

# On Teaching Controversy

*The role of lively debate in the classroom*

## The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools

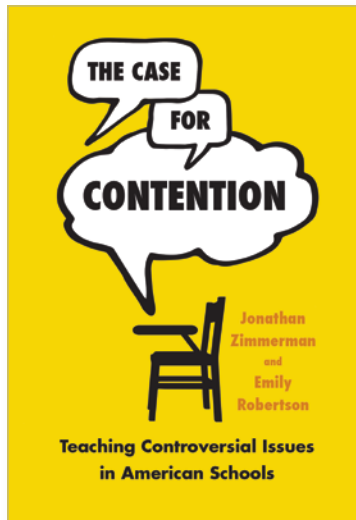
by Jonathan Zimmerman and  
Emily Robertson

*The University of Chicago Press, 2017,  
\$22.50 (paper), \$68 (cloth); 144 pages.*

*As reviewed by David Steiner*

*A people who mean to be their own  
Governors must arm themselves with  
the power which knowledge gives.*

—James Madison (1822)



In Immanuel Kant’s famous essay, “What Is Enlightenment?” the 18th-century philosopher challenged Western societies to display some courage and “dare to know.” Kant and his contemporaries took it as fundamental that a dedication to understanding, to unfettered empirical inquiry, and to moral reasoning would become the engine of human education and advancement. The so-called Enlightenment Project persisted throughout much of the 20th century; in the 1980s and ’90s, social theorists still maintained that respectful open dialogue on foundational matters would advance truth and strengthen democracy.

In regard to the American public-school classroom, Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson, authors of *The Case for Contention*, place themselves squarely in this tradition:

Discussion of controversial issues helps students develop an array of skills and dispositions embodying the ability to formulate and evaluate arguments, thus fostering their capacities for rational thought and action. . . . Leading students in discussion of controversial issues can be regarded as *essential* to effective and efficient education.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is a rapid romp through the

history of the teaching of controversies in American education. Here, the basic lesson is that such teaching has always been difficult—constrained by political forces, legal challenges, parental objections, limited class time, and understandably hesitant teachers who are ill-prepared for the complex task of teaching divisive issues.

Among these pressures, it is perhaps the courts that have done the most to limit teachers’ willingness to take risks. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court’s finding in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) that “it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate,” the court would later hold in *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006) that teachers’ speech is part of their work for their employers—the public school board—and thus belongs to the board. Post-*Garcetti*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit found that “the school system does not ‘regulate’ teachers’ speech as much as it hires that speech.” Zimmerman and Robertson approvingly cite the “stirring dissent” by Colorado judge Gregory Hobbs: “When we strip teachers of their professional judgment, we forfeit the educational

vitality we prize. . . . When we quell controversy for the sake of congeniality, we deprive democracy of its mentors.”

The book’s historical survey has its arresting moments. I didn’t know that Horace Mann, as he worked to magnify the reach of public education, was intolerant of introducing controversial subjects in the classroom: “If the day ever arrives when the school room shall become a cauldron for the fermentation of all the hot and virulent opinions, in politics and religion, that now agitate our community, that day the fate of our glorious public school system will be sealed, and speedy ruin will overwhelm it.” We surely owe to such sentiments the often-tame quality of so many textbooks and curricula in the United States. But the history summary is too brief to be systematic: it may be important, for instance, that in a 1953 survey, Ohio teachers reported “teaching the controversies over the federal take-over of the Steel Mills, the Firing of General Douglas MacArthur, and the use of the Atomic Bomb,” but the reader cannot judge if this instruction was unusual, or geographically limited, or widespread across the nation. At best, this part of the book offers general support for the authors’ claim that “we simply do not trust our teachers to engage students on controversial issues in a knowledgeable and sensitive manner.”

The second part of the book attempts to define what that trust could mean if we took it more seriously. What constitutes a controversy worth teaching, and how should educators approach teaching it? Here, we find the book’s principal contribution: to argue for a distinction between topics on which strong disagreements divide the public but “expert” opinion is largely settled, and those on which both public and experts’ judgments diverge. Regarding the former kind of issue (evolution and global

warming are offered as examples), the authors argue that teachers should not remain neutral but rather teach specific respect for expert judgments and general respect for the expert “epistemologies” that support those judgments:

When the controversy is one between experts and portions of the public, the teacher . . . has an obligation to let the students know the settled judgment of those qualified to investigate the issue.

In regard to topics where neither experts nor the public have reached consensus, the authors “agree that it is important for teachers to ‘teach the controversy’ rather than directing students toward a particular conclusion.” They go further, suggesting that “parents may legitimately ask that the schools represent their side of the issue.”

So for issues such as abortion, the assumption is that teachers would need to take on the role of neutral discussion facilitator. It is striking, however, that abortion is mentioned only twice in the whole book and is not the subject of direct discussion. The death penalty

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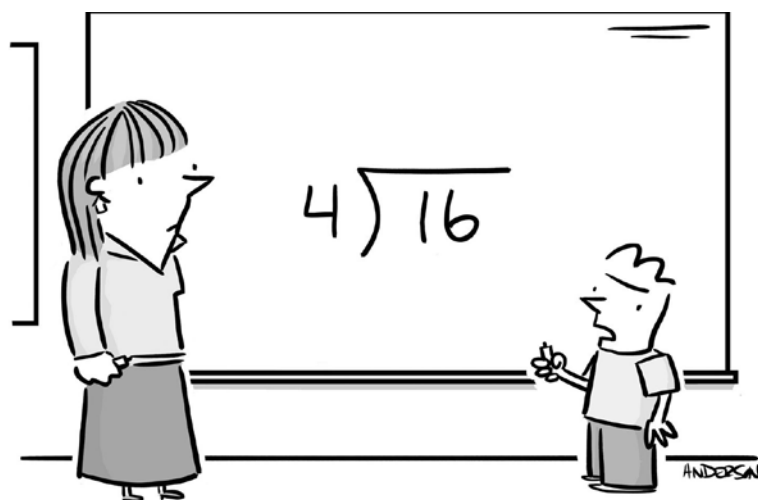
is referred to once, with no analysis. In short, the book is light on discussion of some of the most obviously controversial ethical issues of our time. Moreover, the authors punt even on issues they do address: on white privilege, we are told that the issue of whether “the concept

of white privilege [should] be taught in schools . . . may itself be a maximally controversial question.” Note their use of the word “may” and the fact that the question is left unanswered. In general, if the issue is judged by teachers to be too “hot” in their particular communities, the authors conclude that “avoidance could be a reasonable strategy.”

The endless raising of unanswered questions, the vague explanations of what makes an issue “maximally controversial” (who exactly gets to decide how much intra-expert disagreement gives an issue that standing?), and the generally anodyne quality of many of the conclusions (“We acknowledge . . . that deciding how to classify a given issue can sometimes be difficult”) combine to leave the reader feeling undernourished by both the theoretical and the practical content that is served up.

There is a sense, however, of worrying about deck chairs on the *Titanic*. Recent measures of academic achievement in the United States suggest that the Enlightenment Project is in trouble: our high-school students’ performance is largely unchanged since the 1990s, and students in many other countries have leapfrogged over them. According to a 2013 analysis by Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg of Tufts University, teaching the controversies does indeed appear to increase students’ civic knowledge; perhaps such discussions allow teachers to raise the energy level in the classroom and thus better capture the attention of students. But ours is an age in which teachers are expected to teach critical thinking *about* nothing in particular. It is tough to “dare to know” when any canonical knowledge itself is disdained. Teaching the controversies may indeed be one important way in which to engage students with knowledge. Any contribution to that end is most welcome.

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“We’ve been dividing all week! When do we get to conquer?!”