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Q & A with Wayne Journell on ``Controversial Decisions Within Teaching Controversial Issues"

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wayne Journell

I am 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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QUESTION #1:

Teacher's Question

The example of the ”birther” issue is excellent to strain Hess's neat division. Presumably, what moves a question from ”open” to ”settled” is the degree to which rational or scientific evidence may be brought to its analysis. However, the ”birther” issue shows the limits of

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cold logic and the power of hot emotion. The kind of thinking that ”birthers” use, that of conspiratorial mindsets, cannot be driven away by an appeal to reason. So, should teachers take a question as ”open”, that is, legitimate, if the force behind its not being settled is fantasy, delusion, or wishful thinking? Does the fact that some ”significant” portion of the population holds this view enough to tilt the scales toward it being ”open”? While the author states it is not, I disagree. Isn't one of the most useful things a teacher can do is to shed a light on why people disagree, including the differing ways they may use evidence? After all, belief comes from many sources, only one of which is reason.

Wayne Journell's Response

I appreciate this question; however, I am not sure how to answer it other than to say that we will have to agree to disagree. Certainly, emotion is an aspect of controversial issues that should be explored within educational spaces, but teachers can do that with actual issues, but I do not think that ones that have no basis in reality are really up for debate. In the question, you ask, “After all, isn't one of the most useful things a teacher can do is to shed a light on why people disagree, including the differing ways they may use evidence?” I agree completely; however, for “issues” like the birther theory, there is no evidence that exists to suggest that Obama was not born in the United States.

Further, I do not believe that simply because “significant” portions of the population may believe something simply due to “fantasy, delusion, or wishful thinking” warrants giving it credence in an educational setting. Take, for example, Alex Jones and InfoWars. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, over two million people listen to Jones's weekly radio show, and countless others visit the InfoWars website every day. Here are some of the conspiracy theories that InfoWars has peddled in recent years:

- Hillary Clinton ran a child sex ring out of a Washington, DC pizza shop
- The 9/11 attacks, the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing were orchestrated by the U.S. government
- Barack Obama was the “global head” of Al-Qaeda
- The U.S. government is using juice boxes and city-controlled water to turn people gay
- Former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was murdered

My worry is that engaging with such harebrained theories be a waste of valuable instructional time, many of these delusional “issues” are tinged with aspects of racism, xenophobia, sexism, or homophobia. Giving credence to such made up issues inherently gives credence to those underlying abhorrent beliefs.

I would rather suggest that teachers could deconstruct these arguments not as debatable issues, but in activities focused on media literacy or use of evidence as ways to identify how conspiracist thinking works, how it preys upon people's biases, or how to challenge conspiracy theories.

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QUESTION #2:

Teacher's Question

Now we get to the crux of the question, what should be in the classroom's "no-fly zone"? Should only those things which would fit under Hess's epistemic criterion of rationalism or the wider political criterion that would presumably admit truths gained through faith as well, be admitted? The Hess/McAvoy compromise position of the politically authentic criterion, though wider, would still leave out most of what is controversial.

Wayne Journell's Response

Great question. Assuming we weed out the fake issues that have absolutely no merit whatsoever (e.g., conspiracy theories), determining a "no fly zone" is somewhat subjective. First, I disagree with your assertion that Hess and McAvoy's politically authentic criterion would "leave out most of what is controversial". That criterion does a great job of allowing for discussion on most reasonable issues.

To answer your question, though, I believe it is generally better to not censor students' discussions of legitimate issues, even if such discussions may make some students uncomfortable. For example, discussing building a wall on the Mexican border might make some students uncomfortable, but it is undoubtably an issue that would be "open" on all three criteria and would be game for discussing in a classroom setting. I am also fine with allowing non-empirical evidence, such as religion, to be used in controversial issue discussions because for some issues (e.g., abortion), the crux of the issue is one of morality, which cannot be quantified.

Where I think the subjectivity comes in is in the narrow slice of issues that has absolutely no empirical evidence to support one side (i.e., would be settled under the epistemic criterion) and is open using the other two criteria. I don't think teachers would be wrong to frame such issues as open in their classes, but I would encourage teachers to really give it serious thought if the only justification for it being open is because of bigoted beliefs (as in the case of the transgender bathroom example). It is important to be mindful of the safety of students in one's classes and not put them through unnecessary harm.

QUESTION #3

Teacher's Question

What about sincere views that would be considered bigoted in some way? Most social studies teachers are likely to shut them down were they to be expressed in the classroom, especially if they are likely to hurt the feelings of traditionally marginalized groups. I believe however, that the aim of teachers, over the arc of their careers, should be to engage these sincere though bigoted views.

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Wayne Journell's Response

I think my answer to this question lies in how you are envisioning "engaging sincere though bigoted views". If you are saying that when a student says something bigoted, they respond with "that is interesting, tell me more about that," I would disagree. The teacher is the locus of power and authority in the classroom, and if they give credence to bigoted views, it sends a message to all students in that classroom, one that could further marginalize students who already feel marginalized.

That said, teachers do not have to demean students or tell them that they are bad people for holding sincere beliefs. Rob Kunzman (2006) has written about "reasonable disagreements," and I think this line of thinking works well here. For example, it would be reasonable for a student raised in a very conservative household that adhered to a strict interpretation of the Bible to denounce homosexuality. In such cases, I think it would be fine for a teacher to reach out to that student and tell them that they respect their personal beliefs, but in the context of the classroom, comments like "gay people are going to burn in hell" won't be allowed.

It is always important to remember that this whole conversation applies only to public education. There are private schools that might give credence to such views, and that is well within their rights.

QUESTION #4:

Teacher's Question

Hess and McAvoy write that teachers are generally unable to hide their biases. Given that this is true, and that you think teachers should disclose, what strategies do you suggest to teachers who disclose, to make sure that other positions do get a fair airing?

Wayne Journell's Response

I am a believer in committed impartiality. That means that a teacher discloses their views about an issue to their students but 1) acknowledges that those views are just personal beliefs, 2) students are welcome to have their own views, 3) those views are just as valid as the teacher's position and will be treated as such in the classroom.

I would never ask a teacher to do something that I was not comfortable doing myself. Like most education scholars, I was a K-12 teacher. When I taught high school social studies, I practiced committed impartiality even before I had heard the term. As you may have guessed, I tend to lean more liberal on most issues, but I taught in Roanoke, VA, which is in the middle of the Bible Belt, and I would say that most of my students were more conservative. Yet, we always had a very open, respectful dialogue within the class where all legitimate positions were deemed valid (if anything, the it was the liberal students who got frustrated with me at times because I would not let them get away with weak arguments simply because I agreed with their positions!). During my time as a researcher I have also studied several teachers who have taught in this way with great success, so it wasn't just me

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QUESTION #5:

Teacher's Question

I think classroom teachers are afraid of tipping the scales of their classroom's public opinion with their personal view. Not only would they be open to criticisms from parents, administration, and students, but they have a legitimate fear that students will take up their opinion as the best opinion if the teacher is considered intelligent and thoughtful by students, "If that opinion is good enough for the teacher, whom I like, then it is good enough for me." Additionally, teachers may fear that once this precedence is set, then every issue thereafter will become a "What does the teacher think" spectacle. How would the teacher, who wishes to create a classroom where things are fair, also insert their own view, without it having an out-sized impact on the students' views?

Wayne Journell's Response

This is a great question and one I often hear from teachers. Here is my answer: First, students are always going to want to know what the teacher thinks on any given issue. Typically, it is the first question that gets asked! When a teacher does not disclose, it does not mean that students just say "oh well, I guess we will never know." Instead, they will infer, sometimes correctly and sometimes incorrectly, based on things said in the classroom, telltale hints such as a bumper sticker or a sign in the teacher's front lawn, or simply based on the teacher's demographics.

Here is a quotation from Meira Levinson's (2012) great book, *No Citizen Left Behind*, where she discussed her time teaching in the Atlanta and Boston public schools:

"It is not only students' ethnoracial identifications that pose pedagogical and political challenges. Teachers' own ethnoracial identities also play into the student–teacher relationship in powerful and sometimes unpredictable ways. I was always aware that my students accurately saw me as White and middle class—which to them meant wealthy—and that this led them to make other assumptions that were sometimes less accurate. Many of my students assumed, for example, that I was a Republican. This may in part have resulted from my unwillingness to tell them my political views; since my students in both Atlanta and Boston were overwhelmingly Democrats, they may have reasonably extrapolated that I was reticent because I didn't want to subject myself to their scathing attacks. But I think it also simply resulted from their associating Republicans with wealthy White people, and Democrats with poor people of color" (pp. 70–71).

In other words, even if teachers don't disclose, students are going to make assumptions about their teachers' beliefs anyway (something that I have found in my own research), so this "out-sized impact" on students' views is going to be there no matter what. Disclosure at least allows students to form an accurate picture of their teachers' beliefs, in addition to the pedagogical benefits outlined in the article.

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