

Student Engagement and Controversial Issues in Schools

Dianne Gereluk
University of Calgary

Schools are not immune to being drawn into politically and morally contested debates in society. Indeed, one could say that schools are common sites of some of the most vociferous debates about how one should lead one's life. In such cases, the issue for public schools is how to reasonably and responsibly engage with them in a free, liberal, and democratic society. One choice is to abdicate jurisdiction claiming such matters are beyond the educational mandate. A second choice, adopted by some faith-based schools, is to treat controversies as settled given a particular theological view. A third option is to have schools treat all issues as an "open controversy." A fourth option, suggested by Michael Hand, is to determine whether the controversial issue is, in fact, controversial by applying the epistemic criterion.¹

In this essay, I do not address option number one, not because it is not prevalent, as it is a common approach utilized by educational policymakers, but rather because it is not a common stance taken by philosophers who wish to foster critical reflection, autonomy, and civic engagement. The second option is specific to religious schools, which are generally not required to provide a non-preferenced worldview as part of the mandate in providing a particular religious doctrine. That leaves us with options three and four regarding the extent to which teachers should provide directive or non-directive approaches to addressing controversial issues, and specifically, whether the epistemic criterion provides a basis for providing a normative stance on some controversies.

Specifically, I will explain Hand's approach briefly, articulate the criticism of it provided by Amato Nocera, and then push Nocera's criticism to consider whether his view holds for other issues which are more emotionally charged than those provided by him. Let us turn to the first point accordingly.

If one begins with the question, when is an issue controversial?, the response could be, "... an issue is controversial if numbers of people are observed to disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with this issue."² For Hand, this is an inadequate premise with which to determine which issues are, in fact, controversial. By employing an epistemic criterion, Hand wishes to consider the merits of an argument through the intellectual activity of thinking and acting rationally.

Nocera offers three critiques of Hand's employment of the epistemic criterion: whether rationality is indeed the central aim in education; the pedagogic limitations of applying the epistemic criterion for classroom discussions; and, the inadequate framework that epistemic criterion employs in considering racialized identities within discussions. First, Nocera wishes to challenge the notion that rationality is the central aim of education. Nocera does not suggest that rationality is not important; the fair criticism is that Hand places rationality higher than other arguably important

aims in education. On this point, I think Nocera is correct that rationality, while indeed instrumental to the process of thinking about particular issues, is a far more contested matter than Hand presents regarding the centrality of rationality in education.

Nocera's second criticism asks how compelling the epistemic criterion would be in delineating between directive and non-directive teaching. Nocera suggests that by framing controversial issues through the epistemic criterion of an argument, it "obscures a more complex picture about what is happening in this classroom." Drawing upon Blum's example of a classroom discussion that white people cannot dance and that blacks and Latinos are good dancers, Nocera suggests that by only focusing on the rational arguments pertaining to a controversial issue, the epistemic criterion limits the scope surrounding moral complexities — and in this particular example — that of race. Nocera contends that the epistemic criterion further limits a teacher's empathetic approach to the issues by leaving the dialogue more open for students to engage and work through the issues in a more deliberative and reflective fashion.

While I think Nocera's criticism that the application of the epistemic criterion obscures the complexity of controversial issues, I wish to make a subtle distinction between Nocera's views of why the epistemic criterion is limiting. For Nocera, the emphasis of applying the epistemic criterion to controversial issues does not consider the *moral complexities* and may leave the teacher providing a limited perspective on how to address the issue through rationality. In this sense, I think that Hand would contend that the epistemic criterion would inevitably address the moral complexities and does not exclude the ability of teachers to be engaged empathetically. Using rationality to guide the directive teaching does not preclude one's ability to address the moral complexities of the issue and indeed may help to regulate a classroom dialogue from becoming steeped in emotional, vociferous positioning between students. I suspect that Hand would argue that the pedagogic elements of teaching controversial issues through the epistemic criterion would necessarily delve into the messiness of such issues so long as the direction of such discussions would be to evaluate the evidence and claims made by students.

While the pedagogic approach to teaching controversial issues is of concern to Nocera given the limited engagement of how discussions would arise from the epistemic criterion, I argue that Hand's argument rests on the ability to argue convincingly that contrary views points cannot be supported by credible evidence and are dismissible on such grounds. This is a bold stance to take, and one that treads on dangerous territory, particularly given the morally subjective nature of many controversies. I suggest this is so as the various positions taken in a classroom rest upon various ontological and epistemological assumptions, which differ greatly. For example, Hand suggests that competing claims about homosexuality based on religious doctrine lack credibility and have little reasoned defense to stand up in light of rational scrutiny.³ Even if we take Hand's point that counterpoints made are poor, consensus on comprehensive moral doctrines are too much to hope for even if one sought such a goal which would seem antithetical to the parameters within a

reasonable pluralist society. Hence, I am skeptical that the public sphere will come to any consensus regarding whether schools are able to take a directive stance on the issue. Clearly, this explains why the epistemic argument on moral matters does little to compel policy-makers and educators to take a very clear normative stance on publicly contested issues in schools.

It is at this point that I think Nocera and I have slightly different stances on how to proceed, for while we both do not find Hand's epistemic criterion argument compelling, our suggestions on how to proceed differ. In that regard, let me now turn to Nocera's last criticism and final recommendation.

In considering another alternative to the epistemic criterion, Nocera draws upon Lawrence Blum's example of the White minority kids who cannot dance at a Latino dance function. Through the approach of permitting and acknowledging racialized identities in classroom discussions, the aim is to provide an open and safe environment for a multiplicity of perspectives to come forth from the students. The key emphasis is not that of *rationality*, but rather of setting up an environment that encourages empathy and engagement in a comfortable setting. Through a process of reasoning and moral reflection, students are drawn not just into the facts through a rational assessment but may encompass other non-rational elements that come into play in moral controversies. A clear example of this is the famous 1968 experiment conducted by teacher Jane Elliot and her third-grade class being divided between "blue-eyed" and "brown-eyed" children to draw parallels to that of the larger discrimination found in society.⁴ On the first day, the blue-eyed children were told that they were smarter, nicer, neater, and better than those with brown eyes. On the second day, the roles were reversed. The emotional and psychological impact of this particular experiment is notable, and one in which rationality alone would not suffice. I do not suggest that Elliot's approach should be used in schools, but the experiment posed by Elliot is illustrative that rationality itself is insufficient to unpack the complexities surrounding moral controversies.⁵

Yet, unlike Nocera who advocates for a more facilitative open approach to addressing moral controversies to which Blum ascribes, I am sympathetic to Hand's original intent to provide *some* limited normative stance on some moral controversies. One of the clear difficulties for educators to grapple with in addressing controversial issues in classroom is the emotionally charged nature of controversies and the potential for uncivil and disrespectful comments that may arise both unintentionally and intentionally, which may marginalize members who may already be stigmatized or ostracized from the dominant perspective (recent immigrants, those of different sexual orientations, and minority faith groups, for instance). It is not entirely clear that it is appropriate for teachers to simply take a non-directive stance when hostile or derogatory comments are made by students in the hopes that others will simply provide rebuttals. For instance, in a scenario where a student suggests that "homosexuals are going to hell," or that, "Christians are bigoted, homophobic, bullying and stupid if they disagree with homosexuality," is it simply the role of teachers to *hope* that other students will respond? Applying Blum's example to a more contentious issue of sexual orientation places an undue

burden on other students who may already feel marginalized to provide an alternative perspective than the one posed by the offending student. How can teachers take no stance and hope to engender a safe space for all students within the classroom? Arguably, it cannot and how one might do so is a key pedagogical issue in schools today. Neither Hand nor Nocera have, I suggest, adequately addressed this nor have they offered a resolution to this issue. What is at stake is too important not to try to do so. Let me suggest an approach.

I wish to state briefly the argument as follows.⁶ Morally controversial issues are a salient and social reality of societies. In this sense, schools have a duty to address the issue of the public debate so that students can engage in the issues and perspectives that lead to understanding the competing claims made on both sides. And in those cases, teachers have some responsibility to respond to offensive comments or “uncivil speech”⁷ that “would otherwise have had on their [students’] effective opportunity to participate in the classroom.”⁸

For example, an individual may not wish to pursue a homosexual lifestyle or venture into a particular activity or condone a particular morally controversial perspective, yet the individual must understand that such a possibility exists for other individuals which should both be respected and acknowledged as a possible conception of the good life for another person. The discussion then is twofold: first, public controversies exist in society and they are a part of a social fact of living in a pluralist society; second, while individuals may take a particular stance on a controversial issue, the nature of the controversy suggests that such protections ought to be afforded to individuals in ensuring equal dignity and respect in society. In this particular and narrow scope, there is a directive teaching element for the teacher in guiding students’ understanding to respecting that controversial issues can be valued and respected among a host of other viable opportunities and goods for persons in a diverse society, and further are offered protections within a pluralist society. Second, when a particular dominant perspective is posed by a student or a group, and no counterpoint is offered by another student for fear of being further ostracized, it is the teacher’s obligation to articulate the counter point so that those students, who may feel silenced, are not further marginalized.

In this way, we encourage the level of student engagement in deliberating about controversial issues, along with the empathy, reflection, and reasoning that Blum suggests. The directive element is in addressing the controversy as a social reality in society, with the recognition that students must understand the requisite protections that are afforded to individuals who may be stigmatized due to considerations that include race, sexual orientation, or gender.

In sum, Nocera has provided a thorough and robust critique of the epistemic criterion as it applies to controversial issues. It is a stark reminder of the complexity and sensitivity to which educators and policymakers must negotiate and facilitate such discussions in schools, not simply by relying on the rationality of such arguments, but by recognizing the various responses that will inevitably arise in such discussions. Yet, by simply hoping that students will come to understand the social and historical positioning of individuals through empathy, reflection, and reason,

educators place undue burden on students to understand, articulate, and rectify past injustices that may marginalize and ostracize certain individuals and groups due to such controversies. In this limited scope, teachers have an obligation to ensure that equal dignity and respect is provided to every individual.

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1. Michael Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial?: A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 2 (2008): 213–228.
 2. Charles Bailey, "Neutrality and Rationality in Teaching," in *Values and Authority in Schools*, eds. David Bridges and Peter Scrimshaw (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 122.
 3. Michael Hand, "Should We Teach Homosexuality as a Controversial Issue?," *Theory and Research in Education* 5, no. 1 (2007): 69–86.
 4. For an expanded description of the experiment conducted, please see PBS *Frontline*, "A Class Divided," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/>.
 5. Lawrence Blum, *High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity and Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012), 655.
 6. This argument is developed further in Dianne Gereluk, "The Democratic Imperative to Address Sexual Equality in Schools," *Educational Theory* 63, no. 5 (2013):511–523.
 7. Eamonn Callan, "When to Shut Students Up: Civility, Silencing, and Free Speech," *Theory and Research in Education* 9, no. 1 (2011): 15.
 8. *Ibid.*