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

Diana E. Hess

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.

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 naive 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.

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 “disclosure 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.” 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
Avoidance
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.”

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
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.”

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.

Notes

Diana E. Hess is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For a more detailed discussion of the four approaches presented in this article, see Diana E. Hess, “Controversies about Controversial Issues in Democratic Education,” in Politics and Society 37, no. 2 (2004): 237-261.