

Political Meets Personal: Post-Election Conversations in the Classroom

By [Christina Torres](#) on November 19, 2016 2:43 PM

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Note: A lot of times, I try and write with a really strong point of view or opinion. If I'm not sure on something, I usually don't feel comfortable enough to put it to paper for people to read.

This is not one of the posts. As a fifth-year teacher, I recognize I have a lot to learn as an educator. So, as always, this is a time where feedback in the comments or personally is always appreciated.

"I'm glad Donald Trump won," my student began. A few of their classmates gasped, I hushed them so my student could continue. "Yeah, he said he's going to build a wall, but that's to kick out the illegal immigrants coming in our state, invading our country."*

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

As the child of an immigrant, and someone who taught in a population where a number of my students and/or their families were undocumented, immigration has always been an emotionally charged subject for me. When adults have made similar claims, I often take a deep breath before, frankly, dropping a whole lot of knowledge with far more hand gestures than I use in normal conversation.

The thing is, this student is 12. They're possibly parroting things they've heard adults say or read/misread on the news (I later had a student claimed Hillary Clinton's parents were secretly Muslim, so we've had a lot of issues to face). Obviously, I think my students are brilliant and deserve the same respect as adults, but it would be foolish to not acknowledge that I'm the adult in the room, and dragging a 12-year-old for what I see as misguided opinions feels inherently wrong.

Still, my obligation as an educator is also to try and teach my students to think critically and seek truth. When she finished speaking, I was faced with a difficult question: **How much do I push back on this student, knowing my own opinion and biases will come into play?**

As we're entering an even more divisive time in American politics and beliefs, here are three practices that have helped me in the past week:

1. **Breathe.** Perhaps not all educators need this but as someone who had a fiery temper in a past life, this one is essential at times. Of course, no student deserves to bare the brunt of our moods or disrespected, but we all have topics that we are particularly emotional or sensitive about and maybe tempted to respond to with snark or anger (At least, I hope so. Please, Lord, let it not just be me!).

So, when a student says something that pushes my buttons, it's essential to stop for a second and just breathe. Pause and consider what they're actually saying and why it's upsetting you. Not only is this important for us to do internally, but it's good modeling for students as well. Showing them what it looks like to stop, consider a person's words, and give thoughtful responses even if we're frustrated is a good life skill to have. It's not saying we don't have a right to be angry or upset, but considering how and why we want to respond in a certain way is a powerful tool.

2. **Seek understanding.** This is one of my favorite tactics not just in the classroom, but in life. Instead of immediately jumping on offense, I take a moment, step back, and ask, **"What makes you think that? Why do you feel that way?"** I find this strategy effective for a few reasons.

First, it pushes my students to think critically and metacognitively about their own beliefs. Many students tend to respond with their **gut reaction** instead of considering more logical reasonings behind those reactions. Still, students are often *capable* of self-reflective, critical thought, they just need to be given the space and time to do it.

Second, it helps give me an emotional read of that student. Is there reaction to that question defensive anger? Do they shut down when questioned? Are they able to stop and take a second and consider why they feel that way? We forget, sometimes, that **conversations we start today don't have to end today.** Not all conversations are best served in a moment of anger or frustration. Sometimes it's better to gracefully table a conversation ("Hm, that's an interesting thought. While I don't agree, I'm going to look into this more.") than it is to let your classroom devolve into an emotionally fraught back-and-forth. (Keyword: *sometimes*. Sometimes, children also speak straight fire-truth and deserve to be heard.)

Finally, it **forces me to consider my reaction and why I feel the way that I do as well.** I may have my own biases and reactions to a student that are unfair, and when I probe a student, I may have assumed something was ill-intended when it wasn't. I am not always right. Even if I hear their response and maintain my beliefs, though, understanding where their coming from puts me in a position to accurately and adeptly push back in a way that will be the most effective.

3. **Provide resources and first-hand knowledge.** More and more often, I am seeing that a big gap in education and understanding policy today is an empathy gap. Students don't learn about the parent angered that their children *still* lacks access to clean drinking water, they just hear "angry riot." They don't learn about the children whose lives are uprooted without access to education, they just hear "illegal immigrants" who "take away funding." (They also often don't hear, by the way, about the fact that undocumented immigrants pay taxes among other things, which I brought up to my class.)


In order for students to understand nuance and practical application, we have to share the stories of those actually affected by those policies. **It is essential to teach students how to listen to other communities instead of drawing conclusions based on what they read online.**

I don't know what the next few months or years in my classroom will look like, but I am doing my best to prepare my students and myself enact change and maintaining sanity and joy in the process. Hopefully, we can all move in that direction as well.

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**Second note: I paraphrased my student's writing here since they didn't give me permission to share and I don't feel comfortable writing it verbatim without speaking to them first.*

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