

# On the Nature of Controversy as Pedagogy: Introduction

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## *Abstract*

*Oftentimes, controversial issues are employed by teachers to either enhance pedagogy or as a form of pedagogy in and of themselves. We must consider what such teaching must or must not entail. In order to provide an answer to that question, we must first consider the nature of controversy: How and by what criterion should a topic be deemed “controversial?” It seems far too facile to say that an issue is controversial merely because disagreement attaches to it. Therefore, other criteria—namely a political and an epistemic criterion—have been introduced along with implications for pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** *controversial issues, reason, pedagogy, directive and nondirective teaching*

## On the Nature of Controversy

It might be useful, first, to say that this special issue is *not* about debating a range of issues that people disagree upon in education. It is not, for example, about the pros and cons of charter schools or any other issue in that sense. What is of concern is the nature of controversy and the use of controversial topics as pedagogy in schools. It is much easier to carve out a discrete discussion of the former. However, the latter is sequentially related in that the nature of controversy must be considered first given the inherent practical implications.

The “nature of controversy” refers to the question of how and by what criterion a topic is deemed to be “controversial.” What does it mean to say something is controversial? It seems far too facile to say that an issue is controversial merely because disagreement attaches to it. Such a determination suggests a criterion of numerosity or what others have referred to as a behavioral criterion.<sup>1</sup> How much disagreement must there be or, put differently, how many people must disagree? Must the disagreement be reasonable? By this criterion, the historical fact of the holocaust becomes controversial because some small number of people deny that it occurred. While we might defend the right of such people to make their claims in the name freedom of speech, we would certainly conclude that any such claims are unreasonable.<sup>2</sup>

The question of reasonableness introduces a different criterion for determining that an issue is controversial: the epistemic criterion. By the epistemic criterion, an issue cannot be held to be controversial if argument on one side or the other is contrary to reason. Michael Hand, for example,

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1. For a thorough overview, see Michael Hand, “What should we teach as controversial? A defense of the epistemic criterion,” *Educational Theory*, 58(2) (2008): 213-228.

2. More strongly, we should probably conclude that to fathom the issue as even debatable would be immoral, as Noam Chomsky has suggested even as he defended the holocaust denier, Robert Faurisson (Mark Achbar & Peter Wintonick. *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*. Zeitgeist Films, 1992.)

argues that there are no reasonable arguments against homosexuality and it is, therefore, a non-controversial issue.<sup>3</sup> Defending the epistemic criterion, Hand dismisses the behavioral criterion. However, he also dismisses a third criterion that a number of people, myself included, have tried to defend, namely the political criterion.<sup>4</sup> By the political criterion a controversy obtains when no answer to an issue is entailed in the public values of the liberal democratic state. By both the epistemic and political criteria the issue of homosexuality becomes non-controversial, although it remains unclear how other issues might fare.

In this issue, the first two articles make important contributions to the discussion on the nature of controversy, while also providing a more thorough review of the debates outlined above. While sympathetic to the epistemic criterion, Brett Bertucio, in the opening article, draws on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre to argue that contemporary moral discourse lacks the coherent body of public knowledge required for the epistemic criterion to stand. Bertucio provocatively asserts that the epistemic criterion "collapse[s] under the influence of power dynamics and mirror[s] the behavioral criterion." Helpfully, Bertucio points to some practical implications, suggesting a need for increased study in intellectual history and, drawing on Luigi Giussani, learning to compare ideas and proposals with "the elementary experience" of a need for justice and the classic transcendental.

In the second article, Paul Anders and Nicholas Shudak, note that both the behavioral and epistemic criteria (to which they also add a "social criterion") "express necessary conditions [for identifying controversial issues], though none is individually sufficient." As other critiques, they argue specifically that the epistemic criterion entails an overly modernist account of reason and rationality. In response, Anders and Shudak present a "theoretic criterion," arguing that an epistemic criterion must include an appeal to authority based on expertise and that an issue must be "prevalent in the social context of the students' lives."

I note that both of these contributions challenge the epistemic criterion of controversy, and, to my mind, they do so quite "reasonably." Thus, it may be the case that the epistemic criterion is fatally flawed to the extent that it collapses under its own weight, making the nature of controversy quite controversial. Nevertheless, this discussion is more than mere intellectual exercise. For whether there is an agreed upon criterion or a hybrid or some other approach, understanding such nuance in the nature of controversy informs pedagogy in important ways and, of course, reason is always already involved.

In this vein, the third article in this collection presents an interesting segue between the first two articles and the final four. Richard Hartsell and Susan Harden consider several controversial policy issues that demonstrate the shifting nature of controversy. Through these policy examples — specifically ability grouping and the resegregation of schools — and how schools of education have dealt with the policies, Hartsell and Harden demonstrate "the problematic nature of associating the diminishment of a controversy, what Hegel called sublation, with progress." Indeed, the seeming absence of controversy on these policy issues demonstrates regress, not progress. Pedagogically, teacher educators must channel Kierkegaard to make teachers' lives more difficult.

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3. Michael Hand, "Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?," *Theory and Research in Education*, 5(1) (2007): 69-85.

4. John E. Petrovic, "Reason, liberalism, and democratic education: A Deweyan approach to teaching about homosexuality," *Educational Theory*, 63(5) (2013): 525-541. I should note that while Hand rightly casts my earlier work as following a political criterion, this 2013 response presents a hybrid approach.

## Controversy as Pedagogy and Re-reasoning

The next four essays identify a particular controversial issue that informs how we should reason or re-reason through the issues at hand. In this vein, Adam Greteman uses perversion to prod queerness. Noting changing attitudes toward homosexuality, Greteman, as Hartsell and Harden before, recognizes the shifting nature of controversy to the extent that it is spatially and historically bounded. While Greteman invokes, implicitly at least, the behavioral criterion to understand perversion as controversial, his goal is similar to the way that Hartsell and Harden seek to rekindle controversy as a pedagogical tool to drive existential angst. Toward this end, Greteman engages a reparative reading of "perversion" to open up space to re-imagine queer education in the face of both hetero- and homonormativity. Spurring queerness with perversion, Greteman turns to the Marquis de Sade as a perverse philosopher of education who refutes reproduction in favor of perverse pedagogy.

While Greteman's primary audience is other queer theorists, the primary audience for the final three essays is teachers and teacher educators. Too often teachers consider the introduction of a controversial issue (however they determine it to be so) as a method in and of itself under the assumption that it will engender not only discussion but also thoughtful discussion. This begs a number of pedagogical concerns: how should controversial issues be introduced in schools? What practices might best serve our purpose in dealing with controversy in the first place? Is simple debate among students enough? Are there guiding principles of such debate that should be taught first and what are those? What should the role of the teacher be? Should she seek to lead students to certain understandings? If she holds that an issue about which there is disagreement betrays the epistemic criterion or the political criterion, *shouldn't* the pedagogy be leading? Such questions speak to whether or not teaching should be directive or nondirective<sup>5</sup> or even softly directive.<sup>6</sup> These essays open such pedagogical questions.

In her contribution, Mychelle Hadley Smith observes that book-banning is an indicator of what society deems to be controversial. In the case of book-banning, Hadley Smith notes that the controversial issues are largely sexual content and profanity. While I doubt that either issue would be controversial by the epistemic or political criterion (at least in the context of reading and studying literary works), they are so, implies Hadley Smith, by the behavioral criterion. But the importance of this piece lies in considering the use of controversy as a pedagogical tool (or not) and, more specifically, a particular pedagogy of controversy. On these points, Hadley Smith argues, "The existence of controversial topics must move beyond merely existing as debate and essay topics." Here she reviews several components of handling controversial issues and presents philosophical hermeneutics as a "soft-directive" pedagogy of controversy.

Alternatively, in tackling the perennial curricular controversy surrounding religion, science, and the origin of life, Ronald Lee Zigler seems to endorse a form of non-directive teaching. This is so even though there may not be a scientific debate here (following the lines of the epistemic criterion, it would seem to be "settled"). Zigler notes there are certainly philosophical and public policy debates. So, he asks, how can we engage this issue in a way that optimizes its peda-

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5. Michael Hand, response to Bryan Warnick and D. Spencer Smith in "Afterwords," *Educational Theory* 64(4) (2014): 425.

6. Bryan R. Warnick and D. Spencer Smith, "The Controversy Over Controversies: A Plea for Flexibility and for 'Soft-Directive' Teaching," *Educational Theory* 64(3) (2014): 227–244.

gological value for democratic society, without violating the establishment clause or appearing insensitive to peoples' religious convictions? Drawing adroitly on John Dewey, Zigler identifies two important obstacles to this pursuit, including the effect of emotion on reason. The issue, he concludes, must be treated "not as a scientific controversy with a clear epistemic foundation but as a metaphysical controversy." Treating a controversial issue in this way requires that students examine the underlying metaphysical assumptions to their beliefs, while gaining epistemic humility.

In the final contribution, Kelly McFaden and Sheri C. Hardee argue for a pedagogy of controversy that draws on sociological imagination and the use of autobiography. I chose to end the volume with this piece for a couple of reasons. First, the opening discussion reminds nicely of the nature of controversy presented in the first two contributions. Second, the discussion shifts us from controversy as pedagogy and back to a pedagogy of controversy. McFaden and Hardee speak specifically to the education of teachers—predominantly middle-class, white and female—around issues of race. These students often view the existence of racism and, therefore, discussion of anti-racism as controversial or, in fact, as indoctrination. McFaden and Hardee point out how this is a "false controversy" and should not be treated as a controversy (e.g., through non-directive teaching). Here the authors build on the epistemic criterion as a starting point to get students to "acknowledge their privilege and power" and to uncover their own "raced" positions. McFaden and Hardee's pedagogy of controversy begins with reflection and dialogue (rather than debate) to get students to "understand the limited relativism of their perspective."

Each of the essays in this collection challenges or at least limits to a starting point, either implicitly or explicitly, the epistemic criterion of controversy. Nevertheless, as the Holocaust example demonstrates, it is important to think through the nature of controversy. On the one hand, it is certainly both irrational and unreasonable to teach the history of the holocaust as a real controversy (i.e., non-directively) as would be directed by the behavioral criterion. On the other hand, the epistemic criterion seems to assume either that there is something like pure, objective reason or that there exist public standards of reason against which all arguments should be assessed. Perhaps this is found in the theoretic criterion. This still seems to beg the shifting, historical, and unbounded nature of controversy and, therefore, the reason (expert or not) underlying it. Hand dismisses such arguments as unpersuasive relativism.<sup>7</sup> But, then, he owes us some proposal on the origin of such standards and an argument as to why they are or should be universal and timeless. In the meantime, we owe it to students to wade through the muddy waters of the nature of controversy in order to make the best pedagogic decisions possible for our time. This requires providing, as Hand would certainly agree, students the skills of reason to understand the assumptions they bring with them to issues, the difference between good and bad arguments, and the epistemic humility to know that we might all just be wrong.

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7. Michael Hand, "Framing classroom discussion of same-sex marriage," *Educational Theory* 63(5) (2014): 497-510. See footnote #13, for example.