

On Teaching Social Policy as a Social Worker in the Nascent Trump Presidency

Maybe it's just me, but teaching policy feels a whole lot more difficult these days than it did in years past.

I say that as someone who has been teaching, writing, and talking about social policy in a social work context for nearly a decade—so, still a newbie by many standards, but long enough to have weathered storms like teaching health care policy during the Affordable Care Act debates. For the most part, my approach in the classroom has been to striking as close to a nonpartisan, impartial, focus-on-the-policy-not-the-person tone as I can, both in the classroom and in other professional settings... and I've attempted to steer clear of overtly political debates (trying to stick to policy instead).

Those days are over, and (I will argue) I believe our profession's *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008) has my back on that. As social workers, we are called to shed our fear of appearing partisan whenever the principles of social justice and equality are at stake, and, therefore, we are called to take a stand right now. I say this as someone who exclusively teaches social policy courses, but I believe the statement applies regardless of the topics we are covering. Issues of social justice, inclusion, and equity are embedded in topics as diverse as mental health assessment and statistics. Shying away from these conversations does our students—and our profession—a disservice, regardless of which class we are teaching.

But how do we stay true to our call to stand up for social justice and call out systemic discrimination and oppression while still encouraging and facilitating open dialogue, nurturing opportunities for growth, and demonstrating respect for those who hold opposing views in the classroom? I believe that this is fundamental to our role as social work instructors, and it is a challenge that our training as social workers prepares us for. Below, I describe some strategies that have worked for me as I have opened up my classroom as a space for some challenging political conversations.

First, some comments on why this is not a time to be neutral—especially BECAUSE OF, and not in spite of, our roles as educators.

1. The preamble of the *Code of Ethics* (2008) is not neutral. It specifically calls upon social workers to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, *with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty*” [emphasis added]. It further states that we “promote social justice and social change” and “strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice” through activities that include “community organizing,... advocacy [and] social and political action.” We are called upon to be political.
2. One of six ethical principles in the *Code of Ethics* is, “Social workers challenge social injustice.” As part of this effort, we are required to “promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity.”
3. Lastly, Section 6.04 of the *Code of Ethics* specifically outlines our responsibilities in the arena of “Social and Political Action.” The relevant passages are too numerous to quote

here, but perhaps the most salient is this: “Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally” (NASW, 2008, Section 6.04[c]).

This last statement is striking in these changing political times because the ascendance of Donald J. Trump as a political candidate, and now as our President-Elect, has helped to create conditions around the U. S. that are specifically and intentionally disrespectful of cultural and social diversity. Both Mr. Trump himself, his closest advisors (e.g. Steve Bannon, former head of Breitbart.com), and many of his Cabinet nominees have articulated positions that encourage discrimination and even violence against members of vulnerable populations, including Mexican immigrants, Muslims, women, people with disabilities, and people of color generally. Sure, some of these positions have come out as policy proposals, such as Mr. Trump’s proposal to “build a wall” along the U.S.-Mexico border. But more often these statements have few, if any, policy proposals attached—they are simply insults or assaults directed at a particular person or group of people.

In that context, it becomes very difficult to educate students about the political context within which we are functioning without talking directly about the politicians themselves. We must be free to critique the words and actions of the elected leaders and their surrogates in order to effectively carry out our mission to educate. In this work, we do not have to be specifically partisan; that is, we are not singling out members of one party as targets of our critique simply because of their party affiliation. However, we cannot be NEUTRAL or seek to achieve a balance in critiquing “both sides” when one party adopts discriminatory policy proposals in the party platform, or defends statements, nominations, and policy stances that would exacerbate inequality and injustice—for instance, by overtly engaging in racially targeted voter suppression. In this context, if the discriminatory speech or policy proposal is coming from a Republican, we should not feel forced to offer a similar critique of a Democrat in order to appear “balanced.”

A crucial point here is that in years past, I have tried hard to achieve “equivalence” in order to balance my rhetoric in the classroom. When I’ve critiqued one politician’s words or stance on a particular issue, I have frequently offered a counter-point in the form of a similarly problematic statement from someone “across the aisle” politically. The goal has been to try to minimize the appearance that I think all Democrats are right about the issues, while all Republicans are wrong—I try to find examples that run counter to those prevailing messages in order to create a space that feels nonpartisan and open to dialogue across the political spectrum.

During the recent presidential campaign, however, a similar attempt at balance has led to critiques of the mainstream media for creating “false equivalencies” that served to normalize the false claims, erratic behavior, and egregiously discriminatory statements of Donald Trump, while also seeking to “match” the coverage of the many Trump missteps by over-reporting the story of Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server while serving as Secretary of State. Discussions of the problems with false equivalence are offered by, among others, Paul Krugman in the NY Times (http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/09/26/the-falsity-of-false-equivalence/?_r=0), Thomas Mann at the Brookings Institution (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/06/02/false-equivalence-in-covering-the-2016->

[campaign/](#)), and Neil Buchanan in Newsweek (<http://www.newsweek.com/false-equivalence-clinton-trump-negatives-472818>).

Each of these pieces was written prior to the election, and yet “false equivalencies” in news coverage continued apace until after Election Day was long over. In fact, on New Years Day, the *Wall Street Journal* stoked controversy when the Editor in Chief stated in an interview that he was leery of calling Donald Trump’s false statements “lies,” fearing that “you run the risk that you look like you are not being objective” (Shelbourne, 2017: <http://thehill.com/homenews/media/312359-wsj-editor-word-lie-implies-intent-to-mislead>). This fear of not seeming objective when speaking truth about an elected official is dangerous, and, in the classroom, will cause us to undermine our educational goals.

As social workers, we cannot allow the pressure to appear impartial or nonpartisan to lure us into engaging in false equivalencies or whitewashing the truth in the classroom. Our students need to know when elected officials are engaging in unethical or illegal behavior, or when their actions or proposals pose an existential threat to American democracy. They need to understand how proposed policy changes may rip apart the social safety net upon which the people whom social workers pay particular attention to—those who are “vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty”—rely. While we should not attempt to single out one political party over another, we should feel free to call out the threats to social justice when they arise, from wherever they arise, without censoring the material in order to maintain a veil of nonpartisanship.

One other key point is that normalizing discriminatory language and policies, or tempering our critiques of these things in order to appear more moderate, will cause our most vulnerable students to feel even more marginalized in our classrooms. If we shy away from critiques of policy changes that undo progress made in trans rights under President Obama, for instance, we leave our trans students and their allies feeling as though they are invisible or unimportant in our eyes. If we gloss over insulting language used about people from Mexico, or the threat of creating a registry of Muslims in the U.S., we convey a subtle message to our students that social work values stop at the door of the university that is training them.

But, if our job is to speak up and speak out about these issues, even in the classroom, how do we do so in a way that honors each student’s learning journey, and that recognizes that some students may have voted for—or at least have family members who voted for—Donald Trump? How do we ensure that students know they will not be graded down for their political beliefs—but that they will be held to high standards when using logic and credible evidence to support their positions?

Here are some strategies that may help to foster open and honest dialogue in the classroom while addressing the urgent political topics of our time:

1. Start with the *Code of Ethics*. Let students know that our profession urges us to form educated opinions about matters of social justice, and then to have the courage to express those opinions out loud. Explain that, with regard to matters of social justice, neutrality is complicity, and so we must sometimes step outside our comfort zones to take a non-neutral stance when we see policies or political speech that are discriminatory or oppressive in

nature.

2. Establish classroom norms as a group to help students identify words, actions, and conditions that will encourage open communication, as well as those that will cause communication to shut down. This may take a few conversations, and some check-ins after tough discussions to see what went well and what did not.
3. Critique the words and actions of our elected leaders and thought leaders without disrespecting the inherent dignity and worth of those people. This is fundamental to social work, and we must be role models in this as social work educators. I can critique—in the strongest possible terms and with all due vehemence—the words, choices, and actions of Donald Trump without using baseless insults that demean him as a person. I can call his statements ill-informed without calling him (or his supporters) stupid; I can call his policies racist without using that term to describe him or his supporters as people. This distinction is especially important when others who engage in political rhetoric are not following those rules. Social workers can set the tone here and show others how to disagree respectfully.
4. With that said, DO have the courage to say the tough words: when a policy or political rhetoric is racist, do not hesitate to use that word to describe it. Having the courage to say “racism” in the classroom can be surprisingly difficult for some, and may cause some students to literally squirm in their seats. But I’ve learned from experience that other students will have the opposite reaction: they will stop you after class or email you with their thanks. When we shy away from highly charged and blunt words and topics, we set a tone that subtly conveys to students that we’re unwilling to tackle the tough issues head-on. They will look to others for those conversations and you will lose a valuable learning opportunity, while also showing your marginalized students that you do not have their backs.

I say this most directly to white educators: if we, as people who have benefited from the value of white supremacy that is embedded in so many of our social policies and structures, are unwilling to name white supremacy and racism when we see them, we place the onus on people of color to call these things out. Ally-ship requires that we use the words, even when they implicate us or make us uncomfortable.

5. Repeat #3, only with other tough words: homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, bigotry, misogyny, ableism, and so forth. These stances have shaped public policy overtly and (sometimes) inadvertently for centuries in the US. If we are going to live up to the ethics of our profession, we must be willing to confront that reality, to critique the policies and institutions that have relied on this exclusionism, and to role-model for students how to talk about these ideas in a way that is respectful, inclusive, and (when possible and appropriate) solution-focused.
6. Rely on transparency in your teaching practice to role model how to make mistakes—and how to recover from them. At the beginning of each term, as part of my introduction of myself and the course, I typically express that I seek to create an inclusive learning environment that can (hopefully) be characterized as a “brave space.” (Arao & Clemens, 2013) This means, in part, that we need to be willing to feel uncomfortable, to try out

expressing complex and sensitive thoughts and feelings even if we know we may make a mistake when we do so. And then I give an example of a time when I made a mistake—using a term that was not as inclusive as it could have been—and how I responded when a student asked me to reconsider my language. In giving this example, I invite that type of bravery from other students—and I model how to make a mistake in a way that is not irreparable. We will inevitably err as we strive to grow; how we react when we’re called out on that error is key.

7. Show your work: that is, when you express an opinion, show how you arrived at it. Provide the evidence you used in your assessment, and when appropriate, describe how your thinking has changed based on new evidence. Be clear that your opinions are just that—your opinions—and that you do not expect your students to espouse them as their own. The goal is for each student to become a savvy consumer of the news and of scientific evidence, and for each student to build skill and confidence in developing their own well-informed assessments about policies and politics.
8. Be clear about how you will assess your students, making sure to stress that their political opinions are not part of the grade calculation. It may help to talk about the growing tendency—across the political spectrum—to rely on fake news, bad research, and knee-jerk opinions to craft an argument, and to stress that this practice will not be assessed favorably, regardless of the perceived political alignment of the argument. Assure students that grades will be assigned based on specific criteria, such as the credibility and adequacy of the evidence used, the logic of the arguments made, and the overall quality of writing (or whatever standards you choose to use in your assessments), but NOT based on the political stance taken. Most important, be clear that while you have opinions about the topics covered in their papers, you don’t require your students to share those opinions; you do, however, require that they use sound rhetorical techniques and scientific methods to support their arguments. (Giving examples of what a high quality submission would look like can be very helpful here. If possible, use examples that represent a variety of perspectives. In this effort, offering some balance in political perspectives IS helpful and may go far in demonstrating that you do not equate quality with political position.)
9. Whenever possible, provide opportunities for multiple modes of communication with you about the course content and class discussions. Helpful strategies include:
 - a. The “one-minute paper,” in which students spend one minute at the end of class to answer a specific assessment question about the class, such as, “list two or three things about today’s class that were most thought-provoking, surprising, or challenging for you.”
 - b. Reflection papers, due at several points during the course, in which students are encouraged to offer their thoughts on the readings and classroom discussion, and to ask questions that you can address one-on-one or in the classroom.

Ok, so I started the conversation and now it’s getting heated. What do I do?

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The Bottom Line

We are entering what is likely to be a very difficult time as social work educators. There are already some indications that academic instructors will face increased scrutiny and critique if they are perceived to articulate “leftist” views in the classroom. The temptation to appear neutral on political issues and political leaders will likely be greater than usual; however, in times like these, it is more important than ever to be willing to engage in rigorous analysis and clear communication with and on behalf of those who are vulnerable and marginalized in our communities—even when doing so causes us to take a non-neutral stance on political issues. We must be brave enough to demonstrate how to develop well-informed opinions and to express those opinions out loud. We must be willing to speak truth to power, especially when it feels risky. We must also be willing to model this behavior in the classroom.

References and More Info

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