Teaching Controversial Issues

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Portions courtesy Fred Brooks, Jim Anderson, Samarjit Chakraborty
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?

Governor DeSantis Announces Legislative Proposal to Stop W.O.K.E. Activism and Critical Race Theory in Schools and Corporations

Wildwood, Fla. – Today, Governor Ron DeSantis announced the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act, a legislative proposal that will give businesses, employees, children and families tools to fight back against woke indoctrination. The Stop W.O.K.E. Act will be the
will take on both corporate wokeness and Critical

Governor DeSantis has already taken to ban Critical

For more information about
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!