



Professional Judgment and Deciding What to Teach as Controversial

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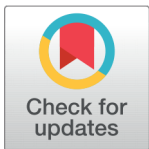
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula McAvoy

I serve as Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Prior to my academic life, I taught high school social studies for ten years at the Foothill Middle College Program in Los Altos, California. I am interested in the role that schools play in developing the skills, dispositions, and knowledge that equip young people for political participation. More specifically, I hope to prepare social studies teachers who are ready and excited to engage students in discussions of political issues. I am also increasingly interested in the ethical challenges that are inherent to the teaching profession. In addition to research and teaching for the university, I lead professional development for teachers and faculty about how to design and lead classroom discussions. Outside of my professional life, I enjoy making craft cocktails with my spouse and giving belly rubs to our dog, Bear.

Li-Ching Ho

I serve as Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am interested in global issues of diversity in civic education, differentiated access to citizenship education, and environmental citizenship. As a teacher and teacher educator with professional experiences in Asia and the U.S., one of my main professional goals is to make the field of social studies education more inclusive and globally-oriented. I am especially interested in developing globally relevant civic education curricula that challenge taken for granted assumptions in the field. In addition, I have enjoyed interacting with and learning from educators in different national and cultural contexts, including the Philippines, China, Singapore, and Brunei. Outside of my professional pursuits, I enjoy playing golf, mahjong, and watching the Boston Celtics and Liverpool Football Club games. "You'll



Accepted July 2020
Published September 2020

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Pages: 27-31

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Never Walk Alone!”

Keywords Controversial Issues, Controversial Topics, Civic Education, Social Studies Education, Teacher Judgement

INTRODUCTION

Social studies teachers sit at an important intersection between the broader political and social contexts outside of schools and a school subject meant to prepare young people for civic engagement. Classroom discussion about contemporary political issues is thus often promoted as an essential strategy in the social studies classroom. Yet, research consistently shows that few students get opportunities to discuss these issues (Kahne et al., 2000; Nystrand et al., 2001, 2003). Teachers avoid classroom discussion for many reasons, but one challenge is that when teachers bring politics into the classroom they confront a number of professional dilemmas about curricular-instructional gatekeeping (Thornton, 2005), including making decisions about which issues should be up for discussion.

THE RESEARCH

Both of our research has, in different ways, looked at how social studies teachers make judgments about the question: “Which issues should be treated as controversial in the classroom?” As Hess (2009) and Hess and Mcavoy (2015) show, the question about what should be treated as controversial is itself a controversial issue for teachers. In this article, we draw upon Ho’s research in Singapore and McAvoy’s in the United States to demonstrate the relationship between evidence and controversial issues. Our research finds that teachers who engage students in political discussion often make different decisions about when to consider related underlying evidence as open to interpretation or settled fact (Hess & Mcavoy, 2015; Ho & Seow, 2015). This decision affects how questions are framed in their classrooms. We conclude with some guidance for teachers about making judgments when teaching with controversy.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

One reason that this question becomes complicated for teachers and researchers is that people are not always clear about some important distinctions. In our previous work, we differentiated between “controversial topics” and “controversial issues” (Ho, McAvoy, Hess & Gibbs, 2017). Controversial topics refer to elements of the curriculum that could be seen as inappropriate or objectionable by parents, administrators, or the larger public. For example, in a survey asking teachers about dilemmas they have faced during their career, one respondent in the United States shared that she occasionally receives complaints from parents who feel she should not be teaching about Islam in her World History class (Gatti & Mcavoy, 2017). She explained that after meeting with parents to go over the curriculum,



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parents usually choose “not to exclude their child from learning about Islam.” In this case, the teacher is defending the inclusion of Islam as a topic of study, even though this occasionally invites scrutiny from parents. Topics associated with the “culture wars,” such as race, immigration, sex and sexuality, and patriotism, have historically caused controversy for U.S. schools (Zimmerman, 2009; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Within the literature on civic education and social studies education, controversial issues are questions that require students to investigate, evaluate, or deliberate multiple and competing views. These questions ask students to make a judgment about a public policy, such as “should assault rifles be banned?” Once a controversial issue is identified, the teacher will design inquiry activities that help students learn about the competing views and then decide for themselves what they think. In other words, controversial issues are public policy questions that generate disagreement among students.

We return to our focal question, “Which issues should be treated as controversial in the classroom?” Notice that “should be treated as” implies that there is a judgment to make. In philosophy of education, much of the literature engages in a different framing of the question, to ask, “Which questions are legitimately controversial?” Hand (2008) for example, argued that questions are controversial when there are at least two rational and competing points of view. In Hand’s (2008) view, if there are multiple rational views then the teacher ought to present the issue as open for interpretation. If there are not at least two rational views, then Hand advocates for teaching students that there is a correct answer. Our research has shown that Hand’s framing misses the ways in which a single issue contains multiple judgments about what should be considered open and settled.

To illustrate, consider this question: Should the government act against climate change by investing in research and development of renewable energy (wind, solar, etc.)? If introduced into the classroom, students will be expected to make a judgment about the proposed policy. But embedded within this policy are a set of empirical questions, including: Is climate change happening? Is it caused by human activity?¹ Both questions are settled within the scientific community but are considered open by many laypeople. There are also some open empirical questions, such as: What are the environmental costs of wind energy? Do the benefits outweigh the costs? Bringing this policy question into the classroom will require the teacher to decide how these empirical questions will be treated. This question also requires teachers to decide whether the solutions for the problem are settled or open to interpretation. In making these curricular decisions, teachers need to: (a) be cognizant of their own professional goals; (b) be aware of (potentially conflicting) education policies; (c) be conscious of what they consider to be the primary aims of education.

For example, in a study of six geography teachers in Singapore, Ho and Seow (2015) found that even when the state’s official position on climate change was unambiguous about the human causes and that message was clearly presented in the national geography curriculum and textbooks, teachers still made different decisions about how to treat the scientific consensus.

Three teachers treated the science as settled and explicitly supported environmental protections, emphasized the need for more state action, and encouraged pro-environmental



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values. They adopted this position because they believed that it was their role to help students become environmental advocates. Thus, these teachers would likely treat our example question as having a correct answer (and thus not controversial) by encouraging students to support renewable energy.

The other teachers in this study, however, conceptualized the purpose of climate change education as critical thinking—a goal explicitly articulated in national education policy—and subsequently chose to include a diverse range of perspectives from both primary and secondary sources. Some in this set of teachers treated the science as controversial and wanted to expose students to a variety of scientific and pseudoscientific resources to “decide for themselves” what to think (notably, these teachers were also more skeptical of scientific expertise). Others treated the science as settled but wanted students to think critically about policy proposals. Both types of critical thinking teachers would likely treat the policy question as open, but the former would allow students to question the science and the latter would likely keep students directed on the policy.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

The example from our research illustrates that deciding what to treat as controversial in the classroom requires the teacher to make a series of judgments about how they are going to frame and facilitate the discussion, and that teachers can make better and worse decisions. In this case, teachers who treat the settled empirical question as open are miseducating students. While it is fair to say to students, “There are many in the public who question whether climate change is a real concern,” it is not accurate to suggest that the scientific community is in doubt. We are also critical of teachers who treat the policy question as settled. What to do about climate change should be open for discussion.

We have identified some of the professional judgments that teachers need to make when deciding how to approach a controversial issue. First, they need to identify public policy questions (issues) that will unearth disagreement among the students. Next, they need to critically examine the issue to determine whether there are multiple perspectives that align with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to the course and democratic participation. Finally, thinking about which aspects of the question are open to interpretation and which ought to be treated as settled will help the teacher frame the question and prepare students for the discussion.

We have primarily focused on the topic of climate change, which has a clear connection to science, but we want to emphasize that all controversial issues contain evidence that needs to be thoughtfully considered. Thinking about immigration policy, for example, requires an accurate understanding about who is entering a country, where they are coming from, what they experience, current policies, and the potential economic and social impact. To invite students to develop opinions based on inaccuracies or misrepresentation of evidence undermines the very purpose of democratic education, which is to prepare young people for informed participation.



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