

Surviving ideological bias in the classroom

The left-wing bias in our schools has been pervasive for so long that most Australians are scarcely even conscious of it anymore. However, it presents many students with additional challenges, writes **Mark Lopez**.

The president of the Australian Education Union (AEU), Ms Pat Byrne, openly acknowledged the ideological bias that dominates the school system in her address to teachers at her union's conference in 2005, when she vehemently defended her union's position. She declared: "... [W]e have succeeded in influencing curriculum development in schools, education departments and universities. The conservatives have a lot of work to do to undo the progressive curriculum."

This bias is the consequence of historical factors originating in the politics of the 1960s that led to a domination of school curricula by the ideology of the politically correct Left. Correspondingly, the majority of high-school teachers (be they in the state or private school systems) appear to have many values compatible or consistent with this ideology. This ideological hegemony is one of the salient features of "progressive" education.

This means that for the numerous students with non-Left views, the education system presents additional challenges.

While many teachers are likeable people who generate a pleasant atmosphere in their classrooms, what pervades in the school system is a way of looking at the world characterised by the Left, an outlook presented not as ideological but as normal, correct, legitimate and just.

More importantly, in terms of assessment, what also exists is a subtle un-stated pressure for students to ideologically conform if they want to succeed academically.

It should be noted that most of the teachers exerting this pressure would probably be unaware that they are doing so because they would be unaware of the bias affecting their assessment. From the teachers' perspective, they are simply sharing their enthusiasms with their classes and responding positively to what they prefer to see in students' work. Meanwhile, the "politically incorrect" arguments presented by some students in their essays would be assessed more severely because, from the teachers' perspective, they are genuinely seen to be flawed.

Teacher bias

As a private tutor, what I have noticed, by closely observing patterns of ticks and comments made in the assessment of students' papers, is that when students clearly indicate in the introductions of their essays that they share their teacher's politically correct beliefs, the teacher automatically clicks into what I describe as a non-critical frame of mind. Consequently, the teacher is less inclined to notice mistakes in grammar, argument, or in the presentation of evidence. Meanwhile, if students cross the teacher's bias, the opposite happens. The teacher clicks into a critical frame of mind, finding every justification in the essay to deduct grades.

Due to the psychological subtlety of this behaviour, it is highly likely that the teachers displaying their bias would not recognise it as such, but rather see the grade solely as the product of their professional judgement. It is human nature to display an affinity for those who appear to be like-

minded, and to favour them, and this is as true for the assessment of essays as it is in most human interactions. However, because so many teachers share an ideological disposition, the aggregate effect of this tendency is a politically correct bias that appears to be both systematic and widespread.

In addition, this bias is so common, so prevalent, and so deep-seated that it has achieved a degree of normalcy or a taken-for-granted quality, thereby being virtually invisible to many involved with the system. This is much like the way we become more aware of the constant hum of an air-conditioner when it is suddenly switched off than when it is running. Consequently, if greater intellectual diversity were introduced into the education system, for example, to reflect the degree of diversity in the mainstream community, it would probably initially appear strange to many people, especially to many of those working in it.

Unfortunately, some teachers are not subtle in expressing their Left-wing bias, being quite militant in the expression of their views and intolerant of dissent. Although evidence of commendable attempts at broad-mindedness and fairness among teachers can be found, evidence of blatant bias is far from rare in the school system.

Suspected bias

For example, a student came to me late in his Year 11 to receive early preparations for Year 12. Soon after I commenced helping him in English, he reported to me a recent incident when he suspected that he had experienced ideological bias in the assessment of an essay. He had written an informative piece that appeared to be broadly appreciative of the United States in its victory in the Cold War, which the teacher had severely criticised. Concerned, he made an appointment to see his teacher to discuss the matter, a courageous move that few students would make.

Unfortunately, what resulted was a severe haranguing, with the teacher yielding no quarter and even boasting

to the student that she was “anti-American”. To many of the politically correct, the United States is perceived as an international villain for being a militaristic capitalist superpower.

When the student renewed his attempt to put his case, her convoluted and uncompromising argument worked its way towards a reference to “Pearl Harbor”. Initially stunned by this irrelevancy, the student soon realised that this was a cruel dig at his Japanese heritage. It did the trick. The student ceased putting his complaint. Coming to the teacher with what he felt was a legitimate grievance, he left feeling that his efforts were futile. He also found the experience somewhat humiliating.

Teachers responsible for scenes like this are probably likely to forget them minutes later. Unfortunately, the students involved are likely to remember them long afterwards.

It is also highly likely that these teachers would not remotely see themselves as politically or ideologically oppressive. Nor would they see themselves as part of a system that creates an environment where free thought and expression can be compromised. The idea that the beliefs of the politically correct, which are seen by them as so noble and emancipating, especially when they were touted by radical students in the 1960s, could have become a means for compromising the intellectual freedom of the young in the 21st century would be unimaginable to them.

Once treated in this fashion, students usually learn not to cross certain teachers on issues relating to political correctness. Henceforth, from an initial unpleasant experience, similar grievances would be shared only with trusted and sympathetic individuals who are likely to understand, such as their school-friends, their parents, or, in this instance, a private tutor.

This tendency means that most of the extensive evidence that ideological bias is compromising the intellec-

tual freedom of many students with non-Left views would remain hidden from the custodians of the system. Because of these teachers' unsympathetic manner, there is an undercurrent of student concern that is deliberately kept secret.

Bear in mind that what can be an oppressive environment for numerous students, can also be oppressive for the minority of teachers who share non-Left or politically incorrect views. They too would experience frequent reminders that they do not fit in either.

As for the student who expressed those moderate pro-American views, upon becoming streetwise as to the realities of the school system, he produced politically correct essays, perfectly tuned into his teachers' biases, to

receive “A” grades that were (thank goodness) hassle-free. This made his schooling both more pleasant and more successful.

Like the characters Winston Smith and Julia in George Orwell's classic anti-totalitarian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, students with non-Left views need to learn to outwardly conform to inwardly remain free.

Prevailing educational practices suggest that the custodians of the education system, like the teachers' unions, have not realised that they are on the wrong side of a growing desire among Australians for greater intellectual diversity and freedom.

It is time to change. There is a need for an education system that would better serve the young members of our community in terms of their need for knowledge and acceptance.

However, as the president of the Australian Education Union recognised regarding the process of reform, there will be a lot of work to do.

— **Dr Mark Lopez is an educational consultant who was a participant in the Howard Government's History Summit in August 2006.**



**Federal president
of the AEU,
Ms Pat Byrne**