Reframing the Disclosure Debate: Confronting Issues of Transparency in Teaching Controversial Content

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I contend that traditional ways of conceptualizing the “disclosure dilemma” are limited due to a lack of attention to the more subtle ways teachers’ personal experiences and understandings help shape their practices. The decision to “disclose” personal opinions on a controversial issue is, perhaps, less important than the exploration of what those personal opinions are and the degree of influence on pedagogy regardless of the decision to make those opinions public. In this way, disclosure can be understood as simply a willingness to be transparent about positionality with regard to the content being taught. As context for this conversation, I offer discussion of my experiences as an elementary social studies teacher educator in which I strived to engage such transparency as both method and content. In the end, I offer reflections about what is difficult, yet critically important about engaging in this work.

Introduction

Discussion of and inquiry into current and historical controversial issues has long been touted as a significant means of developing critically minded, purposeful, active citizens (Duplass & Zeidler 2000; Goodlad, 2000; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955/68; Noddings, 2004; Parker 1996; Yeager & Silva 2002; Wilen 2003). Today, as society grows ever more divisive over issues such as the Iraq War, the War on Terror, the state of the economy, healthcare, gay marriage, and the energy crisis, there are ample opportunities to engage our students in lively discussion of real-life issues. The nation’s increasing obsession with standardization and accountability, however, brings with it steep consequences for the choices teachers make with regard to the content they teach. Teachers’ decisions about which topics to teach and how to teach them draw scrutiny from administrators and parents who do not share their personal and political commitments, (Corley, 2007; Riccardi, 2006) making the idea of teaching controversy less and less appealing.

Traditionally, scholars have attended to questions of how and why to engage students in the study of controversial topics, offering suggestions for specific pedagogical methods, (Bickmore, 1999; Duplass & Zeidler, 2000; Wilen, 2003), discussion of potential skill development in students (Yeager & Silva, 2002), and analysis of the challenges faced by students and teachers who strive to engage these issues in classrooms (Beyer, 1996; Hess, 2005; VanSledright, 2002). An important outgrowth of this work has been scholarship about the teacher’s role in such classroom discussions (Hess, 2002; Hess, 2002, 2005; Kelly, 1986, 1989; Lockwood, 1996; Miller-Lane, 2006; Wilson, Haas, Laughlin, & Sunal, 2002). In particular, many scholars ask, “Should teachers disclose their personal views when engaged in discussion of a controversial issue with students?”

In this paper, I contend that traditional ways of conceptualizing the disclosure dilemma are limited in that they lack attention to the more subtle ways teachers’ personal experiences and understandings help to shape practice. The decision to disclose one’s personal opinions on a controversial issue is, perhaps, less important than the exploration of what those personal opinions are and the degree to
which they influence teachers’ pedagogy regardless of their decision to make them public. In this way, disclosure (or the explicit publicizing of a teacher’s point of view) can be understood as simply a willingness to be transparent and honest about positionality with regard to the content being taught. As context for this conversation, I offer discussion of my experiences as an elementary social studies teacher educator in which I strive to engage such transparency as both method and content. In the end, I offer reflections about what is difficult, yet critically important about this work.

Kelly’s Rationale for Committed Impartiality

In 1986, Kelly engaged us in a thought-piece about four possible perspectives on teachers’ roles in controversial discussions: exclusive neutrality (refusing to introduce controversy into the classroom at all), exclusive partiality (introducing and advocating for one side of a controversial issue to the exclusion of other sides), neutral impartiality (introducing controversy, but refraining from making explicit one’s personal point of view on the issue), and committed impartiality (engaging in discussion of controversy and letting one’s personal viewpoint be known to one’s students). In this piece, Kelly argued that committed impartiality was the most appropriate role for teachers to assume given the stated goals of preparing students for democratic citizenship.

According to Kelly (1986), “committed impartiality” refers to the teacher’s seemingly paradoxical roles to “First … state rather than conceal their own views on controversial issues. Second … foster the pursuit of truth by insuring that competing perspectives receive a fair hearing through critical discourse” (p. 130). Kelly pointed to three elements of his rationale in support of teacher disclosure: personal witness, democratic authority, and collegial mentor. I summarize each here.

The teacher, as a personal witness, is charged with serving as a model, exemplifying how to make informed decisions for their students. Kelly writes, “The idea of a personal witness is meant to convey the power of personal modeling and the imperative of personal integrity. Being a personal witness places emphasis on observation and example, two major modalities by which individuals learn” (p. 132).

Similarly, the teacher, as a democratic authority, recognizes her responsibility to facilitate the development of democratic authority in her students. As such, she plays an integral role in creating opportunities for students to experience what it means to be “citizens-in-training” (p. 133). Kelly writes, “As personal witnesses giving voice to themselves and permitting fair hearing to youth, these teachers, in theory, both embody and help empower democratic authorities” (p. 133).

Finally, Kelly (2005) suggests the teacher’s role should be informed by developmental research positing that children and adolescents learn best when engaged in relationships that are characterized by “mutuality” and “multidimensionality” (p. 133). Mutuality here means “teachers’ beliefs that students can make useful contributions to the learning process. Teachers show genuine respect for students’ knowledge and interests, manifested in a nonimpositional, nonpatronizing style of interaction” (p. 133). By “multidimensional,” Kelly suggests classrooms must involve “relating to others in an authentic, nonposturing way” (p. 133).

Shying Away from Disclosure

Despite what many call a compelling rationale for teacher disclosure offered by Kelly (1986), research reveals a large majority of elementary, middle, and secondary teachers who choose to engage in discussions of controversial issues in their classrooms prefer to remain neutral while doing so (Hess, 2005; Miller-Lane, 2006; Wilson et al., 2002). Miller-Lane
(2006), like others before them, sought to study teachers’ decisions regarding the roles they assume in classroom discussions. Substantiating other research by those such as Wilson, Haas, Laughlin, and Sunal (2002) and Hess (2002), Miller-Lane found most teachers refrain from divulging their personal points of view, preferring instead to remain in a position of what Kelly termed “neutral impartiality.” Miller-Lane interviewed twelve secondary teachers who claimed to favor “neutral impartiality” in order to provide students with a “safe, public forum” for discussion (p. 40). Furthermore, these teachers expressed “fear of community backlash” if they did decide to share their views with students. In this piece, Miller-Lane pushes us to consider whether Kelly, in his call to “disclose,” has asked too much of teachers whose disclosures may earn criticism from parents and administrators.

Similarly, in their study of 22 elementary teachers and eight middle/secondary teachers, Wilson et al. found teachers refrained from engaging in a great deal of controversial conversation in order to protect children from inappropriate content and because of fear that parents would be disapproving. When they did decide to engage in discussions of controversial issues, they tended to focus on procedural and factual knowledge they hoped would help children make sense of the issues rather than engage children in debates about the merits of various perspectives on the issues.

Hess’s work (2005) helps us to understand some of the arguments set forth by teachers who resist disclosing their personal views in the classroom. Teachers who refrain from disclosure, she reports, voice their desire to support students’ growth and decision making without influencing students’ decisions. Here, teachers often call on the same “safe” space mentioned by the participants in the Miller-Lane study and the power of persuasion teachers hold as a result of their position of authority in the classroom.

Disclosure as Transparency to Self and Others

What seems to be assumed as part of this larger conversation of disclosure is that a teacher’s decision to disclose her personal views is a decision to insert herself into the curriculum. Refraining from disclosure, the logic continues, allows for neutrality in teaching, and keeps the teachers’ personal opinions checked at the classroom door. While teachers may want to believe that keeping hidden their personal beliefs means they can prevent those same beliefs from influencing students or shaping their teaching, research reveals this as a falsehood. The simple fact that teachers have identified an issue as controversial constitutes a pedagogical choice about the significance and nature of that issue (Hess, 2005). The methods teachers implement, materials they use, questions they ask, and evaluations they employ shape how students experience controversial content. In this way, disclosure is less a choice about inserting oneself into the discussion than it is the choice to be transparent about personal attitudes, values, and beliefs as these necessarily shapes one’s teaching. As a justification for Kelly’s “committed partiality,” I would add that, at its core, such transparency is a more *honest* way to go about teaching. Transparency with others, however, requires having first reached a healthy level of transparency with self about attitudes, values, and (sometimes deeply held and often invisible) beliefs and how these characteristics play out in the pedagogical choices to be made. In what follows, I offer a description of my efforts to engage such transparency as both method and content in my social studies methods classroom. I begin with a discussion of how I attempt to model such transparency for students. I then turn to a specific curricular example through which I strive to engage students in critical dialogue about disclosure in the elementary classroom. This particular curricular example focuses on students’ personal under-
standings of family and how these understandings might inform the way a teacher engages a study of family with young children.

**Disclosure in Teacher Education**

*Disclosure in Teacher Education A New Set of Rules*

Kent State University, where I currently teach, is a large, public university located in northeast Ohio. I am primarily responsible for teaching the social studies methods course in the early childhood teacher education program, which students take during their senior year prior to their student teaching. The students in this program are almost exclusively White, working- to middle-class women. Many are the first to attend college in their families. The overwhelming majority are between the ages of 20-22 when they take my class as seniors. Most have spent their entire lives in northeast Ohio and hope to teach in area elementary schools upon graduation.

While my role as a teacher educator differs qualitatively from the task my pre-service teacher education students will have as elementary school teachers, I suggest that our primary charge remains the same: to educate a critically-minded, participatory citizenry. Such an approach calls for a new set of rules — both for teaching and for engaging the world around us. These new rules for teachers include transparency to self and to students. As a teacher educator, I must model this by engaging in difficult dialogues (Nieto 2001) and making visible my own values, attitudes, and assumptions. In the words of Simona J. Hill (2002), “self disclosure” serves to “open lines of communication” and “create new ways of looking at deeply held beliefs” (p. 164). With the new rules set, students are less likely to feel betrayed by a teacher who promised safety and comfort and delivers discussion and debate. Adopting this new construction of classroom practice, I, as the teacher, make transparent my commitment to teaching for critical awareness and the development of an informed and participatory citizenry, striving to model appropriate ways for achieving my goals.

I want my students to understand clearly my philosophy of teaching and learning which emphasizes knowledge construction critical in its approach, social in its enactment, and iterative in its process. I believe that informed citizens must ask critical questions about what constitutes knowledge, whose voices count, and how experience and perspective play into ways of knowing. Informed citizens must engage in social construction of knowledge in order to unpack their positionality with regards to others and the content they are learning, and they must be willing to continuously engage new ideas and reevaluate old ones. In the social studies methods course, I share this philosophy with students and invite them to engage in this critical, social, iterative process along with me.

This past year, in preparation for our ongoing critically reflective inquiry, I included the following statement in my social studies methods course syllabus:

As part of this class, it is expected that you will engage in class conversation, group work and individual reflection thoughtfully and critically. Because we will be openly discussing our thoughts and beliefs about complex, sometimes controversial issues, it is important that each of us comes to class prepared to open our minds in ways that will allow us to hear others, to consider alternative points of view, to challenge and be challenged in respectful ways. As members of a learning community and as future teachers, we must recognize our own trajectory as learners, our responsibility to continue to learn and grow, as well as the role we play in helping others to do the same. As a member of this community, I too will express ideas that you are invited to challenge. I will strive to push
your thinking in new ways and to allow myself to be pushed as well. There will be times when the newness of thought will be uncomfortable. It is not my intention to make you uncomfortable, but to push you to be comfortable with not knowing all the answers, to embrace what is most fascinating, engaging, and challenging about social studies. It is important that you understand that your grade will NOT reflect how closely your views match mine or anyone else’s, but how well-informed, reasoned and professionally articulated your views are.

Including this statement and clearly articulating as we engage in debate that my views constitute only one set of understandings helps to foster a community in which students, I hope, feel free to challenge me and offer their own ideas for conversation. It does not, however, absolve me of the responsibility to present various sides of an issue — even those with which I disagree. In fact, such transparency about my goals pushes me to seek out alternative perspectives to counter my own and to show students that I have presented a balanced view as I claim to want to do. I strive to model thinking through issues, basing my choices on evidence, and even changing my mind. It happens that students come to class or write in their papers such persuasive arguments that I am challenged and even persuaded from time to time, as indeed any open-minded person should be. I find these moments incredibly powerful and share them with my students in an effort to model for them the process of thinking carefully, critically, and reflexively. It is my hope that, in time, those same aspiring teachers sitting in my classroom will begin to understand that the greatest learning often requires some discomfort along the way and that life is indeed full of conflict and controversy.

**Curricular Example: What Is a “Family?”**

I have come to understand that working toward transparency with self is a necessary precursor to transparency with others. However, engaging students in critical self-reflection is difficult work. As I have written about elsewhere, within the context of teacher education, such autobiographical work must necessarily look not only inward, but also outward as well in order to take stock of how who we are impacts our pedagogical enactments (James, 2008). Thus, I am interested in pushing students to consider not only the origins of their understandings and how those understandings shape the ways they walk in the world, but also the consequences of their choices for others, particularly for young children.

The purpose of this focused study of family is to consider the relevance and value of controversy and disclosure to the primary social studies classroom. Though students typically begin the study with rather benign conceptions of “family,” it doesn’t take long before they come to see the great variance in our understandings as they are informed by our life experience. What constitutes “family” differs greatly from student to student and so offers a useful starting point for discussing the presence of controversy where we least expect it. What constitutes “family”? Which constructs of “family” count? Which would we feel comfortable including in a study of family with young children and why? These are just a few questions that help drive our inquiry.

Typically, many of my students hold strong (and varied) opinions about same-sex marriage; thus I trust that this issue is bound to play itself out in my students’ teaching — as they choose how to address “family” in their own classrooms and as they approach relationship building with the children they teach. I believe it is important for us, as a group of committed educators, to wrestle with the conflicts that may exist between our ethical responsibilities as teachers to model tolerance and re-
spect for different points of view and our personal beliefs which reflect our varied biographies. My goal is to push students to consider the implications of critical reflection on how personal beliefs may influence teaching. I want students to consider how they will interact with children and families whose ideas conflict with their own and how transparent about their own beliefs they will be.

There are four related goals for this curricular study:

- To engage pre-service teachers in critically interrogating their personal experiences and beliefs in an effort to pursue “self-disclosure”

- To arrive at an understanding of how our personal understandings may shape our instruction

- To wrestle with the ethical implications of pedagogical choices we might make based on personal understandings

- To critically engage the question of transparency within an instructional context: Will I reveal to students my personal understandings of family? When? Why? How? How is my decision to be transparent reflective of my commitments as a social studies teacher?

I begin by sharing with my students the Ohio state social studies standards and talking about the focus of self and family in K-1 curriculum. I then ask students to write a short reflective piece on their understandings of “family,” thinking about what has shaped those understandings. After this first reflective writing piece, I distribute copies of a piece entitled, “Parenthood and pregnancy: The journey of a lesbian couple and their children,” by Tamara J. Stone and Katherine R. Allen (1999, pp. 171-186). The piece tells the story of a lesbian couple’s decision making process as they planned to have a family, the steps taken to bring a child into their family, and some of the challenges they faced along the way. I further explain that regardless of our individual opinions about same-sex families, as teachers we share an ethical responsibility to consider how our personal and political leanings might shape our teaching of young children. I ask students to read the piece and then reflect on the following questions individually:

- How does this story make you feel? What is your initial reaction to it? Why do you think so? What personal experiences have you had that may impact your reading of this piece?

- What responsibility (if any) do you think a teacher has to include this understanding of “family” in a study of family with kindergarten and first graders? Why do you think so? (Please strive to be as open and honest as possible.)

- How do you envision engaging in a study of family with young children? What might be some challenges you will face as a teacher (regardless of how you answer this question)?

The next day, I invite students to meet in small groups as they feel comfortable to talk about the article and their reactions to it. During this time, I typically join in small group discussions as a participant.

Recently, I joined a table with a group of seven students while others met in groups of two to three around the room. The discussion that ensued at our table began with Rowena, who shared that she had reacted first as a parent who would be uncomfortable with a teacher discussing the content with her young children. While she was open to the idea of talking about this topic at home, she did not believe it had a place in the public school
classroom. Anne shared that she had found the article to be informative and explained that her Christian upbringing had taught her that homosexuality is a sin, and so she wrestled a bit with the topic personally. As a teacher, however, she felt a responsibility to respect all children and that “it wasn’t a child’s fault” if his or her parents had made different choices than Anne herself would make. Conversation continued with an outspoken student, Toni, who shared her personal experience of losing a parent at an early age and her belief that having loving parents is a gift, regardless of gender. As an African American woman, she also explained that she had experienced a great deal of intolerance and prejudice, so she felt it imperative to model respect for all people regardless of gender, race, socio-economic background, sexual preference, or ability. “All children deserve to be loved. That’s what’s important,” she asserted.

Next to Toni, Joanne, who is a mother, explained that she felt personally uncomfortable with the article. She agreed with Anne that homosexuality is a sin and that she would not want her children’s teacher to discuss the topic at school. Quite pointedly, she turned to Toni and remarked, “If you were my child’s teacher and you decided to talk about this stuff with her, I’d be at your door first thing in the morning to complain.” One student at the table, Mary, said she had never really considered the idea of teaching about families “like this one” before and was not sure what to make of the article. Ava and Suzi, two fairly outspoken students in the class, echoed one another in stating that as teachers they had a responsibility to open students’ minds to all sorts of differences in an effort to build tolerance and foster understanding. They both were excited to read the article and shared titles of children’s books they could use for teaching about a variety of families.

Once everyone had shared their initial reactions to the piece, a powerful discussion ensued at our table, and then as a whole group, we talked about teachers’ ethical responsibility to invite all students’ experience into the classroom, to model tolerance and respect for students, and to open children’s eyes to experiences other than their own. We had a lively debate in which students challenged each other about how much teachers ought to talk about same-sex marriage in the classroom, how parents (like those at our table) might respond, and what it was about our personal leanings that shaped our views. Andrew suggested that omitting same-sex families in a study of family may unknowingly devalue the experience of children in the classroom and fail to prepare students for the world outside the classroom. “Like it or not,” he said, “same-sex families exist and your kids are likely to run into one or two in their lifetime.”

During the discussion, I participated in the conversation along with students, sharing my experience growing up in an abusive household and the lessons I believed I had learned there. I have come to believe, like Toni, that love is an incredible gift regardless of the package it comes in and that all children deserve to have loving, attentive parents. It does not matter to me whether those parents are male, female, homosexual, heterosexual, or something else altogether. At the end of the session, we all left thinking. We were challenged to consider perspectives outside of our own and to think through the ramifications of pedagogical choices we would likely have made before taking the time to think about the relationship between personal and professional understandings around the topic at hand.

In the end, students created reflective pieces on this unit of study. Some wrote hypothetical letters to parents that they might use in the classroom before embarking on a unit on family preparing parents for the inclusion of all types of families in their forthcoming study: One student, Alicia wrote the following letter:

Dear Parents, I am writing to let you know that our class will soon begin a
unit on family. As part of this unit, we will be discussing many different types of families and I invite you to share in this experience.

Others continued to ponder how they would go about teaching the concept of family to young children, what their responsibility was to include families that made them uncomfortable: same-sex families, families in which one parent was in prison, or families in which the mother was unwed and single. In their reflective writing pieces, many of these students suggested, as did Monica, that “I would probably only talk about these sorts of families if a child brought it up in class.” Ava submitted a reading list of children’s literature she planned to use in a unit on family, writing, “I don’t see this issue as controversial, so I’m struggling with the extent I need to make it be.” Some drew pictures and made collages reflecting their evolving understandings of family. Many shared that they were still unsure about how they would approach the issue of family in their own classrooms, but agreed that the time taken to think deeply about their own personal beliefs and the connection between their beliefs and their teaching was valuable.

**Disclosure Dilemmas**

As a social studies teacher educator, I am committed to involving students in thoughtful, critical reflection and debate of current and historical controversial topics and consideration of the relevance to such topics in their daily teaching of content. Beyond this, however, is my belief that, as teachers and teacher educators, we always need to be aware of the presence of controversy where we least expect it. To many of my students, the topic of “family” seemed anything but controversial when we began. But with just a touch of prompting, they began to see that any content, when opened up for inquiry, offers us an opportunity for thoughtful engagement of multiple constructions of reality. Sometimes what appears non-controversial is simply our unwillingness to interrogate what is, to us, simple, straightforward, and familiar. These are the places where a lack of transparency can be most problematic. If we, as teachers, fail to see the multiplicity of ways a particular idea can be understood or interpreted, we fail to educate our students deeply and flexibly about that idea. For primary school teachers, the topic of family is central to our social studies curriculum and can be interrogated from many angles. It, therefore, constitutes a relevant and meaningful context for conversations about disclosure. Other possible topics include the following:

- **Community:** Who makes up our community? Whose voices and experiences are “normal”? What makes for appropriate participation in our community and why? (These are but a few poignant questions that might guide such inquiry)

- **Heroes:** Who do we consider an American hero? Why? What constitutes heroism? What “unsung heroes” are absent from our curriculum and why?

- **Citizenship:** What constitutes “good” citizenship in our community? Who has authority and why?

Though I would argue that such conversations are necessary steps towards achieving transparency with oneself about how our personal understandings shape our teaching, studies such as the one described here are almost always messy. In what follows, I reflect on four dilemmas involved in such practice: students’ willingness to engage critically, teacher image to reflect expertise, evaluation issues to circumvent, and limited time to adequately enact.
Students’ Willingness to Critically Engage

In the curricular example described here, the students and I discussed the degree to which it is possible to create a community where individual perspectives are respected, where a teacher could share with her students that her life experience has shaped her views in one particular way but that she continues to reflect on her views and consider others, that there may be more than one right way to think about this and other issues. While most students were able to articulate their beliefs about homosexuality and where they believed those beliefs had originated, not all were willing to truly interrogate those views and consider alternative points of view as legitimate. For these students, the conversation focused instead on how they would “hide” their views from students and try to tolerate students who might disagree with them. Needless to say, I was less than happy with this outcome. These students’ difficulty, however, helped me understand the degree to which “disclosure” demands willingness to critically reflect on our own deeply held beliefs and how vulnerable this can make one feel. While my students often thank me for the opportunity to come to terms with how their personal beliefs will shape their teaching, they are less willing to reconsider those beliefs in light of other ideas presented, regardless of where they stand on an issue. And because I do not see it as my responsibility to persuade students to one side of an issue or another, I find myself struggling to push students without making them feel as if I am pushing an agenda on them. The key here, I believe, is to make sure we push all students equally towards critical self-reflection. This, however, requires that as teacher educators, we have a strong sense of our own understandings and how they may influence which students we push and how we push them — as these decisions are closely related to our own persuasions.

Image of the Teacher as Expert

Another interesting dilemma I have come to face while engaging in such practice is students’ understanding that the teacher ought to be expert on the content he or she is teaching. In listening to students’ comments, I have come to understand that when they talk about “expertise,” what they mean is “keeper and disseminator of knowledge.” In this construction of the teacher as expert, the teacher necessarily wields power over the children in his or her classroom. As such, my students are concerned that no matter how hard they try to create space where their students can arrive at their own informed decisions, they will always tend to side with the teacher because he or she is the expert, and thus the authority, in the classroom.

Teachers’ preoccupation with their need to be experts is a point that also requires critical reflection. What do we mean by expertise? What expertise do teachers have and how ought we to use it? We have a responsibility to help teachers understand that expertise can mean using their knowledge of how children learn and knowledge of the content they teach to create and facilitate opportunities where children can construct their own meanings. Children’s evolving understandings and abilities to engage in deep, flexible, open dialogue about the content under study should be the litmus test teachers use to gauge the power of the teaching and learning in their classrooms. With these goals in mind, controversy and disclosure are well justified and defensible. Kelly’s comment about how attacks by parents on teachers’ disclosures are “misguided attacks on democratic dialogue” reminds us that we must be prepared to justify our transparency intelligently using our knowledge of what constitutes powerful social studies education and our responsibility as educators to act responsibly, honestly and ethically.

The fact that students come into my class with a traditional conception of the teacher as
expert is not all that surprising given the experience most of them report having had in their own K-12 education. There is, however, a tension between this traditional construct and the one I am attempting to model and encourage my students to adopt. It is a tension I continue to reflect upon and engage with students, making my own wonderings public for shared inquiry in hopes of arriving at some shared understandings.

**Issues of Evaluation**

A third dilemma arising from my experience similarly centers on the idea of persuasion. For my students, the power of teachers’ persuasion seems intimately related to issues of evaluation. What made my own disclosure within this study palatable to many was the fact that they were not being given a grade on their reflections and responses. I had made the decision to make participation in the study pass/fail in order to avoid issues of subjective evaluation of students’ ideas. The criteria for evaluation, then, included thoughtful, critical, and open-minded participation and engagement with new ideas. In response to students’ work, I offered written and oral feedback in order to stimulate conversation and reflection. Students raised an important point, however, when suggesting that what can make teachers particularly persuasive is that they have the power to assign grades to others’ thoughts and work. I have seemingly resolved this conflict by changing the way I assign value to students’ work. I am cognizant, however, of the culture of classrooms and schools which tends toward evaluation and quantification of progress toward specific outcomes. As an educator, this dilemma leaves me wondering about the inherent contradiction between curriculum that is “thinking-centered” (Henderson, 1998) and evaluation that is not so thinking centered and the role of the individual teacher (and teacher educator) in negotiating this tension. Ongoing discussion of how to create spaces for such engagement with controversial issues and what this might mean for how we construct our roles as evaluators must also be part of teacher preparation.

**Limited Time**

The greatest dilemma I face as I engage in this work, however, lies in my belief that our studies of “family,” “citizenship,” and “community” are insufficient as a means of helping students resolve issues of transparency with regard to their teaching. The criticism has been made that pushing students into these dangerous waters may do little more than make them cringe even more at the thought of controversy and disclosure. Without ample time to reflect, discuss, and work through some of these more complex issues, students can be left feeling uncomfortable and unprepared to engage in similar methods with their students. Does this mean that we ought to abandon such critically reflective inquiry altogether? I don’t think so. While such work may not be enough to fully address the issues at hand, I believe it is nonetheless a necessary start. My hope is that students’ experiences in my class have opened doors they will find difficult to close. Though they may not have the answers to the questions asked, they will have a hard time forgetting that the questions exist — and the questions, after all, are the seeds for continued inquiry.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

Our personal understandings will and do shape our teaching in a variety of ways. Coming to terms with this relationship is an integral part of teacher preparation, particularly in the field of social studies, where even the most benign content (“family”) can quickly be rendered controversial. Teachers need opportunities to interrogate their personal beliefs and wrestle with the ethical implications of allowing those beliefs to shape their teaching. Regardless of the decisions teachers make in the
end, teacher education must play a more active role in facilitating this reflective process so that teachers will be able to engage it on their own. Doing so, however, requires ongoing efforts by faculty over time. We cannot expect sporadic conversations to do the trick. It is hard work — much like a muscle that needs flexing over and over in order to strengthen.

Beyond simply including such practices throughout teacher education programs (and specifically in social studies courses), teacher educators also must consider changes to our means of evaluation. What is it we most want teachers to be able to do, and how can we shift our assessment to adequately measure those abilities? Honestly engaging issues of evaluation requires willingness on our part to interrogate the agendas that underlie and inform our teaching.

Third, as Kelly suggests and my experience underscores, we have a responsibility to help prepare teachers who can make well-informed choices drawing on their pedagogical and content knowledge and communicate these to others. Our education of teachers, then, must also incorporate opportunities for them to experience and practice transparency — opportunities to articulate their views and justify their choices in open and honest ways.

Finally, we must not forget that as with the teachers with whom we work, we must practice critical self-reflection and transparency as teacher educators if we wish both to model this important work and to teach honestly ourselves. Doing so may demand the creation of new outlets for shared reflection, critical dialogue, and peer review among teacher educators.

**Conclusion**

We cannot prevent students, teachers, and administrators from questioning our approaches to teaching any content, let alone controversial content. We cannot deny the personal as it influences our pedagogical choices. The best we can do is to strive for transparency with ourselves and the ability to articulate our goals for others. That we have thought ahead about the complexity of the content we teach and have made purposeful choices in hopes of preparing thoughtful, active, and critical citizens for tomorrow is, after all, the professional responsibility we bestow upon teachers. And it is a difficult task, to be sure. Whatever opportunities we can offer to help prepare our prospective teachers for the difficult road ahead will be reasons for them to thank us later.

**References**


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