

# Classrooms as socio-politically conscious learning spaces: Developing political literacy, affect, and discourse

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## ABSTRACT

With the Philippines' current political climate that has seen the rise of fake news and misinformation, young people, particularly students, turn to their classrooms to help them construct their own views and perspectives on various social and political issues. However, with educational agencies enforcing teachers to be apolitical, it is high time to open discussions and conversations on how classrooms can foster an environment where students develop a more socially and politically conscious mind. In this essay, critical discussions in making classrooms a safe space for political discussions between students and teachers were made. In encouraging this type of learning space, classrooms should be able to emphasize the development of political literacy, political affect, and political discourse among students. Through these three components, classrooms can be able to increase political participation of the youth while promising a stronger citizenship education. Aside from the supporting literature, the paper also included constructs and tenets of the Sociocultural theory, Consciousness theory, and Social Construction of Reality theory in situating student learning in a more sociological perspective. These theories have highlighted the significance of social interactions, most especially inside of the classrooms, in shaping and co-constructing students' worldviews on various societal and political problems and issues. The essay calls for teachers to be an active agent of transformation where classrooms are able to develop not just skillful and capable students but also empathic and critical citizens of the country.

*Keywords: political literacy, political discourse, sociocultural theory, consciousness theory, social construction of reality*

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### Introduction

The May 2022 presidential election has been demonstrative of the Philippine public's increasing social and political awareness especially in the emergence of social media as a space for public expressions. This continuous political awareness is also representative of the increasing participation of students in these discourses where they are usually engaged in their classrooms that, as Hyman (1959) argued, primarily influence their political opinions and affiliations. As people express their political views and dissents, particularly in social media, teachers were reminded of their responsibilities as government employees. In a now-deleted Facebook post, then Department of Education (DepEd) Secretary Leonor Briones reminded teachers to remain 'apolitical' being government agents that adhere to bureaucratic naturalness through DepEd Order No. 48, so. 2018 "Prohibition on Electioneering and Partisan Political Activity" (Bautista, 2021). However, many teachers and public officials expressed their opposition to this view of the agency. Kristhean Navales, the president of the Quezon City Public School Teachers Association, argued that being apolitical does not fit the teacher's function in teaching critical thinking and deciphering what is wrong from right through factual information (Baustista, 2021). This is also the same sentiments of Congresswoman France Castro when she stated, "[b]y saying that teachers should remain apolitical is like saying they should be robots who in turn mold robots that do not care about what is happening in our society" (Manila Bulletin, 2021). She even cited "Commission on Elections and the Civil Service Commission's Joint Circular No. 1, so 2016" that explained that expressing one's views on political issues cannot be deemed as a partisan political activity. With all these debates with the intersectionality of politics within the classrooms, it is difficult to deny how the influence and nature of politics have remarkably become diverse and extensive. In an educational climate that tackles the proliferation of "truth decay" (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018), "fake news" (Journell, 2017), and misinformation (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019), this essay argues that in battling these social problems requires the integration of political discourse across school subjects (Mason et al., 2018) that entails the strengthening of teacher-student political participation inside the classroom (Kuş & Tarhan, 2016). In achieving these ideal outcomes, classrooms should become learning spaces that encourage socio-politically conscious minds through fostering political knowledge and ideology (political literacy), political affect (emotions

in political life), and political discourse. Furthermore, this essay tries to use various theories – Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Damasio's Consciousness theory, and Social Construction of Reality Theory, to support the need and benefits of transforming politically and socially aware citizens.

### **Classrooms as socio-politically conscious learning spaces**

With classrooms as a public sphere where hegemonic societal and classroom perspectives affect identity through discourse (Henson & Denker, 2009), these discursive practices have been mediated by gender, ethnicity, and class (Chatterjee, 2002) where societal struggles are exhausted (Applebaum, 2003; Brandon, 2003). With many political reforms across the globe, democratization has been a term and a process emphasized by various educational systems (Torney-Purta & Richardson, 2004), that led to the rapid emergence of citizenship education (Kuş & Tarhan, 2016). However, even with this initiative, there has been a decrease in the political participation levels of the youth (O'Toole et al., 2003; Pirie & Worcester, 1998). In a study done in the Philippines, Sta. Maria and Diestro (2009) presented how the youth has conceptualized two ways of political participation: a) in terms of doing one's duty and what is expected; and b) in terms of one's connection with others and the community. The findings presented how the urban youth mostly resonated with the former emphasizing their civic responsibility as participation whereas the rural youth perceived their participation through involvement in their community. This urbanized political participation has been coined by Lanuza (2015) as “decaffeinated” activism where state-sponsored civic education dilutes the more radical expressions of the youth movement into ‘slacktivism’ that only supports state ideologies and state-led programs. To solve these issues, Lanuza suggested the exploitation of social media and social networks by the youth to advance their emancipation against this marginalization, which is similar to David's (2013) report on how information and communication technologies (ICTs) were being redefined to amplify voices in political life. Inside of the classroom, these types of discourse and participation can only be manifested if there would be changes in how students think, feel, and talk about politics and the various social aspects it affects.

Aside from upholding values of equality and democracy, political participation positively influences one's personal development, particularly citizenship which pertains to an individual's feelings of

belonging, personal, and societal growth (Quintelier, 2008). One of the significant scopes of citizenship, and probably its most difficult, is the discussions on political literacy (Davies & Hogarth, 2004). Because of the estrangement of youth from politics, many agree that it is high time to improve students' political participation and knowledge. In definition, political literacy is "learning about and how to make [students] effective in public life through knowledge, skills, and values" (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998, p. 13). Even though several factors like socio-economic variables may affect political interest and participation (Verba et al., 1995), improvement on these aspects has been heavily influenced by one's political knowledge, specifically one's education acquired through political education (see review of Kuş & Tarhan, 2016). In the study of Kuş and Tarhan, findings revealed how teaching students to be critical of political problems enables them to effectively make their own decisions, and responsibly perform their duties as citizens. Even though social science classes have the potential to raise current issues, many teachers tend to avoid political subjects, and prefer non-political discussions due to the lack of in-service training in politics and a curriculum that only involves basic political knowledge. Davies and Hogarth (2004) explained how these environments only propagate substantive values that allow students to only think what they are told about rather than having students utilize their knowledge, skills, and procedural values to fully embrace their own citizenship. Thus, political knowledge is a prerequisite in developing political participation leading to a more socially conscious mind.

With political literacy enabling political participation, it is also important to understand a crucial component of contemporary political science, the difficult yet important function of emotion in politics (Davies, 2019). In the context of the classrooms, emotions are commonly referred to as aspects of learning that are non-rational, denote feelings, and usually ineffable (Garrett et al., 2020). One domain of emotional attachments in political life is one's emotional investments in socio-political issues that continually preserves democracy and the norms of civic culture (cf. Noddings & Brooks, 2016), and fuels social movements (Knight-Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019). With politics sorting individuals, research findings showed how people create their identities by enacting political lines and sorting patterns (Bishop, 2008; Enochs, 2017) that result in less opportunities for talking about political and social issues to others who may have different, and sometimes opposing, views. This

makes students more adaptive to a more binary reasoning of arguments. Research on neuroscience and political psychology have proven the unlikelihood of detaching rationality from emotional functions of the brain (Davies, 2019) that leads to tendencies of biased filtering of information associated to one's political or social identity (Redlawsk, 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2016). In various classroom-based research, findings showed how students' motivated reasoning dismiss any presented factual evidence contradicting their worldviews (Garrett et al., 2020) that usually lead to dispute between students and faculty regarding political bias (Losco & DeOllos, 2007), and perceived silencing behaviors inside the classroom (Henson & Denker, 2009). These situations only confirm how people's developed worldview (i.e., beliefs on the function, or definition of a construct) inhibits acceptance to any information that requires critical change of their worldview (Dusso & Kennedy, 2015); thereby, proving the presence of one's affect as an influential domain in interpreting and responding to political and/or social discussions.

With people holding different political views, another aspect of democratic citizenship that should be emphasized is one's participation in political discourse (Bishop, 2008; Rojas, 2008). Not being an abstract or theoretical issue in most universities, political discourse has been a practical consideration that upholds the value of academic freedom whilst promoting culture of diversity and inclusivity (Matto & Chmielewski, 2021). As discussed above, much research has indicated that discussing political and controversial issues inside the classroom improves civic learning and enhances one's disposition and knowledge (Campbell, 2005; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2006). Following this proposition, research has shown pedagogical implications on teaching political discourse such as discussion-based teaching across disciplines (Thomas & Brower, 2017); instructional value of political discussions (Torcal & Maldonado, 2014); and teaching techniques in inclusion of political discussions (Fenner, 2018; Panke & Stephens, 2018). The "Framework for Fostering Student Activism in Higher Education" proposed by Bernardo and Baranovich (2016), states that students contribute to developing activism as part of the university culture through asserting their worldviews and experiences that were distinctly theirs while educators reinforced this culture through inculcating activism through policies, programs, and resources. Moreover, the paper of Labor and San Pascual (2022) highlighted the affordances of online and digital platforms in driving activism during the COVID-19 pandemic through the framing of *UP*

*Babaylan*, an established LGBTQIA+ student organization, in spreading awareness of pro-LGBTQIA+ policies and related issues in their social networking sites.

### **Developing a socio-politically conscious learner**

Constructs of the Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Consciousness Theory (Damasio, 1999), and Social Construction of Reality Theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) were analyzed for their potential to expound how learning is and should be situated in the learner's social and political contexts. These three theories, though came from various disciplines in social sciences, provide extensive and insightful explanations of why and how the classroom should recognize its influence in creating emphatic and critical citizens. The criteria used for selecting these theories are that each theory: a) examines how social constructs of rationality, affect, and discourse influence an individual's meaning-making, b) explains how social contexts influence learning inside of the classroom, c) considers learning as both an individualistic and interactive process, and d) offers distinct understanding of how classrooms can become learning spaces that develop socio-politically aware learners.

### **Sociocultural theory**

Rooted from Kant's philosophies and Marx's dialectical method, Lev Vygotsky was the first one to highlight the systems where culture shapes the very nature of an individual (Cole & Scribner, 1978, in Turuk, 2008). In this theory, rationality and thinking are dominantly influenced by one's social experience (Vygotsky, 1978), and "internalized through cultural practice" (Smagorinsky, 2009, p. 85). For instance, a child's initial speech patterns were intended to communicate with others and participate in adult conversations where this "interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Similarly, an individual's social environment, from their home to their classroom, influences the way they create their perceptions on particular social and political issues. As social interactions continually affect the way one thinks and rationalizes arguments, social experiences in the classroom play an essential role in the meaning-making and transformative process of how students construct their own worldviews of their own identity and the collective identity they want to be associated with. From the students' political participation to their political knowledge, students

as individuals are situated in social relations and historical conditions where they are in constant dialogue with themselves, and their society (Anh & Marginson, 2013). This dialectical relationship of individuals to their society exemplifies the socially meaningful activity that makes sense of one's consciousness, and the behaviors coupled with it. With Vygotsky's argument that '[c]onsciousness is co-knowledge' (Leontiev, 1981, pp. 56-57), he clearly expounded this when he stated:

Any higher mental function was external because it was special at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental function. It was first a social relation between two people. The means of influencing oneself were originally means of influencing others or others' means of influencing an individual. (Vygotsky, 1981b, p. 162)

One of the underlying conceptions of this theory is the mediation of the human mind, where one's learning is significantly enhanced and shaped through social interaction between people with different levels of skills and knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). This position attributes how teacher-student interactions are vital in defining how students were able to enact or misalign a socially conscious perspective on society. This mediation is usually coursed through culturally constructed tools or artifacts (i.e., mediators) that humans use not only to understand the world, but also to transform and master themselves (Vygotsky, 1981a). Such artifacts, whether symbolic or signs, were designed culturally and historically specific, and as such embody one's cultural attributes. Part of the learning process is the child's use of these artifacts as not only a solitary exploration of their environment but their appropriation of methods of action presented in one's culture (Kozulin et al., 1995, in Turuk, 2008). Some examples of these artifacts are written textbooks, school signs, and teacher-initiated instructions and discussions. These artifacts or mediators were categorized in two: a) human mediation, which deals with adult involvement that affects the development of child's performance, and b) symbolic mediation, which pertains to the changes in the child's performance when symbolic tools (e.g., signs, language) are introduced. The former can pertain to how teachers welcome or inhibit political discussions inside the classroom whereas the latter can pertain to the kind of resources students are presented with, like books or films that can prompt social and/or political awareness. As Vygotsky (1978, p. 51) posited, "[t]he basic characteristic of human [behavior]... is that humans

personally influence their relations with the environment and through that environment personally change their [behavior], subjugating it to their control.”

### **Consciousness Theory**

It was Antonio Damasio (1999), a neurologist, who proposed the theory of consciousness supported by evidence from various neurological practices and neuroscience studies (see review of Bosse et al., 2008). Damasio’s theory emphasized the causal or temporal relationships between particular neural states or patterns in the brain. These neural states were interpreted as representations for something, for example as ‘sensory representation’, or ‘second-order representation’ (Bosse et al., 2008). One fundamental component of Damasio’s theory is his notions of ‘emotions’, ‘feelings’, and ‘feeling a feeling’. Firstly, emotions, as Damasio described, are neural objects (or internal emotional states) that are results of an unconscious neural reaction towards a stimulus, triggered by several neural activations in the brain. Defined as neural responses, emotions function as aid to maintain human’s well-being by prompting adaptive behaviors through these neural activations in the brain structures that monitor and regulate bodily actions and states around optimal physiological values (Mosca, 2000). Although emotions are biologically determined, culture and individual development may influence its overt expressions. Secondly, feeling is described as the unconscious sensing of this body state. Lastly, feeling a feeling (or core consciousness) is the result when an organism becomes consciously aware that its own body state or proto-self (i.e., an integrated representation of the organism) has been modified by its encounter of the stimulus (Bosse et al., 2008). As Damasio explained, with interactions with the environment, possibilities to generate representations of one’s proto-self are exhibited; hence, consciousness transpires. Once an individual starts to react to its environment, this is when they start to discover that they are already responding to their environment.

As discussed, Damasio’s notions on emotions, feelings and consciousness can have key roles in understanding individual development towards a more socially and politically conscious mind. With brain researchers identifying neuronal networks involved in political choices (Schreiber et al., 2013), studies showed how emotions, particularly social emotions (e.g., empathy, admiration, jealousy), are essential to these forms of social decision-making (LeDoux, 1998; Panksepp, 2022).

Although emotions are biological and do not necessarily predict one's choices, they limit and bias one's decisions (Verweij et al., 2015). This is in parallel with the literature (Bishop, 2008; Garrett et al., 2020; Henson & Denker, 2009; Losco & DeOllos, 2007) that proved how emotions about one's political life and views can affect their choices and how they rationalize these choices. These findings should be able to prompt conversations on how important it is to embrace political literacy and discourse inside of the classroom for students to regulate their own emotions that still allow critical thinking towards social issues that they may or may not already have preconceived notions. In creating these spaces of interactions, classrooms can develop a sense of consciousness, as Damasio (1999) posited, where students are able to reflect about their reactions to various stimuli their environment provides and to examine whether these reactions address needs of the society or only feed one's biases.

### **Social Construction of Reality Theory**

With behaviors, emotions, and reasoning being affected by the presence or the absence of others, this position emphasizes how the social environment influences cognitive processes (e.g., reasoning), and social conventions, norms and values which determine behaviors (Sandache, 2016). Through the lens of social construction of reality, psychic processes, which involves perceptions, emotions, and feelings, are socially influenced (Sandu & Nistor, 2020). Grounded from the seminal work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), the social construction of reality describes reality as “selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively, and negotiated interpersonally” (Weick, 1979, p. 164). This posits how social reality is subjective and multiple, with individuals actively making meaning of their own realities for themselves through establishing their own (Creswell, 2007), and co-constructing (Sandu & Unguru, 2017). Because of this, reality appears to be a representation of an individual's world of meanings, institutions, and interpretations (Sandu & Unguru, 2017), that is dominantly constructed by language (Sandu, 2016). As Luckmann (2013) argued, communicative interactions, which are ubiquitous in social life, construct and reconstruct social reality in these processes.

Part of developing citizenship among students is allowing them to perform political discourses (Bishop, 2008; Rojas, 2008). Understanding that one's cognition and emotions are socially influenced, fostering

an environment that allows discussions on social and political, and at times controversial, issues provide students a space in making their own decisions while interpreting these issues together with their peers and teachers; thus, creating a more self-directed and autonomous learner. Moreover, discourses that highlight an individual's social experiences and struggles can help establish and construct a social reality among students that is grounded from the shared and collective narratives of each other. This allows students to look into a particular problem in the eyes of their peers, enacting a more empathic response and understanding. With teachers in the helm of these classroom-based political discourses, these pedagogical instructions reinforce a culture where activism is seen as an important component of discourse parallel with the proposal of Bernardo and Baranovich (2016).

### Conclusion

In today's political climate, young people, mostly students, turn to their classrooms as a safe space to construct, co-construct, and reconstruct their perceptions and interpretations of worldviews. With the proliferation of fake news in social media (e.g., Cabañes et al., 2019; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Ragraio, 2021), it is more important for classrooms to welcome political discourses and politically driven topics for students to practice their autonomy and critical thinking as a contributing member of their communities. Teachers should be able to transform their classrooms to socio-politically aware learning spaces that cater to the hunger and ignorance of the youth about the realities of the world. In this transformational process, teachers should be able to feed knowledge and information through developing one's political literacy, to touch emotions and consciousness of one's political life, and to nurture a learning space open for political discourses, no matter how difficult and contradicting they may be. As support, this essay provides theoretical underpinnings to strengthen the proposition in creating a socio-political-centered classroom to produce more socially and politically conscious citizens of the world.

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