

The Disclosure Dilemma in Action: A Qualitative Look at the Effect of Teacher Disclosure on Classroom Instruction

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Journell, W. (2011). The disclosure dilemma in action: A qualitative look at the effect of teacher disclosure on classroom instruction. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 35(2), 217-244.

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Abstract:

Using Kelly's (1986) four perspectives on teacher disclosure, I analyze the quality of instruction present in the classrooms of six high school government teachers during their coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election, an event that received widespread media attention and elicited strong feelings on both sides of the political spectrum. Four of the teachers chose to remain neutral throughout their coverage of the election by not revealing their candidate preference to their students, while the remaining two teachers disclosed their preferences early in the semester, although in strikingly different ways. The findings of this study offer a practical approach to evaluating the "disclosure dilemma" encountered by many pre-service and practicing teachers during their classroom instruction.

Keywords: Secondary school teachers | Public schools | Presidential elections | Candidates | Classroom discussion | Social studies

Article:

Introduction

At a recent conference presentation, I posed the question of whether teachers should remain politically neutral in their classrooms. The audience members, a group that included both pre-service and practicing teachers as well as teacher educators, responded "yes" almost unanimously and without hesitation. When I then asked those who had voiced their opinion why they felt so strongly about teacher neutrality, their responses overwhelmingly focused on the authority teachers wield in their classrooms and the fear of indoctrination should teachers advocate political opinions from their positions of power. Only a handful of participants even questioned whether students could benefit from seeing their teachers model appropriate ways of articulating and defending one's beliefs in a public setting.

Fortunately, I had expected that type of reaction from my audience. Every semester, I pose that same question to the pre-service teachers in my undergraduate methods courses and the practicing teachers in my graduate seminars, and, invariably, the majority of them are quick to state that neutrality is the only responsible course of action for teachers to take in their classrooms. Even after explaining the potential civic and educational benefits of a committed impartiality stance advocated by Kelly (1986) and others, many of my students are hesitant to embrace the idea of disclosing their political beliefs out of fear of unduly influencing their students or upsetting the political climate of their school or surrounding community.

Theoretical Framework

Four Stances for Teaching Controversial Issues

The disclosure dilemma emanates from the view of education as an ideological enterprise regulated by power and authority (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1979, 1982; Counts, 1932; Foucault, 1991, Friere, 1970/1993). Teachers wield considerable authority in their classrooms, both as gatekeepers of information (Thornton, 1991) as well as purveyors of knowledge, dispositions, and beliefs. Certainly, students' attitudes and beliefs are shaped by the material included in the formal curriculum and how teachers choose to deliver that content, but research also suggests that the way teachers present themselves in the classroom has an effect on students' social and civic development (Apple, 1979; Brophy, 1979).

Given the power dynamics present in classrooms and the fact that teachers exert influence through both their words and actions, Kelly (1986) posits that completely neutral instruction can never exist. In describing four stances teachers can take when approaching controversial issues in their classrooms, he argues that "exclusive neutrality," or refusing to engage students in discussions of controversial issues, is both impractical and undesirable. A teacher can never completely censor all aspects of content in his or her classroom, and once a controversial issue is introduced, either by a student or an outside event, the decision to engage students in discussions of the issue represents a break from neutrality. As Jensen (2007) notes, neutrality toward controversial issues can even be viewed as endorsing the status quo, particularly when teachers openly advocate universally accepted aspects of civic education, such as voting or saluting the nation's flag.

The opposite of exclusive neutrality is "exclusive partiality," which Kelly (1986) describes as when teachers engage their students in discussions of controversial issues but only to induce their students into accepting a certain position. While some advocates of a social justice approach to education (e.g. Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Counts, 1932; Kelly & Brandes, 2001, Zion, 2005) may argue that partiality is desirable for teachers wanting to use their positions of authority as a way to create awareness of societal injustices and oppression, Kelly posits that exclusive partiality forces teachers to make moral decisions regarding their instruction. Moreover, Kelly argues that overt partiality discourages open discussion, which denies students from practicing a civic skill necessary for life within a democratic society (Gutmann, 1987; Parker & Hess, 2001).

The third stance is what Kelly (1986) terms "neutral impartiality" and is characterized by teachers actively engaging their students in open classroom discussions of controversial issues but without actively participating and voicing their own opinions on the issue being discussed. Hess (2004) terms this stance "balance" and has observed through multiple studies of social studies teachers (Hess, 2002, 2009; Hess & Posselt, 2002) that most teachers routinely try to implement this stance in their classrooms. Teachers act as moderators or facilitators of controversial discussions but never disclose their personal feelings on a particular topic. At most, teachers practicing a balanced or neutral impartiality stance will play the devil's advocate when necessary, but they will make it clear to their students that they will not publicly advocate a particular position (Kelly, 1986).

Teacher neutrality has traditionally been advocated as the only morally appropriate stance for teachers to take when discussing political issues in their classrooms (Elliot, 1973). For those who adhere to this position, teachers, as agents of the state, are placed into a specific role within an institutional system that requires them to remain politically disengaged and respectful of the communities in which they serve (Bullough, Gitlin, & Goldstein, 1984). Moreover, many educational theorists have questioned how teachers could ever posit an authoritative stance on political issues or other aspects of civic education where multiple interpretations are commonly considered equally legitimate (Brandt, 1959; Palmer, 1983).

However, Kelly (1986) argues that neutral impartiality is undesirable for several reasons. First, as mentioned previously, teachers can never be completely neutral in their instruction. As Reich (2007) notes, even the act of deciding how long a discussion will last or which students will be allowed to speak is a way in which teachers, perhaps subconsciously or even unknowingly, advocate or dismiss certain beliefs. Similarly, Niemi and Niemi (2007), in a study of New York social studies teachers, found that even though they never explicitly advocated a particular political party or set of beliefs, the teachers often let their feelings be known through opinions presented as facts, open frustration with the political system, and snide comments or name-calling directed toward political figures.

Second, Kelly (1986) argues that silence deadens discussions. Even playing the devil's advocate provides little fuel for a discussion because students know that the teacher may not fully believe the points he or she is making. Discussions are most effective when there is a variety of opinions present and all participants are allowed to fully articulate their true beliefs (Hess & Ganzler, 2007; Parker & Hess, 2001). This aspect of discussion follows the Habermasian (1981/1984)

belief that language is a medium for coordinating action among individuals, which can only occur when participants are open about their intentions (Carspecken, 1996; White, 1988).

Kelly's (1986) primary criticism with neutral impartiality, however, is that it does not allow teachers to model how to advocate one's position in a tolerant and civil manner within a public setting. As transnational migration continues to diversify industrial nations throughout the world, training students in the skills of public deliberation will be essential to ensuring their successful participation in increasingly pluralistic democratic societies (Gutmann, 1987; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). If one considers discussions as more than just a pedagogical method but rather an educational objective unto themselves, or, to use Parker and Hess's (2001) term, teaching/or discussion, then it is essential that teachers model what appropriate civic discussions should look like. Neutrality offers nothing for teachers to model during discussions, and when their true opinions invariably surface, they may take the shape of less desirable methods, such as name-calling or sarcastic remarks (Niemi & Niemi, 2007; Passe & Evans, 1996).

After describing the deficiencies of these first three stances, Kelly (1986) advocates for what he terms "committed impartiality," which is characterized by teachers openly disclosing their personal views on controversial issues in a way that models appropriate civic dispositions. Kelly is quick to distinguish between committed impartiality and exclusive partiality by firmly asserting that teachers should not use their position in the classroom to persuade students into advocating a particular opinion. Therefore, teachers using a committed impartiality approach must maintain a delicate balance between using their authority to model appropriate civic dispositions and ensuring that their personal opinions are not perceived to be any more legitimate than those of their students. In other words, Kelly believes that teachers can effectively voice their own opinions while still remaining impartial and ensuring that competing perspectives receive a fair hearing.

For Kelly (1986), a committed impartiality approach to classroom discussion allows teachers to actively use discussions as a tool for civic development rather than simply relying on content. If students view their teachers appropriately defending their personal beliefs with conviction as well as deference to competing opinions, the act of discussion is providing civic instruction in itself. Moreover, Kelly posits that this approach fosters a type of civic mentorship between teachers and students over time, an essential feature for courses which naturally lend themselves to issues centered instruction and the development of civic identities and dispositions (Avery, Sullivan, Smith, & Sandell, 1996; Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006).

Unfortunately, recent research on student attitudes toward teacher disclosure fails to provide definitive support for or against teacher neutrality in the classroom. Through surveys and telephone interviews of current and recently graduated high school students, Hess and McAvoy (2009) found that the majority of students (80%) were in favor of teacher disclosure, yet nearly half of the students (46%) were either satisfied with the amount of disclosure they received or wished they had heard less of their teacher's political opinions in class, and only 52% of the students stated that they wished they had heard more of their teacher's point of view. Similarly, over 40% of both teachers and students surveyed expressed fear that teacher disclosure could unduly influence the political beliefs of students. However, only 23% of students reported that they were likely to change their political opinions to align with their teachers' beliefs. In the

corresponding student interviews, Hess and McAvoy found that students were generally accepting of teacher disclosure as long as they did not perceive their teachers to be forcing their opinions on their classes without giving equal time to opposing viewpoints.

Committed Impartiality in Practice

Despite the theoretical support for committed impartiality in the literature, studies of classroom teachers suggest that few actually use this approach in practice. Based on her work with social studies educators, Hess (2004) has created a typology similar to that of Kelly's (1986) four stances to describe ways in which teachers approach controversial issues in their classes.¹ She has found that many teachers often recognize the controversial nature of a particular issue and choose to ignore it in their classrooms due to the fact that they feel they could not teach the issue fairly, or they fear even addressing the issue in class could result in negative repercussions from their school or the local community. These fears have become intensified amid widespread reports in the United States detailing how teachers have been dismissed from their positions for voicing support or opposition to recent polarizing events such as the nation's involvement in the Iraq War (Westheimer, 2006). However, avoiding potential controversy in the classroom is far from an American phenomenon. In a study of teachers in England, Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004) found that only 37% of teachers reported teaching controversial issues each term, and the overwhelming majority reported that they did not feel comfortable with or adequately trained to teach potentially controversial issues in their subject area.

However, research suggests that even when teachers include controversial issues in their classrooms, few feel comfortable disclosing their personal opinions to their students. In a study of practicing middle and secondary teachers in the United States, Miller-Lane, Denton, and May (2006) provided the teachers with a copy of Kelly's (1986) article and then interviewed them about their feelings on each of the four stances. All of the teachers found Kelly's discussion of neutral impartiality appealing and admitted that was the stance they most often used in their own teaching. Even after reading Kelly's argument for committed impartiality, most of the teachers remained cynical of teacher disclosure and argued that teachers should try to remain as neutral as possible when discussing controversial issues. In a similar study of Canadian pre-service teachers in a program specifically designed to promote social justice, Kelly and Brandes (2001) found that over half stated that neutrality is a worthy or desirable goal for teachers, even if it is not always possible to implement.

These findings support the work done by Hess (2004, 2009) that suggests teachers overwhelmingly tend to believe neutrality, or balance, is the most accepted and responsible stance toward teaching controversial issues, even if research has shown that maintaining neutrality in the classroom is an impossible task (Niemi & Niemi, 2007). As shown in the vignettes presented at the beginning of this paper as well as the study by Miller-Lane et al. (2006), many practicing and pre-service teachers are quick to resist the idea of disclosing their personal opinions to their students even when confronted with theoretical arguments suggesting that disclosure may offer civic and educational benefits for students. Unfortunately, as Hess (2008) notes, one of the deficiencies within the literature on teacher disclosure is a lack of empirical research from which to draw conclusions about the actual effectiveness of disclosure on student learning outcomes and teachers' instructional objectives. The remainder of this paper

will describe a study in which I compare the quality of classroom instruction that occurred in six high school government classes taught by teachers who engaged in varying levels of political disclosure. The results of the study will hopefully provide a practical context from which practicing and pre-service teachers can better evaluate the disclosure dilemma.

Context of the Study

As part of a larger study on teaching politics in secondary education (Journell, 2009), I observed the classroom instruction of six high school teachers during their coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election. Part of the difficulty in researching how teachers respond to controversial issues in their classrooms is that what is considered controversial can vary among individuals and can actually change over time (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2009). However, politics may serve as the very definition of controversial. Even if certain political issues cease to be considered controversial, politics, as defined by the constant struggle over control of public policy, is inherently controversial, particularly in a two-party system like in the United States where ideological differences are often associated along party lines. Therefore, observing these teachers during a presidential election, particularly the 2008 contest which became a highly contentious affair that garnered considerable attention both in the United States and abroad, provided a unique opportunity to evaluate teacher disclosure across multiple classrooms.

The six teachers were situated in three schools located in the Southwest Chicago suburbs.ⁱⁱ The schools were very diverse demographically and provided a nice mixture from which to analyze the effects of teacher disclosure. Roosevelt was a large school located in a major urban area that catered to a diverse student population (43% Latino, 29% African-American, and 27% White). Armstrong was a small rural school that served a predominately White, middle-class student body. St. Thomas, a private Catholic school, was located in the same urban area as Roosevelt, but its student body was predominately White and tended to hail from more affluent households. Courses in U.S. Government were required at all three schools; at Roosevelt the course was part of the freshmen curriculum while students at the other two schools took the course during their senior year. Table 1 lists all six teachers along with their school, demographic information, level of teaching experience, candidate choice in the election, and whether they chose to disclose that information to their students prior to the election.

As Table 1 shows, four of the six teachers chose to keep their choice in the election from their students, at least until after the election took place. Mr. Harrison and Mr. Pierce had not even told their students of their choice by the time I had left their schools at the end of November. Only two of the teachers, Mr. Leander and Mr. Ryan, disclosed their choice of candidate prior to the election, and in both cases, the teachers provided their students with this information near the beginning of the semester.

Table 1
Teacher Demographics and Disclosure

Teacher	School	Demographic Information	Teaching Experience	Candidate Choice	Disclosure Before Election
Mr. Harrison	Roosevelt	Mid-40s; African-American	Less than 5 years	McCain	No
Ms. Wilkinson	Roosevelt	Early 20s; White	First year	Obama	No
Ms. Jackson	Roosevelt	Late 20s; White	Less than 10 years	Obama	No
Mr. Pierce	St. Thomas	Early 60s; White	Over 40 years	Unknown ^a	No
Mr. Leander	St. Thomas	Late 50s; White	Over 30 years	Obama	Yes
Mr. Pierce	Armstrong	Late 20s; White	Less than 10 years	McCain	Yes

Note. ^aMr. Pierce refused to share his candidate choice with the author or his classes.

Methodology

Using a multiple case study design (Stake, 1995), I observed each of the six classes approximately three to four times per week from the beginning of school in August through the elections in November. In each classroom I acted as a participant-observer (Merriam, 1998) and spent time observing classroom instruction and helping students with their work. I also collected any relevant classroom artifacts that pertained to teaching about the election.

In addition, I engaged in two semi-structured (Merriam, 1998) interviews with each of the six teachers, once at the beginning of the study and again after the elections had taken place. In the initial interview, I asked the teachers whether they planned on disclosing their choice in the election to their students and why they had come to that decision. In the final interview, I asked the teachers who had not yet disclosed their choice to their students who they had ultimately voted for, and I asked all of the teachers to reflect on their instruction throughout the semester. Finally, I interviewed students in each class who volunteered to take part in the study. These student interviews, which occurred at the end of the study, asked students to reflect upon their teacher's political instruction, particularly as it pertained to teaching about the election. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed for accuracy.

Additional data were collected through surveys of students in each class as well as large numbers of freshmen and seniors in each building. These surveys served as a way to better assess the political climate of each school and the political knowledge of the students participating in the study. Both sets of surveys were distributed within the first two weeks of the study and contained Likert questions asking students to evaluate their interest in politics as well as identify the candidate they personally supported in the election. A copy of the survey can be found in Journell (2011).

Data analysis adhered to the guidelines for case studies offered by Stake (1995) in which I sought to develop meaning from patterns that emerged from the data. I first triangulated the various data sources in an effort to improve the trustworthiness of my interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Maxwell, 1992), and then I looked for areas of interest within the data from which I could derive meaning about the cases. I then categorized these various points of interest and searched for patterns in an effort to both further my understanding about the specific cases as well as develop naturalistic generalizations that could transfer to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

In their initial interviews, all of the teachers articulated a desire to cover the election during the semester, citing that the election provided a unique opportunity to merge the formal curriculum with real-life events. All of the teachers made good on this promise, albeit to varying degrees (Journell, 2010b); however, the quality of political instruction that occurred in the four classes taught by "neutral" teachers differed considerably from those taught by the two teachers who chose to disclose their political preferences to their students. In this section, I will attempt to highlight those differences through descriptions of both groups of teachers.

The Non-Disclosure Classrooms

As noted in Table 1, the majority of teachers in this study preferred to conceal their political affiliations from their students in an attempt to remain neutral through the conclusion of the election. Each of these teachers felt they had a professional responsibility to avoid swaying their students' opinions on the candidates. As Ms. Wilkinson stated, "I want [her students] to make their own decisions, and I think it would help if they didn't know where I am in terms of that."

However, maintaining political anonymity was a constant challenge for these teachers due to repeated inquiries from their students. Every teacher was asked multiple times during the course of the semester which candidate they supported in the election, which often resulted in the same programmed answer. Both Mr. Pierce and Ms. Wilkinson openly stated that they did not want to reveal their choice for fear of influencing their students' opinions. Ms. Jackson claimed to have not decided and joked with her students that her final decision would be based on the information they included in their election projects. Mr. Harrison, on the other hand, often told his students that he remained undecided and used the question as an opportunity to explain his thought processes and his belief on making informed decisions based on the state of the nation and one's personal life. For example, when he was asked in late October if he had decided on a candidate, he stated,

I honestly don't know. It is about choosing the candidate that will make the country better. For example, if Obama wins and the House and Senate stay Democratic, they might be able to get some stuff done. If McCain wins, they might spend four years bickering back and forth. You have to look at the big picture. I have to look at my age and my retirement, although when you are divorced, just trying to keep it real with you, you can throw retirement out the window. Now eight to ten years ago, I would have probably voted

Obama without thinking about it. Well, to be honest with you, I probably wouldn't have voted at all. I would have been out partying.

While none of these teachers ever directly revealed their personal choice in the election, they often gave their students subtle hints to which they may have been leaning. For example, during a lesson on political ideologies, when a student asked Ms. Jackson where she fell on the political spectrum, she made a mark on the left of the center point on her diagram and stated, "I am about here. I am a moderate, but I tend to lean more Democratic." Ms. Wilkinson would often tell her students that they could make an accurate guess about her political affiliation if they could figure out which political party most teachers in the United States support. Mr. Harrison even shocked his students by admitting that he voted for President George W. Bush in 2004. After claiming that he was still undecided in the 2008 contest, the following conversation ensued:

David: You are going to vote for McCain?

Mr. Harrison: I might. I have voted Republican before and I voted for George Bush last time.

Several students: What? I don't believe it!

Mr. Harrison: See, the way I evaluate candidates is I first go by this book that I live by, the Bible, and then I look and see what candidate is the best for me and my family and the country as a whole. For example, I got to the point in my life where it made more sense for me economically to vote Republican.

Gwen: Do you ever regret voting for Bush?

Mr. Harrison: No, I don't regret it. I made the decision that was right for me at the time.

In addition, nearly all of these teachers agreed to tell their students who they voted for at the conclusion of the election. Ms. Wilkinson and Ms. Jackson shared their decisions with their students on Election Day. Due to the political climate at Roosevelt (Journell, 2010a), Mr. Harrison decided not to reveal that he had voted for McCain at that time, although he told me in our final interview that he would eventually tell his students once the hysteria surrounding Obama's victory had faded. The only teacher who adamantly refused to share his final choice with his students was Mr. Pierce at St. Thomas. In fact, he did not even feel comfortable revealing his decision to me in confidence. Instead, he stated,

All of the classes asked, and I just don't think that is appropriate. I understand in religion classes they have to talk to kids about views of certain candidates, but I think in government class, I tried to balance the articles in current event news everyday with as much information on Obama and McCain and balance that out as best I could. I just think that is the appropriate approach for a government teacher.

Just because these teachers remained ambiguous about their candidate preference does not mean they remained neutral in their classrooms, however. Occasionally, bias could be detected in the

instructional materials teachers used, even for assignments not directly related to the election. For example, Ms. Wilkinson enhanced her discussion of the legislative process with the famous Schoolhouse Rocks cartoon of a bill trying to make its way through Congress. However, she then showed an updated version of the same video, only the audio had been dubbed to a parody of a popular hip-hop song that expressed the legislative process using vernacular terms. While the lyrics had nothing to do with the presidential election, the video contained several shots of Obama dancing on The Ellen DeGeneres Show, a popular daytime television program, juxtaposed with clips of President Bush awkwardly dancing at an African ceremony during one of his trips abroad. Clearly, the video was attempting to poke fun at President Bush while portraying Obama as someone who could relate to a younger audience.

On the same day, Ms. Wilkinson showed a five minute clip of Obama speaking in Richmond, Virginia. The video showed Obama giving an impassioned oratory about the need for change, particularly with respect to the political and socioeconomic divide in the United States. After the video concluded, Ms. Wilkinson offered no explanation for why she chose to show the clip, nor did she attempt to balance her coverage with a McCain speech.

However, the majority of bias seemed to occur when the teachers offered their opinions on political issues or events in the campaign. As Niemi and Niemi (2007) found in their study, these opinions were often presented as facts, making the teacher appear as an expert on the topic. For example, when asked about vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's supposed firing of an Alaskan state trooper, Mr. Harrison told his students,

The question is did she misuse her power? Probably. But I like people who come up from the muck. Obama did drugs, her daughter had unprotected sex, her husband may be into sketchy things, she may have wild sex, I don't know. They all have issues, but the bottom line is that no one is perfect. One thing that I like about Obama is that he came out at the beginning and said, "yeah, I used to get high" and now it is not an issue anymore, not like [former president Bill] Clinton who said he didn't--inhale-please!

Another example occurred after the third debate when students mentioned the candidates' stances on abortion. Mr. Harrison told them,

With regard to abortion, I think Obama is speaking out the side of his mouth. With that issue, I think you are either for it or against it. That is just my opinion. I know some people may say I am shallow for believing that, that there is no grey area. I mean, I don't know what I would think if I knew someone who had been raped or something like that. I guess I am pro-choice in that case. But after I listen to Obama, I don't totally disagree with him. But on that issue, I am for McCain because of my faith. But that is why I don't make any decisions until I hear them speak.

Even Mr. Pierce, who adamantly believed that teachers should not offer their political opinions to their students, would make occasional comments to his class that reflected his personal beliefs. For example, when Obama criticized McCain for not knowing how many houses he owned, Mr. Pierce told his class, "Personally, I could care less about McCain's houses." He would also criticize aspects of both candidates' campaigns, once stating that "McCain just isn't a very good speaker.

The speech was good, just not delivered well." Later in the campaign, he stated that "I don't see how McCain can talk about change when he has been in Congress for 26 years" which was followed shortly with "I still think McCain is a good guy and that he would be a good president, but I don't think he will win."

Perhaps the most revealing example of his inherent bias was Mr. Pierce's initial infatuation with Palin and subsequent lack of confidence in her ability to help the McCain campaign. When she was first nominated, he routinely told his classes that Palin had the "wow factor" and would help carry McCain to victory. Within a month, he was making comments like, "To me, she is wearing a little thin already." By Election Day, he was shaking his head and saying "Palin, I don't know." On the day after the election, he told his class, "I hope there are no Sarah Palin fans in here, but she was picked because she was a woman, and I think if [McCain] would have picked an African-American it would have looked bad."

Despite these types of subtle messages, it remains unclear whether the students in these four classes recognized them as bias. When I asked students to hypothesize about their teachers' choice in the presidential election, students from the same class often differed in their responses. Moreover, when a student predicted their teacher's choice, many of them could not provide a reason for their opinion and admitted that it was simply a guess. Of the students who had a particular hunch about their teacher, their reasons ranged from overhearing them talking to another teacher in the hall to assuming that a teacher was voting for a certain candidate because he or she had refused to disclose his or her choice to the class. Only a couple of students from Mr. Harrison's class stated that they thought he was voting for McCain because "he had said some [harsh] things about Obama."

The Disclosure Classrooms

Both Mr. Ryan at Armstrong and Mr. Leander at St. Thomas made their opinions on the election known to their students throughout the semester. Mr. Ryan told his students that he tended to be more conservative and planned on voting for McCain in the general election. Mr. Leander described himself to his class as a political independent, but that he viewed Obama as the best choice for democracy. These opinions helped frame much of the political discussion that occurred in both classes, but the ways in which Mr. Ryan and Mr. Leander expressed their opinions differed considerably.

Mr. Ryan did not hide his conservative beliefs, but took care to ensure that he did not impose his views on students, at least in terms of his political beliefs (Journell, in press). As he told me in our first interview,

If they ask me my point of view, I will tell them why I feel the way I do, but I won't bring it up and say "well, you are pro-choice, let's me and you debate this right now." I won't do that.

Another goal for Mr. Ryan was to maintain a classroom environment where all viewpoints received equal attention and respect. He described the way he maintained this balance when he stated,

I definitely make it clear, I think, to them that they can have whatever opinion they want and their grade is not going to be affected or anything like that. I try to keep it as general as I can as far as keeping the emotion out of it or the bias out of it when I am presenting both sides. I might talk like I am a liberal sometimes. I might talk like I am a conservative sometimes. But some of my Christian views are hard to keep out of the classroom. So, yeah, it is tough, but it is fun, too.

True to his word, Mr. Ryan regularly presented both sides of an issue during class discussions, even when he felt strongly toward a particular viewpoint. He would encourage his students to assert their own opinions, and he played the devil's advocate when necessary. The following is an example of a typical conversation about the election that occurred in Mr. Ryan's class:

Mr. Ryan: What I don't like about [Obama's economic proposal] is that the people making \$250,000 are supplying the jobs for everyone else, and I am not making \$250,000 so don't think I am saying this because I am going to get hurt by it. It's just the overall way I view the economy for everyone.

Charlotte: Well, how will McCain pay for things if he cuts taxes on everyone?

Mr. Ryan: He will have less programs.

Katherine: Does that mean he will shut everything down? That will cause people to lose jobs too.

Mr. Ryan: But who owns businesses? Not the government. It will be government programs that get shut down.

Katherine: But people work for those government programs.

Charlotte: What are government programs?

Mr. Ryan: Well, I would assume that welfare would be one that would be scaled down. Now, I don't think welfare should be eliminated, and not all conservatives think that welfare should be eliminated. And not all liberals think that welfare should be expanded. We can't look at it as extremes, which is what a lot of people do.

Katherine: But doesn't the top one percent of the world's wealthiest people own the greatest percentage of wealth in this country? So what is the big deal if they are taxed more?

Mr. Ryan: I see your point, but they are already taxed a lot. Are you saying everything should be equal?

Katherine: Not equal, but I agree with Obama. If you are making \$50 an hour, you have more money to throw around than if you are making \$10 an hour. If they earn it, good for them, but they should be able to share it.

Holly: I know several people who are on disability and they just sit around and collect money and don't try to get better, and I don't believe that people who work hard for their money should have to give it to lazy people who just sit at home and collect it.

Katherine: Just because you aren't rich doesn't mean you don't work hard.

Holly: I agree, and there are people who are rich who don't work hard, who inherit money like Paris Hilton, but I think most people work hard and I don't think it is fair.

Mr. Ryan: Well, not everyone on disability or welfare is lazy, but it is a catch-22.

Katherine: Well, I think there is a difference between being ok, being well off, and swimming in money. I think we should tax those.

Even though Mr. Ryan clearly stated his position at the beginning of the conversation, he was able to maintain a moderate opinion throughout the discussion, even contradicting Holly when she stereotyped people on welfare as lazy. He also cautioned students from approaching political issues from extreme viewpoints, which, as he said, people are prone to do.

Mr. Ryan would also attempt to balance coverage of the candidates in his class by noting both positive and negative attributes of both men. For example, when talking about psychological reasons why people vote the way they do, Mr. Ryan told his class,

Without a doubt [Obama] is the better speaker. Does that make a difference? Who knows. I don't think people will vote for him just because he is a good speaker, but it can't hurt. I mean you all keep saying that McCain reminds you of your grandpa because he is so old. Would that keep you from voting for him? Maybe not, but it is in the back of your minds.

He also tried to be fair to both candidates, even when supporting McCain. When Obama ran a scathing advertisement criticizing McCain's lack of computer proficiency, Mr. Ryan cried foul, but stated that the advertisement was the same type of distracting political strategy used by the McCain campaign against Obama. He described the advertisement by saying,

Obama is getting more aggressive in his attacks on McCain because McCain is getting more aggressive. His latest ad says that McCain is out of touch and it shows him in the Senate 20 years ago and says not much has changed. It also pokes fun of how McCain doesn't know how to use email. In my opinion, if McCain can't use email, it doesn't matter. It's kind of like the Obama lipstick thing, not a big deal. I am more concerned with his decision-making, and I am sure as president he can get a hold of people pretty easily. What do you all think?

Finally, it was clear that while Mr. Ryan supported McCain, he still considered Obama an honorable candidate. For example, on the final day of the Democratic National Convention, Mr. Ryan encouraged his students to watch Obama's acceptance speech, saying,

He is giving a big speech tonight. It will be something to see. You should check it out. I am not even a huge fan of the Democratic Party, but I am going to watch it because it will be something to see, even if you don't like politics. This is Obama's chance to show that he is ready and can win over those Hillary [Clinton] supporters.

Mr. Leander, on the other hand, rarely articulated any views other than his own during classroom discussions at St. Thomas. While he never prevented students from raising contradicting viewpoints, he was quick to tell students that their beliefs were wrong. For example, the following is Mr. Leander's response to a question challenging the viability of Obama's tax policy:

Edward: How do the Democrats deem redistribution fair?

Mr. Leander: There is that word again, fair.

Edward: Yeah, but ...

Mr. Leander: There is no right or wrong answer. In your mind it may not be fair. In God's mind, which is the highest power, it may not be fair, but there is no fair in politics. Capitalism sounds good in theory but we have things like minimum wage because pure capitalism doesn't work.

Similar to the teachers described in Niemi and Niemi's (2007) study, Mr. Leander also routinely chastised people or issues with which he personally disagreed and treated his opinions as fact. For example, when discussing the Democratic National Convention, he stated that "the Republicans will have a hard time matching up with the big four: Obama, Mrs. Obama, Bill [Clinton] and [Joe] Biden. Who do they have? McCain can't talk. [President] Bush can't talk. Oftentimes, style does matter, and it wins over substance." Another time, he criticized the McCain campaign by saying, "Every time McCain and Palin go out on the stump, they are talking to rednecks who are already voting for them. It doesn't make sense. Nothing they have done makes sense."

Mr. Leander would also make derogatory, and often crass, comments about politicians he felt were incompetent or unethical. While he seemed to admire both Obama and McCain, stating that "both are fair, honest people," he frequently lashed out at Palin, who he considered unfit for the vice presidency. On several occasions, he stated that McCain needed to provide her with a copy of the U.S. Constitution in response to interviews where she appeared confused about the job requirements of the vice president. In another instance, he made a joke about Palin's foreign policy credentials by poking fun at her assertion that she could see Russia from her house. Mr. Leander retorted, "I can see the moon, so I should be an astronaut." In perhaps his most pointed jab at Palin, Mr. Leander mocked her intelligence, as well as that of President Bush, when he stated,

That is the thing about America, you can be wrong here. In Iraq they just line you up and shoot you. Here, we make you the Republican vice presidential candidate, or in the case of the last eight years, the President of the United States.

However, Palin was far from his only target. He had particularly abrasive words for Joe Lieberman, a Democratic senator who endorsed McCain in the election. He described him in the following way:

I used to be a Joe Lieberman Democrat, a conservative Democrat, or a John McCain Republican, that is before he ran to his base. But then you have Lieberman on TV praising Obama. What a two-face piece of crap.

However, Mr. Leander's harshest criticisms were reserved for the two major parties, particularly their extreme members. He frequently labeled Democrats as "stupid" and "unorganized," which he often stated cost them every election they did not win because they always underestimated the "dumb" Republicans they ran against. He described Republicans as "narrow-minded," "hypocritical," and "evil." He particularly despised the far right wing of the Republican Party, which he believed cost McCain the presidency by forcing him to nominate Palin. In a particularly telling description of the two parties, Mr. Leander stated,

If you are stuck between the far right and the far left, always choose the left. They are harmless, but strange. They may put a flower in your hair or try and get you to accept the gays or save the whales, but they won't hurt you. The far right can be downright violent. They bomb abortion clinics and call for assassinations. They are very principled, but their principles sometimes go too far.

Clearly, even though both teachers felt comfortable sharing their political beliefs with their students, Mr. Ryan and Mr. Leander utilized vastly contrasting styles. One needs look no further than their students' comments to recognize the difference. All of Mr. Ryan's students that I interviewed realized that he supported McCain, but not one accused him of being biased. As Elizabeth said, "[Mr. Ryan] brought up his opinion, but he didn't try to like persuade us to think the same way he does." Gabe seconded that notion, stating, "He expressed his views, but he didn't like really get into debates with it, which I think is good because you really don't want to with your teachers and stuff."

A few of Mr. Ryan's students even felt as if their education benefitted from knowing his political affiliation. Susan stated that she liked knowing Mr. Ryan's opinions because "you knew where he was standing when we would talk about different problems or whatever. You knew where he was going so it was a lot better." Brandon stated that it was reassuring to see that Mr. Ryan had specific political opinions because, as he said, "Every person should fight for their opinions and to stand up for themselves."

Conversely, the students in Mr. Leander's class clearly recognized his liberal bias. As Tommy stated,

I didn't agree with almost anything he said. Everything was slanted Democratic and liberal because everything was more in favor of Obama, and just when you paid attention in class you could easily tell. Like the first week, you didn't know because he sort of kept both sides, but now he is definitely only showing the Democrat in him. He has been bashing the Republicans, and he tries to make it fair with small little bashes and saying Democrats are

stupid but if they got smart they would win each election and the Republicans are just illegal and close-minded and the Democrats are open-minded. So, I mean, he does have most of the facts right, but he is also just showing most of the liberal facts than the conservative facts. Like the article that he passed out about how the liberals were better on the economy, he is just showing what the liberals do better at, and he is sort of blocking out the conservative [opinion].

Another student, Brian, joked that "if it were up to Mr. Leander, he would make me more liberal and make me want to vote for Obama." He continued by saying, "I mean, he pushes more of a liberal, that is more of his background, and he says the more educated you are the more liberal you will be."

Yet, none of Mr. Leander's students I interviewed stated that his liberal bias bothered them. In fact, many insinuated that they enjoyed hearing Mr. Leander's opinions, even when they disagreed with him. Robert said he "thought it was good how [Mr. Leander] had his own opinions about what was going on, but he didn't try and force it by saying this is what is right and this is what is wrong." Tommy even said that listening to Mr. Leander made him "more of a Republican because I am always trying to defend the Republican views, and everything that Mr. Leander says I completely disagree with." He continued by saying,

It was more entertaining almost because you could—we both started fighting about it, making jokes. It was a little bit difficult when he said things that were—I didn't know the exact facts, but it didn't sound right, and I couldn't fight him on it, so I was just like ehh, I don't know, but I can't really argue.

Even Nancy, the only student I interviewed who suggested Mr. Leander could have improved by being slightly less biased, said, "That is just a tiny thing. I mean, I think he did a good job."

Based on the data presented in this section, it seems evident that even though the election was being taught in each of these six classes, the quality of political instruction students' received was not equal. While multiple factors played a part in the varying levels of political instruction at each school (Journell, 2011), it appears as though the teachers' decision whether to disclose their personal opinion on the election helped define the way in which it was broached and discussed in each of their classes. Certainly, one limitation of this study is that these findings cannot be generalized beyond the six teachers in this study. However, the often drastically different approaches to disclosure that occurred in these classes provide a rich context from which educators can better analyze the merits of teacher disclosure. The remainder of this article will discuss these findings from the theoretical perspectives offered by Kelly (1986) and others.

Discussion

The teachers in this study provide a practical way of assessing Kelly's (1986) four stances on teaching controversial issues. First, it is worth noting that none of the teachers practiced exclusive neutrality, or what Hess (2004) terms avoidance, with respect to the election. Perhaps this was due to the ubiquitous nature of the 2008 election, which would have been almost impossible to ignore entirely in a course on U.S. Government. Students were bombarded with

coverage of the election on television, the radio, and the Internet throughout the semester, and it would only have been a matter of time before they brought up the election had their teachers not already done so. Certainly, some of the teachers may have deftly sidestepped potentially volatile issues within the context of the election (i.e. abortion, same-sex marriage), but all engaged their students in discussions about the election to the extent they felt comfortable diverting time and resources away from the required curriculum (Journell, 2010b).

Therefore, all six teachers fell into one of Kelly's (1986) three other stances. The four teachers who refused to disclose their candidate preference fell into the neutral impartiality stance, or what Hess (2004) terms balance. These teachers remained silent about their political preferences out of a pedagogical belief that teachers should not place undue influence on their students to develop a particular ideology, and in the case of Mr. Harrison, out of fear of disrupting community norms. The remaining two teachers, Mr. Leander and Mr. Ryan, disclosed their political preferences to their students; yet, they did so in vastly different ways. Mr. Leander appeared to fall into the exclusive partiality or privileged (Hess, 2004) stance in that he presented his opinion as fact and often rebuked any contradictory viewpoints offered by his students. Mr. Ryan, on the other hand, seemed to come closest to Kelly's (1986) preferred stance of committed impartiality. He often disclosed his personal opinion as a way to enrich student discussion of a particular issue or to ensure that all views received fair coverage in his classroom.

The experiences of these six teachers highlight the complexities of teacher disclosure, and, based on these findings, it does not appear that the "disclosure dilemma" can be answered by simply saying that teachers should or should not disclose their personal beliefs in the classroom. However, these findings offer a starting point from which to assess both the merits and practicality of teacher disclosure. In the remainder of this section I will discuss the educational implications of this study, which will hopefully provide guidance to both pre-service and practicing teachers who struggle with the disclosure dilemma in their own classrooms.

Practicality of Neutrality

Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of teachers in this study chose a neutrality stance during their coverage of the election. These teachers prescribed to an ideology that is common among pre-service and practicing teachers in that neutrality offers students a safe environment in which they can, theoretically, develop their own political ideologies without fear of censorship or reproach. It is worth noting that all four of these teachers deliberately chose to be neutral in order to protect the politically open environment they desired for their classroom. None of the neutral teachers, with the possible exception of Mr. Harrison who was concerned about being ostracized for his political leanings, appeared to avoid disclosure because they were afraid of confrontation. Instead, it seemed as though all of the teachers had sincere concerns about unwillingly indoctrinating their students if they disclosed their personal beliefs.

In theory, neutrality may seem like a desirable option for those very reasons. Also, these teachers should be applauded for recognizing the power they hold in the classroom and the potential influence they have over their students, a fact that many pre-service and even practicing teachers often fail to fully comprehend (Ayers, 1998, 2006). Yet, the findings from these classes support

arguments made by Kelly (1986) and others (e.g. Passe & Evans, 1996; Reich, 2007) that teacher neutrality can never truly exist.

However, what made the actions of these four teachers potentially damaging is that they all sincerely thought they were neutral in their classroom because they never explicitly disclosed their candidate choice during the course of the campaign. Yet, these four teachers regularly exhibited their political leanings through their words, actions, and choices of instructional material, which supports previous research on other "neutral" social studies teachers (Niemi & Niemi, 2007). Even though at no point did any of these teachers overtly push a certain political agenda on their students by explicitly telling them who to support in the presidential election or by tying their academic performance to their political ideology, the teachers often sent clear political messages in their classes. Oftentimes, these elements of bias occurred through subtle comments made in casual conversation, such as Mr. Harrison stating that he believed Obama was talking "through the side of his mouth" with respect to abortion or Mr. Pierce stating that Palin was only chosen as a candidate because she was female. What may seem like a fairly innocent comment may be selectively taken and assigned meaning to by students, as appeared to be the case of the student who believed Mr. Harrison was voting for McCain because he had made comments about Obama that were derogatory, at least from the student's perspective. Other times, the bias came across through what was included or not included in classroom instruction, as exemplified by Ms. Wilkinson who often showed speeches by Obama without countering with similar videos of McCain or Palin or giving an explanation of their exclusion.

Clearly, despite their best intentions, none of the neutral teachers were completely unbiased in their coverage of the election. Further, I would argue that an expectation of neutrality sets teachers up for failure. Teachers often have strong political opinions, and it is human nature to advocate one's beliefs. Even if teachers avoid overt displays of bias in their classrooms, their role as gatekeepers and instructional decision-makers will inevitably affect the way in which they structure their classrooms, which, as Reich (2007) notes, can never truly be rid of bias.

Threats of Indoctrination

As previously stated, the primary reason that these teachers chose to practice neutrality was that they were afraid of indoctrinating their students. However, the results of this study suggest that these fears may have been unfounded, and by not disclosing their political preferences, I would argue that these teachers may have even influenced their students more than the two teachers who disclosed their political beliefs. To argue this point, I will refer to an exercise conducted by one of my graduate students during a presentation on controversial discussions. She arranged our classroom into a Likert scale with signs ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" posted throughout the room. She then read various controversial statements, and the members of the class had to move to the area of the room that corresponded with their feelings about the statement. One of the statements was "Schools should refuse to hire openly racist or sexist teachers." Not surprisingly, many students went to the area of the classroom marked "agree" or "strongly agree." However, several students chose the opposite stance and explained their opinion by stating that openly racist/sexist teachers would not cause as much psychological and emotional damage to students as teachers who are secretly racist/sexist

because the transparency of the openly racist/sexist teachers allows students to place their teacher's comments within an appropriate context.

Now, I do not wish to imply that withholding political preferences is akin to being racist or sexist, but the analogy is the same. It appeared that the students of the two disclosure teachers, Mr. Ryan and Mr. Leander, appreciated knowing where their teacher stood politically, and it helped them separate political fact from their teachers' political opinion. Even in Mr. Leander's class where he openly advocated Obama and left little opportunity for dissenting opinions, the students did not appear unduly influenced. As one of his politically conservative students noted, Mr. Leander had actually made him "even more of a Republican," because he was able to distinguish between the issues being discussed and what he perceived as Mr. Leander's liberal agenda. The students in Mr. Ryan's class also seemed to appreciate the honest approach he took in his class, and several of their comments suggested that they admired him for feeling passionate about social and political issues even if they did not personally agree with his political opinions. Moreover, they seemed to respect the way in which Mr. Ryan advocated his beliefs in the classroom, by maintaining a clear balance between being forthright and forcing his views upon his students. In this sense, these findings support previous research that has found students generally support teacher disclosure as long as they feel the teacher does not have a hidden political agenda (Hess & McAvoy, 2009).

The students in the neutral impartiality classes, however, did not have the luxury of knowing where their teachers stood politically. Some of the more politically aware students may have been able to discern fact from opinion in these classes, but when teachers do not disclose, the ways in which they inevitably articulate their political views often come across as fact. While it is impossible to measure indoctrination, it seems plausible that these teachers who failed to disclose actually may have influenced their students' political ideologies to a greater extent than had they been forthright about their candidate preference at the beginning of the semester.

Yet, the fact that the majority of the students that I interviewed could not accurately predict their teacher's choice of candidate in the election raises questions about the actual impact of teacher disclosure on students. The students who agreed to be interviewed in this study only represented a small percentage of the students in each class, which prohibits making any strong assertions about this aspect of the study. It is certainly plausible that had I interviewed all of the students in each class, I would have found more students who could have easily identified their teacher's political affiliations. However, the findings from the students who were interviewed align with previous research by Hess and McAvoy (2009) that suggest students often have difficulty recognizing teachers' opinions when they are not clearly expressed.

Problems with Disclosure

As my observations of Mr. Ryan and Mr. Leander show, teacher disclosure can take many forms, some of which can create potentially damaging effects to the development of students' political identities. While any type of disclosure may remove the ambiguity surrounding the political instruction being given, the exclusive partiality stance taken by Mr. Leander provided little guidance on how to effectively articulate one's beliefs in a public setting and potentially fostered political cynicism among his students (Niemi & Niemi, 2007). The name-calling, sarcastic

remarks, and stereotypes frequently used by Mr. Leander did little to model appropriate civic behavior, which, for Kelly (1986), is the primary reason why teachers should disclose their political views. Moreover, the way Mr. Leander positioned himself as the only true political expert in the class often seemed to prevent prolonged discussions from taking place.

Mr. Ryan, on the other hand, seemed to find the delicate balance between advocating his opinion and remaining impartial to competing viewpoints. As a result, he was able to reap the benefits of committed impartiality advocated by Kelly (1986). Discussions in Mr. Ryan's classroom often delved deeper into the election than any of the other classes in the study, including Mr. Leander's class where discussions often centered on Mr. Leander rebuking opinions that deviated from his own. Moreover, the discussions in Mr. Ryan's class were often more analytical because he was not afraid to juxtapose his own opinions into the conversation, which often allowed the discussions to continue and expand. Even when Mr. Ryan assumed the role of the devil's advocate in order to further a discussion, there was no ambiguity that may have existed in a non-disclosure classroom because his students knew where he stood politically. In contrast, discussions in the neutral classrooms often faded quickly because the teachers rarely wanted to give their own opinions and preferred to let their students discuss among themselves. While this is a noble goal, Hess and Ganzler (2007) found that such discussions will often falter or turn intolerant, particularly in classrooms that lack ideological diversity.

Finally, the way in which Mr. Ryan articulated his political viewpoints in his classroom modeled appropriate civic behavior. Mr. Ryan was a very strong conservative; yet, he entertained opinions from all sides and gave rational explanations for why he believed a certain way. By the end of the semester, Mr. Ryan had not changed his choice of candidate based on the conversations that had occurred in class, and based on the surveys given to his students at the end of the semester, neither had they. Yet, Kelly (1986) would argue that Mr. Ryan and his students had developed a positive relationship that allowed both parties to mature ideologically throughout the semester, and Mr. Ryan had used his influence to model the appropriate way in which a thoughtful citizen articulates his or her opinion in a pluralistic democracy.

Conclusion

After observing the actions of these six teachers over the course of a semester, I would have to concur with Kelly (1986) and others who argue that neutrality is impossible to achieve. Yet, I recognize the hesitation of pre-service and practicing teachers to disclose their personal beliefs to their students because the line between committed impartiality and exclusive partiality is very thin. One could easily argue that Mr. Leander created a considerably worse atmosphere in his class than any of the neutral teachers did because of his constant negativity toward politics and general refusal to validate dissenting opinions.

However, there seems to be inherent educational and civic value to teacher disclosure. Based on Mr. Ryan's classroom, Kelly (1986) appears correct in that a committed impartiality stance allows for more vibrant political discussions. Moreover, if as Parker and Hess (2001) argue, the act of discussing holds as much civic value as the topics being discussed, then it seems logical that students would need appropriate modeling of how to participate in a civic discussion, just like they would any other academic task. Therefore, perhaps the greater implication of this study

is the need to change the common culture of education from one of fearing indoctrination to one of modeling appropriate civic behavior. While striving for committed impartiality may ultimately prove to be as futile as striving for neutrality, teachers should be encouraged to model appropriate civic behavior rather than project the appearance of civic disengagement.

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Notes

ⁱ Much of Hess's (2004) typology overlaps the descriptions offered by Kelly (1986). For example, Hess's description of "privilege" mirrors that of exclusive partiality. Similarly, Hess uses the term "avoidance" in the same way Kelly uses exclusive neutrality.

ⁱⁱ For a detailed description of the demographics of each school, please refer to Journell, 2009.