Controversy in the Classroom: 
The Democratic Power of Discussion

by Diana E Hess
New York: Routledge, 2009. 197 pages

reviewed by Andrew J Petto

Anyone involved in promoting evolution in education knows that evolution remains socially and politically controversial—despite the fact that the relevant sciences have long ago reached a consensus that evolutionary models provide the best framework both for understanding the history and diversity of life on earth and for generating interesting and productive research questions in fields from agriculture to zoogeography. Too often, however, the scientific community has failed to engage the sociocultural and political environment in which scientific models should be applied (for example, Lewis 2009), taking an authoritative approach instead. Chris Mooney (2010) has called this approach “decide–announce–defend”, and despite the best scientific evidence in support of evolution (and other scientific ideas), it is clear that public acceptance of policy (and curriculum) proposals put forward in this way is limited. We only need to look at the past three decades of polling on the creationism/evolution issue and recent legislation on climate change education to see these results.

For better or worse, our public schools are intimately entwined in the democratic process. To succeed in establishing and maintaining evolution or climate change education in the public schools requires engagement of the democratic process, and Diana Hess’s book explores examples in which teachers have successfully engaged students in productive democratic discussion of socially controversial issues in the classroom. Her main thesis is that having students learn to engage in high-quality deliberative discussions about socially and politically controversial issues is essential to the health of our democracy. She points out a lesson that often escapes defenders of modern science (including evolution, climate change, and related curriculum): it is the sociocultural and political context that makes a topic controversial, and it is in this milieu that the controversy must be engaged.

Topics are not controversial by nature. Instead, they are socially constructed in ways that cause them to be more or less controversial. This is why it is common for issues that are considered closed in one nation or region to be controversial in others. For example, the question of whether evolution (or other ideas about the origin of life) should be taught in public schools is a matter of bitter controversy in some parts of the United States but does not generate the same level of controversy in much of Europe. (Hess 2006:114)
This book focuses on the arena where most of us in the creationism/evolution and climate science controversies are concerned: the public schools as a place where these social controversies play out.

One important concept explored in this book is the way that interest groups and media can “tip” a concept from a closed or settled status to a controversial one. Readers of RNCSE are familiar with the term “manufactroversy”, and others have described the public fuss about evolution as a “nontroversy”. However, Hess’s examples and discussions of “tipping” strategies reveal important lessons about the social dynamics of creating apparent controversy even when issues are considered closed by the relevant disciplines.

In the creationism/evolution and climate science controversies, as in many others, the goal of the tipping efforts is to convince the public that it is a “matter on which several views are or can be held” which Hand describes as a characteristic of an active controversy (Hand 2008, quoted on p 122). NCSE members recognize this assertion immediately in the various denialist campaigns against evolution and climate education—the concept that there is more than one scientific interpretation of the “evidence” underlies calls for “fairness” and demands for “academic freedom” in preparing and delivering curriculum.

Most of the book deals with controversies that do not have a direct bearing on creationism/evolution or climate change issues. Furthermore, Hess is clear that there is a different dynamic for engaging concepts that are considered settled by the relevant disciplines but whose closed status is being challenged in public discourse. However, there is much for the natural sciences to learn here from experience in the social sciences classroom. The strategies and practices for engaging socially controversial issues in the classroom (and, by extension, in society) are useful suggestions for how to promote successful dialog about these issues. One outcome of a successful dialog for the perceived controversies related to NCSE’s mission might be to separate those aspects of the controversy that have to do with values and beliefs of discussants from the scientifically settled aspects of scientific models (for example, see Lockwood 1996).

Controversy in the Classroom is a valuable resource for anyone interested in promoting rational conversations about controversial issues in the classroom—and ultimately in society. The creationism/evolution and climate science controversies are only two of those that get played out in the public schools, and we need a more successful strategy if we are to make any progress in helping students (and future citizens) learn to engage in dialog, rather than “counting coups” in catchphrases and sound bites. The “democratic” in the subtitle refers to the value of informed political discourse that illuminates and promotes understanding. Hess is not proposing a postmodern free-for-all in the classroom, but a model for developing a well-structured and well-informed discussion of relevant issues in the classroom when there is disagreement among citizens about any important topic. Since it is in the political arena where both creationism/evolution and climate science discussions generally take place, it would be beneficial to those active in promoting these scientific positions to adapt and apply some of the strategies examined in this book to “scientific controversies” in popular culture.
REFERENCES


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