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 Midwest-
eran 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 Wis-
consin 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 Wash-
ington, College of Education under the mentorship
of Walter Parker. Once a former high school teacher,
she works now as professor in Curriculum and Instruc-
tion at the University of Wisconsin - Madison School of
Education, where she currently teaches courses for
undergraduate and graduate students in social stud-
ies education. More than a decade she has been re-
searching 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://
is always a strong tendency of closing up ques-
tions to create “positive” knowledge. There’s a lot of
self-censorship as well. Instead, curricula and teach-
ing 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 (com-
pare Totten, Pederson 2006; Bohan, Feinberg 2008).
Infusing controversial political issues into the curricu-
ulum 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 discus-
sions affect students with respect to three dimen-
sions: 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 ques-
tions of public policy that spark significant disagree-
ment. In the first section Hess starts defining why de-
mocracy 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 cli-
mate 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 con-
stant struggle about what is legitimately controversial
-the curriculum material on 9/11 as an ultimate teach-
able 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 (parliamen-
tary) 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-


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, while private issues, while clearly linked to public decisions, are dealt with on an individual level (“Should the United States reinstatethe military draft?”). Hess points out that issues once regarded as controversial in one era — such as whether women should have the right to vote — as well as whether people 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, while 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 arts; even in science, curriculum 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 Hartburtian tradition of educational wisdom. The over-arching 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


References


