

What is Indoctrination?

1. Introductory remarks (Witmer)
2. A proposed account (Beddor)
3. What is to be done? (Witmer)

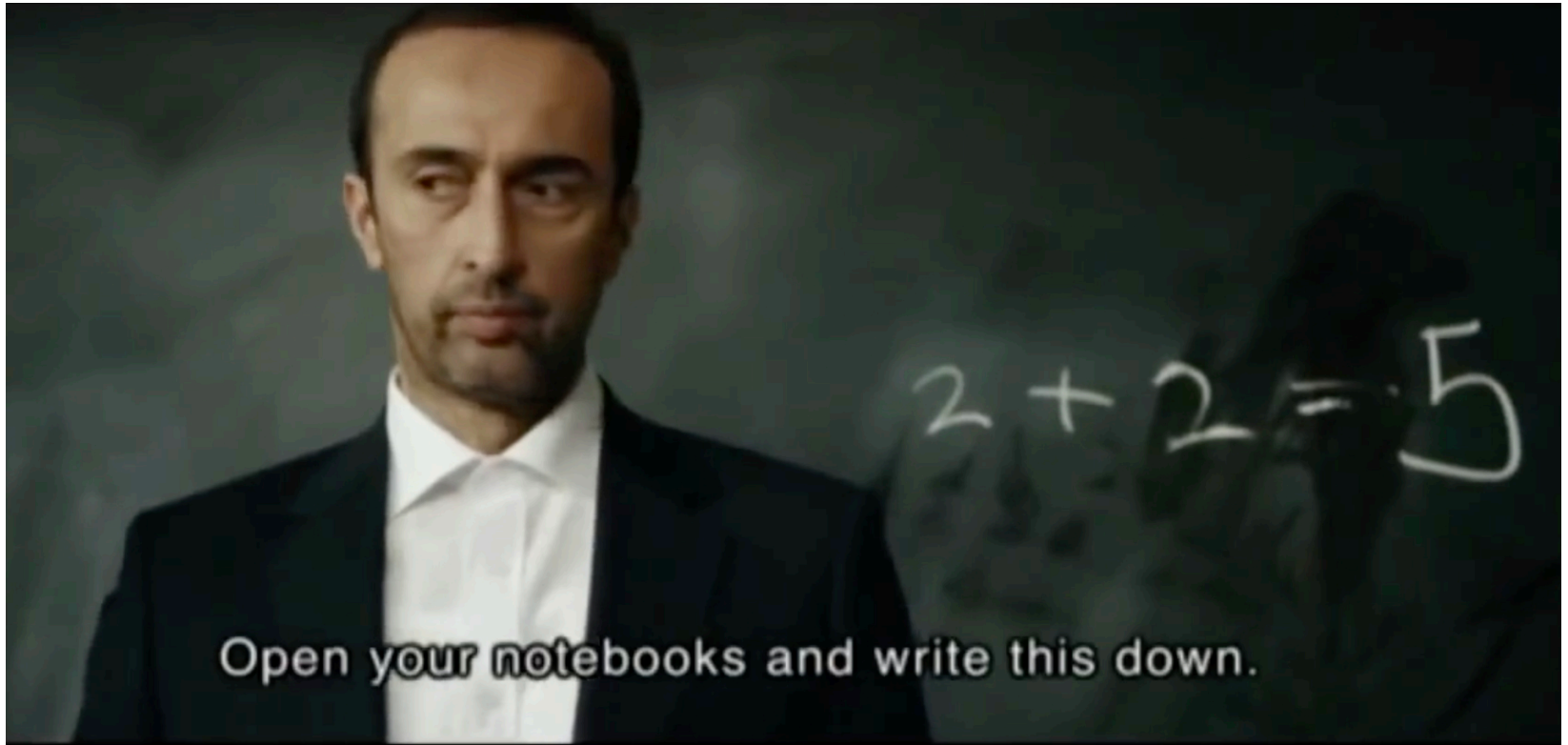


Image from the movie *Two & Two* (2011), directed by Babak Anvari.

Here's a question we might ask:

Do colleges indoctrinate students with some kind of liberal orthodoxy?

Some people think the answer is obviously Yes.



— Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis at a news conference at Mater Academy Charter Middle/High School in Hialeah Gardens on April 22.

Press release, DeSantis administration January 31, 2023:

Today, Governor Ron DeSantis announced legislation for the 2023 Session to further elevate civil discourse and intellectual freedom in higher education, further pushing back against the tactics of liberal elites who suppress free thought in the name of identity politics and indoctrination.

Source: www.flgov.com/2023/01/31/governor-desantis-elevates-civil-discourse-and-intellectual-freedom-in-higher-education/

- It's hardly just DeSantis.
- In writing this, I did a search for "indoctrination" on Google and up popped the following headline from September 1, 2023:

Auditor says several college majors indoctrinate students and should be defunded



Mississippi's state auditor says numerous social science and humanities degrees are “indoctrination factories.”

Source: abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/mississippi-auditor-college-majors-indoctrinate-students-defunded-103378914

- Consider a contrary view
- Headline of an article in *The Atlantic*, September 13 2023.

The Conservative Censorship Campaign Reaches Its Natural Conclusion

Some states are adopting a cartoon version of the past into their curricula.

By Adam Serwer

- The essay traces various reactions from the right wing to the 1619 Project (a publication regarding the history of racism in the USA) from its publication in 2019 to the present day and examines the material produced by Prager U, a conservative outfit whose products have now been approved by the Florida Department of Education for use in K-12 education.

- Serwer's conclusions about those materials:

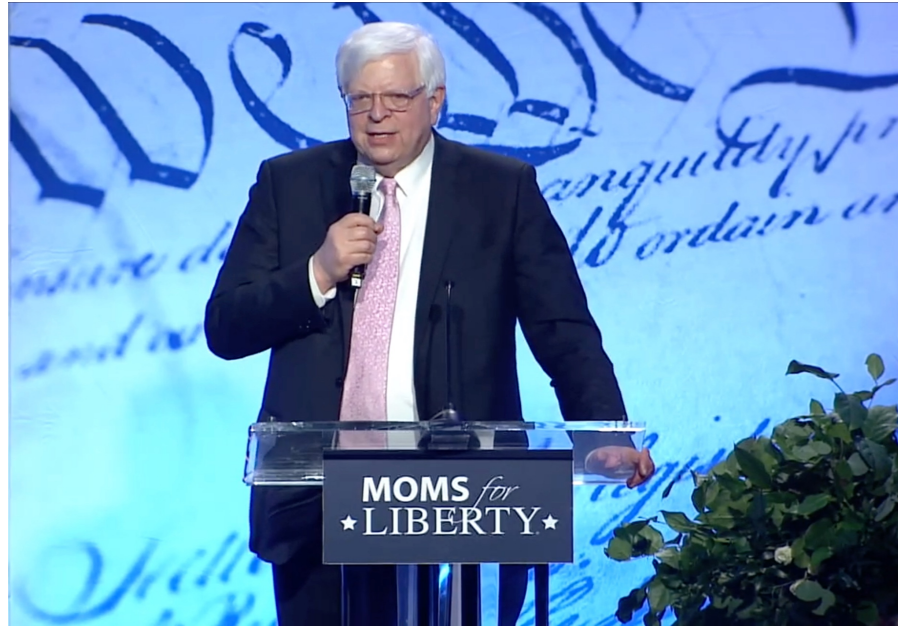
These representations [from Prager U] do far more violence to historical fact than anything in the 1619 Project and it is clarifying that this is the material that some of those who reacted so hysterically to the 1619 Project now wish to employ to educate children. Their objection was not to propaganda, brainwashing, or indoctrination: They wanted those things, but they simply wanted *right-wing* propaganda, brainwashing, and indoctrination. The objective behind this campaign was not to depoliticize classroom history, but to make it as ideologically right-wing as possible, regardless of underlying historical facts.

Source: www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/09/prager-u-indoctrination-public-schools-1619-project/675294/

- Whether Serwer is right about the history I won't venture to say.
- But I want to draw your attention to what the founder of Prager U, Dennis Prager, himself said about whether his material indoctrinates students when confronted with protesters.

Prager's comments at a "Moms for Liberty" conference in August 2023.

Video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuYv4ZWgMhg



When protesters call him despicable...

- “I really wanted to hear what evidence do you have that I am despicable? And all I heard was, ‘Well, because you indoctrinate kids.’ Which is true. We bring doctrines to children. That is a very fair statement. I said, ‘But what is the bad of our indoctrination?’”

- Prager's question is a fair one: what's the bad of it?
- Note his description of indoctrination: "we bring doctrines to children."
- It sounds very gentle, as if a gift is given to them that they can then keep or throw away.
- Who could object to *that*?

- What this makes obvious: the people involved in these discussions don't operate with a clear, univocal understanding of "indoctrination."

- Let's look at one more place in popular media where the term gets used: an editorial from Peshe Kuriloff, a retired professor of education.

Memo to DeSantis: All education is indoctrination

Whatever curriculum teachers present to students emerges from someone's point of view.

Source: www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/florida-ron-desantis-education-indoctrination-woke-dont-say-gay-rcna52302.

After citing DeSantis's declaration that "Our school system is for educating kids, not indoctrinating kids," Kuriloff declares:

- But DeSantis and those around the country who are accusing teachers and schools of indoctrination are missing the obvious: All education is indoctrination to some degree, and whether you label school curricula education or indoctrination mostly depends on your point of view.

Is this Kuriloff's view?

- "Indoctrination" is itself neutral; you call it good or bad depending on whether you agree or disagree with the doctrines that are at issue.
- I don't think this is her view: after all, following her discussion of why she thinks all education is indoctrination ("to some degree"), she writes:

As professionals, teachers recognize these challenges and are taught to watch out for hidden agendas and correct for their biases.

- This suggests she thinks that education *can't help* but involve some degree of indoctrination, though we can strive to *minimize* it.

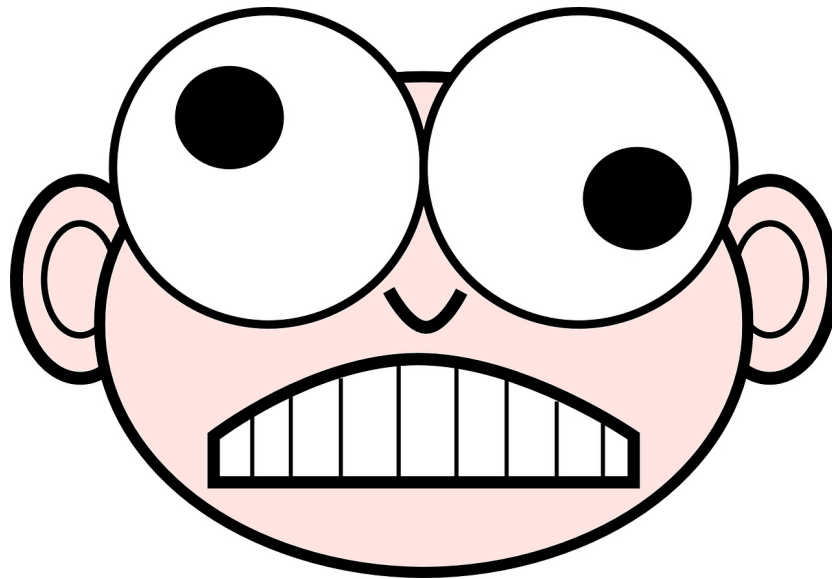
- But why think that education necessarily involves indoctrination in the first place?

- Her answer:

In actuality, whatever curriculum teachers present to students emerges from someone's point of view. It could be the view of textbook authors or publishers, researchers, scholars, modern media, internet sources or their own. No one who teaches can claim that their own education, their own life circumstances or their own system of beliefs doesn't influence their choices about what they impart to students.

If indoctrination is a bad thing and stems from letting one's decisions about how to teach be influenced by one's education, life circumstances, and set of beliefs, then...

- Should UF quit hiring people with doctorates – perhaps sticking to teachers with no education?
- Should teachers ignore such circumstances in their life such as having recently done archival research for historical courses? Or their recent laboratory experiments?
- Should I avoid letting my beliefs influence me? What should I do instead – design courses based on what I *disbelieve*?



To be fair to Kuriloff:

- Presumably she does not mean that influence by *any* kind of education, life circumstance, or belief leads to indoctrination.
- She probably has in mind some select kinds of education, etc. – but which? The bad ones? Which are those?
- She doesn't try to tell us.
- And without an answer,
 - We have no reason to think all education is indoctrination
 - And we have no guidance in detecting indoctrination.

- The lesson I want to draw is this:
- Before we try to answer questions like these –
 - Do colleges indoctrinate students with some kind of liberal orthodoxy?
 - Do businesses indoctrinate citizens with some kind of capitalist orthodoxy?
 - Do lobbyists and donors indoctrinate politicians with views favorable to their specific interests?

....we'd better try to get clear on what indoctrination is supposed to be in the first place.