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Taking a Stand (or a Seat) in the Peace Studies Classroom

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Teaching peace and war is an inherently normative exercise. By normative I merely mean that by using words like peace, human rights, justice, and violence, words that are the bread and butter of peace studies, we are always already using a moral vocabulary. And the normative nature of our discipline is not limited to our language. Many of us teach because we want to make the world more peaceful and less violent, and many of our students take our classes with similar motivations. We bring our norms with us to the classroom, as do our students.

These normative commitments, however, are not uniform. Even those of us who are committed to making the world more peaceful and less violent often disagree about how to get there. Should external actors intervene in internal armed conflicts in order to stop open violence? And if yes, how should they intervene? What is the role of international institutions in ensuring justice? Can military means be used to create the conditions for justice? Or should we use nonviolent mechanisms of civil resistance if we seek a democratic outcome? These are all questions of means. We can respond to some of these questions empirically with an understanding of what has worked historically, but the fitting together of means and ends is an act of prudence that is irreducibly normative.

Beyond questions of means, some of our students will rightly question whether making the world more peaceful and less violent is a good end at all or, more modestly, whether it is possible for us to achieve it. This is a more radical questioning of the basis of our craft and compels us to consider what the goal of teaching peace and war ought to be. Regardless of how we resolve these questions, the fact that our field is morally committed inevitably impacts our pedagogy. But how?

In my course “Ethics of War, Peace and Revolution,” my primary goal is that students take responsibility for their own moral and political commitments regarding violence. Students come to my class with a wide spectrum of already formed (in some cases informed, half-formed, or

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deformed) normative commitments regarding both the means and ends of peace and war. My principle purpose is not to change their minds, although this sometimes happens. My pedagogical end, rather, is that they take responsibility for their commitments, whatever they may be.

Peace educator Betty A. Reardon argues that taking responsibility is the essential active peacemaking capacity in her classic *Comprehensive Peace Education*. She identifies two aspects of responsibility: responsibility for our complicity in systems of violence and responsibility to the other. In my classroom, taking responsibility means that students are held accountable for the implications of their moral and political commitments, especially how those commitments impact the neighbor, the enemy, and the marginalized. I provide a number of opportunities for taking responsibility, in Reardon’s language both responsibility for and to. Most basically, I encourage students to consider the practical implications of their views of peace and war in the concrete production of violence through our in-class discussions and case studies.

I also require students to present an “In the News” assignment in which they apply the concepts of the course to a particular case of their own choosing. This exercise achieves a number of pedagogical goods—allowing students to pursue their own interests, to test the concepts of the course in real time, and to come to specific judgments that they must justify to their peers. But in each case, whether discussions, case studies, “In the News” presentations, or

other assignments, my ultimate purpose is to create the conditions for students to take responsibility for their commitments regarding violence and to articulate their responsibility to others.

The taking of responsibility presents a pedagogical challenge: do I demonstrate for my students how to take responsibility by articulating my own commitments in the classroom, in other words by taking a stand, or do I encourage them to take responsibility by creating the deliberative space for them to come to their own conclusions and thus taking a seat? This question presumes two models of teaching, each of which, I will argue, has an important role in peace pedagogy. Each model proposes a different way of using the power and position of the instructor and, as such, each will be appropriate in different institutional and learning contexts.

Before elaborating the two models, let me be clear on what these pedagogical modes share. As models of peace pedagogy, both share an assumption that the instructor does not have a monopoly on knowledge, experience, or truth, but that, as Paolo Freire famously argued, students enter with something to teach as well as something to learn. Thus, both reject the “banking model” that presumes that students are in our classrooms to receive a transmission of knowledge from us, the instructors.

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Moreover, as models of peace pedagogy, both share a common goal that students, paraphrasing Ian M. Harris, not only learn about peace but learn for peace. The goal of teaching is that students are transformed: whether by deepening their understanding of commitments already held or revising their commitments in light of new information. Peace education is in this way akin to critical theory. As Karl Marx argued in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, the goal of such theorizing is not merely to interpret the world but to change it.

Finally, as should be clear from what I have already written, both models are inescapably normative. They are freighted with moral assumptions about the good and the right, about what a human is and should be, and about how we should organize our common life. Again, this normative orientation is basic to the task of peace education and will play a role in our pedagogy regardless of our instructional disposition.

It is important to note these commonalities because it is, at times, too easy to label one model or the other as undermining the foundational purposes of peace education. Both taking a stand and taking a seat can emerge from these common commitments of peace pedagogy. These pedagogical first principles, however, do not give concrete guidance on our own position and power as instructors, and this is the problem I wish to consider in the remainder of this essay. If we want students to take responsibility for their commitments and to the other, how should we posture ourselves as teachers?

One way that peace educators invite students to take responsibility is by taking a stand on particular issues of concern. This first model will come naturally to those who started out engaging the task of teaching as peace actors. While still in line with Freire’s liberatory, dialogical education, this model pursues education as formation. The instructor demonstrates to students how to take responsibility by taking responsibility herself. In doing so, she holds herself up as an exemplar, or a paradigm, for students to follow. Alternatively, the instructor might include exemplars on the syllabus, people who have been effective peace-builders, nonviolent actors, or just warriors. When taking a stand for more peace and less violence the assumption of this model is that students will have been already exposed to numerous exemplars that justify violence, the instructor is thereby offering a dialogic counterpoint to the dominant culture.

To say this model pursues education as formation is merely to indicate what the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle taught, that in order to know how to live an excellent life, we need people of excellence that we can follow. Exemplars are an indispensable means of accessing moral

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excellence, and in the case of peace studies, they help us see that more peaceful and less violent lives and societies are possible. In our understanding of peace and war exemplars play an epistemic role, meaning they help us to know something we did not know before. If you are like me you can probably remember teachers who took a stand on controversial political and social issues and thereby changed the way you thought and acted. For me, these teachers modeled courage to think freely and critically and to take a path of greater resistance. These teachers who have taken a stand have been critical to my own formation.

The danger of such a pedagogical model is that students will not take responsibility for their own commitments but will attempt to discover the instructor's commitments and tailor their class performance to earn a better grade. Rather than taking responsibility, they might merely mimic the instructor (in homage or parody). Inevitably, students will want to know, what do you really think? And in asking, they hope to discover the correct stand to take and thereby how to ace the final. This may serve learning as students outside the power structure of the classroom might find they take up the arguments, ideas, and practices they mimicked inside the classroom. But, it also relies heavily on the power differential between teacher and student, exemplar and follower. At its most extreme, such a model can devolve into an authoritarian pedagogy in which students merely conform themselves to the instructor and will be at a loss when they encounter complex problems of peace and war beyond the classroom.

Against the excesses of this model, some peace educators choose to take a seat. This alternative is an "objective" teaching model in which multiple views are presented and the instructor remains aloof from claiming any particular position. Formation in this model here is secondary to a commitment to the freedom of the student for curiosity and intellectual inquiry. The goal of the instructor here is not to model taking responsibility but to cultivate a deliberative space in which students are encouraged to take responsibility themselves for their moral and political commitments toward violence.

If taking a stand can be linked, at least in part, to Aristotle's ethics of exemplarity, taking a seat draws inspiration from the teacher of Aristotle's teacher Socrates. Socrates, of course, led with questions, a process that philosophers call *elenchus* (a Greek term meaning refutation). The disposition of the instructor here is not to take one side or the other, but to pursue truth through the elenctic process of questions and critique. Again, we can all likely recall teachers who were intentionally coy about their own commitments in class but who always seemed to come to the defense of the side of the dialogue (or argument) that was weakest. For

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me, these teachers patiently encouraged me to develop my own voice and come to my own judgments. Teachers who have taken a seat have modeled a respect for critical inquiry that I have integrated into my own teaching vocation.

Yet this model too has its dangers. One is that the instructor's commitments still set the terms of dialogue but do so covertly without explicit naming. It pretends a naiveté about the

dynamics of power that are part of any formal educational setting. At the end of the day, the instructor sets the syllabus (even one that is flexible), regulates classroom speech and behavior, and gives marks. Some of these dynamics might be mitigated somewhat in movement or nonprofit educational settings, but they never disappear. And, even if we can disable some of the power imbalances that characterize the teaching venture, a second danger is that students may merely leave with a sense that there are many options, but fail to take responsibility for how they might decide among those options. Rather than taking responsibility within an ethos of respectful pluralism, students may leave such a class with a blithe relativism that fails to honor the normative urgency of our subject matter.

So, how should we invite students to take responsibility for the life and death decisions that are the subject of our classes on peace and war? Should we take a stand and thereby model for students how to take responsibility? Or should we take a seat and cultivate the space for deliberative inquiry in which students can take responsibility themselves? In this short essay I will not venture to give a definitive one-size-fits-all answer to these very important questions. In fact, to offer a definitive answer would itself be part of the problem. My proposal is rather that taking a stand and taking a seat are two pedagogical strategies that should be prudentially deployed in our classrooms.

Rather than promoting one or the other pedagogical model I think both require a constant attention to the relationship between responsibility, power, and position. Responsibility for the impact of our moral and political commitments and responsibility to the neighbor, enemy, and marginalized require attention to power and position both in the classroom and beyond. Ultimately the positions we take in the classroom should be informed by a sober analysis of our personal and institutional power in relation to the students.

All teachers regardless of institutional context or subject location set the terms of the teaching environment. This is an act of power that we should own self-critically. While there can be a high degree of mutuality across formal and informal educational venues, formal education requires heightened attention to institutional power. When we teachers are

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developing syllabi, crafting lesson plans, and grading assignments we are exercising the power of our office and using a mix of disciplinary and incentive structures to cultivate student learning. I am not arguing that this is a bad thing. Rather, these are formative structures that can be used and abused and we need to pay attention to the way in which those powers are working.

We need to pay attention not only to our institutional power, but also the power that comes from our various subject positions. As a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, male, U.S. citizen, I have significant privileges afforded to me simply on the basis of those markers. I have a responsibility to my students to pay close attention to how my subject position influences the construction of our classroom ethos. That responsibility will look different for differently located persons, but the responsibility to attend to the power of subject position will remain.

Attending to institutional and personal power is important not only for instructors, but also in relation to students. The decision of whether to take a stand or take a seat will change based on the program of students, whether the course is a general education requirement or an upper-level elective, whether students are typically first-generation college students, majority male or female, or any other number of considerations.

I raise all of these to say that whether to take a stand or take a seat is a prudential decision that must take into account our institutional and personal power in relation to our students. I have

made different decisions in different institutional contexts. For example, when teaching a general studies requirement to non-major undergraduates, I have tended to take a seat. In doing so, I seek to allow students with whom I have a high power differential the space to develop their own views and positions. Alternatively, when teaching masters-level professional students in upper-level electives, I am more apt to take a stand. For these students I acknowledge that they are more ready to critique my stand and offer alternatives. Which pedagogical strategy I use changes based on institutional context and the quality of my relationship with my students. It also changes with shifts in the wider political discourse. When other contrasting voices are readily available to students, such as during a hotly contested election, I have felt freer to add my voice to the mix, regardless of institutional location, knowing that students will have many arguments ready at hand to resist with, should they choose to do so.

When considering which pedagogical strategy to employ we might ask ourselves a series of evaluative questions. When taking a stand, we might ask: Have I given students the resources and the permission to disagree with me? What other exemplars have I offered to students beyond myself? In what ways will my institutional role as instructor distort

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students' capacities to think critically about my stand? When taking a seat, we might ask: Have students been confronted with the urgency of decision? Have I analyzed reflexively the covert arguments in the syllabus? And have I made those arguments clear to students? Have I taken the risks that I am asking my students to take?

The paradox of peace education is that we need both pedagogical strategies. The world that we want is one in which we take a seat and listen deeply to one another, exchange ideas, and acknowledge difference with mutual respect, and do so in a way that is not controlled coercively by any one person. To get to that world, however, we have to take a stand against bigotry and for social justice, pointing out coercion and violence, and modeling conflict transformation. We will need both strategies if we are to create a context in which our students take responsibility for their own commitments and join us in the creation of a world characterized by more peace and less violence.

Recommended Readings

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