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Our Category Mistake: Why our Talk about Controversy is Confusing

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Introduction

"In developing our understanding of controversy and engaging with controversial issues, we have the opportunity to work towards fostering a citizenry capable of and willing to examine controversial issues in a thoughtful and reasonable fashion" (Sheppard, 2006, p. 2). A more thoughtful and reasonable citizenry, presumably, also would be adept at distinguishing between "considered judgments" and "unexamined reactions", to use Sheppard's terms. In *The Merits of Controversy*, Sheppard discusses the concept of controversy as well as the importance of engagement with controversial issues, arguing, among other things, that it is "not a vice to be avoided…but more like a worthwhile set of educational virtues" (p. 2). Further, if we encourage discussion of controversial issues in classrooms, perhaps "we can learn about the sources of our fear of disagreement and the historical problems associated with the human need for certainty" (p. 2).

Despite the many merits of controversy, however, there are serious concerns about how to approach and teach controversy in the classroom. Kasprisin (2023), for example, points out how across the political spectrum, "morally inflected demands for control of classroom conversation have made headlines [playing] a role in funding, legislation, lawsuits, campaigning, and voting choices." In short, teaching controversial issues is fraught with challenges that range from complaints and grievances to dismissal and litigation. How did a once virtuous educational aim -- discussing current events and controversial issues usually to develop critical thinking -- become a vice, or, at the very least, a virtue under threat?

To address this question, I suggest that there is significant confusion about what *counts* as controversy, and that clearing up the confusion, as well as teaching students reasoning skills to

understand the confusion, may help us to once again see the virtues of discussing controversial issues in our classrooms. Specifically, I argue that we make what Ryle (1949) terms a *category mistake* when we confuse a mere difference of *opinion* with a genuine controversy. Further, that we make this category mistake allows for and is exacerbated by social media and "cancel culture," both of which thrive from so-called "fake controversies" where anyone can gain instant attention, notoriety, fame, and money.

Attempting to correct the "mistake," as well as drawing closer attention to the motives of those continuing to make the mistake, I conclude that education requires a sharp refocusing on critical thinking, and what Siegel (1991) calls "critical spiritedness." Such a refocusing would help students to more clearly distinguish between that which is genuinely controversial and that which is performative, as well as perhaps return the concept of controversy to its rightful virtuous status.

The Mistake

History of the category mistake

Philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) suggests an error in our thinking – a category mistake – when we confuse something as being in one category when it properly belongs in another category. Or, as Blackburn (1994) puts it, presenting an issue in such a manner where "things belonging to a particular category are presented as if they belong to a different category" (p. 58). Though Ryle's term is used in the context of critiquing the mind-body problem (Dualism) by pointing out the category mistake we make concerning the mind, the term is also useful to discuss the error and subsequent confusion as to what constitutes a genuine controversy. My use of Ryle, then, is not to engage in the mind-body debate, but rather use his work to help explain what a category mistake *is*.

In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle (1949) argues that we make a category mistake when we assume, as Dualists do, that a person has both a mind and a body, and that minds and bodies are not only separate, but they are also both *things*. Critiquing this view, Ryle writes that, "bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space" and that "bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers" (p. 11). Minds, on the other hand, "are not in space nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws…[nor are they] witnessable by other observers" (p. 11). Ryle summarizes that the mind-body problem is just "…one big mistake…a mistake of a special kind…a category-mistake [representing] the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one…category…when they actually belong to another" (p. 15). As Ryle later explains, because, in his view, mind is a *concept* and not a *thing*, we make a mistake when we categorize *concepts*, which are abstract and unobservable, into the category of *objects* or *things*, which are empirical and observable.

Ryle goes on to use several examples that illustrate ways in which we make category mistakes. One such example is his description of "team spirit." He outlines a thought experiment where a foreigner watching a cricket game sees the different positions of people in the game (e.g., umpires, batsmen, fielders), but comments that he cannot see the person in the position of team spirit. Ryle's point here is that the observer fails to understand that team spirit is a *concept* and not a *thing* that can be observed like a batter or an umpire. Importantly, team spirit is an entirely different *category* and as such, the observer has made a "category mistake." It is worth repeating here that explaining Ryle's use of the term *category mistake* is not to debate the mind-body problem, but rather to apply his idea to current confusion and difficulties we are having with controversy.

Mistaking contrary opinions for controversy

Considering Ryle's term, educators in particular, and citizens in general, might consider that we make a category mistake, perhaps unwittingly, when we categorize differences of *opinion* as a *controversy*. Further, as mentioned, the situation where we might mistake contrary opinions for, and improperly categorize them as, genuine controversies is exacerbated by social media and cancel culture -- both of which thrive from so-called fake controversies, from which anyone can gain instant notoriety and money.

To explore this particular category mistake, we might first heed Hand's (2008) cautioning words in *What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion*: "Teaching something as controversial is properly contrasted with teaching it as settled or resolved" (p. 213), and that, "whether or not a topic *ought* to be taught as controversial is plainly a different question from whether or not it is ordinarily described as controversial" (p. 214). It is important to examine, then, what counts as a genuine controversy, or as Sheppard (2006) puts it, "[a] first step might be to distinguish between what controversy 'is' and what it 'is not'" (p. 1). To this distinction I now turn.

"To understand controversy is to learn to think about controversial issues from alternative points of view" (Sheppard, 2006, p. 1). The alternate points of view, I would add, ought to (a) be based on fact, and not just on opinion; (b) be reasoned and not just conjecture; and (c) not be demonstrably false. As Dearden (1996) suggests, "a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason" (p. 131). And by "reason" here, Dearden means views that adhere to a "criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures." Simply put, if there is a difference of opinion, or a number of different perspectives, about an issue, such opinions or perspectives must be grounded in reason for there to be a

genuine controversy. It is important to note that Dearden is not addressing the *right* to hold or voice a certain opinion on an issue, nor the right to adopt or voice a certain perspective on an issue. Some might even argue that such rights *are,* or at least ought to be, "non-controversial." But Dearden's point here is that in order for there to be a genuine controversy, the different perspectives expressed must be *reasoned*.

While critiquing some of Dearden's argument, Hand (2008) concurs with Dearden that a genuine controversy requires reasoned views, and that there are certainly merits in teaching students to use reason and think rationally, ostensibly, among other reasons, to assess claims that constitute a controversy. In his "amendments and expansions" to Dearden's argument, for example, Hand writes that Dearden's argument is "along the right lines":

> …the central aim of education is to equip students with a capacity for, and inclination to, rational thought and action…[and] engagement in practical and theoretical reasoning is both intrinsically rewarding and the most effective means of securing a wide range of individual and social goods. By enabling young people to think and act rationally we optimize their prospects of leading flourishing lives (p. 219).

Hand goes on to argue, supporting Dearden's definition of what counts as controversial, that

> [b]ecause the central aim of education is to nurture rational thought and action, and because this involves actively encouraging students to accept claims when, and only when, they are supported by epistemically adequate evidence and arguments, the issues we ought to teach as controversial are precisely those on which "contrary views can be held without those views being contrary to reason" (p. 219).

Given the requirement that a genuine controversy requires reasoned views, it is worthwhile noting here that *having a reason,* or reasons, for an opinion is different from having a *reasoned* opinion. I might, for example, hold an opinion because my mother told me it was true, or because a celebrity I admire claimed it was true. While my mother or the celebrity may be correct in their claims, the point is that using my mother's or a celebrity's endorsement as my *reason* for an opinion is different from having an opinion I reach through *reasoning* (e.g.,

assessing, analyzing, evaluating, judging). As Dearden suggests, individuals might disagree about whether or not the earth is flat. Indeed, there are some who belong to *The Flat Earth Society*. But such a disagreement is not a genuine controversy. While one who opines that the earth is flat may very well have *reasons* for holding such an opinion, the opinion that the earth is flat is not derived from employing reason and is easily proven false. Were one to categorize this particular dispute of *opinion* about the flatness or not of the earth as a *controversy* then, the category mistake is obvious. The mistake is similarly obvious if one were to consider a dispute of *opinion* over whether or not Elvis Presley is still alive as a *controversy*. It is not a controversy, as the contrary view that Elvis Presley is alive is not a reasoned view and is clearly false.

These are obvious - even humorous - examples of mistaking a difference of opinion for controversy but in other cases, where the political, social and emotional stakes are significant, the mistake may be more difficult to admit. Consider the Keegstra case (Elman, 1990) in Canada, for example, where history teacher, James Keegstra, taught his students that the Holocaust was a fraud, or the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, where some claimed that Donald J. Trump won. In both the Keegstra case and the Trump case, there is *no genuine controversy* despite the so-called different perspectives. In the Keegstra case, with moral repugnance noted, the claim that the Holocaust was a fraud is not grounded in reason, fact or truth. Similarly, numerous legal cases, often decided by Trump-appointed judges, no less, demonstrated that the claim Trump won the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election is not grounded in reason or fact, and is demonstrably false.

Notably, making the category mistake of confusing differences of opinion with controversy can have far reaching consequences, including horrific violence and even war. Unlike the prior examples, *The Flat Earth Society* and Elvis Presley, where exposing the category mistake is usually met with concession and even amusement, these latter examples

highlight the pressing need for educators in particular to help students to (a) distinguish the mistake of categorizing differences of opinion with controversy; and (b) learn and practice the reasoning skills necessary to expose *irrational* opinions, held by self and others, that typically underpin racist, sexist, bigoted, conspiratorial, and extremist views. The importance of doing so will be discussed later in the paper, but at this point in the discussion, it is worth examining the possible reasons *why* we might be making the category mistake in the first place.

Why we make the mistake: the noble and ignoble reasons

The reasons *why* we might be mistaking differences of opinion for controversy can be attributed to a number of possible factors. Some might sincerely believe that viewing and labeling an issue as controversial or as a controversy, for example, has more sway and grants the issue its due seriousness, rather than simply viewing the issue as "just a difference of opinions." Or, individuals or groups of individuals may legitimately and nobly seek social justice for those suffering from poverty, sexism, or racism, as examples. I use the word "nobly" here to denote those acting in a manner worthy of respect and honor, those *genuinely* wishing to and *intending* to make a positive difference in the lives of others. In this sense, making the category mistake seems less egregious than those who might be purposely or knowingly mistaking differences of opinion for controversy for *ignoble* reasons -- fame, influence, and monetary profit – all of which are exacerbated by our increasing reliance on social media for our news and sometimes questionable "information." Importantly, those making the mistake for ignoble reasons also contribute to the creation of so-called "fake controversies," often having little concern for the confusion they cause nor, in some cases, the violence they foment.

The noble mistake

Sometimes we mistakenly categorize differences of opinion as a controversy for noble reasons. Such reasons include, but are not limited to, a desire to elevate the issue beyond simply varying opinions; or, a lack of interest in the *labelling* of the issue as opinion versus controversy, and more of an interest in genuinely making a difference in the lives of those less fortunate (such as victims of violence, racism or sexism, refugees, the mentally ill, or children in poverty); or, a general desire for justice where a perceived injustice has occurred. To this latter more general point, psychologist Melvin Lerner's (1980) *Just World Hypothesis* offers quite a useful explanation to help us further understand some of the noble reasons for making the category mistake. As Andre & Velasquez (2015) explain the *Just World Hypothesis*:

> According to the hypothesis, people have a strong desire or need to believe that the world is an orderly, predictable, and just place, where people get what they deserve. Such a belief plays an important function in our lives since in order to plan our lives or achieve our goals, we need to assume that our actions will have predictable consequences.

The authors go on to note that "when we encounter evidence suggesting that the world is *not* just, we quickly act to restore justice by helping the victim" and further, that such views of the world are "continually reinforced in the ubiquitous fairy tales, fables, comic books, cop shows and other morality tales of our culture, in which good is always rewarded and evil punished." With this psychological background in mind, and given how some may indeed be genuinely or nobly motivated to seek justice for others, if a category mistake *is* made, it is certainly both forgivable and understandable. Further, one might correctly point out here that if one is mistakenly categorizing an issue as controversial when it is not, such a mistake in this context may very well have little to no relevance to the recipient(s) benefiting from the broader pro-social action. This is all very different, however, from those who might deliberately and apathetically categorize something as controversial knowing full well that the claims they are asserting are neither

grounded in fact nor in reason, thereby being purposely untruthful and propagating a fake controversy. It is this type of mistake that I now address.

The ignoble mistake

It is important to repeat here Dearden's requirement that in order for something to be controversial, any contrary opinions held on the issue must be based on reason and, therefore, be factual and not demonstrably false. Further, as noted earlier, while those who hold contrary opinions that are *not* based on reason or fact, arguably, have the *right* to such opinions, holding such opinions does *not* constitute genuine controversies.

Along with mistaking a difference of opinion for controversy, the *performative* is also mistakenly categorized as *controversial*. Worrisome is the fact that some take advantage of this particular type of confusion and, sometimes with sinister motives, actually encourage the mistake in order to gain fame, become an "influencer," or get rich. To make matters worse, social media platforms provide an ideal medium for "fake controversies" to flourish.

With surprisingly little to no regard for making claims based on reason and facts, we are seeing an uptick in politicians, celebrities, and individuals becoming influencers, engaging in performative stunts, and brazenly taking advantage of an unsuspecting citizenry inclined to mistake such performances for controversy. As Jones & Trice (2020) caution, "social networks have evolved into a platform for fake news and propaganda, empowering disruptive voices, ideologies, and messages" where social media platforms "hold the potential to alter civic engagement." Citing McCoy (2016), Vicario et al. (2016) and Engesser et al. (2017), the authors also note that "…research found that social media favor sensationalist content, regardless of whether the message was fact-checked or not" and that anyone can "present uncontested or unvetted ideas directly to their audience and articulate their ideology." Further describing those

who take advantage of social media to purposely promote "fake controversy," Jones & Trice (2020) describe the tactics of polarizing, creating conflict, sewing discord and feigning outrage:

> …societies are politically polarized in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", "Us" versus "They", or "citizens" versus "immigrants". The official political *performance* reflects people's general will to forcefully reflect their sovereignty. [This is] a springboard for people to identify a common antagonist/enemy believed to be the perpetrator even if this entails the use of fake news.

Not only do fake controversies flood social media, but they are also potentially profitable. As Lieber (2018) writes, performances by influencers "…with up to 1 million followers can get $10,000 [per post], depending on the platform" and that some celebrities "command $100,000 for posts on YouTube or Instagram." Suciu (2019) warns that "[t]he 'influence' that social media influencers have is already quite powerful, but it is only likely to grow in the coming years… $15 billion by 2022," and that with regard to fact checking claims or vetting information, "there is almost no oversight on how influencers operate – despite the fact that they are paid for their 'work' on social media platforms."

It cannot be overstated here how powerful the social media platform is as a venue to promote knowingly false, irrational claims, and for the performative to be presented as a genuine controversy. Citing Professor James R. Bailey, for example, Suciu (2019) writes that, "[n]ever has Marshall McLuhan's (1966) famous phrase 'The medium is the message' been more apropos than with today's social media," explaining how "[t]he medium…allows bullying and deceit" and that "[t]he nature of the medium allows for the intentional or unintentional distortion of the message." Indeed, there are those who intentionally use deceit and distortion - who knowingly present in a performative way false information, unreasoned claims, and fake controversies - simply for clicks, followers, influence and money. As a result, it is no wonder that we have an "unarmed" citizenry, increasingly reliant on social media, and understandably mistaking the

performative as evidence of a controversy. To these points, one might consider the recent social media flap regarding Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America," wherein a lack of vetting, among other things, on social media, enabled a "fake controversy" to be accepted as a genuine controversy, and to go viral.

Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America"

Harwell & Bisset (2023), in their article, *How Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America" reached millions online*, discuss how "the letter's spread…reflected the bedeviling realities of modern social media, where young people…share and receive information on fast-paced smartphone apps designed to make videos go viral, regardless of their content." That the issue was falsely categorized as a controversy is evidenced by the numerous articles naming it such, including, for example, Ohlheiser's & Li Zhou's (2023) headline, *The Controversy over TikTok and Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America," explained: Why bin Laden's 2002 letter became the latest TikTok moral panic."* This false categorization, that the TikTok discussion over bin Laden's letter constituted a genuine controversy, nonetheless reached and convinced millions. As Harwell & Bisset (2023) note regarding discussion of "Letter to America" on the popular social media platform, journalist Yashar Ali's TikTok video compilation posted on X was "viewed more than 38 million times…[but] when TikTok announced it had banned the hashtag and dozens of similar variations, TikTok videos tagged #lettertoamerica had gained more than 15 million views."

Noteworthy here, and framing the TikTok ban response as evidence of a "controversy," Harwell & Bissett (2023) point out that because of the ban, "the letter's spread sparked a deluge of commentary, with some worrying that TikTok's users were being radicalized by a terrorist manifesto, and [other] TikTok critics arguing it was evidence that the application, owned by the

Chinese tech giant ByteDance, had been secretly boosting propaganda to a captive audience of American youth."

Further framing and mis-categorizing difference of opinions on TikTok as a genuine controversy, Harwell & Bissett (2023) point out that on the one hand, some TikTok videos "featured many people saying they'd known little about bin Laden…questioning what they'd been taught about American involvement around the world," with one poster suggesting that '[w]e've been lied to our entire lives,'" while on the other hand, different TikTok videos criticized Generation Zers' failure to understand bin Laden's letter's "…more extreme criticism of Western immorality and debauchery, including acts of fornication, homosexuality, intoxicants, gambling and trading with interest." And notably, Harwell & Bissett (2023) include comments from a specialist in Islamist militant affairs, Charlie Winter, who is rightly concerned with the airing of obviously uninformed opinions that lack facts and historical context: "[I was] surprised at the response to the letter…[as it is] a kind of core doctrinal text for both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State terrorist group."

Considering this example, it is helpful here to return to the criteria for a genuine controversy, as discussed at the beginning of the paper: that, among other things, alternative points of view ought to (a) be based on fact, not just opinion; (b) be reasoned, not just conjecture; and (c) not be demonstrably false. With particular attention to the first two criteria, the discussion of the "Letter to America" example reveals that there are clearly differences of opinion posted on social media, but such opinions are not necessarily grounded in fact and are sometimes not reasoned but are just conjecture. Also noteworthy is that the differences of opinion in this example reveal (a) a lack of critical thinking; (b) the consequences of being ill-informed and taking things out of context; and (c) the influence of social media on our lives.

Considering such revelations, one could argue that the mistaking of differences of opinion for a genuine controversy here are *noble,* i.e., with no malicious intent, and perhaps even a genuine desire to be supportive of the Palestinian people. This can be contrasted, however, with *ignoble* reasons, where some may have *knowingly* "mistaken" the differences of opinion for a genuine controversy, such as trolling for influential, performative and/or financial benefit, or stoking fears of conspiracies about the Chinese government for political notoriety, likes, clicks and general influence.

In short, online discussion about the letter does not warrant labeling it a genuine controversy, and it is a category mistake - for noble or ignoble reasons. But it certainly *appears* to be a controversy, if one holds that a simple difference of opinion creates a controversial issue. Given such an example, then, how do we prepare our citizenry to (a) combat the barrage of misinformation and manipulation; (b) detect irrational claims and false assertions; and (c) attempt to correct the mistakes we make when categorizing differing opinions or performances as controversies? In addressing these concerns, we might ultimately return the engagement with controversy and the examination of controversial issues to their virtuous status and rightful place in civic discourse - particularly in our classrooms.

A possible correction and final thoughts

Teaching children critical thinking and reasoning have long been educational aims, certainly for educators, and also for parents. Arguably, there is a lot of *talk* in education about the importance of critical thinking, but not as much attention is paid to the development and practice of reasoning – analyzing, evaluating, and judging the soundness and validity of arguments, for example. Telling students *to be* critical thinkers and *to use* reason when making judgements, for example, is quite different from teaching students *how* to be critical thinkers, *how* to use reason,

and giving them significant time to practice analyzing, evaluating, and judging claims and arguments.

Again, returning to Dearden's argument that for something to be controversial, opposing views must be based on reason, and given the mistakes we can make when improperly categorizing differences of opinion and/or performances as controversies, a renewed and sharp refocusing of *how* to use reason to assess claims seems appropriate. The work of philosopher of education, Harvey Siegel, in this area is particularly helpful to educators wishing to revisit and refocus their commitment to the teaching of critical thinking and creating new, reasoned classroom discussions of truly controversial issues.

The critical spirit

Siegel (1985) argues in *Educating Reason: Critical Thinking, Informal Logic, and the Philosophy of Education* that "critical thinking is not just a good or useful addition to the curriculum…[it] is…absolutely fundamental to our educational endeavors" (p. 78). One of those educational endeavors ought to include students having the necessary reasoning skills to distinguish a controversy from a non-controversy, to distinguish between the performative and the controversial, and to distinguish between contrary but unreasoned opinions and genuine controversies.

Siegel (1991) notes in *The Generalizability of Critical Thinking* that critical thinking consists of two components. One component is *reason assessment* that concerns "abilities and skills relevant to the proper understanding and assessment of reasons, claims and arguments" (p. 18). The other component is *critical spirit* that concerns "a willingness and tendency to reconsider one's beliefs and to examine their justifiedness," a "set of dispositions, attitudes, habits of mind and character traits constructive of that spirit, which conduce to the exercise of

those skills and abilities" (Siegel, 2001, p. 186). By practicing the reason assessment piece, one develops critical spiritedness. Of significance here is the *practicing* of reason assessment. That is, learning *how* to assess claims and arguments is key to developing one's ability to reason. As previously mentioned, however, more attention must be given to the specific teaching and practicing of such skills.

Before turning to this priority, it is worth mentioning here why, possibly, despite the importance placed on critical thinking in any teaching training program, and despite teachers valuing critical thinking as a necessary learning objective in any lesson they teach, that something seems lost in translation. Students struggle to *critically* assess and evaluate the soundness and validity of claims, particularly when such claims are counter, for example, to their own personal beliefs. Why might this be? Perhaps because key elements of what it means to *be* a critical thinker and how to teach critical thinking have been left out of our discussions … with consequences for both understanding what counts as a controversy, and the subsequent teaching of controversy in the classroom.

Principled thinking, critical attitude, and critical manner

Along with his two components of critical thinking, reason assessment and critical spiritedness, Harvey Siegel (1980), in *Critical Thinking as an Educational Ideal*, also discusses the importance of *principled thinking, critical attitude* and *critical manner* - concepts that are, arguably, perhaps absent in the discussion and teaching of critical thinking both in teacher training programs and in teachers' own classrooms. Describing the critical thinker as one who "seeks reasons on which to base her assessment, evaluation, or judgment," the critical thinker also seeks reasons "to recognize and commit oneself to *principles* governing such activity," making critical thinking "*principled* thinking" (p. 2). Siegel (1980) goes on to argue that teachers

"need to teach students how reasons are assessed, what principles govern such assessment, and why (we think) such principles are to be adhered to" (p. 3). Principled thinking is an important concept, and it may be that we, as educators, have become accustomed to teaching critical thinking as more about "looking at all perspectives" or "considering different points of view" rather than as a way of thinking that is rooted in a commitment to principles, standards, and ethics, as Siegel (1980) suggests.

This recognition and commitment to principled thinking then leads to what Siegel (1980) terms a *critical attitude*, where the student is not just developing "an ability to seek reasons, but a commitment to seek reasons; not simply an ability to judge impartially, but a willingness to so judge, even when impartial judgment is not in one's self interest" (p. 4). Importantly, a critical attitude demands that students and teachers be open to accepting claims that may be counter to their own personal beliefs or interests - an attitude that requires a significant level of experience, maturity and practiced open-mindedness.

Siegel (1980) goes on to stress the importance of *critical manner* on the part of a teacher. As he writes,

> The critical manner is that manner of teaching that reinforces the critical spirit. A teacher who utilizes the critical manner…always recognizes the right of the student to question and demand reasons; and consequently, recognizes an obligation to provide reasons [herself] whenever demanded. The critical manner thus demands of a teacher…to reveal our reasons to the student and, by so doing, to submit them [for] evaluation and criticism. Teaching in the critical manner is thus teaching so as to develop in the students, skills and attitudes consonant with critical thinking. (pp. 6-7).

A teacher's critical manner then, is a kind of "modeling" of what it is to be a critical thinker, where she is willing to hold up her own views for scrutiny, where she allows difficult conversations to be had and difficult questions to be posed, where she resists censoring or silencing uncomfortable, even offensive or "unsafe" views to some, that nonetheless may be

reasoned views and part of a genuine controversy. She allows such views to be aired and shared, importantly, so as to be *evaluated* and *critiqued* herself, as well as to allow students' views to be evaluated and critiqued by other students. It is important to note here that teachers may, understandably, be unwilling to develop in themselves and teach to their students such a critical manner, especially considering today's volatile political climate, parental concerns, litigious realities, and our current problem of categorizing differences of opinion as genuine controversies. That said, the absence of a focus on significant, related concepts to critical thinking - such as principled thinking, critical attitude and critical manner - may explain some of the reasons why, despite the importance placed on teaching critical thinking in the classroom (ironically enough, sometimes as a justification to navigate the discussion of controversial issues), students are left lacking in their ability to *be* critical thinkers as they seek to understand controversial issues, often through their chosen platform, which is social media. To this lack, as it relates specifically to teaching controversy in the classroom, I now turn and conclude the paper.

Teaching critical thinking

Bailin and Battersby (2016) argue that "students tend to have very little instruction in how to go about the inquiry process and in understanding the criteria used to make reasoned judgments," and point out that, "inquiry is not just an exercise in data gathering but also involves evaluation…of information and arguments" (p. 7). Evaluation of information and arguments requires students to be taught (a) terms such as soundness and validity; (b) how to assess claims for any logical fallacies; and (c) how to detect any emotional and psychological biases. With regard to controversy, in particular, the authors dedicate significant time in their book, *Reason in the Balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking*, to the teaching of reasoning and

assessing "various sides of an issue." As they write, "…that an issue is controversial means that there is some debate on it. Thus, there will be a variety of positions or views on such an issue" (p. 186). They offer one caution, however: "but a debate involves more than just the statement of positions. It also means that arguments and evidence will have been brought forward to support these positions" (p. 186). As a result, students should learn that arguments and evidence for alternative positions in a controversy must be carefully analyzed before making a reasoned judgment. As the authors note, making a reasoned judgment "…involves making a comparative assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of competing views" (p. 187).

Bailin and Battersby (2016) also note the importance of teaching "fair-mindedness" in critical thinking, where "we are willing not only to consider opposing views but also to make unbiased and impartial judgments about these views" (p. 20). Students should be encouraged to have a "respect for reason" when assessing opposing views, including "a concern for the truth and accuracy…a willingness to follow arguments and reasoning wherever they lead, [and] a desire to act on the basis or reason" (p. 20).

Describing in detail *how* to critically analyze claims and arguments, as well as providing scenarios for students to practice what they learn, Bailin and Battersby's work not only echoes Siegel in the importance of developing reason assessment, critical spirit, principled thinking, critical attitude and critical manner, but it is also an excellent resource for educators to help students become good critical thinkers. Finally, teaching students how to be better critical thinkers means they are more likely to use reason in their discussions of controversial issues, more likely to distinguish genuine controversies from fake ones, and, importantly, less likely to make the category mistake of confusing differences of opinion with controversy.

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