

## THE TEACHING OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

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AS ONE LISTENS, in these times, to discussions on educational matters, it is rather common to hear people talk about the wisdom or folly of teaching what they call controversial issues. Many people in our society think that it is very foolish to allow our young people to learn about such matters as communism, socialism, or socialized medicine, for example. The list will vary with different people.

The author of this paper recently attended a meeting of a national organization, the purpose of which is to promote the teaching of controversial issues. The group was composed primarily of city school superintendents. They were good people, wanting to do their best for the youth of their communities, and they were all more or less in favor of having such issues taught in their schools. It was a good meeting, with thoughtful participation on the part of most of those in attendance. But as nearly as this writer could determine, they came to the conclusion that it was all right to teach controversial issues provided the teacher knew *all* the facts, and presented them without bias or prejudice.

The difficulty with this conclusion is that those who promoted it seem to assume that the teacher is going to decide all

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of what is going to be "taught," that it is possible and effective for a teacher to be completely neutral, or unbiased, that it is possible for anyone to have all of the facts about anything, and that the "facts" are reliable.

These notions seem to be contrary to what is now known about the nature of learning, and therefore teaching, since teaching has to depend upon learning for its technique. Learners do not learn exactly what is taught, but they adapt teachings to their own unique backgrounds, and make "facts" uniquely their own. Teachers cannot control what is to be learned, except in the degree to which they can deprive their learners of freedom. So-called "facts" are not reliable, but change with the changing scene, especially when they are "facts" about current matters which have not been validated or settled. If teachers could be completely "fair" and neutral they would cancel themselves out and deny the existence of their own personalities, for which, in part, they have been selected.

### *Kinds of Issues in Social Studies*

THERE ARE really two kinds of issues, those that have been settled and those that have not. It may be a misapplication of the word "issue" to use it in connection with matters which have been settled, but these matters were issues at one time, and perhaps none of them is ever completely settled. We have historical facts about which there can be no differences of opinion. For example, it is settled that the American people fought a war between the states between 1861 and 1865. The reasons for doing so are not completely settled, but nobody disputes the fact that the war occurred. People believed, in the past, that the world was flat, and the Bible mentions the four corners of the earth. This "fact" has been disproven by science, and now nobody, except some members of obscure religious sects, clings to this notion. For nearly everyone, the spherical shape of the earth has become a settled matter, and is no longer reviewed.

Unsettled issues have to do with current matters. There is much difference of opinion about them because they *are* current, and this fact is what makes them true issues. So the

question becomes, "Shall young people learn about what is now going on, or confine their study only to matters which are far enough in the past so that they are no longer issues?"

All current issues are controversial in some degree. The degree depends upon the local situation of the learner. Every time that the interests of the learners are turned toward something that is now in process, there will be some disagreement. This disagreement may be mild or violent. An example of an issue about which most people did not get too excited was the issue as to whether Alaska and Hawaii should be admitted to the Union. When they were admitted, few people continued to talk about whether or not this should have happened. A discussion of the pros and cons of socialized medicine might become violent, particularly in a school attended by a good many young children whose fathers belong to the American Medical Association.

The fallacy of not permitting study of controversial issues is nowhere better illustrated than in examination of the social scene. Issues constantly come into our awareness; we become excited about them, take sides with bitterness, occasionally; and then we see them fade into insignificance or disappear altogether. Here we can see before our eyes the emerging, becoming nature of life, and can see that there is nothing static about it; that there is no firm foundation; that we must learn to live in a world of movement, rather than a stationary one. The concept of knowledge as something "set out to be learned" becomes obsolete when we see that life on the earth we live on is in process, not established. Knowledge obviously is what we know *after* we have learned, and hence is personal, having been learned by a unique learner. Knowledge comes *after* learning and does not exist before learning begins. It is a living, rather than a dead or abstract thing, because it is a part of a living organism.

The question, then, as to whether or not we shall allow learners to study controversial (current) issues is to ask whether the learner shall be concerned with that which is coming up, or with that which has gone by.

### *Current Issues or Past Issues?*

IT SEEMS perfectly clear that if we want our young people to be aware of, and able to cope with, the world as it is and will be, they must be free to study all things as their curious, inquiring minds encounter them. There are, to be sure, many difficulties in the way of such learning. There is public pressure by parents and community members upon teachers to force them to keep the attention of learners focused on the past. This is in the hope that young people will not become aware of current problems, and will not embrace any new ideas. This pressure can, in certain circumstances, become very severe, and may, in a few instances, cause teachers to comply or lose their positions. The risks to teachers who create situations where the learners are able to study current issues are, however, not as great as the psychological hazards, where teachers fear the unknown extent of these risks. Fear of what *might* happen causes more retreat than what *has* happened.

Most of the community members who bring pressure to bear upon teachers to avoid current issues are beneficiaries of the status quo. They like things the way they are, and fear change. If they are well situated now, and if change comes about, they will in all probability be worse off. As John Dewey wrote:

Let us admit the case of the conservative: if we once start thinking no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends, and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.

When maintenance of the status quo becomes one's object, he is likely to think that the way to do it is to study the only thing that is not changing, the past. He does not realize that the past also is changing, since it exists only in the consciousness of people, who are unique and who come and go.

Many of the people who are defenders of the status quo think it is perfectly proper to propagandize children and youth

in its behalf. They do not like the "propaganda" of those who are not satisfied with things as they are. This is a common ailment of zealots, whatever their point of view. For example, the American Manufacturers Association and the AFL-CIO do not like each other's publicity, each feeling that the other is using propaganda while it is putting forth the truth. Or each may think that its own is "good" propaganda, while the other's is "bad."

Propaganda, by its definition, is material which promotes a particular point of view, and not other points of view. It is therefore always one-sided. It can be "good" only in the eyes of those who agree with it. The defender of the status quo thinks his propaganda is good, because it promotes what he wants and what he believes in. If we consider all people, there can be no such things as "good" propaganda, because different people want different things.

Propaganda is the material for indoctrination. Indoctrination is the process of so influencing others that they will not be free to make choices on the basis of intelligence, but will have to make them in accordance with attitudes and prejudices already built into them. Where indoctrination has been successful, the individual has been robbed of his freedom of mind and his freedom to make choices.

Many people in America believe that we should indoctrinate for democracy. In the light of what has been said, this is a contradiction in terms. Democracy implies freedom, and above all, freedom to think and make choices. Indoctrination implies the reduction of freedom. Those who would indoctrinate for democracy must be fearful that, if the learner is free to know about democracy and other ways of living, he will not choose democracy. So it is with all other indoctrinators. They do not really believe in what they are putting forth, for if they did, they would not need to protect themselves by the exclusion of other ideas. I believe that democracy is the best way of life yet invented by man, and that free people, who have free choices in the light of full knowledge, will choose it.

It is anomalous that good citizens who cherish freedom, and who have fought for it, think it is not good for teachers

or learners, and that free people can be built by tyrannical methods. These people do, however, constitute a real menace to teachers, a menace which has to be taken into account when teachers try to provide genuine freedom to learn.

Pressure from the community to avoid current issues naturally has a bad effect on teachers. It most often causes fear, and fear always has a bad effect on people, one way or another. Some teachers become belligerent, make loud demands, but fail to keep their powder dry. Their response to fear is to attack. The vast majority of teachers, however, do not take the aggressive attitude, but withdraw, dealing with threat by an effort to escape. They retreat into the past, taking the learner away from his environs, which contain the things the learner really cares about, and impose upon him the matters which are so far gone by that nobody in the community, and especially no learner, cares about them. A national leader in the social studies once told the writer in a meeting, with flushed face and clenched fist, that he would have me understand that social studies consists of history and geography. But history and geography, to the learner, too often do not contain people. At any rate they do not contain real flesh-and-blood people, but names, places, dates, battles, causes, and so on. It would seem that a social study would have to have people in it, real people, and preferably current people. And so I have long contended that history and geography are not necessarily social studies.

**T**HERE ARE many devices for diverting the learner from the current (controversial) scene to the settled past. The physical arrangements into which the learner is placed are often designed for this purpose. Almost every school building which was built prior to World War II has its windows high so that the world will be excluded, forcing the learner to give full attention to that which is in the classroom. The learner's perceptive facilities are further shackled by placing him in a seat with a built-in desk, which is so placed that as long as he sits the way the seat-and-desk is built, he will look only toward the front of the room, and will see, if he raises his eyes from the desk, nothing but the back of the captive in front of him, or,

raising his eyes still further, the blackboard and the teacher, who has him under surveillance. This is not true, of course, of good schools.

In the degree that it is possible, the learner's attention is directed to the desk, upon which is a book, usually a textbook. Textbooks are thick, often tedious, and history texts, which are the most common social studies books, are usually written in *chronological* order. The first chapter therefore deals with matters farthest from the learner. As the school year advances, he makes progress toward the recent past, but never to the present. The book ends short of the present; the learner may not even get to the end of the book, and the learner and his world have been advancing. Under these circumstances, nothing controversial can arise, because nothing current can be reached.

The possibilities of verbal communication are also frequently controlled. This is done by use of the lecture method, in which the teacher chooses that which may be mentioned, and delimits ideas to what he deems desirable. By these devices, it is possible to keep learners almost completely concentrated on matters which have been settled.

In times of public fear and its attendant hysteria, such as we are now going through, it is not reasonable to expect teachers, particularly in the social studies, not to be deeply concerned for their own safety. They need employment, and most of them, both married and unmarried, have family responsibilities. The temptation to "play it safe" is almost overwhelming.

It is perhaps true that limited temporary personal safety may be achieved in this manner. If the teachers of our country, however, rear a generation unaccustomed to consideration of current issues, and deprived of the development of their power to think about them, this may result in the loss of our democratic form of government and our democratic institutions. The first free institution to be attacked probably would be our public schools and our teachers. The very existence of our free public schools would be menaced, and it might come about that teaching itself, as we know it, would disappear. What looks to be safe may turn out in the long run to be

the most dangerous thing we can do, for enslavement, such as now exists among teachers in despotic regimes, is doubtless the worst thing that can happen to us.

Knowledge of settled issues will not suffice in a democracy. For in a democracy the people are the government, and the people must make decisions as they arise. The world is changing so rapidly, the problems are so new, that the ability to think and contrive is the only thing that can save us. Skill in thinking about previously unheard of problems has to be learned. We are not born with this skill. The only way that the young can develop this skill is by having a chance to think about and form judgments concerning such issues.

Twenty years ago (a second in time!) we were not thinking about the problems of nuclear fission. Now everybody is concerned about these problems, and nearly everybody is filled with fear because of our inability to think well about them. Many harmful decisions have been made, with the result that the knowledge of a way to provide all with virtually unlimited power is threatening to destroy life on our planet. The peoples of the earth are so confused that they do not know how to accept and capitalize on a boon.

There is no intention here to imply that there are no uses for a knowledge of history. What the human race has experienced is enormously useful to us in making decisions as to the future. But it is valuable mainly when brought to bear upon present problems, and has little value in itself. The teacher who confines himself to the past never breathes meaning into that which he teaches. In fact, it would be better to start with current problems, and bring what is known of the past to bear on these problems, choosing those events which will serve this purpose.

Whenever a teacher, supervisor, principal, textbook writer, state or local superintendent, or anyone else sets himself up as one to decide what the learner will learn, he puts himself in an untenable position. He gets himself into the position of the essentialist, who holds that certain knowledges are essential, that is, that there are certain knowings without which nobody can get along. Having assumed this position, it then

becomes incumbent upon him to select those items which are essential.

Selecting these items was not quite so ridiculous 500 years ago, because the sum of human knowledge was much more limited than it is today. Today the field of human knowledge is so vast that many curriculums could be made, one as justifiable as another. To make it worse, the needs and interests of the learners are so vast, so general, and so unspecialized, that the task of listing what ought to be contained in any one curriculum becomes absurd. This is the dilemma of the essentialist. He holds that certain knowledges will come in handy some time, and so he casts himself in the role of predicting the unpredictable.

### *The Role of the Learner*

ALL OF THE TROUBLE about deciding what will be taught, whether or not to teach current issues which may become controversial, how much to risk and how safe to play it, solves itself when teachers cease to decide what will be learned and relinquish the role of infinite wisdom as to what is good for others. This can be done quite simply by consulting with the learner as to what is to be learned. If the curriculum is derived from the needs and interests of the learner, there need be no problem of selection on the part of anyone else.

Those familiar with educational jargon, as most teachers are, will not be at all shocked by the idea of starting with the learner where he is. It sounds fine as long as it remains abstract. But when we propose that it be made concrete, and that we start teaching real learners that way today, not next year, we find a streak of the essentialist in almost everybody. "Oh, but how can *they* know what they ought to learn? They might miss knowing about Abraham Lincoln, for example!" The question would make much more sense if it asked "How can *you* or *I* know what they ought to learn?"

If we derive what is to be learned from the learner, many benefits will follow. The benefit most apropos to this article is that the learner will start with what is around him—that part of it which he can hitch onto his present knowledge and ex-

perience. Whatever he chooses will be current, because he has nothing else to choose from. It may or may not turn out to be controversial enough to disturb anyone. If the teacher did not choose it, nor act in a provocative manner to make the issue more controversial than it need be, he is in a position which is difficult to assail. He becomes a defender of freedom to learn, rather than a provocative instigator. Members of the community who have special interests to promote or eliminate will find it difficult to attack a promoter and defender of freedom.

When what is to be learned is derived from the learner, current issues will provide the starting point, but issues which are no longer current or controversial will be studied too, because seeking answers to present problems will call for knowing how present problems have arisen, whether people have encountered similar situations before, and what solutions they found for them. The pertinent parts of the whole history of man will come clear to the learner, simply because they *are* pertinent. No matter how anyone studies history, he is sure to miss some of it. If he misses that which is not pertinent to him as a unique individual, he will be better off than he will be after studying impertinent or irrelevant matters and forgetting most of them because they do not apply.

### *The Role of the Teacher*

THERE HAS BEEN much discussion in educational circles as to what right the teacher has to put forth his own point of view. Many people really seem to believe that a teacher should present *all* points of view impartially, and should avoid making known what he himself believes. This I believe not to be possible, or if some can do it, it is a tightrope-walking performance which certainly would absorb the attention of the teacher to the exclusion of constructive teaching. It will absorb the students as well if they catch on to what is going on.

It is impractical if not somewhat dishonest for a teacher to attempt to assume a completely unbiased role. This problem arises only when someone other than the learners has chosen what will be discussed. When that which is to be learned is

derived from the learner, the role of the teacher is radically changed. He becomes the facilitator of growth and learning rather than the giver of knowledge. What he believes about an issue becomes less important. He is helping learners solve their own problems rather than telling them what to believe. Under such a learning situation, the problem of propaganda or indoctrination disappears. Of course, it is possible for a dishonest teacher to work some of his wiles by the way he facilitates learning, but the basic problem in such a case lies in the fact that we have a dishonest teacher rather than that we have adopted a faulty method.

A great deal has been said and written, over a long period of time, on the subject of academic freedom. The principle of academic freedom has been defended most vigorously by colleges and universities, and is particularly apropos to teachers of the social studies. It is mostly in the social sciences that such questions arise. All teachers, regardless of subject or grade level, however, are involved. In its lowest form, this means the right of teachers to teach whatever they please, without any interference from anyone. In its higher form, academic freedom implies the right of a teacher to seek the truth wherever it may take him, and to teach the truth to young people.

The idea that anyone, either in the school administration or in the community, should control what the teacher uncovers or presents is repugnant to all democratic people, and any such effort should be resisted with all of the strength of the whole teaching profession. This is thought control, and it is utterly destructive of all free institutions. The freedom, even the safety, of all citizens depends upon resistance to such controls, for down that road lies fascism.

While it is not possible to affirm too strongly the right of freedom to teach, there are some facets of the problem which require clarification. While the teacher clearly has the right to freedom to pursue ideas and to present them, it does seem to be a strange way to make up a curriculum. Operating on the interests and prejudices of individuals for what shall be learned seems a bit hazardous and scattered. We here again encounter the notion that truth is absolute, and that if the

professor pursues truth, he can come out at one place only. The fact is that truth is relative, and that there is no one place for a searcher after truth to come out. In fact, if he starts with a prejudice, it is likely that the further he goes, the more strange his course will appear to most people.

Further, some teachers who defend the concept of academic freedom most vigorously are more interested in their own freedom than they are in the freedom of learners. In fact, their very demands often seem to imply that they not only be free to teach what they want to, but also be supplied a group of captive learners, to whom to teach that which they please. This is in some cases the basis for required courses, for what does it profit a teacher to gain academic freedom unless he is also provided learners? It might come about that the teacher possessed the freedom to teach the truth as he sees it, but nobody comes to hear it! The required course is the neatest insurance yet devised against such eventuality.

The problem of academic freedom would probably never arise if the teacher were not posing as an authority, capable of selecting what other people should learn. Indeed, most of the vexing problems of curriculum making stem from this notion. Surely we believe in freedom of the mind and freedom of speech for teachers, but it is difficult, even untenable, to defend freedom for teachers while denying freedom for learners. We must take a dim view of anyone who demands freedom for himself but not for everyone. We must beware the one who demands the freedom to enslave. Consultation with the learner as to what is to be learned can bring freedom to teacher and learner alike.

We have no safety anywhere except in the operation of free minds in a free society. The professor who seeks academic freedom by law and on demand, without including all people, is really asking that his slaves shall make him free.

During the decade, 1930-40, when our economic system was staggering and many millions of people were hungry and ill clad, the question often arose as to whether the schools dared to build a new social order. Need for improvement and change in the social order was apparent to almost everyone.

The proponents of the idea that the schools *should* build a new social order seemed to conceive the notion that the social science teachers should make up their minds what the social order of the future should be and teach this to the young. Then, when the young matured, we would have the new social order. This sort of talk was going on before World War II, the atomic bomb, or the "cold war"!

The trouble with the idea was, of course, that again it sprang from a static concept of the nature of life, and saw teaching as an authoritarian, indoctrinating, and propagandizing undertaking. In principle it was no different from the "educational" methods of the Nazis and the Communists, except the materials would be what we imagined rather than what they did. The notion again called for predicting the unpredictable.

Of course we must teach for a new social order, because we are going to have one whether we like it or not. The social order is constantly in evolution, as is everything and everybody in the universe. The only way that we can assure ourselves that the new social order will be better than that which we now have is by developing people with free minds, experienced in devising and contriving in the face of unpredictable conditions and circumstances. Free minds can only be produced by freedom vouchsafed to learners as they grow and develop.

**T**HE CRUX of the whole matter of education, and of life itself, is freedom. We know now that every living thing, and so especially every human, is uniquely purposive. This quality provides the direction, points the path along which our energies may best be spent. But purpose is thwarted in the absence of freedom. We can see, then, how the need for freedom is as "built-in" as is purpose, since one is a requirement for the other. The history of the human race reveals that, long before anyone knew the "why" of it, humans struggled to free themselves from the bonds by which others sought to enslave them. History shows, too, that the will to be free has never been beaten down, and that tyranny has never triumphed in the long run.

Freedom begets creativity, and creativity, the devising of

something new, is the growing edge of learning and of life. No slave can be creative in the sense implied here. He might be creative in inventing a way to free himself, but in such instance he is not acting as a slave. All human progress depends upon the creation of the new as the free human contrives toward a better life.

We can see then that he who would deprive another human of his freedom of mind deprives him of his most priceless possession and takes from him that about him which is most distinctly human. Perhaps the best illustration of this deprivation known to us is the case of the Hitler Youth. So thoroughly had they been indoctrinated that there was no place to begin when an attempt was made to introduce ideas other than those of the Nazis. These youth had been mutilated worse than those who had lost arms or legs. In fact, if we could see the psychological self of another person as we can the physical structure, those youth would then appear as the most mutilated of all; our sympathies would then go out to them as they do when we see physical cripples.

Freedom promotes courage, which is so essential in the establishment and maintenance of the life good to live. Up to the present time in our development, there have always been those who would enslave others. To retain one's freedom, one must be willing to take risks, and when he sees that what happens to others also happens to him, then the courageous one will dare to take risks in behalf of others. Enslavement begets fear, so that the enslaved one becomes less and less able to muster the courage needed to struggle for freedom.

We must have free, courageous citizens if we are to remain free. This perhaps, sounds trite, but it will not really be trite until teachers everywhere cease to attempt to enslave their learners, and come to realize that the way to become free and courageous is to have a chance to practice being free and courageous. As we have so often said, teachers must be free, and so, therefore, must learners. Free men cannot be educated by craven teachers, nor by free teachers who render learners craven. Thus it is the plain duty of every teacher to abandon the notion that it is his function to delimit learning, and to