



# Controversial Decisions Within Teaching Controversial Issues

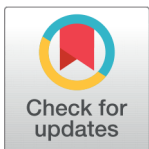
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I serve as Professor and Associate Chair of the Teacher Education and Higher Education department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am also the current editor of *Theory & Research in Social Education*, which is the premier research journal in the field of social studies education. Prior to entering academia, I taught high school social studies in Roanoke, Virginia (which is where I grew up). My ultimate goal is to help new teachers become engaged, critical professionals who can successfully navigate the demands of teaching social studies in an era of increased political polarization and accountability. My research interests include the teaching of politics and political processes in secondary education. My own professional development efforts have been focused on better understanding different approaches to educational research, particularly within the qualitative realm. When I am not working, I enjoy spending time with my wife and seven-year-old daughter. Whenever I have personal free time, I enjoy binge watching Netflix and keeping up with sports (baseball and football).



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## INTRODUCTION

Engaging with controversial issues is a daunting task for teachers, one that has grown more perilous in recent years amid increasing partisanship and political polarization. Even teachers who recognize the civic benefits of deliberating controversial issues may seek to avoid

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controversy for fear of upsetting students, parents, or administrators. Within the social studies, however, it is almost impossible to completely avoid controversial or political topics. Moreover, students are political beings who consume political information outside of school and will insert their beliefs into discussions unsolicited.

## THE RESEARCH

My work centers on the pedagogical decisions teachers make when politics inevitably arises in classrooms [Journell \(2017b\)](#). Many of these decisions are controversial unto themselves. No universally accepted playbook exists for navigating controversial issue discussions, and many pedagogical moves that teachers make during such discussions require a certain level of subjectivity. In this article, I am focusing on two of the most controversial, and important, decisions teachers must make in the face of controversy: defining whether controversy actually exists and, if so, whether to disclose their own political beliefs to students.

Undergirding my recommendations are two principles. First, teachers act as curricular-instructional gatekeepers ([Thornton, 1991](#)), and the decisions they make shape what occurs in their classrooms. As such, politically neutral classrooms cannot exist. Although neutrality may be a goal for which some teachers aim, teachers are human beings with political leanings, and the process of teaching does not lend itself to neutrality. Even the decision to remain silent represents a break in neutrality as it reaffirms the status quo.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

With those principles in mind, I turn to the first decision teachers must make in the face of controversy: whether to even entertain an issue as controversial. My work in this area has built on the fundamental scholarship of [Hess \(2005\)](#) ([Hess & Mcavoy, 2015](#)), who has defined issues as either open or settled. Open issues are ones that have multiple reasonable positions, and when taught, all reasonable positions should be given a fair hearing. Settled issues only have one reasonable position, and viewpoints that run contrary to the settled position should not be presented as legitimate within the classroom space. These categorizations are not always static; issues can “tip” from open to settled, and vice versa.

The problem is that there is no agreed upon method to determine the openness of an issue. For example, the realization that the Earth is round has been settled scientific fact for at least 500 years; however, there are currently groups of people around the world who insist that the Earth is flat. I would hope that few would advocate that we “teach the controversy” of whether the Earth is round based on the beliefs of a small percentage of misguided individuals.

Yet, consider the claim that former U.S. President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. This claim is believed by approximately 20% of Americans, including, at one time, Obama’s successor to the presidency. Like the “flat-earththers,” these “birthers” have not produced any legitimate evidence to support their claim, and for that reason, I would argue that it should not be entertained in K-12 classrooms. Yet, when I have used this example

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with preservice and practicing teachers, some balk at the idea of censoring a political belief that a student (and likely their parents) hold.

The presence of disagreement, however, should not be the barometer for determining the openness of issues. As the existence of “flat earthers” attests, one can find disagreement for even the most settled issues. The decision to frame an issue as open or settled, then, needs to be thoughtful and based on available facts.

Unfortunately, there is no consensus within the scholarly literature on how best to make this decision. One school of thought is the epistemic criterion, which states that issues should only be taught as open if more than one rational viewpoint can be justified through empirical data (Hand, 2008). Beliefs that cannot be empirically justified, such as religious convictions, would not be considered legitimate using this criterion. The political criterion, on the other hand, argues that schools should not repress any beliefs unless those beliefs violate agreed upon societal norms (Gutmann, 1999). Therefore, under the political criterion, religious beliefs would be considered rational, but openly racist/sexist opinions would not. In addition, Hess and Mcavoy (2015) have put forth the politically authentic criterion, which argues that teachers should frame issues as open if they are being actively deliberated within the public policy arena (Journell, 2018).

Each criterion has merits and limitations, but for most issues, they are consistent in determining openness. In my work, I have explored the decisions that teachers must make when the openness of an issue differs based on the criteria one uses. For example, in a prior publication (Journell, 2017a), I looked at the issue of transgender bathroom laws in the United States. Using the epistemic criterion, that issue would be considered settled since there are no empirical data to suggest that having transgender individuals use the bathroom with which they identify causes any societal problems. Yet, the political and politically authentic criteria would frame the issue as open since, respectively, there is no societal agreement on bathroom use and these types of “bathroom bills” were being debated in state legislative chambers and, in some cases, passed into law.

## PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

What is a teacher to do in such a situation? I do not profess to know a definitive answer, but I would encourage teachers to think about the students in their classes, particularly those belonging to traditionally marginalized groups, when making this decision. When deciding how to frame what I have termed “controversial identity issues” Journell (2017a, 2018), teachers must realize that their decision could have potentially traumatic effects for their most vulnerable students. In such cases, I would encourage teachers to use the epistemic criterion to more narrowly define openness.

The other aspect of my work focuses on teachers’ stances once openness has been established. Hess (2005) described the decision to disclose one’s political beliefs to students as a “dilemma” that teachers face. My own research, as well as that of others, has found that students generally appreciate knowing their teachers’ political leanings, provided that they do not feel pressure to conform to their teachers’ beliefs (Hess & Mcavoy, 2009) (Journell,



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2017a, 2017b). Yet, there exists a pervasive belief within certain political circles that K-12 teachers actively seek to indoctrinate students. Occasionally, teachers being disciplined for inappropriately disclosing their political beliefs to students has drawn national attention. As a result, teachers are generally hesitant to disclose, even if provided with theoretical and empirical reasons for why they should (Dunn et al., 2019; Geller, 2020; Hess & Mcavoy, 2009; Miller-Lane et al., 2006).

In my work, I have found that teachers who disclose in ways that are consistent with Kelly's 1986 definition of committed impartiality, which states that teachers should disclose their political beliefs to students but only in ways that allow competing views to receive a fair hearing, often establish greater trust with students and can cultivate richer discussions in their classrooms than teachers who refuse to disclose. Given that politically neutral classrooms do not exist, disclosure also provides transparency and helps level the playing field between teachers and students. Perhaps more importantly, a committed impartiality approach allows teachers to model political tolerance, a skill not often seen on social media or cable news and may not be practiced in students' homes or social circles (Journell, 2011b, 2016).

In this current environment wherein political leaders and governmental policy are often overtly discriminatory, disclosure may serve an even more important function: helping to ensure students' safety. Recent research has provided cases of teachers breaking neutrality in an effort to protect their most vulnerable students from political trauma (Conrad, 2020; Dabach, 2015; Geller, 2020; Payne & Journell, 2019) Sondel et al. (2018). As our politics become increasingly polarized and crass, this potential benefit of disclosure cannot be overstated. Yet, as I have noted elsewhere (Journell, 2016), choosing to disclose is often an act of bravery, particularly when the disclosed stance runs counter to school/community ideology. Without question, there are risks to disclosure, but they are risks worth taking.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers too often exacerbate the inherent challenges associated with broaching controversy with students by entering such discussions without a clear game plan. Simply stating, "What do you think about X" is often a recipe for disaster, and the ensuing fallout may leave teachers unwilling to entertain controversial topics in the future. Engaging with controversy is an essential aspect of a quality civic education, but only if it is done purposefully and thoughtfully. As my work illustrates, many of the decisions that teachers make in framing and executing discussions of controversial issues are controversial unto themselves, but if they are able to justify and articulate those decisions to students and other stakeholders, it will go a long way toward mitigating the inherent risks that come with critically educating for democracy.

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