

**Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry:  
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**The Politics of Contemporary Education**

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## Challenging Ourselves to Confront the Insidious Problems in Educational Politics and Political Correctness

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Many of my colleagues now include their “preferred gender pronouns” in their email signatures—Dr. Smith, Professor of Anthropology, 15B Fassler Hall, [drsmith@times.edu](mailto:drsmith@times.edu), pronouns: she/her/hers. Perhaps doing so is as innocuous or as inane as including the pithy meme-type sayings some do—“Be the change that you want to see in the world,” Gandhi. Regardless, the clear association is with a contemporary argument that, like many things, is vastly complex and has yet been narrowed into a binary-type bumper sticker. Dr. Smith here advocates, through participation, that (a) only the individual can determine her/his/their gender identity, (b) we should only refer to others with their specific and individually determined gender identity, and (c) we should help others by sharing our individual gender identity. As we pull the gaze away from the male, gathering all perspectives around us to be shaped, Dr. Smith also joins the trolls in the self-determinism that follows, controlling and arbitrating when someone is *wrong*.

This Special Issue of *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry* focuses on the many troubling problems in educational politics today. As binary thinking invades higher education, for instance, thoughtful and civil discussion becomes replaced with politically-correct and contemporary leftist ideology and rhetoric. Consider that the call for papers for this Special Issue was widely distributed, and yet the take was limited (i.e., it was seen as dangerous or wrong to question the primacy of political correctness). My essay, which argues for keeping *goddammit* and “long, thin dicks,” was the incensed origin for this Special Issue, and yet, it seemed that other scholars and academics were hesitant to write anything contentious—even as their universities drowned in corporatization, assessment strangled autonomy and professionalization, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and vocational rhetorics undermined the foundations of the liberal arts, “kangaroo courts” of Title IX<sup>1</sup> rampaged, Betsy DeVos and others<sup>2</sup> threatened teachers and tenure, and so much more. Indeed, **Nathaniel Roe’s** stark and striking cover image captures the decay and perversion of the iconic “shiny red apple” potential of education. Knowing some of her research, CPI’s, Cecille DePass invited **Victoria Bohac Clarke** to write a thought provoking article. *Certainly*, this current culture in higher education drives fear and self-censorship, as Bohac Clarke argues in this issue. I asked **Erik Gilbert** to contribute, and he did, critiquing the assessment culture through a creative metaphor of sacrificing children to the god Moloch. Finally, we gathered brave scholars, like Bohac Clarke and Gilbert, scholars unafraid to write contentious things about these controversial educational politics in the hopes of prompting serious and meaningful dialogue.

Acclaimed author Neil Gaiman opens *Trigger Warning*, his 2015 collection of short stories, with an introductory meditation on the contemporary culture. He reacts in particular, to the idea that schools and universities were prefacing and censoring literary experiences. He wonders if literature isn’t inherently about surprise and thus, about not being safe. Gaiman’s is a

reasonable fear, as time and technology have shown us that human history is littered with tensions between ways of prescribing and controlling one's thinking and ways of embracing individuality, imagination, creativity, and human agency in order to become more fully human. The April 26, 2019 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* focuses on reading, and starts with data about how few students today read. Gaiman assumes they might, and argues they should. So does **Jeffrey Condran** in his essay (in this issue), on the "death of the literary mind." His and my essays grapple with why students today don't read and why they should.

Journalist Mick Hume opens his *Trigger Warning*, a 2015 non-fiction treatment of contemporary cultural politics, with a note and prologue about just how urgent and relevant his arguments become in light of the horrible terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*<sup>3</sup>. He engages the internet "troll," government censorship of web content, problems on university campuses from Berkeley to Nottingham, and the many ways scrutiny of entertainers and athletes has impacted media. Hume parallels many other arguments about how illogical political correctness has become, including a radical conflict over the revisionist history in the videogame *Battlefield V*. Its EA/DICE developers advanced an explicit politics in the game, and when fans and gamers balked, those developers attacked and dismissed them (e.g., see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xQyIB6X7rM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xQyIB6X7rM)). **Autumn Dodge** takes on the trigger warning and political correctness in this broader way, focusing on microaggressions, in school hallways and on Instagram and Twitter. For this Special Issue of *CPI*, she engages the tough and realistic pedagogical challenges to teaching within this culture.

I note the recent conflux prompting a fiction writer and a journalist to separately write books titled *Trigger Warning*, but should also note in this introduction the extensive cultural discussion and debate about political correctness. See also, then, Knox's academic *Trigger Warnings*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind* or William Egginton's *The Splintering of the American Mind*, Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West*, Bradley Campbell's *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, Tom Nichols' *The Death of Expertise*, Mark Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, or the fittingly titled '*I Find That Offensive!*' by Claire Fox. These recent, timely, and intersecting books represent the discussion and debate happening in just about every part of the world—the essence of which contests who controls speech and how we value expertise. Ed Husain in *The House of Islam* and Garry Wills in *The Future of the Catholic Church with Pope Francis* explain the ways radicalism and tribalism have found prominence through the promotion of the lay person and populism and the simultaneous demotion of scholars and elitism. The paradox is in wresting control of the sacred texts and their interpretation, the egalitarian goal has thus produced literalist, ahistorical, and radical readings. Civil debate, pluralist thought, and intellectual engagement (foundations of the liberal arts) thus threatened or abandoned, much of this Special Issue is comprised by scholars confronting these conflicts with the modern democratization of "expertise."

In North American schools, this paradox of control in education is seen in trigger warnings, safe spaces, "microaggression" and "privilege" rhetorics, and more, all extensively covered in journalism and satirized in media (including Season 19 of *South Park*, and its treatment of political correctness in elementary schools and fraternities). Trigger warnings are offered in advance of curricular content based on how that content may "trigger" psychological trauma in students. In 2016, the University of Chicago incited continued debate by arguing trigger warnings are antithetical to its intellectual mission, posturing that serious institutions

wouldn't coddle students just to follow politically correct cultural trends. Problematically, trigger warnings and these other policies and rhetorics seem to emerge from implementation of a liberal democratic theory of education and from critical theory. The paradox, then—promoting inclusion and equity while censoring speech and truncating or eliminating contentious content. This Special Issue includes several smart treatments of these educational realities. **Alton James** discusses how we might increase access and equity in education through competency-based education. **Belete Mebratu and Kelly Ahuna** examine the politics and policy ethics of Pearson and Stanford's edTPA in US teacher preparation. Freire's critical pedagogy informs **Lawrence Muganga and Peter Ssenkusu's** study of the dominance of teacher-centered education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is my great hope that *CPI* readers will find this Special Issue of value and will join me in thanking the scholars who thoughtfully and boldly contributed to this contentious, contemporary educational debate.

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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Title IX is a US civil rights law enacted in schools and universities to protect students and student athletes from discrimination based on gender or sex.

<sup>2</sup> Betsy DeVos is the US Secretary of Education. She is broadly critiqued for her lack of experience in or understanding about US education. US politicians (e.g., Scott Walker of Wisconsin, Chris Christie of New Jersey) have faced similar critiques as they fuel public rhetoric derisive of teachers and of conventional public schools and work to dismantle collective bargaining and tenure.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Charlie Hebdo, the "Je Suis Charlie" movement, and more, one might read Gavan Titley's article for Raidió Teilifís Éireann at: [www.rte.ie/eile/2018/0213/940448-how-charlie-hebdo-started-a-debate-about-free-speech/](http://www.rte.ie/eile/2018/0213/940448-how-charlie-hebdo-started-a-debate-about-free-speech/)