Reasoning and Rationale Versus Opinions and Ideas: Using Inquiry-Based Instruction to

Reduce Political Bias in Today's College Classrooms

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Abstract

In theory, the fact that American colleges and universities tend to be liberal-leaning should not be an issue. However, several studies document that political bias in today's college classrooms causes students to avoid discussing potentially controversial topics for fear of criticism and ridicule, lowered grades, and even physical harm. Inquiry-based instruction can increase students' feelings of safety in sharing their views, decrease student self-censorship, and allow students to practice engaging in uncomfortable yet collegial conversations. This article describes how inquiry-based instruction can be used to 1) encourage students' consideration of a balanced range information drawn from a variety of sources (curriculum), 2) facilitate active and student-centered thinking, discourse, and decision-making (instruction); and 3) emphasize thoughtful and research-based logic, reasoning, and rationale over simply expression of opinions and ideas (assessment). Such an inquiry-based approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment can reduce political bias in today's college classrooms.

Keywords: inquiry-based instruction, instructor neutrality, political balance, political bias, trans-political conceptual foundation

Reasoning and Rationale Versus Opinions and Ideas: How Inquiry-Based Instruction Can

Reduce Political Bias in Today's College Classrooms

In theory, the fact that American colleges and universities tend to be liberal-leaning (Hemmer 2017; Howland, 2023; Linvill & Mazer, 2013) should not be an issue. However, several studies document that political bias in today's college classrooms causes students to avoid discussing potentially controversial topics for fear of criticism and ridicule, lowered grades, and even physical harm (Anderson, 2021; Linvill & Havice, 2011; Intelligent.com, 2021). As a politically conservative person, I have always tried to introduce my students to multiple perspectives, often by posing questions to prompt divergent thinking. Even so, beginning in 2019, I noticed that liberal-leaning groupthink had begun dominating class discussions. My subtle questioning approach no longer seemed effective. Apparently, I was not alone. In one recent study, Republican students were two to three-and-one-half times more reluctant to speak up during class discussions than were Democrat students (Anderson, 2021).

To address the problem of student self-censorship, some education experts advocate for classrooms where all students feel safe sharing their views (Anderson, 2021; Hedges, 2022). Others believe students must be taught how to engage in uncomfortable yet collegial conversations (Linvill & Mazer, 2013; Trepanier, 2022). Inquiry-based instruction can do both. This article describes how inquiry-based instruction can be used to 1) encourage students' consideration of a balanced range information drawn from a variety of sources (curriculum), 2) facilitate active and student-centered thinking, discourse, and decision-making (instruction); and 3) emphasize thoughtful and research-based logic, reasoning, and rationale over simply expression of opinions and ideas (assessment). The article culminates with a figure that can be used to guide inquiry-based instructional activities and assessments across academic disciplines.

The Woes of Today's Higher Education System

College enrollment in the United States is declining. Recently, Marcus (2022) reported, "There are 4 million fewer students in college now than there were 10 years ago" (para. 4). What is going on in higher education? One factor is the *demographic cliff*, a significant drop in the number of college-aged students due to a 20% decline in the birthrate of Americans since 2007 (Harris, 2022). In short, fewer kids are going to college. Another factor is Americans' changing opinions about the value of a college education. Miller (2023) points out that most jobs today do not require a college degree, which makes college unnecessary for many high school graduates. Indeed, Americans' "skepticism about the value of a degree, impatience with the time it takes to get one, and costs that have finally exceeded many people's ability or willingness to pay" have caused parents and students alike to consider vocational training or moving directly into the workforce as viable options to going to college (Marcus, 2022, para. 6).

In a recent report by Populace (2022), even college preparation is not as important as it used to be. Today's parents want their children to develop practical skills "for both life and career" (p. 10), critical thinking skills that allow them "to problem solve and make decisions" (p. 8), and moral character traits such as "honesty, kindness, integrity, [and] ethics" (p. 20), yet parents perceived that they were alone in their desire for a practical K-12 education. The study's authors explained, "Even though Americans privately want an education system that prepares children to do work that is personally meaningful and fulfilling…they believe the rest of society does not share their priority" (p. 16). For some reason, parents are not speaking up.

Making matters worse, some college graduates are disappointed with the college education they received (Marcus, 2022). Why? Maranto (2022) posits that education today focuses "too much on preparing workers and too little on preparing citizens" (para. 11).

Trepanier (2022) argues that college courses have acquiesced to students' feelings and interests over educational standards and rigorous curriculum. Or is it something else?

Part of the higher education enrollment problem might be misguided Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts. Building on the idea that today's colleges and universities are not what they used to be, Wooldridge (2021) reasons that recent trends toward lowering college admissions standards to admit more students from underrepresented groups increases the number of students who are underprepared for college while decreasing the number of students who are. Unfortunately, the term DEI may be misleading. Ridgley (2022) warns that many DEI programs claim to promote acceptance and equality for everyone while in reality promoting people of certain races at the expense of others.

Celebrating diversity in higher education is nothing new. Hemmer (2017) explains that in the 1990s:

> Multiculturalism held that diversity was a positive value, because people from different backgrounds brought with them different perspectives, and a wide range of perspectives was good for intellectual debate. Postmodernism, a more academic idea, held – at least in some of its guises – that truth was inaccessible, perhaps nonexistent, that everything might be relative, everything might be perspective (para. 20).

In this way, *postmodernism* has contributed significantly to left-leaning political bias on many of today's college campuses. Although progressive ideologies have been prevalent in higher education classrooms since the 1990s (Abrams, 2016), the establishment of DEI over the past three years has proliferated far-left political ideologies and policies.

Politically Left Domination

The final reason for declining college enrollment – and the focus of this article – is the politically left domination of today's colleges and universities (Hemmer, 2017; Howland, 2023; Linvill & Mazer, 2013), which can lead to political bias. Linvill and Havice (2011) define political bias as "a suppression of political beliefs other than one's own and/or a belief that an individual's own political beliefs are the only correct beliefs" (p. 489). These researchers found that college students' perceptions of political bias in the college classroom – whether accurate or not – include believing their instructors guide class discussions to advance their personal political beliefs, actively discredit student opinions that oppose the instructors' beliefs, and give lower grades on assignments where students present ideas contrary to the instructor's beliefs.

Murawski (2023) asserts that many of today's higher education institutions have "flip-flopped from a culture where everyone looked the same and thought differently, to a culture where everyone looks different and thinks the same" (para. 19), which usually disadvantages conservative students' voices. A recent Gallup poll found that during the third quarter of 2021, 44% of Americans considered themselves Republican and 45% considered themselves Democrat (Jones, 2022). With such a narrow margin between the United States' two major political parties, college enrollment may be declining in an attempt by students and their parents to avoid a politically biased education.

For students who do enroll in college, a left-dominated environment makes politically-balanced dialogue nearly impossible. Murawski (2023) writes, "Surveys repeatedly show that professors are overwhelmingly progressive and students report that they feel intimidated into silence or acquiescence, particularly on hot-button topics like race, gender, immigration, and climate" (para. 11). *Confirmation bias*, which involves "the cherry-picking of data to confirm an

already-held dubious belief," is one commonly-used strategy for emphasizing preferred ideologies and discrediting unfavorable ones (Ridgeley, 2022, para. 9). Confirmation bias can be subconscious, but it can also be intentional.

Whether subconscious or intentional, the dominant leftist culture of today's colleges and universities has led-to widespread student self-censorship (Anderson, 2021; Howland, 2023; Linvill & Havice, 2011), which could be another reason that students are not enrolling – or not staying – in college. Hedges (2022) reported that, in one recent study, "44% of students who identify as Democrats, 58% who identify as independents, and 73% who identify as Republicans report self-censoring because they fear how other students, a professor, or the administration would respond" (para. 5). The study revealed that, out of fear of being judged, shamed, or ostracized, college students self-censor their thoughts, ideas, reactions, questions, and opinions while in classrooms and other public spaces. Anderson (2021) also asserts that conservative students self-censor more so than liberal students, although Linvill and Havice (2011) suggest that self-censorship is dependent on students' perceptions of political bias regardless of their political ideology.

Nevertheless, among conservatives, the problem of self-censorship is not limited to students. Maranto (2022) reports that four out of every ten Americans now self-censor to avoid conflict with others. Howland (2023) recently stated:

> Speakers, professors, and students who challenge political and intellectual orthodoxy in our universities-generally advancing views, incidentally, that most Americans find uncontroversial-are regularly disinvited, slandered, and sometimes fired simply because of the opinions they hold, the questions they ask, or the arguments they make (para. 6).

Faculty self-censorship can be exacerbated by college and university hiring and promotion practices. Specifically, higher education DEI efforts have increased commitment to affirmative action, where selection decisions are based on demographics more so than an individual's knowledge, skills, and experiences (Wooldridge, 2021). When college faculty are required to state their political views at the time of hiring or promotion, conservatives are less likely to be hired or granted tenure and promotion (Howland, 2023; Tietz, 2023b). Howland (2023) elaborates, "Tenure is supposed to protect academic freedom, but today it has paradoxically led to narrowing the confines of acceptable opinion and has encouraged political conformity" (para. 17). Howland's observation undergirds the urgent need for political balance in higher education today.

The Need for Political Balance in Higher Education

According to organizational theory, an open system allows for decision-makers to increase, modify, or decrease organizational structures based on the needs of the institution (Haque, 2015). In education, this dynamic is conceptually referred to as the *education pendulum*. The education pendulum perpetually swings from one extreme to the other for various reasons, including the implementation of new programs, initiatives, and incentives on one hand and funding cuts, educator burnout, and failed initiatives on the other hand (Bielefeld, 2018). Right now in K-12 and higher education, the pendulum has swung far left. According to organizational theory, if far-left initiatives and ideologies are negatively impacting college enrollment, the only direction the pendulum can swing is back toward the right.

Murawksi (2023) explains that "conservative anti-DEI pushback" (para. 16) can take several forms, including major efforts like establishing brand new higher education institutions, reforming existing colleges and universities, and revising institutional policies. For example, in

Texas, the newly-founded University of Austin (UATX), scheduled to open in fall 2024, plans to de-emphasize administration, campus amenities for students, and intercollegiate athletics in favor of prioritizing instruction and academic programs (Howland, 2023). In Florida, the governor recently appointed a new board of trustees to transform the under-enrolled New College of Florida into a thriving, politically balanced public university by restructuring the curriculum to a classical model and adopting institutional neutrality (Rufo, 2023). In Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee was recently ordered to revise its DEI website for bias reporting to make clear that offensive speech – including hate speech – is protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution (Tietz, 2023a). In North Carolina, the governing board of the University of North Carolina recently voted to remove requirements for compelled DEI statements from all admission, hiring, tenure, and promotion applications to "level the playing field for discourse on campus" (Tietz, 2023b, para. 14).

These wide-ranging efforts to politically balance higher education are not without criticism. At New College of Florida, one long-term faculty member stated of the reform, "There is very much a policing of ideas" (para. 19), and a student worried, "I'm concerned they're going to take a school that does not indoctrinate students and turn it into a school that does" (Gecker, 2023, para. 27). Hemmer (2017) takes a more alarmist view, stating that conservative efforts to politically balance higher education institutions is actually a cover for "dismantling American universities altogether" (para. 5).

Fortunately, there are also smaller-scale ways to politically balance today's colleges and universities. For example, Murawski (2023) envisions "voluntary commitments to academic freedom, open inquiry, and viewpoint diversity" (para. 16). This level of institutional reform

empowers individual faculty members to be part of the solution, and one powerful strategy is inquiry-based instruction.

Inquiry-Based Instruction

Hedges (2022) writes that the purpose of a college education is "to pursue knowledge and truth and prepare for life in a democratic society" (para. 6). Howland (2023) describes the beauty of a college education this way: "Education joins what would otherwise be separated, enlarging the realm and enriching the comprehension of human experience. It works in multiple dimensions, linking past and future, time and eternity, and the individual with society and the world" (para. 2). Linvill and Pyle (2017) state, "While in college, students can be taught to engage with peers, consider varying viewpoints, and productively contribute to society" (p. 214). Clearly, the college experience is intended to open students' minds to new ideas and perspectives to prepare them for informed participation in society.

Traditionally, a classical college education included deep study of ancient, historical, and contemporary readings to critique and refine ideas (Basil, 2020). The more modern liberal arts education, which incorporates aspects of classical education, encourages broad exposure to the arts, sciences, and humanities "to cultivate excellence as the condition of meaningful freedom: the power to do good, honor truth, and nurture beauty" (Howland, 2023, para.10). Miller (2023) asserts that colleges and universities should provide "a strong liberal arts program to help students become more informed citizens and lead more meaningful lives" (para. 6).

Nevertheless, in many of today's colleges and universities, liberal education has become *illiberal*. Rather than an education that is open to all perspectives and possibilities, an illiberal education is politically biased, most often leaning left. Berkowitz (2013) explains, "Sadly, the spirit of inquiry once at home on campus has been replaced by the use of the humanities and

social sciences as vehicles for disseminating 'progressive,' or left-liberal propaganda" (para. 8). Because illiberal education has become the norm in many of today's colleges and universities, inquiry-based instruction is a useful strategy for minimizing dominant progressive ideologies in favor of the more balanced reasoning and rationale inherent in a classical or liberal arts education.

Inquiry-based Instruction

Inquiry-based instruction is an approach to teaching that is based on inquiry, or questioning, for the purpose of finding answers – as opposed to finding *the* answer. It is an instructor-guided, student-centered approach to building knowledge and increasing understanding where students work together to formulate questions, conduct research, and eventually, articulate a position, answer, or solution (Gutierrez, 2018; Khalaf & Zin, 2018).

At its most simple, inquiry-based instruction can be used for a specific class activity or assignment. DeClerk and colleagues (2020) studied the effectiveness of a livestreamed speech and debate activity on the skill development of online graduate-level nursing students. Following four weeks of preparation by pairs of nursing students, each 30-minute debate included five minutes for opening arguments, a ten-minute break to prepare rebuttals, three minutes for rebuttals, and two minutes for closing statements. As a result of the debate experience, students showed statistically significant improvement in several critical thinking and presentation skills.

Inquiry-based instruction is also a highly effective approach for teaching longer units of study. Linvill and Pyle (2017) describe an inquiry-based unit designed to develop undergraduate students' civil discourse skills. After receiving foundational instruction, students collectively selected a topic of interest, read widely, and reflected in writing on the topic. With this preparation, students researched further, engaged in class discussion, and finally, wrote opinion-

editorial (op-ed) articles for possible publication in the student newspaper. College faculty who taught the unit report that it equips students with greater respect for civil discourse as well as deeper understanding of the skills and processes necessary to engage in civil discourse.

On an even larger scale, inquiry-based instruction can be used to structure an entire course. Justice and colleagues (2007) describe an undergraduate course collaboratively developed, implemented, and refined over several years' time to teach students how to engage deeply in inquiry within the context of specific course content. After posing an overarching, 'why' question as the object of inquiry, course instructors provide direct instruction, assign readings and films, and facilitate class discussions to prepare students for completion of individual inquiry projects related to the overarching question. As the course progresses, students are guided through a structured inquiry process where each student poses a question, writes a proposal, reads from a range of sources, synthesizes their findings to answer their question, writes formal research paper, and delivers a formal presentation to the class. Throughout the inquiry process, students are supported with structured assignments, instructor and peer feedback, and supplemental instruction.

As a final example, Zeek (2011) describes an interdisciplinary, inquiry-based, dual enrollment course for high school seniors in which two instructors collaboratively taught English composition and political science. The instructors identified a current world issue as the course theme and provided introductory readings and videos from a variety of sources, which the class used as a basis for posing questions about the issue. Each student took responsibility for one question and used it to articulate a research question, develop a thesis statement, and eventually, write a formal research paper. A class website was created for students to post, organize, and share sources; discuss ideas, and give and receive feedback about their writing and reasoning.

The instructors, who researched and wrote alongside their students, found that by approaching the research paper as a thematic and collaborative inquiry project, students wrote more, discussed more, and participated more than students in a traditionally taught composition course. In addition, incidences of plagiarism were lower, the quality of the final research papers was higher, and students were motivated to participate in a community service project as a result of the experience.

In each of these examples, inquiry-based instruction 1) encouraged students' consideration of a balanced range information drawn from a variety of sources (curriculum), 2) facilitated active and student-centered thinking, discourse, and decision-making (instruction); and 3) emphasized thoughtful and research-based logic, reasoning, and rationale over simply expression of opinions and ideas (assessment). As the next three sections of the article elaborate, when instructors establish a trans-political conceptual foundation, scaffold and structure the inquiry process, remain fully committed to diversity in thought and ideology, and assess students *holistically* based on objective-aligned criteria, an inquiry-based approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment can reduce political bias in today's college classrooms.

Inquiry-Based Curriculum: Encouraging Balance and Variety

In terms of curriculum, inquiry-based instruction can be used to encourage students' consideration of a balanced range information drawn from a variety of sources. Because the purpose of inquiry-based instruction is to find answers, its curriculum arises from one or more questions. According to Justice and colleagues (2007), a genuine question "is something that the asker really wants to answer but presently cannot, as opposed to a question which the asker assumes the answer to and wants to prove" (p. 206). Inquiry questions should be interesting, analytical, problematic, complex, important, genuine, and researchable (Justice et al., 2007, p.

206); relevant to students' interests (DeClerk et al., 2020; Linvill & Pyle, 2017; Zeek, 2011); and designed to "explore the possibility of multiple 'right' answers" (Cuenca, 2021, p. 384). In inquiry-based instruction, it is not uncommon for questions to change and/or multiply as students deepen their understanding of complex topics. For this reason, questions should be allowed to evolve throughout the inquiry process (Justice et al., 2007).

While some instructors may shy away from controversial topics – especially politically-laden ones – controversial topics are more likely to pique students' interests and provide a rich basis for inquiry (DeClerk et al., 2020; Garrett et al., 2020). Even when topics are politically controversial, providing balanced and varied sources guards against the risk of inadvertently omitting core concepts or topics (Gutierrez, 2018) and encourages students to consider a range of differing perspectives (Linvill & Pyle, 2017; Zeek, 2011). Anderson (2021) adds that stating a position and facing disagreement helps students build emotional and intellectual resilience. To accomplish political balance, instructors must maintain neutrality across curriculum, instruction, and assessment (McNeilly, 2022). Trepanier (2022) refers to a "middle path" (para. 17). Howland (2023) calls this a "trans-political" approach, explaining, "In a university, all sides of every contested question deserve a hearing" (para. 18).

In terms of curriculum, *instructor neutrality* begins with the topic(s) selected and the question(s) posed but extends to the background information or foundational knowledge that instructors may provide to inspire further inquiry. Cuenca (2021) refers to the need for a "common conceptual foundation" (p. 383). For example, in Zeek's (2011) dual credit English composition/political science course, the instructors provided introductory readings and videos that students used as a basis for developing inquiry questions. In their inquiry-based undergraduate course, Justice and colleagues (2007) assigned readings early in the term and then

allowed students to select subsequent readings. But even when instructors make a genuine effort

to establish a *trans-political conceptual foundation*, students themselves may not be committed

to neutrality. Garrett and colleagues (2020) warn:

> If we ignore the ways in which rational consideration of facts are only one part of our
>
> personal political framework, then we can only reproduce the cycle of trying to battle
>
> facts with more facts, expecting more facts to be persuasive despite research suggesting
>
> the opposite to be true" (p. 315).

In today's college classrooms, beyond encouraging the balance and variety of sources,

instructors must be prepared for – and respectful of – student emotions and even biases that

emerge when controversial topics are raised. At the same time, instructors must strive to remain

neutral in terms of their own personal and/or political views.

Inquiry-Based Instruction: Facilitating Active and Student-Centered Thinking, Discourse, and Decision-Making

Cuenca (2021) asserts that inquiry-based instruction allows educators to avoid limiting

the curriculum to "content prescriptions" (p. 382) by making curriculum "a point of departure for

instruction" (p. 383). Once a trans-political conceptual foundation is established, inquiry-based

instruction can be used to facilitate active and student-centered thinking, discourse, and decision-

making (instruction). While traditional instruction, such as lecture and multiple-choice tests,

limits students to a passive learning mode, inquiry-based instruction requires students to take

responsibility for their own learning by actively engaging in research (Gutierrez, 2018; Khalaf &

Zin, 2018; Zeek, 2011). Put another way, "Inquiry is characterized by the anticipation of multiple

and complex research findings; understanding is generated testing the evidence, both for and

against, hypothetical answers to a question" (Justice et al., 2007, p. 207). Especially during the

instructional stage of the inquiry process, students have opportunities engage meaningfully with one another around the content being studied (Hedges, 2022) as they learn how to gather information, make sense of it, and communicate their thinking with others (Justice et al., 2007; Trepanier, 2022).

Because inquiry-based instruction is often new to college students, they will need instructor guidance throughout the inquiry process, beginning with self-awareness. To explore the complexity of human emotion in political discussions, Garrett and colleagues (2020) observed and analyzed middle and high school class discussions focused on controversial political issues. Recognizing anxiety as the underlying emotion, these researchers suggest making students aware of human tendencies toward confirmation bias and *motivated reasoning* by encouraging students to explore the historical progression of emotions around controversial issues as a valid form of evidence. As an alternative, Linvill and Pyle (2017) required undergraduate students to write personal belief statements:

> This belief statement has been useful in encouraging students to put consideration into topics before class and to articulate opinions that can be expressed, defended, and possibly changed throughout the course of the discussion. We have found that for many topics, students have not been able to articulate a clear perspective until required to do so, and encouraging this step before the start of discussion fosters better discourse (p. 216).

In addition, college instructors are wise to establish ground rules for class discussion. Anderson (2021) recommends questioning to understand and active listening to help students avoid making assumptions about others' viewpoints. Linvill and Mazer (2013) stress zero tolerance for verbal aggression and personal attacks, explaining, "Students and faculty alike must learn to understand

where to expect disagreement on a topic and how to go about engaging in a civil discussion" (para. 5).

While recognizing that emotions and strong opinions are inevitable and encouraging students to articulate their positions in constructive ways provide a starting point, instructors must diligently guide the inquiry process to ensure research productivity, facilitate active and student-centered thinking, and help students avoid confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. Cuenca (2021) suggests scaffolding inquiry tasks from easier and instructor-supervised to more difficult and student-led as students strengthen their research skills and gain momentum. For example, Justice and colleagues (2007) scaffolded students' public speaking confidence by requiring students to speak up during class discussion; then to make brief informal reports to small groups of peers; then to deliver more formal, large group presentations; and finally, to deliver their culminating formal class presentation. Linvill and Pyle (2017) recommend direct instruction and practice to help students develop skills such as making a reasoned argument, evaluating the validity of sources, and maintaining high tolerance for disagreement. Howland (2023) emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to use good judgment throughout the inquiry process by discerning relevant from irrelevant, good from bad, and right from wrong.

Structured inquiry exercises and discussion formats are also useful instructional strategies for guiding – as opposed to directing – the inquiry process. In DeClerk and colleagues' (2020) study, the livestreamed speech and debate activity was structured with a well-defined debate process and time limits, and the preparation leading up to the debate was structured with assigned questions and "for or against" positions. Cuenca (2021) requires that students examine questions and topics through interdisciplinary lenses to ensure consideration from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Linvill and Pyle (2017) explain, "By encouraging students to examine

subject matter critically and by asking questions to which there are no 'right' answers, instructors equip students to build knowledge and understanding" (p. 215).

It is through such open-ended discussions, however, that differences of opinion emerge and emotions can run high – especially when issues are political. Garrett and colleagues (2020) refer to such moments as "a confluence of facts, opinions, and emotions" (p. 317). As uncomfortable as these discussions may feel for both instructor and students, differences of opinion offer the greatest opportunity for student learning, both in regard to the inquiry process and to the issue at hand. Howland (2023) encourages, "We believe that students can learn, and professors can teach, only if they are free to ask questions and share opinions without fear" (para. 9). DeClerk and colleagues (2020) add, "We want to empower our students to think and speak as clearly as they hear" (p. 461). Anderson (2021) asserts that offending someone during a class discussion and learning from it "can be a good thing" (para. 9) because it promotes free speech and gives students practice engaging in uncomfortable yet collegial conversations. During such discussions, it is the responsibility of the course instructor to encourage diversity in thought and ideology by asking questions, arguing opposing viewpoints, and – most importantly – modeling respectful civil discourse.

The purpose of class discussions is to thoroughly explore a topic or issue from all perspectives for the eventual purpose of settling on a final answer or answers, at least for the time being. Similar to scholarly research, the culminating stage of the inquiry process involves answering the question(s) posed and drawing conclusions. Justice and colleagues (2007) explain that communicating the findings of an inquiry project both orally and in writing serves "as a way of clarifying and testing thoughts and linking an individual effort of understanding to the cumulative growth of knowledge" (p. 211). For example, with their graduate-level nursing

students, DeClerk and colleagues (2020) culminated students' inquiry with structured,

livestreamed debates. In their undergraduate course, Justice and colleagues (2007) required a

formal presentation to the class and submission of a formal research paper. Linvill and Pyle

(2017), who asked students to write an op-ed for possible publication in the student newspaper,

explain that culminating assignments like these "[require] students both to synthesize their

beliefs into a concise argument and to reflect on them to the degree that they are willing to stand

by those beliefs publicly" (p. 216). Such assignments also build problem solving and teamwork

skills (Gutierrez, 2018), provide students with "an opportunity to practice inquiry as a habit of

citizenship" (Cuenca, 2021, p. 386), and "lead to greater long term knowledge retention

(Gutierrez, 2018, para. 12).

From teaching the skills of inquiry to scaffolding and structuring the inquiry process to

encouraging diversity in thought and ideology, college instructors can avoid political bias in

today's college classrooms by facilitating active and student-centered thinking, discourse, and

decision-making. But the instructor's role is not complete until students' inquiry efforts are

assessed, which again requires neutrality on the part of the course instructor.

Inquiry-Based Assessment: Evaluating Logic, Reasoning, and Rationale

As the final stage in the process, inquiry-based instruction can be used to emphasize

thoughtful and research-based logic, reasoning, and rationale over simply expression of opinions

and ideas (assessment). When assessing student inquiry efforts, assessing the process is just as

important as assessing the culminating project(s).

Student reflection and self-assessment is one useful way to assess the inquiry process. For

example, following their livestreamed debate activity, DeClerk and colleagues (2020) asked

graduate-level nursing students to self-assess their skill development according to nine criteria, which required students to consider both process and product:

> 1) select appropriate resources and literature; 2) analyze and evaluate literature; 3) apply literature to support debate position; 4) defend pros and cons of a professional issue; 5) predict opposing arguments; 6) counter opposing arguments; 7) compose a well-organized oral presentation; 8) deliver a professional presentation; and 9) establish credibility and persuade listeners (p. 463).

Justice and colleagues (2007) required students to maintain a journal or log of their individual inquiry activities throughout the course, which provided "a persuasive vehicle allowing students to feel that otherwise invisible work is meaningful and is given credit" (p. 213). Requiring students to reflect on and self-assess their inquiry efforts empowers students to take responsibility for the quality of their efforts, which may help to alleviate two possible disadvantages of inquiry-based instruction: low student motivation during the inquiry process and low student learning outcomes (Khalaf & Zin, 2018).

In addition to student self-assessment and reflection, the quality of students' inquiry efforts must be assessed by the course instructor in comparison to clearly-communicated academic standards and/or course learning objectives. For example, in the social studies, Cuenca (2021) describes seven core practices for inquiry: 1) establishing academic language, 2) helping students recognize interdisciplinary connections, 3) asking interpretive questions, 4) helping students organize inquiries, 5) connecting inquiry to students' lives, 6) structuring opportunities for discussion, and 7) expanding inquiry into civic life. Therefore, in the social studies classroom, curriculum, instruction, and assessment all should align directly with one or more of these core practices. The criteria for Linvill and Pyle's (207) op-ed includes 1) clearly and

correctly written, 2) concise, 3) well-argued and free of logical fallacies, 4) grounded in fact, 5) personal, and 6) respectful of differing opinions. As an important reminder of instructor neutrality, these instructors emphasize that the final grade for the op-ed is based on the quality of students' written work – not on students' opinions or positions.

Early in their course, Justice and colleagues (2007) provide students with a checklist to guide the writing of their final research paper. The checklist contains reminders such as, "I have not attempted to prove my hypotheses, but rather to assess them fairly," and "The source of every idea, fact or argument (including my own) is obvious to the reader" (p. 212). In this way, the instructors make clear to students that the focus of the paper is logic, reasoning, and rationale as opposed to elaborating an unsubstantiated position, reciting previously-concluded talking points, or writing what the instructor wants to hear. Similar to ensuring that students are exposed to a balance and variety of sources, assessing students' inquiry efforts in alignment with clearly-communicated academic standards and/or course learning objectives helps to alleviate the risk that mastery of important course content may be overlooked during the assessment process (Gutierrez, 2018; Trepanier, 2022).

Even so, Garrett and colleagues (2020) reiterate that "facts are weak interventions into the belief structures of individuals, particularly when those facts relate to issues of significant personal/political importance" (p. 315). For this reason, a *holistic* approach to the assessment of students' inquiry efforts offers the most authentic view of students' developing knowledge and skills. Zeek's (2011) high school dual credit students were holistically graded on their use of the class website, their participation in the project, and their final research paper. Linvill and Pyle's (2017) students were assessed on their written belief statement, participation in class discussion, and the quality of their op-ed. In addition to smaller, preparatory assignments throughout their

course, Justice and colleagues (2007) required students to make a final presentation and submit a formal research paper. In these ways, all assignments and activities leading up to the culminating project(s) are formative, or developmental, in nature. Because students' efforts are monitored and assessed throughout the inquiry process, final project, unit, and/or course grades are more likely to be representative of the "whole" of students' work.

Maintaining neutrality during the assessment process is perhaps the most important principle of inquiry-based instruction. Instructors must assess the quality of students' work rather than judge the answer or position at which students arrive (Justice et al., 2007; Linvill & Havice, 2011; McNeilly, 2022). Linvill and Pyle (2017) stress that the purpose of assessing students' inquiry efforts "should not be to change individual students' beliefs on given topics, but rather to build an understanding and appreciation of civil discourse through its practice" (p. 217). Rather, instructors must remain fully committed to diversity in thought and ideology, even when students' views seem extreme. Garrett and colleagues (2020) warn, "By not paying attention to the affective processes of learning and not learning, we, as educators, may be participating in the very same practice of motivated reasoning that we are attempting to challenge in students' thinking" (p. 321).
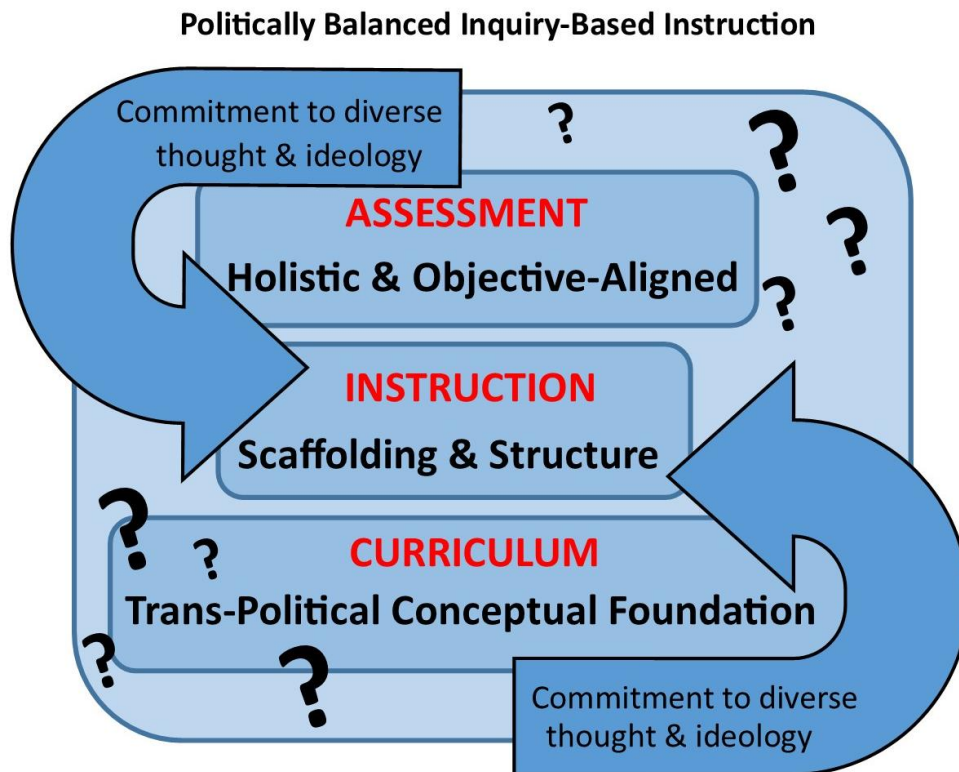
But take heart! Linvill and Havice (2011) encourage: "Understanding fully what students perceive as political bias and how and why they respond to perceived bias can facilitate education professionals in improving the college experience for all students" (p. 496). By using student self-assessment, clearly communicating objective-aligned assessment criteria, assessing students holistically, and remaining fully committed to diversity in thought and ideology, college instructors will be more likely to assess students' ability to apply logic, reasoning, and rationale rather than affirming, questioning, or criticizing students' opinions and ideas.

Reducing Political Bias: A Practical Tool for Getting Started

It is wise to remember that perception is reality. Even when political bias is mistakenly

perceived by students, today's college instructors must make a genuine effort to remain fully

committed to diversity in thought and ideology for the sake of free speech as well as student

learning. The inquiry-based approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment described and

elaborated throughout this article is one way to reduce political bias and restore political balance

in today's college classrooms. Toward this end, Figure 1 offers a practical tool college faculty

can use to guide inquiry-based instructional activities and assessments across academic

disciplines.

Figure 1

Politically-balanced Inquiry-based Instruction

Politically Balanced Inquiry-Based Instruction

Commitment to diverse thought & ideology

ASSESSMENT
Holistic & Objective-Aligned

INSTRUCTION
Scaffolding & Structure

CURRICULUM
Trans-Political Conceptual Foundation

Commitment to diverse thought & ideology

In Figure 1, the question marks represent the basis of inquiry-based instruction – questions large and small throughout the inquiry process. The large, curved arrows represent the instructor's leadership, not only in terms of initiating the curriculum to be explored, but also in assessing what is learned. The arrows represent that both curriculum and assessment relate directly to the heart of inquiry: student-centered instruction. Most importantly, to avoid political bias in favor of political balance, college instructors must fully commit to diverse thought and ideology throughout all stages of the inquiry process.

To avoid political bias in the curriculum, instructors must provide a trans-political conceptual foundation. This can be accomplished by encouraging genuine questions, providing balanced and varied sources, and maintaining instructor neutrality throughout the inquiry process. To avoid political bias during the instructional stage of inquiry, instructors must scaffold and structure students' inquiry efforts. This can be accomplished by providing direct instruction related to both content and process, scaffolding inquiry-based activities from simple to more complex, and engaging students in structured exercises and discussions. In addition, establishing ground rules, encouraging open discussion, and teaching students how to manage their personal beliefs and emotions in favor of civil discourse are important aspects of the instructional stage of inquiry. To avoid political bias in the assessment of students' inquiry efforts, instructors must assess both the inquiry process as well as the culminating project(s). To ensure that students inquiry efforts are assessed holistically, instructors should include process-oriented assessments such as student reflections and self-assessments as well as formal, culminating projects such as research papers and presentations. Additionally, instructors must ensure that students are assessed according to clearly-communicated criteria that are directly aligned to academic standards and/or course learning objectives.

Conclusion

Howland (2023) writes, "Politics should be a subject of study in a university, not its operating system" (para. 12). With that said, political polarization is at an all-time high in the United States today, and many college faculty and students hold strong political opinions. It is my hope that this article inspires college faculty across academic disciplines and political ideologies to incorporate inquiry-based instruction into their teaching repertoires. By establishing a trans-political conceptual foundation, scaffolding and structuring the inquiry process, remaining fully committed to diversity in thought and ideology, and assessing students holistically based on objective-aligned criteria, college instructors of all political stripes can better prepare students to become informed citizens ready to engage with others respectfully and productively.

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