



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

As a professor in Florida, here's what crying in front of my class taught me

How do I teach about war, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction,
war crimes and global justice without my ideological bias dominating
the discussion?



Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering stands in the prisoner's dock at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in Germany in Nov. 21, 1945. Goering is wearing headphones of the court translating system. [AP]

The class of 35 was silent. I was in tears in the front of the room. This was not in the lesson plan! Yet, there I was crying in front of the class.

The course was Human Rights and International Law, and we were “reliving” the Nuremberg Tribunal. I had just finished reading transcripts from the trial that included a moving eyewitness account of a Jewish father and his 11-year-old son, forced to strip naked and stand with a group in a ditch to be shot. Before they are killed, the father tries to comfort the boy, points to the blue sky, whispers that he loves him and that everything will turn out OK.

I had read this account many times, yet this time I choked up and couldn't continue. The intensity of my emotions was genuine. It will probably take a long time for the students in this class to forget not only their teacher in tears but the lessons of Nuremberg as well.

Successful teaching of international relations includes the creation of a learning environment that provides students with a sense of direct engagement with history and current affairs. “Reliving” the Nuremberg Tribunal is just one example of an attempt to breathe life into international relations in a manner that challenges and motivates.

But those of us teaching international relations and political science face a difficult issue. How do I teach about war, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, war crimes and global justice without my ideological bias dominating the discussion? I feel strongly, for example, that the work of the Nuremberg Tribunal, combined with the founding of the United Nations and Human Rights law, established a workable framework for peace and justice between and within the nations of the world.

Others believe differently and argue that the post-World War II settlements were nothing more than a continuation of great power politics, with the violence in the world today a sad demonstration of the failures of the U.N. dream. The challenge is to create a classroom where all views on highly controversial issues are respected and students feel open to challenging my interpretations. My objective in teaching is never to proselytize, but to create a classroom of intellectual and academic freedom.

Academic freedom requires that every argument is required to consider and deliberate its most powerful antithesis so that all sides of an issue can be fully explored. Students deserve the opportunity to try out their ideas and raise their gut reactions to the course material in a safe space.

Yet, a teacher's intellectual and political positions can stifle such an open classroom. Students will follow the lead and instructions of their professors. Students will often accept, without question, a teacher's version of historical and current events.

Students holding positions that differ from their instructors' are often intimidated or afraid to voice their views and retreat from seriously engaging with the course material. The professor's power to evaluate and grade students' performance can further lead to the self-censorship and silencing of those students who hold opposing positions.

Figuring out how to create an open and stimulating classroom is difficult. No matter how hard a professor tries to be "objective," and present all sides of an issue, his or her bias will influence the direction of the course. Professors' bias begins with the creation of the course in the selection of certain books and texts over others and the highlighting in the syllabus of certain topics for class discussion. It is impossible to prevent one's intellectual and political biases from influencing these decisions.

I tried to address this conundrum in two ways in my teaching — through honesty and respect. By upholding these two principles, I believe I was able to create classrooms that promoted lively critical pluralism and acceptance of conservative, liberal and radical student perspectives.

Honesty: On the first day of class, I explain to students that unfortunately I was not a Jedi and didn't have ultimate wisdom. In fact, as a human being, I had my biases and this would undoubtedly influence the course.

For example, in teaching about the Iraq War, it is impossible to pretend I don't have opinions. (I wrote a book on the illegality and immorality of the Iraq War.) Or, another example: In teaching about structural racism in my human rights

class, I have published extensively on the mass incarceration of Black men as the leading human rights issue in America today.

I clearly have strong views on these controversial issues. While honest about my perspectives, I encouraged the students to challenge my liberal perspectives and, where they disagreed, to speak up. I stressed how I would always be honest with them and admire their honesty in return.

By encouraging liberal, conservative and radical students to openly express their views and freely challenge my perspectives, my classes were not only lively, but all of us (perhaps especially me) gained new insights from each other on some of the most pressing issues confronting humanity.

Respect: A close friend of mine once wrote to me about the power of really “listening” and “seeing” each other. I made listening and seeing my students central to my teaching philosophy. “Listening” involves really caring about what students have to say. “Seeing” means getting beyond stereotypes (often not such an easy thing to do) and attempting to reconstruct the world as the student you are seeing might see it. Every student deserves to be heard and seen and respected. Every voice is valuable. Academic excellence in the classroom fundamentally revolves around the ability to listen and see and with compassion attempt to understand the world through the eyes of our students.

As the poet William Blake wrote so eloquently: “Life delights in life/ for everything that lives is Holy.” Such an approach toward “seeing” and “listening” applies not just to understanding students, but is also critical to understanding international relations. How does an Israeli see the world? A Palestinian? A Ukrainian? A Russian? The result of such “seeing” and “listening” is that compassion and empathy move to the fore, and a deeper understanding of both individual lives and our world emerges.

Unfortunately, the DeSantis administration’s well-documented culture war and ideological attack on academic freedom in Florida demonstrates little compassion or understanding of the complexity of teaching. Instead of “seeing” and “listening” to students and faculty, Gov. Ron DeSantis is on an ideological campaign to make campuses more conservative, and bring curriculum in line with the governor’s ideological preferences. This is seen, perhaps most clearly, in the

attempt to remold New College into the image of Hillsdale, a private conservative Christian school in Michigan.

It is also shown in the disrespect the governor displays toward professors across Florida, who now face barriers to teaching basic knowledge and facts around race and gender. For example, the DeSantis-backed Florida Senate Bill 266 (the anti-diversity, equity and inclusion bill) drastically attacks the basic idea of open and free debate of all views in college classes. The new law instead makes it illegal to even discuss certain ideas.

The law states that general education courses cannot be based on “theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities.” As documented in my book, “The Ethics of Interdependence,” the mass incarceration of Black men in America is a result of systemic racism that serves to maintain social, political and economic inequities in our country. My book is now effectively banned in general education courses in Florida’s universities.

With his compliant Republican Legislature, DeSantis has for now won his cultural wars on Florida’s campuses. But, for those of us on the right and the left who believe in intellectual honesty, open and honest debate and academic freedom, our fight against these ideological intrusions must continue and, for the sake of our country, cannot be ultimately lost.



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