



LEARNING TO TEACH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES:

A PATH FORWARD

BY JUDITH L. PACE

Dealing with controversial issues is one of the most important tasks teachers perform. At the same time, we must acknowledge that today, fear of backlash for addressing “contentious, politicized topics” contributes significantly to educator stress (Woo

et al., 2022). A widespread “conflict campaign,” a right-wing movement attacking curriculum that addresses gender and sexuality, racial injustice, and other subjects related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Pollock & Rogers, 2022), has generated laws in 17 states and 100-plus pending bills that censor teaching. Teachers confront

a real dilemma as they weigh their commitment to educational purposes versus protection for themselves, their students, and their schools.

As a nation and a world community, we are facing unprecedented attacks on democracy and human rights, consequences of a global pandemic, and environmental



devastation caused by climate change, along with other crises. Hope for the future depends on cultivating an informed, concerned, and engaged democratic citizenry. That means educating young people who discern facts from fake news; think critically about local, national, and global issues; and deliberate on pressing questions about how to live in a multiracial democratic society. A powerful way to achieve this fundamental purpose is through a methodology called teaching controversial issues, which is supported by research and advocated all over the world (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Pace, 2021a).

I conducted an international research project focused on how four teacher educators prepared their preservice teachers for teaching controversial (and often sensitive) issues in history, citizenship, and social studies classes. My findings from Northern Ireland, England, and the U.S. help us address the paradox of urgency and anxiety around teaching controversial issues. But first, a few core concepts and research findings are essential for understanding what teaching controversial issues is all about and why it is so important to develop capability in this methodology.

WHAT DOES TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES INVOLVE AND WHY IS IT CRUCIAL?

Teaching controversial issues through classroom discussion is considered a cornerstone of democratic education (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Contrary to public opinion, it is the

antithesis of indoctrination. It engages students in examining significant questions from multiple viewpoints, weighing evidence from legitimate sources, deliberating on answers to those questions, and forming their own conclusions.

Controversial issues are different from controversial topics (Ho et al., 2017). The latter refer to broad subjects that some stakeholders oppose being taught in schools, such as gender identity and white privilege. Controversial issues are important questions under public debate related to politics, history, and other subjects. They are considered open if currently debated, settled if they were once controversial but are no longer debated, or tipping if they are moving from open to settled or vice versa (see Hess, 2009). Deciding the status of controversial questions is vital because that will help determine how to approach them in the classroom.

Open controversial issues include:

- Should vaccination be required in schools?
- What are the best technologies for stopping climate change?
- Should SCOTUS be reformed through expansion and/or term limits?

Settled controversial issues include:

- Do humans contribute to climate change?
- Do humans share a common ancestor with apes?
- Should women have the right to vote?

Discussion of open controversial issues in an open classroom climate,

where students feel free to disagree with the teacher and their peers, is crucial for several reasons. Research finds that it benefits students and society by increasing political knowledge, engagement, and efficacy (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). It is a powerful vehicle for developing civic reasoning and discourse in all subjects and an entry point to media literacy and inclusion of historically marginalized perspectives. Students find exploring issues and exchanging views with their peers engaging and meaningful. Amid polarization, echo chambers, and vitriolic political discourse, young people need classroom experiences to learn how to communicate respectfully across differences.

Unequal access to this democratic learning opportunity remains a serious concern (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018). Students privileged by socioeconomic status, race, and high-track classes have greater access to discussion of issues than students of color, new to the U.S., or from low-income families (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Discussion of controversial issues happens less frequently in racially pluralistic schools than racially homogenous ones (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2015).

HOW SHOULD EDUCATORS APPROACH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

School leaders and the teachers they support can do something about this problem by cultivating the understandings and skills involved in

using a research-based methodology (Journell, 2022). That methodology includes creating a supportive classroom environment, selecting and framing authentic issues, and choosing valid sources and dialogic pedagogies that involve students in inquiry and discussion (Hahn, 1998).

I conducted a qualitative study that explored how four teacher educators, working at universities in Northern Ireland, England, and the Midwestern U.S., prepared their preservice teachers to take up controversial issues in social studies, history, and citizenship classes. My book, *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), tells the stories of these brilliant teacher educators and courageous student teachers who took up what they learned in their own classrooms. A key finding was that teacher educators acknowledged the anxieties their students had about controversial issues and provided concrete strategies for containing the risks they feared.

I developed a framework based on my cross-national research (Pace, 2019, 2021a, 2021b) and supported by a prizewinning study conducted by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015). The Teaching Controversial Issues Framework for Reflective Practice represents an approach I call “contained risk-taking,” which encourages examining and discussing controversial issues while employing strategies that proactively address the risks that concern educators. When professional learning leaders help educators understand and use the framework, leaders and teachers can become more comfortable with facilitating classroom discussions and better prepared to respond to families and other educators about what they are doing and why.

I organized the framework around the following eight elements.

1. Cultivate a supportive environment.

Teachers create a classroom culture of trust and respect in which diverse

identities are affirmed. They spend time building a sense of belonging through individual affirmation, community building, warmth, and humor. Their classes continually practice norms such as active listening, respectful dissent, open-mindedness, and evaluation of knowledge sources. Tools such as norms and sentence frames help students learn how to exchange ideas across differences. Collaborative learning is a key goal.

2. Select authentic issues.

Teachers thoughtfully select open issues appropriate for their curriculum and students and frame them as questions to encourage inquiry and discussion of diverse perspectives. The sequencing of issues should progress from cooler to hotter. For example, teachers might start off with, “Should the voting age be lowered to 16?” and move to, “Should vaccinations and masks be mandated?” Controversies that are empirically settled, such as the scope of the Holocaust or the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election, should NOT be examined as open controversial issues.

3. Prepare thoroughly.

Careful and mindful lesson planning is essential. Teachers deepen their content knowledge on the issues they teach and related content to develop a robust purpose, rationale, and goals for lessons. They create developmentally appropriate curriculum based on knowing their students well. They also understand their school communities and take stakeholders’ perspectives into consideration when anticipating possible reactions to their lessons.

4. Choose resources and pedagogies.

Teachers select creative resources to stimulate thinking and provide entry points to discussion. They choose pedagogical approaches, such as structured discussion activities, that allow all voices to be heard and that align with the issues being explored

and their students’ identities. If the issue is highly charged and may make students from specific communities feel vulnerable, teachers use pedagogies aimed at surfacing reactions and understanding different perspectives. If the issue does not hit so close to home, more immersive pedagogies such as role play are appropriate. Teachers should avoid deliberations on questions that set up a false equivalence that normalizes offensive or misinformed viewpoints.

5. Think through teacher stance and roles.

Teachers reflect on their own positions on the issues they teach. They think about the roles they adopt during discussion (for example, advocate or devil’s advocate) to further students’ thinking. Past research shows that teachers can be transparent about their own political views in class while fostering critical examination of competing perspectives and encouraging students to formulate their own positions. But in this intensely politicized climate, teachers should think hard about the purposes behind disclosing their own specific views and the potential risks before doing so. That said, teachers must stand up for civil and human rights.

6. Guide discussion.

Teachers use questioning, discussion formats, and protocols to guide discussions. There are many different discussion models and strategies available, such as Socratic seminar, structured academic controversy, philosophical chairs, and town hall. Teachers facilitate exchanges among students rather than defaulting to teacher-student recitation-style interactions. They teach skills, such as preparation with assigned texts, active listening, and building on others’ ideas to work toward high-quality discussions. Teachers attend to power dynamics and work toward equity among students.

7. Communicate proactively.

Teachers are ready to communicate their rationales behind teaching controversial issues and the methods they use to parents and administrators in advance. They explain that discussing controversial issues involves research-based practices that promote independent thinking, not indoctrination. Teachers let students know the controversial issues they will be studying.

8. Addressing emotions.

Teachers balance affective and intellectual engagement. They provide a space to process emotions, use de-escalation techniques when needed, and get students to think metacognitively about emotionally entrenched perspectives and social divisions. Teachers understand that emotions play a significant role in learning. They are careful not to demonize or alienate students while providing emotional stability when discussions get charged.

Each of these elements is a ripe area for professional learning, and resources can be found on my website at teachingcontroversies.com.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Professional learning leaders have several roles to play in fostering these reflective practices, beginning with professional learning for leaders and teachers to ensure skillful and responsible teaching of controversial issues. Hess and Zola (2012) recommend specific strategies for high-quality professional learning around controversial issues. First, develop teachers' content knowledge and multiple perspectives on controversial issues. Second, provide models of effective teaching of such issues and opportunities for educators to practice pedagogical approaches.

Hess and Zola also point to aspects of high-quality professional learning that are always important,

and certainly when dealing with controversial issues: Promote collaboration among teachers, employ ongoing, practice-embedded learning approaches such as coaching, and consider context and the needs of the community and individual students. These recommendations are consistent with Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning.

Professional learning leaders can also help school and district leaders proactively communicate with parents and stakeholders about the value of teaching controversial issues and developing students' critical thinking and discussion skills (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018). No matter how thoughtful teachers are in framing and executing lessons on controversial issues, some parents, community members, or other stakeholders may react negatively. School leaders must support their teachers, assuming they have made appropriate pedagogical decisions.

Defending teachers from external threats is, unfortunately, part of supporting the civic development of students in this era of political divisiveness (Pace & Journell, 2021). Professional learning can provide a safe, collaborative space for leaders to learn the most constructive and effective ways to do so and work through thorny issues as they arise. Just as teachers need the support of their leaders, leaders need the support of their peers.

Many of us hold misconceptions about what teaching controversial issues involves. My professional learning work with teachers suggests that developing robust understanding and confidence is best served by a series of professional learning sessions in combination with relevant reading, journaling, and collaborative design of discussion-based lessons.

ENGAGE WITH CONTROVERSY, DON'T AVOID IT

Classrooms are typically the main space — sometimes the only

space — where young people get the opportunity to critically examine information sources, weigh evidence to inform their thinking, and discuss public issues with peers from backgrounds different from their own (Parker, 2006). And educators know from experience that controversy often enters the classroom whether or not we plan for it (Pace, 2015). Rather than avoiding it, engaging with it through thoughtful approaches helps teachers and students.

Professional learning is essential for ensuring that educators are prepared and supported to tackle controversial issues in productive and beneficial ways. The Teaching Controversial Issues Framework for Reflective Practice offers a research-based foundation for professional learning to help educators who are striving to fulfill their mission while coping with the risks of teaching in a combative political climate. Our world, and our classrooms, are not going to get less contentious anytime soon. But educators can learn to discuss controversies so that young people are better prepared to navigate the challenges ahead of them.

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Continued on p. 38

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- Learning to teach controversial issues: A path forward
- Continued from p. 29*
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