



Providing Context for Potentially Controversial Material IST_AC10 Administrative Guideline

Occasionally, students express concerns regarding material use in IST courses. Sometimes these concerns are shared directly with faculty, sometimes with the president or provost, and sometimes it is shared with the world via social media. Most often, these concerns are due to misunderstandings and a lack of context.

Frequently, concerns are simply due to a student not understanding how the material is related to the degree they are pursuing. In these cases, the concerns tend to stay local, with students raising the issue with their instructor or someone else within the college. In these cases, examples that show how material is related to future courses or an anticipated career path, can effectively address the situation.

Less often, we hear concerns when potentially controversial topics show up as examples in classes, perhaps the most striking example is when the phrase “heil Hitler” is used as part of examples when discussing encryption. On the surface, without context, this can be rather unexpected. However, with proper context, the use of this phrase is far less controversial. In fact, this phrase is used in examples presented in textbooks, including a textbook used in IST courses. While that provides a little context, the truly meaningful context is that the phrase has historical relevance when discussing encryption and code breaking. More specifically, the phrase was important during World War II as the Bletchley Park team in England, a team that included Alan Turing, were trying to break the codes the Germans produced using the Enigma machine. Recognizing that certain words appeared frequently in messages was a key to their success, and “heil Hitler” was a phrase that appeared in the vast majority of these messages. This is why that phrase often appears in examples of encryption and decryption.

Without this context, the use of the phrase “heil Hitler” is likely to surprise and shock students. As faculty, you are free to use examples that you feel are appropriate for your classes. When potentially controversial concepts or phrases are used in classes, it is recommended that context be provided simultaneously. Further, it is recommended that if such material appears on slides, the context would ideally be presented on the same slide. Otherwise, the opportunity exists for students to share images of the slide via social media without also sharing the context.