



Teaching an Open Mind Through Contextualization

The fundamental purpose of higher education is a more complex initiative than just teaching facts. Educators should strive for students to gain the ability to self-educate, including applying what they've learned in personal and professional contexts. In order to teach students how to self-educate, instructors must define the demographics and psychographics of individuals being taught.

Student Demographics

Young adults, many of whom enter college directly from secondary education, make up a substantial part of the postsecondary population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in fall 2015, full-time undergraduate students under 25 made up 75 percent of the enrollment at two-year public colleges. That percentage increased to 89 percent for four-year public universities. While these statistics do not define the total student population, which includes part-time enrollments and private institutions, the percentages indicate a trend seen by many faculty members in a variety of disciplines. Thus, how do educators adjust their teaching strategies when dealing with an age group that often lacks perspective and experience inside and outside of the classroom? Among the multiple pedagogical challenges when teaching students under 25, there is one that is at the forefront, which I refer to as an essential skill: objectivity.

Few students come into the classroom believing they have narrow perspectives. The vast majority are eager to learn, but their exposure to diverse ideas has been limited, simply due to their age and lack of experiences. Typically, high school teachers, parents, and guardians are the significant influencers in students' lives. While we should not discount students' understandings of the world, primarily gained from their mentors, we should note their viewpoints might be skewed, thus limiting the students' comprehension of certain concepts in the postsecondary environment. For most students, their parents' role is not that of a facilitator who allow students to arrive at their own conclusions, even if may differ from their own. This is not a negative attribute in all regards; young adults need such guidance in finance, fundamental conceptualizations of society, and ethics, for example. However, the results are students who enter higher education with limited experience and skills related to critically analyzing complex content.

For instance, to contextualize the 14th Amendment, a government instructor may cite *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the

case where the Supreme Court ruled in favor of federally protecting same-sex marriage. Are students who grew up in a socially conservative family or community prepared to participate in an objective dialogue, unhindered by the lens of their guardians, if the instructor requires they debate the case's constitutionality? Such contextualization results in contemporary issues that are rooted in political and religious virtues. It can be a challenge for instructors to ask students to use a legal and multifaceted lens when analyzing such issues, instead of an inherited ideological lens.

Three Teaching Strategies

Creating a classroom environment that allows for a discussion of sensitive topics such as the one above will prove to be indispensable, regardless of students' age range. In the process of teaching content, educators' objective should be to facilitate a greater and more comprehensive understanding of all sides of controversial topics, which will allow students to arrive at independent conclusions. There are many methodologies to achieve this end. However, three overarching strategies considered in this article lend themselves well to this endeavor:

- **Understanding and Respecting the Learner's Beliefs**
- **Promoting Debate and Pragmatism**
- **Cultivating Awareness and Empathy, Not Ideological Change**

1. Understanding and Respecting the Learner's Beliefs

Have an awareness of learners' initial understanding of the content and their relevant beliefs relative to the content. Respect those beliefs, regardless of new perspectives offered by the instructor or student-peers.

Instructors can apply this strategy to a multitude of lessons. In the example regarding *Obergefell v. Hodges* and the 14th Amendment, it is important for students to have an understanding of federalism and the amendment text before discussing the Amendment's larger role in society. Assessing students' initial knowledge about the content is an invaluable tool and will determine to what extent the instructor will need to simplify the material being covered. Simplifying content is one of the most important tasks within pedagogy, a need that increases exponentially when teaching younger students.

After closing gaps in the students' knowledge of the content, instructors can then refer to current, applicable events and begin the discussion and debate. The discussion enables instructors to learn the students'

perspectives. Instructors should advocate equality in their instruction; their role is not to dictate any student's personal beliefs. In the classroom, instructors must present points that appeal to students who support and students who oppose the topic being discussed.

2. Promoting Debate and Pragmatism

Instructors must facilitate an environment that applauds disagreement and active listening during class discussions, as well as an environment that acknowledges pragmatism by the instructor and students.

Continuing with the previous example, an instructor could note that the expanding role of government is at times necessary to enhance equality in society, exemplified by the now non-discriminatory legal benefits afforded to these new marriages. These benefits could include social security benefits from a deceased long-term spouse, healthcare coverage, and other legalities not considered by students unfamiliar with these realities. The instructor may have students discuss how these realities are not usually focused on when perceived solely through an ideological lens. The instructor could also acknowledge legal aspects of related events, aside from the actual text of the 14th Amendment. For example, the evolution of federalism during the 19th century that resulted in the 14th Amendment, could be argued as being the unforeseen catalyst that brought the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to fruition in the 20th century. Noting that the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision was also a controversial issue, the instructor should ask students to make similar connections between the 14th Amendment and other court cases.

It is vital for instructors and students to have an objective approach when contextualizing and critically analyzing an issue. Teaching students to be pragmatic and unbiased is never accomplished by invalidating their own beliefs, especially if they have a religious foundation. Their views on the topic should be respected, although challenged when instructors deem comments to be inappropriate for the discussion or in situations when students personally attack another student's beliefs.

As prominent ideologies held by society continue to play a role in court case rulings, an instructor may explain the complexity of the case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, in terms of religious freedom. Stated in the opinion of the court,

“Finally, it must be emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protections as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the

family structure they have long revered. The same is true of those who oppose same-sex marriage for other reasons. In turn, those who believe allowing same-sex marriage is proper and indeed essential, whether as a matter of religious conviction or secular belief, may engage those who disagree with their view in an open and searching debate. The Constitution, however, does not permit the State to bar same-sex couples from marriage on the same terms as accorded to couples of the opposite sex.”

The instructor could have students analyze and debate the opinion of the court. In promoting objectivity, instructors can ask students to derive a conclusion about the complexity of our legal system as it relates to *Obergefell v. Hodges* and the misconception that this issue is not multifaceted. While you may hope students see the value in these expanded civil liberties given to same sex couples, they might also realize that comparable protections support their own liberties. Ultimately, the discussion may also lead students to a greater realization of the importance of these rights in any context.

3. Awareness and Empathy, Not Necessarily Ideological Change

Use a teaching philosophy that promotes student awareness and dialogue, not necessarily ideological changes within the learner.

Instructors need to keep the initial goal in mind, which is not necessarily to change students' central beliefs. While instructors should address student arguments that are factually incorrect, discounting students' ideological beliefs, whether they be religious or political, does not create a nurturing environment that allows for student growth. The goal is to have students learn how to self-educate through an objective approach.

Conclusion

Instructors should keep in mind that the ultimate objective is help students learn how to continue learning beyond the classroom. As instructors acknowledge the diverse perspectives of students, students become more proficient at seeing the credibility in new ideas offered by their peers. Despite many of those new ideas being in opposition to their previously held beliefs, they will develop a greater capability to retain the content being studied. This can be done by allowing students to share their ideas with their peers. In the end, learning how to discuss sensitive topics will prove to be enlightening to students who may arrive on campus lacking those skills.

What strategies have you implemented to facilitate positive classroom discussions? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

Dale Schlundt, *Instructor, History*

For further information, contact the author at Palo Alto College, 1400 West Villaret Boulevard, San Antonio, Texas 78224. Email: daleschlundt@gmail.com

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