

# Use of "Slanted" Materials in the Classroom

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Should a wide variety of materials which advocate or protect vested interests be used in classrooms? This article discusses the right of students to free inquiry—and to the exercise of the critical thinking capacity which accompanies such inquiry.

IT WOULD be inconceivable to train social workers by never letting them come in contact with a slum area. Similarly the medical student who never was exposed to the malfunctioning of the human organism would indeed be poorly trained and equipped. For some reason, however, there is in the American population, a substantial segment — unfortunately, including many educators — who would adopt, in the training of our school-age citizens, the principle of education by insulation.

To many people the citizenship training curriculum is and of right ought to be rather severely constrained by blinders. There are certain areas, topics and written materials on the periphery of this bounded vision which, they say, should not come within the ken of the students. These materials may be partisan, non-objective and "slanted." For these reasons they are rejected.

For purposes of this discussion so-called slanted materials are considered to be a sub-category of the larger grouping of controversial materials. They

differ from the usual type of controversial materials only in degree, not in kind. They are more opinionated, more one-sided and more vitriolic. They are also usually sponsored by persons or groups that have economic, social, or political vested interests to protect.

## The Classroom and Reality

How does the concept of limited exposure or categorical rejection of slanted material in the classroom square with the realities of American society? Let's project ourselves into a situation in which Joe High School Student of 1953 may find himself shortly after graduation. He's working, of course, as are 7 out of 10 of his colleagues. Being interested in a trade (let's call it that of electrician), he has become an apprentice and, as the majority of the skilled tradesmen in his town have done, he has joined the local union.

On the job our recent high school graduate hears one of his co-workers tell about the profits of the company for which they both work. The profits, he says, are enormously high. If these profits were only distributed evenly among all workers the wage rate would nearly double. And where did this co-worker get his information? In the

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weekly union newspaper, of course, which he reads rather faithfully.

On the way home Joe picks up a tabloid size newspaper (this size is easier to handle on a crowded bus) and reads in bold face print the headlines, "'Nation on Verge of Bankruptcy,' Says Candidate—."

When he reaches home he notices that a leaflet has been left between the screen door and front door. He can't miss reading its first page which inquires in eye-catching print, "Do you want your schools run by left-wingers, internationalists and pinks?"

### *Typical Classroom Treatment*

So much for a reasonable replica of the realities facing our recent graduate. Now let's turn to see how he was prepared to meet these realities while he was in school. A return then to Problems of Democracy I, fifth period, senior year. This, in substance, is the class situation.

The unit is one on the history of labor in the United States. The growth of the Knights of Labor and of the American Federation of Labor receive the major attention. It so happens that there is currently in progress a nation-wide strike in one of the basic industries. Acrimonious charges have been bandied by both labor and management leaders. Both sides have distributed special leaflets and posters and have inserted full-page ads in the local newspapers.

When a venturesome student hesitatingly brought one of these materials to class, he was told by the teacher that it was too one-sided, not objective

enough, and besides, "You have to know the fundamental historical background of labor before you can hope to understand any present-day situation." The teacher's major concession to the sin of presentitis was to appoint a student who would consult the Bureau of Labor Statistics material for the latest authoritative data on wage rates for various categories of workers, including those now on strike.

Similarly, when this Problems of Democracy class studied the presidential election of 1952, the teacher stressed the necessity of bringing to class reliable and objective material. Much use was made of the *New York Times*, *Vital Speeches*, the *Congressional Digest* and the current events paper that the class received weekly. But at home the students came into contact with altogether different kinds of information. One student saw his parent rather surreptitiously pass along to his neighbor a sheet that purported to have the inside dope on Eisenhower. He was really, the paper stated, just the mouthpiece for internationalist bankers who were eager to get World War III started. Another parent, relying upon an "expert source of information," insisted that Adlai Stevenson was going to push through Congress a law making divorces easier to obtain throughout the nation.

### *Bases for Present Practices*

Why this discrepancy between what goes on in the classroom and the facts of life outside? It appears that the reasoning behind this duality involves some basically untenable assumptions concerning the function of socially oriented education. The first of these

assumptions we have long had with us, but it is still dying a hard death. It is that the primary function of education is to teach facts. The formation of attitudes, the development of critical insight, the application of understanding to behavioral changes are considered incidentally, if at all.

A second untenable assumption underlying such teaching is related to the first. It is that opinions have far less educational relevance or significance than do facts. Although this may be true in some of the natural sciences, it is not always true in the area of human relationships. The writings of the white supremacy advocates, Allen Zoll's National Council for American Education, the anti-semites and the extreme left and right wings of the American political spectrum have exerted an influence that is proportionately greater than the validity of their arguments.

Another assumption that is open to question has been touched upon above. It is the notion that the schools can and should insulate the student from contact with the seamier side of the world outside. The argument is usually expressed, with some variation, as follows: "They'll learn enough about such publications when they come in contact with them as adults. Besides high school kids are not mentally mature enough to read such highly loaded material." One need only remark that this argument has a familiar ring to those who first advocated sex education in the schools.

The final assumption that militates against the use of highly opinionated publications in the classroom is that the school's proper function is to supply *background* information for stu-

dents. Decision making, and especially a consideration of the consequences of one's decision is deemed again to be of secondary importance. But if the teacher properly rejects this assumption, he will find that he can put slanted material to a highly beneficial use.

### **Justifying the Use of Non-Objective Material**

The matter of the role of the school in encouraging students to reach and evaluate their own decisions—and the place of slanted materials in this process—is of such significance that it merits more extensive consideration here. Probably no other characteristic more basically distinguishes a democracy from an authoritarian form of government than the fact that in the former the ultimate decision making power resides in the people. We recognize this fact when we say that sovereignty rests with the people. The schools decidedly have the obligation to train the students in the proper exercise of this sovereignty.

But decision making is a dynamic *process*, not a static condition. Its end product is not passive retention of a conviction but action based upon that conviction. This is in keeping with acceptable pedagogical as well as political philosophy. For is not an ultimate objective of social education the bringing about of behavioral change in the student?

Slanted materials not only provide some basis whereby the student may formulate his decisions, but, more importantly, they offer to him a convenient means whereby he can appraise the consequences of his decision.

Heavily one-sided publications certainly represent the end product for people who have gone through the decision making process and have come to highly articulate decisions. They *know* what to do about the current strike, the presidential election, the local race riots, and socialism in the schools. Many of our students are equally convinced of the righteousness of their decisions. Why not put these decisions to the test?

If the student is convinced that Negroes are inherently inferior to whites, he should find himself in substantial agreement with much that Gerald L. K. Smith has to say in *The Cross and the Flag*. Let him and the class appraise the consequences of this conviction. If he believes that most social legislation is unnecessary and undesirable, he probably would accept the NAM point of view as found in *Industry Believes*. Or if he thinks the opposite on social legislation he will probably subscribe to the labor view on public housing as found in *The CIO News*. In any case, the student and the class as a whole may engage in one of the most vital processes of a democracy, the appraisal of their own decisions. This is the first of positively stated reasons for the use of slanted materials in the classroom.

### *Developing Study Skills*

A knowledge of certain basic study skills is of value in reading any highly controversial material. The skillful reader will alert himself to such questions as: Who is the writer? What are his qualifications? What supporting evidence has he? Is this fact or opinion? Are his generalizations war-

ranted? Is he consistent? Logical? Overly emotional? We cannot expect these skills to be acquired merely through maturation. The teacher must consciously develop them among the students. Slanted material again can make its contribution here.

A word should be said about the comparative use of highly authentic and objective material and the kind that is highly subjective. There is no attempt on the part of the writer to belittle the use of reliable reference publications. But how many truck drivers, steelworkers or electricians pick up to read after work a copy of the *Statistical Abstract*, *Congressional Record* or the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? These are all excellent references, but they are by no means the *only* sources through which useful study skills can be taught. As educators we are obligated to meet the problems we face on the grounds on which they exist. If we continue to place them on an artificially high level, we may find ourselves doing mere shadow-boxing. It may frequently be necessary to cross the railroad track to see how the other half lives and adjust our teaching accordingly.

### *Educational Objectives Related to Teaching Materials*

A final justification for the use of slanted materials in the classroom arises out of a consideration of a fundamental objective of social education. Stated in its simplest terms this objective is concerned with developing in students the ability to think—analytically, critically, discriminatingly. To the extent that we are depriving our students of this ability we are also failing in one

of our major functions. Deprivation may be brought about by acts of omission as well as commission.

Among those who would eschew slanted materials one frequently hears that they are too dangerous for the students. However, all thinking in a democracy is potentially dangerous. The free mind constitutes one of the inherent dangers, as well as benefits, of a truly democratic nation. It allows a person to select from alternative courses of action. To the extent that we limit his intellectual horizon only to "safe" publications he has less, not more, freedom.

The issue is no less than one with

which John Stuart Mill deals in his essay *On Liberty*. "Strange it is," Mill wrote, "that men should admit the validity of the arguments for free discussion but object to their being 'pushed to an extreme' not seeing that unless the reasons are good for an extreme case, they are not good for any case." Relating this to contemporary American education one may argue that anything which tends to restrict the right of students to free inquiry—and to the exercise of the critical thinking capacity that accompanies such inquiry—is to their detriment as citizens in a democracy and ultimately is to the detriment of the democracy as a whole.

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