Q & A with Terence Beck on ``Identity, Discourse, and Safety in Controversial Issue Discussions''

Terence A. Beck

University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terence A. Beck

I serve as Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington (USA). The University is located on the traditional lands of the Puyallup Tribe. My ultimate goal is to promote school "change where it matters most—in the daily interactions of teachers and students" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). I am especially interested in teacher practices that engage students with learning to talk across difference so that students might be inspired value democracy and work for a more just society. Recently I have been focused on learning all I can about the ways the "isms" (things like racism, sexism, heterosexism) permeate U.S. history and society and how people of all identities might work productively to promote real and lasting change. Outside of my professional pursuits, my husband and I feed our children and grandchildren and travel where we can. Before joining the University, I worked as a teacher and as a principal. In 2018, I was given the University's highest teaching award—The President's Excellence in Teaching Award.

Check for updates

QUESTION #1:

Teacher's Question

Thinking more about your example of the conservatives for same-sex marriage and the gays and lesbians against it, I felt instantly on edge. My visceral reaction to this intervention is that this would further entrench student's commitments, and further erode the confidence of LGBTQ youth because now they would have to face down both conservative voices and

How to cite this article (APA): Beck, T. A. (2020). Q & A with Terence Beck on``Identity, Discourse, and Safety in Controversial Issue Discussions''. *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers, 1(*1), 53-57.

53

ASSERT

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

hostile voices from their own tribe. To what extent does your research speak to this concern? How would you advise teachers on how to account for power-relations in these discussions where cultural capital or privilege play a role in the identities?

Terence Beck's Response

I love this question and hope I can do it justice. I read in the question a willingness to recognize the power dynamics that exist both in the classroom and in the larger society—power dynamics that impact students unequally. The question also reminds me that every classroom situation is different and the advice I offer might best be taken provisionally—as a place to start thinking rather than the final word. Teaching ethically requires attending to each unique setting and group of people. My research does not negate a teacher's lived experience with a particular group of students in a particular context.

It is the concern in the question that LGBTQ students might need to face down hostile voices from their own tribe that helps me clarify what I mean. First, looking at the discussion across students, I noticed that arguments coming from unexpected sources opened up some students' thinking by providing them with cover to consider opinions they might otherwise have dismissed. Not everyone took advantage of this opportunity. But the introduction of ideas they weren't hearing in the larger societal debate was intriguing and many seemed to realize that there were things they didn't know—a first step to engaging in inquiry that goes beyond winning an argument. Second, hearing from diverse voices situated in unexpected places held out the possibility that their "tribe" (and the tribes of other people) was bigger, more diverse, and more interesting than they had imagined. In fact, the debate about whether or not marriage equality was a good idea has gone on for decades within the LGBTQ community. And there have long been people of faith willing to question the dogma that LGBTQ people should be denied this right.

Experiencing the disagreement from within an identity group can help students see that formulating one's own opinion does not necessarily mean forsaking an identity. Not all students seemed to get this, but many did. Third, and perhaps most important, the LGBTQ voices against marriage equality I selected argue from a place of deep respect for LGBTQ people, not out of internalized homophobia. Here, perhaps more than in other places, students are given a model of people arguing against the prevailing wisdom from a place of deep love and concern of the entire tribe.

I can't know how LGBTQ students experienced this because identifying publicly as LGBTQ was incredibly rare in these classrooms. My hope is that rather than experiencing hostility from a member of their tribe, LGBTQ students were able to see the possibility of thinking for themselves while remaining a committed member of that tribe.

QUESTION #2:

Teacher's Question

What would you do in a situation where a student was obviously distressed or hurt by a discussion on a controversial issue?

ASSERT

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Terence Beck's Response

Distress and hurt can happen in controversial issue discussions. Many of the suggestions I make in the article are intended to minimize this (e.g., first establish community, know the arguments and identity risks in advance). My recommendation that teachers solicit confidential responses from students is a key mechanism I use to deal with this problem. I ask students to complete a short survey at the end of each discussion session (including sessions where we are preparing for the discussion). The confidential nature of the response helps students tell me frankly what they are thinking and how they are feeling.

I routinely summarize key results of the survey at the beginning of the next class. If an issue comes up where, for example, a student has been shut down or feels unsafe, I find a way to maintain confidentiality while asking the class to consider what we might do to address the problem. Truthfully, it sometimes happens early on that I'm the source of the hurt. The student will raise a comment I should have sanctioned or, worse still, they will complain about a comment I made. These situations are hard—they feel risky and unfair. And I've come to see them as opportunities to model hearing critique without getting defensive and working to make sure the hurt doesn't happen again. I can imagine situations where this approach could backfire. Political discussions involve give-and-take that can feel dangerous and cause hurt. How do we say what we think while extending care to the others in the room? I try to engage students in grappling with that question.

QUESTION #3:

Teacher's Question

Given that different scholars have mixed opinions on teacher disclosure, how would you approach the question of your own beliefs?

Terence Beck's Response

I think this is complicated and because so much has been written about it, I'll focus on one idea I think my preservice teachers often miss. That is, teachers embody identities that influence students. For example, students are likely to assume a point of view from their Latina teacher around questions of immigration. If students know my sexual orientation, they are likely to assume my position on marriage equality. Skin color can mark us as holding particular opinions about affirmative action or the Black Lives Matter or Idle No More movements. These embodied disclosures may or may not be accurate. I try to be aware of my embodied disclosures and to help students interpret me in a way that opens up the possibility that we will think deeply and objectively about the issue before us. In the marriage equality example, I might talk explicitly about what I find challenging about the question. In truth, I find the question challenging and many of the arguments for and against are compelling. I try to disclose these beliefs. And when there is an issue around which I can't entertain the various opinions, I usually avoid that topic.

ASSERT

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

QUESTION #4:

Teacher's Question

You mention that students should be prepared to disagree skillfully, what would you do to prepare students to confront controversial issues in class in this way?   What routines or classroom management would you have in place to facilitate skillful disagreement?

Terence Beck's Response

Building any skill requires that students see the skill modeled and have many experiences over time to practice with feedback. Skillfully disagreeing is similar. It is with that assumption that I make the following recommendations.

First, it is easier to practice skillful disagreement when you know what it looks like—explicit teaching helps. Show students video or live examples. Show students non-examples—ways that people can be shut down or treated disrespectfully. Bringing in a small group of teachers to disagree with each other in front of the room can be incredibly helpful here (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

Second, explicit teaching should include scaffolding as students focus on the skill. This often means practicing disagreement while addressing topics or questions that don't generate a lot of emotion. For younger students, it is often helpful to provide sentence stems that scaffold students' agreeing and disagreeing around questions. For example, "I disagree with _____ because _____."

Third, students need to practice in an actual discussion. It can be helpful to occasionally stop the discussion and coach the students. The teacher/coach might point out a particularly skillful way someone disagreed, or ask students to "run the play again," this time making the point without attacking the person.

Fourth, consistently debrief the discussion. How skillfully did we disagree today? What might we do next time to improve our skills at disagreement?

Finally, avoid equating skillful disagreement with emotionless disagreement. In the words of diversity scholars, don't engage in tone policing. Anger, for example, can be the appropriate response to a hateful idea. Skillful disagreement can involve, and sometimes requires, strong emotion. Help students work with this idea.

QUESTION #5:

Teacher's Question

How would you moderate the discussion to help ensure everyone is being heard and that the discourse remains respectful and calm?

Terence Beck's Response

Moderating a discussion well is one of the most difficult pedagogical acts I know. Rita Silverman (2004) calls it "teaching without a net." I see my role in the discussion as one of helping students talk with each other. They shouldn't be talking to me. To this end, I invite

ASSERT

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

people in who are quiet, I summarize what's been said so far, I work to make sure the same voices don't dominate.

I think much of the answer to this question is contained in my answer to your previous question (above). If at all possible, I let the discussion run its course and save time to debrief the discussion and learn from it at the end of the class. If things seem to be edging into disrespect, I stop the discussion and coach, asking students to problem-solve and replay the same ideas with different words. If things feel out-of-control, I might stop and ask students to write down what they are experiencing and what they think we should do. We then talk about it and agree to try again tomorrow.

I try to keep in mind that I'm using discussion to help students learn about controversial issues in our society. But, I'm also using discussion as a way of teaching them how to discuss with others who hold very different ideas. When I maintain a high focus on teaching discussion—teaching "for discussion" in the words of Parker and Hess (2001)—it is easier for me to respond in ways that help us all improve. Sometimes the best thing to do is to sacrifice time discussing the question so we might improve on our ability to discuss together.

REFERENCES

Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (and others, Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Parker, W. C., & Hess, D. (2001). Teaching with and for discussion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *17*(3), 273–289. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00057-3

Silverman, R. (2004). *Persona; Communication.*