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Book Review: Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts by Glenn Y. Bezalel

Martha Perez-Mugg
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, marthap2@illinois.edu

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Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts

By Glenn Y. Bezalel

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Review: Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts

Martha Perez-Mugg, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Critiquing a contemporary educational atmosphere where educators evade sensitive topics and aim to eliminate classroom controversy, Glenn Bezalel's book, *Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts*, offers a substantive theoretical and practical blueprint for reintroducing important and timely controversial issues into the classroom. Couching the purpose of his text in offering educators tangible advice for exploring some of the most pressing and controversial topics of the moment, Bezalel provides a two-part guide for combatting rampant misinformation in the classroom through a commitment to addressing controversy through education. Diving into substantive philosophical theorizing around the necessity of teaching controversial topics, the criteria for determining if a topic is controversial, and different approaches to addressing controversy as an educator, the book offers a foundation in theory to encourage educators to commit to teaching controversial issues. Providing numerous examples and stories across the first few chapters, Bezalel makes the case that meaningful discourse and engagement across lines of difference are essential for both the moral and epistemic aims of education.

In the first half of the text, Bezalel raises important theoretical questions underlying the practice of teaching controversy, including why we may or may not have an obligation to teach controversy in the classroom. Calling attention to contemporary trends that encourage interlocutors to refuse debate over some topics and *cancel* others who share problematic viewpoints, Bezalel asks readers to consider the impact of disengagement with these viewpoints. Articulating the importance of discourse as an educational tool, Bezalel suggests that the classroom is an essential venue for disagreement and debate over significant and timely issues. Describing the multitude of criteria offered in educational philosophy to determine which topics are controversial (and for what reasons), he offers several frameworks for determining how to approach different topics. Then, diving into more educational distinctions, Bezalel describes different pedagogical approaches for engagement with controversy, providing theoretical reasons for which educators might choose particular stances over others. Distinguishing between directive and non-directive teaching, he offers both guidance for when to adopt certain instructional approaches and provides reasoning for why each approach might fit best. Next, offering multiple different *teacher stances* (as Bezalel calls them), Bezalel describes pedagogical ways that teachers might approach classroom content that is controversial. In the final portion of the first part of the text, he provides materials for a course on critical thinking in relation to controversial topics. Here he offers both content from the behavioral sciences as well as classic logic into an easily digestible course sequence for the classroom. This serves as a precursor to engaging in discussion around particular topics as it offers students important foundational skills necessary to support productive discourse.

In the second half of the text, Bezalel provides educators with both a general pedagogical blueprint for approaching controversy and substantial guidance regarding teaching individual controversies. There is significant attention paid to formatting, making the text easy to read and use for educators with limited time. Beginning with a “practical guide to controversy” (p.p. 73-86), Bezalel offers guidance around educational practices that will serve teachers well in the context of teaching classroom controversy, including ways to bolster student oracy, foster critical thinking, and guide students through Socratic questioning. Next, he dives into specific controversial issues that often arise within the K-12 classroom, providing significant guidance around background knowledge the teacher might need, specific pedagogical approaches, and other considerations unique to each topic. For those educators interested in understanding more about the theoretical aspects of each topic, Bezalel includes further theoretical considerations at the end of each section. Topics vary significantly in how controversial they are (from whether Santa Claus is *really* real to whether trans women are women) and are approached differently based on the perceived reception within the classroom. Overall, the layout of the guides makes this section valuable for teachers who may need to teach other topics that are not included in the text, as it offers significant general guidance that might apply to any topic a teacher might need to broach.

Teaching Classroom Controversies is an important and timely pedagogical guide for approaching challenging conversations in the classroom that offers substantial guidance to educators feeling uneasy about broaching sensitive topics in their classrooms. Bezalel is sensitive to the political nature of many of the topics he includes and considers possible challenges that might arise for teachers in the context of the United Kingdom or United States. It is worth noting that this text is centered around these educational contexts and may not be as supportive for educators in other cultural and political contexts. Further, readers from the United States may want to consider current bodies of legislation occurring in their teaching contexts that may explicitly bar engagement with some of these topics in the classroom. While the text offers substantial pedagogical guidance for educators who are ready and able to engage controversy in the classroom, little consideration is given to the political and social contexts in which teachers are silenced from broaching these important questions. Moreover, educators feeling social and political pressures to avoid these topics might struggle to understand how to combat these forces in the name of supporting students’ development and engagement with these important topics. However, for educators who are able to engage in these meaningful discussions, Bezalel’s approach to preparing for controversial discourse in the classroom and using these discourses to build critical thinking capacities in students is extremely timely and meaningful.

While this book offers a helpful overview of theory in the first section, this text seems best suited for readers who are interested in bridging theory and pedagogy in classroom spaces. Educators who are seeking course guidance, exemplars, and theoretical grounding will be best served by *Teaching Classroom Controversies*. Nonetheless, for scholars and theorists who are searching for an effective example of how to synthesize years of theorizing to offer practical guidance, this book might serve as a strong exemplar for this scholarly approach. All in all, with its timely examples, easily accessible formatting, and theoretical backing, this book is most appropriate for anyone searching for practical classroom guidance around how to best facilitate controversial discourse.