

## The Objectionable Utterance: A Moment for Teaching\*

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As educators become less enthusiastic about the lecture format in the classroom, with its one-way communication pattern, discursive methods present themselves as likely alternatives. Political science courses that stress values and ideas are particularly amenable to nonlecture methods. Students in the discursive classrooms will, it is hoped, contribute energy and ideas, and participate in dialogue rather than assume exclusively passive roles as note takers and information vessels.

In the new mode, classroom interactions develop dynamics of their own, which has both good points and bad points. For the instructor as well as the students, any moment is potentially volatile when students are allowed to have voice. Social tensions that exist in the larger society will inevitably be reflected in students' utterances; not constantly, but inevitably.

Society at large is, at best, barely competent in dealing with difficult issues such as ethnic difference or sex-role difference, and there is little reason to expect college sophomores to be adept at carrying on such difficult discourses without the help of the instructor. As is apparent, choosing the genuinely open classroom discussion may not be the easiest course to take. This essay offers a consideration of what to expect in a discursive classroom and what to do about it. Some examples of volatile moments will be followed by a discussion of appropriate teacher interventions.

### Examples from the Classroom

#### The Laundry Heroine

A student recalled for the author a video she had watched in an introductory management course. Several videos accompanied a textbook, and one of them contained a case study of a Texas resort hotel that sought to

achieve four-star status and become a national convention center. In the video, quality improvement techniques such as team building, employee recognition, and the use of corporate hero stories were linked to employee commitment and improved quality. One corporate hero story was of particular interest to this student, who wrote about her perception of it:

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That story was about a corporate hero desk clerk who had taken it upon herself to provide an outstanding service to a resort visitor from Australia. The visitor registered late in the day and requested laundry service. The clerk informed him that the laundry was closed for the day. Seeing the disappointment and dismay in the visitor's face, she offered to take his laundry home. . . . The resort related this story in one of the weekly team meetings and recognized this team member as being a corporate hero for providing high quality service above and beyond the expected daily duties.

There was no question that the desk clerk demonstrated high commitment, but for this student there were unasked questions about the dignity of the worker as well as some unacknowledged sexism. Would a male desk clerk have received the same response for taking the hotel guest's laundry home with him? In the classroom, when this student offered her question about workplace dignity, "The class attendees seemed to shift uncomfortably in their seats while Dr. Jones asked for more input on my question."

The student's intervention changed the meaning of the video. By merely stopping the action to question the benign interpretation provided by the video, the student gave voice to a counter-interpretation. The *resonating silence*, requisite to oppressive unexamined assumptions, was transformed into a moment for learning. Laundry has conventionally been "women's work" and the episode provided powerful reinforcement for that cultural habit—until the question was raised. This student provided her classmates a great service; she put the incident into critical context and refused to let an issue of sexism and workplace dignity flourish amid a resonating silence. Pausing to notice, she became teacher of the moment.

#### The Old World Grandmother

In another participative classroom—a language class in this case—a student described stories as told to her by her German grandparents of their life in Nazi Germany. As the story unfolded, it became clear that the student was uncritically and unwittingly repeating not only the wonderful old-world grandmotherly story but also the anti-Semitic lessons embedded in the narrative.

How should the instructor respond? The anti-Semitic remark cannot go unheeded, but by intervening in the action and drawing the issue to the attention of the class, the instructor could very likely raise the tension level, sure to be uncomfortable for someone. On the other hand, by remaining silent, the instructor accommodates the oppressive story, nurtures it actually, by providing it with a resonating silence. *Making a nonissue of an oppressive utterance through the use of silence is itself an act of oppression.* In this case, as it happened, there was no need for intervention; the telling of the story was enough to stimulate the story-

## The Teacher

teller herself to reflect on the unresolved dissonance between love of grandmother and disgust for anti-Semitism. But if the public utterance had not generated the student-initiated introspection, the instructor would need to find a way to pause so that students could reflect on the oppressive disparagement of Jews embedded in the story.

## Jerome from Detroit

In an introduction to public policy class the instructor assigned short editorial-style essays. Consider the following scenario by a college sophomore writing about education policy:

The classic case is Jerome. Jerome is from Detroit and is 6 feet 9 inches tall, weighs in at a meager 423-1/2 pounds, and has been recruited by the Miami Dolphins. . . . He goes through high school and college and manages to cheat on every test he takes. As the story continues though, Jerome blows out a knee while playing in the N.F.L. and has no education to fall back on. Since he cannot blame his own laziness, he blames the teachers and administrators for letting him graduate when he cannot even read.

Three themes are evident: (1) academic success v. sports, (2) personal responsibility, and (3) a stereotypical image of African-American men, for which "Detroit" may be a code.

The third theme is not quite explicit enough to be self-evident, nor is the proper response of the instructor self-evident. Rather than coming to a conclusive judgment as to whether the essay was racist, the student was asked in the margin comments if he agreed that "from Detroit" was code for African-American, and if the description could be construed as racist. The student elaborated in response:

Young black men are no different than anyone else. . . . My own image of blacks has nothing to do with my description of Jerome. . . . However, the fact that he is black is irrelevant because the intent here was to give an example of an athletic and academically negligent person. . . . Inside any high school you'll find decadence, passiveness, and the ignorant attitude that you can get somewhere in life without working.

The student's rebuttal served its

purpose. Both instructor and student had the opportunity to reflect further about their respective interpretations, both of which may have contained truth. Not resolving all ambiguities, but *reflecting on unexamined assumptions* is an important aim of creating a teachable moment when a potentially oppressive expression is offered by a student.

## The Instructor as Aid to Reflection

The strategy employed is to focus not exclusively on information, but to allow students to develop their own ideologies and perspectives on public policy (or business management, or the German language) so that they can examine heretofore unexamined assumptions, so they can think rather than memorize, connect their thoughts to their belief systems, and thus engage in genuine dialogue. For any of this to occur, students *must* be allowed to express their ideas. They may not recognize the meaning in their words until they take a look at what they wrote or said. The instructor can aid in that reflection. If the instructor does not, the resonating silence cultivates rich soil for oppression.

To succeed in the effort to examine unexamined assumptions, the instructor must grant himself or herself permission to *inquire* of the students. The following three principles are helpful:

(1) The instructor need not immediately comprehend all student utterances. There is no embarrassment in asking again or in being asked again, if the matter seems worthy of the class's time.

(2) Statements that exclude others from the debate or denigrate them on the basis of ethnicity, gender, or religion cannot be allowed to stand. It is not the instructor's responsibility to force a retraction or to punish the utterance in any way, but it is the instructor's responsibility to tend the well, so to speak, and keep the poison out of the class discussion, which is a public arena. Free speech does not flourish when hateful utterances are allowed to crowd out the voices of the disparaged and dismissed.

(3) In some situations, the instructor may have to give voice to the powerless.

Speaking up for the voiceless, ensuring inclusiveness, and asking for elaboration are valuable teaching skills, especially considering how effortless it would be to do the opposite. The tempting maneuver when the going gets rough might be to deal with problematic utterances by labeling or dismissing the "guilty" student. This method puts an end to the nonsense, all right, but in the process destroys the feeling of safety that all students in the class need. The classroom envisioned here is an arena for open communication, where one can be embarrassed yet will survive because of an accepting atmosphere. Confrontation is possible because separating the utterance from the person is possible; otherwise the self may be placed at excessive risk. The issue here is trust—not the trust that everyone will be "nice" to one another, but an attitude that an utterance is like an experiment: How do we know what it means until it is spoken and then reflected upon? The focus of attention is the utterance, not the person. The larger point is this: Since the conversation conveys the substance of the day's lesson, the conversation itself must be nurtured and not taken for granted.

On the lookout for moments for teaching, the instructor can help transform even the most dreadful remark into an unexamined assumption, or better, an utterance presented to the group as an experiment, some data waiting to be examined, a teachable moment.

## Note

\*The author wishes to acknowledge the help of L. Brenda Clayton, Joe Feldhausen, Jennifer Ham, Mary Flynn, and James Winship in preparing this manuscript.

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