

Teaching for 'Social Justice'?

The decline of mass media and the rise of the blogosphere have blurred the distinction between the consumer and the producer. Unlike their parents, who grew up as recipients of television wisdom, today's youth upload writings and videos, in addition to downloading them. Don't mistake this as a new fad, following hoola-hoop, bell bottoms, slap bracelets and pokemon. This shift empowers all citizens to speak freely, truthfully and recklessly; and it demands that teachers expand their idea of "teaching for social justice." Two ninth grade girls in my school took a picture of another ninth grade girl, posted it on the web, wrote "call me for a good time," and posted the girl's phone number as well. That night, this unsuspecting student received dozens of calls from men two and three times her age. On the face of it, this is nothing new. Adolescents are cruel and men are lecherous. Yet, the implications of this behavior are far graver than ever before. Who knows whether or not those men will be cyber stalkers, choose to find her home address, and pay her a visit? The dangers of blogging and uploading abound, from the publication of uncensored libel, to revealing the private information of others, to giving all forms of potential tomfoolery a public stage. None of this is news to anyone. What on earth does this have to do with teachers? Can they be held responsible for the rumors and practical jokes of their students outside the classroom? That's a stretch. However, it does mean we need to place heightened emphasis on developing an ethical consciousness at an early age. Before the consequences of student mischief were inherently limited by rudimentary information distribution networks: passing notes by hand, graffiti scrawled on the wall of the bathroom stall, announcements at a school assembly, late night telephone gossip sessions. Now, students have the virtual publication power of professional journalists. From that perspective, we're training journalists. Don't we need to teach ethics, as well as academics? As teachers, we need to promote social justice by not just teaching respect and appreciation for the multiplicity of cultures, races, genders and socio-economic classes, but by using the classroom context to develop the students' sense of right and wrong. I've attempted to do this by creating emotionally meaningful experiences. In one activity exploring segregation, I gave each student a playing card and told them that they weren't allowed to look at the cards. Students had to put their respective playing cards on their foreheads and mingle with their peers, treating each other according to the value of their card on their foreheads. The student with the King card, for example, was treated like royalty, while the student with two on his forehead was ignored. One student responded, "That was mad wrong. Whites treated blacks like dirt for no reason." Another replied, "It made no sense. Getting a two or a nine was random and then it was the biggest deal." A more mature student countered, "It's like the social groups in school. Jocks and pretty girls get treated like kings for no good reason. Then short and fat kids get picked on just because of the way they looked." My students not only knew what segregation was, but they could feel how wrong the Jim Crow laws were. And, if they can draw connections from ethical lessons in class to their own lives, they might wield their keyboards, mice, and video cameras more responsibly.

About the Author

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