
Democracy & Education

Containing Risk.

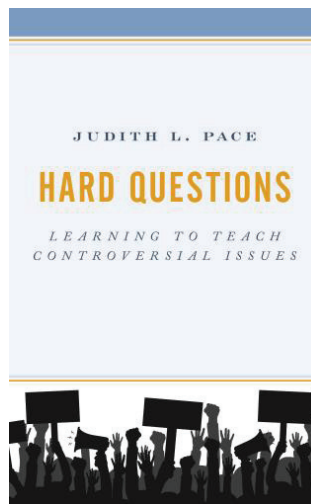
A Book Review of *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*

Jeffrey Frenkiewich (University of New Hampshire)

THE QUESTION OF how best to engage students in civil discourse pertaining to controversial issues has been a perennial concern of teachers for decades. The National Council for the Social Studies originally published its *Handbook for Teaching Social Issues* in 1996 (Evans & Saxe, 1996), and more recently, scholars such as Hess and McAvoy (2014), Noddings and Brooks (2016), and Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) have each made their case for why teachers must engage their students in the controversies of our times and how best to do it. Yet recent political events in the United States and around the world have added urgency to this discussion as many educators still struggle with how to teach controversial issues in a politically polarized society.

In *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*, Judith L. Pace (2021) asks “What do we know about how teachers of the future are being prepared to take up this demanding pedagogical practice” (p. xv)? With many teachers hesitant to engage their students in lessons centered on controversial topics, and with high stakes attached to the outcomes of these lessons (p. xx), it is a worthy endeavor to explore what is being done to prepare teachers for this challenge and develop best practices.

To answer this question, Pace (2021) conducted observations and interviews with university professors and their students in three countries (Northern Ireland, England, and the United States). The book is organized in a series of paired chapters where the author first describes class sessions taught by teacher educators on the topic of controversial issues, illustrating what they taught, the



methods that were used, and the preservice teachers' responses. The second chapter in the pair profiles the preservice teachers in each research site and recounts interviews with those teachers in which they relay the most important lessons they took away from the courses on teaching controversial issues. These chapters also describe the classroom experiences of those teachers (either preservice or in their first year) and highlight the supports, challenges, constraints, and questions they

experienced. The final chapter of the book provides the author's synthesis of the research and offers conclusions and recommendations for preparing educators to teach controversial issues.

Pace's analysis, as recognized by the author, is not concerned with evaluating teaching practices or determining any causal relationships between teacher-educator instruction and novice-teacher practice. Rather, this work documents what is being done in the selected case-study sites and traces how cultural, sociopolitical, and institutional forces may have shaped those practices (Pace, 2021, p. xvii). Each of Pace's observations aligns with the author's grounded theory framework of contained, constrained, and supported risk-taking, and she argues that this framework guides

JEFF FRENKIEWICH teaches philosophy of education, school policy, and social studies methods courses at the University of New Hampshire. He also teaches eighth-grade U.S. history and government at Milford Middle School.

the practices of the teacher educators and their students, regardless of cultural or political context (p. 179).

The most useful part of Pace's (2021) work comes at the end of each chapter where the author lists the key lessons learned from the teacher educators and the takeaways from the reports of the novice teachers. Pace argues that contained risk-taking is helpful for teaching controversial issues in polarized societies because it helps teachers balance the needs of establishing order and also eliciting student engagement (p. 161). Elements of this contained risk-taking include cultivating a warm, supportive classroom environment; thorough preparation and planning; proactive communication with parents, other teachers, and administration; and careful selection, timing, and framing of issues (p. 162).

While teachers can contain their risk-taking, they also face certain constraints that are often out of their control. These constraints include the amount of time teachers have to engage with controversial issues (Pace, 2021, p. 168), the level of student engagement (Pace, 2021, p. 169), school culture (Pace, 2021, p. 169), the influence of other teachers and department leadership (Pace, 2021, p. 170), curriculum and testing policies (Pace, 2021, p. 170), teachers' peer network and their connections to their home university (Pace, 2021, p. 171), and general anxiety regarding the teaching of controversial issues (Pace, 2021, p. 171).

The third part of Pace's (2021) theory, supported risk, provides the most important pedagogical strategy for both teacher educators and their student-teachers. Pace emphasizes the importance of role-modeling in both the relationship between teacher educators and novice teachers and the relationship between classroom teacher and students. Citing the reflections of the novice teachers, the author suggests that teachers model curiosity, open-mindedness, willingness to probe entrenched positions and conventional views, and tolerance (p. 165). This culture begins with the teacher educators and is built through the educators who have direct contact with children. In the final chapter, Pace provides six advice tips for teacher educators, and all but one of them centers on the theme of modeling best practices for teaching controversial issues or having students role-play the pedagogy—the outlier asks teacher educators to provide time for student reflection (p. 172).

Pace (2021) suggests that the book's most significant contribution is that the research presented here provides argument for a pedagogy that can be adopted across culturally and nationally distinct settings (p. 179). Pace's grounded theory framework of contained, constrained, and supported risk-taking seems an appropriate model for understanding how best to prepare

educators for engaging students in a curriculum centered on controversial issues, and the author argues that in courses where theory is not “divorced from, nor was it privilege over, practice,” teacher educators can prepare preservice teachers with the practical and conceptual tools necessary for success (p. 179)—a solid argument for why teacher preparation programs at the university level are still important to the functioning of our public education system and, in turn, our democratic society.

With the sound argument presented in this work, Pace's (2021) book is worthy of consideration. However, this recommendation comes with a word of caution, specifically related to the intended audience. At first glance, the subtitle of the book, *Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*, suggests it may be a practitioner's guide for developing effective pedagogy. While this aspect is certainly present in the “key takeaways” provided at the end of each chapter, a classroom teacher looking for easily accessible practical advice may be disappointed. The author makes clear that the purpose of the book is to provide an empirical account of how teacher educators are preparing their students for work with controversial issues (p. xvii), and with the book's prose reading much like a qualitative dissertation with elaborate descriptions of classroom observations, this work may be better suited for scholars than those looking for a pedagogical guidebook. Pace's key takeaways are useful, but teacher educators looking for a book to assign to preservice teachers and educators already in the field, may be best served by other available options that do not tour the reader through a bog of long narratives before reaching the shore of practical application. With that said, Pace's analysis of teacher preparation programs and the suggestions the author gives for those programs are an important contribution to the literature, and teacher educators, preservice teachers, and practicing teachers can all benefit from considering the argument presented here.

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