

# The Controversy Over Controversy in the Social Studies Classroom

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Social studies is by virtue opaque, unwieldy, and rarely neutral. It challenges convention and conventional thought and action. Embedding controversy into social studies instruction allows students to think deeply, critically, and passionately. Yet controversy is fraught with philosophical and pedagogical hurdles that often limit its use. Thus, the controversy over controversy in the social studies classroom. While recognizing that such hurdles exist, this article argues that, if approached with both fidelity and care, controversy can provide a platform for engaged and engaging social studies teaching and learning.

From carbon emissions to border crossings, from euthanasia to eugenics, social studies is never neutral. Though the presentation of selected names, dates, and events undoubtedly provide an important contextual underpinning to social studies, the very nature of the discipline is inherently fluid and rooted in deep, difficult, and contentious questions that beg for answers not easily found.

It is in this contentious, murky space that controversy resides. Controversy is not clean nor neatly packaged. It is opaque, unwieldy and often uncomfortable. Controversy allows students to grapple with and ultimately challenge convention and conventional thought and, in doing so, produce and offer alternate understandings of how they approach and apply social studies in and for their own lives.

But what is controversy and how should it be manifest in social studies classrooms? Once situated, the argument is made that controversy should be a cornerstone of sound social studies instruction. This will be tempered by an analysis of the sobering realities that often limit—or wholly exclude—controversy from social studies classrooms; the controversy over controversy.

## Controversy: A Brief Theoretical Overview

The most succinct definition of controversy is premised on the notion of authenticity. Simply, controversy is the contention that emerges from real-life—authentic—topics (Hess, 2009). This authenticity (i.e. controversy) raises compelling questions that are both approached and answered from different perspectives premised on one's social, cultural, regional and political values, beliefs, and biases. If controversy is authentic—if it resonates on a personal level—it spurs what Johnson and Johnson (1979) term contextual conflict (“I thought it was *this*, but it may have been *that*.”). Controversy piques curiosity; the desire to dig a bit deeper, to learn a bit more.

Herein lies the theoretical underpinning of controversy; it resides at the core of a functional democracy (Camicia, 2008; Hahn, 1991; Ochoa-Becker, 2007). Democracy works when a plurality of perspectives are not just tolerated but actively encouraged. The health of any democracy is dependent upon the open exchange of ideas and the unfettered practice of discussion and debate. Discussion facilitates and encourages the engagement of individuals around

divergent views. It allows young and old the unabridged right to raise hands, write letters, cast ballots, wave placards, scream and yell or calmly state one's opinion. "The ideal of discussion supports the validity of intrinsic equality by implying, at least symbolically, that all members of a community are political equals and are therefore equally qualified to participate in discussion and decision making" (Hess, 2009, p. 15). The ability to speak and conversely to listen represents the theoretical core of democracy (Gastile & Levine, 2005). Controversy develops distinct habits of democratic thought and action by delineating the purpose of discussion and debate, welcoming the disparate perspectives generated therein, fostering the desire to gain a deeper understanding of impactful issues, and believing that discussion and debate uphold the pillars of democratic thought and action (Sheppard et al., 2011). Ultimately, the goal of such thought and action as evidenced through structured discussion and debate, is to inform, enlighten, and embolden students to raise their hands or raise their voices both inside and outside of the social studies classroom.

### Using Controversy in the Classroom

Johnson and Johnson (1979) provide a five-step overview of how controversy is inextricably linked to classroom learning through discussion:

1. For controversy to be constructive—to arouse conceptual uncertainty, spur creativity, and increase problem-solving—information must be communicated (i.e. presented) accurately. There can be no obfuscation, "sugar coating," or otherwise withholding of information. Allow students to sift through and process *all* information, however propagandizing or unsettling it may be.

2. Classrooms must be premised on trust. A level of support and mutual understanding must be established and maintained for students to feel safe exploring controversial issues.
3. Controversy sparks emotional responses and these emotions are real. Students often struggle negotiating (and then mitigating) the difference between "head" (the disconnectedness of facts) and the "heart" (the real, raw, and powerful emotions such facts often produce).
4. How controversy (and controversial issues) are defined often dictates how it will be approached. Controversy should not be partitioned as winner vs. loser, good vs. evil, right vs. wrong. Such stark divisions are painted by a moral certitude that can cloud and hinder deep, transformative thinking and learning.
5. Students need to explore—and indeed come to welcome—opinions that are both similar and different to their own. Only through "other" perspective-taking can students gain, explore, and ultimately process the entirety of the controversy at hand.

At its core, controversy, and the resultant discussions it facilitates, is rooted in the belief that powerful, enlightening, and transformative ideas (and solutions) can be generated when people express their beliefs—and concomitantly listen to the beliefs of others (Hess, 2009). Facilitating discussion emerging from controversial issues helps students to critically reflect on the information presented, to "pause and wait" until all information is presented before forming a position, to question claims of neutrality and to be tolerant—and ultimately comfortable—with uncertainty (Oulton, et al. 2004). If the sweeping objective of using controversy in the classroom is to push students to develop deeper, layered,

alternatively critical and empathetic understandings while concomitantly raising civic awareness and action, there may arguably be no space more appropriately suited to do so than the social studies classroom.

### **Why Controversy in the Social Studies Classroom**

The belief in civic participation through participatory action is a cornerstone of sound social studies instruction. To this end, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) states that “the aim of social studies is the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life” (2010, p.3). Civic education (e.g. civic participation and civic engagement) is also noted in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (2013a):

[I]n civics, students learn to contribute appropriately to public processes and discussions of real issues. Their contributions to public discussions may take many forms, ranging from personal testimony to abstract arguments. They will also learn civic practices such as voting, volunteering, jury service, and joining with others to improve society. Civics enables students not only to study how others participate, but also to practice participating and taking informed action themselves. (p.7)

Though other areas of study may incorporate structured controversy into their curriculum, it is in the social studies classroom that controversy enlightens, challenges, “ignites small explosions” (Ballinger, 1963, p.98), nudges or shoves and, most importantly, begs for participatory civic action. Since social

studies is inherently contentious, it provides the “ideal set of circumstances for developing young people who are critical thinkers and responsible decision makers” (Meyer, 1998, p. ii).

Teaching controversial issues in the social studies classroom is supported by NCSS in its belief that,

Controversial issues must be studied in the classroom without the assumption that they are settled in advance or there is only one right or wrong answer in matters of dispute. The social studies teacher must approach issues in a spirit of critical inquiry exposing the students to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own. (NCSS, 2016).

Furthermore, NCSS posits that the study of controversial issues should develop the following skills and dispositions:

1. The ability to study relevant social problems of the past or present and make informed decisions or conclusions;
2. The ability to use critical reasoning and evidence-based evaluation in the study and analysis of significant issues and ideas; this includes the development of skills of critical analysis and evaluation in considering ideas, opinions, information, and sources of information;
3. The recognition that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal as a part of social discourse; and
4. The recognition that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process (NCSS, 2016).

Unfortunately, social studies instruction is often devoid of critical inquiry and mired in the read-write-respond model premised on the recitation of (often)

irrelevant and decontextualized “faces and places” (Bolinger & Wilson, 2007; Key, Bradley & Bradley, 2010; Vogler & Virtue, 2007; Wood, 2007). Such fact-based instruction rarely allows students a glimpse of the “conflict, controversy, and complexity” embedded in such facts (Wood, 2007, p, 42). Social studies becomes unidimensional, cold, calculated, rational, and, above all, devoid of dissent, division, and discussion. Lost is the call for criticality and its charge of civic engagement.

**Who Decides What is Controversial?** Not every issue in social studies is inherently controversial and not every controversial issue needs to find its way into the classroom (Camicia, 2008). When selecting a controversial issue, teachers need to initially decide what is the nature of the issue that makes it controversial. Is it the action itself (despite conflicting counsel, Truman’s decision to use nuclear weapons on Japan during World War II) or its result (instantly killing an estimated 70,000 innocent Japanese civilians)?

More importantly, teachers should select controversial issues that are age-appropriate and provide students with reasonable (i.e. again, appropriate) understandings of the topic at hand. There is controversy and then there is Controversy! It may be appropriate to discuss the personal, social, and political contentions of gay marriage in a secondary classroom, yet wholly inappropriate to do so at the elementary level. Elementary teachers can discuss the broad strokes of racial division and inequality in America, using slavery and Jim Crow laws as relevant examples. This inquiry strand can be extended into the secondary classroom with the biting example of the decades-long Tuskegee syphilis experiment. Though controversy—and the nature of the examples used to contextualize it—naturally builds as students move through the K-12 pipeline, teachers need to be ever

mindful of the “appropriateness” of the examples used within their own classroom settings.

Teachers need also be cognizant of the life experiences their students bring into the classroom. A secondary student comes to class with years of opinion formation. He or she has been exposed—and have often reacted—to a plethora of complexities and controversies, both abstract and personal. Some secondary students enter the social studies classroom with immutable opinions; others bring to class opinions more malleable and receptive to change. Younger students bring similarly important yet nonetheless underdeveloped opinions based primarily on their limited life experiences. Though social studies teachers are encouraged to use controversy throughout the K-12 pipeline, a clear understanding of expectations based upon the scope and depth of student experiences is needed.

**How is Controversy Presented?** If social studies classrooms are ideal spaces for supporting rich, diverse, and often difficult conversations, it is the instructional decision-maker—the teacher—who is pivotal in structuring how controversy will be presented in the classroom. If teachers are to be successful at teaching controversy, they need to possess a firm command of the topic at hand. This involves culling information from various sources and “balancing,” if you will, the perspectives emerging from these sources. For students to form a cogent response to the controversial issue, they must possess multiple source types that provide multiple perspectives. It is the teacher’s task to cull and present such rich and varied sources (Nakou & Barka, 2010).

Knowing that controversy sparks passion—amongst other such raw emotions—the teacher needs to be skillful in moderating classroom discussions. This often equates to balancing the “head and the heart” (see Johnson and Johnson, 1979). Teachers

need to know when to push forward and when to pull back. They should encourage all students to participate as well as minimize the potential for a handful of students to dominate the conversation (Lennon, 2017).

Arguably, one of the most difficult tasks teachers face when facilitating classroom discussion is the opportunity for “drift.” Teachers should create an environment of open discussion that is powerful, emotional, and often raw. They should ensure that the discussion is both respectful and accurate. This balancing act may be hard to maintain when passions run high and emotions usurp facts. To mitigate this disconnect, Resiman (2017) encourages teachers to “stabilize the content” (p. 33). When drift occurs, teachers should reassert their presence into the discussion by redirecting the student-led conversation. They should remind students of the initial compelling question, clarify any content-based misunderstandings, or reinforce the rules of discussion. Some teachers may be hesitant to “stabilize,” fearing their insertion will quell or taint discussion. The opposite is often true. The teacher plays an integral role in forming, facilitating, and monitoring discussion to ensure that students are using the content to respectfully engage their classmates in structured, powerful, and passionate discussion.

Using controversial issues in the classroom facilitates critical thinking and sparks rich and constructive debate which encourages civic participation and action (Beck 2003; Hess & Granzler, 2007). It is an instructional strategy students genuinely enjoy (Hess & Posselt, 2002). Unfortunately, many teachers in general, and social studies teachers particularly, are reluctant to use it (Byford, et al., 2009; Kello, 2016; Levitt & Longstreet, 1993; Wood, 2007). Such hesitancy stems from a lack of content mastery, the emotional reaction of students in the classroom, pressure from school

administrators and/or local community members, the loss of employment or feeling hindered by their own beliefs and values (Byford, et al. 2009; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hand & Levinson, 2012; Journell, 2011; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Some teachers deal with the “slippery stuff of social studies” (Wood, 2007, p. 44) by simply avoiding it altogether (Kitson & McCully, 2005). Keown (1998) flatly posits that, “the teacher, while knowing that values and social action are important, feels that the problems and risks are just too great and it is safer to stick to knowledge and skills and avoid values and social action altogether” (p. 14). Controversy is simply too controversial for the social studies classroom.

An implementation obstacle social studies teachers face is navigating the thin line between impartiality and indoctrination. What—and how much—should teachers reveal about their own views concerning the controversial issues they present? Though neutrality has long been considered the most appropriate (i.e. safest) position to take (e.g. “It is not about that *I* think but about what *you* think,”) Kelly (1986) suggests a ‘committed impartiality’ whereby teachers state their own views and, in doing so, model tolerant civic discourse by welcoming divergent opinions from their students. Being transparent not only models what civic dialogue “looks like” but encourages student participation. Students are generally supportive of teachers sharing their own views just so long as the teacher is not perceived to be forcing such views upon them (Journell, 2011d). This perceived threat of indoctrination, and the swift backlash that it will undoubtedly cause, compels social studies teachers to either avoid controversy altogether or to take a neutral position. The result is a palpable disconnect between desired student outcome (civic engagement) and teacher behavior (civic disengagement).

## Balancing the Classroom with the Community

As noted, schools are ideal environments to encourage and facilitate controversy in the social studies classroom as students will (hopefully) be exposed to more diverse viewpoints than those encountered at home or in the community. Schools are “community centers” and, as such, are greatly influenced—and to a degree thusly beholden to—the community they serve (Dewey, 1916; Journell, 2012). When a community espouses certain values and mores, this homogeneity, this like-minded communal thought and action, exerts a tremendous influence on both how teachers teach and how students respond to controversial topics in the social studies classroom. If, for example, a community is rooted to more “traditional” and “conservative” values (acknowledging that such terms are both definitional, contextual, and grossly oversimplified), teachers may use caution (e.g. “play it safe”) when both choosing which controversial topics to explore and how “far” to explore (e.g. push) them. The backlash—from students, fellow colleagues, school administrators, parents, and the community at large—may not be worth the effort. (A fictional yet appropriate correlation may be made to the movie *Footloose* when a small yet influential segment of the community resisted a “new” form of dancing.)

So how do teachers navigate the potentially contentious relationship between the communal climate and the controversial social studies classroom? Just as teachers need to know when to push forward and when to pull back in the classroom, this same recognition needs to be employed in the community. Teachers do not need—nor should they explicitly seek—approval over what (and how) is taught in the social studies classroom. They should, though, seek to

understand the communal climate in which they teach in. Though some may perceive such an understanding as potentially leading to “watered down” or “cautious” social studies by kowtowing to communal dynamics, it is quite the opposite. Knowing (and respecting) the dynamics that shape both the classroom and the community allows teachers to use controversy in more targeted, purposeful, and responsive ways. The goal of using controversy in the social studies classroom is to engage, enrich, and challenge the student. If, in both big and small ways, it can engage, enrich, and challenge the community, the purpose of teaching social studies may very well be fulfilled.

## Conclusion

Powerful social studies is not passive; it is engaging, difficult, contentious, and raw. It facilitates inquiry, evaluation, and action. Hands are raised and voices are heard. Using controversy in the secondary classroom provides students a theoretical and practical springboard from which to wrestle with the “slippery stuff” of social studies. In doing so, students gain a deeper, more layered understanding of the topic at hand. They become active, participatory classroom citizens.

Yet using controversy in the social studies classroom is often tempered by factors teachers can and cannot control. If used thoughtfully, with a purposeful goal for students and a respectful nod to the community, controversy can facilitate healthy, constructive conversations that spark reflection and action both inside and outside of the social studies classroom.

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