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Q & A with Paula McAvoy & Li-Ching Ho on ``Professional Judgment and Deciding What to Teach as Controversial"

Paula McAvoy[1] and Li-Ching Ho[2]

[1]North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA
[2]University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula McAvoy

I serve as Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Prior to my academic life, I taught high school social studies for ten years at the Foothill Middle College Program in Los Altos, California. I am interested in the role that schools play in developing the skills, dispositions, and knowledge that equip young people for political participation. More specifically, I hope to prepare social studies teachers who are ready and excited to engage students in discussions of political issues. I am also increasingly interested in the ethical challenges that are inherent to the teaching profession. In addition to research and teaching for the university, I lead professional development for teachers and faculty about how to design and lead classroom discussions. Outside of my professional life, I enjoy making craft cocktails with my spouse and giving belly rubs to our dog, Bear.

Li-Ching Ho

I serve as Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am interested in global issues of diversity in civic education, differentiated access to citizenship education, and environmental citizenship. As a teacher and teacher educator with professional experiences in Asia and the U.S., one of my main professional goals is to make the field of social studies education more inclusive and globally-oriented. I am especially interested in developing globally relevant civic education curricula that challenge taken for granted assumptions in the field. In addition, I have enjoyed interacting with and learning from educators in different national and cultural contexts, including the Philippines, China,

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Corresponding Author
Paula McAvoy,
pmcavoy@ncsu.edu

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Singapore, and Brunei. Outside of my professional pursuits, I enjoy playing golf, mahjong, and watching the Boston Celtics and Liverpool Football Club games. You'll Never Walk Alone.

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QUESTION #1:

Teacher's Question

How would you suggest broaching this conversation within a larger group, such a department where teachers may have different ideas about how to define and decide what is controversial?

Paula McAvoy and Li-Ching Ho's Response

One option is to engage in discussion about what should be treated as controversial. Begin by making a distinction between controversial topics and controversial issues by brainstorming a list of social studies topics that people think could invite scrutiny from parents or administration. This, of course, does not mean that these topics should be avoided, only that they might need to be approached with care.

Next, ask everyone to generate their own list of political issues (questions) related to the courses they teach that would invite disagreement among students. (Hint: These questions often begin with "should." Example: Should our state pass a voter ID law?). Sharing these lists and discussing whether people agree that the questions ought to be treated as open to interpretation is a good way to start building a common understanding.

Finally, select a question that people agree should be treated as controversial and then discuss what background knowledge and skills students would need before engaging in a deliberation. Is there an empirical foundation that is not open to debate? Which evidence and arguments should be presented to students to deepen their understanding? How can the deliberation be structured and supported in the classroom? What kind of ground rules for deliberation should be established?

QUESTION #2:

Teacher's Question

How might teachers use the advice you are offering to navigate political partisanship in the classroom, either in planned or unplanned ways?

Paula McAvoy and Li-Ching Ho's Response

Political polarization certainly makes the social studies teacher's job more difficult. Students may arrive with distrust toward particular news sources and feelings of animosity for people

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who disagree with them. Students may also bring in some of the worst behaviors that we see in the public, such as name-calling, political bullying, or speech that threatens other students.

To establish the classroom as a place for genuine engagement with the issues, teachers need to first make sure that their own behavior sets the tone of serious academic inquiry. In my (McAvoy's) research with Diana Hess and Mcavoy (2015) we found that teachers who use partisan jokes, flippantly, refer to ideas as "stupid," or public figures as "idiots" cause some students to feel silenced in the classroom while others feel emboldened.

Creating the best climate for discussion requires the teacher to establish a community in which students trust each other and the teacher to be fair. Second, teachers should help students learn how to respectfully disagree by using discussion activities that provide structure. One helpful resource is Gonzalez's (2015) curated a list of discussion strategies for middle and high school classrooms. Using these strategies helps even the playing field for discussion by maximizing participation and establishing rules that help students know when and how to participate and when they should listen. Importantly, structuring discussion keeps the activity academic and prevents it from devolving into a partisan battle. Finally, teachers need to recognize that not all deliberation needs to be conducted in a "neutral" and dispassionate manner. These issues are inherently emotive and it is important to acknowledge and support different ways of communicating within the classroom.

QUESTION #3:

Teacher's Question

How might you incorporate students in the conversation of identifying and navigating the nuances of controversial issues? If you would not, why wouldn't you?

Paula McAvoy and Li-Ching Ho's Response

Giving students voice within the classroom is important for getting them more engaged in the material, but it is also an important way to create a classroom in which students want to discuss. Many teachers set the stage for discussion by asking students on Day 1 to discuss the classroom norms and what they like and dislike about classroom discussions. Teachers can also ask students to share what skills they bring to discussion. Teachers can go one step further by ending a discussion of a controversial issue with the questions, "How do you think we did well in this discussion? What should we work on for next time?" This "meta talk" about the discussion helps students think about what a good discussion looks like and how they can improve their own participation.

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QUESTION #4:

Teacher's Question

What are some effective strategies to introduce students to breaking down and developing solutions to these issues? Is this better implemented on a unit level (across multiple weeks) or in short daily lessons?

Paula McAvoy and Li-Ching Ho's Response

Like all academic skills, engaging students in inquiries (which can be a unit of study, a lesson, or a single discussion) into controversial issues requires scaffolding and preparation. If a teacher knows that a unit of study on the Bill of Rights will end with a deliberation about whether assault rifles should be banned, then she needs to first think about what sort of background knowledge students will need to effectively engage with that issue.

The content in the unit should build toward this by exposing students to the text of the Second Amendment, showing them how the amendment has been interpreted over time, learning about the ban on assault rifles in the 1990s, and to consider arguments and evidence for and against a ban today. Students could receive this background through a lecture or readings, but teachers can also "teach with discussion" (Parker & Hess, 2001). That is, discussion can be used to deepen students' understanding. In this example, students could engage in a Socratic Seminar discussion about the text of the Second Amendment and what they think it means. Next, they might engage in a jigsaw activity in which small groups learn and teach about different Supreme Court cases related to gun rights. Finally, they could engage in a Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) or Philosophical Chairs activity that would require them to look at evidence about gun violence today. The C3 Inquiry Arc and the Inquiry Design Model (Swan et al., 2018) are excellent resources for beginning to think about using compelling questions to frame the curriculum.

QUESTION #5:

Teacher's Question

Could you elaborate on the idea of critical thinking with relation to controversial issues? I can see why a teacher offering sources of varying validity and leaving students to build arguments from them could be miseducative. However, if we do not address problematic sources that students might be drawing from privately, are we failing to counter those students' already established misconceptions? Is that not also miseducative?

Paula McAvoy and Li-Ching Ho's Response

This question is getting at a related, but ultimately different, set of civic education skills. During a controversial issue discussion, teachers provide students with opportunities to practice giving reasons to each other, sharing personal experiences, listening, and drawing upon evidence so that students deepen their understanding about an issue and clarify for themselves what they think.

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We agree that teaching young people to evaluate the evidence that they are likely to encounter in the public is another essential skill for preparing them for political engagement, but this is a different sort of activity. A teacher might design a lesson that asks students to investigate the sources and arguments found on a website claiming that climate change is not caused by human activity and compare it to other more credible evidence. But to be educationally responsible, the teacher would design the activity so that students clearly saw how the website used flawed reasoning or was misrepresenting evidence. In other words, the purposes of the activity are to show students how misinformation is constructed and help them get better at detecting it. This is different than communicating directly or indirectly to students that there is no consensus among the scientific community and that they should decide for themselves which source is correct.

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