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For more information, please contact wrapteam@worc.ac.uk

m.lipscomb@worc.ac.uk

Politics in the classroom

Nursing and midwifery is, in the UK, regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Regulatory duties include establishing standards for education, and from January 2019, new educational programmes will be approved against standards detailed in the document *Future nurse: Standards of proficiency for registered nurses* (NMC, 2019 – hereafter 'the standards'). This publication lists "the knowledge and skills that registered nurses must demonstrate when caring for people" (ibid, p.3); and from September 2020, registration (licence) will require the successful completion of programmes that have been ratified against these standards. The importance of this document in a UK context cannot be understated. However, less parochially, learning outcomes contained in section 7 of the standards raise questions that require educator attention whenever politically sensitive topics (broadly conceived) are discussed. This study explores these questions insofar as they relate to the stance (neutrality or partisanship) that educators adopt in politicised discussion, and the management of student speech/expression. Pratt, Boll and Collins' (2007) paper *Towards a plurality of perspectives for nurse educators* is recruited to structure argument.

Section 7

At the point of registration (license) future nurses will be required to comprehend "health legislation and current health and social care policies, and the mechanisms involved in influencing policy development and change" (outcome 7.2; NMC, 2019, p.25). They need to "understand the principles of health economics and their relevance to resource allocation in health and social care organisations" (outcome 7.3; ibid, p.25). They should be able to "identify the implications of current health policy and future policy changes . . . and understand the impact of policy changes on the delivery and coordination of care" (outcome 7.4; ibid, p.25). They must "facilitate equitable access to healthcare for people who are vulnerable or have a disability" (outcome 7.9; ibid, p.26), and grasp "the processes involved in developing a basic business case" (outcome 7.12; ibid, p.26). Perhaps most intriguingly of all, henceforth, upon completing their studies, students will be obliged to "demonstrate an understanding of the importance of exercising *political awareness* throughout their career" (outcome 7.13; ibid, p.26 – italicisation added).

These are in many respects tall orders. And the manner in which section 7 outcomes are to be translated into programmes/modules, and the form that assessment takes, have yet to be determined. Nonetheless, if we want graduates to be able to enter into and influence discussions about healthcare organisation, delivery, and resourcing in a mature and considered way, then these are the sorts of issue that educators need to help students engage with. Further, as will be argued, insofar as they raise difficult questions about the purpose and aim of aspects of nurse education, while the standards deal with and cover more than the outcomes identified here, unpicking the issues generated by these specific and new requirements has merit.

Political education

While 'developing a business case' can be construed purely as a technical exercise, it also includes (it cannot escape) politically charged normative and evaluative assumptions regards, for example, the availability of resources and the acceptability or otherwise of goals. More pressingly, discussion pertaining to 'resource allocation', the 'implications' of policy, the meaning of 'equitable access', and the demand that nurses demonstrate 'political awareness' are, I contend, political to their core.

Engaging with these outcomes appears to necessitate that nurse tutors undertake what might be termed political education, and to state the obvious, this task requires delicate handling. Problematically, discussing politically loaded topics with students invites ideas with party political associations into the classroom. Educators must therefore decide (and 'must' is probably the

correct word to use here) whether instruction will aim at political neutrality or, alternatively, whether it is legitimate or even desirable that arguments linked with particular political objectives, orientations and parties should be advanced. In making this decision educators ought presumably to think through how their own beliefs and values (i.e. their own biases and political vantage) will influence teaching on these subjects and – crucially – they need to make plans about how to deal with conflict. Specifically, educators need to be clear about what if any limits are to be imposed on student speech/expression.

A good paper

This special twentieth anniversary issue of *Nursing Philosophy* highlights past papers that, for readers, have proven interesting (i.e. 'good' reads). For me, a paper is successful if it does one or more of three things. First, it might open up new terrain. That is, reading can bring to our attention hitherto unrealised areas or topics of thinking-understanding. Second, reading can signpost new paths through familiar territory and, by such means, fresh perspectives are encountered. Third, reading can show us that a way of thinking-understanding we thought was open is logically blocked, or is otherwise untenable. I am less interested in work that merely confirms what is known or suspected. Driving familiar highways tends to dullness.

Pratt, Boll and Collins' (2007) paper is therefore, for me, a 'good' read. The work reconfigures material I thought I was cognisant of and, in this study, ideas taken from the paper shape discussion. The work begins by asserting that most pedagogic literature in or on nurse education naïvely and mistakenly presumes that teaching and learning strategies can be "generalized across contexts, content, learners and educators" (ibid, p.49). This insight has intuitive appeal. Moreover, it is stated that "to be truly effective, teaching strategies must be harmonious with instructor's *b*eliefs, *i*ntensions, and *a*ctions" (ibid, p.49 – italicisation in original). I do not agree with this claim. Or, rather, I do not agree with it in the formulation presented. Nonetheless, Pratt, Boll and Collins (ibid) here highlight something potentially interesting about the educational encounter and, for instance; in discussing politically charged issues, educators cannot be expected to deliver content that strays too far from positions they condone/believe. Put another way, they cannot be expected to successfully teach that which they revile.

Significantly, the power of Pratt, Boll and Collins' (ibid) '*b*eliefs, *i*ntensions, *a*ctions' contention derives from the ideas it stimulates. It is not necessary for readers to consent to what is said for claims to have value. And, similarly, across the paper ways of teaching are presented that – as heuristic tools – can be enlisted to unpack aspects of educator-student interaction that inform a consideration of political education without, again, accepting as correct/truthful what is proposed.

Plural perspectives

Grounded in a review of the literature, Pratt, Boll and Collins (ibid) propose that five category descriptions represent or capture widely held perspectives on teaching. The precise meaning of 'perspectives' remains indeterminate. However, the term variously illustrates or points towards "the lenses through which we view our students and our professional knowledge . . . the power . . . of each perspective lies not in its eloquence . . . but in its ability to reveal what is hidden but essential to understanding someone's teaching . . . [and, further] perspectives are a means to facilitate discussion among colleagues" (ibid, p.58).

Of the perspectives, 'transmission' describes the way in which an articulated body or corpus of knowledge is given or delivered to students. 'Apprenticeship' labels an approach to teaching that rests on socialisation. 'Developmentalism' follows constructivist principles insofar as prior student knowledge and understanding is developed or grown. 'Nurturing', emphasises the valorisation and enhancement of student confidence and capability. And, lastly, 'social reform' describes encounters in which educators assume that "ideals are necessary for a better

society . . . that their [educator] ideals are appropriate for all; and . . . that the ultimate goal of teaching is to bring about social change, not simply individual learning" (ibid, p.56). Importantly, these five perspectives on education are filtered through or interpreted by instructors, and in this way possible tensions between the uniqueness of individual '*b*eliefs, *i*ntensions, and *a*ctions' and the existence of blanket or universal categories of interaction are, perhaps, dissolved.

Apropos political education, my presumptions are that, first, the principle of transmission has limited applicability. Facts can be transmitted in the manner this principle describes. However, political discussion laces together facts and values and while political values can be stated, and values are of course transmitted, the meaning of 'transmission' rolled into Pratt, Boll and Collins' (ibid) descriptor would have to be sorely stretched before it could be used in this capacity. Second, while political orientations are clearly steered and encouraged by socialisation it is unlikely that, for example, 'political awareness' can meaningfully be advanced by apprenticeship (at least not – or not often – uniformly or consistently in the short term). Further, although developmentalism may be important if and when students already possess political insight (i.e. something to build on); realistically, it is difficult to envisage how assumptions embedded in this perspective run out to, for example, constructing a business case. This study therefore focuses on the perspectives labelled nurturing and social reform. Nurturing will be shown to be productive insofar as it highlights important aspects of the problem educators face. Social reform, the perspective most clearly fitting the subject of this study, is rejected. However, again, considering the construct helpfully illuminates that which requires clarification.

Upping the ante

By deliberately targeting policy, economics, business planning, equitable access and political awareness – section 7 of the standards raises the prominence of these activities (e.g. planning) and orientations/dispositions (e.g. awareness) in undergraduate syllabi. This is probably a 'good thing'. However, unless educators forcefully police and artificially limit the remit or boundary of discussion, meaningful engagement with these subjects may well spin off to envelop or generate questions and comments pertaining to politics (normatively or evaluatively charged subjects concerning, loosely, 'who gets what, when, and how' – Lasswell, 1951) and health across a vast swath of topics. Thus, potentially, it is possible to envisage open or unfettered debate trespassing into subjects such as, for example; abortion, gender, housing policy, income distribution, LGBT rights, migration, personal responsibility for health, race, recreational drug use, religion, sexual behaviour, taxation, welfare (and this alphabetised list could easily be extended).

These and kindred topics are not absent from existing curricula. Nonetheless, purposely emphasising, for example, political awareness encourages contentious issues to be 'outed' and, plausibly, contention is more easily sidestepped when politics are not overtly heralded. Thus, although this content is not always or necessarily new, and existing teaching approaches already grapple with at least some of these subjects, these approaches may find themselves tested when politics are foregrounded. Moreover, when discussing political awareness and/or policy, it will doubtless be appropriate for students to develop and argue for the positions they think best. Indeed, conversations of this sort will presumably be encouraged. (In what other way might 'political awareness' or ideas about 'policy' be fostered?) However, students need not share political values in any substantive sense (Lipscomb, 2013), many of the topics listed above merit the epithet 'hot button', and since opinions differ, vigorous dispute is inevitable. Again, while disagreement is commonplace in discussion, deliberately accenting political matters might exacerbate conflict.

Nurturing

Though others will disagree, in my view, within the academy (different rules apply in practice), no reasoned argument ought to be disbarred (censored) on principle. This statement requires clarification and, for example, argument should remain courteous and polite (i.e. basic standards

of conduct apply). Nonetheless, my position clears a path to the expression of widely divergent views – and while openness is frequently valorised, since consensus is not required or likely to be achieved in relation to political matters, tempers may and probably cannot but flare when hitherto unstated beliefs and attitudes are revealed.

It is not wrong to evidence passion in relation to the things that matter to us. This must be stressed. Indeed, we probably should become emotionally engaged and occasionally enraged when important subjects are discussed. That said, clearly, educators need to manage classroom dispute, and while it does not resolve problems associated with conflict, Pratt, Boll and Collins' (2007) concept of nurturing is of interest here.

For example, it might be argued that to establish political awareness discussions about issues with political content must occur, these discussions will expose differences in belief/opinion, exposure will engender dispute, and dispute needs to be controlled in order that students holding popular and unpopular views can both be heard. Not everyone accepts this conclusion. Further, assumptions are smuggled into the idea of 'being heard' that ought, perhaps, to be more carefully unpicked. Thus, I here presume that personal expression ('being heard') forms a necessary part of interpersonal dialog, dialog is necessary for meaningful communication, and meaningful communication is 'good'. These presumptions can be questioned. However, this aside, seeking to enable students to be heard might be labelled nurturative, and nurturing as a goal can be defended to the extent that it facilitates benefits.

Thus, those holding popular views (i.e. majority opinions) may benefit from realising this thing. Or, equally, benefit might come from exposure to less or unpopular opinion. Exposure could confirm majoritarians in their opinion that minority viewpoints have nothing to recommend them and, in this way, existing understandings may be strengthened. Alternatively, exposure to the unfamiliar might lead to a questioning and reformulation of established beliefs. Students whose views are unpopular (i.e. minority opinions) can also claim a 'right' to be heard. Engaging with others may, once more, lead these students to entrench and strengthen their views and/or engagement might initiate change.

The background premise here is that – consequent to encountering the opinions of others – normative/evaluative beliefs are capable of improving development (i.e. being 'advanced') and, awkwardly, this premise is easily contradicted. Specifically, normative/evaluative beliefs may simply change rather than develop. That is, development might be the wrong word to use here since it implies progress and, disconcertingly, absent an agreed metric, normative or moral progress is tricky (potentially it is impossible) to establish. Nonetheless, let us assume for the moment that development is possible. Given this, educators who foster a nurturing environment – in this instance, by creating 'spaces' in which majority and minority political opinions can find expression – possibly enable and support all students to develop.

This sounds charming. Except, life is rarely so straightforward. Plausibly, not all views deserve a hearing, and unashamedly racist, homophobic and other nasty opinions can be voiced by those who are members of majorities as well as minorities. Should then educators 'nurture' by deliberately silencing views (majoritarian or minoritarian) perceived to threaten or harm the interests or worth of those who find them offensive? Self-evidently, offense is a troubling and problematic concept to employ in this context (Hume, 2016). Nonetheless, if debate can legitimately be closed down on this basis, if policing actions grounded on the concept of offense are considered permissible, outside of wild extremes, where ought permissible/impermissible discussion lines be drawn? In the classroom it is probably unlikely that nursing students will express explicitly horrible views in conversations about political or politicised issues. However, conversations around the rights of migrants and/or asylum seekers to publicly funded healthcare may, for example, bring forth views that can be variously interpreted. That is, views which some but not all people will find perfectly reasonable and/or utterly reprehensible.

Developing this point, section 7 of the standards does not state what being politically aware involves (includes/excludes). Awareness is promoted "to maximise the influence and

effect of registered nursing on quality of care, patient safety and cost effectiveness" (outcome 7.13; NMC, 2019, p.26). However, no explanation or evidence is offered to substantiate this highly questionable assertion, and the linking together of care, safety and cost effectiveness is perhaps bemusing in this context. Nonetheless, let us imagine a politically aware student who embraces 'respect' (a concept often seen as important in nursing) and who, on this basis, argues for and joins action groups that aim to roll back and overturn legislation permitting abortion (colloquially, 'right to life groups'). That is, she interprets respect in a manner that privileges foetal *over* mother rights. Alternatively, another student instead argues for and joins action groups seeking to extend 'a woman's right to choose' (i.e. groups respecting mother *over* foetal 'rights'). In discussing abortion – a politicised topic – classroom conversation can be expected to generate 'high octane' exchanges between those holding opposing views. Yet in this instance it is likely that all concerned, while wedded to their own positions, will recognise that alternative viewpoints are logically coherent. (Both, for example, might reference 'patient safety' albeit that the patient concerned varies.) This, and the impossibility of imposing normative consensus in this situation, may allow educators to let heated discussion 'run'. Other subjects, however, possibly involving race-migration or sexual orientation-behaviour, could be more difficult to square with the idea of open debate. Subtle nuances of language, tone of voice, and even the raising of an eyebrow, can signal the holding and/or expression of views that 'right thinking' people reject; and educators may worry that in determining what is permissible/impermissible, they are underprepared for the task at hand *and* vulnerable to institutional censure should students complain that inappropriate views (definitional problems notwithstanding) were not contradicted.

Nurturing is, we might conclude, Janus-faced. Pratt, Boll and Collins (2007) suggest that an aspect of nurturing is facilitated when "the learner's self-esteem and self-concept are not placed at risk" (p.55) and, perhaps, risk of this sort should generally be avoided. However, debate about the values we hold and the reasons we have for holding those values can, if we take other views seriously, if this 'taking seriously' leads us to re-evaluate our own positions, potentially upend or put at risk our self-esteem and self-concept. Critical thinking and vigorous argument can be disturbing. These activities need not lead to or produce emotional equanimity and, maybe, the self-esteem and self-concepts of racists or homophobes should not be protected from challenge in the manner that Pratt, Boll and Collin's (ibid) definition of nurturing appears to suggest is appropriate. This last statement presumes, of course, that it is the views of 'others' rather than 'us' that require challenging (since we naturally hold 'good' opinions). Yet it would be surprising if all our values and beliefs were as secure as we might like to suppose and perhaps – contra Pratt, Boll and Collins (ibid) – educators engage in 'real' nurturing when esteem is, in some instances, purposefully jeopardised. Indeed, as is noted, the "balance between caring and challenging can be difficult to achieve" (ibid, p.56).

Neutrality *versus* partisanship

As stated, Pratt, Boll and Collins (ibid) define social reform as involving three elements. First, educators who adopt this perspective suppose that "ideals are necessary for a better society." Most people could accept this platitude. However, it is worth stressing that ideals are held by those we agree *and* disagree with. Monstrous dictators possess ideals. They are simply (hopefully) not ours, and the claim therefore signifies little. Second, educators who assume their "ideals are appropriate for all" can generate absurdity. Thus, imagine two educators. The first 'libertarian' educator favours voluntary exchange and this leads her to promote private (non-state) healthcare provision. The second 'socialist' educator favours purely state (nationalised) provision. Both educators follow each other consecutively in the timetable and students are sequentially exposed to both sets of view that, according to each individual educator, are 'appropriate for all'. Note, I am not here suggesting that students should not be brought into contact with different opinions. Nor are those we teach passive in their reactions to lecturers (nursing undergraduates are adults).

However, where educators (plural) assert incommensurable universalist views without caveat, confusion is likely. Lastly, third, the notion that teaching aims "to bring about social change, not simply individual learning" is contestable. Those paying for or investing in their education may object if social rather than student centred goals are prioritised (Fish, 2008). And those subject to proposed 'social change' might want some input into whatever is planned. That is, opinions on desirable objectives for social change vary, and educators' who imperiously assert their interpretation headless of alternative viewpoints risk appearing hubristic. Put another way, while nurse educators might favour more resources being devoted to health and social care, given finite funds, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that defence or education or infrastructure or tax cuts or any number of other 'desired things' should be prioritised in preference to higher health and social care spending.

Looked at in this way, Pratt, Boll and Collins' (2007) concept of social reform sanctions what I term partisanship. Specifically, educators who presume their 'ideals are appropriate for all' may (no doubt armed with subtle and thoughtfully reasoned arguments) impose their views on students and – to the extent that the ideals deemed appropriate include those with a political dimension – and where this dimension is associated with political outlooks and/or parties – partisanship is instantiated. Undergraduates are, to repeat, active rather than passive learners. And from a social reform perspective, students are "encouraged to take a critical stance" (ibid, p.57). However, whether this extends to refuting the 'stance' of those who are educating them remains perhaps a moot point. And, putting social reform to one side for the moment, let us begin by supposing that at least some educators will attempt to approach politically sensitive topics in what might be termed a neutral manner. To illustrate what is meant by this a deliberately bland example is presented.

In discussing health policy, educators may choose to give equal weight and prominence to different funding/organisation options (libertarian and socialist alternatives have already been suggested). This could involve plotting a non-prescriptive or non-judgemental line through the range of possibilities that exist or have been taken. And, in a UK context, this might mean educators would present policies favouring greater privatisation and marketization as being different from but not necessarily worse or better than the largely socialised (nationalised) system of healthcare that is currently in place (i.e. the NHS). Privatisation here refers to non-state provision and, plainly, this can involve for-profit commercial and not-for-profit charitable (third sector) providers. Markets and marketization function within and between state and non-state actors. Markets are not synonymous with privatisation. However, the terms are frequently elided and, in the UK, private for-profit involvement in health provision and the use of markets as tools to organise care delivery have long and fractious histories.

Neutrality can be variously defined. Nevertheless, instructors anxious to avoid partisan political entanglement could, as described, limit health related policy discussion to listing the pros and cons that accompany the spectrum of private, market based, and collective or socialised options that exist. However, it is difficult to imagine that pro and con lists could be presented or discussed without personal political preferences making themselves known and, for example, balancing the benefits of for-profit market choice against the problem of coverage associated with privatisation would be difficult and perhaps impossible to address apolitically. Objective facts are in this instance values soaked, and it is unlikely that deliberation would or could be anything other than partisan. Topics that reveal value differences, and questions that resonate politically, cannot or cannot easily be handled in a purely technocratic or value free manner. Fact and value here closely intertwine. Further, putting feasibility to one side, is it not immediately obvious that neutrality is desirable or necessary.

Thus, discarding neutrality, instructors might start from the default assumption that, for example, since it exists, the NHS should exist. Or, educators who believe the NHS is the best available option may argue in favour of policies that support and fortify socialised provision. In both instances collectivist policy choices are privileged over competitive non-state options, and

in abandoning neutrality (and whichever 'direction' they take), educators align themselves with positions that carry party political associations – associations some students will reject.

Education *versus* instruction

At issue is the difference between education and instruction. To force a somewhat crude distinction, education can but need not have an agreed endpoint or conclusion, while instruction aims at instilling a predefined set of ideas or practices. When discussing political issues (here normatively charged subjects) I do not think crude instruction is appropriate. However, non-neutral or partisan options will, probably, be adopted by educators in many instances, and the danger exists that these educators will approach – or appear to approach – political matters in a closed and directive manner (i.e. as per my reading of Pratt, Boll and Collins', ibid, articulation of the concept of social reform).

Comments made by colleagues suggest the majority of those I work with strongly sympathise with policies and parties that boost the NHS. This does not in itself mean my colleagues vote Labour rather than Conservative. Yet, since Labour advertises itself as 'defender' of the NHS, and since the Conservatives are (rightly or wrongly) seen as lukewarm in their support for the NHS, it would be odd if this was not the case. Moreover, it is suggested that many of those working in academia evidence a liberal-left bias and, while disputed, it is proposed that right of centre academics are proportionally underrepresented in higher education (Mariani and Hewitt, 2008; Woessner, 2012; Carl, 2017; Turner, 2017 – see also McCann 2019). For the sake of argument, I henceforth assume that most nurse educators at my institution favour policies on healthcare organisation/funding that are associated with left of centre parties; and in the classroom, educators will thus tend to see state provision as essentially 'good', and voluntary or private encroachment on state provision as 'bad'. (It would certainly be surprising if many of those I work with actively supported denationalising healthcare.) However, unless nursing students differ markedly from members of the wider polity (and this is of course possible), it may be that the political outlook of students is more heterogeneous than (I here assume) those who educate them.

Votes cast for left and right of centre parties in the UK general election of June 2017 were roughly proportional albeit that right of centre parties secured a small lead. Thus, the Conservatives took 42.2% of vote share while Labour captured 40% (BBC, 2017). We can therefore surmise that, perhaps, a significant proportion of students voted (or would have voted had they been old enough) for candidates whose support for the NHS does not preclude expanding 'diversity' (i.e. non-state activity) in health provision. People of course consider a range of issues when deciding how to vote, and healthcare is only one factor among many influencing decision making. Nonetheless, if those I work alongside evidence left of centre allegiances (and my sample is clearly not formally representative), then educator views must be out of kilter with at least some of those they teach. Linking past national voting patterns with current student political dispositions is clearly problematic. However, we cannot assume that all nursing students will enthusiastically rally to the NHS, and some, a few, may even back policies that are antithetical to socialised care.

Cheerleaders and propagandists

Continuing earlier discussion, we should bear in mind that neutrality is a value position. It is not value neutral. Moreover, in a UK context – and regards healthcare financing/organisation – neutrality would, where implemented, bolster or give credence to centre-right policies. Specifically, if in taking a neutral position educators declined to support or actively promote socialised care (the status quo), they would in consequence augment non-state options by giving equal weight to perspectives that are, I propose, presently underrepresented in mainstream UK nursing discussion.

Neutrality's refusal to 'take sides' thus allows ideas to be advanced that currently have little traction – and while this is not good or bad in itself, neutrality's potential implications are worth noting. Further, the alternative, partisanship (here linked to unquestioningly accepting established systems of provision or, more assertively, purposefully arguing in favour of those systems) also runs risks. Namely, left leaning educators (indeed any educator) who accepts the mantle of NHS cheerleader or propagandist may act to close down discussion and impose one set (their set) of political views/values on students (the 'social reform' perspective). That is, rather than encouraging critical thought and analysis, rather than engaging in the type of mutually beneficial if idealised debate promoted here, they could simply denounce alternative perspectives.

How then are educators to proceed? The decision as to whether a neutral or partisan approach should be taken when discussing politically sensitive issues with students is not easily resolved. Nonetheless, I have argued elsewhere (Lipscomb, 2017), that nurses may not share professional values in any real or meaningful sense, and in the absence of convincing evidence to the contrary it is, to repeat, reasonable to assume that student nurses do not share the same opinions on political issues either. This matters. Debate around values and politics are, potentially, 'good things'. However, while it may be a mistake for partisan educators to enforce consensus (i.e. their views) on political discussion regards healthcare funding/organisation – likewise – it could be unhelpful if educators refused to assist students in articulating and deepening their thinking by insisting on remaining neutral.

Rather than shying away from the clash of opinions, I would rather differences were acknowledged and faced. From this perspective educators should – mindful of their own biases – engage with those they disagree with in this as in other matters. Indeed, at risk of inane idealism, debate's value primarily resides in the way it allows those involved to come to better understand their own and, also, others perspectives. Discussion is not or not only about winning arguments. And if debate is seen as a learning experience rather than a competitive or blood sport, seeking out and challenging the opinions of those we disagree with has worth. That said, the complicating feature of political discussion, like values discussion more generally, is that while debate exposes difference, 'progress' in understanding is difficult to conceptualise.

Thus, despite earlier proposing (as an argumentative assumption) that development in normative/evaluative understanding is possible, it is important to recognise that we cannot sensibly claim that political opinions or perspectives are – where they represent or embody normative/evaluative presumptions – correct in an objective or non-subjective sense. At any rate, political opinions are not objective in the same way that factual claims can in some instances be objective and, therefore, the views of those we disagree with (perhaps vehemently) are not necessarily wrong. Instead, the political views of those we oppose mainly evidence different beliefs and values (normative and evaluative ideas) to ours. This leads them to interpret commonly agreed facts differently and, also, to consider other facts as more pertinent and relevant than those we give weight to. This is easy to accept in an abstract sense. However, confronted by arguments challenging fundamental or core assumptions about the things we care deeply about it is unsurprising that emotions spiral.

To promote learning – and mindful of the emotional turbulence that may ensue – my preference is for open and unfettered debate and to facilitate this educators potentially need to establish what, for some, might be a new relationship with students. Specifically, I propose that educators should, when discussing politics and politically charged topics, insist on 'good manners' in debate but relinquish their controlling power to direct the content and endpoint of discussion within classroom settings. Thus, all and any reasoned opinion and argument would be permitted relating to politics and health (broadly understood). This offers a means by which awareness might be inculcated. However, for this to happen we must allow that some expressed opinions will inevitably offend some people.

In addition, it is important that educators refrain from requiring those they disagree with (and those who cause offense) to justify and defend their opinions more robustly than those they

agree with. Students who share educator views should be asked to explain and defend their reasoning in the same way and to the same extent that those we disagree with are asked to do. We might even require that consensus or majority opinions, especially when apparently sensible (i.e. those we agree with) should be challenged so that, for example, in a UK context, if students presume the superiority of socialised care, then they should be tested to provide compelling arguments in support of their position. That is, group thinking and the lazy acceptance of what exists ought to be critiqued in the same way that we would question novel arguments and disquieting positions. (This 'challenging' is not synonymous with neutrality.)

Finally, following Pratt, Boll and Collins' (2007) insight that educator '*b*eliefs, *i*ntensions, and *a*ctions' must have some alignment with teaching strategy for that strategy to be effective, educators should be free to argue for their own political viewpoints in politicised discussion (I do not favour indifferent or forced neutrality). However, the educator's position of authority in the academy ought not to be used to override or put down student opinions that they disagree with. This latitude to express contrary opinions extends, perhaps, even to the statement of political views that are, for want of a better word, vile. To do otherwise would be to foreclose on any possibility of redemptive learning through debate. Students will very quickly realise the position of their lecturer on political questions, and if educators deride alternative views the danger exists that students will stop thinking and, instead, they will merely parrot but not take on board received opinions.

Strategies and craftsmanship

Despite the 'bounty' of commentaries that exist dealing with values in the nursing literature, section 7 of the new educational standards throws out, in my opinion, fresh and difficult problems. For example, if a student reveals in discussion that she is a member of a legally constituted party or group which espouses what many people take to be racist policies, and if that student abides by her professional code of conduct/ethics (no discriminatory act is committed), is that acceptable? Should she indeed be applauded for concretely demonstrating 'political awareness'? And if not, why not? Alternatively, where a student is a member of an established and mainstream faith community which, in its doctrine, advances what many consider to be homophobic or misogynous positions, ought educators to challenge this student? Can challenge extend to a critique of the political implications of religious doctrine? Or is that a step too far?

Put another way, are we as educators simply interested in how students act? Or, are we also interested in what they believe and value? If we are interested solely in acts then students merely need to realise that – irrespective of their personal beliefs and values – certain forms of speech and behaviour is impermissible. Educators in this instance just need to describe and explain where the boundaries are regards acceptable/unacceptable speech-behaviour. Alternatively, if we are interested in what students believe and value then, possibly, internalist and externalist ideas must be confronted.

As someone who is favourably disposed towards internalism – that is, a position which holds that values ultimately derive from or rest on mutable human constructions rather than external (e.g. natural or God given) law – I cannot say that any value or normatively charged political viewpoint is categorically wrong or incorrect. All I can say is that it is wrong or incorrect *for me*, and if you agree with me, *us*. This makes values relative to what I or we believe. It means that, for those holding other (perhaps dramatically 'other') views – all that can ultimately be said is that we differ. This underpins my belief, my leap of faith, in debate/discussion. It is, I contend, the only (if flawed) means that we have for understanding difference and, sometimes, moving to consensus (not that consensus signifies correctness). However, absent consensus, when confronted by those whose views I oppose, and when debate/discussion proves unsatisfactory, what remains? Force? I want to believe that despite difference, communication based upon shared values is possible for "If men cannot refer to common values, which they all separately

recognize, then man is incomprehensible to man" (Camus, 2000 [1951], p.11). Yet this represents another act of faith. Or hope.

Conclusion

By advancing the notion of open debate in the manner described above, arguments in this study might be accused of falling into the trap that Pratt, Boll and Collins (2007) suggest await those who fail to realise that strategies (i.e. facilitating discussion) cannot be separated from the capabilities and beliefs of the "craftsperson (teacher)" (p.49) who implement them. This is an important insight. It recognises that in inept hands unsatisfactory results (poor student learning) may accompany the implementation of supposedly 'good' strategies while ostensively inappropriate teaching strategies can, in skilled hands, prove productive. With this in mind, since the manner in which political education should proceed and the relationship between what is taught and how it is taught remains indeterminate, maybe we simply have more thinking to do. Certainly, if normative and moral opinion cannot be shown to develop or advance in any substantive sense (if the meaning of development and advancement are contestable when used in this context), then – insofar as normative/moral claims are wrapped around political discussion – we need to be particularly careful about how 'education' is interpreted in relation to section 7 of the standards. That is, do educators merely want students to recognise different opinions/positions? Or, are we asking that particular opinions and positions be dropped/adopted? Are we claiming to know what is correct or incorrect, acceptable or unacceptable vis-à-vis political discussion?

In conclusion, three points deserve consideration regards Pratt, Boll and Collins' (ibid) paper. First, this work is more nuanced and interesting than, in pulling out ideas which are useful here, I describe. Second, as so often happens, it is not necessary to agree with what is argued to find value in argument and, thus, while Pratt, Boll and Collin's (ibid) paper does encourage educators to "critically reflect" (p.49) on their activities, reflection need not sanction or confirm what those espousing this thing anticipate. Finally, third, Pratt, Boll and Collin (ibid) emphasise that the question "what difference does it make where I stand as a nurse educator?" (p.57) matters – and regards political discourse of the sort that will be generated by the outcomes specified in section 7 of the new NMC educational standards, this is clearly an aspect of their work that lecturers ought to attend to.

This question returns us to the two problems that form the basis of this study – should educators take a neutral or partisan line through political discourse and what, if any, limits should be imposed on student expression. For me, in unpicking these issues, internalist-externalist debates highlight where future thinking might go albeit that engagement with these ideas may prove uncomfortable. In any event, the 'roll out' of section 7 into the curriculum will be worth watching.

m.lipscomb@worc.ac.uk

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