

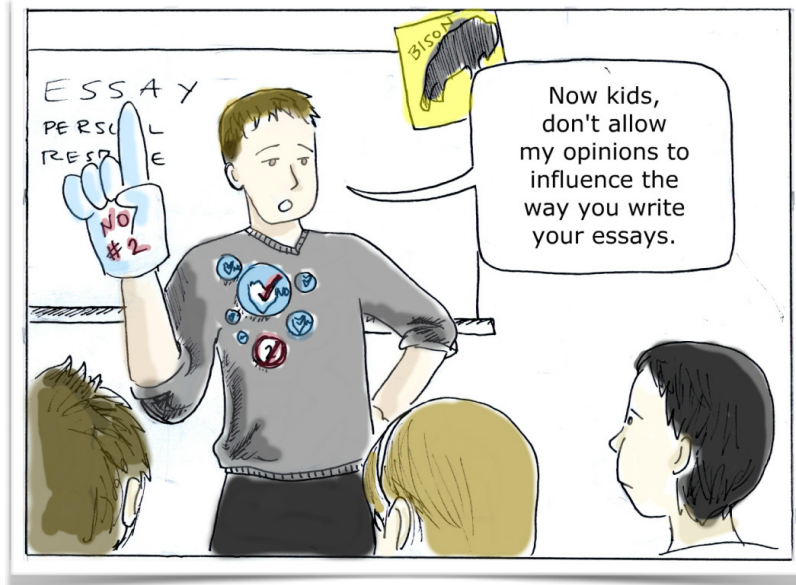
# SMC ETHICS

## Continuing a Dialogue on What We Do and How We Do It

### Creating Identity Through Learning

Whether one chooses to critically introduce political issues into the classroom or not, it is important for faculty to remain mindful of students' needs for intellectual autonomy. In addition to encouraging the kind of "authentic engagement" that is enshrined in one of SMC's ILOs, an autonomy-promoting educational environment is essential for creating empowered lifelong learners who can contribute to our community and democracy.

Recent research on "[Self-Determination Theory](#)" (SDT) reveals what educational practices promote or thwart the development of autonomous learners. This research shows that controlling environments that "[pressure students to think, feel, or behave in a specific way](#)" are unlikely to successfully lead students to internalize the imposed ideas or beliefs.



Cartoon by Erlein Tacastacas

## The Necessity of Critical Thinking in the (A)Political Classroom

At the end of a contentious election season, many of us have undoubtedly found politics creeping into our curriculum, even if uninvited. As instructors, it is often difficult to find where to land on political conversations in the classroom – some of us actively pursue this while others avoid it at all costs, and some just encourage students to vote, regardless of positions or decision-making processes.

So where is the ethical dilemma then? Obviously, as the authority at the front of the class, we bear significant means of influence and it is necessary to consider and understand that influence when deciding how we may incorporate politics in our curricula. By ensuring that our

Moreover, such controlling environments are also likely to undermine student engagement and therefore worsen their overall academic achievement and intellectual motivation. In contrast, autonomy-promoting environments that [“foster the most volitional and high quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities”](#) have been shown to lead to higher levels of competence, achievement and fulfillment inside and outside of the classroom.

Especially in a time when politics seems so urgent, it may be tempting to seize control over the classroom to push forward a political agenda. Research shows, however, that such actions provide little clear benefit to either our own political values or our students' educations and lives.

### On a Related Note...

If you are interested in the subject matter in this issue of *SMC Ethics*, you might find the links below interesting and worth a read. (Links are live in the downloadable PDF.)

[How Much Is Too Much? - NPR](#)

[Hot Summer Thinking - EdWeek](#)

[Campus Politics - The Atlantic](#)

[College Freshmen More Politically Engaged - FiveThirtyEight](#)

discussions, materials, and assignments are rooted in applied critical thinking, it is possible to avoid the dilemma altogether. For example, by choosing to focus political discussions on the dangers of misinformation, such as false news articles or “Facebook Facts,” we can help to create confident, informed voters rather than intellectual acolytes and adversaries.

An interesting dynamic of this dilemma is the crossover between free speech and academic freedom. [The Ethical Professor](#) examined this a bit in 2012 (not coincidentally, a Presidential election year) in terms of the appropriateness of political advocacy in the classroom, even if simply through a t-shirt or button. Academic freedom, of course, allows instructors to use political material in a relevant manner in any course they see fit. For example, an English course might use political rhetoric as a means of examining argument or a Math course might use polling as a means of examining statistical models. A physical science course might focus on the nature of the evidence for climate change and a social science or history course might focus on how strategies of political persuasion have influenced, and continue to influence, public opinion. And of course freedom of speech grants us and our students the right to maintain any political opinion we wish, but creating a system for those opinions to co-exist in an intellectual setting can establish a challenging, but extremely fruitful environment.

We are lucky to be able to have these conversations at all, not only as Americans with the cherished right to freedom of speech, but also as educators bestowed with the job of teaching our students every day. As we face challenges like the 2016 presidential election and deal with them both emotionally and intellectually, it is important to come to the classroom focused on fulfilling our roles as mentors and guides with all of the necessary responsibilities that come with that privilege.

### CONTACT US!

If you have any ideas or issues you would like to submit to the Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee for future consideration, get in touch with us through the links below.

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