Tackling controversial issues: Balance and integrity

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Editorial Note

JALT Publications aim to encourage academic exchange and debate on a large range of issues concerning language education in Japan in order to foster a multidimensional approach to furthering the knowledgebase and practices of professionals working within the Japanese ESL/EFL context. The diversity of publications under the JALT banner, including SIG publications, reflects the interests and experience of our membership working together to form communities of practice. The editors of JALT publications select well-written, well-researched articles that will contribute to knowledge in the field. The editors do not necessarily agree with the views of the author(s) of any particular papers selected for publication.

Through discussion and debate oriented classes students can further develop their critical thinking and language skills by dealing with controversial issues. However, when we introduce an issue close to our hearts, we may be tempted to promote our favorite side of the issue at the expense of academic integrity and balance. Fortunately the matter of how to deal with controversial issues in an educational setting has received a great deal of attention from educational policy makers in various parts of the world. Some offer specific guidelines on how to approach controversial issues in the classroom while maintaining and indeed, advancing, commonly accepted principles and practices with regard to the ethos of academic inquiry. However, for certain interest groups related to EFL this academic ethos appears to be more the exception than the norm.

　ディスカッションやディベートに基づくクラスにおいて、論争を引き起こす問題を扱うことにより学生は批判的思考や言語能力をさらに向上させることができる。しかし、教員が自分にとって感情的になりやすい問題を教材に用いると、学問的な統合性やバランスを犠牲にしても問題の自分の好む側を助長させたくなることがある。幸いにも、教育現場における論争を引き起こす問題の扱い方は世界中の教育指針の作成者から多大な注目を浴びている。ある作成者は、教員が学術研究の観点から一般的に受け入れられている原則や慣習を維持、さらに発展させながら、教室においてどのように論争を引き起こす問題に対応していけばよいのかについての特別な指針を挙げている。しかしながら、興味関心をともにするEFLに関連するあるグループにとってこの問題はあまり重要視されていない。

Controversial content has long been associated with EFL. One reason for this has to do with the inherent multidimensionality of controversial issues. Crick (1998), in a report commissioned by British educational policy makers, dealt explicitly with the role of controversial issues in the classroom, defining them thus:

> A controversial issue is an issue about which there is no one fixed or universally held point of view. Such issues are those which commonly divide society and for which significant groups offer conflicting explanations and solutions. There may, for example, be conflicting views on such matters as how a problem has arisen and who is to blame; over how the problem may be resolved; over what principles should guide the decisions that can be taken, and so on. (p. 56)

This multidimensionality can help foster lively interaction among learners, thereby creating fertile ground for language practice and development. In addition, this can help facilitate the development of critical thinking and independent thinking among learners, both of which are consistent with the open-ended ethos of academic inquiry and academic integrity. With controversial issues, however, there is also the risk of educators ignoring the multidimensionality of a controversial issue and instead siding with and championing a particular view of the issue over other conflicting viewpoints. That is, instead of fairly *examining* the various sides of the ongoing public debate over the issue, the educator chooses to *enter into* the public debate on one side or the other, using the classroom as the venue for what is thus primarily a political exercise. In essence, this amounts to the educator *teaching* their personal political position on any given issue to

learners, necessarily invoking concerns regarding the ethos of academic inquiry. This paper will seek to explicate ways of dealing with controversial issues that are consistent with the ethos of open-ended academic inquiry, from a variety of sources, and at the same time offer relevant examples of materials and explanations that appear to focus on promoting particular viewpoints of controversial issues instead.

Taking a multidimensional approach to controversial issues

Explanations of ways of dealing with controversial issues in a multidimensional way in an academic setting have been spelled out in a number of different areas such as Education for Citizenship and Global Education. For example, the Citizenship Foundation <www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/index.php> in Britain makes the point that teachers need to make a clear distinction between their role as private citizens and their role as public educators and not to conflate the two, especially when dealing with controversial issues; the Crick (1998) report spells out specific guidelines for teachers; and Global Education places great emphasis on the need to understand empathically the many perspectives that constitute any given controversial global issue.

Citizenship Foundation

According to the Citizenship Foundation, in order "to avoid unfairly influencing pupils...it is important for teachers to distinguish their role as *private citizens* from their role as *public educators,"* and

> …it is important for them to distinguish between *private* and *public* values. There are many different

communities in society, each with its own set of values. But a distinction is to be made between 'non-public' communities, membership of which is voluntary, and the larger 'public' or 'civic' community, to which all citizens belong simply by virtue of common citizenship. This difference allows a distinction to be made between the values that may legitimately be taught in schools – indeed, which schools have a duty to teach – and those that are more properly the province of the home, particular interests groups and religious or political parties. Thus, although teachers have no legal right to promote their own personal opinions in school, they may quite legitimately condemn and prohibit injustices which contravene our community values, such as racism and human rights abuse's wherever they take place. Teachers who, regardless of the law, feel they have a moral obligation to promote their personal views in school must be prepared to take the consequences. Where someone finds the moral stance they take on an issue is incompatible with their obligations as a teacher, they may wish to consider resignation. <www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?109>

Crick report

The Crick (1998) report specifically highlights Section 407 of the British Education Act, 1996, which legally "requires teachers to take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to pupils' attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views" (p. 56).

The lawmakers' concerns are rooted in the imbalance of power in the classroom between teacher and learner, and the inappropriateness of using the classroom to attempt to persuade learners to adopt the teacher's personal perspective of a controversial issue that the host society is evidently divided over. Such factors can easily work against the commonly pursued academic interest of encouraging learners to conduct an open-ended inquiry into controversial issues, and having done so, to let them make up their own minds about them. Still, some educators seem to be unaware that advocating their political positions in the classroom treats learners unfairly and can be counterproductive in terms of fostering independent and critical thinking on issues. For that reason, the Crick (1998) report sought to generate specific guidelines for educators on the treatment of controversial issues in the classroom, stating that "…good practice will always seek to provide assurance that the risk of bias is avoided by making sure that every aspect of an issue is examined fairly and thoroughly…" (p. 60).

In addition,

> To avoid bias, teachers should resist any inclination to:
>
> - Highlight a particular selection of facts or items of evidence thereby giving them a greater importance than other equally relevant information;
>
> - Present information as if it is not open to alternative interpretation or qualification or contradiction;

- Set themselves up as the sole authority not only on matters of 'fact' but also on matters of opinion;

- Present opinions and other value judgements as if they are facts;

- Give their own account of the views of others instead of using the actual claims and assertions as expressed by various interest groups themselves;

- Reveal their own preferences by facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.;

- Imply preferences by a particular choice of respondents or by not opening up opportunities for all pupils to contribute their views to a discussion;

- Neglect challenging a consensus of opinion which emerges too readily. (p. 58)

Likewise, to help advance students' critical thinking abilities, the report suggests that

> The most effective way to address these…concerns will be to adopt teaching strategies which place as a priority the objective of equipping pupils with an understanding and an ability to recognise bias, an ability to recognise and evaluate argument, an ability to weigh evidence put before them, and to look for alternative interpretations, viewpoints and sources of evidence. (Crick, 1998, p. 59)

Global Education

Global Education offers a similar explanation, making use of the distinction between substantive content and perceptual content. Elsie Begler (1993), a Global Education teacher-trainer from the International Studies Education Project at San Diego State University, tells us that "The first point, then, is that the *content* of Global Education is perceptual (or attitudinal) as well as substantive" (p. 15). As illustrated below, these two strands combine to form the content of Global Education, which aims to provide an overall account of the different perspectives that constitute the particular issue at hand.
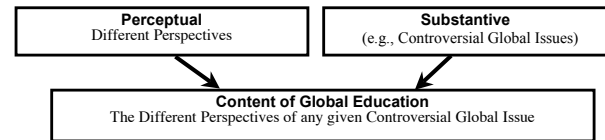

Figure 1. The content of global education

Global Education specialists Ann Kelleher and Laura Klein (2005), from Pacific Lutheran University, point out that

> An aware citizenry must know not only the reasons why events happen but also why people disagree so intensely over how to interpret and respond to them. The answer lies in perspectives; that is, the set of interrelated principles, worldviews, and values that people use to determine what actions should be taken. About any given issue there are several perspectives that can reasonably be used to diagnose the problem and decide what to do. If only one perspective had validity, the problem would not be an ongoing issue. This insight—that

different people can honestly, intensely disagree based on valid but opposing principles—explains why issues seem to have a life of their own and go on and on…Learning about alternative perspectives enables a person to understand why fierce debates and conflicts can occur. Therefore, understanding world events means knowing what perspectives are being applied. (p. xii)

McIntyre (1996) reflects these sentiments when he writes,

To be fair, and to promote development of critical thinking skills, the instructor should try to present the learners with information from as many sources as possible…For almost every social or political controversy, there is usually at least one NGO, one governmental agency, and one corporate entity active in the field. (p. 125)

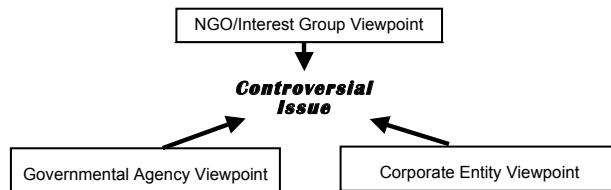This view could be represented diagrammatically thus:

Figure 2. Three possible dimensions of a controversial issue

Roland Case (1993), a Global Education teacher-trainer from Simon Fraser University, points out that

Explicating a global perspective involves specifying both the range of global phenomena to be explored (the objects) and the desired cognitive and affective lenses through which this examination is to occur. Used in this context, global perspective refers to the capacity to see the 'whole picture' whether focusing on a local or an international matter. Promoting the perceptual dimension involves nurturing perspectives that are empathic, free of stereotypes, not predicated on naïve or simplistic assumptions, or colored by prejudicial sentiments. (p. 318)

Case (1993) goes on to point out that although,

a global perspective is not value-neutral, it does not prejudge for educators or students the particular position they should adopt in contentious issues such as the merits of maintaining the current world order. The importance of open-mindedness in developing a global perspective should be self-evident. On pragmatic grounds, it is plausible to expect that we are more likely to reach sound conclusions if we are willing to consider seriously the possibility that we may be mistaken. Similarly, we are more likely to be mistaken if, instead of suspending judgment in the absence of full inquiry, we adopt a firm position on the basis of inconclusive analysis. (p. 320)

Accordingly, Case (1993) makes it clear that Global Education practitioners who base their instruction entirely around their own "worldviews may be guilty of indoctrination if they fail to encourage students to reach their own thoughtful conclusions after a *fair airing of opposing views*" (p. 320).

Similarly, Anderson (1996) writes, "Remembering that I am trying to encourage independent thought rather than fall into the trap of cheap moralizing, I struggle to encourage activities and research with all major positions represented fairly" (p. 24).

Likewise, Steven Lamy (1991), from the University of Southern California, points out the risks involved when teachers deal one-sidedly with issues that they might hold strong personal views on. "Many [Global Education practitioners] make poor teaching choices and simply present one side of an issue or design entire courses around normative goals that correspond to their worldview. This is polemics, not instruction. Advocacy-oriented educators deserve to be criticized" (p. 60).

Contrasting approaches in educational materials

It can be instructive to see samples of teaching material that illustrate the multidimensional approach outlined so far, to see the way in which they explicate the multiple dimensions, and also contrast these with material that adopts a uni-dimensional view of the same topic. For the purposes of comparison, it is helpful to focus predominantly on the same issue here—in this case, the controversy surrounding globalization.

Global perspectives: A handbook for understanding global issues

This textbook points out the absolute necessity of gaining an understanding of the various perspectives of an issue to understand it, and at the same time, how this is based on an understanding of how these different perspectives arose in the first place.

Like democracy and other often-used concepts, globalization's definition depends on the perspective of the person using it. The following discussion provides four general definitions of globalization distilled from its use by policy makers, academics, journalists and interested citizens. Since the process of globalization has ignited controversy, each of its definitions continues to attract substantial criticism. Therefore, the definitional statements are followed by an opposing argument. In this, like any other, age of transition, every trend some people think of as inevitable and dominant will engender an argument because other people identify a countertrend as better representing reality. In times of change, new and old systems of behavior and thought clash and trends collide. Intelligent people deeply disagree over the causes of current problems and which of the available alternative solutions will create a better future. (Kelleher & Klein, 2005, p. 15)

Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial global issues

This textbook provides original accounts of differing views of a number of different global issues, along with an attempt to place these different views within a larger framework.

> The readings, which represent the arguments of leading environmentalists, scientists and policymakers, reflect a variety of viewpoints…By requiring students to analyze opposing viewpoints and reach considered judgments, *Taking Sides* actively develops students' critical thinking skills. It is this development of critical thinking skills that is the ultimate purpose of each of the volumes in the widely acclaimed *Taking Sides* program. (Harf & Lombardi, 2004, back cover)

One of the issues this text deals with is globalization, and the following quote is indicative of how this is dealt with in a balanced way that treats each view fairly and empathically. "It is hard to argue that [globalization] is all positive or all negative…. The literature that will help us to understand the full scope of globalization has not yet been written" (Harf & Lombardi, 2004, p. 265).

The American forum of Global Education

The teaching material on globalization from this Global Education organization treats the issue similar to the two examples above. "Globalization is neither good nor bad. Rather, certain aspects of the complex, and multi-faceted process of globalization have impacts that can be viewed in different ways depending on the values that are at stake" (Rothenberg, 2002, <www.globaled.org/issues/index.html>).

Issues of global concern

In contrast to the multidimensional approaches to globalization shown in the materials above, the ESL/EFL textbook, *Issues of Global Concern*, has a chapter that presents only one viewpoint of globalization, and as such it is difficult to see how it could be intended to further the goals of Global Education and thus appears intent on explicitly thwarting them instead. For example, readers are told that, "Unfortunately, the direction in which globalization is leading us is not towards Utopia, but towards a world dominated by huge corporations whose only purpose is to maximize short-term profits regardless of the consequences for humanity" (Peaty, 2002, p. 69-70). Obviously, it is impossible to either prove or disprove doctrinaire statements of this nature, and thus it is unclear what purpose such statements as this were intended to serve unless it was to try and influence the views of the reader in this direction, in which case it would actually be a rather clear example of Anderson's (1996) notion of "cheap moralizing."

Treating controversial issues as uni-dimensional

Global Education specialists and teacher-trainers such as Lamy, Case, Begler, Kelleher and Klein, and also EFL teachers in Japan with an interest in Global Education and global issues in EFL such as McIntyre and Anderson seem to speak with one voice in pointing out the necessity of taking a multidimensional approach to controversial issues in order to meet the objective of helping learners to be able to take an overall global perspective on any given issue and in the process, further their critical and independent thinking. Nevertheless, some educators, some of whom even publicly

lay claim to being Global Educators, approach controversial issues in a way that seems to better fit the description of what Lamy (1991) says deserves to be criticized, and Anderson (1996) describes as "the trap of cheap moralizing" (p. 24).

For example, Brown (2004) at first appears to take an approach to controversial issues that is consistent with the multidimensional approach outlined above when he writes, "Can English language teachers facilitate the formation of classroom communities of learners who critically examine moral, ethical and political issues surrounding them, and do so sensitively, without pushing a personal subversive agenda?" (p. 24). However, his affinity for doing just that became self-evident when he encouraged attendees at a forum at JALT2004 to actually "push the agenda" in their classrooms, repeatedly making the politically partisan nature of the agenda he had in mind (pro-liberal, anti-conservative) unmistakable to all in attendance.

In a similar vein, it is difficult to know quite what to make of Peaty's (2004) response to an article by Sargent (2004), which dealt with the issue of advocacy in EFL and employed Lamy's (1991) usage of the term, meaning to "simply present one side of an issue or design entire courses around normative goals that correspond to their worldview" (p. 60). Peaty's (2004) response was to state unequivocally that when it comes to advocacy in the classroom, "we need more of it not less" (p. 18).

Cooney (2003) describes teaching English to students to "raise their global literacy and empower them as global citizens" (p. 4) making it clear that one such use of English she has in mind for empowered global citizens is to use it as "the global language of resistance to the dominant world view,

challenging the established powers" (p. 4). Once again, this equates taking a specific political stance with the taking of a global perspective, even though Global Education specialists acknowledge that a global perspective necessarily includes the various perspectives that make up any given issue.

In the *Global Issues in Language Education Newsletter* (Issue #53, April 2004, p. 12) we can read,

> The Olympics were established to further world peace and international friendship by bringing youth from around the world together for two weeks every 4 years. Despite this lofty goal, it can be pretty frustrating for global educators to watch the intense competition, blatant nationalism, medal counting, commercialism and 'us vs them' mentality that still characterizes much of the Olympics.

The anonymous author here appears to be erroneously conflating specific policy positions, such as anti-competition, anti-nationalism, anti-medal counting and anti-commercialism with being a Global Educator. However, a great number of people in the world take the opposite view on each one of these policy positions and thus it would seem rather obvious from all that has been stated above from Global Education specialists that to promote a global perspective on any issue, such as the Olympics, one needs to be able to see empathically and fairly the various differing viewpoints, rather than adopt the kind of prescriptive approach evident here. Are *Global Educators* supposed to be promoting these particular views of the Olympics? Is the measure of how much of a *Global Citizen* a student has become in such a classroom, the degree to which he or she

reflects these viewpoints as well? Why should a bona fide global educator be frustrated by the presence of these values in the Olympic Games or anywhere else, unless he or she is just personally opposed to them? And if that is the case, and the *educator* is promoting such opposition in the classroom (perhaps under the guise of Global Education), then he or she is primarily being a political operative, something that Global Education specialists and other professional educators routinely denounce.

While there is no doubt that no inherent contradiction exists between being a global educator and personally taking any of these positions, there is also no inherent contradiction between being a global educator and personally taking opposite positions. The point that Global Education specialists and others painstaking point out is that one's personal positions are irrelevant in terms of whether one is applying the ethos of Global Education or not. The only relevant issue for Global Education is whether one is able to make a clear distinction between one's private values and the appropriate public values and is able to only bring the public values into the classroom—values that uphold academic integrity by requiring a fair and balanced representation of opposing views of any given issue.

Conclusion

In the absence of specific guidelines on the treatment of controversial issues in EFL, there are EFL educators—at times even describing themselves as *global educators*—who are publicly promoting an approach that calls for advocating one particular view of a multidimensional issue in the classroom. While such politicking is to be expected and

indeed encouraged in public life in democratic societies, this is invariably not the case when it comes to classrooms in such societies. There, controversial issues can be usefully employed to help learners practice how to take an unprejudiced and even-handed approach to any given issue in the interests of furthering academic inquiry. The task for the teacher is to be able to model this and offer education on this process, not to take advantage of the *captive audience* and power differential that exist in the classroom.

Concern should be raised then, when it comes to rationalizations for a uni-dimensional approach to controversial issues, largely because of what this can (and does) mean for those learners who unwittingly end up in a classroom where the teacher has a prescribed political agenda regarding the outcome of the *learning* that they plan to take place in the class. At worst, learners will be seen as potential converts to whatever position the teacher is advocating, or whatever agenda the teacher is promoting, and have their learning considered in this light. At best, this simply represents a missed opportunity to examine the skills and ethos that go with exploring the reasons for the disagreement that surrounds any given controversial issue, by learning how to temporarily set aside one's own prejudgments and approach such issues with an open mind.

As we have seen, many educational entities, and in fact lawmakers in the case of Britain, have sought to promote guidelines that can help ensure that learners are provided with opportunities to explore the diverse, yet valid views that are both reasonably and responsibly held by different, yet sensible and intelligent people who happen to disagree over controversial issues, in a way that encourages, rather

than discourages open-mindedness. The purpose of such guidelines and the criticism of a uni-dimensional approach by Global Education specialists exist for a specific reason. The intention is to try and discourage (or prevent, in the case of British educational law) teachers from taking a uni-dimensional approach and encourage (or ensure) they take a multidimensional approach instead.

It would appear then, that in the eyes of Global Education specialists and others that the uni-dimensional approach is no more of a reasonable and acceptable alternative to the multidimensional approach than racism is a reasonable and acceptable alternative to anti-racism. Thus, for the very same reasons that education professionals have a right, and indeed a duty, to oppose such injustices as racism in the classroom, we also have a duty to publicly oppose the unjust promotion of a uni-dimensional approach to controversial issues in the classroom. Yet, for some inexplicable reason JALT, an association of professionals, through its publications and venues openly condones and abets this very injustice by giving voice to those who advocate uni-dimensionalism with regard to controversial content in the EFL classroom. Clearly, the current situation and absence of guidelines on the treatment of controversial issues in the EFL classroom is not in the best interests of learners. It is a sad irony that the kind of injustice they face is, at times, being perpetuated in the name of Global Education, for Global Education unequivocally stands for the very opposite.

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