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Looking for a Cure for Educationl Exhaustion

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Abstract

Whoa, folks! An entire month got away from me there. Ever had that happen to you? If you're a teacher I'm guessing it probably has. I wish I could say that there was a good reason I hadn't written anything at all on this blog in the past few weeks, but the sad truth is that I haven't really been any busier than usual. Every semester becomes a slog at some point—that right there might be a topic for another post soon; maybe I could write two in a month!—but that hasn't stopped me before. I had some extra responsibilities this year, but usually that just provides more material to write about. The truth is that I stopped writing because I was exhausted—not physically, but mentally. For a good part of the past month I had no real interest in thinking about schools or politics or education policy at all. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Betsy DeVos, education policy, free speech, censorship

Disciplines

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Comments

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Looking for a Cure for Educational Exhaustion

By Dave Powell on May 5, 2017 11:38 AM

Whoa, folks! An entire month got away from me there. Ever had that happen to you? If you're a teacher I'm guessing it probably has.

I wish I could say that there was a good reason I hadn't written anything at all on this blog in the past few weeks, but the sad truth is that I haven't really been any busier than usual. Every semester becomes a slog at some point—that right there might be a topic for another post soon; maybe I could write two in a month!—but that hasn't stopped me before. I had some extra responsibilities this year, but usually that just provides more material to write about.

The truth is that I stopped writing because I was exhausted—not physically, but mentally. For a good part of the past month I had no real interest in thinking about schools or politics or education policy at all. I didn't even want to read beyond the headlines. Believe me, there was plenty to write about: there was that time [Betsy DeVos said "There really isn't any Common Core anymore."](#) when obviously there is, and then there was the time (was it the same day?) Old Man Trump [signed an executive order meant to "return" local control to our nation's schools.](#) When was it gone? There was the day my son went to school late because he overslept and made the mistake of telling them the truth—so he got lunch detention. Messages, people. You do realize that punishing a kid for telling the truth undermines the goals related to "integrity" and "good citizenship" so clearly stated in that long, condescending paper you send home after assigning lunch detention, right? *Right...?*

There were other things. There was that new [report out of DC about the voucher program](#) that had been held up as a model for the new public-private hybrid system some reformers want for all of us. It seemed to confirm what a lot of us who aren't currently serving as Secretary of Education already knew: giving private citizens public money so they can send their kids to private schools is not the educational or social panacea some folks desperately want it to be. It just isn't.

You get the point: there has been plenty to write about. But at this point, a hundred days into the age of Trump, it can be difficult to find the wherewithal to even respond to what's going on

anymore. Before you can even begin to wrap your head around something there's something else to respond to, something else to be outraged by, something else to make you shake your head in disbelief. It's going to be hard to keep up this pace.

Having said all that, something happened this week at Gettysburg College, where I work, that helped energize me just a little bit. I served on several committees this semester and we spent a lot of time preparing for something we assumed to be inevitable. We suspected that eventually a student group, perhaps egged on by some invisible hand in a national organization or a wealthy alumni donor, would push the free speech button and try to bring a divisive figure to campus to stir up trouble. And so they did: a group of students invited a guy named Robert Spencer (not to be confused with the [white supremacist who got his lights punched out on the street recently](#)) to come here and gave a lecture about what he perceives to be the shortcomings of Islam as a religion. I don't want to give him any more publicity than that; go look him up for yourself if you want to know more about him.

I'll say this though: what Spencer brought to campus was not enlightened discourse or thoughtful intellectual discussion. It was, in my view, third-rate argumentation masquerading as "courageous" free speech, a talk filled with cherry-picked information and weak logic that should have embarrassed the students who invited him. And I mean no disrespect to the students when I say that: my feeling is that they should invite who they want. But this was a weak argument, plain and simple, and not even a particularly provocative one.

The cherry on top was a declamation the speaker made calling for the president of the College to resign for inhibiting free speech (I heard that he called her a fascist, too, but I missed that on the livestream when I was trying to wrangle my daughter out of the bathtub). This denunciation was delivered from behind a podium in a quiet room while a check for \$2,000 burned a hole in his pocket. His speech had, in fact, not been denied at all. It had been approved after careful deliberation and it went off without a hitch. He wove his web of circular logic, answered a few questions defiantly, tried unsuccessfully to provoke the crowd, and left. He even thanked the audience for its civility before scurrying off stage. Meanwhile, on the other side of campus, some 400 people gathered at a solidarity rally to protest the speech—not by causing a riot or inciting violence, but by dancing to music provided by a band and generally just enjoying each other's company. Imagine that.

My take on what happened here—and what didn't—is that good old fashioned open deliberation and conversation prevented this talk from being what it could have been, which is a redux of [Middlebury](#) or [Berkeley](#). This is a very different place than Middlebury or Berkeley is—it's more isolated than Berkeley and probably more conservative than both—but it was gratifying, to me anyway, to see so many lessons taken from those experiences and applied successfully here. The easy thing to do—not because it would not have had consequences, but because it would have allowed us the moral satisfaction of saying we did not allow hate speech on our campus—would have been to shut the speech down altogether, and indeed, that's what many of our faculty, staff, students, and alumni wanted.

Instead we talked about it, maybe too much, and in the end I think we made the right decision. [While Berkeley was dancing with Ann Coulter](#) looking desperately for a way to justify

canceling a speech she planned to give there, we were quietly and slowly accepting the fact that suppressing speech, no matter how hateful or illogical it may be, may in fact be worse than allowing it. This is partly because doing so plays into the hands of people who want to expose the supposed hypocrisy of academics who say they are politically tolerant but refuse to hear viewpoints they disagree with. This guy Spencer tried to play that card and it landed with an unceremonious thud because there was no one in the room shouting back at him. Good for us.

It's also because self-censorship is worse even than censorship imposed by someone else, and it's a logical endpoint of suppressing speech that ultimately undermines democracy. We have to hear ideas in order to refute them effectively, and inconsistency on this score undermines the credibility of those of us who genuinely care about tolerance and respect for others. I have to express admiration for my colleagues on the faculty and in our administration for thinking this through and facing up to the inevitable firestorm that any decision on this speech would have ignited. I'm genuinely impressed by how this College handled itself in a tough situation. Our students and alumni, too, weighed in thoughtfully in every way imaginable: on social media, in letters and petitions, by speaking out, by organizing events like the solidarity rally that coincided with Spencer's talk. At first, like a lot of my colleagues, I thought that the best welcome for an ideologue like Spencer would be an empty room but now I'm convinced that I was wrong. What we gave him was even better: a respectful room of thoughtful people who let him say his piece and challenged him in the Q&A period; a symbolic gesture drawing people to the other side of campus; and a quick and quiet exit from town. Again, I say: good for us.

And therein may lie at least the seeds of a cure for the educational exhaustion I've been feeling. Educating other people is hard work, but the really important lesson that I hope all of us on this campus took from this week's events is that allowing ideas to be spoken—even, if not especially, bad ones—is an educational act that pays its own dividends. I doubt that anyone took much of value from Spencer's speech, but I would wager that we learned a lot about ourselves by letting it happen. I hope we learned that peaceful counter-protest is still a very viable option. I hope we learned that we can host speakers some people in our community may fear or hate and not resort to hate and fear as a response. I hope we learned that sometimes blustery talk is just that and nothing else.

Wherever there is learning there is teaching going on as well. I like to think we also taught each other something about the community we have here, which is not perfect by any means but does aspire to get better by making space to hear each other out. There should be nothing exhausting about that, and that's a lesson for all of us to consider. I guess that means I need to get back to work.