CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES:
The Teacher’s Crucial Role

ALAN L. LOCKWOOD

The teacher is the heart of the curriculum. I have seen fine teachers generate debate over potentially listless subjects such as social influences on early and late Greek sculpture. I have also seen teachers drain life from potentially zestful issues surrounding teenage sexual behavior. Sound instructional goals and well-crafted curriculum are clearly necessary for effective and engaging social studies instruction, but they are by no means sufficient. The teacher’s behavior in implementing the curriculum is vital if the desired goals are to be achieved.

In this essay, I will explore the role of the teacher in leading discussions of controversial issues in the teaching of social studies. The central argument is that teachers must consciously choose to enact a clear role or roles when discussing controversial issues. The appropriateness of the chosen role, however, may vary depending on the type of issue being examined and the goals and rationale for examining the issue. Put another way, one role may be of primary importance in one context and inappropriate, or at least questionable, in others.

Teachers should have a sound rationale when defining their role in dealing with controversial issues. Some roles enhance the likelihood that students will achieve the desired results of examining controversy while other roles will interfere with such achievement. As a simple, exaggerated example, a teacher may believe that students should give all sides of an issue a careful hearing as they develop their own points of view. If in practice, however, the teacher permits only selected points of view to be heard, or gives grossly unequal time to alternative points of view, that teacher’s behavior interferes with students’ chances of hearing all sides impartially and carefully. The teacher’s role in leading discussions is critical in helping students achieve the aims associated with the examination of controversial issues. Although this topic would seem to be of central importance in thinking about social studies instruction related to controversial issues, surprisingly little research is available to help shape our practices. Consequently, my comments are drawn largely from personal experience and, unfortunately, do not build on an established corpus of systematic theory and research.

Teachers must consciously choose to enact a clear role or roles when discussing controversial issues.

In my experience, few teachers give sustained thought to their role in helping students discuss controversial issues. While this is especially true among beginners, veterans as well often do not make time or believe they have time for such needed introspection. A major effort is expended in gathering materials, arranging for speakers, setting central questions, and attending to activities necessary for building the curriculum. Given this reality, thoughtful consideration of the teacher’s role in managing classroom discourse on controversy is frequently lost in the midst of other instructional preparations. One consequence of this is that classroom discussion develops more by accident than by design, and the probability of achieving desired goals becomes more a matter of chance than of likelihood.

How then can we determine an effective role for the teacher in discussing controversial issues? I will begin by identifying two types of issues. Next, I will set out educational goals typically associated with examination of such issues. Then I will identify some possible roles for the teacher in addressing these issue-related goals. Finally, I will consider what role or roles would be most appropriate in light of the curricular goals associated with the analysis of controversial issues.

Two Types of Controversial Issues

All controversial issues are not alike. What they do have in common is that they present us with problems whose best solutions are open to disagreement. However, this commonality should not lead us to automatically assume that teachers should adopt the same stance when helping students discuss all the different issues. To explore this question, I will consider two common types of controversial issues and the instructional goals associated with them.

The two types of issues I wish to consider are (1) empirical issues associated with disciplined inquiry in history and the social sciences and (2) issues associated with the exploration of values as they arise in public policy decisions. I chose these two types of issues because they are most likely to be discussed in classrooms that deal with controversial issues.

Empirical Issues

These are issues that arise within the context of studying academic disciplines. For example, the following questions might arise in such study: Who or what caused the explosion of the battleship Maine? Does television contribute to violence in society? How can the forces of racism be controlled? Does capital punishment deter crime?
What would be the economic effects of a flat rate tax? How did anti-war demonstrations influence policymakers during the Vietnam era? Why did Hitler turn to a policy of genocide?

Disciplined inquiry into these questions typically follows some version of what might be called the social scientific method or the historical method. At the minimum, these methods involve gathering data relevant to the question, assessing the soundness or validity of these data, and formulating an answer to the central question that seems best supported by relevant data. The concept of an answer “best supported” by evidence is a critical one because we assume that well-informed people may continue to disagree on the best answer. What is important is that the disagreements entail increasingly sophisticated debates about the quality and relevance of evidence as well as the logic employed in coming to a particular conclusion.

A variety of social studies goals are typically associated with this approach: learning research skills, employing critical thinking in assessing the soundness of data, developing both inductive and deductive reasoning in considering the relationship of evidence to the central question, and exercising skill in persuasive writing and speaking. Goals such as these, and the objectives that flow from them, reflect the central purpose of the use of disciplined inquiry.

This approach normally does not intend that students reach particular conclusions to the central question. The teacher is less concerned, for example, if students conclude that Hitler’s genocidal policies are best explained by Freudian pathology, calculated opportunism, or some other hypothesis than in the students’ development of enhanced capacities in analysis and data-based argumentation. The nurturing of these capacities is the instructional aim of such approaches. It is hoped that growing sophistication in the exercise of these capacities contributes to effective citizenship.

**Issues Associated with Values**

These are issues that arise when students are judging the rights or wrongs of public policies or personal actions. I am referring to what might be called moral/ethical value questions as opposed to non-moral value questions. An example of the former would be, Should capital punishment be legalized? An example of the latter would be, Should color or black and white pictures be used in the yearbook? While both questions might stir passionate debate, moral value questions involve significant issues of human rights and well-being while non-moral issues, at least on the surface, do not.

Examples of such moral/ethical issues that may be addressed in the social studies classroom are, Should affirmative action policies be abolished? Is it fair to give scholarships on the basis of need as opposed to achievement? Should Thomas Jefferson have freed his slaves? Should government prohibit violence on television? Should the Shah of Iran have been admitted to the United States for cancer treatment? These types of questions require difficult judgments involving such fundamental moral values as equality, freedom, and life.

These questions are the kind that go to the heart of such complex social studies goals as defining the meaning of values, identifying how they are involved in concrete situations, determining what values should take precedence when they conflict, and clarifying and justifying principles involved in making value judgments. In the debate about capital punishment, for example, the fundamental value issue of when, if ever, it is right to deliberately take a human life must be addressed.

Although I have set out a dichotomy between controversial issues raised in disciplined inquiry and in examination of values, the two domains are often intertwined. For the time being, however, I want to hold them as distinct—disciplined inquiry being understood primarily as the assessment and interpretation of empirical claims, and values examination as the clarification, application, and justification of ethical arguments.

**Roles Teachers Can Play**

In this section, I will briefly describe some possible roles the teacher may play in conducting discussion of controversial issues. It must be emphasized that these descriptions are general orientations or central tendencies for teacher behavior, not precise specifications or mutually exclusive categories. The following are four such roles:

1. The teacher as presiding judge
2. The teacher as determined advocate
3. The teacher as nurturant facilitator
4. The teacher as Socratic cross-examiner

**Presiding Judge.** The judge systematically organizes the classroom for orderly study of the issue and oversees deliberation among the students, enforcing rules as necessary. This responsibility is not unique to the judge’s role. All teachers must organize their classrooms for instruction and enforce appropriate rules. What is distinctive about the judge’s role is that rulings about “permissible testimony” are made. That is, the judge may rule certain lines of argument as impermissible, demand that students clearly follow pre-set rules of inquiry and presentation, and insist that all discussion be relevant and pointed to the issue being considered. As so defined, this judicial role is to be understood as primarily concerned with procedural matters as opposed to ruling on which side has made the most compelling argument.

**Determined Advocate.** The advocate is primarily concerned that favored solutions to controversial issues be adopted by students. The determined advocate wants students to come to particular conclusions about the correct answers to the issue under examination. In this role the teacher may act as a stern inculcator of “right” answers. However, this heavy-handed approach is not the only way in which the role can be enacted. A determined advocate may also wish students to hold a well-reasoned and justified position on the preferred answer. This can entail explaining to students and persuading them that available evidence best supports one answer or that moral argumentation clearly leads to a single preferred value judgment.

**Nurturant Facilitator.** In this role the teacher is primarily concerned with creating a classroom atmosphere in which students feel free to express...
whatever views they may hold, to pursue lines of inquiry or argument that make most sense to them as individuals, and to arrive at conclusions with little or no challenge from the teacher. This role is akin to that frequently associated with values clarification in which the teacher non-judgmentally encourages students to explore ideas and express their thinking in a non-threatening, caring environment.

Socratic Cross-Examiner. The cross-examiner carefully challenges the assertions and assumptions presented by students. In this role the teacher questions the validity of evidence and comprehensiveness of evidence, raises alternative interpretations and explanations, tests the adequacy of explicit or implicit definitions of terms, pushes students to consider the implications of assertions, and explores the adequacy and thoroughness of student research and thought. This role is akin to that played in the courtroom by prosecution and defense attorneys as they question witnesses.

I wish to emphasize that these rough characterizations of roles are not to be understood as descriptions of teacher style or personality. Stereotypically one might think of the judge as coolly aloof, the advocate as relentlessly pursuing an endpoint, the facilitator as a laid-back listener, and the cross-examiner as a harsh interrogator. The above characterizations are intended to highlight discussion-leading behaviors associated with a particular role, not the tone or manner with which they are executed.

Attaining the Goals
Given the foregoing, what can be said about the teacher’s appropriate role or roles for effectively engaging students in the discussion of controversial issues? I want to emphasize that I regard the best teaching as an artful, although rational, pursuit rather than as a formulaic exercise of mechanically applying prescribed techniques.

Part of the rational art of engaging students in discussion of controversial issues is judging what roles to play at what time in a lesson or unit. We should not assume, for example, that a unit focused on disciplined inquiry requires that the teacher unrelentingly act only as presiding judge, cross-examiner, or in some other set role. What is most critical is that the teacher’s role at any point be constructed in a manner likely to help students attain the goals or objectives central to that instructional moment.

An example can help us better see the importance of linking instructional goals with the teacher’s roles when helping students address controversial issues. Assume a unit is to address the general question of the legalization of capital punishment. The goal of the unit is to help students recognize the factual and value complexity of the issue and develop a well-reasoned point of view on the question. Assume as well that the unit will address two broad sub-issues: (1) What do we hypothesize or know about the effects of capital punishment on society and the deterrence of crime? (2) What moral principles or rules should govern a decision by the state to take or not to take a human life?

The first sub-issue is most consistent with what I earlier identified as an empirical issue associated with disciplined inquiry; the second is an issue associated with values. What teacher role(s) best helps students address these types of issues?

Examining the effects of policy. Virtually any well-developed position on capital punishment must consider its consequences. We want students to consider a variety of possible consequences and the validity of available evidence supporting or refuting hypothesized effects. The pursuit of this general question requires identification of possible effects of having or not having the policy, establishing the relevance of such claimed effects to the general question, and accumulating and evaluating evidence to support or refute the claimed effects.

What teacher role(s) is most appropriate for this issue? Initially it would appear that the roles of presiding judge and cross-examiner would best fit the exploration of these questions. The nurturant facilitator could play a limited role in drawing out student assumptions about the effects of capital punishment but would be constrained in pushing students to consider a potentially wider range of effects than they can generate. For example, students may only see the question of deterrence broadly and wish to consider only general homicide rates of states with and without capital punishment. The nurturant facilitator could also ask why such information would be relevant to the general question. However, staying true to the role of nurturant facilitator would keep the teacher from pursuing finer analyses of homicide rates such as the rates of murder of police officers, prison inmates, and guards. Pressing students to assess the validity of data, to test psychological assumptions about the degree to which murderers calculate the costs and benefits of their behavior, and so on are also tasks not suited to the nurturant facilitator role because the facilitator is more interested in encouraging student expression than in challenging it. The closer questioning of factual assumptions about the effects of capital punishment would be best served by the teacher as cross-examiner.

Playing the role of presiding judge also can be of benefit in pursuing the consequences of capital punishment. Here the teacher would demand that claims of the effects of the policy be clearly shown as relevant to the general question. For example, a student might claim that only vicariously bloodthirsty people favor capital punishment and that such people should not be allowed their sick pleasures. The judge would be within his or her role in requiring that evidence for such a claim be permitted in the "court" only if the claim had clear relevance to the general policy question.

Speaking generally, the roles of judge and cross-examiner seem best fitted to pursuing the goals associated with examination of social science evidence for hypothesized claims of the effects of capital punishment. The role of nurturant facilitator is limited in its effectiveness.
Establishing and testing moral principles. In addition to addressing claimed effects of capital punishment, a well-developed position on the policy also explicates and defends a moral stance on the general question of when, if ever, it is right to take a human life. In pursuing this aim, the teacher wants students to clarify what principles they initially bring to the question and then to test the adequacy of these principles through such modes of analysis as analogy, role-taking, universalization, etc.

The most appropriate teacher role for developing this value issue would appear to be a combination of the nurturant facilitator and cross-examiner. As nurturant facilitator, the teacher could draw from students incipient principles in their responses to the issue of taking of human life. For example, a student might say capital punishment is morally acceptable because the murderer deserves to be killed because he or she also killed. The facilitator might reflect to the student the principle of retribution implied in the statement. Another student might say we should have capital punishment because executing the murderer will keep many others from being homicide victims. Here the facilitator might draw out the utilitarian principle nascent in the student’s position.

The cross-examiner role would best serve the aim of testing students’ initial moral principles. For example, an opponent of capital punishment who contends that intentional killing is wrong could be asked if that principle should apply in wartime. Similarly, a student who claimed that capital punishment is justified on the grounds that it prevents the future murder of many others could be asked if the execution of a possibly innocent person would be justified if we were convinced the act would have a broad deterrent effect. Whether one accepts these particular examples as valid tests of emerging moral principles, the point is that the role of cross-examiner seems most appropriate for the general purpose of helping students assess the soundness of the moral principles they bring to bear on general value issues.

There is no single preferred role for the teacher for dealing with controversial issues. The reader may note that I have not discussed the determined advocate role in the previous section. That is because I generally reject this role for the educational goals associated with the study of controversial issues. There are times when teachers may reveal their reasoned position on issues, if such revelation can assist students in their own critical examination of an issue. For the goals discussed here, however, teacher self-disclosure with the intent of leading students to a particular conclusion is not justified.

The foregoing discussion has been intended to suggest some central characteristics of the teacher’s role that should be emphasized in leading discussions focused on particular issues and goals. The argument that some roles are preferred over others is made with a sort of “loose logic” rather than hard syllogistic entailment. The suggested variation in roles should not be construed as a strict formulaic or mechanical exercise—objective type A requiring teacher role B. Instead, the teacher must make a rational judgment focusing on what behavior is best suited to the pursuit of particular goals or objectives. This brief exploration of the teacher’s role strongly suggests that the effective teacher should vary his or her behavior in accordance with the goals relevant to the study of sub-issues that arise in the discussion of the broader controversial issue being examined.

I wish to emphasize that effective discussion leading requires more than the application of technique. To illustrate, consider what I call the “Ross Epiphany.” A most talented beginning teacher had carefully prepared curriculum materials and key questions for students to debate controversy surrounding a free speech issue. The teacher expressed frustration at the listless quality of discussion of the issue. On closer examination of his role, we discovered that his behavior during the discussion was largely directed at checking student understanding of factual material—substance of court cases, etc. In a moment of insight, the teacher realized that he was unintentionally using the discussion format to pursue content learning goals rather than as a setting for students to express and test their emerging views on the controversial issue. Once he made this realization and reaffirmed his commitment to helping students fully develop their points of view, he was better able to manage the discussion with that goal in mind. With his role now consistent with his goal, productive discussions ensued. His understanding of and commitment to the rationale for examining controversy was as important to his effectiveness as his ability to enact appropriate discussion-leading behaviors.

The preceding analysis should provide some guidance regarding what teachers should take into account when deciding what role to adopt when engaging students in the study of controversy. Such careful decision making is vital if we are to succeed in productively pursuing the study of controversial issues. Clearly, we need further conceptual and empirical work on this crucial feature of good social studies instruction.

Notes
1 My general rejection of the determined advocate role should be understood in the context of helping students develop well-reasoned positions. Kelly (1989) has provided arguments in favor of teachers’ disclosing their own positions on controversial issues. As I understand his position, however, such disclosure should be made as a means to aid students in developing their positions rather than, as is the case of the determined advocate, persuading students to adopt the teacher’s substantive conclusions. I would, of course, hope that the teacher would be a determined advocate of the importance of the process of studying and thinking carefully about controversial issues.
2 Of course, the teacher must also take into account much more than the goals being pursued. An understanding of the abilities and preferences of students, behavior acceptable to the school and the community culture, and other factors must enter into such decisions.

References

Alan L. Lockwood is Professor and Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.