

Learning about Teacher and Student Freedom

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Academic freedom. The term sounds, well, almost old fashioned—a bit outdated in a world of technological wonder, educational innovations, and gadgets. It might well be seen as a quaint idea, overshadowed by the heightened focus and demand placed on education in the recent past. Ours is a “Nation at Risk,” struggling to compete with the excitedly proclaimed emerging threats posed by China, India, and other nations. The education agenda is one of high stakes testing and of multinational corporations proposing and developing educational models—conditions that ignore the study of social issues where intellectual freedom is required. This is not an environment well suited for serious consideration of the concept of academic freedom, nor does it appear to offer a ripe opportunity for dealing with controversies. This is an environment of the now. The past is too often quickly forgotten or ignored, perhaps never known. In this setting, where and how do teachers learn about the need for student and teacher freedom and the corollary need to engage students in the study of controversial topics?

Teacher Education Involves All Teachers

Current social studies teachers are active participants in teacher education in a variety of forms. Teaching is a profession that often draws students into careers as a result of their own experiences in schools; they learn, good and bad, about teaching from watching others. Teachers come from collegiate institutions, learning from college teachers and peers. Teachers observe other teachers in schools, and are models themselves for incoming new teachers as well as for students in teacher education programs. Teachers engage in in-service and continuing education programs aimed at professional development. And teachers learn from discussions with peer teachers, students, school administrators, and others on the roles and expectations for teaching. From the most senior to the most junior social studies teacher, teacher education is among our professional activities.

A profession-wide awareness of how individuals learn beyond that which occurs through modeling and in-service training is valuable. With what knowledge of academic freedom and skills to address it do candidates arrive in our schools? How are colleges and programs of education dealing with that and other topics? Social studies supervisors asked these questions at a recent New Jersey presentation on academic freedom and teaching controversial issues. They wanted information on the preparation of candidates for the classrooms that they supervise, and they wanted an increased focus on academic freedom. This supports the contention that a dialogue about these critical experiences is important. That this issue of *Social Education* addresses the topic nationwide provides even more evidence of the need to expand dialogue. All of the actors involved in preparing teachers—formally and informally—need to reflect on their various roles, and consider how

best to promote common interests. A shared conversation promises heightened recognition and appreciation for all in the field regarding the very diverse and significant impacts on pre-service candidates and future classrooms. This increased awareness of the various influences on teacher knowledge and behavior can also address the often-cited perception of an “us” and “them” relationship between practitioners and teacher educators. NCSS members should know that in university classrooms, pre-service candidates read *Social Education*, are encouraged to attend NCSS conferences, and to both go to and present at regional social studies conferences. Learning about academic freedom and the legitimate study of controversy would appear to be an important part of the activities for both pre-service and in-service teachers of social studies.

In a very real sense, teacher preparation begins with students who explore challenging topics and issues under the guidance of knowledgeable and skillful teachers. This preparation continues, as pre-service candidates examine theories and research data that support and promote teacher freedom to deal with issues of significance on which there is a range of perspectives. The expansion and strengthening of a commitment to academic freedom and dealing with controversial topics finds itself as a foundation for systematic in-service professional development. The concept of academic freedom and the opportunity for dealing

with controversy are thus experienced in dynamic classrooms at all levels.

Evidence of a Lack of Controversy in Classrooms

While the history and expectations of social studies teaching require that controversy be an essential element of instruction, the evidence suggests that teachers and their students do not regularly deal with controversial issues. If the topics that have a direct impact on individual citizens are controversial, and controversy is seen by many as not appropriate for school examination, then what is left for teachers and students to examine? Dates and names, geographic terms and sites, and how a bill becomes a law. All these are important, but only in the context of how citizens use that knowledge and develop the skills to understand and join the public discourse on how we can strengthen and improve our society and world. Hess wrote that not to address these topics teaches that they are either not important, already agreed upon, or forbidden areas for examination.¹ She cited the work of scholars whose work contends that controversial topics are not widely addressed. Hess shared the results of the work done by Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long, who report that there is little classroom discussion occurring.² This work supports that done by others over a span of many years, and leads to questions about teacher education in this area.

The reasons controversy is not more widely addressed are many. It is important to recognize that it is from classrooms characterized by these conditions that pre-service social studies candidates come. It is thus likely that many of them have not experienced a significant amount of instructional time examining controversial topics, developing skills for questioning and analyzing competing claims for truth, or taking part in activities that foster deliberation and reflection. They may well have not seen teachers model ways to engage students in dealing with controversial topics.

Students are preparing to teach in a society and world threatened by an unprecedented range of global challenges. Nelson highlights the risk posed to teachers and teaching during times of threat and great stress.³ These are such times. The controversies are so many and so complex that it is impossible to avoid them, except as the evidence suggests, in those very social studies classrooms where they could and should be addressed. Building an awareness of and support for academic freedom has the potential to protect our pre-service teacher education students as they enter classrooms, providing them with support for dealing with controversy. Academic freedom can protect them from official and external attempts at censorship, as well as from the temptation of self-censorship. Academic freedom embraces a professional code of responsibility—a commitment to both the teacher and the student. It underscores the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning.

Pre-service teachers learn an obligation to meet the scholarly expectations of the field, to recognize student needs, and to design instruction in ways to maximize the success of all learners. No textbook series can accomplish this, nor can any prescriptive teaching method. Neither legislative act nor high stakes assessment can ensure this. Only the person who faces a room of young people day after day for month after month can determine how to navigate the imperatives of a curriculum that must be delivered with the range of skills and abilities needed by the young in the classrooms in which they teach. They must be given the latitude that academic freedom provides. Academic freedom is not license. This is not a retreat from accountability, but a conscious embrace of a far more demanding responsibility.

What Do Pre-Service Teachers Learn about Academic Freedom?

Pre-service teachers often learn in classrooms where the traditions of academic

freedom and of dealing with controversy are limited or do not exist. In the hundreds of hours of field-based observation and teaching, controversy is not widely addressed, nor is academic freedom a foundational concept. Mentor teachers themselves may know of no reasons to question the status quo.

In addition to having little academic experience in dealing with controversy, teacher candidates come from home communities that are increasingly stratified based on economic and political characteristics (Hess⁴). Citing work by Bishop⁵ and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse,⁶ Hess points out that as communities become more and more homogenized, the desire to address a range of perspectives on issues grows weaker, and even the opportunity to do so across political perspectives diminishes. Teachers and students may well be forming views and accepting knowledge claims within these cocoons of comparative ignorance, oblivious to the possibility that not everyone agrees with them. For the pre-service teacher education candidate, the impact of the status quo, based both on their experiences as students prior to college, and their observation of the same in classrooms during field and student teaching experiences, is powerful.

Misco and Patterson report that teacher education candidates in two institutions had a fairly strong and accurate understanding of academic freedom.⁷ However, candidates stated that it was limited, whether by the community in which the school was located or self-censorship, or a combination. There was a reported uncertainty about how to exercise or act on it, and generally it was accepted that academic freedom must be limited for political and cultural reasons. Eighty-one percent of the students reported that they believed they had a limited degree of academic freedom, with only 11% reporting they had it to a great extent. Misco and Patterson report that students perceived certain limitations as inevitable, or givens, and they cited as barriers high stakes testing, standards,

the need to cover the text, as well as the standards of communities. Several reported that they would self-censor to either avoid offending others or out of the fear of reprisal.

In a survey of professors teaching social studies methods courses (Mitchell, Evans, Daly and Roach⁸), 84 % of the respondents reported that academic freedom ought to be studied by pre-service teacher education candidates, with 78% actually addressing it in their classes. Of these, only 48% dealt with the topic in a routine systematic way, with 38% focused on it only if the issue arose. Only 15% of the respondents reported that they had candidates examine the topic both systematically and as the issue arose. Some 22% did not raise the concept in their methods classes. Only 30.2% of the pre-service teacher education candidates in one study reported that academic freedom was addressed in any of their classes (Evans, Mitchell, Daly, Roach⁹). Only 19.2 % of those indicated that it was a formal and planned part of the course, appearing most often in foundation and not methods classes.

In an informal discussion among teachers of social studies methods courses in colleges and universities in New Jersey (including public and private institutions), only one of the schools embedded the teaching of the concept within its methods classes. A telephone sampling of five large national research university teacher education programs revealed similar results. There was no systematic focus on the topic, with only one faculty member indicating that the topic was routinely addressed. They were either uncertain that it might be addressed by colleagues or reported the results of their own informal survey revealing that no one at the institution addressed it. The evidence suggests that a more systematic profession-wide focus on academic freedom for pre-service and in-service teacher education is in order.

What Should be Learned?

Students preparing to become teachers need to understand the nature of the concept of academic freedom, develop-

ing skills with which to work within its protection to examine controversial topics. In-service programs should also develop strong rationales, practical strategies, and knowledge of available resources for competent dealing with controversies and protection of student and teacher freedom.

Teachers are often inexperienced in dealing with issues that reflect real issues and unsure about or unable to control the emotional responses of their students (Levitt and Longstreet¹⁰). They question their ability to effectively teach controversial issues (Hess¹¹). In one study, only 35% of high school teachers questioned reported that they felt able to teach controversy effectively. It is not surprising that pre-service teachers are cautious since so many of the social studies teachers who taught them are uncomfortable with controversy. Misco and Patterson¹² concluded that many pre-service teachers are uneasy teaching about controversial issues such as sexual orientation, sexual harassment and religious issues. An exploration of controversial topics themselves might be helpful. Pre-service classrooms and in-service workshops can provide the opportunity to examine both materials and procedures that can potentially generate confidence in addressing controversial topics. The purpose is to recognize that they are not teaching controversial issues, but exploring those issues with their students. Bringing an issue forward for examination is not advocacy, rather it is recognition that the issue has assumed a place of importance in the public discourse of citizens. By addressing controversy, we can focus on skills essential to democratic citizenship including active listening, communication skills, and alternative forms of resolving conflict—because if there is a controversy, there is conflict. Controversial issues typically involve discussion. Brookfield and Preskill posited that discussion is valuable, since it is a directed process involving interaction between students and teachers.¹³ Discussion can make it easier to deal with controversy, helping students clarify and justify views. Hess maintains that using discussion and getting student

input improves their ability to think.¹⁴

Pre-collegiate and college teachers can develop and share lesson plans, activities, readings and other approaches to working with controversy and academic freedom for use with pre-service teacher education candidates. Pre-service and in-service candidates need to explore recommendations on how to prepare for both challenges to teaching, and responses once a challenge occurs (Daly, Roach, Evans and Mitchell¹⁵). Awareness of support and resources available from the legal system, teacher organizations like the NCSS, and groups concerned with free speech and civil liberties should be increased.

Actual teaching in classrooms—both pre- and in-service—should accompany this effort, to identify best practices and individually useful tactics for handling controversial topics and necessary intellectual freedom. University classrooms should encourage instruction that promotes inquiry and reflection; pre-collegiate classrooms should demand no less, and probably more. Professional development schools can provide an appropriate arena for building the relationships needed to promote and institutionalize the teaching of controversial issues for pre-and in-service teachers. In all schools, practicing teachers—whether in mentoring or in colleague-oriented settings and discussions—should enhance the profession's dependence on academic freedom.

Activities that demonstrate best practice can be effective ways to both build knowledge about academic freedom and illustrate procedures for dealing with controversy. Two groups reading differing perspectives on academic freedom for high school teachers could be given an appeals case (such as *Janet Cooper v Kingsville Board of Education*), and conduct a moot court hearing pulling support from a range of appellate court rulings.

One Local Model

The Secondary Education Program at Seton Hall University endorsed a Civic Mission of the Schools document, which includes the concept of dealing

with controversy and academic freedom to candidates from all disciplines (Daly, Devlin-Scherer, Burroughs and McCartan¹⁶). All pre-service candidates work with middle and high school students on Project Citizen programs. They work with professional teachers in a professional development school on the Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) program. Both programs provide a bridge for having pre-service candidates actively work in classrooms where controversy is a central element. Teacher candidates first learn the procedures and methods of each program in the university classroom. Following that, they learn the deliberation model, observe deliberations in area DID schools, and finally, facilitate a deliberation in the high school setting. They work with university students in Ukraine also involved in the project. The process and the materials provide a foundation for building comfort in dealing with controversy, personally and as the classroom instructor.

Can we afford to have new social studies teachers silent in the face of monumental threats to American beliefs and our way of life? Is it responsible to shield students from the public discussion and consideration of actions that will bring about changes in their opportunities and possibilities? How can our profession educate current and future teachers to deal with controversy while arming them with the knowledge and skills needed to protect them as they do so? How do we incorporate the larger community in considering the importance of free expression and free inquiry in the classroom? These, and many others, are continuing significant issues for social studies teachers and teacher education. They should be addressed in teacher workshops, faculty room discussions, professional journals, and pre-service programs. 📺

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Notes

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