

Political literacy in Australian schools

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Kate Habgood discusses the role of schools in teaching political literacy and some basic tools teachers can use to contextualise debate of contemporary issues.

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It is often mentioned that we have a problem with political apathy in Australia. It is not fashionable to be too interested in politics. Historic, tribal or class loyalties to one party or the other have been eroded as both major parties vie to pander to swinging voters.

Unfortunately, the role our schools and curricula have in this problem is rarely discussed. It seems that those who are knowledgeable about politics and ideology are naïve to the fact that many are ignorant, as they operate or move in circles of equivalent knowledge. I have worked with colleagues who are educated at what are regarded as our finest sandstone institutions who call themselves 'apolitical', describing themselves as such to both colleagues and their students. People learn the terms 'left' and 'right' from parents, social media, books and publications, and from the multimedia they choose to watch. Certainly in conversations I've had with politically literate colleagues, there is a certain amount of incredulity that their peers may not have this knowledge.

The term 'apolitical', however, is deeply problematic. Essentially, it reveals a state of anti-intellectualism. For teachers to tell students they are apolitical, as they can and do, is a damaging thing, because they are role-modelling the myth that it is a possible and rational standpoint. To what extent, though, is apathy and 'apoliticism' linked to ignorance of basic politics: specifically central terms like 'left' and 'right'.

It is difficult to discuss gaps in teacher skills and knowledge. Teachers are blamed and attacked for a number of things and are often derided for being of 'poor quality'. In my experience, however, teachers who are impressively skilled at the craft of delivering lessons can have significant gaps when it comes to political literacy. I have even worked with confident, articulate and well-read graduates of English degrees who will readily admit that they find teaching the political angle of 'issues' topics in English challenging. Furthermore, apoliticism is perpetuated and nourished by a curriculum that is reliant on textbooks.

There is actually nowhere in official core curriculum documents that requires teachers to educate students about the political spectrum. English requires students to write endless opinion pieces, in part due to NAPLAN. But we are not asked to explain that a perspective lies along an ideological continuum. In Geography, where we study globalisation, we are not asked to explain global power imbalances or the emergence of neoliberalism. Instead, textbooks focus on an innocuous 'increase in communication' across the world. In history, we are not asked to identify governments of the past by their ideological perspective, or if we do, it is done with labels that are not generally comparable with current political paradigms, such as 'fascism' and 'totalitarianism'. In Civics and Citizenship, curriculum documents contain bland statements such as students 'understand the complex interdependencies involved in the development of political decisions and civic engagement', with no mention of the word 'ideology' anywhere.

Teaching ideology can be surprisingly simple. I start by drawing a large horseshoe shape on the board. Students copy it down and we then refer back to it throughout the year whenever we encounter any political element to a discussion. I ask students to name political parties and politicians of the past and present. I then label and explain where they exist on the spectrum. In this way, students can see how similar and centrist Australian parties tend to be, compared to American politics which is broader. Drawing the horseshoe allows the two 'extremes' of Communism and Fascism to almost meet up

at the bottom with the shared label of totalitarianism. In addition, and more importantly, this process allows students to work on developing their own political opinions. I simplify the two sides of politics thus. The right believes that people should take personal responsibility for their actions and decisions. If you work hard, you deserve rewards. Students agree wholeheartedly with these ideas, as they should. The left believes that sometimes there are barriers that make it difficult for some people to achieve what they want in life. Left wing people believe everyone in society should have as equal a chance in life and success as possible. Again, it's pretty difficult to disagree with this statement. Students begin to see the complexity in the political spectrum from this fairly straightforward standpoint.

I then encourage students to come up with political views, such as 'private schools should get money from the government', or 'national parks should be protected', or 'gay marriage', and label these along the spectrum, sometimes with arrows extending from either side to show the breadth of this idea. Getting students to discuss with each other where they themselves might lie along the ideological spectrum helps them comprehend the ideas even further. They can see how external influences, parents, religion, cadets, might pressure them to support a political view on an issue, and they can see why that institution might be trying to influence them.

It is also very empowering for students who might have a contrary political view to their peers. The core ideas of the opposing side are identified in a positive way. The child has more confidence in their views rather than feeling like a pariah, and is integrated more into their class and school community. Importantly, it allows students to see that they can develop their own views independent of the influences around them. The students who have really grasped the ideas enthusiastically (those who will become 'political animals' as adults) have often swung wildly across the spectrum as the year progresses, which is how it should be with teenagers exploring their individuality.

I have taught the 'horseshoe' successfully to students from quite marginalised backgrounds. These are students to whom things happen; they don't ever see how their actions can affect change. Some students have had trouble comprehending the political spectrum initially, but with reinforcement of the ideas will increasingly identify and use terms as the year progresses. By having this knowledge, they are able to read more complex articles on issues. They can see more clearly the agenda of Andrew Bolt, Clementine Ford and so forth. They know that they have the power to influence and change something if they do not like it.

I believe it is crucial that progressive teachers consider these ideas more, to counteract the 'dumbed down electorate' and the numbing influence of the typical media reporting of political issues. Critical literacy goes hand in hand with political literacy, and we need to start promoting it in all (Humanities) curriculum areas.