

I've always believed that I should not ask someone else to do something I would not do myself. This generally works very well. If employees see the boss picking up garbage, for example, they are more likely to do it themselves.

This principle also applies to teaching. I cannot ask my students to treat each other with respect if I am not willing to treat them with respect as well. I cannot ask them to learn if I am not committed to being a learner. If I want to teach my students to live principled lives, the most important thing for me to do is to live these principles to the best of my ability. I don't have to be perfect, but I must have integrity.

Recently I wrote a column on a human rights issue that is very important to me. A reader responded, "It is profoundly disappointing to see anyone, particularly a high school teacher like Chidiac, promote this 'protest' movement."

As I reflected on the comment, I realized that the reader did not seem to understand my philosophy of education. I embrace the fact that I teach Social Studies in a country that cherishes academic freedom, freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Canada is also a country that celebrates its diversity. I encourage my students to not only understand the issues that surround us, but to express disagreement with others in a respectful manner.

I also understand that as an educator, I am in an influential position. I walk a line between teaching my students how to be informed and active citizens and being an informed and active citizen myself. I teach students how to vote and how to evaluate the candidates and the political parties according to their own standards, but I never tell them whom I support. If I feel strongly about an issue that is in any way controversial, I generally avoid bringing it up in class.

At the same time, I cannot tell my students that their opinions matter and that they are a vital part of a working democracy if I am not actively engaged in that democracy. Each of us has our gifts to share. Some run for political office, others are party organizers, others write letters, many are part of organizations which support the common good, some engage in public protest, and others donate money.

One of my gifts is writing. I believe in promoting respectful public discourse by publishing thought-provoking and well researched opinion editorials. If I did not do so, I would honestly feel that I was being negligent of my obligation to the democracy that I hold so dear.

Is it "profoundly disappointing" that a high school teacher would engage in such an activity? The more important question to me is, "What would I expect one of my students to do?"

The truth is, whether readers of my columns agree with me is inconsequential. I want them to do their research and respectfully express their informed opinions as they see fit. Some may write letters to the editor, others may debate with their families and friends. Honest dialogue is what we need to keep our democracy viable. As a teacher, this is the sort of discourse I strive for in my classroom.

If I am not willing to embark on the never-ending quest for truth, to risk being questioned and to even risk being wrong, then I have no business calling myself a teacher. If I am not willing to embrace the responsibilities of a citizen in a democracy, then telling my students to do so would make me a hypocrite.

Teaching and learning can be nothing less than an authentic quest for truth. If that makes me “profoundly disappointing” as an educator, then so be it.