

RADICAL TEACHER

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Logical Warrants and the NSA

By Patricia Burns



NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

I teach freshman composition at Tulane University, where instructors pick unique themes for their writing courses. My theme is "war" (since 2001) broadly defined. Students write about anything from border patrol to airport security, Syria to the Iraq War, and sexual assault in the military to racism in the criminal justice system. Course readings cover controversial aspects, both foreign and domestic, of the U.S. War on Terror.

In five semesters of teaching this course, I have seen some pretty exceptionalist thinking on the part of my students: "torture is okay if it can save lives"; "civilian death by drone is okay because 'we' lost almost 3,000 civilians on 9/11 and because drones help stop terrorists"; "stop and frisk is okay because if you have nothing to hide, then you should not mind getting searched." Without a historical perspective, students often believe that the U.S. mission is always moral and therefore U.S. tactics are also moral.

A successful way to get students to interrogate their beliefs is to get them to determine the warrants of the arguments they support. Warrants are logical connectors that tie reasons to claims in argument. They are the (usually unspoken) beliefs that an argument rests on. For example, with the claim that torture should be legal because it might save lives, one would have to believe that torture actually works (at least some of the time) and that any country

or entity could use it to save lives. Thus, if a student's argument in favor of torture rests on its value to the party using it, then it would warrant that Al-Qaeda could use torture to save Al-Qaeda lives. Demonstrating what a particular position "warrants" helps students recognize how ethics and morality play into politics and policy.

Recently, a fruitful class discussion focused on the National Security Agency. Some students declared that spying is no big deal so long as you have nothing to hide. To which I asked: So you accept the warrant that your safety is more important than civil liberties? Many had to stop and ask if they really did believe that. Another line of debate was that it is okay to allow spying because it is combating terrorism. A warrant here is that it is okay to violate civil liberties so long as there is a good cause. We then discussed what might constitute a "good cause" in the future, also looking back to the anti-Communist fervor of the 1950s. Students were able to see that just because you trust a president or a motivation in the present does not mean you can trust them indefinitely. The value of precedent and the protection of law seemed really apparent by the end of class.

Students new to politics do not have much of a moral or ethical compass in determining what is right – they focus too readily on what is right for the United States. By teaching warrants I can clue students into the suspicious and sometimes deceitful aspects of the arguments they are so ready to accept.



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