I'm a liberal professor, and my liberal students terrify me

Reprinted by Vox Media
Edward Schlosser (pseudonym)
June 3, 2015

I'm a professor at a midsize state school. I have been teaching college classes for nine years now. I have won (minor) teaching awards, studied pedagogy extensively, and almost always score highly on my student evaluations. I am not a world-class teacher by any means, but I am conscientious; I attempt to put teaching ahead of research, and I take a healthy emotional stake in the well-being and growth of my students.

Things have changed since I started teaching. The vibe is different. I wish there were a less blunt way to put this, but my students sometimes scare me — particularly the liberal ones.

Not, like, in a person-by-person sense, but students in general. The student-teacher dynamic has been re-envisioned along a line that's simultaneously consumerist and hyper-protective, giving each and every student the ability to claim Grievous Harm in nearly any circumstance, after any affront, and a teacher's formal ability to respond to these claims is limited at best.

WHAT IT WAS LIKE BEFORE

In early 2009, I was an adjunct, teaching a freshman-level writing course at a community college. Discussing infographics and data visualization, we watched a flash animation describing how Wall Street's recklessness had destroyed the economy.

The video stopped, and I asked whether the students thought it was effective. An older student raised his hand.

"What about Fannie and Freddie?" he asked. "Government kept giving homes to black people, to help out black people, white people didn't get anything, and then they couldn't pay for them. What about that?"

I gave a quick response about how most experts would disagree with that assumption, that it was actually an oversimplification, and pretty dishonest, and isn't it good that someone made the video we just watched to try to clear things up? And, hey, let's talk about whether that was effective, okay? If you don't think it was, how could it have been?

The rest of the discussion went on as usual.

The next week, I got called into my director's office. I was shown an email, sender name redacted, alleging that I "possessed communistical [sic] sympathies and refused to tell more than one side of the story." The story in question wasn't described, but I suspect it had do to with whether or not the economic collapse was caused by poor black people.

My director rolled her eyes. She knew the complaint was silly bullshit. I wrote up a short description of the past week's class work, noting that we had looked at several examples of effective writing in various media and that I always made a good faith effort to include conservative narratives along with the liberal ones.

Along with a carbon-copy form, my description was placed into a file that may or may not have existed. Then ... nothing. It disappeared forever; no one cared about it beyond their contractual duties to document student concerns. I never heard another word of it again.

That was the first, and so far only, formal complaint a student has ever filed against me.

NOW BOAT-ROCKING ISN'T JUST DANGEROUS—IT'S SUICIDAL

This isn't an accident: I have intentionally adjusted my teaching materials as the political winds have shifted. (I also make sure all my remotely offensive or challenging opinions, such as this article, are expressed either anonymously or pseudonymously). Most of my colleagues who still have jobs have done the same. We've seen bad things happen to too many good teachers — adjuncts getting axed because their evaluations dipped below a 3.0, grad students being removed from classes after a single student complaint, and so on.

I once saw an adjunct not get his contract renewed after students complained that he exposed them to "offensive" texts written by Edward Said and Mark Twain. His response, that the texts were meant to be a little upsetting, only fueled the students' ire and sealed his fate. That was enough to get me to comb through my syllabi and cut out anything I could see upsetting a coddled undergrad, texts ranging from Upton Sinclair to Maureen Tkacik — and I wasn't the only one who made adjustments, either.

I am frightened sometimes by the thought that a student would complain again like he did in 2009. Only this time it would be a student accusing me not of saying something too ideologically extreme — be it communism or racism or whatever — but of not being sensitive enough toward his feelings, of some simple act of indelicacy that's considered tantamount to physical assault. As Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis writes, "Emotional discomfort is [now] regarded as equivalent to material injury, and all injuries have to be remediated." Hurting a student's feelings, even in the course of instruction that is absolutely appropriate and respectful, can now get a teacher into serious trouble.

In 2009, the subject of my student's complaint was my supposed ideology. I was communistical, the student felt, and everyone knows that communisticism is wrong. That was, at best, a debatable assertion. And as I was allowed to rebut it, the complaint was dismissed with prejudice. I didn't hesitate to reuse that same video in later semesters, and the student's complaint had no impact on my performance evaluations.

In 2015, such a complaint would not be delivered in such a fashion. Instead of focusing on the rightness or wrongness (or even acceptability) of the materials we reviewed in class, the complaint would center solely on how my teaching affected the student's emotional state. As I cannot speak to the emotions of my students, I could not mount a defense about the acceptability of my instruction. And if I responded in any way other than apologizing and changing the materials we reviewed in class, professional consequences would likely follow.

I wrote about this fear on my blog, and while the response was mostly positive, some liberals called me paranoid, or expressed doubt about why any teacher would nix the particular texts I listed. I guarantee you that these people do not work in higher education, or if they do they are at least two decades removed

from the job search. The academic job market is brutal. Teachers who are not tenured or tenure-track faculty members have no right to due process before being dismissed, and there's a mile-long line of applicants eager to take their place. And as writer and academic Freddie DeBoer writes, they don't even have to be formally fired — they can just not get rehired. In this type of environment, boat-rocking isn't just dangerous, it's suicidal, and so teachers limit their lessons to things they know won't upset anybody.

THE REAL PROBLEM: A SIMPLISTIC, UNWORKABLE, ULTIMATELY STIFLING NOTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

This shift in student-teacher dynamic placed many of the traditional goals of higher education — such as having students challenge their beliefs — off limits. While I used to pride myself on getting students to question themselves and engage with difficult concepts and texts, I now hesitate. What if this hurts my evaluations and I don't get tenure? How many complaints will it take before chairs and administrators begin to worry that I'm not giving our customers — er, *students*, pardon me — the positive experience they're paying for? Ten? Half a dozen? Two or three?

This phenomenon has been widely discussed as of late, mostly as a means of deriding political, economic, or cultural forces writers don't much care for. Commentators on the left and right have recently criticized the sensitivity and paranoia of today's college students. They worry about the stifling of free speech, the implementation of unenforceable conduct codes, and a general hostility against opinions and viewpoints that could cause students so much as a hint of discomfort.

> It's not just that students refuse to countenance uncomfortable ideas—they refuse to engage them, period.

I agree with some of these analyses more than others, but they all tend to be too simplistic. The current student-teacher dynamic has been shaped by a large confluence of factors, and perhaps the most important of these is the manner in which cultural studies and social justice writers have comported themselves in popular media. I have a great deal of respect for both of these fields, but their manifestations online, their desire to democratize complex fields of study by making them as digestible as a *TGIF* sitcom, has led to adoption of a totalizing, simplistic, unworkable, and ultimately stifling conception of social justice. The simplicity and absolutism of this conception has combined with the precarity of academic jobs to create higher ed's current climate of fear, a heavily policed discourse of semantic sensitivity in which safety and comfort have become the ends *and* the means of the college experience.

This new understanding of social justice politics resembles what University of Pennsylvania political science professor Adolph Reed Jr. calls a politics of personal testimony, in which the feelings of individuals are the primary or even exclusive means through which social issues are understood and discussed. Reed derides this sort of political approach as essentially being a non-politics, a discourse that "is focused much more on taxonomy than politics [which] emphasizes the names by which we should call some strains of inequality [...] over specifying the mechanisms that produce them or even the steps that can be taken to combat them." Under such a conception, people become more concerned with signaling goodness, usually through semantics and empty gestures, than with actually working to effect change.

Herein lies the folly of oversimplified identity politics: while identity concerns obviously warrant analysis, focusing on them too exclusively draws our attention so far inward that none of our analyses can lead to action. Rebecca Reilly Cooper, a political philosopher at the University of Warwick, worries about the effectiveness of a politics in which "particular experiences can never legitimately speak for anyone other than ourselves, and personal narrative and testimony are elevated to such a degree that there can be no objective standpoint from which to examine their veracity." Personal experience and feelings aren't just

a salient touchstone of contemporary identity politics; they are the *entirety* of these politics. In such an environment, it's no wonder that students are so prone to elevate minor slights to protestable offenses.

(It's also why seemingly piddling matters of cultural consumption warrant much more emotional outrage than concerns with larger material implications. Compare the number of web articles surrounding the supposed problematic aspects of the newest *Avengers* movie with those complaining about, say, the piecemeal dismantling of abortion rights. The former outnumber the latter considerably, and their rhetoric is typically much more impassioned and inflated. I'd discuss this in my classes — if I weren't too scared to talk about abortion.)

The press for actionability, or even for comprehensive analyses that go beyond personal testimony, is hereby considered redundant, since all we need to do to fix the world's problems is adjust the feelings attached to them and open up the floor for various identity groups to have their say. All the old, enlightened means of discussion and analysis —from due process to scientific method — are dismissed as being blind to emotional concerns and therefore unfairly skewed toward the interest of straight white males. All that matters is that people are allowed to speak, that their narratives are accepted without question, and that the bad feelings go away.

So it's not just that students refuse to countenance uncomfortable ideas — they refuse to engage them, period. Engagement is considered unnecessary, as the immediate, emotional reactions of students contain all the analysis and judgment that sensitive issues demand. As Judith Shulevitz wrote in the New York Times, these refusals can shut down discussion in genuinely contentious areas, such as when Oxford canceled an abortion debate. More often, they affect surprisingly minor matters, as when Hampshire College disinvited an Afrobeat band because their lineup had too many white people in it.

WHEN FEELINGS BECOME MORE IMPORTANT THAN ISSUES

At the very least, there's debate to be had in these areas. Ideally, pro-choice students would be comfortable enough in the strength of their arguments to subject them to discussion, and a conversation about a band's supposed cultural appropriation could take place alongside a performance. But these cancellations and dis-invitations are framed in terms of feelings, not issues. The abortion debate was canceled because it would have imperiled the "welfare and safety of our students." The Afrofunk band's presence would not have been "safe and healthy." No one can rebut feelings, and so the only thing left to do is shut down the things that cause distress — no argument, no discussion, just hit the mute button and pretend eliminating discomfort is the same as effecting actual change.

In a New York Magazine piece, Jonathan Chait described the chilling effect this type of discourse has upon classrooms. Chait's piece generated seismic backlash, and while I disagree with much of his diagnosis, I have to admit he does a decent job of describing the symptoms. He cites an anonymous professor who says that "she and her fellow faculty members are terrified of facing accusations of triggering trauma." Internet liberals pooh-poohed this comment, likening the professor to one of Tom Friedman's imaginary cab drivers. But I've seen what's being described here. I've lived it. It's real, and it affects liberal, socially conscious teachers much more than conservative ones.

If we wish to remove this fear, and to adopt a politics that can lead to more substantial change, we need to adjust our discourse. Ideally, we can have a conversation that is conscious of the role of identity issues *and* confident of the ideas that emanate from the people who embody those identities. It would call out and criticize unfair, arbitrary, or otherwise stifling discursive boundaries, but avoid falling into pettiness or nihilism. It wouldn't be moderate, necessarily, but it would be deliberate. It would require effort.

Oxford University, where a debate on abortion was canceled last year. (Sura Ark with Getty Images)

In the start of his piece, Chait hypothetically asks if "the offensiveness of an idea [can] be determined objectively, or only by recourse to the identity of the person taking offense." Here, he's getting at the concerns addressed by Reed and Reilly-Cooper, the worry that we've turned our analysis so completely inward that our judgment of a person's speech hinges more upon their identity signifiers than on their ideas.

A sensible response to Chait's question would be that this is a false binary, and that ideas can and should be judged both by the strength of their logic and by the cultural weight afforded to their speaker's identity. Chait appears to believe only the former, and that's kind of ridiculous. Of course someone's social standing affects whether their ideas are considered offensive, or righteous, or even worth listening to. How can you think otherwise?

WE DESTROY OURSELVES WHEN IDENTITY BECOMES OUR SOLE FOCUS

Feminists and anti-racists recognize that identity does matter. This is indisputable. If we subscribe to the belief that ideas can be judged within a vacuum, uninfluenced by the social weight of their proponents, we perpetuate a system in which arbitrary markers like race and gender influence the perceived correctness of ideas. We can't overcome prejudice by pretending it doesn't exist. Focusing on identity allows us to interrogate the process through which white males have their opinions taken at face value, while women, people of color, and non-normatively gendered people struggle to have their voices heard.

But we also destroy ourselves when identity becomes our sole focus. Consider a tweet I linked to (which has since been removed. See editor's note below.), from a critic and artist, in which she writes: "When ppl go off on evo psych, its always some shady colonizer white man theory that ignores nonwhite human history. but ‘science'. Ok ... Most ‘scientific thought' as u know it isnt that scientific but shaped by white patriarchal bias of ppl who claimed authority on it."

This critic is intelligent. Her voice is important. She realizes, correctly, that evolutionary psychology is flawed, and that science has often been misused to legitimize racist and sexist beliefs. But why draw that out to questioning most "scientific thought"? Can't we see how distancing that is to people who don't already agree with us? And tactically, can't we see how shortsighted it is to be skeptical of a respected manner of inquiry just because it's associated with white males?

This sort of perspective is not confined to Twitter and the comments sections of liberal blogs. It was born in the more nihilistic corners of academic theory, and its manifestations on social media have severe real-world implications. In another instance, two female professors of library science publicly outed and shamed a male colleague they accused of being creepy at conferences, going so far as to openly celebrate the prospect of ruining his career. I don't doubt that some men are creepy at conferences — they are.

And for all I know, this guy might be an A-level creep. But part of the female professors' shtick was the strong insistence that harassment victims should never be asked for proof, that an enunciation of an accusation is all it should ever take to secure a guilty verdict. The identity of the victims overrides the identity of the harasser, and that's all the proof they need.

This is terrifying. No one will ever accept that. And if that becomes a salient part of liberal politics, liberals are going to suffer tremendous electoral defeat.

Debate and discussion would ideally temper this identity-based discourse, make it more usable and less scary to outsiders. Teachers and academics are the best candidates to foster this discussion, but most of us are too scared and economically disempowered to say anything. Right now, there's nothing much to do other than sit on our hands and wait for the ascension of conservative political backlash — hop into the echo chamber, pile invective upon the next person or company who says something vaguely insensitive, insulate ourselves further and further from any concerns that might resonate outside of our own little corner of Twitter.

Update: After a discussion with a woman whose tweet was quoted in the story, the editors of this piece agreed that some of the conclusions drawn in the article misrepresented her tweet and the article was revised. The woman requested anonymity because she said she was receiving death threats as a result of the story, so her name has been removed. Unfortunately, threats are a horrible reality for many women online and a topic we intend to report on further.

https://www.vox.com/2015/6/3/8706323/college-professor-afraid