

Name: _____

“Political Correctness” and Free Speech

(How should we address complaints about offensive language?)

The term “politically correct” (defined by Merriam-Webster as “agreeing with the idea that people should be careful to not use language or behave in a way that could offend a particular group of people”) has long been used as an insult against those seen as too sensitive or quick to complain about perceived offenses. The term has taken on particular importance this election season, with Republican nominee Donald Trump proclaiming, “I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. I’ve been challenged by so many people, and I don’t, frankly, have time for total political correctness.” In addition, a Rasmussen poll last year found that 71% of adults agreed that “political correctness” was “a problem in America Today.”

On the other hand, a Gallup poll earlier this year found that 69% of college students agreed that schools should be able to restrict “using slurs and other language that is intentionally offensive to certain groups.” Some supporters go a step further, arguing, as does school administrator and author Steve Nelson, that the increase of “politically correct” criticisms of offensive language is actually “the long overdue voice” of marginalized groups who have traditionally felt compelled to remain silent regardless of what others say about them.

So, maybe even setting aside the loaded term “politically correct,” to what degree is it a problem or a blessing that Americans feel both an increased pressure to think about the language they are using and an increased confidence to speak out when they feel they are being unfairly insulted? Most importantly, when might speaking out against offensive language be intended to stifle debate? When might it actually be an expression of free speech by the marginalized? **To get started, for each of the following statements write the number (1-4) that indicates your level of agreement (or disagreement), according to the chart, below.**

1	-	-	2	-	-	3	-	-	4
Strongly Agree			Agree			Disagree			Strongly Disagree

- 1) _____ It is important for people to say what they think or feel regardless of how offensive it might be to others.
- 2) _____ School administrators, government officials, and other community leaders have an obligation to take action to reduce or prevent hate speech directed at particular racial or religious groups.
- 3) _____ Words or traditions should not be changed just because a religious, gender, or racial group finds them offensive.
- 4) _____ Words have great power, and using particularly offensive ones can lead to increased hatred and possibly violence toward others.
- 5) _____ All speech that is not illegal or directly harmful should be allowed (if not encouraged) in all places, including schools, businesses, and public spaces.
- 6) _____ Schools should provide trigger warnings about books or other classroom materials that might be upsetting or offensive due to content related to race, sexual assault, torture, suicide, or other possibly distressing topics.

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GRADUATION SPEAKER

FIRST: Read the following real-world example:

In 2014 a group of college students tasked with selecting the school’s graduation speakers invited a comedian and television host to be the school’s fall commencement speaker. After he accepted the invitation, however, a group of students started a petition to boycott his selection due to offensive comments he had made about Muslims that the students labeled as “hate speech.” Some of the statements flagged by the students included “Islam is the only religion that acts like the mafia that will [explicative] kill you if you say the wrong thing,” “The Muslim world has too much in common with ISIS,” “You have to understand, you have to embrace the values of Western civilization; they’re not just different, they are better,” and “Dealing w/ Hamas is like dealing w/ a crazy woman who’s trying to kill u - u can only hold her wrists so long before you have to slap her.” In response to the protest, the student group voted to disinvite the speaker.

SECOND: Discuss and answer the following as a group:

1. How should schools (and students) handle speech that is strongly offensive to particular religions or races?
2. Was the students’ action of protesting and then dis-inviting the speaker a suppression of free speech or an expression of it? How?
3. What should the school do about this situation? *(The teacher will share the actual resolution of the conflict once groups share their ideas.)*

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GENDER-NEUTRAL PRONOUNS

FIRST: Read the following real-world example:

In 2015, in an attempt to encourage students and staff to have an open mind about gender-neutral pronouns (such as “they,” “ze,” “hir,” etc. instead of “he,” “she,” “him,” etc.) for students who don’t identify with a particular gender, a university’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion released a guide in an online newsletter explaining the terms and requesting that staff ask students what name and pronoun they prefer during the first week of class instead of just taking roll. Although the university repeatedly clarified the guide was informational and not a mandate of any kind, many people in the state complained about the support of gender-neutral pronouns in general, saying that the use of such words is divisive. State legislators even blasted the guide as “the clearest example of political correctness run amok that I have seen in quite some time” and threatened action against the university if the information was not removed.

SECOND: Discuss and answer the following as a group:

1. How should schools (or students) handle requests to consider using gender-neutral pronouns?
2. Was the university’s action of explaining gender-neutral pronouns and encouraging their use a suppression of free speech or an expression of it? How?
3. What should the school do about this situation? *(The teacher will share the actual resolution of the conflict once groups share their ideas.)*

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

FIRST: Read the following real-world example:

In 2015 a college student and her parents complained that they were shocked to find depictions of sex, nudity, and violence in the graphic novels assigned for reading in one of her classes, calling them pornographic. The student called on the materials to be banned. Although the school declined to ban the content, college administrators did agree to add a “disclaimer” to the course description as a trigger warning for students who may take the class. In response, the National Coalition Against Censorship along with many national teaching and publishing organizations, spoke out, arguing that adding such a trigger warning sets a dangerous precedent that encourages students to suppress or avoid engagement with sensitive topics and goes against core educational mission of colleges to challenge the beliefs of students.

SECOND: Discuss and answer the following as a group:

1. How should schools handle requests for trigger warnings for students who say they need them to avoid content that may overly offend or trigger trauma?
2. Was the school’s action of agreeing to add a trigger warning to the class syllabus a suppression of free speech or an expression of it? How?
3. What should the school do about this situation? *(The teacher will share the actual resolution of the conflict once groups share their ideas.)*

Example Resolutions (to be shared verbally AFTER student groups discuss and share their thoughts):

GRADUATION SPEAKER:

The University of California, Berkeley, announced that the decision to disinvite speaker Bill Maher was made without participation from the administration and that the school would not accept it. In a statement, the college said it could not accept removing a speaker based solely on his or her opinions and beliefs, “which he conveyed through constitutionally protected speech.” Maher, the former host of a political talk show called “Politically Incorrect,” went on to deliver the speech in December 2014.

- Did the school make the right decision?
- Is this a decision that seemed to support free speech or suppress it?

(For more information, search online or try

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/30/living/bill-maher-commencement-speaker/>)

GENDER-NEUTRAL PRONOUNS:

In the face of political backlash, the University of Tennessee removed the guide from its website. The university system’s president, Joe DiPietro, explained that he was concerned about the negative attention the university was receiving and that it would not be appropriate for the school to give any indication that they expect all students to embrace practices such as using gender-neutral pronouns.

- Did the school make the right decision?
- Is this a decision that seemed to support free speech or suppress it?

(For more information, search online or try

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/09/ut-president-gender-neutral-pronoun-controversy-like-nothing-ve-seen/71976946/>)

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Crafton Hills College in California ultimately decided to remove the trigger warning, with school president Cheryl Marshall announcing that “upon further reflection, we have all agreed that including a disclaimer on any course syllabus is not a solution. It sets an unhealthy precedent by allowing any one person or group to decide on education content.” She went on to state that such a warning could discourage the free expression of views and speech essential for academic freedom.

- Did the school make the right decision?
- Is this a decision that seemed to support free speech or suppress it?

(For more information, search online or try

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/09/college-drops-agreement-add-trigger-warning-syllabus-based-one-familys-protest>)