



Q & A with Thomas Misco on "Practice requires rationale: Lessons from global contexts to ensure controversial issue education"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Misco

I serve as Professor of Social Studies Education at Miami University. My ultimate goal is to better understand the pathways and obstacles to student discussion of controversial and normative topics in various contexts in order to develop more free, open, rational, and just societies. I am primarily interested in cross-cultural contexts related to this goal as they often offer diverse, innovative, and divergent ideas. Recently, I have been spending my time learning more about unincorporated U.S. Territories and how social studies education is mediated and enacted in these contexts. I earned my B.A. in history and geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and began my career teaching history, geography, and philosophy at Terra Linda High School in San Rafael, CA. After earning my M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Iowa I joined Miami University where I have spent my career in higher education.

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QUESTION #1:

Teacher's Question

You discussed how there are some contexts where teachers have no, or almost no, latitude to teach controversial issues and contexts where they do have the ability to teach them. I am curious about the latter. To what extent are the reasons teachers choose to engage in, or retreat from, this approach universally? In other words, do teachers from some cultures lean into or away from controversy regardless of their teacher training?



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Thomas Misco's Response

Culture definitely plays decisive role in determining teacher decision-making as it relates to controversial issue instruction. We might think of this in terms of multiple layers within a context or milieu that provides pathways or challenges. In particular, the governmental structure, history of the country, teacher preparation, administration, colleagues, parents, students, teacher autonomy, and teacher perception of autonomy—all of these variables play a role in determining how things unfold. It is therefore incumbent upon educational institutions, administrators, teacher educators, and others to emphasize and support both teacher autonomy and a strong philosophical rationale to teach controversial issues—these are the critical levers for the enactment of lessons involving controversial issues in classrooms.

QUESTION #2:

Teacher's Question

In your article you propose that the onus for providing the occasion to develop rationales for teaching controversial issues is on teacher education programs. That won't help the majority of current teachers. What can inservice teachers, trainers, and department heads do to support both novice and veteran teachers to do this work? And is there anything we can learn from other contexts in which this work has been initiated more successfully?

Thomas Misco's Response

Great question—this is important work that department chairs, principals, and even superintendents should initiate and support. If administrators are loath to mitigate risks from parents and community members who do not support engaging in these topics, then they further perpetuate closed areas and contribute to the suppression of doubt. These choices, though intended to manage discomfort for individuals within the school and community, have instead a deleterious impact on free democratic societies that require informed and reasonable decision makers. We need structural changes within administrative circles that recognize, cherish, and embrace the free and open discussion of normative and moral social issues.

QUESTION #3:

Teacher's Question

You suggested that we provide justifications based on case law and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Can you provide some examples of what that might look like in different contexts?

Thomas Misco's Response

Here is an example of case law that can be explored that raises significant questions about equity and justice: There are five unincorporated territories, owned by, but not a part of,



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the United States. These include American Samoa, The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, Puerto Rico, and the United States Virgin Islands (USVI). The U.S. Congress governs all five under the Territorial Clause of the U.S. Constitution whereby none are sovereign independent countries nor states of the union, none have voting representation at the federal level, yet all are impacted by federal regulations at the discretion of Congress. The Insular Cases, a series of cases from 1901-1922 that focused on the statutes of the “unincorporated territory,” legitimated “European-style colonial governance” (Aguon, 2014, p. 280) and created a “checkered past” of imperialism, racist subordination, and colonial hegemony Review (2017) , p. 1680). The legal distinction of incorporated and unincorporated, which had no precedent at the time, was birthed in the first insular case, *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), which employed an elaborate and “tortuous historical review” to argue that the Louisiana Purchase stipulated that the entirety of land would be “incorporated” into the union (Brown, 1900) , whereas the Treaty of Paris (1898) stipulated that incorporation would be a congressional decision. The majority opinion focused on “racial questions” and that “constitutional rights should not extend automatically to non-white populations” Boyer (2010) , p. 103). Many of the justices who ruled in this case ruled on the ignominious *States* (1896) case, which was ultimately reversed, while the *Downes* case was not.

In Japan, Article 9 of the Constitution renounces war as a right of the nation, negates the possibility of maintaining military forces, and forbids belligerency on the part of Japan. So many controversial questions involving the past, present, and future of Japan are connected to this Article and as such it can serve as a non-controversial gravitational center for controversial lessons and units.

QUESTION #4:

Teacher's Question

How would you articulate a rationale differently if you were teaching elementary aged students instead of secondary aged students? Would your framework need to be altered for these different levels?

Thomas Misco's Response

I don't think so—the rationale should really be a philosophical one that frames curricular and instructional decisions and communicates to stakeholders why addressing controversial issues is critical for the health and vibrancy of democracy. How that is operationalized, in terms of grade, subject, and context is really the implementation of the rationale. Elementary teachers will of course need to make more refined classroom-based decisions based on the age and maturity of students.



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QUESTION #5:

Teacher's Question

What advice would you give to teachers who have already developed a rationale, but who don't have job security? I can imagine that new teachers on probationary contracts or teachers not protected by unions would hesitate to teach controversial issues even when they have a clear rationale to do so.

Thomas Misco's Response

I think this situation speaks to being more closely grounded in seminal documents—if the topics are tied to national constitutions, judicial court cases, and local, regional, or national legislation, then they will feel more secure. The Council of Europe developed a professional development program for teachers which is designed to support and promote the teaching of controversial issues in schools in Europe (of Europe, 2016). This 70-page (approximately) resource consists of guidance on rationale and training activities on how to teach controversial issues in school. The COE notes “It examines major challenges of teaching such issues and provide practical tools on how to deal with them. The main approach is encouraging teachers to create safe spaces in which children and youth are given the opportunity to explore and discuss controversial issues within the framework of education for democratic citizenship, human rights and inclusive education” (abstract).

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