White on White Education: The Power of Intersectional Sociological Imagination and Autobiography as Tools for Examining Controversy in Teacher Education

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Abstract

The Social Foundations of Education is a field of study dedicated to critically examining issues of social justice in both society and education. When future educators engage in these conversations around race, gender, orientation, socioeconomic status, and so forth, these undergraduates often approach such topics with the belief that they are controversial and unsettled. A fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of controversy acts, in these cases, as a barrier to intellectual growth and, thus, to socially just educational practices in their future classrooms. In this paper, we set forth an argument for a pedagogy of controversy that can aid instructors in conceptualizing how to approach these topics with future educators, and other undergraduate majors, through the use of sociological autobiography and narrative employing the sociological imagination.

Keywords: *social justice, whiteness, social controversy, poetic analysis*

"This class is bigoted bullshit."[1]

We teach Social Foundations of Education (SFE) courses often viewed by students and faculty as controversial courses because we discuss the supposedly "controversial issues" of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, native language, religion, and so forth. For our mostly white, female, and privileged students, anything outside of the dominant ideology is seen as controversial. They are often consumed with policing their own boundaries and not letting in anything they deem as "not like them," including divergent ways of thinking.[2] Yet students have a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes something controversial. They perceive many of their SFE professors as presenting opinion rather than the culmination of work and research. For many of these students, if it is not hard science, it is not established truth and is subjective. For other students, like the one

1. White Male, Spring 2015, Sociocultural Diversity Course.

2. Judith Butler, from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, Wendy K. Kolmar & Frances Bartkowski (eds.) (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1990); Laura Niesen de Abruna, "Homi Bhabha as Public Intellectual at the Turn of the Millennium: Introduction to Keynote Lecture at the Annual NEMLA Conference, Boston, March 8, 2003," *Modern Language Studies,* 33(½) (2003); Cyrus R. K. Pattell, "Comparative American Studies: Hybridity and Beyond," *American Literary Histo*ry, 11(1) (1999): 166-186

quoted in the introductory comment to this paper, SFE professors are seen as indoctrinating students to a particular political ideology.[3] One of the battles we face, then, is how to negotiate false controversy in the classroom and how to help our students navigate their way through what they perceive as controversy to what is actually controversial.

We owe it to our students—and to their future students, as these undergraduates are education majors—to explore rationality and controversy in our classrooms. The American public is losing trust in education due, in part, to the handling of controversial issues. There is no neutral position: It is a fallacy to believe that education or those who convey knowledge can be positionless.[4] For example, our students often argue that racism no longer exists and therefore questions about race can be ignored. Since racism is nonexistent in their view, it is possible to remain positionless in matters involving race. So, when we teach about anti-racist education these same students often see this as negatively biased and controversial however, an unwillingness to acknowledge racism and to learn about anti-racist education is participating in an oppressive and racist institution and it is not, as they would construct it, being neutral or positionless. It is a misunderstanding of controversy to believe that the opposite of anti-racist education does anything other than maintain institutionalized racism in education. There is no safe middle ground. As seen through this example, we have an obligation to teach our students what constitutes real controversy and what does not—we want them to be able to approach non-controversial topics directly and to be able to approach both controversial and non-controversial topics from a socially just perspective. We need, in other words, a pedagogy of controversy, and we argue the first steps in implementing such a pedagogy start with using informed dialogue and theoretical readings to (1) teach students to understand rationality and apply this to education and (2) ask students to examine their own positionality through sociological autobiography and imagination. We see this as a vital pedagogical approach for teacher education programs to model for their students, as we want to help our students problematize trust and education and to help them become educators with the ability to act and teach from a critical multicultural framework in order to catalyze much-needed social change.

Controversy Defined

Before we move into how we approach controversy from a pedagogical perspective, it is important to discuss the nature of controversy in regard to how we, as educators, and our students conceptualize it. Hand and Levinson cited Dearden's definition of controversy when they wrote, "To teach something as controversial is to teach it as *unsettled*, to present it as a matter on which contrary views are or could be held; and we take it that teachers ought only to teach something in this way when 'contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason.'"[5] This is based on an epistemic criterion, rather than political or behavioral criterion, and not from a practical accommodation frame. Thus, dispute does not equal controversy when that disputation

3. Barbara Applebaum, "Is Teaching for Social Justice a 'Liberal Bias?'," *Teachers College Record,* 111(2) (2009): 376-408

4. Applebaum, "Is Teaching for Social Justice a 'Liberal Bias'?"; Henry A. Giroux, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

5. Michael Hand & Ralph Levinson, "Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom," *Educational Philosophy and Theory,* 44(6) (2012): 618.

is rooted outside of rationality. As Hand and Levinson continued, "What matters, from an educational point of view, is not whether disagreement actually occurs, but whether it is epistemically warranted, whether more than one view on a matter is rationally defensible."[6]

In such a definition, cultural and religious diversity, ethnicity, prejudice, race and racism, for example, cannot be defined as controversial topics. Our students, however, do see these topics are controversial, and thus we utilize an epistemic approach as a first step to illustrate for them that the existence of racism, for example, is not controversial. According to Hand, to teach something in a nondirective manner is to teach it as unsettled or up for continued debate and dialogue as opposed to directive, indicating that the matter is settled.[7] As Hand asked, "What possible justification could there be for commending nondirective teaching on the matters of prejudice and racism?"[8] However, he went on to note that these issues are being presented as controversial, citing bullying and racism, in particular, as two issues often tackled in teaching materials related to handling controversial issues in the classroom.[9] We argue this is because many educators do not understand the nature of controversy or the difference between controversy and disagreement, and, as a result, do not teach students the best techniques for employing rationality in their thinking.

We recognize that there are limitations when utilizing the epistemic criterion as a theoretical framework for defining controversy. As Bertucio notes in this volume, the epistemic criterion is not without its faults, including a tendency for ahistorical implementation and a moral relativism that borders on a socially constructed domination by the majority. Because modern moral dilemmas lack the "body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures" that Dearden suggests are necessary for defining a matter as settled, Bertucio argues any determinations as to the controversial nature of a topic are more likely to be influenced by an individual's biased perspective and desire to belong to a particular intellectual group than by rational justification.[10]

In this same volume, Anders and Shudak argue that no single criterion is sufficient in determining what is controversial but behavioral, epistemic, political, social, and theoretical must all be considered in making such determination. We argue, however, that beginning with the epistemic criterion and establishing a basis for rationality in thought and argumentation is essential to the pedagogy of controversy. While we recognize the epistemic criterion is not the only criterion, we argue that this is a starting point for resistant students or students unwilling to acknowledge their privilege and power. Without this foundation of rationality, it is more difficult for students to consider the social or theoretical criterion discussed by Anders and Shudak.[11] The social and theoretical are important to the Social Foundations; however, if students are unwilling or unable to recognize the social prevalence of an issue in their lives, such as racism, or if they are unable to distinguish between political and theoretical authority of their professor, then it adds an additional challenge to using these criteria as a starting point for consideration.

Thus, we are using the rationality framework of the epistemic criterion as the basis for our pedagogy of controversy because rational and critical thought can help students in assessing social, theoretical, and other criterion. Byford, Lennon, and Russell noted, "students are often unable to

6. Ibid., 618.
7. Michael Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion," *Educational Theory,* 58(2) (2008): 213-228.
8. Ibid., 216.
9. Ibid., 216.
10. Ibid., 216
11. Ibid., 216

justify their own opinions and debate various issues through rational reasoning."[12] Therefore class discussions are often "based on disagreement and not rational reasoning."[13] The reasons behind this are twofold: First, students tend to accept their parents' or guardians' views without question.[14] Secondly, they argue, P-12 teachers lack the pedagogical skills, confidence, preparation, and support to navigate such discussions.[15] This is why it is key for us, as professors of future educators, to ensure that our students understand what controversy is, know how to guide students toward rational thinking in regard to perceived and real controversial issues, and recognize when and how to act on controversial issues for social change. Our future educators should be able to navigate through controversial issues related to their field—such as the impacts of educational policies on their students, they should be able to discuss non-controversial issues surrounding social justice directly utilizing theory and critical thought, and they should be able to teach their students to do the same.

Controversy Misunderstood

In order to begin exploring controversy as pedagogy, we must first understand how and why our students misunderstand and misinterpret controversial issues. Whereas controversy requires, by the epistemic criterion, a rational argument to be present on both sides of the discussion, our society often conflates disagreement with controversy, irrespective of the validity of one's argument. Take, for example, a recent skirmish in a school system in suburban Georgia. In September 2015, more than nine years after the state implemented the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), a small handful of parents raised the alarm, accusing middle school teachers in this district of preaching Islam to their students. Standards related to the academic study of world religions, including Islam, occur several times in the Social Studies GPS, including 7th grade World Geography. The "controversy" was sparked when a parent saw her/his child's homework assignment that identified Allah as the same deity worshipped in both Christianity and Judaism. Since the initial complaint went public, accusations have ranged from teaching incorrect content (identifying Allah as described above), to questioning the balance of instruction (suggesting that teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time on Islam as compared to other religions, particularly Christianity), to questioning the true motives of the lessons (that teachers were actively trying to convert students to Islam).[16]

So what is the controversy in this situation? The GPS in question asked students to be able to describe the diverse cultures of peoples in Southwest Asia, including by ethnicity and religion.[17] The academic necessity of studying Islam, in this case, is clear, as one cannot understand the historical, social, and political environment of Southwest Asia if one does not understand the role that religion has played in the region. In order for this to be a truly controversial issue, however, there must be a rational argument against teaching this content. Ignorance and Islamophobia, however,

12. Jeff Byford, Sean Lennon, & William B. Russell III, "Teaching Controversial Issues in the Social Studies: A Research Study of High School Teachers," *The Clearing House: Teaching Controversial Issues,* 82(4) (2009): 166.

13. Ibid., 166.

14. Ibid., 166.

15. Ibid., 166.

16. Ty Tygami, "Some Parents Concerned about How Islam is Taught in Schools," *Atlanta Journal Constitution,* (September 29, 2015). Accessed at http://www.ajc.com/news/news/local-education/some-parents-concerned-about-how-islam-is-taught-i/nnqdJ/

17. Social Studies, Georgia Performance Standards, Georgia Department of Education (2015). Accessed at https://www.georgiastandards.org/Standards/Pages/BrowseStandards/SocialStudiesStandards.aspx.

largely inform the arguments presented. In a conversation with a 7th-grade social studies teacher in this county on October 11 of 2015, one of the authors of this paper learned that it was clear that the loudest objections were coming from parents who were ill informed about Islam and the curriculum in their children's schools. At a meeting of the county's Board of Education on October 13th, 2015, community members were able to speak on this matter. Two of the three speakers focused their attention on the ever-looming threat of Muslims infiltrating "our" country and how teaching about Islam in a public school is an attack on the local Christian community.[18] The immigration of Muslims to this country and the teaching Islam as a world religion are not, in and of themselves, threatening to American public education. What can be seen as threatening, however, are the stereotypes that shadow the religion of Islam and its people. In discussing this issue with our pre-service educators, however, many of our students agreed this was obviously a controversial topic and that no party was clearly in the right. Our students, operating under their misconceptions regarding controversy, would apply the behavioral criterion, which suggests that merely having two sides to an argument is sufficient to deem something controversial. Our job, then, is to help students re-conceptualize controversy from the epistemic criterion and to be able to employ rationality in their own thought and future teaching.

To get us to a deeper understanding of how our students come to misunderstand controversy, such as the example illustrated above, we are going to explore the construct of whiteness and how students view it as controversial. This serves as an illustrative example that can be applied to many identity categories addressed in a typical diversity or social justice oriented course. It is a common refrain in modern political dialogue to assert that Americans live in a post-racial society. Events over the past year, however, have proven this notion incorrect. The constant juxtaposition of the narratives of the likes of Fox News and the social media savvy #BlackLivesMatter and #FergusonSyllabus movements implies an equity to a controversy that does not exist. There has been a great deal of research on examining whiteness for the purpose of deconstructing individual and institutional systems of oppression.[19] This process is particularly important in teacher education where upwards of 90% of the teaching core in America is white, middle-class, and female[20] but more than 40% of the population are students of color,[21] a fact which "is of great concern to critical multiculturalists as we wrestle with the dilemma of how to provide a basic understanding of groups with whom the majority of students have no authentic relationships."[22]

One's racial identity is deeply contextualized and rooted in the social and historical contexts in which it is developed,[23] yet most white students do not see themselves as being raced or

18. Board of Education Minutes (Oct. 13, 2015). Accessed at http://www.walton.k12.ga.us/boardmtgvideos.html.

19. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Joe L. Kincheloe & Shirley R. Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, Joe. L Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, & Ronald E. Chennault (eds.) (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000); Frances Maher & Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, "They Got the Paradigm and Painted it White: Whiteness and Pedagogies of Positionalities," in Kincheloe, et. Al., *White Reign*; Peter McLaren, "Whiteness Is…The Struggle for Postcolonial Hybridity," in Kincheloe, et. Al., *White Reign*.

20. Robin DiAngelo & Özlem Sensoy, " 'OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!': Why We Can't Just Tell You How to Do Critical Multicultural Education," *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12(2) (2010): 97-102; Sonia Nieto & Patty Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (Boston: Pearson, 2012).

21. Caryn Terwilliger, "Mapping Stories: Taking Detours to Challenge Whiteness," *Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity*, 11(2) (2010): 14.

22. DiAngelo and Sensoy, " 'OK, I Get It!'," 99.

23. Terwilliger, "Mapping Stories."

having a racial identity.[24] White people in the US are raised to not talk about race, so as not to be seen as impolite or racist, and are conditioned to see themselves as racially neutral (the norm) and to see non-white people as being raced or "Other."[25] Not recognizing themselves as raced makes it difficult for white pre-service teachers to acknowledge and understand how racial prejudice, privilege, and oppression operate in wider society and in the schools. This lack of perspective often leads students to develop a notion of colorblindness, or the belief they are not influenced by another person's race and treat everyone equally.[26] This idea is especially damaging to students of color who are acted upon not only by the unquestioned stereotypes and biases of the white teacher but also by wider macro-social and institutional discriminatory forces.[27] According to Mazzei, "in such an environment, stereotypes are furthered rather than confronted, and perceptions of self and Other are allowed to remain circumscribed in a protective caul."[28]

If white students, then, are conditioned to not see themselves as raced, what happens when the conversation turns to institutional and individual racism? Many scholars have demonstrated processes through which white students conceptualize race and work through racial identity.[29] These are processes, though, that require consistent action, attention, and thought. White students, not unexpectedly, typically do not want to conceptualize themselves as being racist or as having contributed to the oppression of minoritized racial groups.[30] According to Cooney and Akintunde, white pre-service teachers, in an attempt to negotiate this new awareness, may reject ideas of racism and remain deliberately ignorant of issues, racial inequalities, lash out on anger at feelings of blame for injustices and approach these conversations from a defensive or aggressive perspective, conceptualize issues of inequality from a personal, individual perspective and ignore the wider systematic concerns, or be receptive to being told what to do in a multicultural classroom but fail to deeply explore the impact of their attitudes on the effectiveness of their teaching.[31] It is this second, defensive reaction that is most relevant to the wider conversation about controversy. In an effort to distance themselves from acknowledging their role in systems of oppression, white pre-service teachers often conceptualize the conversation around the existence of racism to be unsettled and up for continued debate. Thinking about racism in this way allows them to argue for their own goodness and excuse themselves from the weight of privilege afforded to them by their race.

Sensoy and DiAngelo have identified a series of common ways students attempt to turn conversations about racism into controversial debate: (1) claiming that schools are politically neutral, (2) dismissing social justice scholarship as the overwrought personal opinions of left-wing

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24. Karon N. LeCompte & Audrey D. McCray, "Complex Conversation with Teacher Candidates: Perspectives of Whiteness and Culturally Responsive Teaching," *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 4(1) (2002): 72-77; Lisa A. Mazzei, "Silence Speaks: Whiteness Revealed in the Absence of Voice," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24 (2008): 1125-1136.

25. Terwilliger, "Mapping Stories."

26. Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing A Colorblind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1997).

27. Mazzei, "Silence Speaks"; Özlem Sensoy & Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).

28. Mazzei, "Silence Speaks," 1129.

29. Dan W. Butin, "Identity (Re)Construction and Student Resistance," in *Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Contexts, Theories, and Issues*, Dan W. Butin (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2005); Janet Helms, "Toward a Model of White Racial Identity Development," in *Black and White Racial Identity*, Janet Helms (ed.) (New York: Greenwood/Praeger, 1993); Sandra M. Lawrence & Takiema Bunche, "Feeling and Dealing: Teaching White Students about Racial Privilege," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 12(5) (1996): 531-542.

30. Alice McIntyre, "Exploring Whiteness and Multicultural Education with Prospective Teachers," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(1) (2002): 31-49.

31. In LeCompte and McCray, "Complex Conversation."

professors, (3) citing exceptions to the rule, (4) arguing that oppression is human nature and inevitable, (5) appealing to a universalized humanity, (6) arguing against socialization, (7) ignoring intersectionality, (8) refusing to recognize structural and institutional power, (9) rejecting the politics of language, (10) claiming over-sensitivity of the oppressed, (11) rationalizing that if choice is involved then it cannot truly be oppression, (12) positioning social justice as an ancillary field, and (13) using guilt to excuse inaction.[32] In each of these claims, students often attempt to argue a non-rational position as a means of mitigating their role in an oppressive racial hierarchy. As an example of the non-rational implementation of citing an exception to the rule, in a journal entry written in response to the seminal Peggy McIntosh work, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*,[33] one white, female student posited that "racism is a mute [*sic*] point. We have a black president now." It is fitting in this situation that the student utilized the term "mute," as she does not recognize the voices of those who argue that racism is still very much alive. Such non-rationalizations are essential to protect their limited worldview and short-term mental wellbeing. In taking such beliefs into the classroom, these future teachers maintain the status quo, and this results in the continuation of institutional racism—the very opposite of what an anti-racist educational approach would entail. Our responsibility as educators is to help them use a rational approach to rebuild a more robust understanding of privilege and oppression and to acknowledge their roles in these systems of power.

The question then centers on how we can help our students move from a misunderstanding of the existence of racism and implementation of anti-racist education as controversial topics to the ability to think critically and deeply about issues of social justice. In relation to racial injustice, white students need to be able to see and understand themselves as racialized beings. They need to "brush up against their own whiteness" and question their own privileges, biases, and assumptions.[34] Rather than shunning the idea of themselves as raced, they should be taught to embrace and explore their racial identity and consider how this identity influences their views and interactions with the world around them. They should consider how race shapes their lives, not just how it shapes the lives of people of color. Once they have achieved a deeper understanding of their own racial identity and the privileges that entails, the next step is to decide how they can use their white privilege to either perpetuate the status quo or fight against it.[35] This is one of the biggest stumbling blocks for many pre-service teachers. To be neutral in this context, to argue that anti-racist education is biased, or to fail to acknowledge that racism exists is to support the status quo and participate in a racist pedagogical perspective. Additionally, to misunderstand a topic such as "the existence of racism" or the teaching of anti-racist education as controversial issues indicates that racism, the binary to antiracism, has a rational basis. To be clear, many of our students challenge the construct of racism as applying to modern America. They see it as an historical issue that no longer impacts individuals or institutions. While they would avow they are not themselves racist, they simultaneously reify racist rhetoric and ideals.

In order to prepare our students to be critical multicultural educators, we have an obligation to teach them about the nature of controversy to better understand themselves and their values as educators. If we want our students to be critical agents of change, we do not want them to be muddled over questions of whether the existence of racism and the implementation of anti-racist

32. Sensoy & DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*

33. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Accessed at http://ted.coe.wayne.edu/ele3600/mcintosh.html.

34. Mazzei, "Silence Speaks," 1134.

35. Lawrence & Bunche, "Feeling and Dealing."

education are controversial. We want them to be strong in what they believe and what they are teaching. We want them to be able to rationally defend against irrational arguments. In order to accomplish this, we propose the use of a pedagogy of controversy in teacher preparation courses that helps students through the process of recognizing what is rational and what is not so they can apply this knowledge to their own teaching in regard to content and pedagogy.

The Pedagogy of Controversy

In an effort to teach students how to determine what is controversial by epistemic standards first (and then the social and theoretical recommended by Anders and Shudak[36]), we need a pedagogy of controversy. In discussing disagreement and the epistemic criterion, Kelly noted that the following questions guide students as to whether disagreement is controversy:

> Can one rationally hold a belief while knowing that that belief is not shared (and indeed, is explicitly rejected) by individuals over whom one possesses no discernible epistemic advantage? If so, what assumptions must one be making about oneself and about those with whom one disagrees? In deciding what to believe about some question, (2) how (if at all) should one take into account the considered views of one's epistemic peers?[37]

Thinking through these questions would require that students are able to (1) reflect on their views in relation to the self and the world around them and (2) dialogue—rather than debate—with their peers. These are both skills, though, that require critical thinking and the application of a pedagogy of controversy on the part of the professor/teacher.

To start with dialogue, most scholars posit various forms of discussion/dialogue as the means of addressing controversial issues.[38] There are several issues, though, in regard to engaging in meaningful discussions in class, especially those discussions that may involve working through whether an issue is controversial. For one, many institutions, including educational ones, as bell hooks reminds us, fail to support discussion. More often than not, our educational institutions tend to operate from a banking model,[39] where the teacher, as expert, filters information down to the students.[40] This unidirectional model of instruction does not allow students the space to grapple with challenging concepts or engage in the kinds of critical thinking necessary for intellectual growth. Given the deficiencies of this model, why are so many educators reluctant to engage with dialogue in the classroom?

Many educators often opt out of discussion due to the fear of these conversations turning into angry debates.[41] Instead, many educators often opt for "negotiating a compromise position

36. Anders and Shudak, "Criteria for Controversy."

37. Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, John Hawthorne & Tamar Gendler (eds.), forthcoming.

38 Byford, Lennon, & Russell, "Teaching Controversial Issues;"; Hand, "What Should We Teach"; and, Hand & Levinson, "Discussing Controversial Issues." While we prefer the term dialogue, we use the terms discussion and dialogue interchangeably, as the majority of the sources reference herein utilize the term discussion.

39. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

40. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

41. Byford, Lennon, & Russell, "Teaching Controversial Issues."

acceptable to discussants with conflicting views," or what Hand also defined as "the practical accommodation frame."[42] Even organizations such as the National Council for Social Studies noted that a standard for teaching students how to address controversial issues should include "the recognition that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process."[43] Yet, as Hand would debate, reasonable compromise is difficult when "some participants in a discussion hold false views for bad reasons" or if "*all* the considerations on one side of an issue are groundless."[44] Going back to Kelly's quotation, the problem in some ways is teaching our students to listen to and understand their peers and to engage with theory in order to dialogue. Some are not necessarily willing to take others' views into consideration and to weigh the rationality of those views. Instead, they view disagreement as the only necessary criterion for controversy.

Additionally, many educators argue about how to appropriately approach discussion/dialogue. Hand and Levinson write, "Without exception, as far as we can tell, the contributors to this body of literature hold discussion to be the pedagogical approach most appropriate to the exploration of controversial issues in the classroom. Remarkably, however, they give little serious attention to the questions of what discussion is, why it is the preferred approach, and how best to facilitate it."[45] Hand and Levinson take this further by noting that listening and learning are key to classroom dialogue in order for students to shift their thinking, and they note that "reasonableness, peaceableness and orderliness, truthfulness, freedom, equality and respect for persons" are important elements for meaningful conversations with the power to impact individuals' thinking.[46] There are many steps involved, though, in preparing students to engage with one another while keeping these characteristics in mind.

Lastly, dialogue can and should be part of both directive and nondirective teaching, but the approaches for both methods are debated. With directive teaching, the teacher has a specific position to which she/he encourages/guides students to accept, while teachers using a nondirective style do not attempt persuasion to any one viewpoint.[47] As Gregory explained, with directive teaching "teachers should attempt to persuade students to accept the correct positions on topics that are not rationally controversial—even in the face of significant opposition."[48] With nondirective approaches, teachers "should *not* attempt to persuade students one way or another on topics that *are* rationally controversial—even if the teacher, personally, holds one of the opposing views."[49] Thus, when discussing truly controversial issues, teachers should refrain from "attempting to ensure that…students come to the same conclusion" held by the instructor.[50] When, however, discussing issues viewed by students as controversial but not meeting the epistemic criterion for controver- siality, directive teaching is appropriate and often necessary.[51]

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42. Michael Hand, "Framing Classroom Discussion of Same-Sex Marriage," *Educational Theory*, 63(5) (2013), 507.

43. Byford, Lennon, & Russell, "Teaching Controversial Issues," 166.

44. Hand, "Framing Classroom Discussion," 509.

45. Hand & Levinson, "Discussing Controversial Issues," 614.

46. Ibid., 616.

47. Hand, "What Should We Teach."

48. Maughn Rollins Gregory, "The Procedurally Directive Approach to Teaching Controversial Issues," *Educational Theory*, 64(6) (2014): 628.

49. Ibid., 628.

50. Hand, "What Should We Teach," 220.

51. Bertucio, "Alasdair MacIntyre." We would like to reinforce the distinction here between directive teaching and teaching a matter as settled. As Bertucio notes, model moral dilemmas lack the "body of public knowledge" to be

When issues are non-controversial, such as "racism as a current problem in America," and can be taught in a directive manner, there is disagreement about the best way to approach such classroom dialogues. Gregory, for instance, noted that directive teaching could bring power issues into play, with the teacher as expert.[52] Gregory went on to argue for procedurally directive teaching an approach that "provides positive support that gives students practice in asking critical questions and thinking carefully through the information and ideas presented to them."[53] This is an approach that is both personal and collaborative, utilizing "evidence from the students' own experiences" and dialogue with peers.[54] This is where Anders and Shudak, in this volume, argue for the theoretical criterion. The educator has a theoretical basis that the students do not have, and thus has expertise that gives her or him authority. This is not to be confused with political authority, they argue, that necessitates obedience from the students.[55] The problem, as stated previously, is when students do not recognize the difference and view theoretical authority as political indoctrination of liberalism.[56] Such misunderstandings can results in arguments rather than dialogues and student resistance to participating in dialogue.

Dialogue on controversial issues and discussion over whether an issue is controversial are activities that one cannot jump right into without establishing a classroom climate conducive to such conversations. Hand and Levinson, for instance, found that discussion required four factors including "effective preparation, accessible topics, strong and diverse views among discussants, and appropriate facilitation."[57] Another critical factor is establishing a climate of trust within the classroom, which is predicated on the willingness of an individual to be in a position of vulnerability and interdependence with others.[58] Mazzei remarked on the prevalence of silence in her classroom when discussing issues of race and racism: "due to cultural conditioning and the sensitive, potentially controversial, even explosive nature of racial interchange, these fears are exacerbated when entering that milieu of potential embarrassment and conflict with their peers."[59] Students learning in a high trust environment are more likely to feel empowered and invested in the learning process,[60] which can be especially beneficial in an environment where we are asking students to confront long-held beliefs and stereotypes.

There are other elements involved in teaching controversial topics, most notably helping students understand what is controversial and what is not and why this distinction should be made. We agree with Gregory that students' experiences should be a significant part of directive teaching[61] and that students should learn about how to distinguish what is actually controversial (rational) from what is not (emotional). Although directive teaching is appropriate when establishing whether an issue is controversial or not, once the issue has been deemed to be controversial, a nondirective approach is preferred. Students see the world through their particular sociocultural

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taught as truly settled. This does not negate, however, the ability to teach modern moral dilemmas in a directive fashion where epistemic criterion dictates one position to be more rational and defensible than another.

52. Gregory, "The Procedurally Directive."

53. Ibid., 637.

54. Ibid., 637.

55. Anders and Shudak, "Criteria for Controversy."

56. Applebaum, "Is Teaching."

57. Hand & Levinson, "Discussing Controversial Issues," 620.

58. Debra Shelden, Maureen Angell, Julia Stoner, & Bill Roseland, "School Principals' Influence on Trust: Perspectives of Mothers of Children with Disabilities," *The Journal of Education Research*, 103 (2010): 159-170.

59. Mazzei, "Silence Speaks," 1132.

60. Curt M. Adams & Patrick B. Forsyth, "Revisiting the Trust Effect in Urban Elementary Schools," *The Elementary School Journal* 114, no. 1 (2013).

61. Gregory, "The Procedurally Directive."

lenses—they are engaging through their habitus, as Petrovic noted, which is directly impacted by the history, culture, and politics surrounding them.[62] As educators, we have to "meet them where they are," so to speak, and work through students' experiences and lenses to discuss controversy—including what should and should not be included under this designation. We cannot expect students to automatically understand why an issue is not controversial (i.e., racism or bullying), if this is what they have been socialized to believe. The challenge, then, is to help students understand the limited relativism of their perspective and to acknowledge that their experience is not universal. Students must be able to critically reflect on their experiences, understand them in the context of their habitus, and then rationally locate them in the wider context of systems of power and privilege. This has to be a process, and it is a lengthy one.

While student experiences are significant to this process,[63] we should try to avoid students' falling into the trope of viewing one personal experience as the Truth ("X happened to me, therefore X is true") or utilizing exceptions to the rule to demonstrate their arguments ("I know someone to whom X happened, therefore X is true").[64] How we bring students' experiences into the classroom, then, is key in this process. When engaged in classroom dialogue, we do not want students "to construe any further attack on the opinion in question as an attack on their identity."[65] This can occur when students utilize the tropes mentioned above in integrating personal experience into dialogue about controversial topics (or non-controversial ones). As previously discussed, students often have strong, if misguided, reasons for clinging to faulty thinking, as to do otherwise is uncomfortable and potentially upsetting, particularly in conversations around privilege, power, and oppression.

Sociological Imagination and Autobiography as Pedagogy of Controversy

Prior to bringing students' experiences into discussion through directive teaching, we should start with self-reflection and writing about one's beliefs, where they emerge, and upon what they are based—in other words, engaging students in sociological autobiographies or connecting their biography with their social history.[66] To move to the point where students do not see a topic such as the existence of racism and the teaching of anti-racist curriculum as controversial, because it is not, we have to take a journey with them to explore the rationality (or lack thereof) behind their belief system, which is not easy. It is difficult to discover that there is no rational basis behind one's beliefs (no epistemic basis), and thus this has to be navigated with compassion and care. In regard to this process, Kebede wrote the following:

> Old habits do not go away easily. To use Pierre Bourdieu's expression, since one's habitus is an enduring embodied sensibility, although not a permanent one, it cannot be abandoned every time we are exposed to new ideas even if they are earth shattering (Bourdieu 1992; see also Brint 2001). Hence, it would be unwise to aim at destroying an old habitus in one

62. John Petrovic, "Reason, Liberalism, and Democratic Education: A Deweyan Approach to Teaching about Homosexuality," *Educational Theory*, 63(5) (2013): 525-541.

63. Gregory, "The Procedurally Directive."

64. Sensoy & DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*

65. Hand & Levinson, "Framing Classroom Discussion," 625.

66. Alem Kebede, "Practicing Sociological Imagination through Writing Sociological Autobiography," *Teaching Sociology*, 37(4) (2009): 353-368.

> stroke. Instead the instructor should pave the way for embracing sociological disposition alongside with other forms of sensibility.[67]

The sociological autobiography can help us, as educators, to better understand where our students currently are. More importantly, it can help the students understand where they really are. We routinely have students complete autobiographical narratives and without fail, numerous white students in the class, when asked to talk about their ethnic heritage, will reply in the beginning that they do not know where their family comes from. For many, this is a profound realization and the first time they view themselves as potentially Other. These autobiographies can be personal at first—shared only with the instructor, who provides feedback—and then shared with others, if the class feels comfortable.

These autobiographies, while intensely personal, cannot be written in a vacuum. Terwilliger argues that one of the critical missing components of multicultural education is the lack of opportunities for students to engage in guided self-reflection.[68] This is particularly relevant in situations where students are put into diverse field placement experiences and then asked to reconsider what they know about themselves and others. Lacking guided self-reflection in these situations means that students may not actually confront their misconceptions related to race or other identity categories and will leave the class with the same misconceptions with which they entered. It is essential, then, that the creation of the autobiographies be a discursive process between the professor and the student and then, if possible, between the students themselves. Critical self-reflection is essential for identity renegotiation and the acknowledgement of one's place in the existing systems of privilege and power.

Thus, it is important that we approach student autobiographies from an intersectional standpoint, bringing in the multiple and intersecting elements of their identities and asking for exploration as to how these identities merge and change over time.[69] For example, if we are approaching narrative from the perspective of examining why a topic such as the existence of racism is not controversial, we may want to pair theoretical readings on whiteness and privilege with narrative prompts, asking questions such as (1) when was the first time you realized race was significant? (2) in what ways did race impact your family when you were growing up? (3) in what ways did your family influence your current views on race? and (4) how did the community in which you grew up influence your views on race? In terms of an intersectional approach, we also want students to explore the ways in which their views on race have (or have not) changed and how their socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, religion, and native language—just to name a few—have impacted their views on race and vice versa.

We have also found it useful to leverage students' oppressed identities to open up the communication pathway to their dominant identities. For example, our students are largely white females, as is typical in teacher preparation programs in America,[70] so beginning the conversation with sexism before bridging the intersectional gap to racism can help students understand the complexities of identity, privilege, and oppression. These prompts can take place over the course of a unit or semester, depending on class time, in an effort to have students truly explore the impact of

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67. Ibid., 354.

68. Terwilliger, "Mapping Stories."

69. Lynn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Oxford University, 2009).

70. DiAngelo & Sensoy, "'OK, Now I Get It!"; Nieto and Bode, *Affirming Diversity*.

race on their personal lives. Through these in-depth explorations, along with carefully chosen readings and class discussions, students who may have been more reticent may begin to understand how privilege can be unrecognized and unacknowledged.[71]

Practice with the intersectional sociological autobiography can also assist in asking students to step into the shoes of another, a vital second step to this process of understanding what is controversial and why. Once students write their autobiographies, bringing in their multiple and intersecting identities, then we can move them into activities that incorporate Mills' sociological imagination,[72] writing and thinking from the perspective of someone with identities different from their own. Kebede describes this in more detail in the following quotation:

> sociological imagination involves the ability to move between sociological consciousness and other forms of cultural and social viewpoints. Such a view under-scores the idea that the possessor of sociological imagination can be engaged in "double hermeneutics" (Giddens 1984): one can make a good interpretation of how individuals make sense of their social world.[73]

Dandeneau argued that the sociological imagination is not philosophy but is critical theory.[74] This may be true, but it can provide a means for a philosophical understanding of what is controversial and what is not based upon the self-recognition of whether a student's viewpoints are rational. Once a student has the rational capacity to determine whether a particular issue is controversial or not, they can then apply this fundamental skill to modern questions. Thinking about the question of the existence of racism, for instance, the student must first understand that racism is as much a modern phenomena as it is a historical one. Personal narrative can then be paired with activities incorporating the sociological imagination, one event can be explored from the perspective of another in a way that helps enlighten an individual to the social, cultural, and historical forces at work. Once a student has written a personal narrative, we, as professors, can create individual assignments for a student to explore an event from another perspective. As an example, one former student wrote about her high-school prom, where Black students and white students still had separate dances. The general gist of the narrative was that this was not an issue because this was the way the town had always been—"a live and let live" mentality. Yet having her explore this same topic from another perspective helped her to realize that this viewpoint was held more by the white students than the African American students. She conducted research on the town's racialized history; spoke with individuals from varying racial, gendered, and socioeconomic backgrounds in the town; and wrote a new narrative based upon her discoveries.

The point, though, is that we, as educators, may understand that an issue such as the existence of racism is not controversial. As professors, we must help our students understand not only that everyone should have equal and equitable resources and the same rights and privileges, to which they do not object, but also how their unacknowledged privileges and biases prevent them from a comprehensive understanding of what that looks like. Students will often profess a commitment to equality while simultaneously espousing support for programs and policies that oppress others; they do so because they have not engaged in both critical self and social reflection. Yet,

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71. McIntosh, "White Privilege."

72. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

73. Kebede, "Practicing Sociological Imagination," 354.

74. Steven P. Dandeneau, "Sisyphus Had It Easy: Reflections of Two Decades of Teaching the Sociological Imagination," *Teaching Sociology*, 37(1) (2009): 8-19.

when some of our students do see issues such this as controversial, we have to meet them where they are in an effort to move the class forward. In doing so, we have to remember that knowledge is always politically and socially constructed and influenced, and power plays a large and undeniable role in knowledge production.[75] Students may see issues of racism as controversial because they are typically presented this way in school, in the media, and in other mainstream forms of communication. While our students would categorically deny being racist, they fail to see that their uncritical participation in perpetuating dominant ideologies maintains status quo racist practices. In teaching future educators, we want them to understand that there is no neutral option that ignoring or denying the racial dimensions of issues is, in fact, racist and that the examination of this topic is not controversial. We want them to understand that issues, such as the existence of racism, are more complex than the simplistic portrayals they have been previously exposed to so that they can move into their own classroom with the ability to teach in a directive manner on these topics. We also want our future educators to enter their classrooms with the confidence to counter an example such as the one above with action—to understand not only that a segregated prom is not an acceptable approach for a high school to take and to take steps to change such inequities but to also see how this is merely one example of a wider system of privilege and oppression to which we are all subject. We skip a step, however, if we do not acknowledge that many undergraduates do not understand controversy as it relates to rationalism, and to teach in a directive manner on these topics when students are not open to this can defeat the very purpose of this approach. We hope that our students will take this knowledge, as well, into their own future classrooms to help them better understand and value the backgrounds of their students.

Conclusion

Our experiences teaching at an institution with largely monocultural students means that quotations from students like the one at the beginning of this paper are, unfortunately, not rare for us. This also means, as we noted previously, that asking students to recognize that their opinions are not rational and teaching them to understand what a controversy consists of and how to advocate on behalf of their future students in regard to controversial issues are difficult—this is a process requiring much care and time on behalf of the professor, as it can take significant time to convince some students that anti-racism, for example, is not "bigoted bullshit" when such knowledge has been ingrained in them throughout their lives.

Self-reflection prior to, during, and after discussion, along with thoughtful reading, discussion of theory, and the construction of a sociological autobiography, allows students to come to recognize the irrationality of their beliefs, we hope, in a manner that is not throwing them into the lion's den, so to speak. This is made even more difficult when institutional structures do not support such processes. hooks noted, "our institutions are conservative and they confine our voices and our imaginations more than we know. Unwittingly, we become our own gatekeepers, representatives of an institution, and not devotees to the sacred world of the imagination. We censor ourselves. We bring an aura of death into the classroom."[76] In an effort to bring the classroom back to life and to attempt to show these future educators how to bring life into *their* future classrooms, it is our duty to find a theoretical, philosophical, and pedagogical approach to our Social Foundations of Education courses that can help them on this journey. We see this as achievable through a

75. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, & Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs*, 38(4) (2013): 785-810.
76. hooks, *Teaching Community*, 169-170.

pedagogy of controversy. As stated throughout this paper, though, this type of pedagogy involves struggle. After all, as hooks argued:

> The quest for knowledge that enables us to unite theory and practice is one such passion, which has to be fundamentally rooted in a love for ideas we are able to inspire, the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears. In many ways this is frightening.[77]

While it is frightening, it is a necessary journey for teacher preparation programs to make. In this manner, we can work with our future educators to ensure that they approach their classrooms utilizing pedagogies of controversy—they should learn to love their students enough to wade through the "bullshit" and help their own students become critical, rational thinkers.