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Identity, Discourse, and Safety in Controversial Issue Discussions

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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.

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INTRODUCTION

In my utopian fantasies, teachers create safe spaces where students learn what it means to tackle difficult issues together. Students engage in a respectful give and take. They are equals grappling with the question, "What should we do?" (Beck & Parker, 2017; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2003). They gain important perspectives, recognize everyone's common humanity, and they come to understand the critical role of talk in a democratic society.

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But this vision is little more than fantasy.

THE RESEARCH

When discussing controversial issues in schools, students draw on society for both the substance of their arguments and the way they approach disagreement. And the larger society often lacks resources that would support my classroom vision. It is rare, for example, for students to witness adults with very different perspectives listening carefully to one another with an eye toward understanding another perspective, responding by seeking common ground, and arriving at mutually acceptable solutions for the problems they face. Instead, there is evidence that U.S. society is, "dangerously tribal, fueled by a culture of outrage and taking offense. For the combatants, the other side can no longer be tolerated, and no price is too high to defeat them" (Hawkins et al., 2018, p. 4). A mutual willingness to grapple with issues can far too easily be subverted by cultural models suggesting that those who disagree are evil and that the goal is to defeat evil at any cost.

A second fact complicates teachers' efforts to conduct equal and ethical classroom discussions about controversial issues: students do not experience the classroom and the larger society as a place where everyone wields equal power, students have different relationships to the issues being discussed and the free exchange of opinions impacts students differently (McAvoy et al., 2011). The work I explore here involved students engaging the question of same-sex marriage in the years prior to the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, which legalized such marriages. During these years, same-sex marriage was a particularly divisive and contentious issue. In those classroom discussions, some students experienced the burden of free speech more intensely than others. Most often, LGBTQ students were subjected to claims that cast them as morally and socially inferior. In one predominately liberal setting, where same-sex marriage was assumed to be the only unbigoted opinion, students with deeply held family or religious views carried the heavier burden of expressing their views Court (2015).

Teachers are positioned on the horns of a dilemma, particularly when discussing issues that involve social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.). Learning to discuss difficult issues with others requires that students try it out. However, many of the most contentious topics (e.g., immigration policy, Black Lives Matter, gun control, Idle No More) draw on cultural scripts that demonize and denigrate the students we require to participate.

In the studies described here, I worked with high school teachers to engage their students in discussions of same-sex marriage. These discussions happened in settings where opinions on the topic were mixed, and in settings where opinions were dominated by either liberal or conservative viewpoints. In each case, I observed and audio-recorded the discussions. I interviewed selected students and I used discourse analysis—which looks at how they use language within a social context—to understand both the nature of students' arguments and what they were trying to accomplish through their comments and silences. My purpose was to understand "the identity risks and possibilities" teenagers navigated as they discussed the topic of same-sex marriage (Beck, 2013, p. 2). The experiences of participants can help

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clarify the ethical choices teachers face as they contemplate discussing contentious issues.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Students in the same-sex marriage discussions grappled with more than what they think about an issue of policy. They also struggled with how to represent themselves in ways that did not risk their psychological safety or social status. Assumptions that everyone in the room was straight were prevalent, even in the most liberal settings. Assumptions of heterosexual and masculine superiority predominated and posed risks to all participants (Beck, 2013).

In my initial study (Beck, 2013), the sources we provided served a dual function—informing students' arguments and reinforcing the link between identities and beliefs. The sources were drawn from the societal debate that was raging at the time in the United States and the various perspectives were aligned closely with tribes—people bound together by a shared identity. Pro-same-sex marriage arguments came from groups like the Human Rights Campaign, a LGTBQ advocacy group, while anti-same-sex marriages sources were often from religious or conservative groups such as the National Organization for Marriage (NOM). Students seemed to see the debate as falling along identity lines: conservative and religious people were against it and liberal and LGTBQ people were for it. Thus, to align themselves with a position also risked being aligned with an identity. Arguing against same-sex marriage risked being cast as a conservative or religious. Arguing for same-sex marriage risked being cast as liberal or as LGBTQ.

In a second study (Beck, 2019), we provided students with sources that crossed identities. That is, we located conservative writers who supported same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian writers who wrote against it. This provided students with greater freedom to try out opinions with fewer identity risks. One student, opposed to same-sex marriage in a room full of supporters, drew skillfully on arguments by a lesbian against same-sex marriage to make his case. He did this in ways that reduced the risk he would be seen as conservative.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Teachers must remember that students will experience the discussion differently. For some, such discussions are interesting thought experiments or a chance to demonstrate their considerable verbal skills. For others, the discussion is deeply personal—their very selves (or those of loved ones) are on the line. The arguments students read, the claims their classmates make, and the necessity of representing themselves accurately without inviting unnecessary social and psychological risks, can feel overwhelmingly difficult. After all, when students open their mouths to speak, they risk revealing who they are (Gee, 2010).

Although few teachers continue to engage in discussions about same-sex marriage (Journell, 2018), other topics raise similar issues. Questions around military service for transgender people include risks for people questioning or hiding their gender identity or with gender expansive family members or friends. Questions surrounding immigration policy

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often mirror those of same-sex marriage in that immigration status is hidden and cannot be known for sure unless it is declared. And the consequences for revealing the undocumented status of oneself or one's family are significant (Dabach, 2015; Dabach et al., 2018). Questions of the ability to deny service to LGBTQ people on religious grounds raise identity risks for deeply religious conservatives, political conservatives, and for LGBTQ people.

When selecting topics for discussion these studies suggest that teachers ask themselves several questions. First, what is the nature of the arguments in the larger society? Students will draw on the larger discourse to form their opinions and arguments. Knowing those arguments (particularly those that might be hurtful) is critical to structuring the discussion and anticipating the issues that are likely to arise.

Second, are there sources available that challenge the tribal nature of the arguments—sources that argue a perspective from an unexpected identity? For example, are there transgender people who argue against trans inclusion in the military? Are there conservatives who argue for an open and welcoming immigration policy? Providing students with sources, created by people who do not neatly confirm the notion that identity and opinion are aligned, can open up the discussion.

Third, what controversial topics might help students gain the skills and attitudes necessary to tackle the tougher ones? The discussion topics I have mentioned here often generate considerable emotion. Emotional topics can invite students to engage more thoroughly—there feels like there is something at stake. Tough topics should be addressed. Yet, these and other studies suggest, that issues like immigration or religious exemptions for businesses might be more successfully addressed after a classroom community is established and students have learned how to skillfully disagree (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Fourth, what identity risks and attacks are likely to come up as students consider the topic? Teachers should begin with the assumption that there are people in the room who are directly impacted by the question under consideration. Sexual orientation, immigration status, political or religious affiliation, and even gender identity are often hidden, unformed, or even denied. Teachers might structure the discussion so that students are invited to present opinions without claiming to believe them, thus reducing the identity risks students face.

Fifth, how might students be supported in working with the likely risks? Students need to understand that controversial political discussions are often messy and contentious (Lo, 2017). Students should explore the limits of free speech before the most difficult discussions (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Teachers should solicit confidential responses from students following each class session to understand how they are experiencing the activity and ways they might be supported. Students benefit from debriefing sessions where they talk about what went well, what stifled the discussion, and what they might do differently.

This research does not suggest that the most difficult topics be avoided. Difficult topics carry risks, but they also contain possibilities to speak back to larger cultural discourses and hateful speech. This research suggests that teachers approach such discussions with a level of humanity and humility, a belief in their students, and an awareness of what they are asking students to accomplish.

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