

Holding Class While Holding Our Breath

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Like many, I have vivid memories of my first presidential election. It was the year 2000, and I was voting in the crucial battleground state of Ohio. I was a conscientious student, but I was so distracted by the race that week, I put off starting a paper that was due the morning after Election Day. I told myself I would get to work once the polls closed and the results were clear. I was a night owl, and races were generally called by 9PM, so I didn't think it would be a problem.

Florida was called for Gore at 8:00 PM, but Ohio was too close to call, so I decided to wait. It was not until 4:30 AM, after the original Florida call was retracted, called for Bush, and then retracted again, that I began typing an essay about the social contract through sleep-deprived tears. I remember thinking that an unfolding electoral and constitutional crisis just might be a reasonable excuse, but I still couldn't bring myself to use it.

Fast forward 16 years. I was a professor in Texas and teaching a course on [political disagreement](#). I had been so disturbed by the rhetoric of the 2016 campaign that I decided to address it head-on. But when the race was called for Trump at 2:30 AM on election night, I was inconsolable. I was also scheduled to meet with my students less than 7 hours later. I knew they'd be looking to me for guidance and that I wasn't remotely ready to provide it. So I wrote them and told them to get some sleep, instead.

In the days that followed, it was clear my relatively apolitical campus was in turmoil and that similar scenes were unfolding across the country. Conservatives began to criticize higher education for treating a legitimate electoral outcome like a terrorist attack or natural disaster, and I myself began to wonder whether I could justify my decision to cancel class. Would I have done the same if the race had been called for Hillary? When I finally reconnected with my students that Friday, I decided to put the question to them: what did their professors owe them in that moment, and had my decision met that bar?

I learned that I was not alone in canceling class, that other faculty had held class but broken down in tears, and still others carried on as if nothing of significance had happened. The students were generally grateful to have gotten the extra sleep in my course, but there was little consensus about the ideal. Some appreciated the authenticity of faculty who disclosed their fears; others worried it would alienate students who disagreed. Some thought ignoring the election was insensitive; others appreciated the respite from political discord. Regardless of their perspective, it was clear the students had something to say, and that they were grateful to have had the opportunity to say it.

I've been thinking a lot about these moments as I've talked with many of you over the last few weeks. While this election gives us plenty to be anxious about on its own, it's clear that echoes of past elections—2016 for most, and 2000 for some—are amplifying our collective unease. If you're like me, you've been "managing" this unease by listening to 25 different podcasts a day, reading the crosstabs of obscure Iowa polls, and stress-eating Halloween candy for five days straight. But even those who are more confident (or less concerned about presidential outcomes) may be holding their breath tonight.

You may have heard the CAT, like many other teaching centers across the country, has prepared a formal [guide](#) to teaching during the 2024 election. I encourage you to make use of the resources in that guide, and to join us for drop-in hours on [Wednesday](#) and [Thursday](#). But if you are short on time, there are three important lessons from the stories above worth keeping in mind over the next few days.

First, **the election may shape your students' ability to learn**. As my experience in 2000 makes clear, students need not experience a mental health crisis to find themselves underwater this week. Likewise, we need not be [mental health professionals](#) to support our students in this moment. Just as we would make adjustments if a fire alarm were pulled during an exam, we should be prepared to make adjustments if the next few days disrupt our students' best laid plans. In fact, all of us—whether we're teaching Accounting, Biology, or Classics—can use this moment to demonstrate our commitment to democratic education. By making room for our students' civic obligations, we are communicating that a Wake Forest education aligns with, and is responsive to, the realities of democratic life.

Second, **the election may shape your ability to teach**. When I made the decision to cancel my class in 2016, I knew I was not yet ready to show up for my students. I was anxious about this decision for the better part of a week, but I eventually came to see it as a reflection of my humanity. We are encouraged to take time off to recover from physical illnesses and, likewise, should find no shame in taking the time we need to process our emotions and refill our tanks before returning to the classroom. But if we are up for it, we can also enrich our students' experiences by showing up and sharing in an authentic way. By leaning into who we are and what we value, and processing our reactions openly, we can help students process their own reactions and model what authentic democratic engagement looks like.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **the election may tempt us to mistake neutrality for fairness and respect**.

I suspect some of you may feel uneasy about the recommendation I just made. You might be asking: Given the power dynamics in the classroom, isn't it risky to share our political perspectives with students? Won't doing so alienate students who see things differently? Wouldn't it be safer, and perhaps more just, to keep our views concealed?

If so, we are kindred spirits. I have rarely stepped foot in a classroom or talked with an individual student without worrying about these issues. I've had a book project on indoctrination bouncing around in my head for a number of years. And these were precisely the concerns that weighed on me after I cancelled my class in 2016. I knew that I wouldn't have cancelled if Hillary had won, and I worried my decision would be read as an obvious signal of my political preferences or, worse, a sign I disrespected students who were less concerned than I was. So why am I now recommending bringing our whole selves into the classroom, particularly when emotions are high and divisions are deep?

The conversation I had with my students the Friday after Trump won, and numerous conversations I have had since, have convinced me that what we demand of our teachers relies on a conceptual mistake. More specifically, we have often demanded neutrality of teachers when what we really want is teachers who treat their students with fairness and respect. What I realized that day (and seems obvious in hindsight) is that it is entirely possible to treat my students with fairness and respect *without* pretending I am a "woman from nowhere," with no identity, values, or political preferences. And in doing so, I can model an essential skill of democratic engagement.

None of this is to suggest we have an *obligation* to bring our politics into the classroom. Many of us have good reasons to keep our politics, and other matters of our personal life, private. But if you find yourself overcome with emotion in the next few days, and you worry about what this means for your students, I encourage you to engage them with equal parts honesty and respect. In doing so, you can demonstrate that a healthy democracy isn't built on silence, but on the ability to stand firm in our beliefs while welcoming others into the conversation. This week, more than ever, we have the opportunity to embody this lesson.

Stay well tonight, friends. And don't forget to breathe! ❤️

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