Anxiety and learning

Cultural polarisation in social science courses

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ABSTRACT

University social science instructors sometimes encounter student silence or quarrels around culturally contentious subjects. In a culture that promotes distrust around the issues they teach, how do professors perceive and cope with such difficulties? Preliminary research using qualitative interviews with teachers from two different US universities explores problems they encounter and strategies they employ in the face of student struggles with nuance and a phenomenon referred to here as *polarisation anxiety*. Professors strategise how to teach the complexity of phenomenon some students have been culturally pre-disposed to oversimplify, polarise or remain silent about.

KEYWORDS

affective polarisation, culture wars, silencing, social science, student anxiety, teaching

Teaching globalisation one day, I linked global processes to projected local economic and demographic changes. Cities would continue to grow; towns and farms to stagnate. Growth among immigrants and communities of colour would outpace white populations. Most new jobs would require post-secondary degrees. Decades old demographic shifts have made such changes inevitable. Minnesota had already, and would continue, to change. One of my usually cheery students, a middle-aged white woman, showed confusion, then terror, then tears. Something about these issues triggered her. I felt bad. Later, I wondered how emotional responses influence learning. If this student was so shaken by the class topic, could she have truly absorbed lessons about globalisation, modernisation and world-systems? Or, would previously held anxieties and mass media understandings of the subject impede learning? I feared she would simply conclude immigrants and people of colour were destroying Minnesota.

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I could not know for sure. Certainly, contentious issues have provoked strong reactions in my students. This research explores how professors perceive and deal with students' sentiments around contentious issues. Social science presents particular pedagogical challenges because US society predisposes many towards negative reactions to social issues. Some of my students are vocally defensive. Some sit in indignant or distressed silence. Many arrive unprepared for the content and perhaps miss its points. Colleagues convinced me my experiences are not unique. Some suggested the 2016 election aggravated previous problems. Students occasionally dug into stereotypical Democrat/Republican, Liberal/Conservative stances, making teaching and learning difficult. We spent more time explaining the legitimacy of source material. We stopped arguments and insults.

Does content from social science classes trigger student apprehensions that make learning difficult? Why? This article details a preliminary exploration into instructors' experiences with this. I explore if tensions are widespread or limited to certain contexts, and what professors think about them. After selecting two demographically distinct universities, I interviewed sixteen professors in anthropology, political science and sociology about their encounters with students. I begin by presenting literature relevant to understanding the US cultural context of student difficulties with social science. Next, I outline procedures and outcomes of the interviews. Finally, I conclude by discussing the ramifications of a concept I refer to as *polarisation anxiety*, an apprehension towards both topics of discussion and the potential political inclinations of those participating in them, for teaching and learning social science in higher education.

Literature review

Scholarship indicates that cultural divisions interfere with teaching college-level social science. First, culture-wide divisions predispose US populations towards distrust and polarisation around social issues. Second, the university itself represents a hegemonic struggle around such divisions. Finally, early education may fail to prepare students for discussions around social differences and instead predispose them towards difficulties.

The culture wars hypothesis (Hunter 1991) suggests the United States divides itself into orthodox and progressive groups that wage a war over moral authority, with each individual issue representing a battle site. Members of each group therefore possess normative views on a host of social issues. 'If

a person opposes abortion, we should be able to predict they'll oppose recreational drug use, GLBT sexualities, erotic imagery in the media, and they'll probably tote a gun' (Doukas 2010: 19). Doukas concludes real people defy such simplicity, and actually have quite complex views. After eighteen years researching gun debates, she found 'culture wars' explanations serve mainly as political tools to divide people. While individuals' actual beliefs defy simple binaries, belief in the culture wars convinces many to simplistically label others as enemies in the contest for moral authority. '[P]erceiving the population through the lens of the "culture wars" reduces a vast field of conservative pulls and experimental tugs in every direction, to a two-dimensional cartoon. Looking through that lens, we can imagine the worst about the people around us, and even despair of democracy altogether' (Doukas 2010: 19).

Political identity seems vital to this wedge fomenting despair. Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood (2015: 691) performed experiments on *affective polarisation*, the tendency to view opposing political identities negatively and co-partisans positively. This created 'a reduced willingness to treat the actions of partisan opponents as legitimate' (Iyengar and Westwood 2015: 705). Experiments found affective polarisation had an even more divisive effect than racism, since people would attempt to self-correct racist tendencies, but not political polarisations. Political divisions are felt, not just thought, a function of identity rather than intellectual preference. Iyengar and Westwood's experiments proved such polarisation destroys the trust required to even play simple games together. Such dynamics play out around higher education.

Affective polarisation threatens trust between the public and academia. Pew Research Center (2017) reveals most Republicans (54 per cent) view colleges and universities as overall bad for the country. A third of all Republicans with college degrees agree. Exploring this, Clara Turnage (2017) states: 'In an increasingly polarised culture, this drastic shift is the latest piece of evidence that institutions of higher education . . . have been plunged headfirst into a hyperpartisan war'. Disapproval peaks among those aged fifty and over, and those earning more than \$75,000. Even younger respondents and those without college degrees (the groups most likely to view colleges positively), showed approval drops since 2015 (Pew 2017: 9).

Neil Gross (2013) concludes political bias is the context of enmity. While social science and humanities professors tend to be liberal, they do not appear to indoctrinate students, belittle their views, or present liberal opinions as facts. Though few 'radical' professors exist, conservatives perceive a pervasive threat. Criticism of liberal professors 'provide[s] ammunition for a

larger and ultimately far more important battle against liberal elites' (Gross 2013: 15). The public criticises social science for 'sloppy empirical methods, or no methods at all' (Routledge 2017) and 'weaponising' their disciplines for political purposes (Horgan 2013). Yet Gross (2013) finds professors in economics, biology and engineering are more convinced of their absolute objectivity and political neutrality, while most social science and humanities professors problematise objectivity and directly address bias. Practicing 'political transparency' (Gross 2013: 209), they believe sharing opinions and biases is only appropriate if distinguished from facts. Nonetheless, perceptions of professors as biased may introduce affective polarisation to colleges, classrooms and administrations.

Professors worry over this, particularly as they reel from the effects of divisive moves within their institutions. Many instructor/scholars have attested to feeling pressured by changes in higher education. School leadership and policy have been politicised to promote market-based customer service policies such as tuition increases, reductions in hiring full-time faculty, the exploitation of adjuncts, reliance on student debt, partnerships that cater to private interests, and increased assessment to justify budget cuts while promoting brands. Effects on students are clear: diminished reading, writing, and analytical skills (Newfield 2016); anxiety over cost and stability (Lyon-Callos 2015); and deepening inequalities (Cantini 2016; Hyatt et al. 2015). The polarising neoliberal model converts the university into 'an important location of hegemonic struggle', (Shear and Hyatt 2015: 3). How do students and professors react to polarising subject matter within such polarised contexts? What previously enculturated experiences complicate this?

Vincent Lyon-Callos (2015) notes neoliberal middle-class enculturation foments anxiety around privilege-loss, making education vital to success. However, neoliberal individualism situates explanations and coping strategies for social problems not on group dynamics explored by social science, but on personal initiative. Ironically, Lyon-Callos finds the neoliberal anxiety that draws students into colleges and universities may predispose them to dismiss the content of social sciences. He found students consistently agreed problems of inequality, economic security and neoliberal disenfranchisement exist. Yet they found such social science critiques pointless or naïve, embracing the 'dominant message that the only reasonable thing to do is compete individually in the marketplace . . . engaging in "white cultural practices" is just rational . . . as it is the only logical way to survive economically' (Lyon-Callos: 94–95).

As students, particularly conservative whites who believe themselves the ‘default’ or ‘mainstream’ Americans (Grossman and Hopkins 2015), enter diverse communities, they also encounter ‘social and psychological dislocation’ (Tanaka 2009: 91). Their sense of culture disintegrates as their default status is questioned. Tanaka’s analysis places them within a process of being de-cultured, deracinated, beset by a loss of meaning that constitutes a moral threat. The social science focus on race, class, gender and identity is likely to trigger such sentiments. Most professors recognise silence. Students ‘check-out’ around polarising issues such as race. Structural antecedents of silence and silencing in primary and secondary schools precede this. Michelle Fine (1987: 157) refers to silencing as active institutional processes ‘which obscure the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students’ daily lives, and which expel from written, oral, and nonverbal expression substantive and critical “talk” about these conditions’. Her analysis in a Manhattan high school of low-income black and Hispanic populations identified several forms of silencing by teachers and administrators.

Administrators silence topics that point to social inequities within or affecting the school. Teachers may shut down contentious conversations to preserve a sense of classroom order. They may also create pedagogical false dichotomies, simplifying complex social problems into polarities with right/wrong answers. Schools may also ‘psychologise’ students’ voicings of social problems by relegating them to counselling. Finally, Fine notes avoidance of sensitive topics, by defining ‘good students’ as those who do not raise them. In their efforts to avoid difficult topics, maintain order and avoid critique, administrators and teachers teach students a suffocating negativity around the exploration of social issues such as inequality and racism.

Many may feel Fine’s evidence means little for higher education, since these students were mostly not college bound. Angelina Castagno’s (2008) work suggests otherwise. Rather, silencing, particularly around race, occurs society-wide in the ‘good’ and the ‘worst’ schools (Castagno 2008: 316). Comparing elementary schools, she states: ‘Despite very different demographics . . . patterns of silence . . . were the same’ (Castagno 2008: 316). Progressive sounding vocabulary (‘language-minority students’; ‘refugee status’; ‘alternative language services’) reframed and restricted conversations, silencing conflict and refuting claims of racism. Fine’s and Castagno’s work suggest difficulties teaching and learning social science begin early. Students learn such topics are divisive, policed and either to be avoided or spoken of ‘correctly’.

Educational policing of students who sincerely wish to understand and discuss difficult social topics creates negative responses. Both the student who dares to speak and all those who witness the resulting silencing form toxic associations. School becomes a place where inquiry, curiosity and expression get you in trouble. If students discover the education system enforces silence around social problems, they will quickly find the rest of society and the internet do not. Thomas Leitch (2014) examines how students might thus trust internet sources more than professors and course materials. He notes alarm in academic and intellectual circles, quoting a Dutch documentary that laments ‘that there are no truths, that everybody has their truth’. The absence of gatekeepers, ‘the ones who determine truth’, means that ‘anyone’s truth becomes as credible as anyone else’s’, and ‘truth itself is a casualty . . . Truth becomes truthiness’ (Leitch 2014: 60). Leitch cites US television host Stephen Colbert’s humorous critique: ‘Who is *Britannica* to tell me George Washington had slaves? If I want to say he didn’t, that’s my right. And now, thanks to Wikipedia, it’s also a fact . . . All we need to do is convince a majority of people that some factoid is true . . . What we’re doing is bringing democracy to knowledge’ (Colbert in Leitch 2014: 61). Without school guidance in how to comprehend social issues, loud voices in public discourse teach what is legitimate or not, and where to find authoritative facts about the social world.

Higher education collides with previously enculturated patterns such as the silencing, distrust of academia and political divisions described above. In social science classrooms, identities are brought to the forefront, triggering previously established essentialisations about the culture wars (Doukas 2010) and affective polarisation (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Anxiety develops as social science classes ‘name’ issues students have been enculturated to silence (Castagno 2008; Fine 1987). Further, naming threatens some students’ identity, triggering frustration and anger (Tanaka 2008), such as when discussions of white privilege or toxic masculinity may alienate whites and men. This occurs in educational institutions that are already objects of public apprehension (Pew 2017; Turnage 2017) and sites of hegemonic struggle (Cantini 2017; Hyatt et al. 2015; Newfield 2016). Within a wider context of a crisis in legitimate authority (Leitch 2014), all this influences learning in the classroom.

Such blocks to learning are not unique to social science. Language teachers often discuss the ‘affective filter’ (Krashen 2003; Mitchell and Myles 2004). ‘If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider

himself or herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language . . . , he or she may understand the input, but it will not reach the language acquisition device [in the brain]' (Krashen 2003: 6). A similar cognitive filter would explain difficulties experienced by teachers and students in social science classrooms. The research below describes a preliminary exploration of such issues by asking professors their impressions about teaching polarising content at their universities.

Locations and methods

Two dissimilar universities were selected here. The goal was to identify teaching issues that span both elite and more diverse contexts. Elite Southern University (ESU) resides in a major metropolitan area in the southern United States. Its total enrolment is around 11,000, with an average age between eighteen and twenty-one, and about a quarter listed as 'minorities'. More than three-quarters identify as Catholic or Protestant. ESU ranks among the top sixty out of 310 best national universities in US News. Annual full-time tuition payments range from about \$55,000 (no housing, meals, or course specific fees) to over \$70,000. ESU falls within the top hundred most conservative universities in popular rankings. The school serves a moderate to conservative student body from a largely white upper-middle class and wealthy background.

Public Midwestern University (PMU) resides in a major metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States. Its mission statement mentions marginalised communities. More than 40 per cent are students of colour, with average age in the late twenties/early thirties. Annual cost for eight courses remains under \$9,000. More than half are part-time students. PMU represents a diverse community of lower middle- and working-class background with a progressive mission and liberal tendencies. The school differs demographically and culturally from ESU.

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board at Metropolitan State University (my home institution), nine interviews from PMU and seven from ESU were conducted and are analysed here. Professors in anthropology, political science and sociology from both schools were contacted through email with requests for participation throughout the 2018–19 academic year while I travelled on sabbatical. After obtaining consent, interviews occurred face-to-face, by phone, or video. They ranged from thirty minutes to an hour. Many interviewees stated concerns they could be identi-

fied by students, colleagues, or administrators. No specific markers (such as age, race, gender) will be associated with any responses presented here, unless the response itself states it. Instructors ranged from their early thirties to late sixties, including tenured, tenure-track and contingent faculty. They have taught from no less than three years to over thirty. Most identified as straight and white. Most identified as female, the rest as male. To protect anonymity, a yearly updated list of unisex baby names from *Cosmopolitan* magazine (Fabian-Weber and Newbould 2019) provided the pseudonyms used here. Interviews first asked instructors for common teaching problems arising in courses. A second set of questions asked for problems unique to teaching their disciplines. A third presented theories about classroom difficulties and asked professors if they felt applicable to their experiences. These included 'culture wars' issues, enculturated silence and student feelings of persecution in response to course materials. The final set focused on effects of current political divisions on classrooms and higher education.

Research goals sought to identify ubiquitous or wide-spread teaching issues. Rather than contrasting differences between schools, analysis focused on overarching themes common to both university settings. Interviews were transcribed and analysed. Similar reports of incidents with students were grouped together, as were similarly worded reflections by professors. Four major themes resulted: student struggles with nuance, polarisation anxiety, teaching strategies, and race. Nuance resulted from grouping responses reflecting perceived difficulties in student comprehension. Polarisation anxiety resulted from responses that referred to emotional states in either students or professors. Teaching strategies involve practices professors talked about using in courses. Race groups together responses describing both student incidents and reflections by instructors involving race and racism. Many statements by professors overlapped in more than one theme. Major themes were present in all, or all but one, interviews. Sub-themes reflect variation within the major themes, but do not necessarily include the majority of respondents.

Results

Nuance

Broadly, instructors described difficulties teaching nuance. They attributed two basic causes. First, students lacked awareness of how their identities and biases trigger responses to materials. Professors felt students thus ignored, rejected, or misunderstood materials. Students sometimes projected

assumptions about authors' or instructors' intents and failed to understand complex materials. Second, students' academic skill deficits made recognising important details, comprehending course readings, understanding authors' arguments and forming arguments difficult. These two factors often overlapped, fomenting confusion, frustration, and even resentment in the face of complexity.

Cognitive biases

Professors noted some students desire paternalism when confronted with complex subjects that did not lead to simple 'black and white' answers. Students struggled with 'grey' areas, seeking quick conclusions and settled debates. Some appeared to ask professors for simple answers and moral absolutes when the complexity of a topic became frustrating. Others appear to self-silence out of fear of giving a 'wrong answer.

They like straightforward answers. And the social sciences in general . . . it has a lot of nuance to it . . . I think that grey area is frustrating for students. They want an instructor to say, 'This is how things are'. And we weasel our way around things. (Drew, PMU)

We don't have a lot of takeaways. Like, 'Therefore you should do "blank"'. But that's because we're not supposed to . . . Sometimes students will be like 'Tell us what to do [about the social problem discussed]!' And I actually had one student say 'Well, you've been there, and I probably never will even go to [the nations being discussed]! Why don't you just tell us what to do?' And I was like, 'Because I'm trying to teach you how to think!' (Hayden, ESU)

They have a hard time with there not being *an* answer . . . There're arguments, and using data, and understanding different points of view . . . [I'm] trying to teach critical thinking and being in someone else's shoes . . . That can be embarrassing when [students] do badly . . . If you suck at a math problem, it's still embarrassing, but it doesn't reflect on you as a person in the same way as if you accidentally say something messed up about a particular kind of group. (Gray, ESU)

Some students use the lens of the culture wars to make sense of things. Texts, their authors and even instructors become either allies or enemies, to be agreed or disagreed with, rather than understood, analysed and synthesised. At times, students question and dismiss content they perceive as polarised. Often, the notion that multiple perspectives on the same issue exist fomented confusion.

We've got the one end that says 'whatever you say because you're from a different culture must be right', and on the other side 'I don't wanna talk about that because I don't agree' . . . It's that polarity that we're seeing . . . And the middle ground, where I think learning really happens, where you can take a look at both ends, both sides, no longer exists. (Bailey, PMU)

Reading and thinking critically [are common difficulties]. Being able to step back from their core beliefs, core values that guide their life . . . I think this is tied in with reading academic texts . . . Why are people arguing this? What are the motivations for arguing something like this? How can I pick apart the argument? How would I challenge that argument? Those are the specific skills that I think they're not as versed in. (Micah, PMU)

I did have a student who was very, very difficult in my [race-themed course] . . . right away rejecting the whole basis of the course. The history of race and the inequalities, the structural issues . . . She basically reimagined what the text was saying, and the films, to fit her own perspective on the world . . . And I talked to her probably for a couple of hours. Not sure we made much progress. (Harper, PMU)

I teach a class where we talk about African American women and low birth weight babies. Even if you're super educated and wealthy, you're still having this experience of higher risk of low birth weight in children . . . It seems really charged to them . . . And there's usually some white male that's uncomfortable with the argument . . . The tools I come back with are showing the data . . . *New England Journal of Medicine* isn't fake news. I'm not making this up . . . It's always a surprise to me, they're biology and chemistry majors, so I'm like 'How could this be?' And almost arrogantly, without any sense of the ten African American students in the class. (Hayden, ESU)

Academic deficiencies

Many professors felt some students lacked basic preparation for analysing complexity. They seem more accustomed to remembering, understanding, and occasionally applying knowledge. Performing analysis, evaluation, and engaging in creative thinking seems more of a challenge.

Students [believe] . . . their job as students is to memorise some set of facts and repeat them back. They aren't taught to have divergent points of view. They're essentially taught convergent thinking . . . Nuance is not very acceptable in our public discourse . . . What they see is two diametrically opposed sets of views. And they have to pick sides. (Kyle, PMU)

[With] humanities, there isn't really a formula. And it's more of a qualitative answer than a universal answer . . . [Students wonder] 'How do you apply it? What do you use it for?' It takes a lot longer to process data than something that's formulaic. (Reagan, ESU)

Students struggled to evaluate whether arguments were legitimate and logical, and distinguishing between emotion-based opinions and evidence-based analysis. Sometimes simplistic understandings of bias, along with poor reading skills, led them to conclude they understood materials (such as by labelling materials as biased), even when they clearly did not.

'Everyone is entitled to their opinion' – I hear that a lot . . . Students might say every political point of view is legitimate. The assumption is there is nothing similar to math or science. I feel the challenge in teaching it is not to go in the entirely opposite direction, to say it is all scientific. Rather, to introduce some ideas of 'truth and provable'. There may not be only one right view, but there are definitely some wrong views. (Kyle, PMU)

We were talking about [a local controversy]. What do you think about what [the mayor] said? People started going all over the place. It dawned on me – Wow. You are conjecturing a lot of things here . . . And I stop and say – What do we *know* that he said? Not what we *think* he said. These are two different things . . . They could not identify what was said . . . Critical thinking is not about that stream of consciousness. (Bailey, PMU)

At times, students demonstrated simplistic understandings of history and epistemology. Earlier lessons about history as a progression of moral and technological advances can lead some to dismiss social problems. Some miss that knowledge-building occurs as seemingly contradictory evidence is sorted, compared, and synthesised.

I have a lot more problems getting people to move away from that idea that people's lives were worse, and now they're better . . . So I spend more time . . . breaking that down, the simplistic linear view of, like, gender equality. Like, 'No, colonialism messed up a lot of it, guys. It's not "they were less free and now they're free"' So I spend a lot of time trying to push back against that and look at nuance. (Hayden, ESU)

[Problems occur] because they were taught to question authority . . . [only] to the point where they believe that reading one source, it makes them an expert. . . . They're empowered to have the wrong answer and continue with it . . . And they believe that having 'alternative knowledge' is really, really valuable. (River, PMU)

Polarisation anxiety

All instructors mentioned anxiety-creating cultural polarisations as a difficulty. Both professors and students carry such tensions. Instructor anxiety often revolves around relieving or avoiding student anxiety. They feel some students believe deeply in culture wars polarisations. Professors also feel anxiety over institutional norms. Polarisation anxiety appears as an affect-based barrier to comprehension, based on public discourse polemics, which influences small group interactions. Symptoms include silencing of self and others, truculent debates and emotional displays like outbursts and crying.

Student anxiety

Instructors believe students fear persecution, demonstrate defensiveness, and harbour resentment around others' views on contentious issues. They sense tension in student body language and facial expression. Professors perceive student apprehension from their silence, avoidance of frank discussion, and polarised quarrels.

I've never had a semester where students were truly authentic . . . They're always so cautious, careful what they say. And when there are moments when a student tends to speak up, they tend to speak up when silencing others. Not to have a debate. I feel like there are momentary blow ups in my classes that show students have strong feelings. (Kyle, PMU)

Oh yeah. As soon as you'd mention [polarising issues], you can see the blinders flash across people's faces. It's not too late, that is, if you introduce it intentionally, you say you are going to take various views on this. Then you see the looks on their faces soften up. But it's almost like they braced themselves. (Reagan, ESU)

[Question: Do you feel students silence themselves?] Well, if it's related to political correctness, yes. Sometimes, I think. Yes. I think people don't say certain things because they don't wanna go there. They don't want to get into the argument. (Kennedy, ESU)

People would start to talk and start crying, and other people would start yelling. I felt that in that moment I needed to be trained in group therapy, not just [social science]. (Jules, PMU)

In terms of students, more of them will complain of stress-related elements. More are sick on certain days. They don't wanna discuss certain topics. Or they have to speak to the school psychologist after. (River, PMU)

What I can say is that after the 2016 election I did feel my class was particularly raw. People were nervous . . . I picked up on it pretty quickly. That was the class where one of the students said, 'Thank you for not talking about politics all the time and sticking with the material'. Because I think a lot of people were, like, venting in the classroom. (Harper, PMU)

We had a lot of right-wing politically active people, then extreme left, and I had those two particular groups. And they were so alike . . . Both groups had to come down from their high tower to be able to come to some sense of what's real. (River, PMU)

Students seem very concerned about which polemic 'team' others will perceive them belonging to, fearing a prejudicial label. Professors felt students self-silence to avoid persecution, or support team positions even when they may not personally agree. Teams present themselves as oppositional (e.g. liberal versus conservative), sometimes fighting the other side, other times remaining silent to avoid a fight. Professors feel students' previous experiences encountering polarisation compound this.

We'll have a student who spent six years in a Kenyan refugee camp sitting next to a student who can't find Kenya on a map. They're in a classroom together. They don't have any conflict with each other. But they're aware there's a larger conflict between people of colour and people who call themselves white. I feel like the students in my classroom are trying to figure it out, and they kind of look for evidence if another student is on their side . . . But partly I think it silences them, makes them more cautious. Afraid to speak up. If they were to say something and it were to put them on the wrong team, 'Oh my god. I don't wanna be on the racist team. But I don't know how to say what I'm feeling, so I'm just gonna say nothing'. (Kyle, PMU)

Religiously conservative students . . . feel that often their perspectives are not welcome or are frowned upon in the academy . . . So, they just kind of keep it to themselves. They talk about it in their campus ministries with other likeminded people. Some have talked to me. (Logan, ESU)

They avoid things they shouldn't say if they don't wanna get pushback. So, they're like, even though the dorms are full of pro-Trump stuff, they're not gonna say things in class they would say in the dorms . . . It's rare I get an honest question . . . You see people tightening up and you have to be like, ok, let's stop. (Gray, ESU)

Instructor anxiety

Professors pointed to their own polarisation anxiety, generally indirectly. More often, professors' apprehensions were voiced as desires to protect students from tensions, maintain a 'safe space' and teach effectively. They worry how to do this. Professors resolve worry with personal guidelines for how to present class materials, phrase speech, frame debates and select readings. Some fear being branded a 'crazy liberal academic'. They and their students ride a tension between what they 'should' / 'should not' say.

I would be so glad to be, like, a Shakespeare scholar or something right now . . . In such a highly polarised and partisan era, there is no non-polarising and controversial issue. There's nothing I can bring up that people are not going to immediately take sides and demonise and vilify the people on the other side. It makes my classrooms really emotionally fraught and very dangerous. (Jules, PMU)

I think I unknowingly set myself up to create defensive responses in students . . . [P]eople felt like I was this outsider. Coming from [a different region], crazy liberal, not considering their viewpoints. . . . I didn't obviously intend for that to be the case. (Taylor, ESU)

I find that forces me – this might be a good thing – makes me hyper aware of what I'm saying. Like, sometimes in class I feel like I sound super awkward. I'll say 'Some might argue "blah blah". While others might argue "blah blah". What do you think?' I sound like that because I worry I'm gonna end up on some liberal professor list. (Sawyer, ESU)

I feel like in our classrooms, there's just an incredible inability to have a contentious conversation without getting mad. (Kyle, PMU)

Teaching nuance to anxiety

Believing polarised thinking leads to cognitive blocks, instructors see themselves as mediators between the triggering nature of their course content and authentic learning that extends beyond the classroom. Thus, a major theme involves teaching the nuance of content in a manner that obviates polarisation anxiety.

Instructor self-presentation

Professors strategise about their own cultural biases. Some choose not to mention their own views. Others share openly, modelling acceptability of

multiple perspectives while inviting students to share their own. All strategies within this continuum of approaches demonstrate recognition of existing tensions.

There's a certain way that my students are constantly trying to figure out my politics. Then to decide whether to listen to anything in class they learn. Based on whether they agree with my politics. I intentionally don't express my politics. (Kyle, PMU)

I'm not really explicit with what I believe. It's just a teaching choice I've made. Because I prefer to position myself as someone who likes to ask questions. I'm sure they have assumptions about me, but I don't know. (Gray, ESU)

I'm open that I'm a bleeding-heart liberal, but I have family members that are very conservative, and I love them all. And your ideas and comments are all welcome and it won't affect your grade. They could google me and figure it out, so why hide it? (Charlie, PMU)

I use. . . full disclosure. I'm a socialist. I put up with Democrats. I can't stand Republicans. I said that. But I also then say, we all need to learn from one another, whatever it is. (Bailey, PMU)

Teaching to polarisation

Many felt content's contentious nature, properly managed, provides great potential. Creating a sense of safe group interaction becomes crucial. Professors build this solidarity by making contentious issues objects of discussion, through icebreaker exercises and establishing consensus-based ground rules. Many approach anxious students privately.

[Question: Have students rejected or challenged your teaching?] I have had that . . . I really appreciate the fact that they are feeling comfortable enough to ask . . . And, as a guide, I usually try to engage the rest of the class in 'what do you think about this question. Why do you think this?' . . . Rather than jumping immediately to 'That's wrong. You can't possibly think of that that way. You're a racist.' (Bailey, PMU)

I said, 'Why is it so hard for us to talk about this stuff?' I crowdsourced rather than me preaching at them. We had this very long, elaborate conversation from many perspectives about why it is so hard . . . After that we made a rule book of what are the rules of engagement in this class. (Taylor, ESU)

I did have a student in the class, well, that was particularly anxious. I remember in a group discussion he was refusing to join the group. I said to him, 'Well, instead of just writing out the answers, why don't you join the group?' And he said, 'No, I'm just too angry, I don't want to talk to anybody.' So I sat down with him and said, 'There's a lot of that going on. A lot. Sometimes it helps to just talk it through, communicate with others.' He finally did. (Micah, PMU)

Professors mediate the cultural polarisation of perspectives through teaching strategies. Some professors present 'balanced' views of culture wars debates like immigration, race and abortion, by showing 'both sides'. Others avoid 'straw man' arguments that may alienate students. Some push back on presenting issues as simplistically two-sided.

It's really important students feel like you have presented the arguments for each side of that question with the greatest level of intelligence and nuance and sophistication . . . Students who are on the side that feels slighted will tend to disengage . . . They sort of roll their eyes and say, 'Oh, he or she is one of *those*.' Because that person doesn't take my view seriously, I'm inclined to take him or her less seriously. (Logan, ESU)

So, how do you present this point of view, and this point of view, and this point of view, and let the students read it, sort through it, and find the merits on their own? Whereas either social media, or some teachers who really do take one stance, if they mention others, it's just as a straw man to destroy it. Students see through that . . . Then students will ask me, 'Well, who's right?' And I say . . . 'Maybe nobody's right. Maybe everybody has a piece of the bigger picture, but nobody has a monopoly on it.' (Reagan, ESU)

We raised the question of whether [a Native American homeless encampment] . . . should be put on the top of the priority list for housing . . . The case that was made for it was 'Yes, it should be. Because these are mostly American Indians and they have had their land taken away from them . . .' Meanwhile, the argument against that was . . . 'Yeah, but if this was [where African Americans live in our city] this wouldn't be happening this way.' So, take two very liberal issues and you face them off against each other. And it was magnificent how a Black Lives Matter person and an American Indian person looked at each other and did not want to say that the other was not important as well. So, I think they came to the realisation of 'This would be a tough call.' It just was a remarkable thing. (Bailey, PMU)

Race

Race appears at the intersection of three themes: student polarisation anxiety, professor polarisation anxiety and the struggle to teach nuance. All professors mentioned race in some way, even when not their central course theme. Professors pressure themselves to avoid both heated exchanges and student silence around race through teaching. First, many spoke of struggling to facilitate learning for white students. Second, they described concerns for students of colour as such teaching occurs.

Catering to white students

Professors perceive some whites demonstrate guilt and defensiveness. Of the cognitive biases noted above, this particularly preoccupied professors. Unless these are dealt with through teaching strategies, instructors feel students may not learn. They attempt this through assignments, choice of readings, relating personal experience and engaging students Socratically.

My biggest challenge has been teaching in a way that accurately addresses the concerns my class discusses . . . in a way that doesn't alienate white students . . . And that's not true of all my white students. But definitely there has been a contingent of white students that it's hard to reach them in a way that they don't get this defensive front. (Taylor, ESU)

It's majority white students, and I don't want them to feel uncomfortable talking about it. I have them watch films to get over that. I have them watch at home, so they don't feel like we're watching them. I have them write reflections . . . And all the assignments . . . were all about white people . . . So, everything I assigned them was, like, who supports voter ID laws, well, it's like white people with a lot of anti-black prejudice who support these laws. What do white people think about gun control – it's white people who don't like black people for no gun control. I don't know if they realise that . . . Yeah, nobody was like 'Why do we have to learn about minorities?' There was no tension there. (Sawyer, ESU)

Any conversation about who we are as a country . . . is going to probably make a lot of white students defensive. It's helpful that I'm white . . . I've very open about how I struggle with thinking that I am a decent human, or try to be, and at the same time I benefit from all this. (Jules, PMU)

The other issue I find is when white men are called out for racism. And so, I have to gently inform them, 'Are you sure you want to say it that way? Where did you get the information from? Can you provide a reference?'

Sometimes the others will come and call them out directly . . . Yes, fragility is real, and I feel bad. (River, PMU)

Saying that everyone tends to focus on race and gender, and if you're a white guy and saying 'I'm supposed to be privileged, but I don't feel I'm getting a good deal out of society' – well, that's because of class. You're not wealthy. Here's where you're coming up against that as an obstacle. Phrasing it that way, pointing out those things circumvent the difficulties. They can say, oh yeah, I'm not rich. I'm not at the top of the heap. If I can at least get them to accept that. If money is keeping you back, then imagine if you're a woman, or trans, or black. (Drew, PMU)

Concerns for students of colour

Instructors worry deeply for students of colour. Students of colour seem burdened by whites in class, enduring implicit and explicit racism as whites struggle to comprehend and feeling pressure to be the 'token' voice. They are particularly sensitive when the voice of students of colour is raised to contradict whites.

Students who are in a dominant group, whether that's racial, gender, religious . . . There isn't a way they can feel like they can look critically at privilege without feeling attacked. We read [a noted African American scholar]. The students who call themselves white in those classes say, 'Well that's just racial, racist language' . . . The students of colour in that class feel, well this is really important to recognise that whiteness is a chosen identity. That comes up routinely. (Kyle, PMU)

Then, I think, there can be a dynamic that develops when there are some eager white students who want to speak perhaps beyond their experiences. And that ends up having a little cooling effect, I think, on students of colour. Who might be thinking, 'This isn't their time'. Or in addition, some students of colour might think, 'It isn't my job to educate white students. They need to do their homework.' (Micah, PMU)

For some minority students at [this school], I think it's a really stressful situation for them. So, they've gotten really used to having to be loud and opinionated and be like 'No. I'm a person and I get to have rights', and just not caring. And others respond oppositely with quiet . . . You hear white students say, 'Oh, this is such a diverse place', . . . I think there's a real disconnect among portions of the student body based on identity politics. (Gray, ESU)

What I've learned is to not put myself as the debater . . . I try to just throw the questions back to the class . . . But it's difficult, as a white cis-person. There's a careful line I try to walk. Because I want my students of colour know I support them 100 per cent. But I have to do it in a way that doesn't reveal too much to my other students. (Taylor, ESU)

Discussion

Data here represent a preliminary foray into issues of teaching social science in contexts of social division. With only instructors' perceptions presented here, conclusions remain limited. Nonetheless, a distinct pattern emerges that transcends the demographic and regional differences of these two universities. Enculturated dispositions create struggles with nuance: students may seek simple answers to complex questions, while ethnocentrism blocks new perspectives or leads them to reinterpret content. Deficits in academic building blocks (evidence-based reasoning, analysis of arguments, history) compound this. Then, social science classes trigger public-discourse conceived apprehensions around polarised content. Simply put, being in a place where contentious topics are taught creates unease, particularly when people have learned such topics mean a fight could or should start. As noted above, even the silence reaction occurs as a response to potential conflict.

This polarisation anxiety manifests through tribalism, silence/avoidance, outbursts, instructor hypervigilance of student mood and fear of reprisal. Instructors attempt to cope strategically. Strategies concern professor self-presentation, creating solidarity, and addressing the 'two-sides' approach of public discourse. Race remains a critical area where issues of nuance struggle, polarisation anxiety, and pedagogy intersect. Professors balance between catering to the polarisation anxiety of whites while worrying about racism students of colour endure. They do all this in a context of hegemonic struggle with neoliberal processes that capitalise on anxieties to both draw students to higher education (Lyon-Callo 2015) and pressure professors to perform (Newfield 2016).

Some professors felt these issues are common, others rare, but all pointed to incidents and strategies to prevent them. Even professors stating such issues were not a problem, or not grave, provided statements confirming the themes. Consistency from professors of various subjects, at distinct universities (different by student age, racial and class composition, private/public funding sources, region of the country) suggests social science pedagogy

encounters these themes, perhaps more frequently than other disciplines. Further research must illuminate this.

Part of the struggle with nuance concerns enculturated silencing (Castagno 2008; Fine 1987). Schools silence students to provide 'peaceful' outcomes. Yet this sets the stage for polarisation anxiety. Silenced students lack skills around discussion, fail to learn the complexity and nuance of critical issues, and associate polarising topics with disciplining, shame and quick resolutions. This mixes with affective polarisation (Iyengar and Westwood 2015) around social polemics: tribalism, distrust and confrontation combine with silence. Collaboration, listening and establishing premises, conclusions and truths becomes difficult.

Reflecting on a discourse of competing 'truths', Leitch (2014: 36) notes the Family Feud effect. In that classic game show, contestants answered questions to earn points. The number of points scored depended on how closely answers matched a popular survey on the topic. The more popular the answer, the more points gained. This reflects the contemporary crisis of authority. The right answer becomes a function of matching popular opinion, rather than of academic learning. Students may not trust higher education to confer learning but may trust popular politicised rhetoric.

I suggest this crisis of authority is influenced by affective polarisation (Iyengar and Westwood 2015), whose central characteristic is unwillingness to treat non-group members as legitimate voices. Affective polarisation results from US enculturation in the modern age under a public discourse of distrust, intersecting with policed silence around social issues encountered in primary and secondary education (Castagno 2008; Fine 1987). That is, affective polarisation and silencing set the stage, or are ingredients for, polarisation anxiety. Students and instructors walk into a classroom with these. The final ingredient is course content (which triggers polarisation anxiety to draw group lines, reject the legitimacy of non-group members, clam up, and/or prepare for conflict), particularly when presented within institutions that themselves are polarised in public discourse (Cantini 2016; Hyatt et al. 2015; Newfield 2016; Pew 2017; Turnage 2017). A clear definition helps. Polarisation anxiety is an individual response to a group dynamic that occurs as introduced topics trigger apprehension about both the topic and the affiliations of others in the group. A class on race triggers embodied memories that race is a policed topic and feelings that others in the room are not to be trusted to talk about race.

Instructors concerned about polarisation anxiety can draw a few preliminary conclusions from this research. First, we should recognise that we have

the potential to trigger polarisation anxiety in our students, whether we intend to or not. Like many other Americans, some students believe that all people, even their instructors, belong to a 'team' in the culture wars. Furthermore, experiences in primary and secondary schools suggest some students may be predisposed to view us negatively, as silencers of free speech and policers of opinion. In short, we must recognise that some students actively seek to label us.

Second, that awareness should become part of our strategies to alleviate polarisation anxiety in our students and ourselves. We must continue to be vigilant about our own biases and make decisions about how to address them while teaching. These professors demonstrate a range of strategies for this, from nondisclosure to full disclosure. Recognising that our anxiety may aggravate that of students, we should select strategies we are comfortable with, rather than force our own compliance with policies and best practices. Note, our strategies may shift over time as we experiment, gauge student reactions, and discover what methods best alleviate our own anxiety.

Third, instruction must provide opportunities for students to relinquish cultural commitments to polarisation. Peoples' views are more complex than popular polemics suggest, and we must allow students to see that. We should not get students to abandon differences in views. Rather, we should allow students to see even polar disagreement as utterly normal, and not indicative of threat or crisis. Group solidarity both permits and encourages difference. Instructors here used icebreakers, ground rules and both group and private discussions to attempt this.

Fourth, addressing the polarised nature of content seems logical, as to ignore it replicates silencing. Many of the problems addressed in our courses are portrayed as imminently polemical in the public discourse, a 'story' with two opposing sides. We cannot ignore that the public and our students feel this. If that is their starting point with our content, how do we choose to address cultural binary oppositions? Some here opted for presenting both sides, others for questioning both sides, and others for arguing no issue has only two sides.

Limitations exist here. While research with ESU and PMU indicates that issues may span across distinct regions and campuses, broad conclusions are limited with only two examples. Also, students clearly must be consulted about whether they actually suffer from polarisation anxiety. Are these professors merely biased in their perceptions? Do their teaching strategies work? Without student corroboration, no clear conclusions result.

Polarisation anxiety may exist in different degrees in different individuals at different times. Professors did not describe utter chaos, but incidents of varying degrees and frequency. Further, they do not perceive insurmountable problems, but teaching challenges. Like other apprehensions, polarisation anxiety can be soothed. Yet this dilemma is uniquely pedagogical. Not being counsellors, our recourse remains academic. This research suggests professors rely on strategic teaching to cope with the effects of cultural divisions in their courses.

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