Book Reviews

Teaching Controversy

Levy Visano & Lisa Jakubowski. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002, 184 pp., ISBN 1-55266-074-5

At first glance, Levy Visano and Lisa Jakubowski provide a rationale, framework and model for teaching controversial issues in higher education. At a deeper level, this book explores the post-structural and post-modern paradigm of Paulo Friere's radical critical pedagogy (1970) by providing a Canadian context and perspective. In both cases, the central themes explore the role of power and privilege, grounded in struggle and oppression by hearing the "voice of the silenced," and using culture and social context as the basis for learning and growth. Just as Friere focused on educating illiterate adults in Brazil to be able to look critically at the world in order to develop self-dignity, self-awareness and societal change through experience and action, these authors address similar experiences of First Nations Peoples and other marginalized groups.

The central premise of the book is that teaching controversy is valued and necessary at the university level, yet problematic and difficult to achieve because of the power differential between students and teachers, and between those of privilege (white male) and those of marginalized groups. The authors state:

Traditional models of teaching and learning continue to judge differences, colonize compliance and shackle the imagination. What is required is a more emancipatory and transformative pedagogy, grounded in struggle. Through a more critical education, we will uncover our assumptions, learn more about our own learning, self-consciously challenge the dominant ethos and develop oppositional currents". (p.12)

Controversial issues and teaching, however, are threatening to students, and to the dominant culture, because they are designed to question rather than reinforce the moral, political, social, economic and intellectual organization of society that is transmitted overtly and covertly through traditional educational institutions.

The authors suggest that teachers must adjust and unlearn their patterns of teaching and learning by developing a more equitable reconceptualization of the student-teacher relationship. This renegotiating involves developing mutual respect, creating a "friendship of intellectuals", surrendering power to the students, developing alternative testing and grading, abandoning lecture for dialogue and coupling learning with activism (p. 27).

In order to "Unravel the Complexities of Controversy", Visano and Jakubowski state that one must focus on the meaning of the social and cultural context, negotiate boundaries between the participants, and be cognizant of institutional constraints. The authors combine a social constructivist (Friere, 1970) framework grounded in the revolutionary need to change and improve

society, due to the inequalities, oppression and ongoing struggle, with a Vygotskian (1986) constructivist approach centering on the importance of the social context and culture, which mediates human interaction.

The authors' continue to develop a framework for shifting from the traditional model of transmitting knowledge and cultural norms, that in the authors' view repress social equality and reinforce hegemony by valuing authority, obedience and respect, towards a reframing of education that invites students to develop a critical awareness of their social world, consciousness-raising and societal intervention. Hegemony is the process by which one group achieves domination over others using physical and/or ideological means (p.30). The shift the authors' refer to involves altering the role between teacher and students, developing approaches of critical thinking, amending the phases of education and problem-posing.

The authors, once again, make the case that the role of the teacher must shift toward that of a facilitator who empowers students to think critically and create social change. The role of educator as authority and student as dependent is replaced with participants as intellectuals who take collective responsibility for the advancement of teaching and learning. Critical thinking involves critical responsiveness, moving from "guided conversation" to dialogue that engages the participants in reflection and inquiry. The three phases of education focus on fostering action and community-based learning. They include: experience and reflection, structured reflection, and dialogue and action. Reflective practice is what transforms personal experience into learning (p.35). During structured reflection, it is the role of the teacher to draw links between experience and theory.

The authors quote Friere (1998) "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning" (p. 59) making both teacher and student mutually responsible for the learning process. "Problem-posing" is the recommended strategy to enhance a mutual learning experience. The process involves listening, dialogue and action. It begins with inquiry and questioning about situations affecting our personal experiences and daily life and moves towards action and transformation (p. 41). Vivid examples and illustrations of problem-posing are provided for the reader to, first, hear the voice, and then, feel the struggle and oppression of First Nations Peoples through their personal accounts, storytelling, narratives, and talking circles. This is followed by exercises and activities that transform personal experience to dialogue and action. Included are eloquently-written personal recollections of the "Residential School Syndrome" by Ursula Elijah, recounting the oppression, abuse and dehumanization she received; "Injustice in the Criminal Justice System" by Julie George and "Towards Healing and Justice: The Struggle for Identity: In Retrospect" by Ursula Elijah and John Elijah. Additional personal accounts and scenarios of other marginalized groups such as prostitutes and "squeegee kids" follow, juxtaposing them with problem-posing strategies including "reaching-in" and "reaching-out" activities that stress the value of diverse voices and experiences in helping us to understand controversial issues.

Finally, an attempt to balance the pedagogical ideals with institutional

constraints is presented. The authors recognize and identify the logistical and practical roadblocks that are encountered when attempting to implement their vision. These include: the impact of the dominant culture, where the teacher is seen as the “authority”; and the influence of the occupational culture, where the teacher is bound by the academic institution’s traditional standards and norms towards their own tenure and promotion; the bureaucratic managerialism that is prevalent in a large social institution such as a university, and the commodification of knowledge where funding is governed by “for-profit” corporations who compromise the academic integrity of knowledge and learning with the objective of preparing students for a market economy.

Teaching Controversy is definitely food for thought. The authors articulate their philosophical and conceptual framework with great passion, clarity, and conviction, while providing theoretical and research support and using vivid “voices and personal narratives” to illustrate their beliefs. Yet, the practicality of many of these ideas being implemented in today’s academic institutions on any consistent level is questionable, due to one of the fundamental issues that they repeatedly address: social context. Given the current political, social and economic climate, our institutions of higher learning continue to promote, reinforce and value traditional cultural norms of hegemony, power and privilege. Even if certain teachers could successfully reduce the power differential between them and their students, the institution-at-large has abundant power, authority and privilege over each teacher through rank and a hierarchical system.

The authors’ describe classroom strategies and exercises to engage in to develop a “partnership” between teacher and student that include mutual respect, trust and trustworthiness. They do not, however, explore the personality traits or other affective components of the teacher that may hinder the process. The authors suggest that teachers need to facilitate dialogue and problem-posing. Yet, to be able to guide and scaffold students while keeping ones’ own agenda at bay is difficult for many. It not only demands skill and expertise, but a personal characteristic that may be found more readily in a therapist than a teacher. Even in a situation where there is equal status and no power differential, particular individuals who are knowledgeable, passionate and articulate may be more persuasive than others, affecting the outcome of an interaction.

Furthermore, teaching controversy in “higher education” is problematic if during students’ formative years they were continually reinforced and conditioned via traditional approaches and normative values. If true change or reform is to take place, the very “context” in which this model needs to begin is in elementary school when students are still developing their values and cultural norms. Granted, the content of controversy may need to be different to meet the developmental level of the students, but the pedagogy and methods outlined in this book could be successfully applied. Waiting until adulthood is far too late. I see this in my own teaching on a regular basis. I encourage my students to use reflective practice. I try to get them to read or write for their own personal growth and learning. Yet if a mark is not attached, if I am not going to grade it, few take the challenge seriously. One sixteen-week semester of meeting with students for three hours weekly is simply too little, too late to make substantive

changes in their quest for life-long inquiry learning, critical thinking and engaging in social and political action.

The authors cite prominent theorists in the field of critical pedagogy, yet overlook Gutmann's (1987) *Democratic Education* and Howe's (1997) *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy and Schooling*. Both of these books provide a participatory model of education, critical thinking and democratic moralism that confronts and addresses oppression, repression and discrimination by providing deliberative freedom and communal self-determination. Reference to these authors would provide a stronger foundation for the argument in this book. The model and approach presented in Guttman (1987), Howe (1997) and Visano and Jakurowski (2002) could be effectively implemented in programs supporting affirmative action and inclusive classrooms where diversity is not only accepted, but valued and celebrated. In addition, valuable contributions from other notable ethnographic researchers were absent, including Delpit (1988) and Seller and Weis (1997), whose descriptions and interpretations of the voices and silences of oppressed, marginalized groups could have added to the richness of this text.

The authors did an excellent job in identifying and recognizing some of the constraints and limitations inherent in implementing their vision. They did not, however, provide realistic, practical solutions to the problems. Perhaps this is because practical solutions may not mesh with conceptual visions. This in no way undermines the book, or suggests that the authors' objective was not met. On the contrary, by giving us food for thought, by reframing and encouraging us to question and think outside the box, it means that we are actively engaged in the very problem-posing process the authors describe. The authors stress that it is this problem-posing, and not necessarily problem-solving, that is the critical ingredient to the process. And this text challenges us to do just that.

References

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