

Review

Diana Hess

Controversy in the Classroom. The Democratic Power of Discussion

**New York/London: Routledge 2009, 198 pages
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“One warm day in the spring of 2006, I visited a U.S. History class at a public charter school in a large Midwestern city ...” (p. 1) This is the beginning of Diana Hess’ book about the methods of democratic discussion in classroom and it indicates its strong narrative quality including several teacher portraits and scenic vignettes. The book is winner of the 2009 “Exemplary Research in Social Studies” award from the National Council for the Social Studies. In an interview with Kerry G. Hill for the campus journal (School of Education, University of Wisconsin <http://campusconnections.education.wisc.edu/post/LEARNING-Diana-Hess.aspx>) the author roots the book’s content back to her own biography and socialization: While growing up in northern Illinois, Diana Hess recalls members of her family engaging in lively, raucous political discussions. “Disagreement wasn’t a negative thing,” she remembers.

Diana Hess received her PhD at University of Washington, College of Education under the mentorship of Walter Parker. Once a former high school teacher, she works now as professor in *Curriculum and Instruction* at the University of Wisconsin - Madison School of Education, where she currently teaches courses for undergraduate and graduate students in social studies education. More than a decade she has been researching what young people learn from deliberating highly controversial political and constitutional issues in schools and became a highly respected expert in the field worldwide.

Teachers are often tempted to avoid controversial issues in preference for „safe“ knowledge and „safe“ teaching practices. This question about the epistemic status of knowledge is not only relevant in history teaching but in civic education as well (compare the approach of Bürgler and Hodel in this issue <http://www.jsse.org/2010/2010-3/contents-jsse-3-2010>). There is always a strong tendency of closing up questions to create “positive” knowledge. There’s a lot of self-censorship as well. Instead, curricula and teaching should be based on controversial issues.

Teaching controversial issues is a project which has a relevant tradition. The “jurisprudential” approach has been famous and influential until now (Oliver 1957; Oliver/Shaver 1966; Newmann, Oliver 1970) within the so-called new *Social Studies movement* (compare Totten, Pederson 2006; Bohan, Feinberg 2008). Infusing controversial political issues into the curriculum now remains within the mainstream conceptions of democratic education (28). This means preaching the mainstream (for international discussion compare

Chavet 2007 or <http://www.deliberating.org>). But there remain various problems in classroom practice. Hess examines empirical evidence about how discussions affect students with respect to three dimensions: democratic values, content knowledge, and political civic engagement (31-36; compare Fine 1993). The reader will look forward to Hess’ future empirical research here.

Controversial political issues are defined as questions of public policy that spark significant disagreement. In the first section Hess starts defining why democracy demands controversy by relating to political theorists like Amy Gutmann (Democratic education, 1987, revised 1999) and others. However, concerning everyday politics in a conservative educational climate that is dominated by policies like “No Child Left Behind”, her diagnosis is that in the US “the trend is clearly moving in a non-deliberative direction” (12). This pessimistic statement is surprising because it seems a little bit un-controversial. Is there not constant struggle about what is legitimately controversial - the curriculum material on 9/11 as an ultimate teachable moment (131-160)? Hess could relate controversial issues discussions in classrooms to communication culture in other contexts more systematically: What distinguishes a discussion in class from a (parliamentary) debate, a family conflict, a talk show or business negotiations and so on? Thus discussions in classroom as a method could be compared to other “natural” forms of discussion outside school. The problem of (false) analogy and misconception is obvious here.

Throughout her argumentation Hess prefers the term “democratic discussion” instead of “civic educa-



tion” because to her mind the latter suggest “fitting in” to society as it currently operates (14). By the deliberate use of “democratic” she wants to highlight the dynamic and contested dimensions inherent in a democracy.

Hess has a lot to give to practitioners. In spite of all difficulties and mental reservations Hess observes an astonishing openness and affinity towards controversial issues among teachers and students. Good teaching depends on differentiating and it is a characteristic of an expert teacher that he or she understands to differentiate. In the course of her book, Hess points out the relevance of making distinctions which are important for lesson planning and conceptualizing a learning environment for discussion. A professional teacher is able to distinguish between a topic and an issue (and a problem), unfortunately used in everyday communication to mean the same thing (see Leps <http://www.jsse.org/2010/2010-3/contents-jsse-3-2010>). For instance, “immigration” is a topic whilst “Should the United States increase the number of people who can enter legally?” stands for an issue. Another important difference is the one between public and private issues. Public issues demand public decisions and have an impact on the majority of people, for example “Should the United States reinstate the military draft?” Private issues, while clearly linked to public decisions, are dealt with on an individual level (“Should I join the military?”). Hess points out that issues once regarded as controversial in one era – such as whether women should have the right to vote – might be considered settled by another. On some issues, whether a question is open or closed might be fodder for a discussion in and of itself (Teaching in the Tip, 113-130).

Hess also explores the different ways in which policy and constitutional issues are conceptually distinct, yet overlap. Even constitutions differ from state to state. The European reader may look forward to one of Hess’ forthcoming books on “courting democracy” (Hess 2012).

It is a challenging question if diversity really is a deliberative strength. Are discussion results better in more homogeneous classrooms or in more heterogeneous ones where diversity is in our midst? There might be a third group, the apathetic classroom. Hess is quite sceptical about simply tossing out a topic and offering students an opportunity to chime in on the spot. Spontaneous discussion is rarely successful (?). Should we disclose a question or should we not? What about online discussions? These and other practical questions are considered in the large chapter two “inside classrooms” (53-112). What about student’s who prefer to remain silent in large group discussions? Should they be forced to communicate orally? Are there inter-cultural differences in talking, negotiating, or discussing? For example, some students are born

talkers, while others are only listeners. What about learning cultures in Asian or Arabic-Persian countries where listening to a mentor is a core value? Therefore, apart from many other factors influencing, “the single most important factor is the quality of a teacher’s practice”. (53) Another four examples of teachers effectively engaging students in controversial issues discussions are presented. Especially the first one is interesting because it represents an example of failure and falls “completely flat” and counteracts the somewhat optimistic touch of the book. A meta-analysis of the appropriate style of reporting would be worthwhile: Who is talking in the scenic vignettes we read – the observer, the teacher, the students in the multivocal classroom ...?

Hess is currently the lead investigator of a five-year study that seeks to understand the relationship between various approaches to democratic education in schools and the actual political engagement of young people after they leave high school. The study involves 1,000 students from 21 high schools in Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana. When interviewed several years later, students recall classroom discussions with astonishing specificity!

Teaching controversial issues is seen as a cross-subject matter task: curriculum projects in English, literature, and language art classes; even in science, curricula are infusing political issues into courses in order to make the curriculum more authentic (27). In addition, it is seen as a matter of school culture. Perhaps a further edition could integrate empirical information on the rich culture of student participation in school councils or in simulated mock trials or debating clubs and competitions.

The target group of readers are teachers of high school classes. But a propaedeutic approach is possible in elementary schools as well (Beck 2003, Parker 2009). The book can certainly contribute to what is called “pedagogical tact” (van Manen 1991) in the Herbartian tradition of educational wisdom. The overarching messages from Hess research is: “Teachers are really key!” Much of the scenic vignettes in the book could contribute to a social studies case archive!

Forthcoming projects and publications by Diana Hess:

Website:

<http://www.education.wisc.edu/ci/faculty/details.asp?id=dhess>

<http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/people/staff.php?sid=554>

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