

tion that their station and contributions deserve. Only by such a program can we produce powerful defenders of de-

mocracy. Upon such a program does the humanity and freedom of the world depend.

Place of Controversial Issues in Teacher Education

AGNES SNYDER

Questions as to the what, when and how of controversial issues are discussed by Agnes Snyder, chairman, Department of Education, Adelphi College, Garden City, New York.

THERE is no escaping controversial issues. Great and small, major and minor, they fill all our days. To attempt to keep the controversial out of the classroom would be nothing more than a weak surrender to the ivory tower. This is particularly true in the education of teachers. The school can play its role in influencing social change only as teachers are not merely aware of the currents and cross-currents of their culture but have thought through clearly their own position where controversy exists and are prepared to act in accordance with their convictions. Any sound teacher education program must accordingly be deeply imbedded in the problems of society. These are by their very nature, always controversial.

Innumerable questions cluster around the treatment of controversial issues in the classroom—questions of what, when and how. The following brief answers to these questions state the position to be developed in this paper:

- *What:* All issues which are or can become real to the learner and for which he has the maturity to deal

with such adequacy as is satisfying to him.

- *When:* Continuously in the context of the total program.
- *How:* With the utmost skill possible, considering the maturity level of the student, in the use of the scientific method; with application of the principle of the integration of thought, feeling and action as basic to sound behavior.

The discussion that follows will be limited to the above questions as they pertain to the education of teachers.

ALL ISSUES THAT ARE REAL TO THE LEARNER

What? Assuming the usual college age of from approximately seventeen to twenty-two for most students preparing to be teachers, the normal developmental tasks of this age are natural stepping stones to consideration of the most profound of the many controversial issues of today. The urge to realize themselves as individuals in their own right, to establish their independence, to find a mate, to develop their own personal

value base inevitably leads young adults into conflict situations. The interest of a daughter, for example, in a man of different national, economic, or religious background often precipitates family conflicts that lead to an almost overpowering demand to understand the reasons behind the differences in attitude.

Approaching adulthood, too, almost universally brings with it questionings of family mores and beliefs. Problems of sex, family relations, religion, politics, are areas of perennial controversy to which each man must ultimately find his answers himself. But it is the due of any young person to find in his college career the guidance that will help him find the answers that are satisfying to him. Were we to give genuine recognition to the developmental tasks of college-age students as determinants of the curriculum, those areas in which controversy is dominant would form the core of the curriculum.

The controversy of the moment is often the best point of departure in the classroom approach to areas of controversy. With the individual counselor, however, the more personal problems within these areas ordinarily take precedence. A too personal approach in the classroom violates the privacy of the young adult and gives him the feeling that he is not quite getting solid college stuff. But, if there is a combination of the personal in the individual setting and the more general approach in the classroom setting, then we get a gradual identification by the student of his personal conflicts with those on a world basis. Unless there is such an identification, interest in the broader issues remains merely academic.

Questions of Religion and Politics

Today, for example, we are acutely aware, perhaps more than for many decades, of the problem of the relation of church and state. This problem affects the student of education particularly because of the highly controversial issues that have developed around the question of federal aid to education. From the consideration of such a specific problem the inquiry under skillful guidance will be pushed deeper into the historic development of the American approach to the relation of church and state as against the prevailing European approach, and from this to the meaning of spiritual values, to deism, theism, humanism, and thus into areas of deep personal concern to the student.

In the realm of politics, the burning controversial issues today of whether or not Communists should be permitted to teach, of loyalty oaths, should be faced squarely. From these there naturally results a pushing down into an understanding of the many isms that prevail today, of the conflicts in ideologies, and of the psychological situations that give rise to such conflicts. In the meantime, the student concerned perhaps with his own rebellious feeling against the political conservatism of his father is helped in establishing a base for political decisions. The teacher needs to be aware both of the universal drives of the maturity level of students, of the specific individual needs of his students, and of the crucial issues of his time. Then there can be the shuttling back and forth between individual counselling and classroom teaching that gives the best assurance that the real needs of students are being met.

There is no issue that can be considered too dangerous to be handled in a classroom. The students at college have reached the age when only a courageous look at what is—at reality—can be satisfying. Certainly the realization of the supreme function of education as the search for truth wherever it may lead demands that those preparing to teach should never have blinders put upon their eyes.

CONTINUOUSLY IN CONTEXT OF THE TOTAL PROGRAM

When? Dealing with controversial issues separately and apart from the total curriculum is seldom effective. The current events period, for example, is part of that era of sharp departmentalization of subject fields which has rarely served the student in the integration of his experiences into wholeness of outlook. Dealing with controversial issues effectively demands, on the contrary, that they be considered within the total context of the curriculum. To do this, it is necessary that the curriculum, as was implied in what was said earlier, be based not upon subject matter as an end but upon the problems of living as a continuous and branching stream of inquiry. The selection of those problems should be made in terms of their representing the "unfinished business" one generation passes on to another.

Areas of Unfinished Business

A faculty analyzing the social scene from this point of view will map out in advance those areas of living which hold the most urgent phases of the "unfinished business," the burden of which the oncoming generation must assume. To illustrate:

- World War II has left a housing problem the solution of which will require more than one generation. Whole cities in rubble will take a long time to rebuild, to say nothing of the disrepair into which many of our own houses have fallen and the acute housing shortage here. How can rebuilding be carried forward so as to make for better living conditions?
- World War II brought spectacular advances in new drugs and the treatment of disease. How can the use of these drugs be secured for more people who may have need of them?
- "Point IV" provides for the development of the underdeveloped areas of the world. How can young people be helped to see the vision in this provision? How can the task be accomplished without exploitation of native population?
- The divorce rate continues to increase, as does crime. What understandings can be given that will turn this tide?
- Neither World War I nor World War II has realized its dreams, its aims. What can be done to prevent another war?

Such problems as these can be multiplied almost endlessly. Each one is fraught with controversy. A curriculum based on such problems will bring the controversies out in their natural settings. The time to deal with them is as they occur in a curriculum carefully planned to meet the needs of the present and the future.

How deeply should we go in handling controversial issues? How widely should we try to stretch the horizon of the thinking of students? There is no definitive answer to these questions. Individ-

ual differences both in ability and in interest must determine the answer. It is certainly true that one could spend a lifetime on the study of any one issue. The study of any one problem will always leave unanswered questions. College should mean to a large extent the raising of the questions which will form the basis of a lifetime of study. If it means this, then there will be frequent referral in the study of a new problem to questions left unanswered in the study of an earlier problem. It is part of the art of teaching to know when any matter may be dropped temporarily and when picked up again.

WITH SKILL, INTEGRATION AND USE OF THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

How? In dealing with controversial issues the "how" is quite as important as the "what." The students are often impressed by a teacher whose brilliance of presentation sweeps their thinking along with his. Aware of the paucity of their own background, they listen in admiration to the knowledge of the teacher as he pours forth fact upon fact, argument upon argument. There is often a fine stimulation in such a performance and the student who is already avid for knowledge will occasionally follow such a lecture by attempting to pursue the thought further. Groups of students, too, have some of their best college experiences in informal discussion after a class with a stimulating teacher. But, on the whole, such teaching is of relatively small value compared with the kind of teaching that leads a student toward the precise definition of a problem, sends him off on a search for relevant data, helps him to organize the data and draw conclu-

sions from them, and finally test the conclusions in action. The kernel of the method in dealing with controversial issues is that search for truth which once generated in the minds of men finds infinite satisfaction in the gradually deepening insight as the quest goes on.

Scientific Method in the Classroom

It is not easy to apply the scientific method to controversial issues. Indeed, it is not easy to apply it at all. We have been too prone in the past to leave the acquisition of skill in the use of the scientific method to chance. Even to learn to define a problem with precision is no small job. As for the rest of the process—the painstaking search for facts, the organization and interpretation of facts, the weighing of their value one against another, the drawing of salient conclusions, the testing of the conclusions in terms of reality—each step requires those higher thought processes which represent the best in human intelligence. They all need to be taught, and they can be learned.

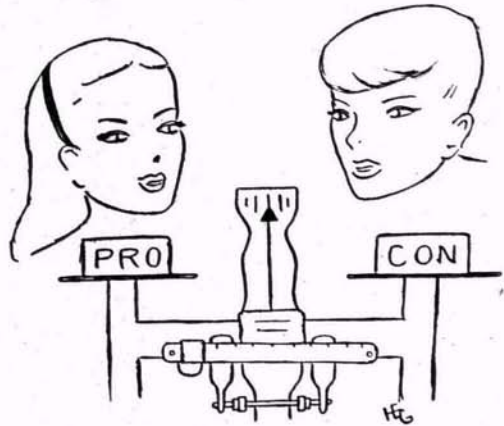
Of course, in a simple way this process should be begun in the early grades in the elementary school. Not until it is well it become a part of the fabric of living of our people. Unless we make this process the usual instead of the exceptional characteristic of our classroom method, dealing with controversial issues degenerates into mere susceptibility to the greater knowledge and more able thinking of the teacher—in short the most effective kind of preparation not for democracy but for dictatorship.

A classroom dominated by the scientific method may often seem a rather subdued place. There are frequent long

pauses of perfect quiet at times when thinking is happening. There may be occasional flashes of excitement at the birth of a new idea but, on the whole, the process is marked not by the passion of excitement but by the far more potent passion of the compressed essence of ideas in the making.

There is feeling in the process. Those who have even in a little way experienced moments when insight deepens and vision widens have realized perhaps the most finely-tempered of all human emotions. Out of such moments if they are genuine, comes an irrepressible desire for action. When one *feels* that he *knows*, he must *act*. Then we have that union of feeling, thinking and action which gives the human being the security within himself which in turn stimulates confidence of others in him.

Should we encourage students to act in controversial issues? Most certainly we should. Part of the responsibility of the college teacher is to help the student find those criteria by which he himself can choose the most effective avenues for his action. We had a sad spectacle in the '30's of young college people aghast at the world of frustration in which they found themselves, seizing at straws, lining themselves up with this organization and that. Many of them today have had careers blighted



because of errors of judgment in aligning themselves with groups since labeled subversive. These young people might have been saved much later grief if college classrooms at this time had taken greater responsibility in the examination of the problems of the time and subjected them to mature scientific analysis.

It is the role of the teacher never to discourage action and put a premium upon neutrality. This applies to his own life as well as to his attitude toward students. But equally it is not the role of the teacher to indicate the action that a student should take. If a teacher is imbued with the scientific spirit himself and makes the quest for truth his dominating goal, he will never deliberately indoctrinate.

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