



Do College Professors Corrupt the Minds of American Youth?

Marc Edward DiPaolo (July 04, 2008)



As a college professor who tries the best he can to teach students to be well-read, think for themselves, and analyze complex social problems with their intellects and their hearts, I'm getting tired of arch-conservatives on TV and in my own circle of friends questioning my patriotism, my intelligence, and my motives.



“Marc, I know you’re a college professor now, and everything, but you’re not actually going to vote for Obama are you?”

“Yes. And with great excitement and enthusiasm.”

“Have you lost your mind!?!”

Even though I live in Pennsylvania, which is relatively close to New York, I don’t get to visit my home town of Staten Island often these days. Fortunately, I was able to return for a visit with the old gang, Griffin Masina, Hank Stewart, and Kyle Ahern, which included devouring three vodka pies at Goodfellas pizzeria, two games of Texas Hold ‘Em poker, and an annoying political conversation. The annoying political conversation occurred at the end of the evening, after folks had a few drinks and decided they were mad at me for demonstrating beginner’s luck at cards. That was when I was asked pointedly whether I was voting reluctantly for McCain, or boycotting the election, as the others faced this choice themselves. I said I had voted enthusiastically for McCain during the Republican primaries in 2000, but couldn’t vote for a Republican after the disastrous and ego-maniacal Bush presidency. The conversation rapidly degenerated into an argument after I made this statement. Griffin remained polite and thoughtful, and made excellent points from a conservative standpoint, but the other fellows were not particularly polite, and were very dogmatic and judgmental in much of what they said. By the end of the evening, I discovered that, according to a handful of my friends, I was an out-of-touch academic who is “part of the problem,” and who sees his job as primarily the recruiting of a new generation of Democrats, and the perpetuation of the notion that climate change is a reality when everyone knows it is not. After all, I may have been a reporter for two years and have read “tons of sociology books,” I may currently devour *The Economist* each week, listen to NPR daily, sporadically watch *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, and hold a doctorate in literature, but I am, on balance, uninformed and ignorant. Why? Because I didn’t watch O’Reilly every day, read the *New York Post*, or follow the minutiae and gossip surrounding the day-to-day muck and mire of politics.

(“Oh, you only know what Reverend Wright said last week? You don’t know what he said this week? You really need to get cable and stop living in a cave! Wright said, ‘God damn America!’ How could he say that? And Obama won’t wear an American flag on his lapel!”)

Good thing this is what my friends think of me. One wonders what my enemies would think of my classroom lessons.

Obviously, I don’t believe that their impression is accurate, although I can see where those who have a strict moral code and utilitarian view of what college “should be all about” would cite me for crimes against education. Knowing this, I thought for the next several days about what my mission was as a college professor and what I hoped to teach my students. I reread my “*Philosophy of Teaching*,” a document that I wrote for my Third-Year Review for Tenure, to see if it was lacking.

After reviewing the document, I could see where a conservative would hate what I had to say,



but I decided that I stand by it.

For those who are interested, I have decided to reprint below my Philosophy of Teaching, which outlines my goals as a college professor. While I do not think that many news “commentators” would like it, and while they might, if they got a hold of it, cartoon my motivations, I believe it is a thoughtful document that can be respectfully disagreed with. I do not, however, believe my philosophy is simplistic or evil.

Here goes:

In both my teaching and writing I simultaneously hold two entirely contradictory ideological beliefs. Contradictory as they are, I believe them both wholeheartedly. I am equally a moral relativist and a moral absolutist. As a moral relativist, I believe that the only way to truly understand anything is to not stand in judgment of it, but to judge it on its own merits. This is how I try to understand other people, other cultures, and works of art and popular culture. It is the kind of approach Walt Whitman used in *Leaves of Grass*, when he expressed love for the grass, saw himself in everything, and saw everything in himself. He eschewed qualitative judgments, denied the existence of evil, and privileged similarity over difference. This mindset is what enables me to get along well with students who often feel themselves marginalized or oppressed (either off or on campus), and which informs my writing about critically disparaged works of popular art like superhero comic books. This approach also enables me to teach very nuanced lessons on the use of the Confederate Flag on the television show *The Dukes of Hazzard* in my Mass Media class when one might think that it is impossible to say anything of value about such a topic since ... well ... *The Dukes of Hazzard* was a terrible show.

On the other hand, I am also a moral absolutist. I believe that there is a clear pecking order in the universe, there is indeed evil (the military junta in Burma, for example), and qualitative judgments are both inescapable and made countless times a day. Therefore, while I love comic books, I understand that they do occupy a literary stratum beneath that of *Lord of the Flies* and *1984*, and that those books, in turn, are not quite on the same literary level as *Hamlet*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Paradise Lost*. On the other hand, comic books are clearly better for one’s health than advertising, *The O’Reilly Factor*, and most movies featuring David Spade. In a similar fashion, the Beatles are better than Jethro Tull and Mozart is better than the Beatles.

Finally, even though I try to present both sides of every political issue fairly to my students, I think it is safe to say that, at my core, I have very specific political beliefs and, at times, it is difficult to disguise these biases.



Being simultaneously a moral relativist and a moral absolutist used to be challenging and confusing for me. However, I am more comfortable in my own skin and do not feel myself vulnerable to charges of inconsistency or hypocrisy. In fact, I am able to reconcile my incompatible beliefs by acknowledging the fact that, at different points in my life, I have believed many things, and I have loved many kinds of intellectual and artistic works. For the bulk of my formative years, I was a very superstitious person, saw the world in staunch black-and-white terms, and adored adventure narratives presented in comic books, fairy tales, and pulp novels. During my college years, I was religiously and politically adrift, but I decided to hold off on joining any ideological association until I'd finished reading most of the Harold-Bloom-approved "Great Works of the Western Canon." As a graduate student, I read sociology books and multicultural American literature, watched foreign films, and became a much more tolerant, open-minded person.

While my archconservative friends from Staten Island would challenge this notion, let us assume for the moment that the evolution I describe above was, on balance, a positive thing. Now, this is the critical point: I still remember what I was like during all of these various phases in my life and I do not judge myself. It was all part of the same emotional, intellectual, and spiritual journey.

I was very much the same person I am now, only my focus and my way of processing information was different. I feel a little superior to my old self, but I still like my younger self – who is at once undoubtedly me and undoubtedly an entirely different person. Therefore, I retain my youthful affection for comic books and Puritanical righteousness even as I believe that my current preference for Jane Austen and the striving to be as reasonable as possible, whenever possible, is the way to go.

Reading and Morality:

When I first decided to enter the doctoral program at Drew University, I was fully aware of the fact that I loved to read while most of my friends and extended family members had not read a book in their lives. I therefore became interested in why I first developed a love of reading and decided to make a study of children's fiction: fairy tales, comic books, and horror novels. After all, these were the tales that got me excited to read (as opposed to, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Experience," which I loved when I re-read it as a graduate student, but would have hated had I stumbled upon it in the fifth grade, and which I did, indeed, hate when I first encountered it as a college freshman.) I was also interested in what effect these rather lurid, highly supernatural tales had on my ethical and cognitive development as a young reader.

I was also convinced that movie adaptations of classic works had encouraged me to read



because I had loved the movies that I had seen on PBS as a child and was eager to read the books when I was old enough to understand them. Graduate school helped me discover that I was interested in the academic fields of narratology and adaptation theory. These were two critical lenses through which I could examine story cycles, serial narratives, and adaptations that I had enjoyed as a child and, significantly, continue to enjoy as an adult now that recent film adaptations of childhood favorite tales seem to be in vogue. In fact, during my investigation into narratology and adaptation theory, I discovered – quite by accident – that these approaches help scholars gauge how various media-representations of race, class, and gender changed over time. For example, if one considers how a “staple” narrative (like the Beauty and the Beast story cycle) or a multimedia character (like Robin Hood) changes from oral tale, to written tale, to song, to film, to video game, these changes reveals a lot about narrative technique and genre. On the other hand, if one also considers how the character changes thematically from generation to generation, or shifts from one culture to the next (like the American sitcom “The Office” as a remake of the contemporary British sitcom “The Office”), then that approach may reveal much about history and culture. Therefore, a comparison of several incarnations of Wonder Woman – from the 1940s comic books to the 1970s television show to the 2000s cartoon – reveals a lot about how gender is “constructed” during these various historical eras.

This brings me to one of my principle academic interests. As interested as I am in literacy, children’s literature, and adaptation theory, I am also very interested in the ideological components of various works of art, from the populist to the elitist. I am interested in their overt political messages, their subtexts, and how they represent the “other” – people of a different gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, or creed. What messages are imbedded in works of art? Were they intentionally placed there? Unconsciously? Are these messages received as intended? Are they distorted?

This interest in the “effects” of reading on the reader was similar to the concerns I had about the mass media, both before I was a journalist and during my own tenure as a news reporter. How could a reporter ethically report the news? What effect did the news have on the news reader when the story was actually somewhat “balanced” ideologically? When it was clearly biased in its perspective? When the news story’s only concern seemed to be with sensationalism and the profit margins of the news venue?

As an Italian-American who hates the media-bolstered stereotype of the Italian gangster, and all of its attendant baggage (macho posturing, stupidity, wife-beating, etc.), I am very concerned about how the media, be it film, television, the news, or even politico-speak, represents members of different races, social classes, nationalities, religions, and ethnic groups. I am sympathetic to every Asian who chafes at the portrayals of the Japanese as a culture of samurais, every woman who is



weary of the blonde-pop-star-Lolita standard of beauty, and every black person who has the same reservations about the gangsta stereotype that I have about the gangster stereotype.

These were the issues which concerned me when I first entered graduate school. These remain the questions that concern me, in both my scholarship and the courses I teach. To some degree or another, everything I write and every lesson I teach touches upon this core group of issues. I believe that the media caricatures people, simplifies complex topics, and makes sensationalistic that which should be considered in a sober, thoughtful mindset. The best way to defeat the media's desire to dumb down the quality of public debate and discourse is to encourage thoughtfulness, healthy skepticism, and tolerance at every possible turn.

Practical Concerns and Application:

Even though I currently have a very calm way of looking back upon my intellectual, spiritual, and emotional development through a protracted, rigorous diet of reading, I must admit that, at the time I went through the multiple ideological conversions I touched upon above, I found the process to be emotionally violent, spiritually unsettling, and outright traumatic. However, having gone through these turbulent periods of my "inner" life, I feel that I understand myself, and the world, better because of these experiences. I am a better person for the effort and the agony, even if I still am a work-in-progress with a long way to go.

Which raises the question: What do I do with my students? There is an extent to which I want (and need) to respect my students' beliefs and worldview - especially given the fact that I teach at a Roman Catholic college that promotes Franciscan values. However, there is also an extent to which I want to shake students out of the same kind of intellectual rut I was in when I was an undergraduate. After all, as C.S. Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed*, the Judeo-Christian God is not impressed with a "house of cards" faith built upon ignorance and complacency, but wants his flock intellectually and spiritually challenged. Certainly, reading, done properly, does not validate the worldview of the reader, but challenges the reader to consider alternative perspectives, moderate their understandable instinct to demonize their political enemies, and know themselves more objectively. (For more on this, see Harold Brodkey's superb essay, "Reading: The Most Dangerous Game.")

Of course, recent articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* have argued that students do not go to college to challenge their own beliefs, or learn about other cultures, or to improve their



reading and writing skills. They go to party, date, and get job training and certification. In my experience, that mindset is common, in society and in the classroom, and it is my chief obstacle in being an effective teacher. The student is in the classroom for one reason, I am there for another, and neither of us wants to change the goals of the class.

The other challenge I face is the cultural reluctance of students to read for pleasure, and the seeming inadequacy of K-12 public education to prepare students for a meaningful college experience. Here I am not talking about the several schools that I have taught at over the past decade, as both a tenure-track professor and as an adjunct, but about a widely reported crisis in literacy.

These, of course, are widespread cultural problems that I cannot hope to “solve.” However, I can do the best I can on a small scale at Alvernia in my interactions with individual classes and individual students. I will say that I am always thinking about different ways I can reach the students, challenge them, maintain a disciplined classroom, a fair set of grading standards, and make sure they are doing the homework.

If I have one goal, it is this: get the students to read. I care not if they begin, as I did, by reading comic books, or escapist fare such as J.K. Rowling or Dan Brown. I just want them to have the patience to read, the ability to understand what they read, and the fortitude to tune out televisions and iPods and cell phones long enough to be immersed in another world and another perspective. Those who know how to read also know how to write and how to think. And this goal, while seemingly small and insulting to the students, is not intended to malign them, or to make any college that I have taught at, past or present, “look bad.” In my experience, most freshmen come to college not knowing how to read, or not having exposed themselves to serious literature. Jeffrey Hart has noted that even Dartmouth freshman soon come to realize, through his tutelage, that “their first twelve years of schooling had mostly been wasted.” (See the oft-anthologized essay “How to Get a College Education.”)

After all, when I first went to college, I was functionally illiterate, raised on Star Trek and Wizard of Oz novels, and I was capable of writing nothing but Doctor Who fan fiction. After four years of college, I was reading Thucydides, Plato, Dante, Virginia Woolf, Sherman Alexie, Voltaire, Toni Morrison, Bernardus Silvestris, and Molly Haskell, and my writing quality increased a thousand fold. If I can remember where I started, and have patience with my freshman for having read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and nothing else, then I can teach them to truly read and truly think critically. Then, they will begin the same painful-but-wonderful process that I began, discovering themselves, their politics, their spirituality, and their core values system as they read. Each of them will have a different journey. Some of them will change a lot and some very little. Some of them will be new recruits for the Democratic Party. Some of them won't. But I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I nudged at least a percentage of my students in what I believe to be the right direction - intellectual autonomy in the face of a mass media that is only interested in turning people into mindless consumers who have exactly the same taste and who all think and feel the same way about every topic.



And that's my goal as a moral relativist/absolutist college professor.

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