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Why We Owe it to Students to Take Partisan Stands: A Response to Levinson and Reid

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Abstract:

In their article “The Paradox of Partisanship,” Meira Levinson and Ellis Reid take up the daunting issue of teaching controversial issues. Much has been said on the topic in recent years and most of what has been said has focused on the question of what exactly constitutes a controversial issue. While there are various criteria that have found their place in the discussion, I want to focus on another issue addressed by Levinson and Reid: namely, the questions that arise after an educator knows they are teaching a controversial issue.

Keywords:

reply

In their article “The Paradox of Partisanship,” Meira Levinson and Ellis Reid take up the daunting issue of teaching controversial issues. Much has been said on the topic in recent years and most of what has been said has focused on the question of what exactly constitutes a controversial issue.¹ While there are various criteria that have found their place in the discussion, I want to focus on another issue addressed by Levinson and Reid: namely, the questions that arise after an educator *knows* they are teaching a controversial issue.² When a teacher is faced with teaching a controversial issue either through choice or circumstance, there quickly arises the question of whether or not they should reveal their own stance on the issue—an action described by Levinson and Reid as “taking a partisan stand.” While it is clear that teachers can take a partisan stand in ways that are morally impermissible or pedagogically inadvisable, it remains unclear whether it is *always* wrong for teachers to take a partisan stand. As I will demonstrate, there are several arguments for why it is generally advisable for teachers to take partisan stands and these arguments merit consideration not given by Levinson and Reid. There are three reasons to believe that taking partisan stands is not just appropriate but also beneficial. By revealing their personal stances on controversial issues, teachers (1) avoid lying to their students, (2) avoid subversively coercing their students, and (3) avoid demeaning paternalism. In other words, taking partisan stands treats students honestly while helping them maintain their rational agency and develop as critical thinkers.

Levinson and Reid begin their article by claiming that, “It is a truism that public school teachers should not take partisan stands in the classroom in ways that discourage students from considering or adopting alternative

reasonable perspectives” (2018, p. 1). This assertion seems non-controversial; a pedagogy that robs students of the chance to hold—let alone consider—perspectives different from the perspectives of their teacher is wrong. However, is it still a truism to suggest that taking a partisan stand in the classroom at all is wrong? Elsewhere in their article, Levinson and Reid may imply that taking any partisan stand ought to be suspect. They note that teachers are at risk, in some cases, of sanction as a result of taking partisan stands (Levinson & Reid, 2018, p. 2) and they also say that teachers “will inevitably find themselves taking partisan stands” (p. 3). This inevitability seems to consternate Levinson and Reid as they ask, “How, then, should we move forward?” and conclude their article by suggesting that, “There may therefore be no path out of this morass” (2018, p. 3). A focal point of the conundrum for Levinson and Reid seems to be the crossroads teachers find themselves at in having to take partisan stands while also making sure not to “discourage students from considering or adopting alternative reasonable perspectives” (Levinson & Reid, 2018, p. 3). However, if taking partisan stands is sometimes advisable then much of the pressure of this situation could be alleviated. Thankfully there are several reasons to think this is the case.

Taking a partisan stand need not be authoritarian or dogmatic in the first place. In arguing against the so-called *political criterion* of controversiality, Michael Hand writes that when a teacher endorses certain positions the goal is not to engineer compliance with such positions but rather to “[acquaint] students with the arguments for and against a moral position, [help] them to evaluate those arguments, and [encourage] them to accept or reject the position if, and because, the arguments on one side are decisive” (2008, p.

224). While it is conceivable for a public endorsement of a particular position to be done in a way that limits discussion and exploration of alternate beliefs, it does not have to be. Even ignoring the fact that partisan stands can avoid authoritarianism, could a teacher even remain neutral if she or he so desired? Attempting to not take a partisan stand may be an impossibility thereby confirming Levinson and Reid's premonition that partisan stands will become increasingly inevitable in this age. Paulo Freire sums up the basis of this argument in his work *Politics and Education*:

It seems fundamental...that a neutral, uncommitted, and apolitical educational practice does not exist. The directedness of educational practice, which allows it to position itself and pursue certain outcomes—a dream, a utopia—does not permit it to be neutral. The impossibility of being neutral has nothing to do with the arbitrary imposition of authoritarian educators on their learners (1998, p. 39).

Freire asserts that the simple act of teaching requires teachers to be political. Attempting to remain apolitical and not take partisan stands is, in a way, a denial of the reality of teaching. The fact remains that any teacher is not truly apolitical or neutral and that despite avoiding outward manifestations of his or her partisan stance, a partisan stance exists. By taking a partisan stand, teachers can demonstrate honesty and transparency toward their students.

Nonetheless, it might be argued that taking a partisan stand can ostracize students who hold other positions or inadvertently communicate that divergent views are incorrect. While this may occur, it can be mitigated by the manner in which the teacher discloses his or her perspective and through myriad other buffers ranging from classroom culture to instructional approach. However, the alternative of not disclosing one's position will lead to certain harm in the form of subversive coercion thereby making it the less desirable of the two approaches.

If a teacher believes him- or herself to be neutral and then also adopts a *laissez-faire* pedagogy, they risk inadvertently manipulating their students because of the fact that education cannot be neutral (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 102; Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 157). When students are told that they are receiving a neutral education from a neutral educator, they are being lied to—but they may not realize it. George Counts acknowledges the same in his series of addresses to the Progressive Education Association: “[C]omplete impartiality is utterly impossible... [It] is a fundamental truth that cannot be brushed aside as irrelevant or unimportant... Nor can the reality be concealed beneath agreeable phrases” (1932, p. 19). In such deception where the reality of partisanship is concealed, students may be unwittingly influenced by the non-neutral beliefs that are actually being espoused to them through their teacher, the curriculum, and the school itself.

In this way, it is more ethical to claim non-neutrality (seeing as neutrality is impossible) so that students may be more consciously equipped to resist coercion. This phenomenon of unintentional coercion and domination is evidenced in empirical studies on teaching controversial issues. For instance, Deborah Cotton sums up the results of her study as such:

[The teachers'] desire not to express their own views frequently led to the situation where these views were expressed indirectly in the form of questions, or by control of students' turns in discussion. Whilst these strategies enabled the teachers to avoid explicitly stating their views, such an indirect expression of attitudes may have been harder for the students to challenge than a direct argument presented by the teacher (2006, p. 237).

In this way, taking a partisan stand outright may be a more favorable approach than hiding one's partisanship in the name of neutrality. Not only can taking partisan stands avoid unintentional coercion, it can also be, when done appropriately, a means of enhancing what Warnick and Spencer Smith call confidence in oneself as a rational agent.³ In their article “The Controversy over Controversies,” Warnick and Spencer Smith identify four vital tasks for students on the way to learning how to reason. The third is described as “a confidence in their [the students'] ability to employ rationality and critical thinking strategies. As part of this, they need to find in themselves the courage and confidence to use reason to guide their beliefs and to ‘think for themselves’” (2014, p. 230). At first glance, it might be argued that creating this self-confidence is best achieved through teachers remaining neutral and not disclosing their own views lest students simply adopt their teachers' perspectives on the basis of social or epistemic authority. However, such a view already presumes a lack of rational ability in the students to begin with. It is a paternalistic perspective to suggest that students cannot handle hearing their teachers' stances.

It should not be presumed that students of a certain age cannot think rationally. In fact, it has been said that children as young as four ought to be considered rational agents on the grounds that they act with reasons and possess what is called a “theory of mind” (Moshman, 2013; Tarricone, 2011). Nonetheless, there does seem to be prima facie evidence that a four-year-old child is categorically different from an adult individual – but what about a fourteen-year-old child? On the contrary, there is extensive evidence to suggest that adolescents do not differ categorically from adults in any aspect of rationality (Franklin-Hall, 2013; Moshman, 2013; Moshman, 2011a; Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002). David Moshman even goes so far as to say that, “Research simply does not support categorical distinctions between adolescents and adults in rationality, morality, or identity” (Moshman, 2011b, p. 206). Thus, there does not seem to be an empirical basis for suggesting

that an adult should be treated with transparency in dialogue while adolescents deserve obfuscation or nondisclosure.

If many students in schools ought to be considered no categorically different from adults in rational and moral senses—and many more ought to be considered rational agents—then what are our students owed? In his article, “Critical Thinking as an Intellectual Right,” Harvey Siegel advances an argument that our society’s children are owed the right to become critical thinkers (1986, p. 40). Siegel says that teaching in a way that fosters critical thinking “demands honesty of a teacher: Reasons presented by a teacher must be genuine reasons, and...the teacher must submit her reasons to the independent evaluation of the student” (1986, p. 41).

Given the empirical and ethical observations at play in this discussion, the impetus that teachers take partisan stands becomes increasingly prominent. When a teacher transparently discloses their beliefs to their class yet also

intentionally and effectively maintains a culture of egalitarian dialogue and a mission of rational thought, they do more to engender self-confidence in their students than otherwise. Given the research, it seems likely that students know when their teachers are withholding information let alone tacitly directing learning. The message this sends to students is that they are not agents capable of resisting irrational coercion in the form of social authority. But when a teacher treats their students as rationally capable agents in the first place, teachers can disclose their thoughts and send the message that in the classroom the teacher will not paternalistically choose what students can and cannot hear. Avner De-Shalit labels this push to be truthful with one’s students as “a political and democratic commitment” (2005, p. 116). Being forthright as teachers with our students about our partisan stances is not just a commitment we have as teachers toward our students, but, in De-Shalit’s words, is a responsibility we have as citizens toward other citizens— even if they are younger, even if we call them our students.

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About the Author

Drew Chambers is a secondary educator and independent scholar in the greater Boston area. He serves on the executive committees of the New England Philosophy of Education Society (NEPES) and the newly formed Philosophy of Education Society of North America (PESNA).

¹ There have been many scholars that have put forth or argued for criteria determining what constitutes true controversiality. For examples, see Tillson (2017), Gregory (2014), Warnick & Smith (2014), McAvoy & Hess (2013), Cooling (2012), Hess (2004), Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace (2004), and Gardner (1984).

² In general, there are four major criteria for determining whether an issue is controversial or not. First, there is the *behavioral criterion* tacitly supported by Diana Hess (2009) and famously critiqued by Robert Dearden (1984/2012), which argues that controversiality is determined by the presence of multiple perspectives on the issue in the public sphere. Second, there is the *politically authentic criterion* advanced by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2014), which modifies the behavioral criterion to specify that the evidence of public controversy must manifest in official venues such as courts and legislatures. Third, there is the *political criterion* advanced by David Archard (1998), which suggests that any issue is controversial if its resolution does not find a basis in the basic values of democracy. Finally, there is the *epistemic criterion* defended foremost by Michael Hand (2008), which holds that an issue is controversial if multiple epistemic positions on it exist—in other words, if there is only one defensible position, the issue is non-controversial. For an excellent overview of the criteria and an argument against each of them, see Yacek (2018).

³ Warnick and Smith ultimately argue that teachers should “take a position [when teaching controversial issues] and explain the reasons behind it” (2014, p. 244). They find that this approach exposes students “to an example of the epistemic virtue of being ‘open to challenge’ in the face of a seemingly settled question [and] seems to avoid relativism, to send messages of trust to students, to best avoid coercion, and to aid the development of fallibilism” (2014, p. 244). In doing so, teachers model the rational agency that they hope their students learn to practice.