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Does Neutral = Controversial?

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An exploration of the dilemmas teachers face when teaching contentious issues in Social-Sciences

During the practicum component of my teacher-training to be a history teacher, I observed a wildly enthusiastic teacher. In one of his lessons, he modeled a memorable way to get young students to structure their thoughts and writing so that they explored different sides of an argument. He wore these massive colorful mittens on each hand, and then waved his right hand at them, bellowing out: “On the ONE hand!” and then his left, shouting: “one the OTHER hand!” He repeated this exercise a few times much to my bemusement, although his students were obviously attuned to his eccentricities! He went on to say that you needed an ‘on the one hand’, and an ‘on the other hand’ when building up a full picture of the past. In fact, the more hands (or perspectives) you had, the fuller your story would be. He proceeded to verbally build up an argument why, on the one hand, Mary Tudor deserved her reputation as a Bloody Queen. He then provided a counterargument, suggesting why some people argue this reputation could be unfounded – all the while shaking his mittened hands. I’m sure those useful sentence-starters stuck in his students’ minds.

I’ve always seen history as a braided narrative – a collection of multiple narratives and perspectives. This is why I liked the idea of offering young history students a framework that acknowledged the existence of multiple viewpoints, and prompted them to write about different sides of an argument. When I first began teaching, I wanted my classroom to be an open space where there was “fair competition in the market place of ideas” (Kelly, 1986). I wanted my students to raise different arguments in response to controversies in history, and come to their own conclusions. I felt it was important to conceal my own position so as not to influence them, and that the most appropriate role for me was the neutral facilitator. However, I soon started to believe that teacher neutrality wasn’t really possible, and nor was it desirable.

Teaching is inevitably political, and hence, implicitly or explicitly I (or any educator) could not be ‘neutral’ in the classroom. Every action that we take is shaped in some way by our socio-political stance. Schools are not distinct from wider society, but are themselves the site of struggle and social change. In this sense, teachers’ minds are far from a tabula rasa when they enter the classroom; the signs of a teacher’s (and a system’s) social and political lens will always be visible in the classroom when one takes a closer look. The choice of textbook or resources is one obvious indication. This certainly applied to me. I chose textbooks that focused on subaltern and peoples’ histories, rather than high politics – because these textbooks aligned to the school of history that I identify with. However, there are also less apparent details which give an indication of a teacher’s particular stance. For example, the way that a teacher facilitates a class discussion – the points she lingers on, the ones she chooses to ignore – all these will be a reflection of her social, political values and beliefs.

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Cotton (2006) underscores the difficulty of ever achieving teacher neutrality when teaching controversial environmental issues. She states that while teachers may want to adopt a ‘balanced’ approach to teaching contentious subject matter, such an approach is unsustainable within the classroom. Her research findings, based on detailed analysis of classroom interactions, demonstrate that “the influence of [teachers’] own attitudes was greater than they intended or, in all probability, realized” (p 223). The interchange below about land rights for indigenous people demonstrates the struggle the teacher faced in being neutral when there was a disconnect between her values and those being put forward by a student.

18. T: Mmmm… Well, they call it the Maring's forest because it belongs to the Marings, yeah.
19. Sarah: It doesn't belong to them, they just live there.
20. T: Ah, well that could open up all sorts of debates, Sarah, couldn't it? If it doesn't belong to them, to whom does it belong? And does that mean indigenous people…?
21. Sarah: It doesn't belong to anybody, they just use it.
22. T: And does that mean… does that mean that indigenous people have no land rights?
23. Sarah: No [I guess not] (Cotton 2006 p 236).

On reading the full transcript we see that the teacher eventually accepts Sarah's point of view but not before expressing her own attitude in the lesson through the way she steers the argument. She does this in a variety of ways. For example, while she used open questioning at the start of the discussion, this rapidly changes into rhetorical questioning (such as the question seen in Line 23) which restricts open dialogue, and indirectly expresses disagreement with the student. She also goes on to pick students to contribute to the discussion who she knows (through their previous comments) will argue against Sarah. It is interesting that the teachers in this study were striving to be neutral, and despite this intention, their own values and persuasion continued to influence classroom transaction. This is in keeping with much of the literature which discounts the possibility of balance and neutrality in teaching. For example, Outon et al (2004) argue that the requirement to maintain balance is unhelpful as it is probably impossible to achieve.

I know that my own values and persuasions had a bearing on my classroom transactions. Just a week after I first started teaching, I had to teach a Class 9 history unit about Victorian poverty. I know I made it clear to students that I personally felt 'laissez faire' politics were irresponsible and that the state had a responsibility to provide public services such as education and healthcare for the poor. At the same time, in Class 8, we were studying a unit about slavery and bonded labour (the cocoa trade with countries in western Africa). I facilitated discussions where we explored the reasons why workers, including children, continue to work in these conditions today. Before teaching these units I thought about how I should approach them. I did not want my own social concerns for marginalized populations to suffocate student enquiry or prevent them from thoughtfully considering opposing viewpoints. But at the same time, I wanted my students to know that I believed in equity and social justice. So I decided that I had no desire to feign neutrality. This approach was shared by Bigelow, a high school social-studies teacher interviewed by Kelly and Brandes (2001) in their study of teacher neutrality. Bigelow spoke of a unit he had taught on Nike and global capitalism, and highlighted his concern with teacher impartiality when discussing issues of social justice: "to pretend that I was a mere dispenser of education would be dishonest, but worse, it would imply that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice. It would model a stance of moral apathy."

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There is a body of research to support the view that the teacher expressing her own stance in the classroom can be preferable to her trying to conceal it. Cotton (2006) states that since teachers end up implicitly or explicitly expressing their attitudes in the classroom, it is better to be explicit about one's position as, "indirect expression of attitudes may [be] harder for the student to challenge than a direct argument presented by the teacher" (p 237). Her case studies outline examples of teachers who find themselves (though often unaware of this, until it is discussed in a de-brief with the observer) steering the conversation in a particular direction. Rather than this, Cotton argues, it is better to be open about one's stance, thus giving a fair chance for students to raise their opposing views. Ashton and Watson (1998) also argue against the teacher presenting themselves as neutral, stating that this can be interpreted by students as teacher indifference. They state that it is preferable that the teacher expresses herself and enters into dialogue with students because this demonstrates to students that their views are being taken seriously. Of course the success of classroom interactions in which a teacher shares her views is heavily dependent on the classroom culture. A teacher interviewed by Kelly and Brandes (2001) encapsulated this when he said, “you can as a teacher express your opinions and still have a fair and respectful environment, just as long as it’s understood that your opinion isn’t overbearing, that if anyone goes against you, you would never knock them down” (p 448).

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In terms of my own teaching practice, I decided not to shy away from putting forward my views in the classroom, and inviting students to dissect my, and each other’s arguments. I wanted to give my students the opportunity to see that history was a subject that lent itself to dialogue, opinions and debate. We had some healthy debates about plenty of subjects, ranging from the extent to which the Indian National Congress was responsible for the Partition of India to whether King George really was mad. These lessons got more successful with time, as I got to know and develop positive relationships with my students. Once we had that rapport, and students felt ‘safe’ to express themselves and argue with eachother in my class, we had many fruitful discussions where students supported their points with evidence and explanations. There were certainly times when my students had differing views to myself, but I found myself feeling proud of them for finding ways to challenge me and drive their arguments forward.

However, there were times in discussion that I simply did not see eye to eye with certain students. I remember one particularly difficult discussion I had with a group of students. It was a very snowy day which had dissuaded the majority of students from coming to school. As there were so few students in class that day, I abandoned the lesson I had planned and decided to just have a chat with them about their families, the news, or anything at all. We started talking about relationships and found ourselves having a fairly charged discussion. A vocal minority of two students stated that they thought it was perfectly acceptable for a woman to be stoned to death if she committed adultery. There was an equally vocal group of students, about six of them, who found the idea abhorrent. The groups were somewhat divided along religious lines – the minority group who were arguing in favour of stoning were Muslim girls, and the majority group against stoning included both Muslim and non-Muslim students. It was a difficult situation – and I wasn’t sure how to move it forward, especially since both groups were using (different facets of) religious decree as their armament. I felt I needed to express my own view in this argument – if I had stayed silent, that in itself would have said something. This was important to me because I didn’t want to give off the impression, even implicitly, that I supported the idea of violence. I chose to state my opinions and I explained why I held these opinions. I tried to facilitate the discussion in such a way that different students presented their opinions without personally attacking their opposing peers. I was keen that while we may not come to a consensus, we should establish some procedures to help us learn how to deal with conflicting opinions in a respectful manner. I still don’t know if and how I could have dealt with that situation better. I felt it was important to intervene, but it upset me to know that the two students whose views I had countered felt that I had disrespected their beliefs.

Neutrality and balance sound like the ideal values for a social science teacher to embody. However, there is much evidence, explored above, which supports the argument that these values are not really possible to attain. Teachers, like all of us, view the world through a particular social and political paradigm; it is unreasonable to expect that this will not, in some small way at least, be reflected in their practice. Furthermore, one could argue that attempting neutrality is in itself undesirable. By attempting to be neutral, the teacher limits the ability of students to challenge her, to engage in a meaningful dialogue and to see the world through different lenses. The social sciences lend themselves to argument, debate and opinion – and by choosing to simply referee students' ideas, the teacher does not model the passion and enthusiasm that these subjects have the ability to invoke. Finally, it is arguable that it is necessary at times for a teacher to intervene, in order to "counter massive prejudice" (Ashton, E. & Watson, B. 1998. p88), 'Values Education: a fresh look at procedural neutrality', *Educational Studies*, 24 (2), 83-193). Arguments that promote violence or social injustice may well emerge within the classroom. It is important to explore these arguments rather than shut students down. However, it is irresponsible, on the pretext of teacher neutrality, to leave these views hanging in the classroom either.

None of these arguments preclude the fact that by stating her own perspectives, the teacher may well influence students' independent thought processes – students may imbibe the teacher's views unintentionally or they may choose to align their views with her simply because they have a positive relationship with her. Conversely, it may be that students take on an opposing viewpoint to their teacher simply because they have a negative relationship with her. The stance that teachers should take in the classroom is therefore one that still instigates controversy. In my classroom I chose to be honest with students and lay out my assumptions and perspectives, hoping that we had a classroom culture that allowed students to freely express themselves too. I still think about this issue – and I wonder to what extent my approach truly promoted independent thought and enquiry.

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