University of Wisconsin-Madison

From the SelectedWorks of Lauren Gatti

2010

Putting Politics in its Place: In the Classroom

Diana Hess
Lauren Gatti, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lauren_gatti/6/
Teaching university students through discussing controversial issues has the potential to build civic capacity and political tolerance.

Putting Politics Where It Belongs: In the Classroom

Diana Hess, Lauren Gatti

Throughout the last 50 years, the debate over engaging politics in the college classroom has raged on, sparked in part by the belief that liberal biases saturate scholarship and teaching in universities, which in turn lays the bedrock for the left-wing indoctrination of students. Polarizing and vitriolic debates abound regarding if, when, and how professors should disclose their political stances, whether or not they bear the responsibility to balance their curricular choices, and if and how they should approach teaching controversial issues. Frequently the pedagogical consequence of these debates has been to expunge politics from the classroom: politics are too dangerous, the thinking goes, too divisive for students and professors. In this chapter, we argue against this logic, asserting instead that politics indeed have a place in the classroom. Classrooms are rich sites for the discussion of controversial issues in large part because the students who populate them bring with them a diversity of perspectives, ideologies, and experiences. Classrooms can and should be places where students build deep knowledge about important controversies facing the body politic and where they learn how to talk and disagree about political controversies in ways that are inclusive and productive. When professors intentionally frame controversial issues, leverage diversity in the classroom, and are intentional (or not) about disclosing their own positions, they can facilitate rich controversial issues discussions in ways that work for student learning and democracy.

The rub for discussion-based teaching, however, is that its orchestration is as difficult as it is important. Many faculty members find it intimidating. C. Roland Christensen, who helped develop case-method teaching at Harvard University, described this kind of teacher as “planner, host, moderator, devil’s advocate, fellow-student, and judge—a potentially confusing
set of roles” (Christensen, 1991, p. 16). He added, “Even the most seasoned
group leader must be content with uncertainty, because discussion teaching
is the art of managing spontaneity” (p. 16). Adding politics to the mix makes
this form of teaching even more challenging because political discussion
engages religion, social class, race and culture, power, and privilege—topics
that have the potential to catalyze exchanges which cross a line from lively
to destructive of relationships and classroom dynamics. In this chapter, we
offer practical ways that professors can structure and facilitate rich discus-
sions about controversial political issues without compromising relation-
ships or learning outcomes.

As noted in the first chapter of this volume, communities across the
nation are experimenting with promising forms of public problem solving
classified by high levels of citizen participation and carefully structured
dialogue and deliberation. These well-designed processes require of citizens
a number of skills, such as analysis, listening, intercultural communication,
critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving, all applied in a public and
collaborative (as opposed to individual or private) setting. There is powerful
empirical evidence that deliberation of political issues among a diverse pub-
lic fosters learning. Several studies, many undertaken by political scientist
James Fishkin (Fishkin and Farrar, 2005) on his “deliberative polling”
process, examine fundamental questions about what results from political dia-
logue and deliberation, including the key question of whether political dis-
course is simply a communication strategy—the way one demonstrates
verbally what one knows—or a knowledge-building act.

A deliberative poll is a process involving a random sample of adults
who come together to engage in a structured deliberation about an authen-
tic political issue (such as whether to close a school). This form of discourse
is distinguishable from spontaneous conversations, which tend to attract
people who already know one another and are like-minded. Deliberative
polling, like most models of political deliberation, is committed to particu-
lar principles: political equality and inclusion (the consideration of every-
one’s preferences) and an open, public process of reasoning and deliberation
(weighing competing arguments based on their merits). Organizers work in
advance to research an issue and prepare background materials so that par-
ticipants are informed. The sessions are moderated by trained facilitators
who help the group establish guidelines for how they will talk with each
other (e.g., respect, active listening), and experts are available to respond
to participants’ questions. Most of the deliberation occurs in small groups,
and participants are formally surveyed about their views before and after the
deliberation polling process. All of these components could readily be trans-
ferred to the classroom.

Research on the effects of deliberative polls that compares participants in
polls with non-participants consistently produces the finding that deliberation
catalyzes learning; this learning, in turn, shapes opinion. Frequently, people
not only leave the deliberative polling experience significantly better informed,
but also often leave having changed their views on the issue over which they deliberated (pre- and post-), which indicates that learning has taken place. Some follow-up studies show that these learning outcomes are long-lived: participants express interest in learning about the issue for months after the deliberative poll. This is significant on both individual and societal levels, for this intensified interest often inspires people to continue engaging the issue through pointed political action (Fishkin and Farrar, 2005).

In addition to learning and applying best practices in public deliberation to a classroom setting, professors must make other judgment calls about whether, when, and how to teach political controversies. One threshold question is how to frame an issue. When it comes to framing an issue, it is helpful to consider whether an issue is open, closed, or “tipping.” Open questions are those for which we believe different answers could be legitimate. Though we may have personal opinions about the best answer to these questions, it is not appropriate to teach our students that a particular answer to an open problem is correct. Closed questions are those for which we believe there is a correct answer that we should teach students to build and believe, even though it may have been open in the past, or may even open in the future. What is considered open (and therefore, “legitimately” controversial in the classroom) and what is considered closed is a matter of social construction. Consequently, the same issue may be considered open or closed for discussion depending on the country, region, or individual. Just as questions are controversial in some places and not in others, over time issues can move from being closed to open and vice versa, a process I (D. Hess) have labeled “tipping” (Hess, 2009). For example, at one time the question of whether interracial marriage should be legal was considered controversial in the United States. Now the overwhelming majority of Americans support this civil right and it is hard to imagine much contemporary controversy about this issue in most university classes.

Before a professor engages his or her students in discussions of controversial issues, he or she should first identify if the issue is closed, open, or tipping. If it is closed, there is no need for discussion of controversial political issues, which is not to say that the issue should therefore be left out of the curriculum. For example, the issue of women’s suffrage has tipped in the United States. Professors may teach about how women gained the franchise and why it was so important, but it is not currently a controversial issue. Nevertheless, teachers may engage their students in a structured discussion that asks them to deliberate the issue in the historical context. Issues that are “open” in contemporary society are the kinds of controversial political issues that are especially important to include in higher education classes. If the issue is tipping, there is also room for discussion, but professors should take into account the controversial nature of the issue while designing and implementing the curriculum, and recognize that the decision they make about whether to treat an issue as open or closed will undoubtedly be one that sparks some degree of controversy.
Much of the controversy that arises from teaching political issues emanates from professors’ decisions about whether to present an issue that is in the process of tipping as open or closed. For example, in some university classes the issue of same-sex marriage is framed as open, and students are encouraged to deliberate it as a matter of legitimate contemporary controversy. But other professors treat the issue as closed and focus discussion on what can or should be done to ensure marriage equality. Not surprisingly, students are often not in agreement about how the issue has been framed by their professor.

**Diversity and Tolerance**

Teaching controversial issues through discussion strengthens democracy because of the causal relationship between discussion and the cultivation of tolerance. When we use the word tolerance, we are specifically referring to political tolerance, or the ability to extend basic rights (i.e., free speech) to those who are different from oneself. Fostering political tolerance is important for all democracies; however, in highly diverse democracies like the United States, it is particularly important that members of society cultivate this attribute.

Research shows us that political tolerance is best built through engaging in discussion with people who hold different opinions from your own. Diana Mutz’s (2006) series of studies analyzing the impact of “cross-cutting political talk” on attitudes and actions is a particularly powerful one. Examining the “natural occurrence” of political talk within routine social life in the United States, she focused specifically on the consequences of being exposed to different political views than one’s own. This category of talk—“cross-cutting”—allows Mutz to differentiate it from the talk people typically engage in, that is, talk with people who share similar views.

Mutz was certainly aware of the abundance of research that showed the powerful effects of highly structured deliberative experiments, like Fishkin’s deliberative polling, but she was particularly interested in determining whether the same effects occur within the informal interactions people have within their social networks. Her core curiosity stemmed from a simple and important question: What are the benefits of hearing the other side of an issue? Although the percentage of people in the United States who engage in this cross-cutting political talk is low—23 percent—those who do engage actually become more politically tolerant. The connection between cross-cutting political talk and political tolerance emerges from two related reasons: cross-cutting political talk allows participants to become familiar with legitimate rationales for different, opposing viewpoints while it also legitimizes a political conflict. Mutz argues that this combination has important consequences for democracy because it often translates to the inclination to extend civil liberties to others, including groups whose political views one dislikes (p. 85).
The rationale for encouraging discussion in democracy as a way to foster political tolerance only matters, of course, if the health, stability, and sustainability of a democracy are bolstered by the extension of rights to those who are different from oneself. When a society lacks political tolerance, its enacted policies will likely deprive some groups of their right to influence the political agenda and to have an influence on decision-making. Consequently, there can be no political equality, and without political equality, democracies cannot flourish. This is one of the primary reasons why discussion in democracy and political tolerance are not just interrelated, but inextricably bound.

There is a strong line of research that shows that within the classroom, talking with people who hold different political views can similarly work to build political tolerance. One of the strongest studies illustrating this relationship between issues discussions (and other forms of conflictual pedagogy) and the development of tolerance is a study of 338 middle and high school students (Avery, Bird, Johnstone, Sullivan, and Thalhammer, 1992; Bickmore, 1993). Defining tolerance as “the willingness to extend civil liberties to groups with whom one disagrees,” researchers created a four-week unit with a group of teachers that included a variety of active learning strategies, many of which centered on the relationship between the expression of freedom and controversial issues. Their research, which used a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control classes, found that most students, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic status, or previous levels of achievement in schools, shifted from mild intolerance to mild tolerance after the four-week curriculum. And these gains were far from ephemeral: a follow-up study conducted four weeks later showed that these gains persisted. Interestingly, however, a small group of students who demonstrated low levels of self-esteem and high levels of authoritarianism actually became less tolerant after engaging in this four-week, experimental curriculum. This is a disturbing backlash, to be sure, but it is not the norm for the students in the study, most of whom experienced increased tolerance.

Experienced differently by different students, the classroom is among the most complicated of social spaces. A majority of students might experience the discussion of controversial issues as engaging and relevant, whereas others might perceive them as uninteresting, or worse, as ways of creating or reifying unequal power relations among students in the classroom. Annette Hemmings’ (2000) study relates to this latter point. In her study of discussion in two high school classrooms, she illustrates the ways in which sociocultural divisions shaped students’ participation. Displays of tolerance, she found, sometimes actually work to mask deep race- and class-based divisions.

For professors who want to make discussions of controversial issues part of their pedagogy, Hemmings’ (2000) research raises a troubling challenge, especially given the ways in which the belief that diversity is a deliberative asset
underpins much of the theory on issues discussions (e.g., Gutmann, 1999; Parker, 2003). According to this logic, controversial issues discussions in a homogeneous classroom would yield less powerful results than would controversial issues discussions in a heterogeneous classroom where students come from different socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds. In a classroom situation where students are similarly situated, the thinking goes, there would not be enough variety in terms of opinion and experience to produce a meaningful consideration of competing perspectives. Simply put, it is less likely that discussion would allow students to develop respect for differing opinions if they are not given the opportunity to deliberate with diverse group members. Because the United States is a multicultural democracy, the classroom must mirror that diversity rather than concretize divisions based on religion, race, class, and so on. However, as Hemmings’ study shows, although diversity has the potential to be a deliberative strength, it also can re-inscribe social divisions if students feel that they are being silenced during a discussion or do not want to express opinions that might be different from the majority.

There is no simple cure for these problems. However, research on effective discussion teaching points to some practices that are likely to mitigate these problems. First, it is important for professors to structure their courses so students know that they are expected to participate and when discussions will occur. Some professors expect that high-quality discussions will occur spontaneously as long as they have the flexibility to take up “teachable moments.” This rarely happens in practice, in large part because we know there is a crucial link between preparation for discussion and high-quality participation. It is also crucial for professors to establish clear ground rules for discussion and explicitly teach the discussion skills their students need.

A mix of small and large group discussions can be especially helpful because some students are less comfortable speaking in large groups. Developing their skills and confidence in small groups can spur participation in large groups. Moreover, there is rarely enough airtime in large group discussions for all students to participate. However, small groups tend to have less diversity of opinion than large groups, so if one goal is to ensure that students encounter multiple and competing perspectives that cover a wide range, then it is likely this will occur more frequently in a large group. It is important to note that regardless of whether the students are working within large or small groups, there is difference to be mined. The challenge is figuring out ways to surface the difference that already inevitably exists in the classroom. Attending carefully to the design of questions and prompts is one important way to make sure that the underlying nuances of people’s beliefs, attitudes, and opinions are surfaced.

**Disclosing Personal Perspectives**

Another major challenge for professors is making wise decisions about what role their own political views should play in discussions of controversial
political issues. Although some professors believe their own views make valuable contributions to their students’ learning and have no qualms about freely sharing them, others hold their own views in check, either because they fear unduly influencing their students’ views or because they believe it suppresses students’ participation.

There is little empirical evidence from research on learning in higher education that would help us determine which of these stances holds the strongest warrant. However, a recent study of high school students (the vast majority in their senior year and thus only a matter of months away from our campuses) indicates that most students are open to hearing their teachers’ views, and some see it as necessary for their learning. But they are especially wary and resentful of teachers who try to “push” their own views on students and are sharply critical of teachers who foster a climate in which competing views cannot be aired (McAvoy and Hess, 2010). Thus, professors should monitor carefully their students’ views on whether they are interpreting the classroom climate as open to multiple perspectives and take that into consideration when deciding whether to voice their own positions.

Infusing higher education courses with rich and high-quality discussions of controversial political issues is not easy. In fact, what should be obvious from this chapter is that there are a number of challenges to this kind of teaching. The skill of the professor matters quite a bit; just as is the case with other forms of pedagogy, we know that few are “naturals.” In fact, research on highly effective discussion teachers shows that they work hard to improve their practice, seek professional development on how to use discussion effectively, and continually assess not only what their students are learning from discussion, but whether they are becoming more effective discussants. For professors who make the effort to become skillful at this form of teaching, the pay-off is high. This kind of teaching can be enormously enjoyable and because the students are saying so much, it is also educative for the professor. The pay-offs for students are even greater.

References


**DIANA HESS** is a professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**LAUREN GATTI** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.