

When Hate Speech Strikes, What Will Your Terms of Engagement Be?

Ignoring controversy is not your best option

By Veronica McDermott



Days before the start of the 2017 school year, while visiting Ottawa, the capital of Canada, I was offered a window seat at a restaurant—and what turned out to be a bird’s eye view of an antiracism protest taking place adjacent to the American embassy. This unplanned encounter gave me a chance to see how people reacted when identically clad members of a white supremacist group arrived on the scene.

Thankfully, this rally ended peacefully. While unfolding, it raised many questions about how we, as educators, can or should respond when our classrooms, corridors, or communities become flashpoints in the crosshairs of hate-fueled controversy,

something likely to happen given today’s polarized political atmosphere. Sometimes a bumper sticker, a slogan on a T-shirt or hat, or a passing comment is enough to inflame a hotbed of emotions.

In Ottawa, I noted three distinct reactions from participants and passersby, that, if examined carefully, could provide educators with insight into the range of possible terms of engagement open to them when confronted by those whose hearts are marked by the black hole of hatred and its close relatives, bigotry, bias, and racism. These include minimal engagement (which most opted for), open confrontation (the second-most-popular reaction), and

the one I would strongly suggest be adopted, strategic allyship.

Minimal Engagement. Results of surveys conducted during the 2016 election reveal that the majority of teachers have no taste for controversy. Initially excited about following the election with their students, as the rhetoric became more heated, teachers’ enthusiasm plummeted.

Politics, many said, has no place in their classrooms, not understanding that *politics* and *partisanship* are different. Politics concerns the values by which a community chooses to live, a choice guided by civil discussion and deliberation, two once highly regarded skills still worth modeling and teaching. Partisanship, on the

other hand, is a biased and often intractable view of things. The polar opposite to open and considered discussion and deliberation, partisanship has no place in classrooms.

Complicating matters further, a dizzying array of new players—with confusing agendas and methods—have been showing up at rallies around the globe. A short while ago, few people had heard of the alt-right, anti-fa, or Black Blocs, to name a few.

It is understandable, then, that many teachers say, “I just want to close my door and teach.” A closed door, however, is no guarantee that intolerance will remain benignly in the corridor. Instead, it is possible that your own students will utter hurtful, untrue, and demeaning comments that they have learned from their families or on social media. The alt-right is known for actively—and successfully—targeting and recruiting young people through its massive and persuasive social media presence.

Educators have an ethical obligation to ensure that all of our students feel safe and supported in our schools. With this responsibility comes a commitment to stamp out all forms of intolerant speech, jokes at the expense of others, and curriculum decisions that leave out entire swaths of the human story in favor of a small slice of Eurocentric history. In addition, we need to recognize and intervene when we see signs that a student may be succumbing to radicalized rhetoric. Minimal engagement is not a viable option.

Open Confrontation. Social justice advocates, like many of the ones in Ottawa, are genuinely appalled and viscerally shaken by hate speech. Many want to fight back. The anger-fueled exchanges I observed led to nothing more than red faces, loud exchanges, and spleen venting. It is understandable that social justice advocates want to openly defend those they have committed to support. Doing so effectively is another matter.

In schools, I have seen a similar tenacity from educators. Many lovingly refer to their students as “my kids.” Many courageously defend them from any hurt, harm, or detrimental happenstance.

This devotion can spill over to hurt-fueled outrage. A well-regarded and highly devoted advocate of “her kids” openly and angrily challenged the president of the board when he denigrated and demeaned the families of “her kids” (black and challenged by poverty), dismissing out of hand their needs and concerns. The advocate, a young black woman, rose up in anger—justifiable anger, many would say—and screamed furiously at the board president, delivering a tirade in support of her kids and critical commentary on the president’s divisive and degrading language. Her outburst was understandable, her message was an important one, but even she admitted her method of delivery was not the most effective.

In this instance she was hurt, but not heard.

Strategic Allies. If minimal engagement and open outrage are not effective options for educators committed to equity and fairness, what is? I believe that educators are uniquely positioned to be strategic allies in the battle for social justice by disposition (they possess big hearts), by preparation (they know how to plan with a goal in mind), and by position (they have access and influence), but they need to earn the appellation *ally*, not commandeer it.

Strategic allies responsibly cultivate an identifiable set of characteristics, some of which I observed among the participants at the Ottawa rally. They:

- Listened more and spoke less. They stood quietly and steadfastly in the background, supporting the efforts of those most directly threatened by the hateful comments spewing from the mouths of the supremacists.
- Demonstrated resistance to all forms of oppression. They were

there to support the LGBTQ community, the black lives they feel matter, religious tolerance, immigrants seeking a new life, First Nations people seeking truth and reconciliation.

- Chose not to be spokespeople for others—or the center of attention.
- Remained when everyone else left, demonstrating their commitment to the cause.
- Came prepared with facts and figures regarding the oppressions experienced by others.

How should we, as educators, respond when our classrooms, corridors, or communities become flashpoints in the crosshairs of hate-fueled controversy?

Strategic allies are not satisfied with a status quo that subjects certain groups of people to exclusionary practices, lies, and invective. They understand how oppression works, and they are ready to unwaveringly employ their advantages on behalf of justice—when asked to do so.

As the school terms progress this year, it is likely that educators will face the dual demons of hateful speech and actions. They may not have a choice about that. They may stumble into a situation unexpectedly, like I did in Ottawa. But they can choose their terms of engagement. They can turn their backs and do nothing. They can be justifiably outraged and hurt, but not heard. Or they can be strategic allies in the battle for social justice, allies who recognize that in this era of re-awakened racism and nationalism, the only race that matters is the human race. **P**

Veronica McDermott, a retired school superintendent, is author of *We Must Say No to the Status Quo: Educators as Allies in the Battle for Social Justice* (2017, Corwin).