

Chapter 17

Teaching Controversial Issues, Liberally



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Controversy lurks, even in the most benign, pacific classrooms. It also leaps, showing itself unexpectedly and inopportunistically. Its appearance in the classroom often unsettles students, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), graduate-student teachers, and faculty members alike. It brings awkward silences and uneasy feelings that move between outrage and violation. For some, full-blown controversy is entertaining, for others titillating and cathartic. It also can be off-putting, divisive, and dispiriting. These corrosive effects may prompt efforts to purge the classroom agenda of any hint of controversy, to apply a hermetic, controversy-proof seal. Rather than emphasize controversy's downside, we argue here for its merits, confident that teaching controversial issues can invigorate the classroom culture and enliven students' learning.

Controversy arises from difference, from alternative points of view. It may be considered an invitation to students to sample and engage what is unfamiliar or alien. Generally, students perceive the invitation as aversive. Enlarging one's awareness and scope of reference is rarely easy. The reasons are intellectual and emotional. One may have to think in fresh ways and to deal with feelings that oppose such thinking. Both are hard work. One may have to reckon with previously unglimped possibilities and oblige distasteful prospects. One may have to turn around on what one traditionally

has prized and call it, painfully, into question. Ultimately, what started in controversy may even result in the arduous, draining project of regenerating one's self.

Controversy and the Liberal Ideal of Education

In his classic examination of the wellsprings of personal and collective freedom, John Stuart Mill (1859/1988) gave bold contours to controversy:

In the case of any person whose judgement is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and to expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious. . . . No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner. The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it; for, being cognizant of all that can, at least obviously, be said against him, and having taken up his position against all naysayers . . . he has a right to think his judgement better than that of any person, or any multitude, who have not gone through a similar process. (p. 80)

Mill's is a tall order and may be considered an ideal, given practical realities. Still, it offers a test of the validity of intellectual (and, by extension, moral and political) authority that installs controversy, that is, the pitting of views, comprehensively. For Mill, authority is best trusted that resolutely remains open to critique.

Mill's liberality underpins pluralist, democratic society and, within it, liberal education. For Richard Rorty (1999), that education is two-step: first, socialization, then individualization. One gives way to the other at the approximate boundary between high school and college. According to Rorty,

The question, "What should they learn in college?" had better go unasked. Such questions suggest that college faculties are instrumentalities that can be ordered to a purpose. The temptation to suggest this comes over administrations occasionally, as does the feeling that higher education is too important to be left to the professors. From an administrative point of view, the professors often seem self-indulgent and self-obsessed. They look like loose cannons, people whose habit of setting their own agendas needs to be curbed. But administrators sometimes forget that college students badly need to find themselves in a place in which people are not ordered to a purpose, in which loose

cannons are free to roll about. The only point in having real live professors around instead of just computer terminals, videotapes, and mimeoed lecture notes is that students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings. (p. 125)

Although loose-cannon status (as GTA, graduate-student teacher, or faculty member) may accompany flamboyance and stage hogging, they are not necessary companions. What Rorty commends is that the controversy-laced agendas of loose cannons nourish the individualism to which liberal education aspires. Controversy is the medium in which freedom is enacted and modeled.

Gerald Graff (1992) offers his own case study in teaching controversial issues for the same ends to which Mill and Rorty pointed, and for further ends:

I argue that the best solution to today's conflicts . . . is to teach the conflicts themselves, making them part of our object of study and using them as a new kind of organizing principle to give the curriculum the clarity and focus that almost all sides now agree it lacks.

. . . In an important sense, academic institutions are *already* teaching the conflicts every time a student goes from one course or department to another, but they are doing it badly. . . . [S]tudents typically experience a great clash of values, philosophies, and pedagogical methods among their various professors, but they are denied a view of the interactions and interrelations that give each subject meaning. They are exposed to the *results* of their professors' conflicts but not to the process of discussion and debate they need to see in order to become something more than passive spectators to their education. Students are expected to join an intellectual community that they see only in disconnected glimpses. This is what has passed for "traditional" education, but a curriculum that screens students from the controversies between texts and ideas serves the traditional goals of education as poorly as it serves those of reformers. (p. 12)

Graff's (1992) subject matter is English literature, and the controversies belong to culture wars that pit literary canons against each other (often on the continuum of political correctness). But his controversy-centric approach, including the selection of textbooks and classroom methods, is transposable to other disciplines and classrooms.

A final glimpse of controversy-stoked teaching comes from Mark Edmundson's (2002) memoir. Drawing from memories of his senior year of high school, Edmundson assembles the portrait of a teacher, Frank Lears, freshly graduated from college and whose naïvete was initially unnerving to his students. He was a laid-back provocateur who allowed their interests to set the daily agenda while he applied an overlay of controversy. He insisted that the

questions and issues they studied be analyzed from more than one perspective, always with an eye to implications for their current lives and futures:

Really, all he seemed to want was to make us look at ourselves from new angles, become judgmental aliens in our own lives, and then to show us a few alternative roads. If we took them, all to the good. If not, who knows?—maybe something else would turn up for us later. Of all the teachers I have had—some of the world’s best known, in fact—Lears was the purest in his evident wish to make his students freer. He would be sorry about the costs, for relative autonomy can have many, but nothing would deter him. (pp. 239–240)

Edmundson’s mention of risk is apposite. Teaching controversial issues is risky in at least two ways. In one, the teacher may send her or his students off on protracted personal paths not worth pursuing and that end ignominiously. Alternatively, the encounter with controversy may sour the student sufficiently that she or he ever shies from it. In what follows, we offer advice to GTAs, graduate-student teachers, and new faculty on managing the risk.

Caveats for Those Who Teach Controversial Issues

Depending on one’s students and subject matter, it may be possible to predict the controversial issues. In a previous treatment of the topic (Buskist & Davis, 2006), several authors shared experience and insight from teaching the following issues: race and ethnicity (Freeman, 2006), evolutionary psychology (Barker, 2006), human sexuality (Finken, 2006), gender and gender roles (Lloyd, 2006), religion (Hester & Paloutzian, 2006), and drugs and behavior (Bailey, 2006). In addition to specifying potential points of controversy, the authors addressed textbook selection, the syllabus content, classroom etiquette, and techniques for recognizing and accommodating controversial issues in the flow of classroom life, including assignments and other forms of assessment.

Our review of the authors’ conclusions and recommendations produced the following caveats (in no particular order of importance):

- Where possible, invoke empirical data in assessing the issue at hand. Students’ consideration of data and identification of multiple interpretations of what the data say may result in their deeper appreciation for the complexity of the issue (Freeman, 2006). In turn, this may dispel any notion that the issue already has been decided.
- Encourage students to recognize the difference between what they believe, what they feel, and what they know (Barker, 2006). Being able to draw clearer distinctions among these categories of experience may help them reframe controversial issues more appealingly or at least less defensively.

- Remember that the active use of humility, humor, and goodwill can defuse hostility and suspicion, and promote openness and collegiality (Barker, 2006).
- When preparing for in-class consideration of potentially controversial issues, there is good reason to consult with faculty mentors or other colleagues as to whether the planned-for material and methods are advisable (Finken, 2006).
- Be aware of institutional or departmental policy regarding issues to be avoided, if any. Receiving the department chair's prior approval of material and methods allows a further buffer against impropriety (Finken, 2006).
- Adopt and publicize (in the syllabus, for example) "ground rules" for class conversation. Doing so may prevent or at least reduce felt conflict when controversial issues are considered. For example, students may be asked to (a) refrain from sharing highly personal details, (b) allow someone else to speak before rejoining the conversation, (c) adopt an empathic stance by imagining what others in the conversation are feeling and factors that might have contributed to their perspectives on the issue, and (d) realize that they are under no obligation to state their views or to change them (Lloyd, 2006).
- Maintain an announced availability to students for consultation should they have concerns about the course material or the classroom conversation regarding issues raised by the material (Lloyd, 2006).

In an essay that introduced those referred to above, Pittenger (2006) listed principal student complaints related to the treatment of controversial issues in their classrooms. The list emerged from the author's review of anecdotes posted at a website (www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org) where students reported instances of discrimination by faculty for political views. The complaints were (a) required readings that only present one side of an issue, (b) *ad hominem* derogation of political or religious figures, and (c) assignments that require the student to advocate a point of view that runs contrary to their own. Such missteps on the teacher's part almost always derail otherwise constructive consideration of controversial issues.

Pittenger (2006) also cautioned against unguarded humor—the spontaneous aside that can put even the best-intentioned teachers in the students' doghouse. To avoid such, he urged self-editing to “ensure that expressions of humor are not made at the expense of others” (p. 183).

Teaching Styles and Resources for Teaching Controversies

Several teaching styles are available for teaching controversial issues. Stradling, Noctor, and Baines (1984) identified three: commitment, balance, and neutrality. Using the *committed* style, the teacher informs students of her or his position on the issue, as well as the personal biases that may have been conducive to that position. Teachers may do so when the issue is first

broached or subsequently as they consider the best tactics. The *balanced* style obliges teachers to supply alternative viewpoints so that the issue is considered multidirectionally and also to categorize the alternatives in ways that sharpen their differences. The *neutral* style may be the most challenging, because it requires the teacher either to support each of the alternative viewpoints equally (*affirmative neutrality*) or to refrain from supporting any of them (*negative* or *procedural neutrality*).

Although controversial issues are more likely to emerge spontaneously in the course of classroom give-and-take, they also may be included deliberately as part of course design. In courses where the design includes a sequence of weekly topics, for example, a regular component of each topic may be a controversial issue related to it. Alternatively, the issue may be introduced following a series of topics in order to demonstrate their mutual relevance and interconnection.

In addition to classroom conversations (both small-group and whole-class) that introduce and develop controversial issues, teachers can draw from a variety of formal and informal assignments available in graded or nongraded versions. Among written assignments, Miller and Lance (2006) listed progressive papers, multiperspective papers, group papers and projects, reflective writing, interpretive writing, reaction papers, and knowledge maps. Possible oral assignments include mini-lectures and debates. Both types of assignments may be combined in multimedia presentations or in-class poster sessions.

Textbook publishers also are alert to the potential virtue of teaching controversial issues. A popular series titled *Taking Sides* (published by McGraw-Hill/Dushkin) offers a series of volumes across academic disciplines. For example, issues addressed in this series include moral issues (Sattris, 2011), educational issues (Noll, 2010), and social issues (Finsterbusch, 2010).

Regular perusal of intellectual media such as newspapers, magazines, documentaries, and blogs, and scholarly media such as journals and books, is sure to yield a more than ample store of controversies for tactical inclusion in lectures, classroom conversation, and assignments. Another dependable source is one's teaching colleagues, who can be consulted for their recent experiences with controversy as well as for time-tested controversies by which they stoke their students' thoughtful, creative engagement with the subject matter.

As already noted, controversy also can emerge spontaneously and unbidden during a class meeting. Innocent as well as intemperate remarks and gestures may promote escalating exchange, whether originating from students or the teacher or both, to trigger a sudden awkwardness, a chilling hush, a sinking feeling of sides setting up all at once. Such moments are inevitable, but they need not be disastrous. Instead, our counsel to GTAs

and new teachers caught in them is promptly to recognize them for what they are, take a deep breath, and turn what may be feared as loss into gain. Pose questions: What has just happened? How shall we think about it? What sides showed themselves? How shall we work through it? What is important to learn from what we experienced? Invite several voices to be heard. Ask students to talk together in small groups. Assign them to write about their feelings and their afterthoughts. Assure them that good can come from turning around on differences and contentiousness—good such as civility, the prizing of diversity, deepened understanding, awareness of new and inviting possibilities, and the flush of rapprochement.

Conclusions

There is no sure way to avoid controversy and remain alive. Instead, one strives to do one's best to avoid being upended by it. For those who teach controversial issues, the liberality advocated by J. S. Mill and endorsed, respectively, by Rorty, Graff, and Edmundson in their own way shines a light on personal characteristics—openness to alternatives, never being too sure, empathic regard, appreciation for argument and reason-giving, and goodwill—that will serve the teacher in the joint roles of arbiter and model. Thus supplied, students—learners from controversial issues—someday will look back on their controversy-rich classrooms as microcosms of the unendingly diverse, maddeningly kaleidoscopic experience that now enfolds them. If those classrooms served them well, they eventually will show themselves graceful, even artful, in that experience.

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