

Turning Points as Civic Teaching Moments

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‘Turning Points’ is a concept that is not easily defined. Rather, it is the kind of concept that best fits the criteria “you’ll know one when you see one.” Or will you? Some turning points are moments when people say, “the world (or the country) will never be the same;” others are events or a series of events that are seen in hindsight as moments or periods when the culture or the country faced a crossroads and began to walk down a new path. Furthermore, one person’s “turning point” is not everyone’s turning point. Location, timing, and perspective matter.

For example, my parents’ generation in the United States viewed The Depression and December 7, 1941 as significant turning points throughout the remainder of their lives. For my generation, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the developments of the personal computer and the Internet have been key turning points. Members of my generational cohort also remember where they were when they heard that President Kennedy and Dr. King were shot—although in retrospect the term ‘turning point’ might more appropriately fit the subsequent legislation and programs named “the War on Poverty,” which expanded the federal government’s role in society. For my current university students, 9/11, the Obama election, and social networking (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) have been key “turning points.”

Other turning points are revealed through the long lens of history. For US society, a list of such turning points would include the development of the Constitution, the abolition of slavery, the expansion of public schooling, and landmark Supreme Court cases (indeed, that is what makes them “landmarks”). Such a list would be quite different for German society—or for Chinese, South African, or any other society.

Yet, though the particular turning points may differ, the ways in which teachers can use such cultural shifts to stimulate student learning are similar. Teachers use current events that students and their families follow on the news, such as 9/11, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hurricane Katrina, and the Asian tsunami as “teachable moments.” Taking advantage of heightened student interest following 9/11, many social studies teachers in the United States reported teaching more about the Middle East, Islam, and terrorism than they had previously (see issues of *Social Education*, 2001-2002). But to achieve civic purposes, I believe that teachers should do more than provide information when students’ interest has been piqued by dramatic current events. In this paper I argue that turning points—both historic and contemporary—have the most potential for civic learning when they are used as springboards for deliberation about controversial public issues.

First, I will review the tradition of issues-centered teaching in the United States. Second, I will describe findings from research on controversial issues teaching. Third, I will identify barriers to widespread use of controversial issues teaching and suggest some ways to reduce those barriers. Finally, I will conclude with a concern that I hope we will address as we move forward from this conference.

Rationales for Controversial Issues Teaching

I first became committed to the idea of teaching controversial issues as an essential part of civic education during my teacher education program many years ago. I read the classic social studies methods textbook by Hunt and Metcalf (1955/1968), in which the authors argued that in a democracy teachers should encourage youth to inquire into the “closed areas” of society. Closed areas are the enduring, unresolved, difficult

issues over which citizens disagree. Over the next several years I was exposed to the writings of Richard Gross (1952), Shirley Engle (1960), Donald Oliver and James Shaver (1966), Fred Newmann (1970) and others who also emphasized the importance of young people investigating controversial public issues. As a teacher, I used the Harvard Public Issues Project materials, which encouraged students to confront enduring issues in United States history. That project and the scholars I just mentioned were part of a long tradition in the United States that goes back at least to the 1920s (Evans, 2004; Gross, 1948) and continues to this day (Hess, 2009; Evans & Saxe, 1996; Ochoa-Becker, 2007).

For much of its almost 90-year history, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the professional association of social studies educators, has argued that in a democracy, it is important that students explore controversial public issues (Evans, 2004). For example, NCSS articulated that point in a position statement in 1977:

Education for citizenship in a democracy must emphasize the study and discussion of controversial issues and must teach the skills needed for this study and discussion...[For that reason] the National Council for the Social Studies recommends that it be the explicit policy of the nation's public schools to encourage and maintain the study of the unsolved problems and the current, controversial issues of our society. Only through this study can children develop the abilities they will need as citizens of a democracy (NCSS, 1977, p. 26).

NCSS continues to reaffirm that commitment today, as evidenced by the current policy:

Education must impart the skills needed for intelligent study and orderly consideration of societal issues. Students need to learn how to study controversial issues by gathering and organizing facts, evaluating information and sources,

discriminating between facts and opinions, and discussing different viewpoints in order to be able to think and make, clear informed decisions...The study of controversial issues should develop...the ability to study relevant social problems of the past or present and make informed decisions or conclusions...and the recognition that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal as a part of social discourse (NCSS, 2007).

Most advocates for controversial issues teaching have argued that exploring, discussing, and debating such issues is consistent with the ideals of democratic discourse. Today we also have empirical evidence pointing to the benefits of using such an approach for civic learning. In the next section, I discuss some of that research.

Research on Controversial Issues Teaching and Learning

Over the years I have become increasingly committed to the importance of controversial issues discussion for civic teaching and learning as a result of reading and conducting research on civic education and political socialization. Through a series of empirical studies carried out in the United States beginning in the 1960s, researchers found that teaching civics courses and topics could enhance student knowledge and skills—but had virtually no effect on attitudes. Rather, researchers found, that student attitudes of political interest, efficacy, and trust, were associated with students having had experiences investigating controversial issues in an open, supportive classroom climate, in which they were encouraged to listen to and express diverse viewpoints (See reviews in Ehman, 1980; Hahn, 1991, 1996, 1998; also Niemi & Junn 1998).

In recent years, researchers have extended that line of inquiry. In one study, researchers controlled for students prior attitudes and measured student attitudes over several years. The researchers found that student civic commitments were positively influenced by classroom civic learning opportunities, which included: learning about current events and problems in society; studying issues; and experiencing an open climate for discussion (Kahne & Spote, 2008). Further, in another recent longitudinal study, researchers found that young people who debated issues in class were more likely in later years to be civically and politically engaged; they followed political news, were involved in organizations outside of school, raised money for charities, signed petitions, participated in boycotts, and attended community meetings (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

In addition to political socialization researchers' findings from surveys of student attitudes, evaluators of widely used civic education curriculum projects also point to benefits of using issues-centered instruction in an open classroom climate for discussion. Students who participated in civic education projects in which they were encouraged to examine diverse views performed better on a number of measures than students who were not exposed to the issues-centered programs. The students who participated in the projects tended to show increased civic knowledge and increased frequency of following the news and discussing political issues with family and peers. They also showed increased political interest and efficacy, a greater desire to participate in civic life, and increased commitments to participatory citizenship and justice-oriented citizenship (Bennett & Soule, 2005; Broudy, 1994; Hahn, 2008; Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2002; Leming, 1993; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000; Peng, 2000; Vontz, Metcalf, & Patrick, 2000).

Researchers who studied samples of students in countries other than the United States also have found benefits associated with students reporting they experienced issues discussion in open classroom climates. For example, in the 28-nation Civic Education Study sponsored by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), student reports of discussions in an open classroom climate were associated with student knowledge and student expectations of voting as adults in 22 of the participating countries (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). In studies conducted in Ukraine and South Africa, students who were exposed to a curriculum in which they discussed issues and heard and expressed diverse views also showed increases in participatory attitudes, as well as knowledge (Craddock, 2005; Finkel & Ernst 2005).

However, despite a long tradition of advocacy for controversial issues discussions in social studies and civic education and a substantial body of research that points to advantages of such an approach, one would not necessarily see controversial issues teaching and learning in a “typical” class on any given day in the United States. Indeed, researchers find that students in many schools rarely have the opportunity to explore controversial issues (Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, & Thiede, 2000; McNeil, 1988; Zukin et al., 2006).¹ Moreover, it appears that students who live in low-income, urban

¹ However, students tend to report more issues discussions than researchers observe. Hess (2002, 2009) thinks the reason for the discrepancy is that students equate talk with discussion and thus overestimate the amount of discussion that occurs. In contrast to the research cited above, in other studies close to 70 percent of US students report on surveys that in their social studies classes teachers encourage them to discuss issues and express their views (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001; Ehman, 1969; Hahn, 1998; Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1975). However, higher percentages of students report that teachers encourage them to make up their minds about issues and express their views than report that teachers encourage students to discuss controversial political or

communities have the fewest opportunities for issues discussions (Hahn, 1999; Hess, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Rubin, 2007). Hess (2009) calls this inequality “the democracy divide.”

When colleagues and I interviewed teachers for the US portion of the first phase of the IEA Civic Education Study, one of the teachers in an urban school system explained his department’s reasons for not giving students opportunities to discuss issues and engage in participatory activities saying:

We do the traditional things—lectures and have students answer questions in the text... We’ve got to do whatever we can to get students to read the textbook... The students are not reading at home so we end up doing it in the classroom, which none of us likes... We’d rather be doing other things... [and] our students are falling behind... but we’ve got to play with the cards that we’re dealt (Hahn, 1999, p. 602).

Feeling a need to focus on reading comprehension and knowledge acquisition is one reason some teachers give for not including controversial issues discussion in their teaching. There are a number of other reasons that teachers cite, which I explore in the next section. Civic educators will need to address these if they want teachers to use turning points for their potential as civic teaching moments.

Overcoming Barriers to Controversial Issues Teaching

In this section, I discuss three concerns: perceived difficulty, meeting curricular standards, and fear of being attacked. Beginning teachers tend to be especially worried

social issues (Baldi, et al. 2001; Hahn, 1998). Students perceive that they are encouraged to express their views, but about topics that are not very controversial.

about these issues, but many experienced teachers also express concern. I wonder if any of the factors also affect civic teaching in Germany.

Perceived difficulty. Some teachers worry that it is difficult to lead discussions of controversial issues particularly if the focus is a “hot topic” about which students and their parents have strong opinions. To address such concerns, I think it helps to give teachers models for structuring discussions. Four approaches that teachers can use to facilitate controversial issues discussions related to historic or contemporary turning points are seminars, deliberations, value analysis, and structured academic controversy. These methods have been designed to scaffold students’ exploration and discussion of controversial public issues.

Parker (2001, 2003, 2006, 2008) recommends using the first two discussion formats—seminars and deliberations. Seminars, according to Parker, emphasize democratic enlightenment, understanding, or “knowing” whereas deliberation emphasizes political engagement, making decisions, or “doing.” In a seminar, the teacher encourages “students to see the world more deeply and clearly” (Parker, 2008, p. 71) as they discuss the meaning of a text. In a seminar, the teacher facilitator and student discussants work together to listen and learn as they seek enhanced understanding. I have seen many seminar type discussions of texts in classes in Germany

Deliberations encourage participants to think together to decide a course of action to address a shared problem that requires a decision and “controversy arises over which alternative is best” (Parker, 2008, p. 72). The two kinds of discussions can complement one another when a class explores issues related to a turning point. For example to explore a domestic issue, a class might read an article about proposals for US health care

reform and use a seminar format to seek understanding of various proponents' arguments and supporting points. The following day the class could have a deliberative discussion to answer the question: Should everyone be required to have health care coverage either through private insurers or a public option? Similarly to explore a global issue, a class could first hold a seminar to discuss various positions on global warming and environmental policies followed by a deliberation over whether the students' country should support a particular position on a revised Kyoto treaty.

A third format for a discussion that is more structured is called "value inquiry" or "value analysis" (Banks & Banks, 1999). A value analysis strategy is an approach that contains elements of both a seminar and a deliberation. A class could use this format to investigate alternative positions on issues such as providing public services to undocumented immigrants. Based on a model proposed by Banks and Banks (1999) a teacher might have students read a text passage or a newspaper article or view a video and work through a series of questions: What is the problem here? Who has done or said what? What might they value, which might influence their position? What are the alternative positions that are possible? What might or could happen if each alternative is followed? What do you think should be done? Why? The first two questions are comprehension questions to foster understanding. The third question aims to help students understand that values influence people's decisions and values are often and naturally in conflict both interpersonally and intra-personally. Next, students are encouraged to consider alternatives, and to weigh the likely consequences of each alternative. Finally, students are encouraged to take a stand and to justify it in light of their values. Whether a value analysis discussion occurs in small groups or in a whole

class session, the teacher should encourage students to listen and consider diverse views that are expressed.

A fourth format for discussion is called “structured academic controversy” (SAC) and is based on research by Johnson and Johnson at the University of Minnesota (Avery & Simmons, 2008). Students are given a set of materials to read that argue two different positions on a public issue, such as: Should racist groups be allowed to exercise free speech and press? Should capital punishment be abolished [in the United States]? Using this approach, first, in groups of four, two students present one viewpoint on an issue; then, they listen to an alternative view presented by the other two students in their group. Second, the students switch roles and present the opposite view to what they initially presented. Finally, the group of four students deliberates about what they think the best position would be as they try to reach consensus. One civic education project, *Deliberating in a Democracy*, supported by the Constitutional Rights Foundation in Chicago, uses this approach. Project staff developed student materials and a teacher-training program for teachers in three US cities and three countries in Eastern Europe (Avery & Simmons, 2008). Students who participated in the program said they learned about the issues and discussed national and international topics more with their teachers than they had previously. Additionally, the students said they liked hearing diverse views and being encouraged to express their opinions. Importantly, both the teachers and the students found the approach relatively easy to learn.

Using pedagogical approaches like these to stimulate a discussion or using other methods, such as the “Pro/Contra” lessons I have seen in classes in Germany, is important but alone it is not sufficient. The pedagogy needs to be used in combination

with conflictual content (issues over which reasonable people disagree) and in a supportive or “open” classroom climate for discussion (Hahn, 1996). Indeed, teaching about controversial issues in a closed climate where some views are privileged can have negative consequences, such as increasing students’ political cynicism (Ehman, 1969).

The expert controversial public issues teachers that Hess (2002) studied teach students how to discuss—to listen carefully, to treat each other with respect, and to cite evidence to support their views. The teacher’s role as discussion facilitator involves asking students sometimes to elaborate on a point (probing) to deepen student thinking; other times they ask other students if they agree, disagree, or have another view (redirecting) to broaden participation in the discussion. Students are encouraged to express their views, to feel that their comments are welcomed, even when they differ from what the majority of the students think. The goal is to foster a tone of thoughtfulness, in which all students feel comfortable stating their views and from which all students learn (see Hess, 2009, chapter 4, for further points on teaching with discussion²).

Encouraging teachers to use structured approaches for leading controversial issues discussions may help them to develop confidence in their ability to lead such discussions. However, perceived difficulty is only one of several challenges to overcome if teachers are to use turning points as opportunities for deliberation about controversial issues. Today, in the United States teachers also worry about the need to “cover” state standards.

² One point Hess (2009) discusses is the importance of ideological diversity within a classroom. She describes ways in which master teachers cultivate the expression of diverse views. Hess argues against schools tracking students by ability level because she thinks the policy may have the unintended effect of narrowing the range of views to which students are exposed. I wonder if such a concern exists about separating German students into different types of secondary schools.

Standards and accountability. Since the 1983 publication of the report *A Nation at Risk* by the Reagan administration (a turning point) schools have been under constant pressure to be accountable for raising student achievement. In the 1990s, following the development of national standards in mathematics and science, Congress provided funds to develop voluntary national standards in history, civics, and geography. Later, professional associations supported the development of additional standards for social studies and economics. In subsequent years, most states developed their own state standards in social studies subjects. Importantly, many states administer tests to students to assess how well students are doing in meeting their state's standards. In this environment, it is not surprising that many teachers are reluctant to teach anything that they do not see explicitly stated in state standards.

Although some standards documents assert the importance of students developing critical thinking skills, their tendency to list topics or information to be mastered can undermine that assertion. Many teachers focus on the lists of topics and decide to “cover” the information through lectures and by drilling students on their recall of specific correct answers. In contrast, there are some effective teachers in states with high stakes tests (students must pass the test to obtain a high school diploma), such as New York, Texas, and Virginia, who approach standards by identifying issues related to the various topics. They then teach for higher level thinking about enduring issues, and include information that is mentioned in the standards (Yeager & Davis, 2005). These individuals who practice what S.G. Grant calls “ambitious teaching” (in Yeager & Davis, 2005) would be good models for beginning teachers. Fortunately, some do take on the extra task of mentoring the next generation of civic educators.

I understand that demands for accountability are now being made in Germany “aP” (after PISA). Teachers feel the pressure to teach content that will help students do well in international competitions like the PISA assessments. I wonder if this leads some teachers to give students fewer opportunities to explore controversial issues than they did in the past.

Fear of attack. One of the principal forces in the United States contributing to teachers’ hesitancy to teach controversial issues is a fear that they might lose their jobs. Such a fear is not unfounded. Every year newspapers carry stories of teachers who lost—or were threatened with losing—their jobs because some parents or other community members complained about the way in which they handled controversial issues in their classroom. After September 11, 2001 some teachers were called un-American and threatened with job loss when they used the turning point as an opportunity to have their students explore such controversial issues as: Should the US attack Afghanistan/Iraq? Should the Patriot Act be passed/revoked/amended to protect civil liberties? And more recently, Should the US close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba? At the same time many other teachers successfully facilitated students’ inquiry and discussion into such questions without any reprisals and a number of prominent civic education organizations developed instructional materials to support such investigations.³

Still, the attacks are frequent enough to warrant attention. The report *The Civic Mission of Schools* makes the important point that “teachers need support in broaching

³ In particular the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Street Law, Kettering’s National Issues Forum, and the Choices project based at Brown University developed materials to inform and to promote deliberation about controversial issues. Hess (2009) noted that the materials were designed to address the missions of the sponsoring organizations, such as developing understanding of Constitutional issues, foreign policy choices, or public issues.

controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions” (Carnegie & CIRCLE, 2003, p. 6). In such cases, professional associations have supported challenged teachers if the teachers were encouraging students to explore diverse views—not promoting a particular view. NCSS has an academic freedom committee and a legal defense fund to support challenged teachers in the belief that “an attack on one is an attack on all.” This support is important, but it is support at the local level that may be the most valuable. School districts and states should have official policies that assert the importance to democracy of students being able to explore diverse views. School administrators should ensure a district and/or school climate in which such policies are respected and honored—even when many in a community have strong feelings about an issue.

Censorship cases have a broad “ripple effect” beyond the community where they occur. When news of an incident spreads, there is a “chilling effect” as teachers in other schools—both near and far—begin to self censor in hopes that they will not be similarly attacked. This is why it is important that all of us in our different roles—as teachers, professors, school and district administrators, and community members—continually remind our colleagues and the public how important the consequences can be when educators do not give young people opportunities to explore controversial issues. I wonder if in Germany, where teachers are civil servants and parents have not traditionally made demands on schools to the extent they have in the United States, teachers are more willing to encourage controversial issues than are teachers in some US communities.

Finally, I would like to return to one point I mentioned earlier—the existing inequality in opportunities for students to explore controversial public issues and to

participate in a number of other civic education activities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). I wonder if this is a challenge that also exists in German schools, particularly schools serving youth from low income and immigrant backgrounds. This inequality in civic opportunities for students from different socio-economic levels is what Hess calls the “democracy divide.” It is my hope that 10 years from now we will look back on this conference in Helmstedt as a “turning point” when civic educators in Germany and the United States together undertook efforts that reduced “the democracy divide,” fostered controversial issues teaching, and helped to create and sustain classroom environments where turning points become civic learning points for all students.

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