

What's Stopping You? Classroom Censorship for Better or Worse

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At the beginning of the 2009 school year, the Obama administration announced plans to broadcast the president's Back-to-School speech to the nation's children. Although, a Back-to-School speech has become a somewhat traditional annual speech for presidents, Jim Greer, chairman of the Florida Republican Party, condemned the Obama speech as an attempt to indoctrinate children with his "socialist agenda," stating Obama's plans for the speech were an abuse of power.¹ Oklahoma State Senator Steve Russell (R) accused the president of attempting to create a cult of personality, adding, "As far as I'm concerned this is not civics education."² School officials in Democratic suburbs near Washington, D.C., reported either bans or intentions to screen the speech before allowing it. Numerous districts and schools across the United States banned the speech from public and private school classrooms. The effort to ban the president's speech was, itself, a controversial social issue.

What was your district's response, and more importantly, what was your response to their response? Social studies teachers and supervisors are subject to a variety of pressures. One of the most important, though often subtle, is a continuing choice between being a transmission agent for socially sanctioned information and skills or an agent of transformation through open examination of controversy and critical thinking. Which path teachers follow depends on their view of the teacher's role, their professional rights and responsibilities, and their specific school and student situation—all questions related to academic freedom. Sometimes these considerations are supplanted by decisions made outside the classroom, by others, through censorship or political restraint.

Ironically, it may be that opposition to and censorship of President Obama's

speech to the nation's school children in 2009 dramatically raised student interest in the speech. Historically, that which has been banned has often become more enticing. John Dewey once wrote in a 1940 letter to *The New York Times*, "There is no thought so dangerous as a forbidden one."³ In that short letter, he argued succinctly for freedom in education, stating that the best thing for young people is to face ongoing issues in an open classroom as a preventive measure for a healthy democracy. Censorship of the sort described in the example above is particularly dangerous for social studies teachers, who are responsible for providing expansive content, play a prime role in civic education, and need the freedom to examine controversies.

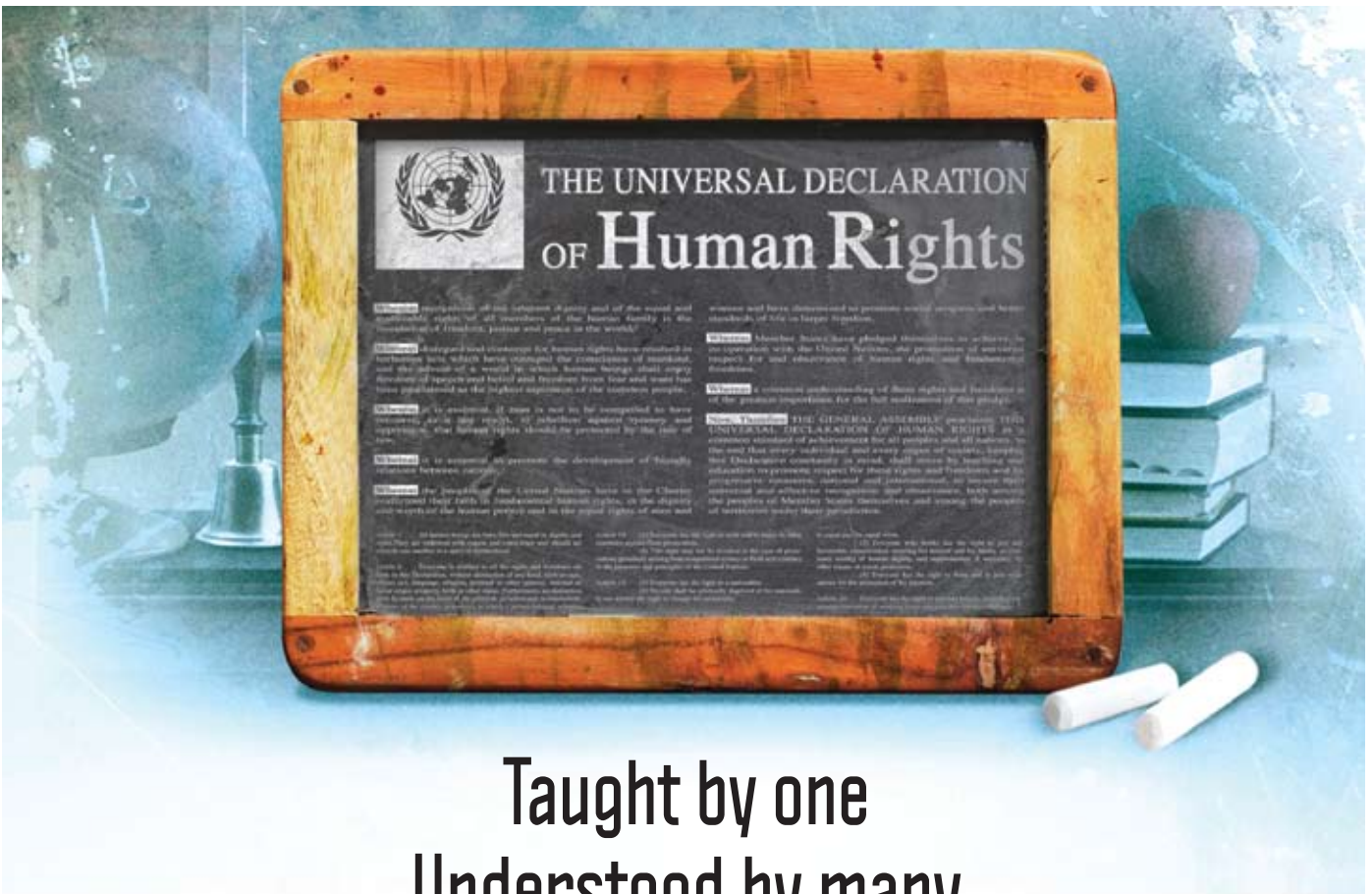
The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statement on Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher strongly endorses openness and

discussion of controversial issues in social studies classrooms. It states,

Academic freedom for social studies teachers includes the right and responsibility to study, investigate, present, interpret, discuss, and debate relevant facts, issues, and ideas in fields of the teacher's professional competence. Academic freedom for students in social studies courses provides the right to study, question, interpret, and discuss relevant facts, ideas, and issues under consideration in those courses. These freedoms imply no limitations, within the guidelines of the subject area.⁴

Teacher choice of content, pedagogy, and expression of reasoned opinion in fields of professional competence, with full student freedom to dissent, is evident. Teaching controversial topics is a prominent and integral part of the position statement, such that the statement includes a list of skills and attitudes necessary to its study. These include:

- The study of relevant social problems;
- The use of reasoning and evidence in decision-making;
- Affirming different points of view as a common and valuable part of discussion; and



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1. Source: Amnesty International Report 2009

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- Recognizing the importance of reasonable compromise.

Hess found that successful discussion leaders not only use discussion for the content outcomes, but they also teach the process of discussion and critical analysis through the use of discussion itself—teaching both *for* and *with* discussion—the implication being that teachers need both content knowledge and process skills to teach successfully about controversial issues.⁵ While controversies abound in social studies, censorship serves as a major barrier, restricting the full deliberation necessary.

Censorship Uncensored

Censorship is a complex question. Studies show a number of reasons teachers refrain from teaching controversial issues. These include:

- The general “chilling effects” in school and community contexts, characterized by fear of reprisal,⁶
- Standards and high stakes testing,⁷
- Insufficient teacher preparation to teach about controversy,⁸ and
- Inadequate teacher understanding of academic freedom and the rights it affords them.⁹

Teachers often respond to these barriers by censoring themselves—a decision that ultimately undermines academic freedom.¹⁰ Cornbleth focused on the balance needed in schools for academic freedom to take root, arguing that law and order climates can stifle meaningful teaching and learning and breed self-censorship.¹¹ As such, “It is not necessary that censorship efforts be officially successful in order to be ‘effective,’”¹² as teachers instinctively regulate themselves. Even teachers who strongly value a free classroom often find themselves questioning their decisions and limiting their offerings. One study found that teachers decided not to teach certain “hot button issues,” including sexual orientation, sexual harassment, and religious conflict due to fear of reprisal.¹³

Other research shows that teachers may choose not to teach about controversy

because they do not have the necessary content knowledge or the pedagogical content knowledge.¹⁴ A study of secondary teachers in the United Kingdom found that only one in eight teachers felt prepared to teach controversial issues, and 60% reported never having received any training at all. In another study, researchers found that pre-teachers’ top reason for discomfort with teaching specified controversial topics was lack of content knowledge.¹⁵

To confront such barriers—a chilling context, fear of reprisal, lack of preparation—teachers need understanding and awareness of the value of and their right to academic freedom. Misco and Patterson found that while pre-service teachers’ overall notions of academic freedom aligned with many elements of the NCSS definition, deeper analysis indicated that they were either unsure about how to exercise academic freedom properly, or they accepted the notion that such freedoms must, in deference to political and cultural necessity, be limited.¹⁶

Teachers also need a conducive climate, one in which the teacher’s beliefs about the teaching of controversy align with that of the overall community culture and that of their particular school. A study of successful teachers of controversial issues found that administrative support was a key element for the teachers who taught controversial issues, as it provided reinforcement for teachers’ preferred practices.¹⁷

What Stops Some of Us: Some Current Information

To understand better how and why social studies teachers self-censor, a small group of teachers from several Midwestern schools and districts were surveyed in 2010 about their approach to the teaching of controversy. This survey was adapted from a previous study of pre-service teachers.¹⁸ In the current study, teachers were asked a number of questions about teaching controversy, censorship, their individual and school contexts and their sense of their own

academic freedom. They reported on previous experiences with censorship, and they were asked about preparation to teach about controversy.

All secondary social studies teachers in six schools from four districts in two Midwestern states were given an online survey. Forty-one (59%) of those teachers completed it. Almost 90% of the respondents were from suburban schools and had a range of teaching experience, from one year to over 30 years. Sixty percent had over 10 years of teaching experience, and 66% had tenure. Just over a quarter of respondents had been at their present school for 4-6 years, and 34% for over 15 years.

Contexts for Teaching about Controversy. These teachers present a relatively strong picture of their teaching environments as conducive to the teaching of controversy. Ninety-eight percent believe they have academic freedom either to some extent or to a great degree, and 91% reported that discussing controversial issues is either somewhat or closely aligned with the mission of the school in which they teach.

Ninety-five percent of respondents (all but two) report actual teaching of controversial topics, and just under a majority (47%) state they did so at least once per week.



Most of the respondents state they do so because it is a life skill for students and a necessity for good citizenship. One teacher includes controversial topics, “Because our students live in a world of controversy and should be able to learn about topics in a safe environment.” Another teacher states, “I teach

history. History is about life. Life is full of controversy. It's hard to teach history if you avoid the controversial topics.”

Forty-five percent of these teachers report either not remembering or having had no formal preparation for teaching about controversy. Just over one-third (37.5%) received in-service training on the topic, and 17.5% received pre-service training. Reported teacher preparation for dealing with controversy among these teachers was slightly higher than the 60% who identified no training as reported in a previous study.¹⁹



In spite of their general lack of preparation, 56% report feeling reasonably well prepared to teach about controversy, and 39% report feeling very well prepared.

Acceptable and Unacceptable Limits. Nearly all of the teachers (93%) believe that academic freedom has its limits, noting constraints that seem necessary and therefore acceptable limits, and others that appear onerous or unacceptable. Teachers report limits imposed by their communities and administrations as well as limitations they imposed on themselves.

Limits teachers identify as acceptable include specific needs of students, including physical safety, freedom from bias and indoctrination, respect for basic individual rights, and age-appropriateness. One stated, “As a history teacher of high school students, I sometimes have to censor graphic episodes in history.” Teachers also list limitations coming from administrative requests, such as warnings about political fairness, encouragement to be careful to be non-biased, and having to send out an email about

upcoming racial topics to be presented in a class video. One teacher states that requests to avoid certain subjects, or limiting “my opinion on anything,” poses no problem.

Three teachers mention standards as a necessary limitation, emphasizing the need for exercising academic freedom but within the context of a common core curriculum. One stated, “There should be some agreement, at the very least, between the teachers of a specific topic, who are in the same building, on what needs to be covered.” Five teachers mention time pressures related to the scope of the curriculum, conveying the notion of the standards as onerous, forcing unwelcome omissions from the curriculum. One teacher commented, “I am pressured to stay on schedule with the curriculum which limits my ability to go in depth on certain interesting topics for students.”

Many responses note community elements as limiters, including the nature of the community itself, parents, administration, and the school board. Some teachers appear to accept these limitations, and others do not. In reference to limitations of certain controversial topics, one teacher said, “With us being a public school, we have limitations in subjects we are able to teach and/or discuss with our students due to cultural/religious sensitivity.” Several teachers were very concrete in their acknowledgement of the need for self-censorship. One stated, “I usually try to censor myself,” and another relates that there was never any problem with administrative censorship for her/him, because s/he understood the boundaries.

The most common survey response to the question of what stops one from teaching about controversy was fear of reprisal from community, parents, and/or administrators. These responses are indicative of a “chilling effect” of school and community contexts.²⁰ One teacher commented, “... when President Obama gave his speech to schools in September, we got an email from our principal saying we could only show the speech if it

fit in with our curriculum and that she had already received phone calls about it. The implications were limiting.” Another teacher seems uncomfortable with the necessity to limit herself, but experiences fear of reprisal. She mentally questions whether or not something would be challenged by the school board or parents and because of that, often chooses not to discuss the topic.

Asked if they had experienced personal pressure to limit the teaching of controversy, 34% of teachers said “yes,” and gave examples. One was a request made from the community for changes in the content of a civil rights unit. Another teacher had a confrontation with the principal regarding a controversial topic. A third teacher was required to respond to parents who questioned the relevance of a controversial topic, and in a fourth example, a parent complained to the administration that teachers were talking about bias in textbooks.

As in the Misco and Patterson study of pre-service teachers, these practicing teachers identified gender identity/sexual orientation, sexual harassment, abortion, domestic abuse, and religion as topics they were least comfortable teaching.²¹ The most common response (16%) to why they were not comfortable with these topics was their personal, sensitive, or emotional nature: “These are hot button issues, and students tend to be more emotional about these issues,” or “These are often personal, private, and religious issues that are often concrete in peoples’ value systems that they *will not change* their beliefs on no matter the circumstance,” and “These topics often have moral overtones that make discussions complex for students to participate in objectively.”

The second most common reason teachers offered as to why they were not comfortable with teaching these topics was preparedness (12%). “It is a matter of preparedness on my part—to be prepared with solid, credible information. This is especially true to address religious arguments that are raised.” One teacher mentioned both personal nature and

lack of knowledge, and two described fear of reprisal. For example, “I worry about students feeling I am ‘forcing’ my view on them. I am worried that parents might perceive that due to a misunderstanding.”

Perceived Sources of Academic Freedom

As for the teachers’ perception of who determines whether or not a teacher has academic freedom, the most common response was the state, followed by the school district and the school board. Teachers rated themselves as the stakeholder having the least impact on determining their levels of academic freedom. Two teachers indicated in the comments section that one choice had been left out—they suggested parents are the ones who determine whether or not teachers have academic freedom.

Censorship for Better or Worse

The results show a commitment to offering students powerful social studies experiences, with 95% of respondents arguing for the need to teach controversial issues as well as reporting contexts that welcome such teaching. At the same time, these teachers report limiting themselves, sometimes willingly and sometimes not. Whether or not and why teachers accept these limits has significant implications for the citizenship education of students and teachers alike.

No one would argue with the assertion that there are numerous natural limits placed on classroom teachers that relate to student safety, care against bias, and civil rights in the classroom—factors that require consideration and thereby limit absolute teacher freedom. For example, no school board or administration would condone a teacher’s choice to show graphic images of the Holocaust to 1st-graders or

sanction violent re-enactments of Civil War battles that might endanger students. More difficult for teachers to accept uniformly are the boundaries imposed by subject field standards imposed on schools. While some welcome the standards as an important unifying element that provides a common core curriculum, others report feeling restricted by time limitations imposed by the scope and sequence of the standards that often force them to excise what they consider to be important material or particular pedagogies from their curricula.

Although teachers report and support reasonable administrative requests for attention to bias such as forewarnings to parents about upcoming controversial topics, and suggestions about how to deal with controversy, they also report requests to avoid certain subjects entirely. Just under one third of respondents had had an experience of this sort, where they

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were asked to censor specific content, and some appeared comfortable with such requests while others did not.

Almost half of these teachers are uncomfortable teaching certain “hot button” issues (gender identity/sexual orientation, sexual harassment, abortion, domestic abuse, and religion), either because of fear of reprisal or due to lack of preparation, and likely censor themselves in relation to them. Few of these teachers received training to teach about controversy in their pre-service programs, but many more did in their in-service programs, which may explain the large majority reporting they regularly teach about controversy.

While the lack of knowledge and skills plays a role in self-censorship, it is less of a barrier than are community, administration, and/or student reactions. This finding is the opposite of that from the study of pre-service teachers, who reported lack of knowledge as the primary barrier, and affirms that practicing teachers are more sensitive to school and community contexts.²²

Sometimes what stops us from teaching controversial topics is legitimate, like censoring ourselves from teaching things about which we are not knowledgeable, or protecting students from developmentally inappropriate material. As for limiting ourselves due to fear of reprisal or a scope and sequence that precludes the treatment of critical controversial issues, we should constantly and carefully consider the “danger of forbidden thoughts,” and discern respectful and appropriate ways to bring them to light. We should carefully re-consider what acceptable limitations in a free society may be, and use our academic freedoms to challenge those limits. In short, we should work to build among ourselves a resilient academic freedom mindset. What’s stopping you? 📖

Notes

1. CNN Politics.com, “Many Conservatives Enraged over Obama School Speech,” (Sept. 5, 2009) www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/09/04/obama.schools/index.html.
2. Ibid.

3. “Censorship not Wanted,” in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Southern Illinois University: Board of Trustees), 373.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, “Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher” (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 2007), www.socialstudies.org/positions/academicfreedom.
5. Diana Hess, “Discussing Controversial Public Issues in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms: Learning from Skilled Teachers,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 1 (Winter, 2002): 10-41.
6. Catherine Cornbleth, “Climates of Constraint/Restraint of Teachers and Teaching,” in *Critical Issues in Social Studies Research for the 21st Century*, ed. William B. Stanley (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age, 2001), 73-96.
7. Thomas Misco, Nancy Patterson, and Frans Doppen, (Under review), “Policy in the Way of Practice: How Assessment Legislation is Impacting Social Studies Curriculum and Instruction in Ohio.”
8. Christopher Oulton, Vanessa Day, Justin Dillon, and Marcus Grace, “Controversial Issues—Teachers’ Attitudes and Practices in the Context of Citizenship Education,” *Oxford Review of Education* 30, no. 4 (December 2004): 489-507.
9. Thomas Misco and Nancy C. Patterson, “A Study of Pre-Service Teachers’ Conceptualizations of Academic Freedom and Controversial Issues,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 35, no. 4 (2007): 520-550.
10. Jack L. Nelson, “Academic Freedom, Institutional Integrity, and Teacher Education,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Winter 2003): 65-72; Nancy Patterson and Prentice Chandler, “Academic Freedom in the Balance: What we Know about Secondary Teachers,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2008), www.socstrp.org.
11. Cornbleth.
12. Ibid., 83.
13. Misco and Patterson.
14. Oulton et al.
15. Misco and Patterson.
16. Ibid.
17. Hess.
18. Ibid.
19. Oulton et al.
20. Cornbleth.
21. Misco and Patterson.
22. Ibid.

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Academic Freedom Mindset

My students and I have ample opportunity to study relevant social problems, use reasoning and evidence in decision-making, affirm different points of view as a common and valuable part of discussion, and value and practice the art of reasonable compromise.

I have examined the boundaries to my academic freedoms in my school and district, and find that they do not limit unnecessarily student opportunities to engage with the above.

I understand my role as an advocate for academic freedom and feel comfortable exercising my rights and responsibilities.

I understand that academic freedom is no guarantee—that rights are won by every generation, that change begins with committed individuals.

I know the difference between professionally acceptable and unacceptable censorship, and will strive to overcome censorship that has no legitimate educational purpose.

I have ample freedom in my classroom to choose what and how I teach within my professional expertise so that my students learn best, and if I don’t I will seek to understand why.