

How Do Teachers' Political Views Influence Teaching about Controversial Issues?

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MANY TEACHERS advocate teaching students to deliberate on controversial political issues as a powerful way of preparing them for political participation. Support for this approach recently came from a Civic Mission of the Schools report, which endorsed including political controversies in the curriculum. Specifically, it recommends that schools:

Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school.¹

The literature on democracy education abounds with varying approaches to teaching controversial issues. Embedded in most approaches is a focus on encouraging the analysis and critique of multiple perspectives on how the issue should be resolved. Such an orientation has been the object of harsh critiques, though, as being naïve and wrongheaded. For example, when introducing their resource text on teaching about globalization, William Bigelow and Robert Peterson state that for educators to feign neutrality is irresponsible. The pedagogical aim in this social context needs to be truth rather than balance — if by balance we mean giving equal credence to claims that we know to be false and that, in any event, enjoy wide dispersal in the dominant culture.²

For some time I have been interested in questions and controversies about how teachers' political views influence what and how they teach and what their students learn as a consequence. I used to believe that the most important decision teachers had to make about teaching controversial issues was whether (and, if so, in what ways) they should disclose their personal views on the issue to their students. The "dis-

closure question" is prevalent in the literature, causes heated debates among teachers I worked with in a variety of professional development seminars and graduate courses, and is one with which I have personally wrestled since the beginning of my teaching career.

When I started teaching, one of the most controversial political issues facing the body politic was whether the Equal Rights Amendment should be added to the Constitution. I remember searching for good pro/con articles for my students to read and then moderating heated and often exciting discussions about the issue in the social studies courses I taught. As a new teacher, I was unsure about how to respond to students' queries about my own views on the issue, but I remember feeling vaguely pleased when I heard two students debating what I thought about the issue as they left the classroom. Their debate was a signal to me that my strongly held personal views on the issue were not readily apparent to my students. It was evidence, I thought, that I was not a biased teacher.

At lunch, I shared the students' conversation I had overheard with other teachers, which sparked an intense debate. Some of my colleagues thought I had wasted an opportunity to demonstrate to my students how adults think through political issues. One said I was acting like a "political eunuch" and knowing of my own intense interest in politics, asked, "Why do you want to be a non-political political role model?" Other teachers at the lunch table disagreed. "It's our job," said one, "to help our students think through these issues, not to impress upon them our own views." Another added, "The longer I teach the more I understand about how much power teachers have over students. I don't want to abuse that power—and I don't want kids to agree with my views just because I am the teacher."

I remember leaving the lunch table feeling ambivalent about what I now call the "disclosure dilemma" and have subsequently listened carefully when others teachers discuss their views about it. I often learn that teachers against

disclosure define their stance as a criterion of good teaching, as a Virginia high school teacher recently said about engaging her students in discussions about the Iraqi conflict: "I push them to make their own decisions; if my kids ever know my views, I have failed as a teacher."³ Conversely, teachers who disclose their views to students often argue that they have an obligation to model the importance of taking a stand on issues. They also value reciprocity, voicing concern about asking students to take a public position on issues when they remain silent.

The question of whether (and if so, how) teachers should disclose their personal views on political issues to their students is undoubtedly important. But my research on teaching and learning controversial issues and my teaching experiences have convinced me that an even more important question for teachers is to ask how our political views influence what we think is a controversial issue in the first place, and what criteria we use to determine whether and how to approach issues in our teaching.

Four Approaches to Controversial Issues

To date, I have identified four distinct approaches (see Figure One) that illustrate different ways in which teachers' political views influence their teaching of controversial issues.

Denial

The first approach is for teachers to deny that an issue is actually controversial. When a teacher does not believe an issue to be controversial, then by disclosing her views, she is not taking a "side," but speaking the "truth." For example, one teacher argued that whether the death penalty should be used in the United States was not a controversial political issue, but a question for which there was a clear right answer that students should be taught to believe. She was a member of Amnesty International and deeply embarrassed to live in a nation that sanctioned capital punishment. She still wanted to include the topic of the death penalty in her curriculum—not as

Figure One
Four Approaches to Controversial Issues in the Curriculum

Denial
It is not a controversial political issue: "Some people may say it is controversial, but I think they are wrong. There is a right answer to this question. So I will teach as if it were not controversial to ensure that students develop that answer."

Privilege
Teach toward a particular perspective on the controversial political issue: "It is controversial, but I think there is a clearly right answer and will try to get my students to adopt that position."

Avoidance
Avoid the controversial political issue: "The issue is controversial, but my personal views are so strong that I do not think I can teach it fairly, or I do not want to do so."

Balance
Teach the matter as genuine controversial political issue: "The issue is controversial and I will aim toward balance and try to ensure that various positions get a best case, fair hearing."

a legitimate controversy, but as an illustration of how the United States is out of step with prevailing world opinion. By doing so, she hoped her students would understand that the United States has not realized its potential as a democracy and that changes are necessary.

Privilege
Conversely, the next approach involves teachers who believe a topic is controversial, but want to privilege a particular perspective in their teaching. An example of this approach is provided by a teacher who is a political activist working on a number of social justice issues designed to achieve "equality and liberation in a true sense." Shortly after returning from a weekend trip to Washington, D.C., to protest the pro-globalization policies of the U.S. government, he taught a lesson about sweatshop labor that was designed to "counter the brainwashing" his students receive from a "biased media."

Recognizing that the issue of globalization was indeed a genuine issue, he shared an article from the Gap's website explaining their labor practices as a token toward balance. He acknowledged, however, that the lesson was not balanced. He struggled with whether it was ethical for teachers to purposely and explicitly create an ideological curriculum. Yet he also wanted to "speak truth to power" and encourage his students to consider "what side they are on." Doing this, however, caused him to question whether there was any real difference between teaching for social justice (which he wanted to do) and stacking the ideological deck so far toward his own perspective that he was, in fact, indoctrinating students.

Avoidance
Even when teachers believe a topic is a controversial issue, they do not necessarily include it in their curricula. When talking with a group of high school teachers about what Supreme Court cases they think deserve attention in high schools,

I encountered an example of avoidance: virtually all of them said they did not teach *Roe v. Wade* though they acknowledged it was a landmark case and that abortion is still an important controversial issue in the United States. Their reasons for avoiding this controversy fell into two categories. Some teachers were afraid that the very mention of abortion in the classroom would cause uproar in the community. Some even taught in school districts that had explicitly forbidden coverage of the topic. More prevalent, however, was the influence of the teachers' own views. One teacher, a staunch Catholic, said her personal belief that abortion was a sin caused her to fear that she could not approach the issue fairly. Another teacher who strongly supported abortion rights was furious about the tactics used by anti-abortion groups and simply could not stomach hearing her students' views about why abortion should be illegal. Thus, these teachers avoided including issues in the curriculum not because they thought they were not important, but for precisely the opposite reason: Their strong views about the issue prevented them from teaching their students about it in a pedagogically neutral fashion.

Balance
The fourth approach, which I call "balance," typically involves applying a standard for determining whether a topic is an issue and, if it is, teaching about it without favoring a particular perspective. For example, two teachers whose course I studied believed that if there were genuine controversy about a topic in the world outside of school, then it should be treated as a controversial issue in the classroom as well. Even when parents complained, the teachers treated especially controversial topics as legitimate issues and went to great lengths to ensure that students had exposure to different perspectives on the issue. One of the teachers gave this explanation of his goals:

Students have a right to whatever opinion they want, whatever perspective they want to take, but they need to

understand both perspectives to intelligently take a position on an issue. I also argue that if they know the other side's position they can be more effective in their advocacy for their side.

The "balanced" approach, while on its face appealing to many educators, school administrators, and members of the general public, is not without problems. Applying a "balanced" analysis to a topic that some people believe is not a legitimate controversy would not strike them as balanced, but as biased. This concern, of course, often leads to avoidance or to the selection of controversial issues that don't actually spark a lot of controversy. That is, the very reason that this form of education is often advocated—to teach young people how to deal effectively with authentic and challenging political controversies—may be abrogated if relatively "safe" issues dominate the curriculum.

While there are undoubtedly other ways in which teachers' political views inform their approaches to teaching controversial issues, the four I have just summarized illustrate the complexity of this form of democratic education and also explain why teaching about controversial issues can spark controversy. This is certainly not a reason to avoid teaching students about controversial issues, but it does indicate the importance of identifying and critiquing how our own political views influence what and how we teach. By doing so, our "taken for granted" assumptions about such fundamental questions as what constitutes a legitimate matter of controversy and whether it is wise to disclose our political views to our students will be unveiled. While it will not make the controversies about controversial issues disappear (they never will), it may help us better understand why we teach the way we do—and whether we should rethink the ways in which our political views are informing how and what we teach. 📖

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1. Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), *The Civic Mission of the Schools* (2002): 6. Available on-line at: www.civiclearningofschools.org/campaign/cms_report.html
 2. W. Bigelow and B. Peterson, *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Rethinking Schools Press, 2002): 5.
 3. S. Dillon, "Schools Seek Right Balance as Students Join War Debate," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2003, p. A1.

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