



Q & A with Rebecca Cooper Geller on: "Teacher Political Disclosure in the Trump Era"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I serve as Assistant Professor of Secondary Social Studies Education at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, WY, got my Ph.D. in Education from UCLA, and taught at the elementary and middle school levels in Oakland, CA for six years. My ultimate goal is to create spaces to support critical social studies education, preparing teachers to challenge racism in schools, and supporting teachers to create classrooms that are humanizing and nurturing for students of color. I am interested in civic and democratic education, critical race theory, research-practice partnerships, and social studies education. My own professional development efforts have been focused on learning about teaching social studies in rural contexts. Outside of my professional pursuits, I spend my time rereading my favorite books by Philip Pullman and Jesmyn Ward, watching Top Chef and The Great British Bake-Off, and relaxing, eating, and going on adventures with my husband and son.



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QUESTION #1:

Teacher's Question

Can you illustrate what it looks like when teachers have disclosed their political beliefs to their class and done it well (made discussions better) compared to when teachers have done so poorly?

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Rebecca Cooper Geller's Response

There were more examples of disclosure gone wrong than of teachers who disclosed well. (And there were many more examples still of teachers who tried to avoid disclosure altogether and tried not to put themselves in a position to disclose.) In one example, a teacher described disclosing her opinions in order to model nuanced political thinking for her students, walking them through her own thinking on a particular issue. In another example included in my article, a teacher revealed her presidential vote to her students who were largely undocumented because she saw it as an important part of whether or not they would trust her (see also [Conrad, 2020](#)). That's not something that every teacher could (or maybe even should) do, but at her school, in her context, with her students, that moment of political disclosure.

Teachers should make a professional decision to disclose in ways and for reasons that are relevant and reasonable in their community context. The teachers who were less successful were those who had no particular rationale for disclosing (see Thomas Misco's article in this issue for more on the need for rationales) and instead shouted their opinions at students in order to close off discussions that got out of hand. In those cases, they weren't thinking about pedagogy or student agency, and their decisions weren't reasoned or thoughtful; they were reactive. When I taught middle school social studies and English, my reactive decisions were never my best ones.

QUESTION #2:

Teacher's Question

As a veteran teacher who mentors preservice and new teachers, my inclination is to tell them that political disclosure should only be undertaken once they've become tenured. I would feel guilty if I encouraged them to disclose and it cost them their job. To what extent am I right to be encouraging them to be cautious? If you think I'm wrong, please convince me otherwise.

Rebecca Cooper Geller's Response

The consequences of disclosure are real for a lot of teachers, and I wouldn't pretend otherwise. One of the teachers in this study who most wanted to be transparent about bias with her students said she "felt like a coward" because she was silent about specific issues when her administrators threatened firings. Another teacher put a lot of effort into hiding his political beliefs in the classroom after members of the local community threatened gun violence in relation to political events at the school. Those concerns absolutely matter, and caution is understandable. But the problem is that whether or not teachers intend to disclose, their decisions in the classroom constantly send political messages that students pick up on.

Researchers like Wayne Journell (2011) have found that teachers who claim they are neutral in the classroom actually communicate their partisan opinions regularly through

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the comments they make, the materials they use, how they frame questions, and in dozens of other small, seemingly innocuous ways.

The question ought to be whether teachers will disclose in ways that are transparent and allow space for dissent on the one hand, or ineffectively shrouded such that students can still, as one teacher stated, “ferret out” their political beliefs, on the other. Your caution isn’t necessarily wrong, and disclosing isn’t necessarily right, and this research shows that disclosing is hugely dependent on the context (which I talk more about in a later answer). But the dichotomy in the choice about whether or not to share is a false one. My argument based on this research is that teachers need to recognize that disclosing—again, done thoughtfully and based on professional judgment—can be a more ethical choice and can contribute to student learning (to say nothing of contributing to feelings of safety and connectedness for students marginalized or targeted in the issues being discussed), and that figuring out how and when to do it is particularly challenging in this polarized political climate.

QUESTION #3:

Teacher's Question

It seems that teachers could potentially engage in either political disclosure or fact-checking, without (potentially) doing both. In your research how do these two acts compliment or complicate the other?

Rebecca Cooper Geller's Response

This is such an important point! One of the challenges that the teachers in this study experienced was that they felt like they were disclosing, even when what they were doing was fact-checking. Many of them pointed to how any communal or shared definitions of truth and fact have been eroded since the 2016 presidential election, and that this erosion has politicized their efforts to correct errors or misinformation in the classroom—regardless of what the teacher’s own political beliefs actually are. The teachers in this study felt that since “basic facts were contested,” the line between giving away their political position and asserting facts became blurred. Though they described feeling it was their duty as the teacher to ground lessons in facts, assert factual information, and teach students to be critical consumers of media, they also said that doing so felt inherently political, even partisan. One economics teacher even said that when he presented data in the classroom, his students demanded that he provide “alternative facts” that would be more “fair and balanced.” The increasingly partisan nature of determining what counts as a fact isn’t a question that my research answered, but it’s absolutely related to disclosure.

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QUESTION #4:

Teacher's Question

I worry that political disclosure makes the teacher and their views the center of all debate, which is the opposite of what I think teachers want. Once you decide to disclose, I worry that students will want to hear my views at the outset of any and all discussions. What does your research reveal about how teachers who disclose avoid this situation or minimize its impact on the discussion?

Rebecca Cooper Geller's Response

The key for teachers is in the how. Disclosure can silence student opinions, but it can also be done in ways that keep students, their learning, and their opinions at the center. Instead, a teacher's disclosed opinion can just become one of the many political opinions in the classroom. This is what Thomas Kelly (1986) called "committed impartiality," in that the teacher is partial to a given perspective, but they do not impose it on students in the classroom (Wayne Journell writes about this in more detail in his article from this ASSERT issue).

Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015) have done some research on the student side of teacher political disclosure. They found that students overwhelmingly supported hearing teachers' opinions as long as the disclosure didn't "push" opinions onto students, and that students didn't feel particularly swayed to adopt the teacher's beliefs. They found that students wanted to figure out their own stances on political issues, and that for some of them, hearing the teachers' opinions as part of a broader discussion of issues in the classroom could help them with that process. (That means, of course, that some didn't feel that hearing teachers' opinions could help them make up their own minds about the issues, and interestingly, students in their study often disagreed about whether the teacher had even disclosed in the first place.)

In my study, the teachers who minimized their opinion's impact on discussion did two things: one, they grounded their disclosure in transparency. For example, one teacher's summary of her approach was: "here are both sides, but I want to let you know that I have an opinion about this and it's going to shape my narrative." Second, they encouraged students to disagree with them and to provide evidence to support their arguments. When teachers do that and are clear with students about their pedagogical choices, they can avoid having their opinions move into the realm of indoctrination. The point is that teachers should not impose their political opinions in the classroom, flagrantly trumpet their beliefs on every issue in the classroom just for the sake of disclosing, nor profess a neutrality that no person is able to uphold. Teachers need to exercise their professional judgment to determine when, how, and on which topics they should consider using their opinions to support students' learning, and those choices should be grounded in understanding their community context.



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QUESTION #5:

Teacher's Question

In your article you mentioned that teachers of all stripes in all contexts felt this shift in sentiment. What did teachers whose own political ideology was significantly different from their community context say about how they disclosed in those situations where they chose to do so? Was the nature, scope, or process of their disclosures different from teachers whose ideologies matched those of their communities?

Rebecca Cooper Geller's Response

As part of the larger study, I also interviewed 18 English teachers who taught controversial issues (16 interviews in 2017, ten in 2018, and two in 2019). Across all 58 of my interviews with the 36¹ English and social studies teachers, none of the social studies teachers described consistently disclosing personal political opinions in the classroom as part of classroom discussions and discourse, and only one English teacher did. That one teacher described himself as a very liberal English teacher working in a very conservative local community. Despite his political misalignment with the community, he had been teaching at the same school for a long time, his administrators supported him, he had deep ties and a solid reputation built up in the community, and his disclosure came from an academic place, not one of “spewing political rhetoric.” Put together, that afforded him the space to use his disclosure to support learning even though what he said daily was in stark contrast to what his students and their families tended to believe.

On the other hand, a liberal social studies teacher in a liberal district characterized himself as “gun shy” when it came to disclosing his opinion. The real difference between teachers who disclosed and those who tried to avoid it was that teachers in the latter camp also reported increases in contentiousness and hostility. When their schools experience “unleashed” intolerance and political bullying, teachers feel less willing to talk about their personal beliefs and opinions—regardless of whether their opinions are aligned with the community. I think that highlights something I’ve touched on across these answers: how and when teacher disclose depends substantially on their context.

The how of disclosure from misaligned teachers was actually not especially different from the disclosure of the aligned teachers; they still focused on providing their opinions as a filter for students to contextualize what they said in the classroom, and they encouraged students to disagree with them. Even then, teacher political disclosure isn’t a one-size-fits-all strategy that means teachers should just shout their opinions from the school building’s rooftops. It’s a contextual, nuanced, thoughtful decision that teachers should make based on what they know will be effective for students in their context.

¹The article refers only to 16 social studies teachers because the data from the two additional teachers had not yet been analysed prior to the original article’s publication. Findings from these teachers’ interviews did not alter the conclusions from those of the other 16 teachers.

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