

The High Cost of Self-Censorship on Campus

Self-censorship greatly diminishes the joys and satisfactions of teaching and learning

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Self-censorship is taking a toll on public life, especially education. It's not just the books and articles that teachers quietly remove or the reluctance to engage with students on sensitive topics or the talented educators who quit. It's the questions students become afraid to ask, the untold anecdotes and jokes, and the deleted assignments. A great deal of knowledge is quietly vanishing—and along with it the joys and satisfactions of teaching and learning.

There's also the psychological toll. Censorship cultures make people feel anxious, hopeless and frustrated, and they can lead to stifling and cold communities full of bitterness, paranoia and isolation. Problems that people can't talk through get acted out in more destructive ways.

A few years ago, I taught an undergraduate course in developmental psychology. To add some real-world context, each week I brought in a clinical

case study about a child in the age range we were discussing. I thought this was an interesting way to illustrate what typical and atypical developmental sequences can look like.

But about two-thirds of the way through the semester, a student complained that too many of the case studies involved female patients. They argued that because I'm male, this was sexist and indicative of my biases. By overusing female case studies, I had "pathologized" women. (Though if I had used fewer female case studies, I might have just as likely been accused of *underrepresenting* women.)

In response, I went back and tallied it up. I had five male case studies and six female case studies. But because the discussions of case studies sometimes went over class time, the female case studies were discussed in 10 classes, whereas the male case studies were discussed in only six classes.

After the complaint, I tried talking to the class about the gender balance in my case studies. I brought in a slideshow that gave an overview of the data and talked through it. But to no avail. Many students still seemed unsatisfied, and despite my best efforts, I probably just came across as defensive. The issue hadn't been resolved, or really even improved.

For future classes, I was careful to review my case studies beforehand for any potential issues: I considered the racial balance of cases, LGBT+ representation, representation of immigrants and people with disabilities. And I looked to see if cases could be read as reflecting poorly on a "protected group." But the demographic math seemed impossible to get right. Good cases are hard to find, and given all the concerns about identity categories, I couldn't prioritize the most interesting or educational cases.

In the end, it just didn't seem worth it. Too many students today are preoccupied with identity and eager to fight about it. In my courses I had already deviated from the dominant university ideology about race, religion and politics, and this just didn't seem like the hill to die on. So, I took the case studies out altogether. I didn't teach that course again, but when I taught other courses, I avoided using that teaching model.

I'm not the first person to observe that accusations of sexism (or racism) are impossible to defend against, even when they're baseless. Actually, the more intensely one defends oneself, the guiltier one can appear.

In some ways it's just a power play: Often, in cases where the teacher is male and the student is female, the teacher will lose. Losing an argument isn't such a big deal, but when a student uses a damning label like "racism" or "sexism," there can be severe professional and social consequences.

Some instructors remove material from their courses because they don't want to face a Diversity Committee inquisition, or they don't want to be asked to complete re-education training. Some worry about quiet blacklisting or their contract not being renewed. Other times they worry about social ostracism, being gossiped about or antagonized in less direct ways. I wasn't as worried about these things as I was about having disruptive and unproductive conflicts with antagonistic students.

Because resolving these attacks seems impossible, people censor themselves. They try to guess what might risk offending the most aggressive students and administrators—and then they simply avoid saying those things. And even when they don't fear getting fired, the arguing and the hopeless attempts to prove one isn't racist or sexist are so humiliating, distracting and unproductive that most people would do nearly anything to avoid them.

Ironically, self-censorship probably just reinforces the worldview of the most narrow-minded students. As they encounter fewer and fewer ideas that make them uncomfortable, they become even less tolerant and more belligerent.

What's lost here? The students' education, for sure. Students are now missing so much great material. But we also lose some of the joy of teaching, the ability to share the love of the material with students, the spark. Where once there was humor, light and spontaneity in the classroom, now there is a coldness, a formality and, at times, even a lingering unspoken acrimony. The opportunity to challenge, to expand students' understanding, to get them to embrace new ideas is what draws many people to teaching in the first place.

How much has been lost in our culture as a result of dynamics like this? It's hard to say. Many academics suppress research findings or theoretical arguments. But it's also little things. Sometimes it's a painting in a slideshow that could be construed as "colonialist," a great short story with a controversial passage, a movie with a scene students might fixate on. Most students have no idea how much they're missing.

This lost material must be preserved. Not just to keep it from being lost forever, but also to show people the price we pay for self-censorship—the lost wisdom, the psychological toll, the strangulated culture.

This has led a colleague of mine, Samantha Hedges, to develop a repository of "Lost Knowledge." Teachers and professors can submit their stories of censored or self-censored material on her [website](#). All stories are welcome, and people can submit anonymously. This material might be vanishing from education, but it should be preserved somewhere. Hopefully we can keep some of it from being lost forever.