

When Do You Tell Them? Information Restriction in a Troubled World

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ABSTRACT The relationship between students and teachers is usually one of sharing of information, and teachers in particular are charged with providing useful instruction to their students on a formal and informal basis. However, sometimes information flows are blocked by teachers, perhaps partially because of attitudes and standards adopted from the larger community. Certain types of information may be secret, or may be withheld "in the interests of the students." Breaking through the taboo of restricting information may depend on human development, age and stage issues, such that only with appropriate timing can the restrictions be removed. However, finding an agreed upon time to break through with the dissemination of important information is an arbitrary matter at best. The earlier students can be informed about difficult matters, the sooner they can and will engage in helping solve the coming problems that affect societies around the world.

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As a teacher of both adults and teenagers, I work with my many students in small and large lectures, discussion groups, seminars and tutorials, workshops and of course, individually. Exchanging information is not our only activity, for assignments, reports, and examinations blend with the creation, development and eventual detachment of interpersonal relationships. We share not only data, but ideas, feelings and very often, a bit of our own personal lives. When these students graduate, and go their way, I hope that I have served as a role model, as well as transmitter of information, and perhaps even more, as a person who challenged them to go beyond where they might otherwise have reached. This is as it should be, for the teaching role is, at least, I hope that it is, never devoid of human relationships and pushing potentials for achievement.

In addition to my students, I also relate closely with teaching and research colleagues, both at the University and in the larger community. Recently, I shared a draft or outline of a lecture with one such colleague. In my planned talk, I carefully outlined some of the major challenges I saw facing us, opportunities if you will, for innovative research. My intent was to raise and discuss issues that will impact on the lives of young people in their late teens or early 20's particularly as they grow older. My colleague, after perusing the outline of the material, was initially pleased, but then she thought more seriously about the issues involved and suddenly she became aghast. She started her critique by telling me that, "you should not tell them these things." She exclaimed, "they are too young and naive."

What were the matters about which I planned to speak? I teach in one of the disciplines in the social sciences, a field that relates to human and health services. I planned to address a variety of difficult environmental and human matters that will impact on us in the near future. Among topics, I planned to deal with were global warming and accompanying sea level rises that could create needs for movement of populations to high ground, the loss of the ozone layer and consequent skin cancer and other problems and the complex causes of sexually transmitted diseases including AID's. I also wanted to address environmental pollution (air, soil, water) and their long-term effects on health, potentially adverse impacts of advanced technology on human health which could result in head injuries, cancer, and other trauma, and finally, stressful lifestyles. A host of other "unpleasant" issues are available, but these seemed more than sufficient for one lecture. I regard, and planned to teach about, these matters as coming social problems to be met, addressed, and hopefully solved, and I specifically did not plan to present just a doomsday scenario. I feel, deeply, that

these and others are the problems of our times and they need to be firmly addressed, particularly by academics, in positive and forthright styles, and with all students.

Why was My Colleague Reluctant for Me to Deal With These Issues?

"They are too young to have to deal with such difficult and depressing matters," she claimed. "Not only that, they don't need to know - let them find out later on their own," she added. "You don't need to tell about such matters, you should keep things cheery and bright and only address what they can handle," she concluded thoughtfully. Because she is on the way up in the hierarchy at the university, she will certainly achieve promotions and greater rank more readily than I. Accordingly, I listened carefully to her, and I had to acknowledge that her words made some sense. I naturally pondered her advice for some time.

But, since that occasion, I have thought again and again, "when do you tell them?" When indeed?!

If not now, then when? And who should tell them? A student in a university is for all practical purposes an adult. They can and do have children, they get married, serve in armed forces, drive cars, and take on leadership roles that will influence society for years to come. After a great deal of internal debate, I am convinced that the problem is not with the students. They need to know, not someday, but here and now, about all sorts of difficult scenarios for the future.

Unfortunately, I believe, some academics are shirking their responsibilities in the interest of providing entertainment. If teachers fail to take the lead in raising challenges and confronting issues, then who should do the informing, discussing, and charting of future options?

Academia unfortunately, has become a game, designed for entertainment rather than for dealing with the big issues, a game of cheering up rather than discussion of ideas, a game of platitudes rather than challenges, a game of methodology and detail rather than reality. The meaningful part of an education has moved from the teacher and the classroom to some other place, "when on their own." Of course, academics need to be worried about their performance ratings, just as politicians must worry about polls, and television executives worry about their ratings for various programs. But, the ratings are not measurable just by entertainment value or popularity. Further, the ratings of academics should not be measurable just by entertainment value.

A head in the sand approach will not solve the problems of our societies - in fact, ignoring the big issues will only deter and delay any solution. This ostrich type of answer robs the individuals most directly affected, the leadership of the emerging generation. Thus rendered impotent, they cannot contribute their energy, enthusiasm and intelligence to design and development of appropriate solutions.

CONCLUSION

Teaching is a fine art, dependent upon providing information flows about matters that are and will be significant for the on-coming generation. Students are being entertained in many universities, not educated, all too often. Restricting information because of the belief that informal means will be sufficient, or that age requirements are not met even at a university, is tantamount to collusion in the demise of knowledge, science, and society. Addressing the big issues must be promoted by academics in all walks of life.