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Learning to Teach Controversial Issues in a Divided Society
Adaptive Appropriation of Pedagogical Tools

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Abstract

Worldwide crises, including a global pandemic, have exposed deep divisions, democracy's fragility, and humanity's vulnerability. Educators are called upon to help students grapple with these crises and strengthen democracy through teaching controversial issues. How can teachers be prepared for this highly demanding, often avoided set of practices, particularly in contentious times? This exploratory case study examines how preservice teachers, in a citizenship methods course in the divided society of Northern Ireland, were provided by their teacher educator with an adaptable toolkit to safely and pragmatically teach controversial issues. The concept of *adaptive appropriation* explains how preservice teachers took up discussion of controversial issues, adjusting to their teaching contexts and identities.

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Introduction

IN A WORLD turned upside down by confrontations over political divisions, threats to democracy, and the coronavirus pandemic, cultivating young people's civic reasoning and discourse about controversial issues could not be more urgent (Conklin, 2021). Education scholars have argued for decades that classroom discussion of controversial issues is fundamental for cultivating understandings, skills, and habits needed to strengthen and uphold a democratic society (Gutmann, 2004; Hahn, 1998; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2006). Resources for teaching controversial issues are plentiful (Foster, 2014; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Journell, 2016), but many teachers avoid it because they feel unprepared to meet its challenges (Hess, 2009; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Scholars and policymakers have called for university-based teacher education to prepare preservice teachers to teach issues being debated in these contentious times (Carter Andrews et al., 2018; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). Yet research suggests this preparation is limited (Ersoy, 2010; Nganga et al., 2020; Woolley, 2011). And although some teacher educators do undertake this work, scholarship that examines these efforts has been lacking.

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This article draws from a cross-national qualitative study on teacher educator (TE) efforts to prepare preservice teachers (PSTs) for teaching controversial issues (TCI) in Northern Ireland (NI), England, and the United States (Pace, 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b). Here, I focus on one case to address the following questions: How are PSTs in a citizenship methods course located in the divided society of NI prepared with pedagogical tools for TCI? What comprises PSTs' learning about TCI and their attempts at using these tools during school placements? And what factors shape these attempts?

The case study presented in this article examines a teacher educator's provision of an adaptable pedagogical toolkit and preservice teachers' initial appropriation of tools during school placements. It bears significant lessons for teacher education that advances democratic education in these extremely polarized and contentious times and raises important questions for secondary school and teacher education practice as well as institutional policy.

Theoretical Frameworks

Teaching Controversial Issues

Conceptions of controversial issues vary. British scholars Stradling, Noctor, and Baines (1984) defined controversial issues as "those problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values" (p. 2). Controversial issues are taught through inquiry, analysis of sources, formulation of arguments, position-taking, and decision-making (Ho et al., 2017).

According to research, discussion of issues in an open classroom climate, in which the class examines diverse perspectives, the teacher encourages students to express their views, and students feel free to disagree with their teacher and peers, is most beneficial (Hahn, 2011). It is correlated with increased political efficacy, interest, knowledge, and engagement (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

Skillful teaching of controversy requires discussion facilitation and several other complex capabilities such as creating a supportive and open classroom environment and facilitating inquiry-based learning (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). Discussion places great demands on teachers (Parker & Hess, 2001), and studies find it is rare in social studies classrooms (Barton & Avery, 2016).

Additionally, teachers of CI navigate sociopolitical tensions in the wider society that students bring to school (McCully, 2006; Pace, 2015). In post-conflict societies, TCI can provoke strong emotional reactions, which increase challenges for teachers (Barton & McCully, 2007; Kitson, 2007; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Where there is ongoing conflict, discussion of controversial issues may be avoided or suppressed (Pollack et al., 2018).

TCI is shaped by institutional structures in different national contexts (Ho et al., 2014; Misco, 2012; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Educational regimes may undermine TCI through curriculum policies, accountability mandates, and technicist standards for teaching (Montgomery & McGlynn, 2009). Ho et al. (2017) have stated that TCI involves navigating "a complex terrain of institutional and curricular constraints; societal discourse and expectations; national, group, and individual histories; local, state, and national politics; personal beliefs; and multiple and overlapping identities involving ethnicity and religion" (p. 323).

Preparation of Preservice Teachers for Teaching Controversial Issues

Little scholarship exists on preparation of PSTs for TCI (Pace, 2021). Dahlgren, Humphries, and Washington (2014) found that their PSTs, when assigned to teach a controversial issue in student teaching placements, taught a wide range of controversies; however, they restricted classroom discussion. The authors did not report what they did to prepare for TCI.

Hess (2001, 2003) and Parker (2003) described their preparation of preservice teachers to lead discussion. Hess's PSTs participated in discussions with different structures and analyzed videos. They examined the nature of controversial issues through conceptual formation activities. Hess's classes discussed teachers' roles and assessment practices. The PSTs developed controversial issues discussion lesson plans, taught them during their school placements, and revised them. Parker demonstrated facilitation of Socratic seminars and structured academic controversies, invited PSTs to rehearse facilitation, and assigned them discussion-based lesson planning. Both approaches embody practice-based teacher education as well as teaching with discussion and teaching for discussion (Parker & Hess, 2001). The former utilizes discussion as a major vehicle for teaching and learning while the latter cultivates capacities for participating in discussions and understanding its relationship to democracy.

Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) explained that according to sociocultural theorists (e.g., Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1981), learning to teach occurs through problem-solving mediated by social interactions, tools, and practices located in distinct yet connected, culturally shaped activity settings. For PSTs, these settings include university coursework and school placements. PST learning also is mediated by teacher identity, which includes goals, values, and educational histories. Grossman and colleagues (1999) stated, "Activity theory is useful . . . particularly in illuminating how teachers choose pedagogical tools to inform and conduct their teaching" (p. 4). Conceptual tools include principles, theories, and frameworks that guide teaching. Practical tools are methods, strategies, and resources that teachers use. Learning to teach occurs through a process of appropriating, or adopting, conceptual and practical pedagogical tools and making sense of what they do and how they should be used.

Appropriation of pedagogical tools from coursework is challenged by the disjuncture between educational ideals and realities of K–12 classrooms (Kennedy, 1999). For example, inquiry-based learning clashes with curriculum coverage and exam preparation. Appropriation may also be impeded by the "apprenticeship of observation" (Korthagen, 2010; Lortie, 1975)—deeply held understandings about teaching and learning that result from many years of being a student. The long-standing divide between theory and practice identified in university-based teacher education contributes to the problem (la Velle, 2019).

Grossman et al. (2000) explained that TEs must support appropriation of conceptual tools with explicit modeling of practical tools (Lunenberg et al., 2007; Ritter, 2012) and reflective conversations about them.

Jesnet, Klette, and Hammerness (2018) highlighted the importance of emphasizing different kinds of practice in teacher education coursework. They analyzed data from methods courses in six programs located in Finland, Norway, and California. The researchers found that, overall, teacher candidates had the least opportunity to rehearse teacher roles, see explicit models of teaching, and analyze student learning. They had many opportunities to take the students' perspective (do work that students would do) and use, discuss, or analyze teachers' materials, artifacts, and resources (p. 192). Opportunities to plan and rehearse teaching, make connections to local and national curriculum, and discuss school placement experiences were variable across programs.

To strengthen teacher preparation for a crucial and demanding set of practices, we need to know more about how TEs equip PSTs with pedagogical tools, how PSTs appropriate them, and how factors located in university coursework, school placements, and PST identity shape appropriation.

Methods

I conducted a qualitative study from 2016 to 2018 to examine how PSTs were prepared to teach controversial issues and what they learned. The study was located at four universities in Northern Ireland (NI), England, and the United States. This article focuses on one of two research sites in NI. I chose this case because all four PSTs reported successfully teaching at least one CI lesson during student teaching.

Setting and Sample

NI is an informative national context for teaching controversial issues because of its history of and educational initiatives aimed at addressing it (McCully & Emerson, 2014). Division is rooted in centuries of conflict between the native, Catholic Irish and British rulers and Protestant settlers from England and Scotland. The violent response to the civil rights campaign in the late 1960s protesting long-standing discrimination against Catholics sparked the 30-year period of violent conflict known as the Troubles. The 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement (GFA) created a power-sharing government, dramatically decreasing sectarian violence. But there was no formal transitional justice and reconciliation process (Worden & Smith, 2017).

Despite major efforts toward a peaceful and more cohesive society, unresolved trauma, injustice, and mistrust persist. A culture of conflict avoidance in schools and the broader society has hindered efforts at reconciliation (King, 2009). The Northern Ireland Assembly (NI Parliament) collapsed over political battles in winter 2017 and only resumed in 2020. Brexit has exacerbated tensions that in early 2021 erupted in violence. Of course, many controversies not related to sectarian conflict, for example, marriage equality and abortion, also divide public opinion in NI.

To conduct my study, I recruited teacher educators based on purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) assisted by my professional network. Paula (pseudonym) was an experienced social sciences and citizenship teacher educator as well as human rights scholar and activist. She worked with young people in a variety of schools and communities. She helped develop NI's Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) curriculum and conducted professional development on TCI. Paula was especially interested in developing young peoples' critical understanding of politics. This commitment permeated the citizenship methods course she taught for a mixed group of politics, sociology, and religious education preservice teachers.

The course prepared graduate preservice teachers to teach at the secondary level (ages 11 to 18). NI's Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programs generally schedule courses for two six-week blocks that alternate with student teaching placements and meet briefly at the end of the academic year. Over a ten-month program, preservice teachers spend about twice the amount of time in school placements as they do at university.

Paula's main teaching responsibility was social sciences. Citizenship is an additional credential that may be added to one's major certification, and the course meets for about three hours each week. Paula's PGCE program requires that social sciences teacher candidates take citizenship. Religious education candidates take it as well. The class I studied had 24 students.

The four PSTs I interviewed volunteered to participate in my study. Margaret and Sean, from working-class Catholic backgrounds, were earning their PGCE in social sciences, and their focus was politics. Luke and Andrew, from middle-class Protestant backgrounds, were in the religious education PGCE. Margaret and Sean grew up during the Troubles, while Luke and Andrew were too young to remember it. The two older students had several years of experience working in schools. Luke had worked for one year as a special needs aide. Andrew was the youngest and least experienced.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to study the preparation of PSTs for teaching controversial issues. I resided in NI in the fall and winter of 2016–2017 for two months total. During this time, I was a participant observer, visiting Paula's citizenship course for 18 hours spread over five class sessions. I wrote detailed field notes, recorded lessons focused on teaching controversial issues, and collected course-related documents.

Over the year, I conducted a series of three audio-recorded, semi-structured individual interviews (final interviews were conducted through Zoom) with Paula and four preservice teachers from her course. The fall interviews with PSTs took place after Paula's daylong session on teaching controversial issues, the winter interviews after the class I observed on February 20, and the summer interviews after the school year had concluded. Luke was not available for the winter interview, and Margaret was not available for the summer interview.

I also collected PSTs' lesson plans on CI and end-of-year essays on the teacher's role when dealing with sensitive and controversial issues. Analyses of these four data sources—field notes, interview transcripts, course documents, and PST

documents—were triangulated to strengthen validity (Maxwell, 2005).

During data collection, I wrote reflective research memos and did open coding of interview transcripts and field notes using NVivo software, which informed subsequent data collection.

To analyze Paula's preparation of PSTs for teaching CI, I developed a coding structure that fleshed out her purposes, conceptual and practical tools taught, and pedagogical approaches used. For example, the concept *Purposes* included the categories *Safety* and *Pragmatism*. For the analysis of PSTs' appropriation, I developed coding structures for PST identity, learning from coursework, and student teaching experience. The concept *Learning from Coursework* included *Conceptual Tools* and *Practical Tools*. Identification of relationships within and across these concepts and categories along with in-depth interpretations of data generated findings.

I discovered that an important pattern was PSTs' adaptation of tools learned in Paula's course, specifically discussion methods, to fit their school placement contexts and teacher identity. Tacking back and forth between my theoretical framework and data, I developed a "core category" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14) and an analytical argument about adaptive appropriation of pedagogical tools for teaching CI.

Results

Paula provided her class with an adaptable toolkit for TCI that could be used with different subjects, student populations, school cultures, and teacher proclivities. Her emphasis on safety and pragmatism, situated within the contentious yet conflict avoidant culture of NI, encouraged cautious experimentation and gave permission to PSTs to adapt the pedagogical tools she provided to their comfort level as student teachers and the school placement activity setting. These conceptual and practical tools were embedded within a framework that combined theory and practice. Preparation was enacted through an all-day workshop, follow-up sessions, and an end-of-year essay assignment.

Framework for Teaching Controversial Issues

The TCI framework Paula taught emerged from professional development for NI's citizenship curriculum (Emerson et al., 2012). It revolved around the following process: First, teachers reflect on their stance toward the issue, taking account of their biases. Second, teachers set realistic goals, such as raising awareness, developing critical political understanding, and changing behaviors, versus changing attitudes. Third, teachers work on framing the issue with questions and resources. Fourth, teachers think about pedagogical methods to use, for example, jigsaw or deliberation. Fifth, they do a pedagogical risk assessment in which they reflect on whether the methods they chose provide opportunities for exploration of multiple perspectives, expression of everyone's ideas, debriefing, and closure.

Paula explained that her approach to TCI emphasized safety for students and teachers living in a conflict-affected society as well as pragmatism given conditions of schooling. The practical tools she modeled were less ambitious than congressional hearings, moot courts, and simulations, which demand substantial time and teacher expertise and often target high school students (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). She criticized whole group discussion because she saw it as too risky—difficult-to-manage tensions could arise quickly, and some students inevitably felt their voices weren't heard. She advocated structured, manageable discussion methods such as deliberation (structured academic controversy), carousel conversation, circular brainstorm, speed debate, walking debate, world café, and silent conversation. As the course progressed, she modeled all these practical tools.

Teacher Workshop

On October 10, 2016, Paula conducted an intensive all-day workshop on TCI using the framework as a skeleton. She involved all 24 PSTs through modeling, planning activities, and reflective conversations. Paula told the class they needed a practical approach for 35–40-minute classes that would build their confidence and help them try out and evaluate methods. She emphasized her priority: "*Safety* is the word of the day . . . We need safety for the teachers, and we need safety for the pupils." Paula juxtaposed the potential risks of TCI, such as heated emotions and negative reactions from parents, with what she would be teaching them about taking control of their goals, stance, framework, and most importantly, the methods they would use. All of this would go into their toolkit for teaching controversial issues.

Using Post-its and a spectrum laid out on the floor, Paula asked everyone to identify CI related to their subject and the extent to which they felt comfortable or highly anxious about teaching them. The class discussed factors that influence teaching these issues, such as religion, age group of students, parental attitudes, school location and ethos, and sociopolitical climate. Paula validated people's anxiety and said that student teachers must notify department heads, mentor teachers, and parents explaining what they're teaching and why.

During the workshop, Paula introduced a conceptualization of TCI, informed by scholarship, that included a definition of CI, contextual influences, and benefits of TCI. She defined CI as questions that "deeply divide society, challenge personally held values and beliefs, generate conflicting explanations, evoke emotional responses, [and] cause students to feel threatened and confused." Contextual influences included school location, school ethos, and sociopolitical climate. The rationale for TCI included their relevance, enduring significance, preparation for democratic citizenship, development of interpersonal skills, and growth in critical thinking.

Through exercises and debriefs, the class addressed elements of the TCI framework. They talked about teacher disclosure, achievable goals, and conducive classroom climate. Paula provided critical guidance on framing CI for classroom lessons. She advocated starting discussions using "safer" questions that called for multiple viewpoints, and—given segregation between Catholics and Protestants in schools and society—broader than those represented in particular school communities. This meant framing CI with diverse public perspectives instead of personal opinions. Getting concrete, she said that instead of asking students how they

felt about ethnic minority communities, teachers should pose questions like, How can we evaluate Northern Ireland's response to the increase in people from ethnic minority communities? Paula said human rights frameworks could help with critical analysis of CI and teaching about structural and historical roots of contemporary conflicts was crucial for deeper understanding and critical thinking.

Stressing safety again, Paula talked about making time for students to "self-position"—whether publicly or privately—at the end of lessons, and showed a variety of possible methods. She was adamant that teachers not expose individuals by asking them to divulge personal information or opinions because in a divided society, it could put young people at risk.

To teach the pedagogical methods and risk assessment elements of the framework, Paula explicitly modeled and debriefed a series of TCI discussion-based activities. A popular activity from the LGC curriculum was called "community symbols card sort." In small groups, PSTs were given a set of 30 cards with cultural, political, and religious symbols associated with the two main communities in NI. They were asked to sort these into meaningful groups and to avoid dividing them into Catholic versus Protestant. Paula discussed with the class how to proactively manage potentially volatile reactions from students. Following the symbols activity debrief, PSTs worked in small groups to develop a definition of *sectarianism*. They acknowledged the concept's complexity, and agreed that, despite popular usage in the media that sometimes demonized working-class communities, sectarianism was more related to politics, culture, and national identity than to religion.

Follow-Up Sessions on Teaching Controversial Issues

I observed three additional sessions in which Paula continued to prepare for TCI. On October 17 in a session on human rights, she modeled a "walking debate," posing controversial statements related to human rights and asking students to position themselves along a continuum to show whether they agreed or disagreed. Then individual students spoke about why they had taken a particular position, and people were invited to move if they felt swayed by someone's argument. On October 31, she asked small groups to brainstorm ideas for teaching about the Asher's Bakery case concerning the refusal to bake a cake with a message supporting same-sex marriage on the basis of religious beliefs.

The February 20 session focused on medium-term planning around the theme of immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers. Paula modeled the world café method, in which each of four small groups wrote down responses to questions related to teaching these topics as CI and circulated them so others could add ideas.

Toward the end of class, Paula modeled a deliberation (academic structured controversy) on a controversial question: Should we allow free movement of labor across borders in the European Union? She quickly explained how the strategy worked and let students form groups of four, and then two, to read the texts she provided and present each side of the issue, and then switch sides. Using the term *self-positioning*, Paula told the groups to now discuss where they stood on the issue, which might be somewhere in the middle of the black-and-white arguments they had presented.

PST Learning

Paula's PSTs expressed deep appreciation for her course. They developed conceptions of controversial issues, their relevance to contemporary life, and what teaching them involves. They most appreciated Paula's modeling of structured small-group discussion activities. Three of the PSTs spoke about their favorites. Luke and Andrew talked about how the small group discussion on defining sectarianism brought out the complexity of the question. Andrew spoke about the community symbols card sort several times. He found it "eye-opening" that despite being open-minded, he was unfamiliar with certain symbols of Irish identity. He tried the activity with his classes and found it rewarding. Andrew and Margaret were impressed with the speed debate on war crimes in which Paula flashed pictures of scenes from war and students had to quickly decide whether acts were within or outside the rules of war.

Evidence of individual PSTs' initial appropriation of TCI emerged in interviews, lesson plans, and essays. The tables below represent their responses to interview questions about conceptual and practical tools they learned from Paula's course and what they did with these tools during school placements. Margaret and Andrew took up more practical tools from Paula's TCI lessons than Sean and Luke did.

Table 1: Margaret

Pedagogical Tools	Reported by Margaret
Purposes of TCI	Make a difference for future of society. Increase critical thinking, tolerance, sensitivity, and understanding of differences. Deal with legacy of conflict in NI.
Methods of TCI	Many different discussion activities. Best when different perspectives explored and teacher lets students respond to one another. Students question texts/authors they read. Teacher fosters equitable participation and sensitivity to minorities. **In student teaching, used silent conversation, deliberation, jigsaw, and organic discussion in response to resources and prompts**.
Teacher Role/Stance/Disclosure	Don't express biases. Be a positive and passionate influence. Be prepared and confident. Allow freedom of expression but offer guidance. Essay: Wrestled with neutrality vs. committed impartiality. **In student teaching, framed citizenship topics and issues with human rights**.
Planning TCI	Highly prepared lessons are key. Teachers should read widely to build their knowledge, be clear about what they're presenting without bias, select the best resources. Be prepared for strong emotional responses and students crossing the line from free expression to open disrespect. Warn students about upcoming issues.

Table 2: Andrew

Pedagogical Tools	Reported by Andrew
Purposes of TCI	Help young people deal with life, respect and appreciate other people. Teaching about sectarianism and two communities in NI is path toward more peaceful future. Morality intersects with politics, e.g., abortion, euthanasia, and equal marriage.
Methods of TCI	Variety of discussion methods. Students are active, doing ranking activities, staking out positions, engaging in discussion with peers, thinking independently. Examples = defining sectarianism, speed debate, community symbols card sort. **In student teaching used walking debate, two-person deliberation, community symbols card sort activity, ranking exercises**.
Teacher Role/Stance/ Disclosure	First interview: Teacher should be unbiased and neutral, but model critical thinking and be authentic while not imposing views on students. Third interview: Further readings supported new view that teacher neutrality when teaching CI may not be possible or desirable (e.g., actively encouraging anti-racism). Teachers consider alternative viewpoints, remain open-minded, and model this behavior for students. **In discussions during student teaching sometimes played "devil's advocate" to get students to see another side of an argument. His lessons encouraged anti-racism, tolerance**.
Planning TCI	Preparation: (a) plan CI lessons carefully in advance, (b) determine one's learning intentions, (c) understand why issues are controversial, (d) think about how one feels about the issue and how to maintain a balanced approach in the classroom. Teaching: (a) promote active student involvement, (b) preempt possible problems, (c) finish each session with time for closure.

Table 3: Sean

Pedagogical Tools	Reported by Sean
Purposes of TCI	Vital to democratic process. Break through avoidance of conflict in NI. Teach students the skills of democratic debate, knowledge of issues, history of conflict.
Methods of TCI	Front-load knowledge, context, and useful perspectives with interactive presentation, resources, case studies. Then open up for students to explore. Monitor small groups and question incorrect information. Provide space for students to ask questions, debate, reflect, form their own conclusions. **In student teaching used debate through role play, modified walking debate**.
Teacher Role/Stance/ Disclosure	Don't repeat avoidance of conflict that he was socialized in. His political identity shapes his teaching. He won't pretend to be impartial, but he won't proselytize. He will disclose his views. **Promoted human rights perspective**.

Pedagogical Tools	Reported by Sean
Planning TCI	Teacher preparation and content knowledge are key. "You need to know your facts inside and out." Teachers need to find good resources. Deciding on learning intentions will lead to figuring out methods. Planning must be "tight" and "layered."

Table 4: Luke

Pedagogical Tools	Reported by Luke
Purposes of TCI	Foster students' interest in issues and understanding of different perspectives. Develop informed perspective. Break down apathy.
Methods of TCI	Create environment for discussion, if not among students, then within their heads. Active learning. Defining sectarianism was most helpful. Structured discussion methods that allow for uncertainty and self-positioning. **In student teaching used whiteboards for student responses and mini case studies snowball**.
Teacher Role/Stance/ Disclosure	If students ask, he will disclose, if appropriate. Teacher should help students understand their own perspective and learn something new. **Was conscious of his affiliation with religious groups at school**.
Planning TCI	Knowing content is key. Find case studies and other good resources. Present information that will make students rethink their positions.

Initial Appropriation of Conceptual Tools

Paula's PSTs articulated key conceptual understandings they learned from her course: At its core, TCI involves exploring multiple perspectives, challenging assumptions, and forming independent conclusions. Especially in a divided society, teachers should ask students to analyze different positions instead of asking students to initially state their own views. Margaret said, "You're not asking them for their opinion [at first]. It's about looking at the other perspectives and understanding why people think what they do."

A second understanding was the importance of careful preparation for TCI, which involves developing subject matter knowledge, finding rich resources, and reflecting on their own views in relation to other perspectives. Andrew appreciated the session on planning around immigration and refugees. "So, the whole idea of planning carefully and asking these questions, like, why is this idea controversial, and what should I expect from the pupils?"

PSTs' understanding of a third element of TCI, teacher stance, evolved during the academic year. Sean said Paula made him think about how he would respond to students' questions about his political and ideological affinities. Sean and Margaret spoke about being conscious of the language they used. Luke talked about learning to develop a posture of openness. Andrew explained in his essay how he shifted from neutrality to "inclusive situated engagement" (Kelly & Brandes, 2001). He told me, "I believed that it was

possible to be neutral, but then I've realized . . . actively encouraging the values of tolerance and respect, then I'm already sort of, I'm not neutral."

Initial Appropriation of Practical Tools for Discussion

All four PSTs valued Paula's modeling of TCI discussion approaches. Yet their uptake of discussion tools during school placements ranged significantly. All four of them reported successfully teaching at least one discrete lesson on a controversial issue. Andrew and Margaret taught in ways that differed greatly from the teacher-centered, didactic methods they had experienced as students, but Margaret taught under more favorable conditions than Andrew did. Sean cautiously experimented with discussion methods yet maintained an emphasis on frontloading content. Luke was granted less autonomy and was reluctant to let go of teacher control, and his appropriation of discussion was restricted. Both teacher identity—goals, values, and educational histories—and institutional factors shaped initial appropriation of TCI.

Extensive Uptake of Discussion

Margaret's PGCE focus was politics. During our second interview, her report on her first school placement showed extensive uptake of CI discussion relative to the other PSTs. Discussion was a regular feature in her lessons. She tried deliberations at her first placement in two lessons. The first was with a year 10 citizenship group in a unit on democracy and participation, specifically "whether or not voting should be compulsory." Her purpose was to introduce students to deliberation, which she learned was much more effective than debate.

Margaret's second and much more complex deliberation was in an A-level politics class, which met for 65 minutes once a week and 35 minutes four times a week. It focused on the struggle between the two main Northern Irish parties, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), over whether victims of violence during the Troubles who had been members of paramilitary groups should be compensated. This deliberation involved two class periods and homework. Margaret explained:

> So, I had printed out things like the proposed program for government. I had gotten them information from an actual question-and-answer time that had taken place in the Assembly between the politicians over the definition on what a victim is . . . I got them to use the resources to come up with their arguments and then they had to swap over and do the same thing. That took the full hour for them to actually prepare for it, and then it was the next class that they did the actual deliberation. It meant, as part of their homework, they had to add to the resources I had given them, or they had to support arguments that they had to come up with whatever they find.

This description reveals in-depth preparation. Instead of providing students with short texts, she collected sources from government proceedings and prepared resource packets. It indicates her confidence to challenge students by asking them to find additional texts and develop their own arguments.

Margaret learned about deliberation in both of Paula's politics and citizenship courses. It involved "a lot of work" on the teacher's part, but taught students to interpret texts and construct arguments. Margaret managed to encourage students hesitant to take up different viewpoints: "Some of the girls were going, 'I'm not doing DUP . . . I just can't.' I was going, 'You can, because you don't believe it . . . but you have to acknowledge that these are the reasons why there's so much division.'" She reassured students that expressing perspectives antagonistic to their identity was tolerable and even beneficial.

Margaret taught at a well-regarded school with an excellent mentor teacher and a timetable that allowed exploration of complex subjects. Additionally, she had worked for five years as a special education aide in a primary school. She told me she constantly practiced new methods she was learning with her own children. Margaret said that Paula's classes had made her rediscover forgotten parts of her identity, including a passion for politics. Margaret's enthusiastic appropriation during her first placement indicated her comfort with CI discussion within the context of a supportive school setting.

Enthusiastic but Constrained Uptake of Discussion

Andrew's PGCE focus was religious education. His appropriation of discussion of CI evolved over the course of the academic year. He got his feet wet during the first school placement, and the second one afforded him numerous opportunities to practice. Andrew was like the proverbial sponge that absorbs the teacher's lessons almost verbatim. He was eager to apply methods from coursework. With autonomy and assigned to teach religious education and LGC curricula replete with CI, Andrew was able to teach more controversies than the other PSTs. But he was constrained by the citizenship timetable.

In his second placement, Andrew taught citizenship for 35 minutes once a week to two groups. He said the final lesson in a series on freedom of expression, racism, and hate crimes was the most controversial. The intentions were to "discuss the human right of free speech, to analyze examples of racism today, and then to debate whether or not the Internet should be censored to help prevent racism."

In that culminating lesson, the class watched a video on Internet use around the world. They looked at the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights article on free speech and had a "good discussion" about whether free speech should ever be limited and examples of where it was threatened. Andrew showed examples of racism on the Internet from NI that his department head had provided.

For the central discussion activity, Andrew used deliberation, in pairs instead of groups of four, on the question: "Should the Internet be censored to prevent racism?" He gave them a few minutes: "Partner One had to argue yes, and Partner Two had to argue no, and a few moments later, they had to switch sides." The students were to create a table in their notebooks to write down the arguments on both sides and then formulate their own conclusion.

Andrew said it was an enjoyable lesson that met his goals "to an extent." Ultimately, discussion was constricted by limited

time. Andrew had planned for students to write up their conclusions and then think about ways to fight racism as a whole group but never got to the final activity. He explained that in a 35-minute class, "you have maybe 25 minutes and 30 at best, I think." He acknowledged, "And looking at my lesson plan, I know that we didn't spend 15 minutes on the paired discussion because I probably overspent my time before that."

Andrew was, like Margaret, highly motivated to teach differently from the way he had been taught. He used practical tools from Paula's methods course but had to adapt deliberation for a tight timetable. He had one 35-minute period to explore the conflict between freedom of expression as a human right and censorship of racist speech on the Internet. He presented relevant resources, had students respond to them, and conducted a significantly modified deliberation. Paula's recommendation that a deliberation lesson be spread over two days was not possible with citizenship class once a week. For Andrew, the timetable was the key obstacle to more extensive appropriation of discussion tools. This case points to the constraining role of institutional factors in teacher learning.

Cautious Uptake of Discussion
Like Margaret, Sean's PGCE focus was politics, and he took multiple courses with Paula. Sean identified as a "critical pedagogue" and espoused discussion of CI as crucial for building NI's future. At the same time, he prioritized providing content knowledge to awaken students' social and political consciousness. The tug among these tendencies was apparent in the lesson described below.

In his second placement at an integrated school that intentionally brought together Catholic and Protestant students, Sean co-taught a year 10 history class with his mentor teacher. After a lesson on the GFA, Sean approached the teacher, requesting that he take the next class period to delve more deeply. Sean took the official curriculum on the partition of Ireland and its impact on NI in a riskier direction he said teachers typically avoid, linking contemporary disputes with history (Kitson & McCully, 2005). The lesson opened with a 20-minute introduction on contemporary wall murals, which students connected to different communities and their earlier study of Irish history. Then Sean spent 15 minutes reviewing the GFA and identifying the political parties currently represented in the Northern Irish power-sharing Assembly.

Students completed a worksheet outlining the GFA's key elements, such as the principle of consent (reunification with Ireland based on majority vote), rights and equality, decommissioning of weapons, prisoner release, and normalization of security. Using a table divided into Nationalists versus Unionists, the class talked about who benefited from each of these provisions.

Sean posted the seven elements of the GFA and, adapting the walking debate method, asked students to stand beneath the one they prioritized for contemporary NI. He had them explain their positions and move if convinced by someone else's argument. Finally, Sean asked them to compare NI before and after the GFA and discuss how the political landscape had changed.

In this lesson, time for the modified walking debate was limited to about 10 minutes. Sean said that conducting political discussion in an integrated school represented an important milestone for his teaching. Citing Kello (2016) in his final essay, he noted that in a classroom of mixed backgrounds, there was an "inherent element of 'risk-taking' due to the value-laden nature of the discussion." He explicitly advocated that students take a "rights-based stance" and ensured that "aspects of the agreement were examined from a multitude of perspectives . . ."

Sean told me there should be a 50/50 balance between student voices and teacher voice in lessons. Yet content-heavy lessons with multiple activities revealed a cautious approach to discussion of CI. Discussions were given 10 or 20 minutes in his lesson plans and in practice probably were shortened as they occurred after front-loading content.

Sean felt compelled to immerse students in knowledge but acknowledged the importance of fostering democratic debate, especially in NI. He said he needed to learn to trust students' ability to think critically and give them opportunities to arrive at their own conclusions. Sean's lesson was supported by his mentor teacher and a relatively generous timetable for history compared to citizenship. His cautious approach to discussion partly stemmed from his teacher identity. With over 10 years of prior teaching experience, he seemed torn among old habits, pedagogical beliefs, and new possibilities.

Restricted Uptake of Discussion
Like Andrew, Luke's PGCE focus was religious education. Luke's appropriation of CI discussion was restricted by limitations imposed by his school placements and his own choices. He used different practical tools to elicit student participation in a unit on euthanasia but did not facilitate sustained discussion in any of the lessons.

At the state secondary and grammar schools where Luke was placed, opportunities to teach citizenship were few. He said his richest experience with teaching controversial issues was a series of lessons on euthanasia in his year 11 religious education class during his second placement, which met for a double period once a week. Previously he had taught the issue of abortion using the department's curriculum, but that fell flat. His university supervisor advised him he "needed to put more of [his] own stamp upon things."

Luke initially used the department's materials, which were "quite standard" and "quite dry." He provided background information on legislation in different countries and reasons for and against different policies. Lessons picked up when he started using individual whiteboards, which allowed students to quickly express ideas in response to prompts such as the phrase *quality of life*.

Luke showed a clip from the film *Me Before You*, a romantic drama about the relationship between a man who is paralyzed from an accident and his caregiver. He said the class had a "great discussion" about the main character's conception of quality of life. The next phase was a "snowballing exercise" using mini case studies, provided by the department, about people from the UK who had traveled to countries where they could "go through with

euthanasia." In small groups, students read a case and became the "experts." Then they taught another group about the reasons for people's decisions. The class looked at cases that argued against euthanasia, such as Stephen Hawking and Jean-Dominique Bauby.

Luke did not have time at the end of the euthanasia unit to ask students to self-position. He said it was not encouraged at the school. Luke said he would ideally want to include that but felt his autonomy was restricted as a student teacher. He was told, "'You need to teach them this so that they can answer in an exam. So, you need to teach them both sides, and if there's any time for discussion, then you can do that.'"

Along with external restrictions, Luke acknowledged that part of his reluctance to dive into discussion of CI came from not yet feeling comfortable as a new teacher. He understood the need for students to discuss multiple perspectives on CI, but in our first interview indicated that discussion could occur inside students' own minds. He said he hoped to expand his use of discussion in the future but envisioned it taking up about 10 minutes in a 40-minute class.

Discussion

Paula's approach centered on providing an adaptable toolkit, organized by a TCI framework. She modeled different methods PSTs could use that were appropriate for novice teachers, 11–18-year-old students, and a conflict-affected society. She encouraged reflective practice through the framework, activity debriefs, and final essay on the teacher's role in TCI.

The four PSTs' initial appropriation of TCI is noteworthy. All four articulated key conceptual elements they learned from Paula's course, although Luke's understanding of discussion as something that could happen within a student's own mind was a serious misconception. They all taught at least one CI lesson and applied practical tools, introduced at university, to different subjects. Three out of four experimented with discussion tools for deliberating on issues. However, institutional or identity factors limited their uptake by Andrew, Luke, and Sean.

The logic underpinning Paula's model is that engaging PSTs in experiential activities, in which they (1) discuss conceptual tools, such as contextual factors in TCI, in real terms; (2) observe the modeling of practical tools, and (3) engage with the tools from either a teacher perspective or a student perspective, will transfer to classroom teaching. It fits with a general shift in teacher education from inculcating theory to developing practice.

Paula's citizenship methods class did not rehearse teaching or analyze student learning in preparing for TCI. But she did emphasize practice in several ways identified by Jesnet et al. (2018). PSTs observed explicit modeling of TCI activities, were immersed from the student perspective, and debriefed them. They had opportunities to brainstorm teaching ideas during class sessions and write about teacher roles while connecting scholarship to their student teaching in their final essays. PSTs experienced teachers' materials, artifacts, and resources from student perspectives and analyzed them. And class sessions were connected to the LGC curriculum's themes and resources.

PSTs' interview data and lesson plans show evidence of uptake of discussion methods, particularly deliberation (structured academic controversy), and walking debate. Although data were limited, this exploratory study generated an illuminating concept called adaptive appropriation. Adaptive appropriation describes PSTs' selection of tools from Paula's toolkit and their unique modifications of them to fit their lessons, students, school placements, and teacher identities. It underscores PSTs' agency as learners as well as factors that mediate or constrain their learning.

The preservice teachers explained the factors that shaped their appropriation and supported or limited their teaching of controversial issues. Time was a major restriction when citizenship had a 35-minute weekly slot for only part of the academic year in the school timetable. This made it exceptionally difficult to instill knowledge, explore multiple perspectives, and engage in discussion. Andrew experienced this challenge more than others. Luke had very limited opportunities to teach citizenship at all, which foreclosed possibilities for applying lessons from Paula's course. Other constraints were pressures to prepare for exams and cover curriculum, expressed mostly by Luke. Sean said that facilitating discussion in an integrated school, with representation from communities on either side of the divide, was risky.

Some school-related factors supported appropriation of teaching controversial issues. Andrew identified the curriculum, his mentor teacher, and established classroom rules. Sean and Margaret benefited from double periods and two-day sequences along with supportive mentor teachers who gave them space to experiment.

Teacher identity also shaped appropriation. Margaret's passion for politics and teaching, after a mid-career change, and her love of interacting openly with young people motivated her experiments. Andrew was the least experienced and youngest but seemed driven by his values and enthusiasm for learning to teach. Sean, a strong advocate for critical pedagogy, wrestled with views about imparting knowledge versus elevating discussion. Luke wanted to explore multiple perspectives and valued tolerance but was the least eager to facilitate discussion. The PSTs adapted their appropriation of practical tools to fit their proclivities.

All four PSTs, and especially Margaret and Andrew, challenged their prior experience as students and their socialization in a conflict-avoidant society by taking up CI. Three spoke explicitly about their motivation to teach CI as a vehicle toward a more peaceful future for NI. Luke expressed a commitment to exploring different viewpoints in religious education but had not thought so much about the legacy of conflict in NI. Political commitments and/or desire for reconciliation in NI seemed to fuel motivation for appropriating CI discussion tools for Margaret, Sean, and Andrew.

This case study raises important questions: What might promote more appropriation of discussion methods by the PSTs? Paula taught many different methods that made facilitation of discussion quite manageable. Her approach involved teaching with discussion more than teaching for discussion (Parker & Hess, 2001). If she had prepared preservice teachers to cultivate capacities for democratic discourse and discussed its role in a democratic

society, perhaps PSTs would be more compelled to emphasize it. Also, Paula engaged her students in various elements of practice. Perhaps if the citizenship course also included rehearsal of teaching (Jesnet et al., 2018), PSTs would feel better equipped to facilitate discussion.

Paula's emphasis on safety for students and teachers, as well as pragmatism given institutional constraints of schooling, is particularly helpful during a time of crisis, when teaching controversial issues is urgent but risky. But did she play it too safe? Would it be beneficial to prepare PSTs to take on a higher gradient of risk, for example, by getting PSTs to deliberate on highly charged issues and dealing with associated emotions instead of avoiding them? In the community symbols card sort activity, they could have tackled this question: "Should potentially divisive symbols be displayed?" (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 18). When brainstorming ideas for teaching the Asher's Bakery case, they could have deliberated on the decision. One PST said that learning to discuss issues openly was exactly what Northern Ireland needed and wished Paula's class had taken the risk to wrestle with them and prepare for potential classroom problems.

Conclusion

Paula provided an adaptable toolkit and involved her PSTs in activities that revolved around practice. PSTs taught CI lessons and were able to select and adapt pedagogical tools to fit their school placements. Paula's approach and her emphasis on safety and pragmatism are particularly useful when encouraging greater numbers of teachers to take up TCI during turbulent times when TCI is crucial for democracy yet fraught.

What might strengthen PSTs' appropriation of discussion facilitation? At my Midwestern research site, the TE taught with and for discussion and provided opportunities to practice with the benefit of coaching from the TE (Pace, 2021). Hess (2001, 2003) assigned her PSTs to develop and teach a discussion-based CI lesson during school placements and then revise it.

Practice teaching must be considered in light of class size and demands on teacher educators and their programs. The Midwestern course I observed had 10 students, not 24. While practice-based teacher education has become increasingly popular, Peercy and Troyan (2017), teacher educators who conducted a self-study of their own efforts, explained that providing opportunities for systematic examination and rehearsal of core teaching practices in teacher education courses requires "massive epistemological and pedagogical shifts" (p. 27).

Along with possibilities for teacher education, this case study reveals changes needed in schools to promote discussion of CI. The low status of citizenship in NI (Pace, 2021; Worden & Smith, 2017) makes opportunities to student teach it highly variable. Three of the four CI lessons described here occurred in other subjects. In many schools, the prioritization of test scores leads to curriculum coverage and exam preparation. Time pressures detract from granting student teachers autonomy to experiment.

Ideally, mentor teachers, department heads, university supervisors, and teacher educators would work together to strengthen PST learning experiences. Prior research from the U.S.

finds that PSTs experimenting with TCI defaulted to lessons with minimal discussion among students (Dahlgren et al., 2014). If discussion-based lessons were required of PSTs and coaching as well as sufficient instructional time were provided, stronger appropriation of CI discussion tools could occur. However, institutional arrangements, including the excessive workload of educators in different settings, impede this kind of collaboration and support. And in the U.S., state laws and local policies that constrain democratic education through curricular mandates make TCI particularly scary for new teachers.

This research indicates the need for longitudinal studies on appropriation of TCI that follow novices into their first years of teaching (Crocco & Livingston, 2017). With purposeful and diverse samples, they would deepen our understanding of how learning to teach CI evolves and is shaped by different activity settings and teacher identities that support and constrain this vital work. Research findings would inform teacher development that advances education for democracy—an endeavor that is critical to our collective future.

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