Thinking Controversially: The Psychological Criterion for Teaching Controversial Issues

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Introduction

How should we teach controversial issues? And which issues should we teach as controversies? Recently, these two questions have received considerable attention in the journals of philosophy of education, beginning with Michael Hand’s (2002) article, “What Should We Teach as Controversial?” followed by Bryan Warnick’s and D. Spencer Smith’s (2014) response, “The Controversy over Controversies” and Maughn Gregory’s (2014) rejoinder, “The Procedurally Directive Approach to Teaching Controversial Issues.” Hand’s article has become a locus classicus for a defense of the “epistemic criterion,” according to which only epistemically unsettled controversies, i.e. those which comprise multiple rationally-defensible positions, should be taught as controversies in school. On this view, teachers should approach such controversies using non-directive methods, even-handedly presenting each of the several reasonable positions and refraining from endorsing any one of them. With epistemically settled controversies the case is different. Here teachers should employ directive methods designed to lead students to the one correct position (p. 217). For Hand, the stakes are high when teaching controversial issues. Failure to follow the epistemic criterion does not merely result in pedagogical error; it corrupts the very development of students’ reason (p. 228). Warnick and Smith (2014) problematize Hand’s pedagogical imperative, arguing that teacher endorsement even in epistemically settled controversies may introduce an element of social authority corrosive to students’ reasoning (pp. 236-238). They suggest a more student-centered method called “soft-directive teaching,” by which the teacher gently guides students to an explicitly endorsed position, encouraging them to question crucial steps along the way (p. 240). Gregory (2014) finds even this modest form of teacher direction to be an improper incursion of teacher authority. In its place Gregory proposes an inquiry-based form of teaching controversial issues, in which teachers avoid endorsing any substantive position in the argument and interject only to improve the quality of reasoning within it (pp. 636-638).

These recent attacks on directive methods in teaching controversial issues overlook three crucial aspects of an educational environment which would successfully cultivate students’ reason by means of controversy. (1) There are certain psychological conditions that must obtain in the minds of students in order for them to appreciate an issue as controversial in the first place. (2) Students’ reasoning is subject to various “obstacles” or “corruptions” that characteristically prevent these psychological conditions from obtaining. And (3) directive teaching methods are instrumental for helping students overcome these cognitive obstacles and establishing the necessary psychological conditions that constitute true controversy. In what follows, I attempt to validate these three claims. First, I critically engage with the various issue-centered criteria for teaching controversial issues that have been advanced in the literature. Second, I advance a competing, student-centered criterion called the psychological criterion and discuss how the “corruptions of reason” can frustrate efforts to establish the necessary conditions for teaching controversial issues. Finally, I propose several legitimate forms of directive methods for teaching controversial issues. From the perspective of the psychological criterion, directive methods are far from being the corrosive intercessions of teacher authority that previous authors have thought them to be. Rather, they are the necessary first step in teaching students to think controversially.

Defining Controversy: The Behavioral, Political and Epistemic Criteria
One of the greatest challenges of teaching controversial issues is deciding which controversies to teach. What counts as a controversy is itself controversial. The issue of climate change is the most obvious example of this in the American context. While one side hopes to impugn the evidence of anthropological causes of global warming and thus to "keep the debate alive," the other points to scientific consensus on the matter and calls the debate settled. Diane Hess (2009) terms this phenomenon "tipping." She observes that issues can vacillate between controversial and non-controversial states and that when this occurs, teaching the issue in schools becomes especially precarious. Parent chagrin, student frustration and official reprimands are real possibilities that the teacher faces if she chooses to broach the issue in class. Hess does not dissuade teachers from teaching controversial issues "in the tip," as she puts it, but she also does not give them explicit guidance for doing so. She recommends teachers be "transparent" about their choices, to "engage in discussions about them with their colleagues" (p. 127), and to be "conscious about the criteria they are using when classifying topics as open or closed" (p. 125). But, we may ask, what criteria are the right ones for making such a choice? Which controversies should we teach?

One way to answer this question is simply to let society decide. That is, if there is controversy over an issue in the public sphere, then the teacher should consider the issue controversial. This principle has come to be known as the behavioral criterion. Although it has been criticized by several writers on controversial issues, most recently by Michael Hand (2008), the behavioral criterion has a long history in educational philosophy. Harold Rugg was perhaps the first to defend the behavioral criterion in his American Life and the School Curriculum published in 1936. In true progressive spirit, Rugg argues that the entire school curriculum should be "built around the study of problems and of optional courses of social action" (p. 301). Controversial social issues are to be the center of the school curriculum because they offer a chance for students to take part in the critical analysis of society that is necessary for bringing about a renewed democracy, a "new social order" as George Counts had characterized it in 1932. Skeptical of Counts' claim that the new social order must be "imposed" upon students in the democratic school, and adamant about preserving conditions of "intelligent consent," Rugg recommends "parliamentary discussion" as the only just method for teaching controversial issues (p. 299).

Rugg's argument nicely captures the attitude towards teaching controversial issues that has become common sense for many educators and educational policy makers today (although they have not taken up his radical proposal to construct a curriculum solely around controversial social issues). If teachers are to eschew indoctrinatory methods and encourage open-mindedness in students, then they should strive to create a classroom environment in which students hear a variety of perspectives on controversial issues and refrain from endorsing any particular position. ¹ "All sides of the issue should be given to the students in a dispassionate matter," one current controversial issues policy reads, where "issue" means any "topic on which opposing points of view have been promulgated by responsible opinion or likely to arouse both support and opposition in the community" ("2240 – Controversial Issues," 2002). As reasonable as this may sound, Hand (2008) challenges the commonsensical veneer of the behavioral criterion. According to Hand, the behavioral criterion, by requiring teachers to treat every controversial issue in the public sphere – no matter how petty or wrong-headed – as a legitimate controversy, sends the dangerous message that reason, argument and evidence are not the final arbiters of controversy that they should be. Allowing climate change into the curriculum as

¹ In actual fact, Rugg (1932) explicitly defends teachers’ “right” to endorse a position in controversial issues (p. 302), but his predecessors would see the obvious threat to students’ freedom of mind this poses.
a controversial issue betrays a deep skepticism regarding the reliability of rational argumentation in general, and the scientific enterprise in particular, and subtly communicates that truth is to be determined by lot (p. 218). Because, for Hand, the “core aim” of the school is “promoting rational thought and action” (p. 228), the teacher abdicates her main educational responsibility when she employs the behavioral criterion.

Hand’s criticism of the behavioral criterion is persuasive, but not completely satisfying. Certainly many of the controversial issues that preoccupy the public sphere are mere pseudo-problems founded on confusion, proxy issues that derive from deeper cultural rifts, or else rhetorical impasses that result from a lack of a shared moral or political vocabulary (see MacIntyre, 2012, pp. 6-14). For this reason alone we might want to scrap the behavioral criterion, even if Hand’s claims about the “message” it sends are exaggerated, as Warnick and Smith (2014) have convincingly argued. However, the criterion cannot be dispensed with so easily. Rugg, in line with other progressive educational theorists of the day, believed that bringing social problems into the school curriculum would break down the barrier between school and society, transforming the former into “a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place apart in which to learn lessons” and the latter into “worthy, lovely and harmonious” mode of cooperative living (Dewey, 1959, pp. 39, 49). This is a substantive educational aim, at least as important as cultivating students’ reason and not clearly reducible to it. Even the public sphere’s pseudo-controversies can provide educators with fodder for cultivating a social conscience in students, a sense of responsibility for righting social wrongs, and a commitment to fairmindedness on the issues close to people’s hearts. The teacher may decide to bring in such pseudo-controversies precisely for the reason that they provide a contrast from real ones. Or perhaps she thinks their emotional valence will jumpstart students’ interest in the course material. Hand’s unqualified rejection of the behavioral criterion disregards the variety of pedagogical rationales that can justifiably lead a teacher to broach even pseudo-controversies in the classroom.

That said, I do not believe the behavioral criterion is a good guide for teaching controversial issues on its own. It is both impractical and misguided to introduce issues into the curriculum for the sole reason that some social controversy surrounding them exists. One can dig up social controversy surrounding just about any issue. There is a not insignificant contingent of people who believe the earth is flat, after all. Attempting to include all such controversies in the curriculum would overwhelm the pursuit of other valuable educational aims. Dewey himself thought the school should be wary of opening its door to all of society’s problems. In Democracy and Education, he argues that the school must establish a “purified medium of action” that “eliminates, so far as possible, unworthy features of the existing [social] environment from influence upon mental habitudes” (2008, p. 23). Even the critical analysis of society in which Rugg hopes to engage students must presumably distinguish between real and pseudo-problems and focus its efforts on resolving the former. It is clear, then, that the behavioral criterion is insufficient on its own. Yet it does not follow that the teacher should give up on the preoccupations of the public sphere.

A related criterion for determining which controversies to teach is called the political criterion. Though not quite as laissez faire as the behavioral criterion, it treats as controversial all issues whose resolutions do not derive from the (minimal) values of liberal democracy. In such controversies teachers are again to remain thoroughly neutral (see Archard, 1998). Proponents of the political criterion are worried that a teacher’s endorsement of a position on substantive moral questions constitutes an improper incursion of the state into the realm of private life. Most moral questions are rightly decided by private values, and a teacher’s attempt to persuade students to adopt a particular answer to these questions can be seen as a form of indoctrination. Hand (2008) summarizes the argument for the political criterion as follows:
“Where public values are silent on a moral question, teachers have no business promoting an answer to it” (p. 222).

Hand comes to reject the political criterion as well. First, he argues that its proponents’ worries are unfounded. A teacher’s representation of a rationally defensible position cannot be properly considered an act of coercion or indoctrination, as long as her aim is to promote students’ moral reasoning rather than to enforce state-sanctioned behavior (p. 223). When a teacher endorses a rationally defensible moral position, it should be understood as “an exercise in the giving of advice and the promulgating of information” (p. 224). Second, he points out that our adherence to the values of liberal democracy is justified only if these values have epistemic support. Schools promote the liberal democratic moral perspective because there are good reasons for doing so (p. 227). The problem with the political criterion is that it masks the place of moral reasoning in the appeal to public values and thus lends itself too easily to skepticism on moral questions.

Having dispensed with the behavioral and political criteria, Hand defends the epistemic criterion for teaching controversial issues. The proposal is straightforward. According to the epistemic criterion, only those issues should be treated as controversial that encompass several rationally defensible positions, where “rationally defensible” means simply having the support of empirical evidence and cogent arguments. If only one position in a controversy enjoys such support, then the issue is to be considered settled and taught directly. Otherwise the issue is to be considered genuinely controversial and taught non-directively. Directive teaching implies that teachers should endorse the one correct position in the controversy, while non-directive teaching implies that the teacher is to remain scrupulously neutral on the issue (pp. 213-214). For Hand, an infraction of the epistemic criterion is no small crime. Anything else destroys students’ confidence in the power of rational argument and thereby undermines the “core educational aim of promoting rational thought and action” (p. 228).

Hand seems to think that with this approach the teacher has more freedom to direct her students to answers to moral questions than with the political criterion. This is presumably because the “class” of moral questions with definitive answers derived from reason is larger than the class derived from public values, though he is not clear on this point. In other words, to associate all moral education that extends beyond liberal democratic values with indoctrination, as proponents of the political criterion are wont to do, would be to assume a thoroughgoing skepticism regarding the efficacy of reason in moral questions.

While I am sympathetic to Hand’s arguments against the political criterion, I do not think the epistemic criterion is much of an improvement. I agree that the political criterion arbitrarily limits the range of moral discourse in the school, but the epistemic criterion appears to do the same. Hand does not seem to realize that the vast majority of interesting moral questions are decided not on epistemic grounds (for they are usually undecidable on such grounds), but in pursuit of moral-aesthetic ends. We make most moral decisions because we think the action that follows from them realizes what we envision to be a good life. Where reason ends, imagination begins. True, questions such as the moral legitimacy of pedophilia or bestiality, which Hand discusses, can be decisively answered with rational argument. But students are rarely looking for guidance on such questions. They require guidance on questions of love, friendship, family and career, precisely where rational argument ceases to provide clear answers and where the teacher, according to Hand, must remain strictly neutral. The irony of the epistemic criterion is that it directs teachers to offer almost no moral direction to students.

But perhaps this is just the nature of public education in a pluralistic society, and it is to other cultural institutions that children must go to seek out more substantive guidance toward the good life. Yet if moral education is really as Hand says it is, an exercise in the “giving of
advice and promulgating of information,” then perhaps Hand’s worry is also unjustified. Teachers can be permitted to “give advice” to students on epistemically controversial issues by presenting students with images of the good life to which the various positions may conduce. The teacher’s intention is not to steer action, but to enrich students’ imagination, namely of the various courses that their lives may take. If Alasdair Maclntyre (2012) is right that “[t]here is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a telos” (p. 215), then to deprive children of a rich set of such images would, as he predicts, “leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words” (p. 216). For Maclntyre, such images are best conveyed in the form of stories.

Warnick and Smith (2014) take issue with Hand’s epistemic criterion for different reasons than I have, and the defense of teacher neutrality they advance along the way may prove troublesome for the position I have just outlined. Warnick and Smith’s tack is to undermine Hand’s claim that a failure to follow the epistemic criterion destroys students’ confidence in reason. To do so, Warnick and Smith outline four “tasks” necessary for the successful cultivation of reason — (1) mastery of the “necessary tools” and epistemic virtues associated with the use of reason, (2) confidence in reason as a productive tool for deliberation, (3) confidence in themselves as rational agents, and (4) a sense of fallibilism (pp. 230-231). They then show that the teacher may need to contradict the pedagogical consequences that Hand derives from the epistemic criterion to cultivate any one of these “tasks” in her students. Teacher neutrality in epistemically settled issues can be a sign to students that the teacher trusts in their ability to come to the right answer, thus promoting the third task of reason (pp. 234-235), and teacher endorsement here may corrupt students reason if they adopt the teacher’s position purely on account of her social authority (pp. 236-238). Conversely, the teacher’s endorsement of a position in an epistemically controversial issue can be instrumental for exemplifying the epistemic virtues, thus promoting the first task of reason, and neutrality here can decrease the ideological diversity of the discussion (pp. 238-240). Thus, they demonstrate that Hand’s pedagogical proposal does not successfully subserve to the central educational aim of promoting reason.

While Warnick and Smith’s argument against Hand is decisive, their list of the tasks of reason seems to be missing a crucial one. In addition to the acquisition of the epistemic virtues, confidence in reason and a sense of fallibilism, students must possess the proper emotional, cognitive and volitional disposition to consistently follow the dictates of reason. This oversight, while immaterial for their critique of the epistemic criterion, becomes problematic when Warnick and Smith present their own pedagogical proposal for teaching controversial issues. Because their defense of teacher neutrality competes with their promotion of the teacher as exemplar of epistemic virtues, Warnick and Smith compromise and suggest a soft-directive approach to teaching controversial issues. To teach soft-directively, the teacher explicitly endorses a position but periodically drops “markers” for students to think critically about the teacher’s position and imagine alternative views (p. 240). While the endorsement enables the teacher to exemplify the process of reasoning through difficult epistemic issues, the opportunities made for critical analysis are meant to lessen the risk that students adopt the endorsed position purely on the basis of social authority. With this addition, Warnick and Smith equip the teacher with the methods of non-directive neutrality and soft-directivity for cultivating their students reason in controversial issues, methods the teacher selects on the basis of “classroom dynamics rather than on the epistemic status of the issue[s]” (ibid.).

Warnick and Smith’s proposal makes an assumption about students’ rational capacities that demands scrutiny. They, like Maughn Gregory (2014) after them, take for granted that students have the right emotional, cognitive and volitional disposition in order to “follow reason” to a sound position when the teacher has remained neutral, or to take seriously the teacher’s
endorsement when she has dropped markers for critical thinking. To put it another way, they assume (1) that students come to class with simply an incipient stage of rationality ready to be cultivated directly by the teacher and (2) that the gravest threat to this endeavor is the teacher’s social authority. These assumptions are mistaken. What seems much closer to the truth is that the development of students’ reason is inhibited by certain “corruptions of reason” that students bring with them to class. We are all “absolutists by instinct,” notes William James (2000), echoing Pierce (1992), and that’s just the start of it. Another corruption of reason – relativism – seems to have become a characteristic rational pathology of our “postmodern” world, as has pessimism, understood as a general loss of confidence in the powers of reason. Finally, in school environments where the grade stands front and center, students may learn to opportunistically flatter teachers’ expectations without actually engaging in the material at hand. Each of these corruptions of reason – absolutism, relativism, pessimism, and opportunism – characteristically prevent students from truly engaging in the controversies with which teachers hope to cultivate their reason. The corruptions of reason are important to take note of because they undermine the epistemic status of positions in controversies different than one’s own and thus preclude the efficacy of teaching controversial issues for fulfilling the tasks of reason. The upshot of their presence is that students fail to appreciate the issue as a genuine controversy, regardless of its epistemic status, relationship to public values or prominence in public discourse. Students are neither interested in the various views represented in the controversy nor invested in its resolution. They are not live options for belief.

From these observations a new criterion for the teaching of controversial issues can be derived – the psychological criterion. In the rest of this essay, I will describe in more detail what I mean by the psychological criterion and the pedagogical consequences that follow from it.

The Psychological Criterion for Teaching Controversial Issues

Imagine you are a social studies teacher in a small community high school in rural Texas. Your passion for thinking through moral and political controversies is what first drew you into becoming a social studies teacher and you have long wished there was more room in the curriculum for discussing controversial issues. Over the past few weeks, your students have been making their boredom with the curriculum more and more obvious, and your own frustration with it has come to a head. Something has to change. Next class period, you have decided to surprise your students with a class debate over an issue that is of particular interest to you and that seems interesting enough to rekindle your students’ curiosity. The debate will concern the moral legitimacy of the death penalty.

You prepare for the lesson with enthusiasm and great care. You anticipate that most students will support the death penalty, given the cultural mores of rural Texas, but that a few whose parents made their left-leaning politics quite clear in the last board meeting will take on the opposing position. In splitting up the class, you will allow students to choose the side that they would personally defend but will probably have to ask a few to defend the opposing position. The exercise will be instructive in both cases.

The class begins and you inform your students of the surprise debate. Students seem more interested than usual and take sides as anticipated. They have twenty minutes to formulate their arguments in their groups, after which they will present the arguments to the other side. As students do so, the debate takes a course that you had not expected. The opposing arguments are lackluster and weak, even the ones presented by the “left-leaning” students. They just don’t seem “into it.” The supporting arguments, however, are boisterously delivered and strong. In the rebuttal round, the opposition has trouble thinking of anything
interesting to say and is trounced by the other side. After the debate, you ask the left-leaning students what happened, and they respond that they just don’t care that much about the death penalty. You ask the others how they thought the debate went, and all they seem to remember is the dramatic display of beating the opposition.

What went wrong in the social studies teacher’s lesson? We may want to make several critical observations. Perhaps the debate format is flawed. Maybe the teacher didn’t frame the issue well. A preparation lesson may have been necessary. The teacher might have helped students formulate good arguments. These tips can go on and on. Whatever we may make of them, they all seem to point to one particular problem with the social studies teacher’s classroom — namely, the absence of an intellectual tension obtaining between the various views of the controversy in the minds of students. The right-leaning students on the side opposing the death penalty seem never to have considered plausible the arguments against the death penalty and had trouble imagining arguments to present against it. The several left-leaning students were either uninterested in the topic or so invested in their views that debate seemed futile. The debate was a case of tragic irony. Although the teacher thought himself to be leading a class on the controversy surrounding death penalty, there was really no controversy at all.

From this example a psychological criterion for teaching controversial issues can be formulated. The psychological criterion defines controversy by reference to the existence of intellectual tension between at least two of the positions within a controversial issue, which positions must seem plausible options for belief according to the individuals considering the issue. This student-centered criterion is a necessary condition for teaching controversial issues, a condition for the very possibility of educative experience in this context. The teacher who follows the behavioral, political or epistemic criterion will come to different conclusions about which controversies to teach, but each will have the same discouraging result, if this necessary condition does not obtain. They will find that their students have gained little from the experience and have perhaps become even more entrenched in their previous beliefs, as some empirical studies have shown (Hess 2009, p. 31). It is tempting to conclude that teachers should only teach issues which students appreciate as controversial, but “teaching controversial issues” is simply a misnomer for what teachers are doing when the intellectual tension that defines the controversy is not present in the minds of students.

A thoughtful reader might object that I have turned a substantive ethical question into a blandly logical one. To the question, “What should we teach as controversial?,” I seem to have given the evasive answer, “Only what we can teach as controversial.” I freely admit that if an issue passes on the psychological criterion as I have formulated it, then the teacher will still need to decide whether the issue is a good one to teach. The psychological criterion presents a necessary but not sufficient condition for teaching controversial issues. Nevertheless, I think teachers will often need to take active measures to make sure this condition obtains, and this entails important pedagogical consequences that have as yet been overlooked.

A close examination of William James’ (2000) “The Will to Believe,” Charles Pierce’s (1992) “The Fixation of Belief,” and Hans Georg Gadamer’s (2006) famous section of Truth and Method on the “Hermeneutic Priority of the Question” will adumbrate these pedagogical consequences and lend us a rich vocabulary for understanding what went wrong for our social studies teacher. In “The Will to Believe,” James makes a crucial distinction between live and dead hypotheses. A live hypothesis is a claim which is considered a real possibility for belief, while a dead hypothesis is a claim that, for whatever reason, enjoys no such consideration. To be a possibility for belief means not only that we can entertain its plausibility but that there is some “tendency” within us to act upon it (p. 199). An option between two (or more) hypotheses — or controversy, we might say — is living when both hypotheses are live. Yet even the liveliness
of controversy does not guarantee that it is taken to be a genuine one. For James the choice that one faces in a genuine controversy should be forced, in the sense that one is logically compelled to adopt one or another position within it, and momentous, in the sense that the choice is considered personally significant. When all of these criteria are fulfilled, one is engaged in a genuine controversy. Conversely, a controversy in which the choice between several hypotheses can be easily circumvented or is not felt significant by its participants is frivolous and artificial (pp. 199-200).

James’ conception of the live option brings to mind Pierce’s (1992) earlier analysis of belief in “The Fixation of Belief.” For Pierce, a true question surfaces only upon an “irritation of doubt,” a feeling which troubles our thinking in a way that stimulates inquiry. The mere use of the interrogative does not guarantee that inquiry takes place; rather, “[t]here must be real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle” (p. 115).

Gadamer’s account of “true” questions points to a similar set of criteria for defining genuine controversy. Gadamer argues that the mark of a true question is the establishment of psychological “equilibrium” between the various positions implicated therein. “The significance of questioning,” Gadamer writes, “consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned. It has to be brought into this state of indeterminacy, so that there is an equilibrium between pro and contra” (p. 357). Questions that lead students to this indeterminate state are truly open ones, while “wrongly put” or “slanted” questions suggest indeterminacy but lead students away from it (p. 357–358). Crucially, then, false questions are not to be condemned because they direct students to a predetermined place, but because they direct them in the wrong way.

Gadamer, Pierce and James’ reflections on the qualities of genuine questions have significant consequences for controversial issues pedagogy. Following Gadamer, every true question is directive. Directive methods are not only indispensable for teaching controversial issues; they are constitutive of it. Teaching controversial issues is a mode of directed revealing – namely, revealing the “questionability of the question.” Making a question appear live, momentous and forced entails a robustly directive effort on the part of the teacher, especially in light of the previously discussed corruptions of reason, whose presence in the minds of students actively work against this effort. The corruptions of reason characteristically undermine the legitimacy of alternative views, and thus teachers will have to work hard to convince students of the real indeterminacy of the issue at hand before it can be treated as a controversy. Warnick and Smith’s soft-directive pedagogy and Gregory’s procedurally neutral pedagogy for teaching controversial issues are ill-suited for fulfilling these imperatives. Their attacks on directive pedagogy ignore the real cognitive obstacles that hinder students’ development of reason and, in doing so, banish the very methods that would help them overcome these obstacles. If students are to appreciate the controversial issues that we pose to them as true questions, if they are to internalize the intellectual tensions that constitute them and feel the weight of their indeterminacy, then teachers must employ directive methods for teaching controversial issues.

**Practical Consequences: The Forms of Directive Teaching**

What, then, might the directive teaching of controversial issues look like in practice? To answer this question, we should turn once more to Warnick and Smith’s analysis. They helpfully point out that directive teaching involves two characteristic elements: the teacher’s endorsement of a position, and the teacher’s guidance of students to it. These elements can be enacted in either an implicit or explicit way. Warnick and Smith’s notion of soft-directive teaching, for example, is an example of directive teaching with explicit endorsement and implicit guidance.
Warnick and Smith, as well as Gregory, reject directivity involving implicit endorsement, explicit guidance, as well as directivity involving explicit endorsement, explicit guidance.

This rejection is a mistake. Both forms of directivity are instrumental for mitigating the corruptions of reason and creating psychological tension in the minds of students. Let’s first consider the former mode of directivity, in which the teacher implicitly endorses a position but explicitly guides them to it. The utility of this method, which Hand (2013) has called “steering” (p. 499), can be made more apparent if we give it the name, dramatic directivity. This is a method of directivity in which students realize they are being led somewhere, but that somewhere is left mysterious. If done right, a palpable suspense is built in the classroom, and students become closely engaged in following the path and divining the goal. The goal is of course a particular position in the controversy that students, for whatever reason, do not consider a live hypothesis, but because this position is never explicitly stated, students’ absolutist impulses to reject it out of hand are frustrated. If each argumentative step towards the end position is cleverly crafted, absolutist students might find themselves, by a series of moves with which they cannot help but agree, defending a position that they would not have taken seriously in explicit form. The persuasive effect of building suspense is also a helpful antidote to relativism and pessimism, both corruptions of reason that lead to student disengagement. Intrigued by the line of inquiry laid out by the teacher, these students can experience the excitement of discovery in the pursuit of truth and experience the efficacy of careful rational analysis along the way. The opportunist also has a good chance of being carried away by these antics. The opportunist’s usual strategy of sniffing out the teacher’s preferences and flattering them is effectively discouraged because the teacher does not reveal her endorsed position. Of course, the opportunist might just choose to follow the teacher’s line merely because she expresses a clear desire for her students to do so. Admittedly, dramatic directivity would not be very helpful in such a case.

The second type of directivity that Warnick and Smith reject, the one involving explicit endorsement and explicit guidance, might be called “hard” directivity following the nomenclature of their proposal. However, we can do the utility of this method more justice if we call it again by a different name – exemplary directivity. In this approach the teacher defends a particular view in a controversial issue partly on the basis of rational argumentation, but also partly on the basis of her status, in the eyes of her students, as a role model. Because the corruptions of reason are characteristically parasitic on the epistemic status of alternative views, the support provided by the teacher’s exemplarity is crucial for bringing students to appreciate these alternatives. Exemplary directivity attacks the corruptions of reason in several ways. First, the relativist and pessimist can witness in the teacher what it means to make an intellectual commitment and are thereby brought to accept a strong view on a controversial issue, an experience that they rarely have. This provides an important educational opportunity that they would miss with “softer” directive teaching methods. Even for the dogmatist, taking a strong position on a controversial can be beneficial, as long as the position is contrary to the one that they would typically adopt. Admittedly, the method is most problematic with the opportunist. Yet he too can be profited by following the teacher to a strong position if he in fact accepts the position partially on the basis of her practical exemplarity, rather than on a calculus of the grade.

The goal of both of these methods is the emergence of a truly indeterminate question for students. At this stage, the teacher may decide to teach the controversy in a procedurally directive, soft-directive or in the more directive, MacIntyre-inspired way that I briefly described previously. In any case, the teacher who has brought her students to engage with controversial issues in the robust way required by the psychological criterion has achieved a significant result in itself. Indeed she has fulfilled an aim of teaching controversial issues that has too long been ignored. In teaching controversial issues, we aim to teach students to appreciate the intellectual tension that defines true controversy and to live with the irritation of doubt. Rather than hurriedly
and desperately attempting to drive out this irritation and reinstate a new fixation of belief, as Pierce describes our tendency, students learn to embrace indeterminacy and the vibrant discussion that issues from it. In a word, students learn how to think controversially.

References


