



Teaching Controversial Issues

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Portions courtesy Fred Brooks, Jim Anderson, Samarjit
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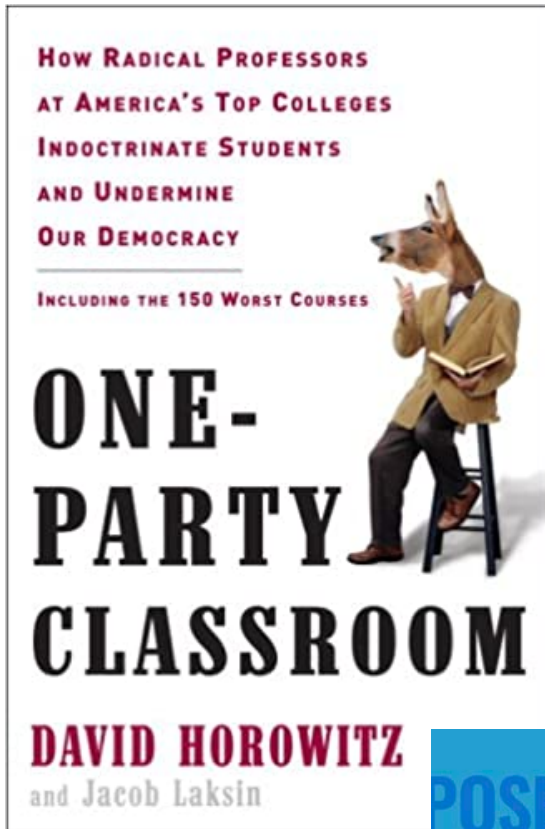


Why cover a controversial issue?

- It is germane to the course
 - Hard to teach an AI course without talking about the impact of ChatGPT on education and work
 - Ethics of offensive security, responsible disclosure
- To teach students to think and argue
 - C.f., debate teams
 - I routinely crap on Unix to break through the “halo effect”
- Professional development
 - We would do our students a disservice not to discuss DEI
 - How to navigate toxic culture?
 - e.g., Linux kernel mailing list
 - How to effectively field non-friendly questions?



Why *not* cover a controversial issue?





Why (else) *not* cover a controversial issue?

- It may undermine the learning objectives! How?
- Students may not be on an even footing to disagree
 - Minority opinion among students
 - Power dynamics
- Students may perceive their opinion affects grade
- Your IQ is lowered when you are upset/stressed
 - By analogy: we let students take exams in a quiet room
- Silence != assent

Proceed with caution



Many bad role models for disagreement





Advice 1: Plan

- Have a crisp idea what you want to cover/ NOT cover
- How are to bring it up?
- How are to ensure civil dialog/ what are the ground rules?
 - Note that most students don't have a lot of experience with conflict resolution that doesn't involve an authority figure
- How to end discussion if things get messy?
 - Consider timing: near the end of a lecture period



Moderating Student Discussion

- Allow students to share their own perspectives
- Acknowledge societal shortcomings and the need for improvement
- Ensure civil behavior, no personal attacks
- Try to stay rooted to the topic at hand
- Link arguments to evidence and logic whenever possible



Social Controversy

- Sincere question: Is it appropriate to comment on social issues / current topics?
 - “Processing” the 2016 or 2020 election results?
 - Google firing Timnit Gebru?
 - Nikole-Hannah Jones situation at UNC?



Advice 2: Tread Lightly on Social Issues

- Choose your battles
 - I often avoid giving too many personal details/opinions
- Interrogate your motives
 - Am I just looking to ventilate in a friendly environment?
- Signaling importance matters
 - I look for opportunities to highlight DEI issues, *briefly*
- Explicit delimiters around “test content” and “meta content”
- Only open discussion if you want other opinions
- Choose your words carefully:
 - Shorter excerpts may sound worse without context



Advice 3: Be prepared to argue both sides

- My graduate architecture course involved many technical debates
- When discussion got too unbalanced, instructor jumped in and argued the other position, vociferously
 - Even against instructor's papers or prior positions!
 - Trying to predict instructor's bias was a losing strategy
- Heaped praise on lone dissenters

Again, you get the behavior you reward!