

## **The Case for Preparation: Why and How Teachers Should Learn to Teach Controversial Issues**

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**Abstract:** This paper makes the case for preparation with a call for the creation of online teacher consortiums. Through the construction of a hypothetical curriculum, the first section reviews three books on teaching controversial issues. The second section explains the contained risk-taking approach. The third section introduces the political, epistemic, social, and theoretic criteria of controversy. The fourth section looks at the directive, soft-directive, and procedurally-directive approaches to teaching controversial issues. The paper ends with a charge for teachers to decide if they want to prepare to teach controversial issues.

The 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones, et al., 2019), the George Floyd Protests, the 1776 Report (The President's 1776 Commission, 2020), and the Capital Riot set off renewed policy interest in American civics education. Since January 2021, 44 American states have introduced legislation that limits how teachers and students can discuss racial or sexual issues in the classroom. Either legislatively or administratively, 18 states have banned or limited the discussion of certain controversial issues in the classroom (Schwartz, 2022).

Legislation that bans or limits controversy in classrooms assumes teachers teach controversial issues. Most American teachers, however, steer clear of classroom controversy due to a lack of preparation or fear of punishment (Gardner, 2020). Most American citizens, nevertheless, support the discussion of controversy in classrooms (Saavedra et. al., 2022). Considering legislative efforts to restrict controversy, unprepared and fearful feelings of teachers about teaching controversy, and popular support for teaching controversy in classrooms, there is an immediate need to prepare teachers to teach controversial issues where it is still legal to do so.

While there is a need, American teachers today have too few opportunities to learn how to teach controversial issues. Educators and policymakers, in response, have argued for university-based teacher education to prepare novice teachers to teach controversial issues (Pace, 2021). But in our current sociopolitical climate, American educators and policymakers must think beyond teacher preparation programs and create opportunities outside university-based solutions.

I make the case for preparation with a call for the creation of online teacher consortiums. Compared to university programs, three reasons stand out in favor of teachers creating their own online consortiums to learn how to teach controversial issues. First, being online increases the number of pre- and in-service teachers able to join. Second, teachers can autonomously run the consortium. Third, costs are significantly lower than university-based programs. The rest of my paper, then, illustrates the case through the construction of a hypothetical curriculum for an imaginary online teacher consortium. My case for preparation rests on two assumptions. First, good democratic education requires teaching controversial issues. Second, the more teachers know about teaching controversy, the more often they will teach controversial issues.

### **Section I: Three Books to Get Started**

Before teachers worry about how to teach controversial issues, they need space to explore why teaching controversial issues is a good idea. In the curriculum for a teacher consortium on controversial issues imagined in this paper, I suggest teachers begin their studies with three books. First, *The Case for Contention* (2017) by Emily Robertson and Jonathan Zimmerman, which makes the case for teaching controversy within a deliberative democratic framework. Second, *Teaching Controversial Issues* (2017) by Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks, which argues for controversy within a participatory democratic framework. And, third, *How to Disagree* (2019) by Darren Chetty and Adam Ferner, which argues for teaching controversial issues within an agonistic democratic framework. After reading each book and exploring the competing democratic frameworks, teachers can then decide for themselves which democratic ends they will teach controversial issues.

In *The Case for Contention* (2017), Zimmerman and Robertson argue that discussing controversial issues encourages students to form their own reasonable arguments for or against an issue. The book traces the symbiotic relationship between war-time fever and public charges of indoctrination. For teachers to teach controversy, then, is not a matter of collective democratic will. Rather, they conclude, controversy in the classroom can only exist if local school boards craft policies to protect teachers' professional discretion to teach controversial issues.

In *Teaching Controversial Issues* (2017), Noddings and Brooks differ from Zimmerman and Robertson. Teaching controversial issues for a participatory democracy combines concern for feelings and character while deliberation prioritizes reasonableness. Critical thinking, for Noddings and Brooks, means not only the construction of reasonable arguments but a critical search for meaning which leads to social action. To encourage the teaching of controversial issues, the authors suggest the creation of a high school course that brings together students from all grades to discuss various moral and social issues, including religion, race, gender, poverty, and patriotism, all of which they outline in the book.

In *How to Disagree* (2019), unlike the other authors, Chetty and Ferner do not study teaching controversial issues specifically but look philosophically at disagreement. Deliberative democratic education aims for consensual reasonableness. Participatory democratic education aims for making sense to inspire social action. Agonistic democratic education, on the other hand, protects difference and maintains disagreement. When teaching for agonistic ends, Ferner and Chetty argue, teachers ought to dwell with students in discomfort and eschew consensus for wrestling with disagreement.

Whether the aim is deliberative, participatory, or agonistic democratic education, all the theorists agree: Navigating disagreement in the classroom is essential for sound education in any democracy. But is preparation a worthy goal for democratic education? John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), notes the futility of preparation as an educational aim. Teachers, though, cite inadequate training as a reason for not teaching controversial issues. The heightened political intensity surrounding the topic, moreover, begs for teachers to become familiar with both theoretical and practical knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy. While preparation may not be a worthy educational aim on its own right, it is — right now — necessary. What, then, can be said about preparing teachers to teach controversy?

In *Experience and Education* (1938) Dewey expands on his argument against preparation by distinguishing two different senses of “preparation.” Dewey holds firm against the assumption

that learning something in the present is somehow an automatic guarantee of its usefulness for future experience: “When preparation is made the controlling end,” Dewey says, “then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future.” That’s when “preparation” becomes “a treacherous idea” (19 and 20). But Dewey continues his discussion about “preparation” by asking: “What, then, is the true meaning of preparation in the educational scheme?” He answers by saying, “... it means that a person, young or old, gets out of his present experience all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has it” (20). A student who gets as much out of present experience as possible is most likely to carry lessons learned usefully into the future. In the case of teachers teaching controversy, understanding there is controversy about teaching controversy prepares teachers in two ways in the educationally sound sense described by Dewey. First, teachers will be prepared in the sense that they have resolved for themselves a meta-controversy — meanings of democratic education — connected to their curriculum. Second, they will be prepared in that they will have developed a principled approach to teaching controversy to guide them toward planning and execution of successful instruction.

## **Section II: The Contained Risk-Taking Approach**

Once teachers in the imagined consortium think through their why, they can begin thinking about the how. The second section of the curriculum introduces the contained risk-taking approach. In *Hard Questions* (2021), Judith Pace re-centers the question about teaching controversy on issues of pedagogical practice: Given the academic consensus and clear democratic imperative to teach controversial issues, how can we best prepare and support teachers to teach them? To answer, Pace conducted a qualitative cross-cultural study in Northern Ireland, England, and the United States to construct a framework for teacher educators and teachers to use when preparing to teach controversial issues. The contained risk-taking approach provides teachers with eight steps for how to teach controversial issues.

First, cultivate a supportive classroom environment through a mutual establishment of norms, appreciation of dissent, affirmation of differences, and encouragement of humor.

Second, select materials and a plan that outlines a clear purpose, addresses identity and considers place and space.

Third, think through the positionality of discussants and anticipate the pros and cons of the issue.

Fourth, proactively communicate with students, parents, fellow teachers, and administrators to help thwart charges of indoctrination.

Fifth, progressively select controversies, first cold then hot issues.

Sixth, choose resources and select a pedagogy that challenges presuppositions, amplifies diverse voices, and fosters critical inquiry.

Seventh, practice facilitating conversation in a respectful and meaningful way.

Eighth, especially when dealing with hot issues, emotions must be addressed and processed using self-awareness and de-escalation techniques.

The steps listed by Pace contain risk when teaching controversy by 1) warming students up to deal well with progressively hotter and hotter issues (First, Fifth, and Seventh steps),

2) settling stakeholder issues before beginning to teach the controversy (Fourth step), 3) choosing curriculum material likely to access but then challenge student voice (Second, Third, and Sixth steps), and 4) channeling emotional response to controversy into deeper understanding of the sources of controversy (Eighth step)

In the ideal teacher consortium, teachers can test out the framework as they learn from their own teaching and discuss successes and challenges with participating colleagues. To enact the framework, though, steps five and six — selecting authentic issues and choosing a pedagogy — require further study. What makes an issue controversial? Once we've decided on the nature of a given controversy, how should a teacher teach the issue? The next two sections of the paper further develop our imagined curriculum for teaching controversy, first, by presenting criteria to distinguish among issues in terms of their ripeness for controversy and, second, by discussing instructional approaches from among which teachers may choose when they teach controversy.

### **Section III: Understanding Controversial Issues**

What makes an issue controversial is itself controversial. Educational theorists hold different, sometimes contradictory positions, on the nature of controversial issues. The third section of the curriculum reviews the political, epistemic, social, and theoretic criteria for deciding whether an issue is controversial or not.

The political criterion (Anders & Shudak, 2016) marks an issue as controversial if it is related to state-based values. Private or public moral issues that go beyond liberal-democratic concerns, ought not — under this criterion — be taught as controversial.

The epistemic criterion (Thorndike, 1937) classifies an issue as controversial if reasonable people backed by valid evidence disagree. An issue is controversial if disagreement itself is not predicated on unreasonable terms (Hand, 2008). Compared to the political criterion, the epistemic criterion teaches moral and social issues as controversial.

The social criterion (Anders & Shudak, 2016) labels an issue controversial if existential significance exists. In other words, the issue must be of deep concern in the lives of the students inside and outside the school. Unlike the political criterion, the social criterion teaches both moral and state-based issues; like the epistemic criterion, the social criterion can only be met if multiple minds recognize a given controversy.

The theoretic criterion (Anders & Shudak, 2016) makes an issue controversial if it is socially important and experts disagree on sound interpretations of valid evidence. The theoretic combines parts of the social and epistemic criterions to ensure the issue meets the theoretical and practical dimensions of education. Compared to the political criterion, the theoretic criterion does not make a moral distinction.

Rather than consider these criteria as exclusionary of one another, however, think of the criteria as aids in deciding if a controversy is worthy of teaching. That is, when an issue meets the Social criterion of existential significance to the lives of students, especially if the controversy involves government action in a democracy (Political criterion) and when an issue

meets the Epistemic criterion of valid evidence, especially if the evidence emanates from experts (Theoretic criterion), then the issue is ripe for controversy. But to fill out the list of criteria for identifying controversy it should be noted that the Theoretic criterion creates the possibility of Meta-theoretic controversy. That is, there may be controversies still searching for a clear meaning of ‘valid’ and ‘expert’ when deciding which evidence applies to a controversy. The goal of teaching a Meta-theoretic controversy would be to make the controversy meet the Theoretic criteria of agreed-upon meanings of ‘evidence’ and ‘expertness’. Of course, real-life controversies likely come connected in some degree or other to each of the criteria. Best, then, to think of the criteria as filters through which to run an issue to size it up for likely success when using it to teach controversy.

There’s a larger debate that includes criteria beyond those briefly reviewed here. Nonetheless, an online teacher consortium would allow teachers to define, debate, and reflect on which criteria seem most salient for a given issue and most appropriate to local teaching contexts. Scholarly disagreement can be acted out in real time. Consequently, teachers not only become familiar with the materials but also experience criteriological disagreement and become part of the dialogue among educational researchers. Once teachers explore and test criteria for different issues online with other teachers and educational researchers, they can move to explore pedagogical stances for the issues they choose to teach.

#### **Section IV: Pedagogical Approaches**

Like the debate over what makes an issue controversial, scholars also disagree on the best approaches for teaching controversial issues. The fourth section of the curriculum reviews the directive, the soft-directive, and the procedurally-directive approaches to teaching controversy.

The directive (Gregory, 2014) approach encourages the teacher to direct student thinking on controversial issues. The directive, consequently, maintains the teacher’s authoritative power to point students to view issues a certain way.

The soft-directive approach (Warnick & Spencer, 2014) uses student discretion to steer thinking on controversial issues. Unlike the directive approach, soft-directive works with students and their thinking about how to view certain controversial issues.

The procedurally-directive (Gregory, 2014) puts the emphasis on the teacher to show the student how and why the experts disagree on an issue. Instead of relying on their own authority, the teacher turns the students to the debates had by experts. If students hold controversial views, the teacher should bring in the disciplinary debate that surrounds the issue to resolve the tension.

As with the criteria, there are more pedagogical approaches than the ones reviewed. But these, I think, are a good place to start. Together they describe the range of pedagogical options available to teachers of controversy, from authoritative to facilitative to mediational. For teachers who are interested in more approaches or more criteria, the hope is the consortium will be flexible enough to not only encourage self-directive learning but also allow teachers themselves to insert or redact curriculum. Nevertheless, for any teacher, no one stance and no one criterion will work for all issues. Rather, the teacher consortium is designed for collaborative intellectual and pedagogical exploration of best options for instructional action in actual contexts of teaching.

### **Section V: Is It Worth It?**

Given the outsized political and professional risks of teaching controversial issues, is it even worth it? This question can only be answered by teachers. Teachers themselves will make their own case for preparation through the creation of an online consortium. My paper, thus, presents only one possible track teachers can take to prepare for teaching controversial issues. But it is a track that brings together from all over teachers interested in teaching controversy. It is also the sort of plan that could be maintained and operated by a college of education with social foundations/social studies doctoral programs or, perhaps, even a teachers' union would find it worthwhile to sponsor consortiums like the one I've described. The litmus test of the waters of teacher interest in teaching controversy is to set up the sort of web-based system I've described. Once in place we will see who uses it and get ideas from users about how to improve the consortiums to attract more users and meet user interests.

Americans expect schools to create citizens, to instill literacy and numeracy, and to mold children into good adults. Devoid of dealing with controversy, teachers have enough to do. But if a teacher sees dealing with controversy as a necessary component of education, then — at minimum — they should have the opportunity to learn how to teach controversy. Surveying America's current sociopolitical landscape, teaching controversial issues will itself remain controversial. But a good way to resolve that controversy is to provide interested teachers an online forum to work through a curriculum like the one described in this paper. Should a strong trend towards learning to teach controversy develop, then controversy may in time become part of the regular curriculum. The best way to deal with controversy, especially for teachers, is to learn about it and learn to teach it.

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