

Understanding the Sociopolitical Content of Controversy

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Shelby Sheppard has provided us with an eloquent account of the importance of gaining understanding about the concept of controversy. She begins with the assumption that there is — to use her words — “a general resistance or aversion to controversy” and “that *controversy is a vice*, something to be resisted if not avoided at all costs.” She goes on to make the point that this condition is of particular concern in classes of pre-service teachers. Consequently, she wants to argue that it is crucial for educators to help students understand the idea of controversy as a collection of virtues with educational value, rather than something to be avoided.

I do not disagree with the basic arguments Sheppard puts forward; rather, I want to point out some questions about first, her guiding assumptions, and second, what she chooses to emphasize as having “significant educational value.” So, in my comments today, I will endeavor to build on Sheppard’s arguments and suggest ways of expanding her call for understanding the *concept* of controversy to understanding the *content* of controversies in education.

GUIDING ASSUMPTIONS

Sheppard’s primary assumption, or the major premise from which she constructs her arguments, is that citizens have certain reactions to controversy. She names three: (1) partisan positioning, (2) turning to religion or spirituality, or (3) apathy. She believes these reactions show that there is a “general resistance or aversion to controversy.” Yet, Sheppard’s conclusion that there is an “unwillingness to engage in discussions about ‘what is going on’” is not self-evident and does not necessarily follow from the common reactions she describes.

The first reaction to controversy Sheppard names, partisan positioning, is not necessarily an action that resists or avoids controversy. In fact, it thrives on controversy and disagreement, although I readily acknowledge that it may not always be in the spirit of “informed and reasoned judgment” sought by Sheppard. Nevertheless, there are many current examples of active discussion about the current controversial events Sheppard references. Consider all the internet activity discussing issues such as the war in Iraq, politics, and the actions and policies of the Bush administration coming from educational entities, individual bloggers, and political action groups on both the Left and Right such as MoveOn.org, Daily Kos, The Center for American Politics, NewsMax.com, or Campus Progress, to name but a few.

There are also myriad counterexamples to Sheppard’s claim of widespread apathy about current controversies. In the field of education in particular, individual educators and scholars actively engage educational controversies, both in the classroom and out. Take, for example, the town meetings being held across the country by individual members of the National Academy of Education aimed at informing citizens about the controversial federal education policy No Child Left

Behind. Similarly, teacher groups like the New York Collective of Radical Educators and San Francisco's Teachers 4 Social Justice aim to inform the community and effect social change around controversial issues such as high stakes testing, military recruiting in schools, and teacher quality.¹

Sheppard also contends that "resistance to controversy is common to classrooms" and "most pre-service teachers...adopt the safe position of 'teacher neutrality' in respect to controversy." This seems like a big generalization to make. Perhaps this condition varies by institution. At mine a good number of pre-service or current teachers embrace the opportunity to discuss controversial issues, especially as related to education policy and politics (for example, affirmative action, school vouchers, high stakes testing, merit pay for teachers, decreases in funding for Head Start, and inequality in school finance, and the list could go on). Indeed, in our foundations of education courses for pre-service and current teachers, one of the primary aims is to help students think through difficult policy questions, controversial issues of practice, and moral disagreements that affect education so that they can gain understanding and be able to engage their own students in controversy. Without such examinations and conversations, what is left but more straightforward lessons on teaching methods or classroom "management" (both of which can evoke their own brand of controversy as well)? Any discussion of education policy and practice involves values; because of our pluralist democracy, those values are often contested and controversial.

I agree that understanding the concept of controversy is important, but I think it is just one part of using education to foster a more informed, deliberative citizenry. It seems obvious that students need to learn to deal with controversy, or disagreement, or conflicting views, or competing values. Merely understanding the concept of controversy and learning to view it as a collection of virtues is a limited strategy in the pursuit of the "global understanding and harmony" that Sheppard herself names as important.

FROM CONCEPT TO CONTENT

More significantly, what is called for is a deeper understanding of the *content* of sociopolitical controversies. That is, rather than gaining understanding about the value of controversy as an idea, it is more important for students to go beyond that to gain understanding of actual controversies. In the field of education, for example, students need to understand the nature of enduring disagreements over policies, pedagogies, and curricula such as affirmative action, bilingual education, intelligent design, school choice, and whole language. This includes gaining an understanding of the historical, moral, social, and political roots of these various societal debates. Consider the case of affirmative action. Would it be enough to teach students that there exists a profound sociopolitical disagreement over affirmative action policies and that the controversy over such policies is to be embraced for the political and educational goods it evokes? It seems to me that the primary value in using sociopolitical controversy in education is to give students the opportunity to engage with the deep-seated debates, so that they may gain a deeper understanding of the issues themselves and the varying perspectives and opinions on the issues. With

affirmative action, students would benefit from learning about the content of the debate, that is, how the policy came about in the 1960s, what it was originally meant to accomplish, how those on the political Right and Left came to disagree about the policy, what the primary rationales for affirmative action are, and what the current outlook is for the policy.

Sheppard mentions that most scholarly literature regarding controversy centers on “discussing particular controversial issues rather than arguing for the value of discussing ‘controversy’ in general.” Perhaps the value of discussing controversy in general is taken for granted in a liberal democratic society, so Sheppard’s point about the need to discuss the concept of controversy more openly is well taken. Nevertheless, there is a good reason for the emphasis on discussing “particular controversial issues.” Discussing the value of the concept of controversy goes only so far in helping “citizens fulfill their democratic responsibilities...and adopt a spirit of inquiry in pursuit of the ‘good life,’” both goals articulated by Sheppard. Gaining an understanding of the content of controversies and disagreements is of greater value for those of us (that is, educators, pre-service teachers, and philosophers of education) interested in fostering democratic deliberation about competing values and conflicting claims, and, ultimately, improving education policy and practice. Sheppard herself approvingly quotes Harvey Siegel on this same point: “our educational aim is, in fact, not merely to teach people *how* to be good citizens, not merely *how* to go about voting, but *to* vote.” This seems to undermine her argument about the importance of understanding the concept of controversy in general. Here, Siegel implies that what is important is engaging the controversy, deliberating, learning the different sides of the controversial issue, understanding the nature of the disagreement, “not merely *how* to go about” understanding the idea of controversy, but *engaging in* the substance of actual controversies.

An acceptance of or a willingness to engage in controversy is indeed a desired educational aim. However, simply educating about the concept of controversy and how it is not fruitful to shy away from it does not necessarily foster the capacity or willingness to actually examine controversial issues. Education ought to engage students in the content of various sociopolitical debates. Indeed, the list of goods coming from the study of controversy Sheppard advocates show her to be concerned about the content of controversy as well as the concept. The issue may be one of emphasis or priority. In any case, Sheppard’s thought provoking and, dare I say, controversial, paper itself provides an opportunity for just the sort of inquiry and dialogue that help us, as she writes, “engage with the predicaments of life”. For that I know we are all grateful.

1. Amalia Oulahan, “Teacher Organizers Take Quality into Their Own Hands,” *Rethinking Schools* 20, no. 2 (2005–06): 11–14.