

Infusing Advocacy into Teaching Psychology and the Law

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Dr. Stevenson was invited to submit this column as the winner of the 2024 Outstanding Teaching and Mentoring Award from the AP-LS Teaching, Training and Careers (TTC) Committee.

I have come to appreciate that our roles as teachers extend beyond imparting knowledge – the best students model the best of our behavior. So much of my becoming an educator involved modeling the best teachers I knew and that continues today. I am indebted to my graduate school mentor, Dr. Bette Bottoms, the third person ever to receive the AP-LS Outstanding Teaching and Mentoring Award and an absolute beacon for excellence in teaching and mentoring. Being on the receiving end of this award now is only possible because I've done my level best to teach and mentor my students in the way she taught and mentored me. I am beyond grateful to her for supporting my nomination. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to my wonderful colleagues, Drs. Paula Millin and Sarah Murnen, and to my amazing students for supporting my nomination.

In the spirit of modeling the best teachers, this newsletter column highlights an approach to teaching that I've modeled from fellow teacher-scholars within AP-LS – an approach that infuses advocacy into teaching psychology and the law. Indeed, scholars and teachers within AP-LS are at the forefront of answering the American Psychological Association's call for psychologists to embrace advocacy (APA, 2011), certainly because social justice and public policy advocacy is so centrally relevant to research within our field. The recent AP-LS convention in Los Angeles featured impressive work of scholars who devote considerable effort applying psychological science and relevant expertise toward improving law and policy. One such scholar, Dr. Apryl Alexander (a 2022 winner of the AP-LS Early Career Teaching and Mentoring Award), spoke about her various advocacy efforts, which she has also incorporated into her teaching (Alexander et al., 2021). Although there are many ways psychologists can harness their expertise to affect law and policy change (Culp, 2013), in this newsletter column, I highlight one approach – the op-ed.

A few years ago, I attended a virtual coffee hour hosted by APA's Division 37 that featured Dr. Alexander who spoke about the merits of not only writing op-eds that apply psychological science to current law and policy, but also incorporating such op-eds as assignments in psychology classes. Although I was immediately inspired to incorporate op-eds as assignments in my own teaching, I felt I couldn't unless I had published one myself. And, I hadn't. As luck would have it, an opportunity to do just that soon arose. The local public schools in Columbus, Ohio had recently instituted heightened security measures following a school stabbing -- measures that psychological science shows are likely to disproportionately harm students of color. A former student and I had just published a study documenting racially disparate treatment of children who experienced excessive force from a school resource officer (Watson &

Stevenson, 2022) and so we felt poised to weigh in on this new policy. We worked quickly to develop an op-ed, which we submitted and was published a few days later in [the Columbus Dispatch](#). Although my student and I anticipated possible hostile backlash considering that our op-ed raised racism-related policy concerns, that did not happen. Instead, what followed was an invitation to join Ohio's Attorney General Task Force on Criminal Justice and Mental Health.

This experience increased my own self-efficacy and motivation to engage in public policy advocacy and so I wondered - would it do the same for my students? Although there is little research exploring the effectiveness of public policy advocacy training, tentative evidence suggests that advocacy training is likely to increase subsequent advocacy efforts (Lyons et al., 2015). In addition, early life experiences of civic engagement increase one's likelihood of civic engagement later in life (e.g., Birdwell et al., 2013). Moreover, enhanced motivation to challenge social injustice via advocacy and community engagement is associated with positive student outcomes, including enhanced academic achievement (Seider et al., 2019) and higher job salaries (Rapa et al., 2019).

That fall semester, I revised two of my courses to incorporate an op-ed assignment and devised a plan to assess its relative impact on students' subsequent self-efficacy, motivation, and intentions to engage in psychological advocacy. Specifically, in two of my classes, students read and discussed articles describing best practices for communicating psychological science clearly and ethically. Students also read and critiqued various science-informed op-eds and, finally, developed their own op-ed on a psychological topic of their choosing. Specifically, they selected and wrote about how psychological science informs a current law, policy, or practice at the local or national level. Although not required, students had the option to submit their op-ed for possible publication (incentivized with extra credit). A few students did so and two students published theirs in a local [newspaper](#) and another published hers in APA Div 37's Section on Child Maltreatment Newsletter, [The Insider](#).

To assess students' positive attitudes toward and intentions to engage in psychology advocacy, I administered a modified version of the Scientific Civic Engagement Survey (Alam et al., 2022) at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. I also administered this survey to a control group of students in psychology courses in which there was not an op-ed assignment (e.g., "Social Psychology"), which permitted at least some basis for exploring attitude-change in classes that did versus did not include an op-ed assignment. Of course, this was an imperfect experimental design, naturally, due to myriad confounding differences in the nature of these courses. Namely, the two courses that involved the op-ed assignment ("Stereotyping, Racism, and Prejudice" and "Psychology, Public Policy, and the Law") seemed likely to disproportionately attract advocacy-oriented students. To address this, I also assessed students' actions and motivation to challenge social injustice via the Critical Consciousness Scale (Diemer et al., 2022). In line with my suspicions that I am "preaching to the choir" more often in certain

classes than in others, students in classes with op-ed assignments did indeed enter the class scoring higher on critical consciousness than students in classes without op-ed assignments. And so, I conducted a 2 (Op-ed assignment: present vs. absent) X 2 (Time: pre-course vs. post-course) mixed-subjects ANCOVA (controlling for students' critical consciousness scores) on students' intentions to engage in psychology advocacy. Supporting hypotheses, students' intentions to engage in psychology advocacy increased from pre- to post-semester, but only if they were enrolled in a class with an op-ed assignment.

As a scientist, I find the results of data analysis compelling, and so I am encouraged by the tentative finding that incorporating an advocacy-oriented assignment into my classes fostered greater intent to engage in psychology-related advocacy. Even so, students' words always hit me harder than numbers ever do. On the last day of the spring semester, a student who had been in one of my op-ed courses in the fall gave me a letter describing the course as having *“changed my life and genuinely opened my eyes to the world we live in and how psychology importantly contributes to the world that ought to be. It was the most transformational class I’ve taken in my entire life and I thank you for teaching the class in a way that empowered us as students to take what we learned into the real world.”*

As teachers, we owe it to our students to engage in the behavior that we hope they will model. And to do that, it helps to model the best behavior of our colleagues and mentors. Fortunately for us, we do not have to look far to find many excellent models.

References

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