

Political Bias & Political Misinformation in the Classroom

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Big Government destroys trust ... free markets have natural mechanisms of “truth telling and promise keeping,” When they are corrupted, the market’s self-regulating moral behavior goes awry. The corruption of such mechanisms of trust by Big Government helped bring about the financial crisis ... decades of affordable housing policies along with the flood of market-distorting mortgage money from Fannie and Freddie, destroyed vital “trust technology” – such as credit ratings. By flooding the mortgage market with money, Fannie and Freddie encouraged banks to be too trusting and lend to many untrustworthy borrowers. So did Federal Reserve Bank low-interest-rate “easy money” policies. Further destroying market trust was the return of a little-known accounting rule known as mark-to-market. When the financial crisis began in the summer of 2007, the rule perversely forced institutions to understate the value of their loans, making them look weaker than they were. Short sellers swooped in like vultures, shorting bank stocks and bonds. Banks had to write down value of capital even more, which put them in a death spiral. This led to the crash of the stock market and a destruction of trust throughout the entire U.S. financial system. (p. 233).

Between 2006 and 2010, there were, in fact, more than 10 million subprime foreclosures. Wei and his colleagues ... ticked through the worrying trends in the industry that were leading toward a disaster: “loose underwriting,” “predatory lending,” “third party originators/lack of accountability,” and “inadequate oversight.” “From 2003 to 2006, the market just went crazy,” says Wei, “and nobody cared!” During the same time that CRL [Center for Responsible Lending] was predicting a coming catastrophe in housing, Ben Bernanke, then a Federal Reserve governor nominated to become chair, was assuring anyone who would listen that the housing market was fine. In July 2005, he said that the “fundamentals” of the housing market were “very strong” And he was doing this despite the fact that representatives from CRL and other similarly situated groups were actually meeting with members of the Fed to warn them of what was coming. “I don’t think people realize how much information the regulators had,” says CRL chief operating officer Debbie Goldstein. “They had plenty of complaints, they had plenty of research. They had standards they could have put in place the profiles of the local bank boards are all bankers, and they’re the only people who get a vote when selecting those who will serve on the Federal Reserve Board. What this means is that the people running the single most powerful economic institution in the country are mostly chosen by bankers. And as we’ve learned the hard way over this past decade, bankers’ information about the economy isn’t necessarily the only information there is, and their interests don’t necessarily align with those of the public’s at large Such is the core lesson of the financial crisis: the increasing inequality, compartmentalization, and stratification of America in the post-meritocratic age served to seduce those at the top into an extremely dangerous, even pathological, kind of complacency. The ship sprung a leak down in the lower decks, flooding the servants’ quarters, and no one up top realized that it would bring down the whole thing. The cocktails continued to flow, the band continued to play, and the party rollicked on Wall Street throughout the housing bubble, even as subprime borrowers drowned, as their lives and wealth and homes were destroyed. But the water kept coming in, and it climbed deck by deck until, eventually, the music stopped and the party ended, and it looked like the entire thing might go down. (pp. 208-212)

NOW – From where do these quotes come?

Forbes, Steve, and Ames, Elizabeth (2012). *Freedom Manifesto: Why Free Markets are Moral and Big Government Isn't*. New York: Crown.

Hayes, Christopher (2012). *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*. New York: Crown.

SO – What's the Problem?

1. Political issues – such as the housing crisis – are already complicated, confusing, boring, seemingly irrelevant to our students.
2. Our students “seek out traditional news sources less and less and that they have a difficult time knowing how to judge the legitimacy of the information that does come at them”
3. Our “students have acquired a regular news habit or a reliance on legitimate news sources. Rather, they get their information from short snippets on the radio or television” and the internet and their phones!
4. Many students “aren't willing to see things from a different point of view”

SOURCES:

2. PBS Newshour, “News Literacy Project Trains Young People to Be Skeptical Media Consumers.” December 13, 2011 http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/july-dec11/newsliteracy_12-13.html
3. Emily Tymus, 2012, “Comparing News Sources: Where Would You Turn?” http://www.hsj.org/modules/lesson_plans/detail.cfm?LessonPlanId=331
4. Susan Herbst (2010). *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, p. 114.

NOW WHAT – How do we address this?

The Center for Media Literacy has some suggestions:

1. Compare headlines with/and story content
2. Identify politically-charged labels, adjectives, and verbs
3. Question the hidden agenda of suspicious sources
4. Consider whether the placement of ideas and sources affects story impact
5. Look for alternate perspectives
6. Be suspicious of polls and statistics
7. What is left unanswered and what is not discussed in a story?
8. Look for the writer who goes the “extra mile” and includes history, culture, etc.

AND – What about MY bias?

Do I try to stay “objective”?

Do I disclose my political perspectives?

How can I offer “balanced” views, or should I?

Potential problems of instructor disclosure:

1. My perspectives could cause a “chilling effect” on students’ thoughts
2. Students may fear being “wrong”
3. I may drown-out other important perspectives
4. If I want my students to think critically, my opinion may stifle that
5. My views may “indoctrinate” students
6. My perspectives may cause imbalances in class debates

Potential benefits of instructor disclosure:

1. My perspectives could excite some students to share their thoughts
2. Students may be motivated to learn more from my perspectives/expertise
3. My thoughts might provide ideas students have not considered
4. I can share valuable experience that students don't receive from readings
5. My views may motivate students to be more agents of change
6. My perspectives may stimulate more in-class debate

Ultimately, this is what I do now:

1. I LISTEN and encourage my students to listen to each other
2. I try to empower student AGENCY by providing opportunities for leadership in the classroom
3. I encourage and teach my students how to CRITICALLY QUESTION
4. I suggest my students think about, and research, MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES
5. I teach about ARGUMENT – how to construct it and question/refute it
6. I expect and motivate my students to seek out DIVERSITY OF SOURCE material
7. I ask students to WITHHOLD JUDGMENT while gaining information
8. I provide examples of DIFFERENT VIEWS in the class material
9. I DISCLOSE my perspectives when asked – or I will share particular aspects of my views if I think it adds to any of the above pedagogical techniques

What do YOU do?

**What are YOUR thoughts about
these issues?**

What questions do YOU have?