I’m OK, You’re (Not) OK: Teaching in a World of Relativism

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I teach writing because I believe that learning to write is a powerful political tool: by writing we learn what we believe and by writing in certain forms we persuade others to think in new ways and, perhaps, to act on those beliefs. I teach writing because I want students to become involved in the political struggles in our country—whether they choose my side of those struggles or not. And because I believe that the ways we use and define writing can include and exclude people from public discourse, I teach writing because I want my students to recognize that it can be oppressive as well as liberatory.

I often arrange course readings so students will be confronted with multiple perspectives because I want them to recognize that our evaluations are based on assumptions about writers, readers, and institutions. I want students to recognize that issues will be differently defined, analyzed, and critiqued depending on who is viewing them. In short, I want students to see that claims about the world are socially constructed because this view will give them a place to stand back, evaluate, and advocate action to create and recreate that world. Often, however, the class discussions which ensue end in a sense of despair. Let me give you an example.

The classroom is small; it has no windows but is brightly lit. Twenty-five students, almost all nineteen years old, most of them Anglo, sit in a circle, their textbooks dutifully open to a collection of essays about affirmative action policies. The room is silent as I lean back in my chair and study their faces. No one speaks for a while. We have read essays from a pro-affirmative action stance (written by a white man), an anti-affirmative stance (written by a Black man), and a middle of the road stance (written by a Chicana woman). After a brief discussion, the students are trying to come to terms with the variety of perspectives.

“What are you thinking?” I ask finally.

One young man looks up and taps his pencil on the book. “What’s the answer?” he asks. He seems annoyed that things have become so messy. He looks to me, partly hoping that I will have the solution and partly accusing me, a female instructor commanding so little authority that I sit in the circle with my students, because he suspects I don’t know the solution.
“The answer depends on how you define the question,” I say. “Which question are you asking?”

Another student shifts in her seat. I look at her expectantly and don’t let up my gaze. “It’s all a matter of opinion,” she shrugs. “No one is right and no one is wrong. Everyone sees it in a different way.” The rest of the class moves in ways that suggest they agree, and the conversation appears to be over.

“Do you think these writers would be content with that?” I ask. “Can we take any action if all we have is a collection of equally valid perspectives?”

The first student stretches his legs, annoyed by this apparently rhetorical question. But the truth is I am holding my breath hoping someone will come up with a solution. We have stumbled into an epistemological snare, one that has caught feminists and other political activists, and I would love to find a way to cut through the ropes that immobilize us. But no one speaks. The conversation is over.

When my classes have these discussions, I am both excited and upset. I am excited because most of the students appear to have shifted away from a dualist perspective—unlike the young man who wants “the” answer, most of the class recognizes that the “answer” is multiple and that no one person or group has a monopoly on the “truth.” I am upset because this realization often ends in paralysis: if everyone is right then no one can take action based on his or her own beliefs without compromising the respect that should be accorded to others.

In order to understand this moment—both in my class and in the academic understanding of knowledge more generally—I find myself turning to the theories of intellectual development posited by William Perry, reinterpreted by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, and later re-contextualized by Janice Hays. These authors would describe my students’ reactions in terms of levels of intellectual development and suggest that my students’ current multiplicity is just a stage they will grow out of. That is certainly a comforting thought, and I read these authors eagerly to find out which teaching strategies will help my students progress.

Ultimately, however, this line of inquiry is not satisfying. While the authors assure me that students eventually will find ways to resolve the conflicts surrounding relativism, I am not so convinced. After all, there are plenty of well-educated people—and people with power to define education—who think that the push towards relativism is too messy and should be avoided. The ultimate end of the new epistemological position, they tell us, is godless anarchy, where no action or belief can be judged as “wrong” because each stems from a cultural and epistemological place from which our ethical judgments are excluded. If we aren’t going to judge things by a universal standard, they say, we cannot really judge at all. Thus, the theorists who posit that people will mature into an awareness of social construction seem to overlook the fact that their definition of maturity is
itself political. And it's not a political position that is beneficial to those who once defined "universal standards."

Furthermore, I recognize that there is an uneasiness among those political groups that do benefit from an epistemological position which sees knowledge as multifaceted and situated. Talking about the relative truths of different peoples and cultures walks dangerously close to essentialism. Do all women think in certain ways? Do all Mexican Americans advocate the same political strategies? Once we admit the answer is "no," the danger of paralysis is real. And the danger comes from outside as well. Once I suggest that a universal reality is impossible, people comfortable with the status quo can use that information to resist any alternative reality I try to suggest. If their position is "just their view," then my position is "just my view" and they are under no obligation to try to see things my way. In short, the new epistemological position appears to undermine political action. Therefore, even those among us who want to broaden the understanding of knowledge to include a variety of perspectives are nervous about the project. How do political activists address the question of relativism? What solutions do they offer? How can I use their strategies in my classroom to push beyond this paralyzing moment of silence?

To find techniques I might use in my classes, I have performed a quick survey of writing by politically active academics, and I have extracted some of the strategies used to justify the socially constructed epistemological position and to advocate particular action based on a particular view in a complex, relativistic world. Although I delineate the strategies separately, it's important to note that none of the writers use only one method. The need to persuade others to see knowledge as constructed and to act based on necessarily-partial understandings of the world is so strong that these authors draw on multiple persuasive tools to make their claims.

I have found three general strategies: (1) a hierarchical view of epistemological stances, where the socially-constructed view is seen as superior and people who do not hold this view are seen as ignorant; (2) a claim for the importance of personal experience, with an assumption that a true understanding of one's personal experiences will lead to a political awareness and political stance; (3) arguments of morality—that is, an assertion that the socially-constructed view of knowledge is more ethical than other views and that "proper" action should be based on concerns for all humanity. A common technique within this final category is to analyze epistemological positions according to how they maintain power relations and to argue that positions which dominate others are immoral.

I find these rhetorical moves persuasive: as a white woman committed to liberatory politics, I value these essays for the ways they convince me to more closely analyze my own actions and for the ways they encourage me to take political stances. But this time, I come to these articles trying to see them from other eyes. I come to discover how I might use their strategies to
convince my students that a position of uncommitted relativism is not good enough. I want to know how to make my students take a stance. For these audiences, as I hope to explain, the first two of these strategies are most tempting and least effective.

Hierarchies of Ignorance/Awareness
A common way to profess a social-constructionist epistemology and justify political action is to establish a hierarchy of "awareness." As can be seen in theories of epistemological development, some scholars who embrace social constructionism readily accept the assumption that their views of knowledge and reality are more "mature" than any other. Consider, for example, the much cited works of William Perry and of Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule: these authors delineate sequences of intellectual development which end in "Committed Relativism" or "Constructed Knowing." Many who advocate this view rely on the developmental model to justify why students should embrace social constructionism. Janice Hays, for example, states that we should try to change students' thinking because "more intellectual complexity is better than less" (in press). This claim that social construction is the highest intellectual position makes it easy to dismiss others as less educated or less aware and to assume that with more information and more reflection they will see the truth of our position. (It is especially easy to do this when these "others" are our students.) Let me briefly show examples of this strategy at work in essays by Bonnie Zimmerman and Heidi Hartmann.

Zimmerman uses this strategy most clearly. In "Seeing Reading, Knowing: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature," she describes a way of reading which she calls "perverse" because it goes against the original intentions of the text. As a lesbian, she says, she reads literature differently and is acutely aware of the heterosexist assumptions of texts and criticisms. She wants to clarify, however, that she does not view heterosexists or racists as conspiring against other groups; rather, she understands their actions to be a result of ignorance about the other groups. She says,

I believe that feminist inquiry must see that such [heterosexist] narrowmindedness is the product of ignorance, not malice, and that, as lesbian scholars articulate both a lesbian perspective and a critique of the heterosexist perspective, most unreflective thinkers will change and adjust their own vision of the world. (97)

Zimmerman's view is not unusual among academics—after all, our profession is based on the notion of passing on knowledge and expecting that others will adjust their perspectives based on the new information. For Zimmerman, the best views are the ones which are most complex because they take into account a variety of other perspectives. She assumes that these "narrowminded" people adhere to her epistemology and won't be threatened by the need to adjust their views. While it is true that most social
constructionists would be willing to consider such a change, logical-positivists (like New Critics) will not admit that a new perspective should force them to change their views. As both Sandra Harding and Lorraine Code point out, logical-positivists do not believe that the particular positions of the knower should make any difference in the acquisition of "knowledge."

The ignorance/awareness hierarchy is also employed whenever political advocates push for consciousness-raising. At the end of "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," Hartmann urges feminists and Marxists to work together to fight the capitalist patriarchy. She suggests that part of this fight will be a form of political consciousness-raising where women attempt to teach men to examine the "human needs for nurturance, sharing, and growth and the potential for meeting those needs in a nonhierarchical, nonpatriarchal society" (33). Although Hartmann acknowledges that men might ultimately choose the status quo rather than lose their current positions of power, the fact that one step in the Marxist/feminist strategy is to raise others' consciousness implies that a big reason for the lack of change is ignorance. She suggests that, at this point anyway, men are not "choosing" to remain in the hierarchical patriarchy and that we should, at least, make them aware that they have a choice. When they see the whole picture, they will be more likely to make the "right" choice. What this strategy ignores is the fact that these men may well have considered all this information and may well be making their choices based on other rationalizations. Simply giving more information will not necessarily lead others to change their views.

While the ignorance/awareness dichotomy is seductive, we will recognize its arrogance as soon as we hear the same logic come from an adversary. In the "Advisory" in the beginning of his book The Way Things Ought to Be, Rush Limbaugh suggests that the only reason liberals don't advocate his conservative philosophy is that they don't yet have enough information. Once they have the information, they will have to take his view:

For those of you among the Liberal Elite who take a stab at reading this book, be forewarned. Everything in this book is right and you must be prepared to confront that reality. You can no longer be an honest liberal after reading this entire masterpiece. Throughout the book you will be challenged, because you will actually be persuaded to the conservative point of view. Whether you can admit this in the end will be a true test of your mettle as a human being. (xiv)

Limbaugh's assumption that we are leftists only because we have not thoroughly examined our situation is offensive. And when feminists and social constructionists assume that others don't advocate a feminist/social constructionist position because they have not had access to the right information or have not reflected enough on the material that they do have, we make this same arrogant leap. We cannot simultaneously decry conservative elitism and use the same strategy ourselves. Social constructionism is a
complex, useful theory, but our stating that it is the "best" and the "most sophisticated" will not make it so. We cannot assume that everyone would eventually end up a social constructionist, given the right environment. Social constructionism, like logical-positivism, is an epistemological position which endorses political positions, and we must acknowledge those political positions when we advocate it.

The Personal Is Political
A second strategy for claiming that social constructionist epistemology is the best choice and for advocating particular action within social construction is to insist on the importance of personal experiences and intuition. The assumption here is that when one truly incorporates personal experiences with external knowledge, one will be put in a position to challenge the assumptions of traditional epistemologies. This perspective takes on a variety of shapes, as we can see by examining essays by Sandra Harding, Naomi Scheman, and Chris Weedon. First, however, let's return to Bonnie Zimmerman.

When Bonnie Zimmerman describes how she reads as a lesbian she enacts this personal/political strategy. She places her own experiences with literature against the assumptions about literary criticism that have been handed down in the discipline. She uses her own experiences to critique those assumptions. Recognizing that her style of reading is a political act, she calls it "perverse" and encourages others to "read perversely" as well. Sandra Harding tells us that acknowledging such "perverse identities" in oneself is an "advantage, epistemologically" ("Who" 103). When we claim a "perverse identity," we can more readily recognize the cracks in claims to universalism, because we are those cracks. We ourselves are what is left out of the traditional paradigm.

Naomi Scheman suggests that an acknowledgment of the personal is precisely the tool which upsets traditional epistemologies. She tells us

When people are empowered to speak in their own voices, out of their own bodies, lives and communities, and not as impersonators of the privileges, the tools of thought are transformed. Truth becomes a goal of ever broader coalitions, the hallmark of knowledge shareable by more and different particular others, for more and different political ends. (197)

Her references to the body here resonate with the claims of French feminists like Hélène Cixous who call for women to "write the body": once again the willingness to abandon what others have told us and truly examine and validate our own experiences is seen as the way to transform our perspectives on reality and, ultimately perhaps, suggest the proper actions needed to change reality itself.

It would be dangerous to assume that the move to examine and affirm the personal would, in itself, account for the transformation of knowledge. A
woman reflecting on her experience may not recognize the patriarchal forces around her; an Anglo reflecting on her experience may not recognize how she participates in the racism around her. Chris Weedon writes,

Many feminists assume that women's experiences, unmediated by further theory, is the source of true knowledge and the basis for feminist politics. . . . [But] it is not enough to refer unproblematically to experience. . . . We need a theory of the relation between experience, social power, and resistance. (8)

As all of these authors imply, and as Chris Weedon tells us overtly, reflection on personal experiences must be accompanied by analytical tools for understanding those experiences. When these authors call for us to use our personal experience as a way to begin to transform knowledge, they assume that we already have tools for recognizing those experiences in political contexts. Thus, the call to examine personal experiences applies to women who are feminists, for example, or, as Joyce A. Joyce says, “African Americans who are undeniably Black” (170).

Like the call to seek out additional information to end one's “ignorance,” the call to turn inward and claim those personal experiences which are not respected in the traditional structures of knowledge turns out to be a confirmation for people who are already “converted.” At best it is a helpful framework for people who are already willing to see the world differently and wish to hear how others' reflections on experiences have given them political and personal insights. But the key is that people must enter this dialogue willing to consider reshaping their understandings of their experiences. Simply looking at personal experiences will no more help a person critique the dominant epistemology than giving her more information will ensure that she “rises” to a social constructionist view. Both of these strategies will, however, help people who already espouse a social constructionist view to reaffirm their positions. In order to lead new people to see social constructionist epistemologies as a worthwhile and necessary way to view knowledge, we need an analytical theory for interpreting the personal and external knowledge they gather.

Liberation Morality and the Analysis of Power
The strategy I find most common (and most persuasive) in essays by political activists who critique dominant ideologies is what I call “liberation morality,” a claim to morality which proposes epistemological positions and action based on a concern for others and a self-reflective analysis of whose interests are being served. In her critique of traditional definitions of “literature,” Joyce A. Joyce pronounces as immoral their inherent exclusion of other groups' ways of writing and ways of knowing. She sees “the welfare of human beings” as a primary concern in her work: “My sensibility is that of a humanist, not a scientist, and my intellectual, analytical, emotional, intuitive, and pedagogical values arise from my concern for the welfare of human
beings" (164). This stance allows Joyce to reject traditional epistemologies because of their exclusion and to advocate a particular course of action. Joyce claims a course of action by examining which epistemologies and which actions will be most inclusive. This stance, it seems, is an ideal way to get around the traditionalist's anti-relativism argument, that paralyzing strategy whereby the traditionalist undermines any course of action by suggesting that, in a relativistic world, one cannot choose one thing because everything is equal. Joyce's position (or liberation morality) proposes that one can choose actions and ideas by selecting theories and actions which will not restrict or harm people. To make such selections, one needs to analyze situations according to relations of power.

Many theorists contextualize the "problem" of relativism by analyzing the power relations involved. Harding points out that it is only a "problem" when those in power feel that alternative positions might be capable of upsetting their dominant views—views in which they are heavily invested. In fact, she tells us, if alternate views are not threatening, relativism can serve the status quo: people in power pay lip service to other views, give them a "place" and never consider how those views might conflict with their own. When alternative views begin to gain power, however, they are seen as problematic by the dominant forces, who deny that two views can exist simultaneously (Whose Science? 153). They want one, over-arching view: their own. But politically active, marginalized people have already seen how two beliefs of knowledge can exist simultaneously (either peaceably or in a state of struggle): they have already recognized the differences between their own epistemological understandings and those of the dominant group.

Feminists' standpoint theory offers us a way to claim positions and take actions. It demands that we recognize the multiple positions we occupy, and that we use the works of liberation movements to help us analyze how our positions interact with others. It demands that we listen especially hard to the observations and theories of marginalized groups, whose perspectives offer us a new way to view the world and our positions in it. As Harding explains in Whose Science?, the goal of using standpoint theory is to arrive at a "less false" view of the world. We must recognize that no one person is able to offer an all-encompassing "truth"; therefore, we must interrogate our own multiple positions and those of others, searching for a combined view which is less distorted by the underlying and often controlling needs of dominant groups.

What tools do liberation movements offer for analyzing power relations? If we push for an epistemology of inclusion, the analysis will question: Who is included and excluded? How? For whose benefit? Every belief and action will be scrutinized according to its rhetorical context: Who said or did it? Who was the speech or action directed towards? What was the larger context of the interaction? What assumptions were left unquestioned? What kinds of power were involved?
Teaching from Committed Relativism

The pedagogical question remains. Can I use any of these strategies to push beyond the paralysis of classroom discussions which end at a level of uncommitted relativism? What strategies might I apply to help students move past the “everyone has an opinion” and “tell us the answer” stages and find the motivation and justification for political action in a complex world?

While we may be convinced that social construction is, in fact, a more mature view of the world, and while we may find that our interrogation of personal experiences has helped us recognize (and confirm) the differences between liberatory and dominant ideologies, it is difficult to apply these strategies in our classes. As the analysis of the ignorance/awareness strategy reveals, learning more will not necessarily convince people to take actions to reverse power imbalances. In fact, as Henry Giroux and others have demonstrated, mere “education” can serve the interests of dominant groups. Unless students already believe in social construction, and unless they have already recognized a rift between the dominant ideology and their personal experiences, we will not be able to persuade them by saying either, “This is more sophisticated,” or “Look inside and you will understand what I am saying.”

For university classes in general, the best strategy, it seems to me, is to practice analysis of power relations wherever possible. We need to offer students a persuasive method that exposes the differences between the professed, dominant values and the actual effects of those ideologies. As Chris Weedon points out, we can use poststructural theory. For writing courses, we can scrutinize the rhetorical positions authors take, examining the power relations inherent in the texts. For example, do the authors make gestures to include or exclude various audiences? Do the authors assume that certain points are universal? If so, how does the text change when we consider a variety of audiences? In short, we must include questions of power in our rhetorical analyses of texts, asking not only “Who is the author?” and “Who is the reader?” but also “If we examine the text in terms of larger contexts of power, do certain claims or assumptions in the texts take on different meanings?”

The difficulty is that not all students will feel invested enough in the issues of debate to push beyond the relativist stance. Even if we follow Ira Shor’s advice and design our courses around topics that the students raise, students may not want to take the discussion beyond an articulation of different beliefs. We may need to convince our students to view the urgency of the issues, the necessity of arriving at a committed position. And this means claiming our role as teachers in the world of relativism. We don’t abandon our beliefs here. As Charles Paine points out, embracing antifoundationalism and throwing out universal, “grand theories” does not mean that we give up on all of our convictions. Rather, antifoundationalism means that we must justify our convictions in different ways: we must clarify our reasoning (546). And, if we believe we have a moral obligation to make
the world more egalitarian, we need to express these values to our students.

Our positions as politically active teachers are not merely rhetorically effective ones. They do more than provide us with an ethos from which to demand that others consider political choices. Sharing our ideals is a moral imperative: we cannot just deconstruct our students' world and walk away. We cannot teach students to be skeptics and leave it at that. As Patricia Bizzell points out, we engage in "a pedagogical bad faith" if we do so:

We . . . deconstruct ideologies the students hold as foundational, a very painful process that students often oppose no matter how egalitarian and non-authoritarian the teacher tries to be. . . . [S]tudents oppose being goaded by grades and professorial approval to achieve skepticism or the hip smirk. But it would not be exactly correct to say that this opposition springs from naive foundationalism. I think students oppose the push to skepticism because they've already seen skepticism and they don't like it. The world already looks horribly meaningless to them. (Academic 269, 271)

We must offer students a "utopian" alternative (Bizzell "Marxist" 55). We can offer our own visions. As a feminist, I agree with Dale Bauer, who argues that "political commitment—especially feminist commitment—is a legitimate classroom strategy and rhetorical imperative" (389). We can offer our goals as feminists. We can offer a goal of achieving "less false beliefs," as Harding does. We can propose the ideals of Bonnie Zimmerman, who desires a world where difference is not seen as a danger, but as an asset. We can share the urgency of Joyce A. Joyce, who wants a world which cares for the welfare of all. As Bizzell argues, "Teachers can exercise legitimate authority to set progressive educational agendas, and they have a moral right to do so" ("Classroom Authority" 861-62).

Classroom Applications
As teachers who approach class as committed relativists, ready to lead discussions which interrogate the power relations among different positions, what steps can we take to encourage students to move beyond paralyzing relativism? The first step, it seems to me, is to push students beyond their apparently untroubled acceptance of conflicting arguments. We need to persuade them that un-committed relativism is an uncomfortable place to remain. When students try to end discussions by saying "Everyone has a right to an opinion," we have to explicitly examine who benefits from this assertion.

A collaborative text described in the Winter 1994 issue of JAC provides a clear example. The collaborative group chose to write about homophobia and decided to each write a section of the paper explaining their personal encounters with and beliefs about homosexuals. One student denounced homosexuality as immoral; another student described a gay couple who lives in her neighborhood and argued that society should accept gays and lesbians. These two narratives were placed together, along with others which took
positions in between them. In their introduction, the students jointly wrote a thesis which stated that homosexuals and homophobes should accept each other's opinions. Amy Goodburn and Beth Ina point out the problem with their students' relativist logic: "the contradictions inherent in [the group's thesis], that homosexuals should respect other people's homophobia, ignores how homophobia affects gays and lesbians in material and psychological ways" (142).

Not coincidentally, the students framed their essay with admonishments that individual opinions should be heard but not judged. The idea of "respecting" relativist positions meant "listen and leave us alone." This definition in itself undermines any possibility of action and therefore only serves those groups who do not wish to make changes. It smacks of the negative connotations of the word "tolerate." After all, only those in a position of power can choose to "tolerate" others. Those who are oppressed do not have that liberty. Likewise, many groups would not consider their opinions truly respected unless they were allowed—encouraged even—to act on their beliefs. The call to "respect" multiple beliefs serves the status quo.

One way to make students uncomfortable with uncommitted relativism, then, is to zoom in on the uses of the word "respect" and lead students to examine how it functions. I had this opportunity in a recent Advanced Composition class. On a computer list-server set up for the class, a science major argued for a particular definition of "objectivity," which involved the term "respect":

Aaron: If mankind [sic] were to achieve full objectivity, then everyone would have to have respect for all others’ beliefs, etc.

Me (Phyllis): Does that mean that in the "objective" world, the homosexual would have to "respect" the homophobe who thinks all gays are immoral, or that the African American would have to "respect" the members of the KKK, or that the woman has to "respect" the men who threaten to rape her? Respect seems to be an ideal that denies power differences.

Aaron: I believe that total objectivity would eliminate the types of attitudes you are referring to (gay bashers, rapists, etc.). Of course I can only speculate, but total objectivity would have to be accompanied by a much higher attainment of morality.

Kevin: It sounds like you are defining "objective" as agreeing with your political and moral beliefs. Are there any views you hold that an "objective" person would not?

Sally: Respecting other individuals' ideas all the time is simply too hard to do in the society we live in today. Phyllis brought about an interesting point when she mentioned gays, for example, respecting homophobic ideas about
them. Or the Black person respecting the ideas of the KKK. If I was in either of these situations I certainly wouldn't respect their prejudice[d] views of me. In my mind, respect is an important thing to have for others, not for their opinions. I can respect the fact that they have an opinion, but I am not always going to respect their opinion, especially if their opinion offends me.

Aaron: That is why I am saying that absolute objectivity, theoretically, would have to be accompanied by a change in how we view things socially.

Several other voices where interspersed in this exchange; I have simplified the debate some. But the results of the questioning are, I think, fairly clear. The implications of the terminology are called into question. Aaron is forced to clarify how his definition fits in with the power dynamics of dominated and dominating groups. Students consider the impact of morality and politics. Sally, in particular, provides a way to move beyond paralysis when she points out that respecting people is different from respecting opinions. Her position allows us to judge positions and, therefore, justify actions.

We can also generate discussion and debate about the term "respect" by using it as a "generative term" and having students freewrite. We could then draw on these writings and list the assumptions behind the definitions—that "respect" means that we should not try to change others’ opinions, that "respect" means we should not judge others—and discuss whether these assumptions complement or conflict with other assumptions in the term—that people should be valued, for example. We could ask students whether they believe the authors they have read were "respectful" of the others' opinions and to show how those authors acted upon that respect. We can ask whether "respect" is always valuable: in what situations would "respect" conflict with egalitarian goals? When does the call to "respect" undermine valuable political action?

An assumption that sometimes wiggles in among the equivocations of the term "respect" is that multiple positions can exist separately. We can agree that multiple views exist simultaneously: any politically active, marginalized group can point to both a dominant belief and their own view. The danger comes when we propose that these multiple views do not interact with each other. We must ask students how each position affects others. Beliefs are not isolated from actions; even if we ourselves do not take action on our beliefs, we may give implicit permission to support others' actions. Therefore, we must examine how our beliefs might translate into state or national legislation, university policy, daily behaviors, and so on. What do our beliefs "allow" us to do, what do they demand we do, and how might those actions interact and conflict with others' beliefs and actions? In the dialogue above, my question to Aaron takes his discussion out of the abstract, where we can "respect all views," and into a realm where views slam hard against
each other. In the collaborative project on homosexuality, the homophobe's assertion that gays and lesbians should respect his opinions undermines any attempts to challenge that belief. It ignores that fact that his opinion has an affect on the gay couple in his peer's neighborhood.

Perhaps the most difficult impasse in pushing beyond relativism when we take on such political discussions is that students feel that they are not capable of resolving all of the conflicts. This was true in my first-year composition class when we discussed affirmative action. We had, after all, just read the works of scholars who themselves could not come to an agreement. I did not expect them to develop a policy which would have resolved the authors' concerns. I did, however, want them to feel the urgency of the issue. I wanted them to feel uncomfortable with the multiple views in the class: Anglo men had protested that they were being shut out of jobs, while a black woman had stressed that she, in fact, was not going to have an easy time in the workforce. That students did have personal investments is, perhaps, a clue to another strategy we can use to break the paralysis: we can ask students to research the way the issue affects the community. We can ask students to interview other students and faculty on campus, counselors in the career placement office, affirmative action officers. We can bring in salary comparisons; we can look up the relative rates of employment in various fields. We can examine the national debates which led to the establishment of the affirmative action policy and explore which of the conditions have changed since its implementation. In each instance, we can ask how the results of our study might affect members of the community.

In the end, of course, even the most committed, active class may not feel that their studies will have an impact on the university community. In the end, even the most committed, active class may not come to consensus. I recognize that in our teaching we must leave space for ambiguity, space for students to hold disparate ideas until time and experience give them ways to reconceptualize those ideas. But this space is different from the comfortable position of relativism. In relativism, we can ignore the conflicts, assuming that all opinions live in happy harmony. In the space of ambiguity, we are less comfortable; we acknowledge the dissonance among the opinions and we intend to find solutions. Relativism is a point of premature closure; ambiguity is a recognition that closure has been delayed.

As a teacher committed to liberatory politics, I am troubled when my students are content to remain relativists. I recognize that many of my own reasons for embracing committed relativism—politically active social constructionism—come from feeling the ropes of relativist paralysis cut too painfully into my hopes for emancipatory politics. The blunt truth is, I want to make my students feel this discomfort as well. To do so, I must share my utopian goals—I must offer a hope that goes beyond skepticism. To do so, I must point to the ways that our common justifications for advocating uncommitted relativism don't hold up in a hierarchical, power-stratified
society. To do so, I must arrange discussions and import class materials which show the clashing relationships among positions once viewed as simultaneous and separate.

True, I cannot expect my students to arrive at committed positions in my class. With any issue, in any situation, arriving at a commitment is a long process. But I can promote that place of ambiguity. And while I cannot guarantee that students will remain there, or will not, after the semester, slip back into the more comfortable relativism, I can believe—as Ira Shor does—that this moment, this process, might serve as a precondition for an embrace of a social constructionist view which strives for political action.

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M.A. and Ph.D. in English with Specialization in Rhetoric and Composition

The University of South Florida offers a specialization in rhetoric and composition at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels. Students can choose this specialization to prepare themselves to conduct research into rhetorical history, theory, and practice, and to teach composition and literature at the college and secondary levels.

This program allows students to study the history and philosophy of rhetoric, the theory of composition, composition research and its design, the teaching of writing and literature, the theory and practice of stylistic analysis, and the administration of writing programs. Students also study traditional British and American literature and critical theory.

Teaching assistantships, tuition waivers, and other kinds of financial aid are available. For further information call or write: Professor Sara M. Deats; Director of Graduate Study; English Department; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620 (813-974-2421).