

Hess, Diana E. (2009) *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*. New York: Routledge Education.

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In *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, Diana E. Hess outlines the need for teachers to engage students in discussions of controversial political issues in the classroom in order to promote a more democratic society. Hess, who began her career teaching in a high school social studies department, is currently an Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The book contains a thoughtful analysis of how the discussion of controversial issues fits into the classroom and the potential benefits associated with such discussions. The intended audience, high school social studies and civics teachers, will find much of the discussion beneficial in planning curriculum that serves the purpose of allowing, or more appropriately, inviting “controversy in the classroom.”

About the Author

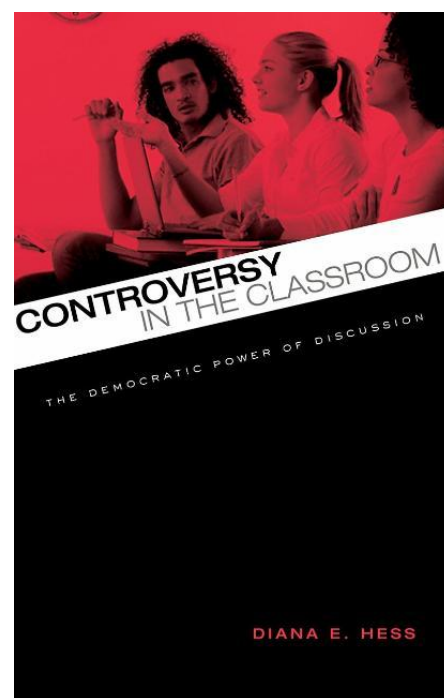
Diana E. Hess is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her area of interest is social studies education.



Hess begins by describing the benefits of such controversial discussion in classrooms: increased civic participation, tolerance for differing viewpoints, and understanding of characteristics of effective discussion. In response to a Supreme Court case regarding freedom of speech afforded students in schools, Hess asserts that both conservative and liberal justices alike wished to maintain school's traditional role as "educating citizens for political participation and exposing young people to multiple and competing views about controversial issues" (p. 11). Hess later states that even though members of society, as well as educators, may say this is an important role of schools, she could not find consistent action supporting these goals. She was unable to find evidence of discussions, except in the civics and government classes that lend themselves to issues debates of this nature. One could argue that the role of schools, spoken loud and clear through both policy and practice, is to foster academic achievement as measured by standardized tests.

Working under the assumption that schools are to prepare students to discuss controversial issues, Hess attempts a definition of the same. While at first, the definition appeared to echo Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography (viz., "I know it when I see it.") the discussion actually would prove quite helpful to practicing teachers. Hess makes visible some potentially taken-for-granted ideas that could sabotage controversial issues discussions in the classroom. For example, she illuminates the difference between topics (e.g., healthcare), problems (e.g., lack of access to healthcare), and issues (e.g., what should be done to enhance access to high-quality healthcare?). These are important distinctions for teachers to make in choosing the issue to be discussed. Although discussions on topics and problems are important, "the opportunity to consider what should be done...would be lost" (p. 41) without tackling policy issues.

Another important aspect of defining controversial political issues is the concept of "tipping," which



denotes the movement of an issue from “open” to “closed” status. Open issues are those issues that have not been resolved and have multiple potential answers. Closed issues include those issues to which an answer that is widely believed as true has been reached. While open and closed issues may be somewhat easy to define, it is the issues that are in the process of tipping that can become even more controversial if introduced as topics of discussion for the classroom. Hess provides two examples of topics that are in the process of tipping from one status to the other: same-sex marriage and global warming. As a former classroom teacher, I can see the importance of analyzing the status of an issue prior to choosing to include it in classroom discussions. Issues that are in the process of tipping will generate even more controversy when included in the curriculum. Hess does an excellent job of explaining how choosing a topic that is widely looked on as closed, while useful in some respects, will not afford students the opportunity to examine multiple viewpoints in attempting to arrive at a conclusion.

The next section of the book involves the description of three teachers who have successfully implemented controversial issues discussions in their classrooms, albeit using different teaching styles. Hess describes each classroom and then draws parallels between the cases to provide overall points for readers to consider. She states very strongly that the quality of teacher practice is “the key ingredient to the creation of high quality issues discussions” (p. 55). The three key characteristics of skillful discussion teaching outlined by Hess are 1) Teachers understand that preparation is paramount, 2) Teachers make thoughtful decisions about assessment, and 3) Teachers make the discussion the students’ forum. Hess described teachers who were very deliberate in aligning performance objectives to the issues discussions and who used a variety of methods to assess students’ growth throughout the process. The final point, students’ ownership of the forum, received the bulk of the author’s analysis. Hess’s description of the master teachers’ interaction with students *during* the discussions was integral to

understanding how the students come to have ownership of the forum.

Hess followed up this section regarding the key characteristics of skillful discussion teaching with an in-depth analysis on the topic of teacher disclosure. Teacher disclosure, or teachers sharing their own personal viewpoints on the issues, is an important point to analyze in any conversation about controversial political issues discussions. Teachers hold significant power in the classroom. Some argue, according to the author, that teacher disclosure is synonymous with indoctrination. I was expecting a stern warning from the author regarding teacher disclosure. Instead, Hess merely described spectrum continuum of teachers' disclosure, from those who go out of their way to avoid disclosure to those who look at disclosure as a way to further teach students to engage with controversial topics. The author included the students' perspectives on teacher disclosure. The findings supported the key characteristics of skillful discussion teaching. If teachers were perceived as respectful of differing viewpoints and did not "look down on" students with whom they did not agree, students had no concern about teachers sharing their own viewpoints. The main concern about teacher disclosure was that it would threaten to influence unduly students to change their opinion on an issue to match the views of the teacher. In fact, Hess provides a student quotation that demonstrates the opposite, if that teacher has shown himself or herself to be open to differing views:

When he presented his own opinions and why he felt that way, it kinda showed us what we should be basing our opinions on, even if we didn't share the same opinion. I guess I started to see more sides of issues than I did before, so I thought more about my own opinion (p. 103).

Throughout the book, Hess briefly analyzed some of the barriers that impact the successful implementation of this model, including standardized testing and

curriculum considerations. As a former classroom teacher, I believe a more consistent analysis of the barriers might have been useful, including a discussion of the ways to overcome them. There are a number of challenges teachers would face in implementing controversial issues discussions in schools, including parents and community members who believe that teachers are working toward indoctrination of students. Perhaps these concerns might be better raised in an additional volume, as there are a number of them to address.

In the final chapter, Hess only superficially addresses the potential impact this type of education could have on ethnic and language minority students. She briefly addresses the issue of tracking within schools, stating:

...when social studies classes are tracked, there is a tendency to lower the intellectual demands that are placed on students in lower tracks. Given the difficulty of controversial issues discussions, they may be reserved only for students who are viewed as already capable of participating effectively in them (presumably students in upper-level classes) (p. 165).

It is imperative for the reader to note that those students who are typically tracked into lower level classes are generally those students from ethnic and language minority groups. It is even more important for these particular groups to participate in controversial issues discussions, especially if the end goal is to improve the future participation of students in the democratic process. What better way to empower students to work for greater change in society than to prepare them with the skills necessary to navigate their way intelligently through discussions of controversial issues?

About the Reviewer

Cynthia Mruczek has been a teacher in the public school system for thirteen years. As a public school teacher, Cynthia began her career in the special education classroom and has also taught fifth grade in a general education classroom. For the past seven years, she was a Collaborative Peer Teacher, serving as a coach and mentor for teachers on her campus. She was also responsible for providing professional development to the staff on a variety of topics ranging from writing strategies to cooperative learning. She recently started working toward a PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Arizona State University. Her research interests include culturally responsive pedagogy and the continuous professional development of teachers in the classroom.



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