

“Challenging Classrooms: Beyond Small, Safe Spaces ”

March 6, 2018

Janet Polasky

Thanks to Eliga Gould for the introduction and to Jan Gollinski for his faith in my teaching, even if my class rethinking the French Student -Worker Revolt of May ‘68 got so boisterous it disrupted his class next door. When Jan asked the cluster of students in the doorway who was in charge, they replied, without missing a beat, “We are.” Thanks to my colleagues in the history department, a truly amazing crew assembled on the fourth floor of Horton.<sup>1</sup> A particular thanks to Jeanne Mitchell, Susan Kilday, Laura Simard, and Lara Demerest who really are the ones in charge, the ones who make us all better teachers.

When I learned that I’d been awarded the Brierley, I texted my daughter Marta who was teaching biology at Bard. Five minutes later she replied. “Actually I think Peter, Megan and I should get some of the credit.” It can’t just be a coincidence that Sarah Sherman, who won the Brierley two years ago’s son, Peter, Greg MacMahon who was last year’s recipient’s daughter Megan, and Marta were all together in the inaugural Kenya Kindergarten class at CSDC, out by the cow barns. I have wonderful memories of literally building part of that classroom in Sarah and Jamie’s backyard, with the kids mixing paints for the tree house that still serves as the reading nook in the UNH kindergarten.

This talk started at a alumni volunteers breakfast at Carleton College last June when a man who had graduated years before me took aim at Steve Poskanzer, the President of the College. He had obviously been reading denunciations of the political correctness rife on college

campuses and disdained the idea that classrooms should be "safe spaces." Was Carleton just another liberal bastion, he asked? Classrooms, the President answered, should not be safe spaces. Just the opposite.

That exchange led to an email conversation between President Poskanzer and me and led me to the title for this talk. The phrase "Challenging Classrooms" is a double entendre. Classrooms should be places where students and teachers challenge each other's ideas. But in a world where internet-learning and vocationally focused education is offering new challenges to classrooms as primary sites of learning, professors need to find better ways of engaging with that world beyond the classroom.

Why unsafe? Because that's how learning happens, where "faculty and students confront the underlying assumptions framing their world views," in the words of my friend Anna Khalid."<sup>2</sup> Unsafe discussions are nurtured in classrooms where students and faculty feel safe, safe to question. These are classrooms that encourage us to follow ideas wherever they lead, no matter the preconceptions that fall along the journey. I study revolutionaries who traveled in the eighteenth century, and I would posit that unlike Equiano and Elkanah Watson and Anna Falconbridge, we are not likely to set off in an uncharted direction without support. It's only when students trust the community that is the classroom that they will hazard ideas none of us had considered before we entered that classroom that day. Paradoxically perhaps, unsafe ideas depend on safe spaces.

Last spring, about midway through the term, in my Atlantic Revolutions course, having read Marx's analysis of 1848, one of my students commented that of course we really should all be aligned on the side of the barricades protecting the property of the middle class. Why then, he

asked, did all of us side with the workers about to be slaughtered in the June days? Noah didn't expect the answer he got from a relatively quiet freshman. Eileen replied: "not all of us would have been bourgeois." Remember the peasantry that Marx couldn't understand? she asked. She elaborated that she came from a farming family in a small Southern town and was the first in her family to go to college. Her trust in her classmates that they would appreciate her different perspective and her trust in herself that her contribution would take the discussion in a promising direction allowed her to disrupt the consensus. I will always think differently about teaching revolution. Why is it that students understand upheavals from the perspective of the downtrodden? Is it the readings I've assigned or the questions I've asked?

It doesn't always work that way. I was very careful during the first meeting of my Gender and Politics class in the Fall of 2016. The gender balance and political leanings of the class were definitely skewed. I had set out explicit ground rules about respectful and active listening, civil discourse and speaking from experience, usually rooted in the texts. Throughout the term, I recognized my responsibility to create an environment that encouraged students to express themselves without fear that others would attack or ridicule them. Given the tone of public rhetoric, that seemed both especially difficult and important. Periodically, I intervened when a tentative interjection was too quickly shut down by a majority of more self-assured classmates. Then there was the election. I'm not sure I handled the day after well. The students, or to be clear most, but not all of the students, were too distraught to listen to the guest speaker who was also crying. One student complained on his teaching evaluation that I should have prevented the students from expressing anguish and just gotten on with the lesson as I had planned it.

Even if that was a day when I suspect no one taught well, I've been reading and thinking

ever since about how to create an inclusive classroom where students are free to challenge ideas, including or especially mine. In short, where all are invited into the conversation and build our understanding together. In “Challenging Classrooms: Beyond Small, Safe Spaces, ” I’d like to think together about how students and faculty alike can be called to challenge their ideas in the community that is our classroom. How do we encourage not only toleration of difference, but respect for divergent positions and views?

That’s important, I think because public education informs our democracy. Our founders were convinced that American universities would prepare future citizens to engage in debates and share their well-considered ideas. Thomas Jefferson wanted to establish "a university on a plan so broad and liberal and modern, as to be worth patronizing with public support."<sup>3</sup> The other founders agreed.

In our email exchange, President Poskanzer, who is a education lawyer by training, argued that colleges enter a compact whereby they are granted certain privileges such as tax exemptions and the right to critique and challenge the status quo in return for creating an environment that develops and explores new ideas and educates citizens. As part of that bargain, those in the university, students, faculty, staff, "need to be willing to challenge ANY idea and be open to the possibility that everything one has believed (heretofore) to be true and on which a scholar has built their entire reputation could be wrong."<sup>4</sup> Academic freedom of speech is unique. We are free to follow our autonomous judgement wherever it leads us, as long as, in Amy Gutmann’s words, we “stay within the bounds of scholarly standards of inquiry.”<sup>5</sup> Historians ground their analyses in records from the past, natural scientists in hypotheses, repeatability, and peer review. These open discussions prepare students for what Columbia

professor of American Studies, Andrew Delbanco, calls a life of enlarged sympathy and civic responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

This academic freedom was perhaps defined most clearly by United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren in the case *Sweezy vs State of New Hampshire*: “Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.”<sup>7</sup> That ruling was handed down in the middle of the Red Scare of the 1950s. It upheld the right of Paul Sweezy, a UNH Humanities professor, to lecture in his classroom. The state had instituted a loyalty program that made “subversive persons,” meaning sympathizers with Communism or the Progressive Party, ineligible for state employment. Justice Felix Frankfurter concurred with Chief Justice Warren. His language continues to guide our discussion over sixty years later, cited, I should note, on both sides of recently raging political debates over controversial speakers on campuses: “In a university knowledge is its own end, not merely a means to an end,” Frankfurter affirmed. “This implies the right to examine, question, modify or reject traditional ideas and beliefs...The concern of its scholars is not merely to add and revise facts in relation to an accepted framework, but to be ever examining and modifying the framework itself.”<sup>8</sup> I grew up with dinner table discussions of the McCarthy era when my father was a young law professor.

Historians are rarely the ones drawing parallels between historical periods. Still, with all the noise generated by pronouncements on who should be free to speak on university campuses, I returned to the preface of Robert M. MacIver's book, *Academic Freedom in Our Time*, written in 1955. Tellingly, I think, MacIver coupled McCarthy's attack on free speech with the loss of understanding of the role of the university in society. In response to "the aggravated assaults on

academic freedom and the general disesteem of intellectual enterprise characteristic of our country at this time,” he called for “a stouter defense and the yet greater need for a wider understanding of the intrinsic values of higher education.”<sup>9</sup> Our exercise of academic freedom is contingent upon a widely-shared belief in our intellectual enterprise.

The recently published and widely cited work of economist Bryan Caplan, not so subtly titled *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System is a Waste of Time and Money* asks: Why bore students with required courses designed to introduce them to useless subjects like art, history, and foreign languages.<sup>10</sup> His is just the latest version of the dismissal of Jefferson’s broad and liberal education and failure to understand the importance for democracy of Delbanco’s life of enlarged sympathy and civic responsibility. The utility of professional, skills-based training has been pitted against the generation of unsafe ideas ever since the founding of the land grant university. It should be enough to remind our critics that the Morrill Act of 1862 mandated that land grant universities “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes.”<sup>11</sup> But it’s not.

Remember Scott Walker’s attempt to recast the mission statement of the University of Wisconsin? He wanted to remove words that commanded the university to “search for truth” and “improve the human condition” and replace them with “meet the state’s workforce needs.” We don’t have to look back that far...as if three years is far to an eighteenth-century historian. Betsy Devos, our secretary of education, was spurred recently by the Israeli ambassador to wonder why “America’s higher ed bubble [had not] burst?” and why “America’s businesses haven’t simply stepped in to create their own education programs to equip individuals with the necessary skills.”<sup>12</sup> Stefan Collini, reminds us, “that what societies have wanted from their universities has

been historically variable, internally contradictory, and only ever partly attainable.”<sup>13</sup> Through all the ever-changing mandates, Collini nevertheless concludes, universities must be “intimately bound up with the place which the extension of understanding has in human life, individually and collectively.”<sup>14</sup>

I hate dichotomies. I’ve just argued that we need safe space to nurture unsafe ideas. I sometimes think my role as a historian has been to challenge bifurcators. As President Huddleston said in his State of the University Address a little while ago, “It’s not liberal arts versus professional education. It’s both.”<sup>15</sup> I’ve learned from my Global Citizenship students from Engineering, the Paul School, and HHS who are diving deep into curriculum reform, that the challenges facing classrooms across this campus aren’t all that different from one discipline to the next. The need to raise big questions and follow them wherever they lead is no less pressing in Kingsbury than in Horton. It isn’t a divide in departments, history vs. engineering, that is at issue. Richard Riley, secretary of education under President Clinton made the often quoted observation: “We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist using technologies that haven’t been invented in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet.”<sup>16</sup> We are **all** challenging our students to think critically.

So what can we learn from each other about opening challenging discussions within our classrooms? A European historian, I look forward to teaching Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and getting students to apply his entreaty to “Find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.”<sup>17</sup> What decisions, I ask my students, would they entrust to their classmates? Would they

be willing to alienate, to give themselves over completely to the will of the whole, to the general will, to agree to abide by all decisions of the community? 'What about the assignments and grading for the course? Or John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty's* defense of the rights of the minority. These texts almost always change the dynamics of the class, for at least a few weeks.

I'm curious, though, about what works in other classrooms in Kingsbury or McConnell or Ham Smith? Professor of Engineering, Nancy Kinner, in her 1996 Brierley talk, "Paradigms, Parables, and Possibilities," discussed those classes "when a student asks a question that helps you see things that you have taught many times before in a new and different perspective."<sup>18</sup>

How do you create safe spaces for unsafe ideas? How do you encourage discussion, keeping up our side of the compact as defined by our nation's founders? I often wonder if it all depends on the size of the class? With an annoying persistence, including over a series of teaching lunches graciously hosted by President Huddleston at his house, I've made an argument for seminars convened around a table. At the same time, my friend Professor Ross Gittell described his amazingly huge and effective online, distance learning courses in economics. I'd love to hear your ideas.

You may have noticed a couple of students in your midst. They're survivors of the Inquiry seminars I've taught at UNH the last couple of years. They've agreed to flip the classroom, or flip the luncheon tables. What opened your most memorable discussions in class?

5- 10 Mins. DISCUSSION and reporting out

And finally to beyond the classroom. For me, that's been the surest route to a challenging discussion. Sometimes that means just continuing discussions after class over coffee on the sidewalk in front of Breaking New Grounds. It's also taking classes to the Boston Symphony and

stopping for a Vietnamese dinner on the way from South Station to Symphony Hall. I always feel like “Make way for Ducklings” leading students onto the T. I love taking a seminar of freshmen to the Boston Public Library rare books and manuscripts to do research, and having one student realize that even with only the bare minimum of French required to satisfy the language requirement he could figure out an eighteenth century pamphlet from the revolt in Saint Domingue, or another holding a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Polish general he was studying. I’ve taken a senior seminar to the Houghton Library at Harvard on a Saturday and had to pry them away so we could catch our bus back to NH. One of those great moments happened when the very stuffy archivist, who had retrieved all of their folios of pamphlets and boxes of correspondence and first editions for the students, asked me what grad seminar I was teaching. I answered that they were undergrads. He then asked what university. He was shocked when I said UNH, not Harvard or another elite, private school.

This fall, we couldn’t find a time when enough students weren’t in labs or working to go to Boston. Closer to home, Wildcat Transit brought students to the African American Burial Ground and the Portsmouth Symphony followed by pizza at Flatbreads. In Global Citizenship, for final projects, Julia discussed the cinematic interpretation of *Les Mis* while Brianna finished simmering her family’s Italian spaghetti that we ate at my house after a walk through the College Woods led by Owen talking about Aldo Leopold. Leaving the classroom with its seats bolted to the floor and its bare cinder block walls with a class in tow is sort of like one of those children’s stories I loved, where you find a new world through a wardrobe. Magic happens.

But what do we do when we don’t have funds set aside for adventures into the world? The less expensive option is to bring the world into the classroom. It challenges the established

classroom dynamic. I especially like inviting others from around campus to join the class. As you may have heard from some of the students who took Global Citizenship last year, we added an extra hour, at 8 am on Tuesday mornings in HoCo. Who knew that students would be willing to get up an hour earlier than they had to, to eat breakfast together in the dining hall? That meant we could invite speakers like President Huddleston to join us for conversations beginning with stories about how they got from their days as an undergraduate to where they are now. Dean Bostic discussed early modern French texts last year and Grand Challenges this year, Jeanne Sokolowski talked about her travels before she sketched the possibilities for studying abroad available at UNH. Vice President Targett talked about design thinking, inspiring us to change the final project for the course. From off campus, Jeff Warner came and taught students to play spoons last year. My woodwind quintet demonstrated the differences between Hadyn and Mozart and that a very skilled oboe player can juggle two little kids while playing, it all depends on the length of the rests and a little help from the flautist's slightly older kids. A Legal Assistance attorney from New Jersey came to talk about immigration, surprising the students with her head scarf, and me with the lack of halal options for lunch in Durham, for a continuing discussion within the context of a course on cosmopolitanism and nationalism. The highlight in Global Citizenship last year may have been the visit of Ruth Weiner, a theatre director from Minnesota, with whom the class performed Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage." We staged it as theatre in the round, set in the middle of our square of seminar tables. We decided on gender neutral casting, with Annie's red high heels mandatory for everyone who read the part Katherine, and with this our chicken, who has become the 444 mascot. Brian, who is pre-vet had offered to bring a live chicken.

Another way to bring the world to our small classrooms, to prompt unsafe ideas, is skyping in speakers. I assign panels of students to interview the authors, if they're alive, of the books we read for class. Memorable was Mike Rapport in Glasgow whose daughter wouldn't go to bed, so she joined in. Why does everyone keep talking about revolution? she asked. I'm hungry, too, she added as the students asked her father about counter-revolutionary forces in Budapest. In the midst of a discussion with historian Lynn Hunt, her builder rang the door bell, she let him in, and her dog joined our skype session, jumping on Lynn's desk. The late Mark Kishlansky answered one student's question about why he'd written his history of England in the seventeenth century, published by Penguin, with a deadpan, "to make money."The discussion of Hungry Hungary with Mike Rapport built an analysis of revolutions and their demise that went far beyond anything we'd read in class. After skyping, the students were much more engaged in their reading, seeing authors as real people who fumble with their computers, welcome kids home from school, and can't get them to bed. They've seen historians thinking out loud in front of them and watched the historians changing their ideas because of questions they, the students, asked.

In the end, I'm making an argument for the importance of ongoing campus encounters, inside and outside the classroom, for the significance of small classes interspersed along a UNH career so every student can participate in the give and take of discussion. In those spaces, democracy flourishes. We are candid and exposed, and our students take risks and aren't afraid of big, new ideas. There are awkward moments like the day after the election.. But that doesn't mean that those moments, messy as they may be, should be avoided.

Barack Obama, who after all was a professor of Constitutional Law reflected, "when I

went to college, suddenly there were some folks who didn't think at all like me. And if I had an opinion about something, they'd look at me and say, well, that's stupid. And then they'd describe how they saw the world. And they might have had a different sense of politics, or they might have a different view about poverty, or they might have a different perspective on race, and sometimes their views would be infuriating to me. But it was because there was this space where you could interact with people who didn't agree with you and had different backgrounds that I then started testing my own assumptions. And sometimes I changed my mind. Sometimes I realized, you know what, maybe I've been too narrow-minded. Maybe I didn't take this into account. Maybe I should see this person's perspective."<sup>19</sup> I hope that in my classes, students find the moments to wonder, to talk with their classmates, figuring out the logical connections between divergent ideas, or taking off together in a completely different direction. I hope they walk out of the classroom with ideas different from those they held when they entered. Actually, those are my goals for myself, too. The stakes are great, if we are to preserve the autonomy of the academy.

Thanks to my students for coming. This award means so much to me, and because of that, I would like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Pam Raiford, a student and teacher whose humanity and curiosity I continue to discover in the Oyster River students she taught. I am so grateful when their journey through UNH brings them, and a reminder of Pam, into the small space that is my classroom.

## Notes

1. A special thanks to my editorial crew, who read and made invaluable suggestions, Professors Laurel Ulrich and Ellen Fitzpatrick, and David and Marta Lyons. In the History Department, we are all fortunate to have wonderful editors as colleagues, always ready to read and immeasurably improve our work. I am fortunate, too, to have two children, both gifted writers in their own right, who have taken over their grandmother's task of editing. Without them, this would have been a very different talk.
2. Jeffrey Aaron Snyder and Amna Khalid, "The Rise of 'Bias Response Teams' on Campus," *New Republic*, March 30, 2016.
3. Thomas Jefferson cited by Jonathan Israel, *The Expanding Blaze. How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 103.
4. President Steven Poskanzer, Carleton College, Email, January 25, 2018.
5. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 175.
6. Andrew Delbanco, *College. What it Was, Is, And Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015),
7. Chief Justice Earl Warren, U.S. Supreme Court, *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234 (1957), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/354/234/case.html>.
8. Felix Frankfurter, cited by John S. Brubacher, *The Law and Higher Education. A Casebook*, (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 197), 1: 268.
9. Robert M. MacIver, "Preface," *Academic Freedom in Our Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955),
10. Bryan Caplan,  
[https://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Economist-Argues-That-Our/242348?cid=wc&utm\\_source=wc&utm\\_medium=en&elqTrackId=4e2a502ed5874dc39224e484974ae05f&elq=0de210eed8124918bf58858063c4f5f5&elqaid=17649&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=7765](https://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Economist-Argues-That-Our/242348?cid=wc&utm_source=wc&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=4e2a502ed5874dc39224e484974ae05f&elq=0de210eed8124918bf58858063c4f5f5&elqaid=17649&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=7765).
11. Cited by Paul Reitter, "The Business of Learning," in *The New York Review of Books*, February 22, 2018,  
<http://www.nybooks.com.libproxy.unh.edu/articles/2018/02/22/the-business-of-learning/>.
12. Valerie Strauss, "On Thursday, Betsy Devos smacked American higher education. On Friday, President Trump said something different," *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2018.
13. Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2017), 17.
14. Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, 87.

15. President Mark Huddleston, University of New Hampshire, “State of the University” February 20, 2018, <https://www.unh.edu/president/state-university-2018>.

16. Richard Riley cited by Delbanco, *Colleges*, 25.

17. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book 1, Chapter 6, *The Social Contract and Discourses* trans. G.D.H. Cole (New York: Dutton, 1973), 174.

18. Professor Nancy Kinner, Brierley Lecture on College Teaching, March 19, 1996, [https://www.unh.edu/sites/www.unh.edu/files/departments/center\\_for\\_excellence\\_in\\_teaching\\_learning/pdf/kinner.pdf](https://www.unh.edu/sites/www.unh.edu/files/departments/center_for_excellence_in_teaching_learning/pdf/kinner.pdf).

19. Barack Obama, September 14, 2015, “Remarks by the President at Town Hall on College Access and Affordability,” North High School, Des Moines, Iowa, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/15/remarks-president-town-hall-college-access-and-affordability>.