," writes Grant, "there was widespread agreement that customers would always want hard copies of pictures, and key decision makers failed to question this assumption. It was a classic case of groupthink—the tendency to seek consensus instead of fostering dissent" (p. 176).

Principals who censor critical articles in student newspapers and administrators who demand unquestioning obedience from their faculty are perpetuating a culture that suffocates students' capacity for innovation and divergent thinking. Relegating dissent to lunch-table grumbling by students and faculty, poolside gossip by parents, or anonymous online postings is toxic and destructive.

Dissidence should not be seen as *dissonance*—"a lack of harmony among musical notes." Instead, if we extend a musical metaphor, it is an integral part of the symphony that makes up a classroom, school, or district, helping to add the necessary layers, contrasts, nuances, and complexities that make a great piece of music. Rather than being silenced, dissidence should be systematically taught and encouraged.

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