

Opinionated Students

Having a right to one's opinion refers only to the democratic tradition of free speech.

By Vincent Ryan Ruggiero

"Well, that's my opinion!" Modern students state this phrase with the confidence medieval miscreants displayed when they rushed through the cathedral doors a few steps ahead of the authorities and cried, "Sanctuary."

Once formally labeled as an opinion, an idea is considered safe from criticism, challenge, and even simple questioning. Thus, the expected response on the teacher's part is to cease offending and acknowledge the validity of the student's statement.

If the rules of this game applied equally to all players, teachers could at least be assured that *their* opinions would be accorded similar respect but, alas, that is not the case. When the teacher says something that a student disagrees with, the teacher is still the offender, because the student's right to be right trumps the teacher's right to her opinion.

Opinion has not always been so highly esteemed. "Here is the beginning of philosophy," wrote Epicetus, a first-century Greek philosopher, "a recognition of the conflicts between men, a search for their cause, a *condemnation of mere opinion* ... and the discovery of a standard of judgment" [emphasis added].

Sir Robert Peel defined opinion as a "compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs"; John Erskine as "that exercise of the human will which helps us to make a decision without information." William Wordsworth claimed that, far from liberating us, opinion enslaves us.

The common thread in all these observations is that all people have a natural tendency to exalt their opinions. My term for this tendency is "mine-is-better" thinking. It first manifests itself in early childhood in attitudes such as "my daddy is stronger than yours," my dolly is prettier," my bike is faster," and so on.

In adulthood, it can be found, albeit in muted form, in the attitude that our status symbols are more impressive and *our opinions more worthy* than other people's.

Even when it is not delusionary, the "mine-is-better" tendency is an impediment both to sound thinking and to effective functioning in society; one might have reasonably expected that an industry that promoted self-improvement would oppose it.

Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred. By promoting self-adulation and self-assertion, self-improvement mavens have legitimized the "mine-is-better" tendency.

The attitude "I have a right to my opinion, so my opinions are right" leads to a number of unfortunate assumptions. One is that there is no need to exercise care in thinking or to consider a variety of viewpoints before selecting one.

Another is that the way the opinion is expressed — the precision and felicity of the words, the coherence of the phrasing, the observance of the conventions of grammar and usage — is unimportant, and teachers who place emphasis on such matters are fussbudgets.

A third assumption is that questions about or challenges to one's opinion are personal insults to which the appropriate response is first to repeat the opinion, then to shout it, and finally to couple the shout with a personal insult to one's antagonists.

The challenge for teachers is to help students discover that "I have a right to my opinion, so my opinions are right" is a logical fallacy and to adopt in its place the attitude "*I have a right to my opinion but since opinions don't come with a guarantee, I can't have confidence in them until I've tested them thoroughly.*"

There is no quick and easy way to wean students away from the doctrine of opinion infallibility, but well-chosen initiatives, if sustained, can be effective. Teachers can create learning situations in which students have an

opportunity to examine a variety of opinions on issues.

Every academic field includes many once-controversial and still-controversial issues, and students can profit from exposure to both. The former illustrate opinions that have been definitively validated and invalidated, as well as the process by which this has been accomplished.

The latter allow students to apply the process, at least at a rudimentary level, and prove for themselves that opinions are sometimes right and sometimes wrong.

As they employ these learning challenges, teachers should seize opportunities to explain and reinforce several important realities. First, 'opinion' is simply another word for 'idea,' and ideas differ widely in quality. Also, the sense of attachment and loyalty we feel toward our opinions proves that they are familiar, not that they are correct.

Third, the phrase "having a right to one's opinion" refers to nothing more than the democratic tradition of free speech. The freedom to express one's opinion regardless of whether that opinion is right or wrong is important in order to enrich the dialogue about issues important to individuals and society so that the best ideas can be recognized and implemented.

This dialogue should be a spirited one, in which every idea is subjected to challenge. The attitude most in keeping with the ideal of free speech is that the expression of an opinion is but the first stage in a two-stage process. The second stage is vigorous debate.

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