Teaching Controversial Issues

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving … conflict is a "sine qua non" of reflection and ingenuity.
– John Dewey, 1922.

Controversy, conflict, and disagreement are integral elements of college teaching, and all instructors must anticipate controversy and plan to use it productively. Teachers usually expect particular subjects to elicit debate in their classes (e.g., evolution, racism, welfare policy), but all topics are potentially controversial, since students enter college with particular social, political, philosophical, and religious perspectives that may conflict with the material in their courses. Moreover, without controversy (or at least, disagreement), teaching students to think critically is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Knowing how to handle controversy and conflict productively is therefore an essential skill for all college teachers.

Some instructors use controversy deliberately, planning for discussion and debate as integral elements of their courses. Research has shown that this kind of "intentional engagement" is very effective in promoting higher-level thinking in students. However, controversy may also arise spontaneously, in any class, as students react to topics introduced by the instructor or other students. In these situations, teachers need to have a repertoire of approaches that will avoid antagonism and make the discussion productive. This essay addresses planning for controversy; the next essay in the FYC series addresses strategies that help teachers with "conflict management."

Critical Thinking

In 1970 the Harvard psychologist William Perry published *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*. This book provides a schema that can help instructors understand the intellectual development of students as they move from simpler to more complex modes of thought — and how teachers must *challenge* them in appropriate ways in order to facilitate their development. Perry's schema encompasses nine "positions" that developing students might assume in the process of learning to think critically and develop an ethical perspective of their own, but the schema can be divided into four basic positions: dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. The descriptions below are adapted from Pierce, 1998.

Dualism At this stage, one is very certain of what one knows and of what makes it true. All questions have a single right answer and the authorities are supposed to tell you what that answer is. Dualists are passive learners; in their view the only appropriate response to course knowledge is to memorize it because the textbook and professor are the authorities; therefore, their knowledge must be true. The only appropriate response to ethical issues of right and wrong is to find out what the authorities say about it (school, church, parents, the state).

Multiplicity Sooner or later, one must give up the comfort of certainty for the realization that not everything is known, even by the experts. In some areas it must be acknowledged that there is no single known truth. The attitude of students during the multiplicity stage is "Everyone has a right to his own opinion" and "Where authorities do not know the answer, my opinion is as good as any other" (Perry, 1981, p. 84). The belief at this stage is that no opinion can be wrong, that any moral principle is as right as any

other. Multiplists see no point in criticizing other points of view because it doesn't make any difference — all opinions are equally valid.

Relativism   As Perry uses the term, relativism is the stage where one recognizes that there are several approaches to an issue, that these approaches are not of equal validity in all situations, and that the context has an effect on the validity of knowledge and a way of knowing. At this stage, students come to understand several points of view by analyzing the thinking processes displayed, by examining the use of evidence and reasoning. And also at this stage they judge those points of view and the thinking that supports them. At this stage, students understand the importance of learning procedures and criteria for judging some viewpoints as better or worse, for assessing how well some writers support inferences, for determining whether one view explores consequences more deeply than another, for approving the higher moral principles of one viewpoint over another.

Commitment   Making choices and decisions after the reasoned explorations of the relativist stage is the next developmental step. An example of the commitment stage is choosing a position on controversial ethical issues (for example, abortion, assisted suicide, affirmative action) based on values you have chosen after considering the moral complexity of the issues — rather than choosing based on the values that were handed to you by authorities or enculturation. For college students, choices at the commitment stage also involves choices of majors, careers, and relationships. Another realization made by many students at the commitment stage is that there is no final stage. Intellectual and ethical development is a recursive process. Issues never really get settled; new knowledge replaces old; the context of knowledge and values changes.

Perry's research (and subsequent studies that reinforce his basic conclusions) clearly shows that students may not be "developmentally ready" for critical thinking when they enter our classrooms. In order to address controversial issues, teachers must first understand that these students may react very negatively to the whole idea. Dualist students will not welcome the teacher's invitation to question "received knowledge," and Multiplists may refuse to debate any issues, since "all opinions are equal." The remainder of this essay provides suggestions for creating a classroom structure in which the teacher can challenge students to exercise higher modes of thinking while supporting them in their discomfort

as they attempt to grow out of their accustomed modes. Challenge is necessary, but support is equally necessary. Perry points out that this kind of intellectual growth is often painful and frightening, and instructors need to provide a supportive classroom climate.

Intentional Engagement

Instructors who are accustomed to using controversy as a teaching strategy understand that they must prepare the students mentally and emotionally for the experience. This preparation normally includes a first-day discussion in which the instructor alerts students to the potential for disagreement and seeks to establish a classroom climate in which conflict is expected and even welcomed. This strategy is particularly effective if the teacher leads a discussion on the first day, demonstrating the kind of interaction and facilitation that s/he wants to have in the course — giving students a "free sample" of the technique. Typically, the instructor will also introduce the notion of "ground rules," perhaps suggesting a few and inviting students to create their own rules:

Sample Guidelines for Classroom Discussion

- Always listen carefully, with an open mind, to the contributions of others.

- Ask for clarification when you don't understand a point someone has made.

- If you challenge others' ideas, do so with factual evidence and appropriate logic.

- Always critique ideas or positions, <u>not</u> people.

- If others challenge your ideas, be willing to change your mind if they demonstrate errors in your logic or use of the facts.

- Point out the relevance of issues that you raise when their relevance might not be obvious to others in the class.

- If others have made a point with which you agree, only repeat it when you have something important to add.

- Be efficient in your discourse; make your points and then yield to others — take turns speaking.

- Above all, avoid ridicule and try to respect the beliefs of others, even if they differ from yours.

Successfully negotiating discussions of controversial issues (whether planned or spontaneous) also depends strongly on the instructor's knowledge of the students — their backgrounds, attitudes, beliefs,

and expectations. Previous experience in teaching a course provides some clues about the topics and issues that may elicit disagreement or dissent, but an intimate knowledge of the student cohort in each class enables the instructor to tailor his/her facilitation to achieve the maximum benefit. Often, teachers distribute "student information sheets" on the first day of class to elicit this kind of information. In addition to the usual contact information for each student, one can ask a series of questions that will elicit a more comprehensive profile of the students' perspectives and experiences:

> Note: Your answers to the following questions will be kept in strictest confidence. The questions are optional, but they are intended to help your teacher respond more effectively to the needs and interests of individual students.

- So far, what event in your life has had the greatest impact on you?

- Name three people that you admire and briefly explain why.

- What do you think is the greatest issue facing the United States this year? The World? Explain your selections.

- If you could select a single book for all students in this university to read, what would it be?

- What is your definition of an "ideal" teacher?

- What is your definition of an "ideal" student?

Methods and Approaches

Instructors who deliberately incorporate controversy into their teaching may use a number of strategies, each of which yields different learning outcomes (Payne & Gainey, 2000). For example, some instructors try to maintain strict neutrality with respect to controversial issues, even to the point of concealing their own opinions and beliefs. They see their role as a kind of arbiter or judge, with the responsibility for making sure that all viewpoints are considered and those who express unpopular ideas are permitted to have their say. The goal of this approach is to insure fairness and provide a mode of discussion that is safe for all students. This model is often employed in courses for first- and second-year students, whose discussion skills may be poorly developed, and it helps provide "academic distance" from the heat of controversy. In this approach, class discussions are highly structured and teacher-directed, often taking the form of formal debates.

"Structured controversy," which is a somewhat more challenging approach, moves the locus of control

from the teacher to the students. The goal of this approach is to resolve conflicts between different viewpoints, and it is a well–established strategy in courses based on a cooperative learning model (see Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1992, and Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000):

1. The teacher proposes a controversial subject (e.g., national gun registration).

2. Students are paired off as teams to research the background of the topic and prepare their case for or against the resolution

3. The opposing teams present their arguments to each other and attempt to refute the other side's arguments.

4. The teams then *reverse their roles* and present the position they had argued against.

5. The teams abandon advocacy and write a compromise report that synthesizes the arguments of both sides.

This technique can adapted for use in larger groups and many variations are possible. For example, some teachers may prefer to use only the first part of the process and not require that students argue both sides of an issue (Payne & Gainey, 2000). In another variation (Watters, 1996), the teacher requires individual students research both sides of a controversy on their own and write papers supporting each side. In class, the students are divided into "pro" and "con" groups that debate the issues and develop their best arguments. The teacher then asks them to develop a compromise statement acceptable to both sides. In any case, the instructor should always provide detailed instructions and "rules of engagement" that promote the use of fact–based arguments and help students discuss emotionally–charged issues courteously and rationally.

Some instructors will play "devil's advocate," shifting from one side of an argument to another, depending on which side appears to be weaker. In this way, the teacher can model good debate practice and illustrate how to conduct an argument and expose weaknesses in opposing views. This technique is also valuable in cases in which a large majority of students in a class share the same perspective on an issue, especially if their view is based on popular opinion rather than verifiable facts or empirical research (Payne & Gainey, 2000).

Yet another approach is for the teacher to make his/her personal opinions explicit, but scrupulously treat students' counter-arguments with respect, illustrating the principle that it is possible to consider alternatives to one's strongly–held position in ways that are critical, logical, and fair. As with the other methods, one must adhere closely to previously-

established ground rules and avoid using one's position of authority to overwhelm or silence any student.

Regardless of your approach, at the beginning of the semester be sure to describe your goals for developing critical thinking and explain your strategies for addressing controversial issues in the course. Students may still be uncomfortable with challenges to their opinions, but if they know what to expect they will be more likely to cooperate and less likely to resist the process of intellectual development. The following principles will also help establish a classroom climate in which intellectual growth can occur:

Establishing a Classroom Climate

1. Create a classroom climate that is "safe" for discussion and disagreement, which means that the rules of discourse need to be established early and followed by everyone, especially the instructor.

2. Although students may have agreed to follow the discussion ground rules, they may need to be reminded of the guidelines from time to time during their debates.

3. Once students have reached consensus on a particular point, make sure they acknowledge and record the fact so they don't recycle their arguments over old ground.

4. If necessary, call "time outs" to allow tempers to cool. The instructor might use the time to summarize the discussion or ask students to write down their thoughts at that point so they can be shared and used to re-start the discussion.

5. Reserve time at the end of the discussion to provide a wrap-up of the session in which students can report what they learned and examine any conclusions that might be drawn from the exchange.

We hope you find these ideas helpful in your courses. For more information about teaching controversial issues, or to request a consultation on the subject, please contact the Center for Faculty Excellence at 966-1289 or e-mail cfe@unc.edu.

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