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ERIC TRACKS

Academic Controversy

David W. Johnson
University of Minnesota

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education has recently published **Academic Controversy: Enriching College Instruction Through Intellectual Conflict** by David W. Johnson, Roger Johnson, and Karl Smith. In it they discuss the value and importance of creating intellectual conflict (i.e., academic controversy) in the college classroom. In this ERIC Tracks column, David Johnson reviews the cornerstones of research behind the book.

Every college instructor may wish to remember that (a) conflicts are inevitable and (b) conflicts have many potentially positive outcomes. In most if not all subject areas, no matter what you do, students will disagree with each other and even with the authorities in the field. **Intellectual controversy** exists when one student's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement. The goal of controversy is for the individuals involved to reach the best reasoned judgment possible by giving all points of view a fair and complete hearing and viewing the issue from all perspectives. Controversies are an inherent part of reaching a reasoned judgment, making decisions, and being a citizen in a democracy. While the controversy process occurs naturally, it may be considerably enhanced when teachers structure it in academic situations. Structuring controversy in lessons can result in greater motivation to learn, higher achievement, greater retention, more frequent higher-level reasoning, more creative thinking and problem-solving, and more constructive social and cognitive development. There are so many advantages to intellectual conflict in the classroom that it is hard to understand why instructors use it so infrequently. One reason may be that they do not know that they are supposed to create intellectual conflict as part of the educational experience. Another reason may be that they do not know how to do so. The book *Academic Controversy* addresses these two issues.

Over the past 35 years the authors have developed a theory of controversy and conducted over 20 experimental and field-experimental research studies to test and refine the theory. Our work represents the majority of the research directly focused on controversy. There are, however, dozens and dozens of related studies addressing parts of the theory. In this column the history of the theory and research that inspired and paralleled our work and underlies the use of academic controversy in college classes is traced.

The Value of Conflict

Utilizing the power of conflict to focus students' attention on what is to be learned, generating continuing motivation to learn and inquire, creating a need for improved conceptual frameworks, and generating more creative and

higher-quality decisions begin with realizing that conflict potentially has many positive outcomes and is essential to learning. Traditionally, many college faculty have viewed conflict as being destructive and tried to avoid and suppress it in the classroom. Instead, faculty must create, seek out, and structure intellectual conflict in order to maximize student learning and motivation.

Graham, P. (Ed.). 1995. **Mary Parker Follett—Prophet of Management.**

Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Deutsch, M. 1969. "Conflicts: Productive and Destructive." *Journal of Social Issues*, 25, 7-41.

Both this book and this article are landmarks in presenting the position that conflicts can be constructive if managed skillfully. Mary Parker Follett, an amazing pioneer whose career peaked in the 1920s, emphasized the potential for problem solving that results in integrative solutions that fulfill the needs of everyone involved. She pointed out the many ways that conflict can lead to integrative problem solving that creates positive outcomes for everyone involved. Morton Deutsch, perhaps the greatest living theorist in the field of conflict, emphasized the satisfaction parties feel after the conflict is over. Deutsch describes the conditions under which conflicts result in constructive outcomes. The vivid examples and conceptual frameworks he presents set the stage for our research that began in the mid 1960s on integrative problem solving and academic controversy.

Cognitive and Moral Development

Constructively managed conflict not only increases achievement and motivation, it also is essential for cognitive and moral growth. A wide variety of developmental psychologists have proposed that conflict is an inherent part of healthy growth. One of the most clearly stated developmental theories that places controversy at the center of healthy growth was proposed by Piaget.

Piaget, J. 1948. *The Moral Judgment of the Child.* Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Piaget, J. 1950. *The Psychology of Intelligence.* New York: Harper.

Piaget proposed, on the basis of his observations of children's cognitive and moral development, the premise

that when individuals cooperate, socio-cognitive conflict occurs and creates cognitive disequilibrium, which leads to a need to verify one's information and reasoning, which results in the development of logic, all of which stimulates perspective-taking ability and cognitive and moral development. To Piaget, working cooperatively with peers results in conflict that accelerates a child's intellectual development by forcing him or her to reach consensus with other individuals who hold opposing points of view about the answer to the school task. Piaget argued that a person's need for logic arises from being confronted with opposing ideas, which leads to doubt and a desire to verify. Cognitive and moral reasoning advance the more frequently controversy occurs during cooperative endeavors.

Controversy, Effective Decision Making, and Healthy Organizations

Janis, I. 1982. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

The need for controversy, and some of the destructive consequences of trying to make decisions without disagreement and intellectual challenge, are found in the examples of decision making fiascoes documented by Janis. Groupthink is the collective striving for unanimity that overrides group members' motivation realistically to appraise alternative courses of action and, thereby, leads to (a) deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment and (b) ignoring external information inconsistent with the favored alternative course of action. Groupthink leads to concurrence seeking where group members inhibit discussion in order to avoid any disagreement or arguments, emphasize agreement, and avoid realistic appraisal of alternative ideas and courses of action. Quick compromises and censorship of disagreement are characteristic of groups dominated by concurrence seeking. Janis discusses the conditions under which groupthink arises and flourishes and the procedures (notably controversy) that must be encouraged in decision-making situations to ensure that groupthink is not taking place.

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October

Editor's Note:

Late last spring, I began to have second thoughts about what I was doing. "I just write about the ideals," I thought, "I never write about the shadows." And teaching has many shadows in it, things they don't warn you about in graduate school and generally don't talk much about in programs for new faculty. Hence, the lead article in this issue of the *Forum*. For me the crux, the nightmare at the center of student incivility, comes exactly at the point where my ideals and my insecurities meet. It's there that I'm vulnerable and there that any class I teach becomes vulnerable, for if I'm not calm and centered and confident, I can betray my high mission, not fulfill it. And my mission excludes resorting to all those authoritarian modes of control the anger that rises up in my insecurity prompts me to. I have to know what I'm doing, not just know my subject. And worst of all, I can presume nothing except that I'm expected to lead the class back to a productive path.

You sense, I'm sure, that I approached this topic with some unease. I've come away from my interviews feeling quite differently. Paths lead out of my nightmare, productive ones, non-authoritarian ones that can turn these frights into teachable moments. Teachers can harness the energy in incivility and turn it to a good end. We've known this was true of conflict, debate, controversy for a long time, but we've been inclined to forget it. David Johnson reminds us of the long and distinguished history of "academic controversy" in this issue's ERIC Tracks column.

There's a partnership in a good debate. Indeed, as Pankaj Saxena's PRAXIS article suggests, "partnership" serves as a powerful metaphor for faculty and students working together in a course. Similarly, Madeleine Picciotto's article on "whole-class collaborations" draws a vivid picture of the excitement learning together can release.

Tom Creed, the *Forum's* contributing editor on technology and pedagogy, takes this issue's TECHPED column to discuss the importance of selecting software that allows you to structure your students' interactions with course material (and with each other) even in the "virtual space" of the World Wide Web. There, too, partnership and collaboration overwhelm unproductive conflict.

And finally, to move out of the shadows and momentarily into the conceptual light, William Palmer revisits William Glasser's "five conditions of quality," guideposts for reviewing both our efforts and our processes.

The symbiotic partnership between the printed periodical you hold in your hand and [its site on the Web](#) also continues as a growing resource. Last week alone, there were over 6,000 "hits" on the site. In support of this issue, subscribers will find posted there useful handouts, a bibliography of sources and additional contacts for the lead article, "Teaching and Crowd Control." As usual, Tom Creed's "Virtual Communal Space" offers stimulating additional material and contacts that demonstrate the ideas and concepts discussed in his column.

With this issue, the *Forum* reaches thousands of new readers whose campuses have established site licenses to make the publication available to all their faculty. Welcome! Remember that for you the Web site and e-mail addresses in the online Web edition are "hot links" through which you can immediately access additional materials or post a message to an author. You can also post your reactions to the discussion section of the [Forum's Web site](#) or send me immediate feedback. You can also "flame" me, of course, but that takes us back to "incivilities" and we've already covered that. Haven't we?

— James Rhem

Tjosvold, D. 1991. *The Conflict Positive Organization*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

One of the early researchers on controversy and the positive impact it has on decision making was Dean Tjosvold. In this book he discusses how to make an organization conflict-positive rather than conflict-negative. Much of the book is based on his extensive research on controversy. Collaborating with the authors in the 1970s, Tjosvold's research was instrumental in (a) documenting the process of controversy (uncertainty results from being challenged by others) and (b) identifying the conditions under which controversy results in positive or negative outcomes (in a cooperative context, positive outcomes tend to result while in a competitive context, negative outcomes tend to result). He applies his research to decision making in organizations, and his research in the 1980s and 1990s has documented the positive consequences of controversy on the decision making and problem solving of a wide variety of companies.

Maier, N. 1970. *Problem Solving and Creativity in Individuals and Groups*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Maier's research documented that poor decisions are often made for a number of reasons. One is that group members quickly decide on a solution based on their dominant response and, therefore, do not think of the proper alternatives or do a poor job of evaluating and choosing among the alternatives being considered. A second is that even when group members identify the proper alternatives, group members often do a poor job of evaluating and choosing among the alternatives. Maier and his associates found in their research that controversy corrects for these two flaws in decision making. In addition, they conclude that controversy results in more creative solutions and more member satisfaction compared to group decision making without controversy. Controversy encourages group members to dig into a problem, raise issues, and settle them in ways that show the benefits of a wide range of ideas being used. Controversies also result in a high degree of emotional involvement in and commitment to solving the problems the group is working on. Groups with heterogeneous members are often more effective than homogeneous groups because with

heterogeneity come more frequent natural controversies.

General Field of Group Dynamics

Moscovici, S. 1985. "Social Influence and Conformity." In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (3rd Ed., Vol. 2, pp. 347-412). New York: Random House.

Whether individuals' views are challenged by a majority or by a minority of group members has important implications on the outcomes of controversy. **Majorities** typically exert more influence than do minorities through compliance or conversion. **Minorities** convert through validating their position. Minorities stimulate a greater consideration of other alternatives. Those exposed to minority views are stimulated to attend to more aspects of the situation, they think in more divergent ways, and they are more likely to detect novel solutions or come to new decisions. On the balance, these solutions and decisions are "better" or "more correct."

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, F. 1997. *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills* (6th Ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

The broad field of group dynamics provides numerous bodies of research in the areas of goals and motivation, minority influence, leadership, communication, power and diversity, that support the theory of controversy. The central role of controversy in effective decision making and creative problem solving is discussed in depth.

Academic Controversy and Citizenship

It is vital for citizens in a democracy to seek reasoned judgment on the complex problems facing our society. Especially important is educating individuals to solve problems for which different points of view can plausibly be developed. To do so individuals must enter empathetically into the arguments of both sides of the issue and ensure that the strongest possible case is made for each side, and arrive at a synthesis based on rational thought. Structured academic controversies are a vital instructional tool that teaches the skills students need to be responsible citizens in a democracy, resolve civil justice issues without going to court, and improve their academic achievement. |||

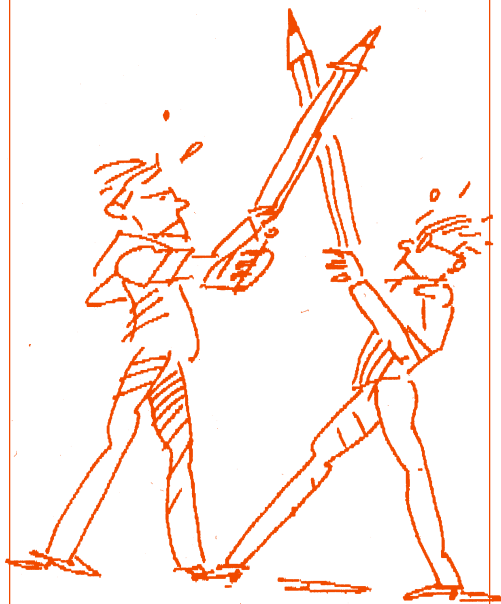
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Have you learned lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside for you?

Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced themselves against you, and disputed the passage with you?

— Walt Whitman, 1860



Academic Controversy by David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith summarizes the theory and research supporting the use of academic controversy, and describes the process of how controversy works. It then goes on to detail the instructional procedures for implementing intellectual conflict among students.

The monograph is available for \$24.00 (plus \$3.75 postage) from ASHE/ERIC, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183. (Telephone: 800-773-ERIC)

Advocates of Controversy

Pericles 95-429 BC

...instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.

John Milton 1608-1674

Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing...

Samuel Johnson 1709-1784

I dogmatize and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight.

Edmund Burke 1727-1797

He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.

Thomas Jefferson 1743-1826

Difference of opinion leads to inquiry, and inquiry to truth.

Walter Savage Landor 1775-1864

There is no more certain sign of a narrow mind, of stupidity, and of arrogance, than to stand aloof from those who think differently from us.

John Stuart Mill 1806-1873

Since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinion that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Mark Twain 1835-1910

It is best that we should not all think alike. It's difference of opinion that makes horse races.

John Dewey 1859-1952

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving... Conflict is a "sine qua non" of reflection and ingenuity.

