

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note
Discourses on War and Peace in
a Professional Ethics Classroom

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ERNESTO NETOWE. LIVE IN A SYMBIOTIC LOVE. SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK PURCHASED WITH FUNDS CONTRIBUTED BY THE INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR'S COUNCIL AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS.

Introduction

Teaching in premier science and technology institutes in India is an entirely different experience for teachers of humanities subjects owing to the secondary status that they 'enjoy' and because of the sheer lack of interest the students have in learning them, which they cast off as the least important subjects. Most of my students had excellent academic track records. All of them scored high in the qualifying Joint Entrance Examination (JEE). Many of them were from urban backgrounds, having done their schooling in prestigious institutions. 20% of the classroom population was from rural backgrounds but academically sound enough to challenge their urban peers. 25% of the total classroom strength constituted female students; the male students were the majority in class. Being an English teacher assigned to teach a Professional Ethics course for a semester as an alternate, temporary arrangement (owing to faculty shortage) proved to be a rewarding experience for me.

The course content comprised topics ranging from morals, ethics, values, dilemmas, and decision making to engineering disasters, corporate social responsibility, and weapon development. Students always prioritise their core courses (engineering courses) and though Professional Ethics was a compulsory course, my students had a negative attitude towards it because they perceived it as 'irrelevant to their stream of study.' From an initial, informal discussion with the students, it became evident that they considered it a privilege to be a part of the premier institute, an institute of national importance and one that ranks high in the ranking hierarchy. However, it was also evident that the students never believed they had any responsibility in paying back to the society or paying forward for the privileges they enjoy using tax-payers' money. Most of them chose engineering studies because they wanted to enjoy the social status they acquire once they graduate and secure a job. Many of them had plans to go for higher education or work abroad and settle in countries like the UK, US, Australia, and Germany. Contributing to their immediate society never featured in their list of ambitions. Rooted in this background, teaching them professional ethics was problematic, especially in the context of the teachability of ethics itself being debated. Loui (2005) in his research asserts that engineering students often acquire their professional identity from their relatives and colleagues and, as Stappenbelt (2011) argues, their professional ethics mostly are an extension of their personal ethics. However, in my class, it was appalling to find my students with excellent subject specific competency lacking ethical concerns, empathy, critical thinking skills, and a mindset for collaboration.

Through focus group discussions, I understood that most of the students did not perceive it as an ethical responsibility to use their engineering skills in contributing to the development of the society. Several discussions and Socratic seminars were carried out to engage them in thinking about the very purpose of engineering education. The comfort zone of campus did not make them aware of their importance in building a better humanity. Throughout this course, discussions were carried out on various topics and case studies were analysed. The final discussions before

their examinations, which required them to reflect on their preliminary statements about their ambitions and perceptions as engineers, were very revealing. There was a clear transition towards giving back to the society from being mere beneficiaries of privileges. This gradual change was owing to the multiple rounds of critical questioning and discussions that we as a class engaged in, as stated by one of the learners in the feedback form. As an example, I will illustrate how their perceptions changed about war, peace, and the ethics of weapon development over a few hours of discussion.

Initial Perceptions on War, Peace, and Weapon Development

The students were advocates of weapon development and they articulated their nationalist sentiments in their statements. For them weapon development was part of their national pride and they perceived it as a mandate for ensuring the nation's security. They were not concerned about the ecological cost involved or the economics of it. They largely perceived war as a phenomenon that happens "elsewhere as far away as in Ukraine." Some of them expressed concerns about their relatives who were stuck in Ukraine. There were a few students who reflected on war as a threat to humanity and they iterated that "nobody wins a war." However, most of them came up with clichés like "everything is fair in war and love" and could not understand the magnitude of terror that any war generates. It was important to make them start thinking in humane terms.

Discussions on War Memes

The Russia-Ukraine war was the context for discussions, though the World Wars were also referred to. There were several war memes being floated on social media and the students were asked to collect them. A few of them gathered some war memes and we began discussing them. The discussion on the selected memes challenged their casual ways of dismissing memes as funny and made them think critically. Socratic seminar, in which several questions are asked to promote thinking, was used as students needed prompts most of the time.

With prompts from peers in their respective groups (6 groups, each with 6 students), they discussed the underlying meaning of the memes. In the discursive realm, some of them were able to problematise the insensitivity of meme makers because several memes glorified the war, taking the side of one of the nations engaged in war. Some other memes dealt with war in a simplistic way, miscalculating the perpetual impact of war on humans and the ecosystem. However, the meme above was discussed in detail as the students found it to be an interesting deviation from the ones populating social media. The students engaged in critical discussions about how human beings tend to alienate themselves from disasters and dismiss them as "events

when you're laughing at ww3 memes and start to wonder why the sun is coming out at 9Pm



SOURCE: [HTTPS://MEMEZILA.COM/WHEN-YOU-LAUGH-AT-WORLD-WAR-III-MEMES-AND-START-TO-WONDER-WHY-THE-SUN-RISES-AT-9PM-MEME-10931](https://MEMEZILA.COM/WHEN-YOU-LAUGH-AT-WORLD-WAR-III-MEMES-AND-START-TO-WONDER-WHY-THE-SUN-RISES-AT-9PM-MEME-10931)

happening elsewhere.” With such a turn in the discussion, as a teacher, I could see some of them reconsidering their previous statements about war, and two of the students who associated nationalism with weapon development now stated that “there is much more beyond nationalism, and we don’t realise it as we live in our own safe cocoons.” Although I did not use any standardised psychometric tests to analyse their attitudinal change, I could clearly see a thinking public emerging with more civilised mindsets. I found that the memes and the Socratic seminar served as a congenial ground for their transformation from a careless bunch of teenagers into a group of critical thinkers with better civic sense.

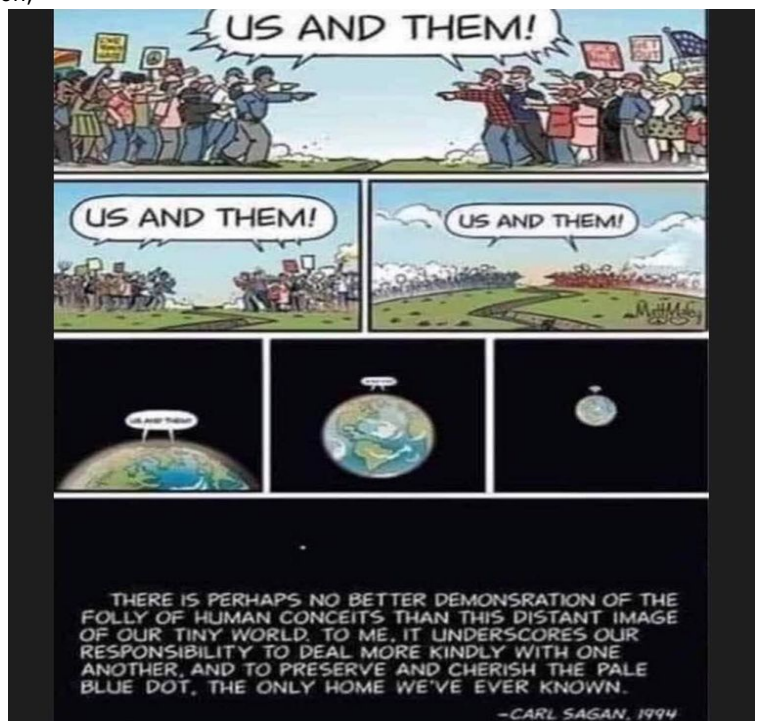
Towards Establishing Peace and Foregrounding Ethical Questions

Other than the changes observed in their attitudes, I noticed that they began to monitor their language use. The usual rude comments/remarks were restricted, and I could find them processing their cognitive load, attempting to express it in a peaceful style. In a sense, they were trying to communicate peace and discourses around peace through a more convivial lingua. The class as a learning community positively responded to this change in environment and transactions. In a minute

way, my students were defining personal ethics for themselves. Their interactions with me outside the classroom indicated a positive signal that endorsed their willingness to change. As a teacher, I found some reassurance about the possibility of an attitudinal change among the students if the teachers make efforts.

For the next session the footfall was greater and surprisingly all the newcomers (the hitherto regular absentees) were well informed about the classroom tasks. They brought more memes and had discussions, and I could see a lot of autonomous students evolving in my class. After scrutinising several memes, the group leaders together selected one meme for discussion.

Some sample responses extracted from the individual



SOURCE: [HTTPS://KNOWYOURMEME.COM/PHOTOS/2322723-WHOLESOME-MEMES](https://KNOWYOURMEME.COM/PHOTOS/2322723-WHOLESOME-MEMES)

"Though this is in the shape of a meme, it is a bigger philosophy. Something about the idiocy of humans. We are a small spot somewhere in the universe. Just like dinos we can fade away if we continue such meaningless wars"

"We don't need weapons. We need peace. If there is peace across borders then why would we want weapons. Wars mean destruction. We don't think about the millions of birds and animals that lost their lives in Hiroshima or Nagasaki. We only count human deaths. But that too with insensitivity"

"I am not sure what an engineering graduate can do about establishing peace, dismissing war and all. But we can begin small. Maybe we should try to be compassionate with others. Like how they teach in schools, to be kind and all. I thought all of such things as silly but our discussions on these memes and the social media posts related to the Ukraine-Russia crisis did something to me. We should discuss more of such topics"

"I think as an engineer we should be more ethical. When it comes to weapon development, we should try to develop weapons that are accurate so that the effect or magnitude can be controlled to a particular spot to be attacked so that innocent people don't die. But whatever it is, weapons are dangerous and just like words we say it hurts people. And many a time we can't revert them. So if weapon development research and the engineers who create them focus on accuracy and more features like reverting them if required can benefit people. But war is war. And it involves killing. Weapons are tools for it. So I am not sure"

"We are always building walls and say that this side it is for us and the other side is for them. This meme is kind of an eye opener. I discussed it at home and my father was telling me how powerfully it conveys our significance. I understand that we are actually voiceless even if we shout if we think from the point of view of a bigger particle somewhere in the universe. Our voices are feeble. Our claims of my space and your space and their space and our space are not relevant. I understand that we should all be a little more concerned about our moral responsibility. It is important to have a meaningful life if we can help it. I am hopeful"

SAMPLE RESPONSES

essays they wrote after their group discussions are given below.

It is evident from their responses that they became more conscious about not only our human vulnerability but also about the ecosystem's vulnerability when it comes to wars. They were given a short newspaper article to read titled "When Art Goes Nuclear." Discussions on this article further fortified their faith in the humanness with which one must approach science and technology. This article emphasised the transdisciplinary critical inquiries into life and living and the students were able to comprehend and communicate possibilities of courses like professional ethics, liberal arts, or theatre contributing towards the scientific temperament. As a follow-up activity, the students were given "On the Nature of Reality" -- the transcript of the

conversation between Albert Einstein and Rabindranath Tagore -- to read and discuss.

Implications and Conclusions

The discussions and the Socratic seminar galvanised by select memes and texts clearly brought a change in the students' perceptions, which was evident through their classroom transactions. I found that many questions were engaging the students metacognitively as they had to think and rethink their own thinking patterns. Perception-generation or modification is not an easy chore. What I was trying to do in my class was to create assemblages. Assemblage of ideas, which is a posthuman theoretical construct, is a useful tool in educational contexts. When

materials were assembled and questions were triggered the ideational assemblages emerged. Through active engagement in a critical discourse analysis of the memes, students formulated certain assemblages about the human predicament, war, and the importance of “peace across all borders.” These formulated assemblages were further invigorated through the reading texts and the discussions that followed. When the topic to be taught was approached differently by taking students beyond the syllabus barriers, I could see affective assemblages being created. Through this classroom task, a platform for students was facilitated to germinate critical assemblages in order to deconstruct their biased and narrow thinking prospects. This revamping resulted in their acknowledging the role of discussions on philosophy and ethics in an engineering classroom as a compulsory component because knowledge is no longer restricted within any boundaries, and we are truly in the age of transdisciplinarity. This task proved to be one of the ways in which we can radically reform our classroom environment, making it conducive for multiple affective assemblages that facilitate learning becoming fundamentally meaningful.

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