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EDITORIAL

Facilitating Discussions of Controversial Issues in Difficult Times

Lorraine Kasprisin, Editor

Although the *Journal of Educational Controversy* has covered many different educational controversies since its founding in 2006, we have never devoted an entire issue to just the topic of controversy itself. Volume 16 now addresses the theme: Facilitating Discussions of Controversial Issues in Difficult Times.

This issue posed the following controversial scenario for authors to address:

Controlling speech in classrooms has been an issue for as long as there have been schools. Who gets to speak, what they are allowed to say, what counts as a legitimate topic for discussion, and what constitutes *truth* have always been determined by the economic and political processes that control education. Recently, these processes have become the subject of public debate and political controversy. From both the putative right and the putative left, morally inflected demands for control of classroom conversation have made headlines and have played a role in funding, legislation, lawsuits, campaigning, and voting choices. Bans on certain words, trigger warnings, a shift from politics to psychology, a focus on trauma, fear of certain theories (usually those with *critical* in their title), the struggle for control of historical narratives, the censorship of invited speaker, and the framing of identities have all become part of the discussion of what can and cannot be said in a classroom, what will and won't get funded, and who can be fired for speech.

We invite authors to bring clarity and illumination to these issues from a conceptual, philosophical, historical, and political perspective and to offer ideas about actual classroom practices.

What do we mean by *a controversy*? Do all differences of opinion count as legitimate controversies? What purpose does the discussion of controversies play in the education of democratic citizens?

What are some effective practices in the teaching for complexity through the classroom discussion of controversial issues in the different disciplines—literature, science, social studies, history, environmental studies, mathematics, political science, economics, psychology, the arts and theater, etc.

What is the legitimate scope of decision-making by teachers and librarians based on professional knowledge, by the democratic control of education through state legislatures and governors, by local vs. state authority, by the rights and concerns of parents.

Authors have addressed the scenario utilizing a number of approaches. There are papers aimed at bringing clarity to our use of the term itself. What makes something controversial? Does any

conflict of ideas constitute a controversy? What is the purpose of bringing controversies into our classrooms? Do all differences of opinion count as a controversy for educational purposes? Or do we need to develop a normative conceptualization of the concept that is helpful for educational purposes? If so, what would it be? One of our authors examines the concept of controversy itself and starts off our exploration of the topic with a philosophical analysis. For the author, not every difference of opinion is a controversy that serves an educational purpose. It must meet certain criteria which the author examines in her paper. While getting clear about how we are using language might be the hallmark of a scholarly journal, it also has real life consequences. In our current climate of legislative bans and proscriptions on what can be talked about in classrooms, a misguided directive was sent out to teachers mandating that they teach both sides when they teach about the Holocaust. Stories started to appear in national publications and broadcasts like the [*New York Times*](#), the [*Washington Post*](#), [CNN](#), [NBC](#), [NBC2](#) and others that described the consequences on the fate of a teacher who questioned the mandate to teach both sides of the Holocaust. We began to realize that our topic on *Facilitating Discussions of Controversial Issues in Difficult Times* was going to have to begin with some deep conceptual analysis of what we are talking about.

But teaching controversies in difficult times has also required us to think about actual practices. Teachers were asking how they were to teach with integrity without violating legislative and school policies mandating that they avoid any divisive concepts and any ideas that could make students uncomfortable. Several articles in this issue describe effective practices that can teach for complexity, examine alternative perspectives, and expose underlying cultural and institutional structures that work against teaching for social justice and inclusion. The effective use of case methods and biographic storytelling are explored. Moreover, authors were able to reveal ways such teaching might also act as *workarounds* to the *pushbacks* that they are experiencing from state mandates and political pressures.

While teachers were struggling, so were administrators. One author reexamines the notion of educational leadership that is required in dealing with controversies in difficult and uncertain times. Rather than controlling speech, as legislative bans on divisive concepts do when conflicts and controversies arise, the author develops a concept of critical literacy that enables school leaders to respond to a crisis by learning to read the landscape from a moral, political, cultural and spatial-temporal literacy and respond in a more nuanced and democratic way.

Finally, one author discusses ways to facilitate discussions of controversies on the university level. While a common goal for having students engage with controversies is to improve their critical thinking skills, the author points us to deeper purposes. He asks us to consider the kinds of dispositions that are needed to be a rational and critical thinker, dispositions like humility to question our deepest assumptions, openness to the other's point of view, respect for those with whom we might disagree. In an educational environment that often focuses on teaching goals that can be immediately measured and quantified, we can too easily neglect to teach for the very virtues that create a meaningful life and a civil society.

Below are the authors' abstracts of the papers that are published in this issue:

Our Category Mistake: Why our Talk about Controversy is Confusing, Shannon Rodgers
(Western Washington University)

There is significant confusion about what counts as controversy, and 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 Gilbert 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.

Biographic Storytelling Classrooms as a Workaround to Critical Race Theory Pushback,
Lisa M. Perhamus (Grand Valley State University)

This article argues for biographic-storytelling classrooms—spaces where counter-narratives thrive, lived experience is valued, contexts are considered, and oppression is resisted. It considers how PK-12 teachers and professors can facilitate anti-racism learning environments in settings that deny structural racism. Current cultural and political pushback in the United States to the supposed use of critical race theory in education is making it harder for teachers to teach with an equity lens. Biographic storytelling offers a sense of critical hope and metaphoric nourishment for both students and teachers to thrive with their full humanity despite the toxicity of these culturally and politically divisive times.

Applying Relational Pedagogy in Teacher Education: Using the Case Method to Analyze Controversial Issues, Chloe Bolyard (Missouri State University), Amber K. Howard (Missouri State University - Springfield), Stacie Finley (Missouri State University)

The case method in teacher preparation allows teacher candidates to analyze real-life scenarios by applying theoretical ideas (e.g., relational pedagogy and equity literacy) to professional practice. Researchers have found that the case method deepens critical thinking abilities and problem-solving skills. Further, analyzing cases enables teacher candidates to consider multiple perspectives, to practice seeing the complexity of classroom and school conditions, and to evaluate various responses to controversial issues happening in schools. In this conceptual piece, we detail the following: 1) a brief overview of the uses of and research on the impact of the case method in teacher preparation on teacher candidates’ beliefs, practices, and student outcomes; 2) the tenets of relational pedagogy as outlined by Hinsdale (2016); 3) four case analysis methods; 4) and three teacher educators’ experiences using the case method through a relational pedagogy approach to address controversial issues with teacher candidates.

Conflict, Crisis, and Controversy in Schools: Critical Literacy for Educational Leadership Response and Responsibility, Charles L. Lowery (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University)

In this article, I operationalize the concept of critical literacy for educational leaders facing conflict, crisis, and controversy in PK12 schools. Specifically, an emphasis is placed on political, moral, cultural, and spatial-temporal literacies. School leaders can develop these habits of criticality to shape unconventional and nuanced responses that are better suited for leading schools as democratic spaces in a politically polarized and socially divided society. Just as readers learn to decode and comprehend written texts to become literate, critically literate educational leaders are equipped to decode the cultural texts of contentious situations and comprehend the meaning of critical incidents through inferencing and drawing conclusions for decision making. In conclusion, practical recommendations based on the critical literacies are offered as possible means to counter the external tendencies to control speech and to instead facilitate open dialogues about conflict, crisis, and controversy in difficult and uncertain times.

Connecting through Controversy: Disagreement as Respect, Paul Chen (Western Washington University)

Educators praise the benefits and virtues of teaching students how to discuss controversial topics with their peers with civility and respect. But in addition to developing these deliberative skills and intellectual dispositions, I suggest that a further goal of using controversial discussions as a pedagogy (CDAP) is to help students cultivate a respectful form of disagreement with others, openness to hearing opposing viewpoints, greater self-awareness of their own biases, and ultimately recognizing mutual integrity in everyone, including in those with whom they disagree. In this paper, I first discuss why and then describe how I use CDAP in my classes in general. I then reflect upon my experience of using the legalization of polygamy, specifically, as a CDAP topic, whose ultimate goal was to help my students see how they shared the same biases that they had seen in their opponents, but had not yet seen in themselves, in order to cultivate empathy for those with whom they disagreed.

Finally, two new books were published during the period in which we were finalizing the publication of this issue. Both were highly relevant to our theme so we are providing reviews of the two books, *Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts*, and *Critical Race Theory and Classroom Practice*.