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Fact or Fiction: The Indoctrinated Collegiate

Indoctrination is a word that has been loosely thrown around as of late. The political fearmongering of today would have you believe there is some evil cabal planning to indoctrinate the youth into liberal elites that will take away our freedoms; something akin to the Hitler Youth.

The definition of the word indoctrinate that we will be using will not be: to instruct especially in fundamentals and rudiments ([merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indoctrinate)). We will instead delve into the philosophical debates on the word, and into some of the political arguments of its claimed use in academia in the form of inculcation or brainwashing, even propaganda.

There is a quote that was attributed to Erasmus of Rotterdam, a 16th century theologian. It said, “all definitions are dangerous.” Let’s ponder this in reference to how we search for ways of defining the world around us through heuristics, biases, et cetera. But let’s disagree with the quote as written.

Perhaps the sentiment behind that quote has some potential. For instance: when we define something, it can cause problems if we take the nuance away from what it is we are defining. That becomes a form of manipulation as it is only a partial truth. The academic sources of information that are being used for this paper all point to a more complex definition of indoctrination than is currently found in either the Oxford English Dictionary or the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, two of the most widely academically and professionally used English lexicons.

There appears to be a consensus that there are some prerequisites to indoctrination. You do not need every one of them to be considered indoctrination. And generally speaking, over millennia, academic indoctrination has been on the tongues of both liberal and conservative pundits. And in that same time there have always been fearmongers and patronizing elitists spewing misinformation and fallacy on the subject. In the current political climate, we see conservatives spreading the fear with liberals minimizing those fears.

Holden Thorp is the editor-in-chief for Science Magazine, a family of academic journals. Unfortunately, and confusingly, the website is not dedicated to academic journals only, but therein is a blog which is full of the opines of people not necessarily considered experts in the field they write on. Such was the case for Thorp's, "The Myth of Academic Indoctrination." His thoughts on the subject were well written. He believes that "getting students to confront rigorous scholarly material and discuss it openly is not indoctrination." Unfortunately, there is not much else in the blog post that could be used as evidence for or against the fear of academic indoctrination as it is mostly conjecture, reactionary to what some politician did. There is some externally verifiable truth in what he says, but there were also many logical fallacies throughout the rest of his commentary. Perhaps the false analogy, ad hominem, and maybe the argument from authority fallacies.

Tapio Puolimatka is a Finnish philosopher and educationalist. His paper, "The Concept of Indoctrination," is extensive. Basically, his understanding is that philosophy has not settled on a conclusive way to define the word: indoctrinate. The derogatory use of the word is relatively young. Human beings fall under the philosophical, "opening process," which means we are

dynamic beings that need to form dynamically. In this paradigm, he says there are some criteria we can look for to help tease out the nuances that can determine if something is indeed indoctrination in the negative.

Some criteria that can help determine indoctrination over educative teaching would be: an inability to assess the validity of what is taught, a teacher misusing their authority, not being able to question what is taught, The intention of a teacher to have their students conform to their ideologies – consciously or unconsciously, the repetition of what's taught - especially when the student cannot question it, individual students are not respected, or pretty much any way that free discussion is not allowed can be indicators.

Puolimatka and Thorp appear to agree on that stance. Puolimatka describes indoctrination as an “antinormative way of teaching in certain crucial ways as the analytical... the interactive, and the moral.” There is no one criteria that describes it.

Palmer R. Roderick wrote, “Education and Indoctrination” in 1957, in a journal that is still active today through Vanderbilt University, the Peabody Journal of Education. Something written over sixty-five years may seem too outdated but it sounds familiar enough to be considered valid.

Roderick further elaborates on criteria that were introduced by Puolimatka, especially regarding the immaturity of the students being taught by what Roderick claims to be propagandists. Propaganda becomes another criterion for which indoctrination can be considered a part. Further, he states that biased presentations of the facts, appeals to emotion, or other “tricks employed among adults by unscrupulous propagandists” are also indicative of indoctrination and should be treated in the same manner that the propaganda would be.

Roderick describes how both liberals and conservatives attack books in school and are in some cases removed, but that typically the "...conservatives attack the newer textbooks and the liberals the older ones." All things that are going on this very day, as if nothing has changed. And what is a most poignant assertion "...to foster sectional animosities within our own country... It is also alleged that books in English courses keep alive malignant prejudices against some of our racial and economic minorities."

It appears that the negative connotation to indoctrination, the one that is likened by many sources to propaganda and taking advantage of immaturity, and that is still not completely defined in philosophical circles, is indeed present in the education of the United States youth. In coursework as you progress in your degree, pay attention to how things are taught. Is there room for debate? Can discussion around a topic occur, especially about social and economic topics? Or are you expected to listen without context or a chance of rebuttal? It appears that we are indoctrinated beyond current understanding.

Is there a cabal of individuals that are trying to brainwash students? It's doubtful. Are there teachers that, through different means – purposefully or not – are facilitating indoctrination to some degree or another? The evidence points to yes, there are. Is it a serious problem? Maybe. The amount of time that this has been happening could indicate a serious problem. In addition, the people that are being taught may not be in a mental state where they could think critically about what is taught, when you consider their age and the immense variations in how things are taught. But in a climate where these things are ridiculed when spoken of, even if the evidence is there, it may be hard to prove.

Works Cited

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