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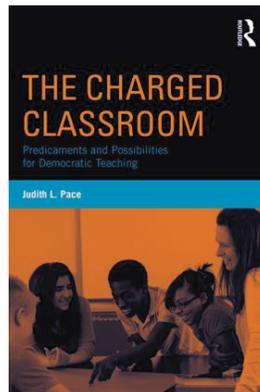
# Democracy & Education

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## The Hard Work of Teaching A Book Review of *The Charged Classroom: Predicaments and Possibilities for Democratic Teaching*

Reviewed by Paula McAvoy (University of Wisconsin)

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**F**OR SEVERAL YEARS I have taught courses in the foundations of education in which most of the students were preservice teachers. I've taken to ending the course with this final message: "For those of you going into teaching, I want you to know that teaching is hard. I tell you this because I've worked with student teachers and early career teachers, and at some point you'll begin to doubt if you've made the right decision and think, "Maybe it shouldn't be this hard." No, it should be that hard. But it is also the best kind of hard work, and the joy of teaching comes from puzzling through the complex problem of helping others to learn."

What is difficult to convey to new teachers (and the general public) is what it is about teaching that is so hard. There are the macro decisions about designing a unit of study or finding the right approach to classroom management that consume a lot of the teacher's time, but there are also thousands of micro decisions that happen in the moment of teaching that can have a profound impact on how a lesson evolves or how students experience the course. In *The Charged Classroom*, Pace (2015) provides the reader with rich cases of classroom practice that focus on these micro moments,

which, alongside Pace's careful analysis, illustrate just how hard teaching is.

The book draws upon Pace's (2015) data from three qualitative studies of language arts and social studies classrooms to identify and discuss "perennial tensions rooted in the very nature of classroom teaching" (p. ix). These tensions are discussed as "charged" encounters that emerge in three domains: communicating academic expectations, discussing provocative topics, and navigating competing curricular demands. Pace defines charged moments as those that are "*suffused with contradictions that create both friction and potential*" (p. 4, italics original), and she argues that in these moments, "democratic learning opportunities . . . are both opened up and closed down" (ix). Pace's conception of democratic education is primarily relational. That is, her analysis

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examines the extent to which students are given the opportunity to express themselves, to treat each other as political equals, and to engage in the curriculum—particularly through discussion of controversial issues. Pace also pays attention to the relationship between teachers and their students. Democratic education, Pace argues, requires that teachers are aware of whose culture is and is not represented in the curriculum and the ways in which differences in social status affect student engagement.

Three of the four main chapters of the book (chapters two, three, and four) focus on one domain and then examine how several teachers experience and respond to charged moments. Chapter two, for example, identifies the tension between holding students to high academic expectations and trying to keep students engaged with the curriculum. One of the strengths of this book is that Pace (2015) escorts the reader into a variety of classroom settings, spanning upper elementary through high school, to focus on particular moments of instruction when the tension arises. For example, in chapter two, we “watch” as Ms. Berger announces to her seventh-grade class that grading their work over the weekend left her feeling “depressed” and “exhausted” (p. 29). She then uses a combination of threats and encouragement as she passes back their work. In this moment, students could have pushed back against Ms. Berger’s displeasure about their work and the large number of Ds and Fs she distributes. Yet her demeanor and new tutoring policy effectively convey that she is still on their side, and the students appear to respond with a desire to improve. Other teachers are not so effective, and the vignettes in each chapter show how teachers respond in ways that are more or less in line with democratic values.

Each of these chapters follows a standard structure of opening with a short conceptual framework that identifies the particular tensions that emerge within the domain, presenting several short cases of teacher practice that illustrate that tension, and a concluding analysis that discusses the cases as a set. At times, this traditionally academic approach distracted me from the rich data and Pace’s (2015) narrative, and I often found myself wanting Pace to lead with her own ideas and voice. Happily, she did this in chapter five.

In this chapter, Pace (2015) brings the reader back into Ms. Berger’s classroom to provide an extended case study that weaves together tensions introduced in the previous three chapters. This in-depth look at one teacher’s practice was incredibly interesting to me, and I think it would make for fruitful class discussions with preservice teachers. We learn that Ms. Berger is a teacher with high expectations for her social studies students and is skilled at orchestrating engaging activities, yet we also see areas in which she struggles as a teacher. Her interactive activities often come at the expense of learning deep content, and her skill with classroom

organization sidesteps moments when students might engage in a discussion of controversial issues. She is also unsure about how to meet the demands of the district’s literacy assessment, which emphasizes particular writing skills and seems to care very little whether the student is saying something that is historically accurate.

Throughout the book, Pace (2015) discusses these issues as “tensions.” At times she seems to believe tensions are a natural part of teaching, often calling them “perennial tensions.” At other times, it feels as if the existence of the tension is a problem to be solved. Pace notes, for example, that “tensions prevailed” in Ms. Berger’s classroom (p. 108). At times the tensions are referred to as “contradictions” that seem to be impossible to resolve. For example, Pace saw teachers caught between their desires to make the curriculum culturally relevant and mandates to prepare students for standardized tests. And at other points tensions are framed as “dilemmas” that teachers need to learn to negotiate. As a philosopher of education, I think about tensions as ethical dilemmas that emerge from competing educational aims. Teachers have many educational aims that include: keeping students engaged, developing deep content knowledge, being culturally responsive, holding students to high standards, and meeting (reasonable) expectations for accountability. Because teachers are situated in various school contexts and teaching students with different needs, they cannot hold all of these aims equally at all times; as a result, teachers are necessarily making decisions in which they will need to make tradeoffs between these aims. Teachers need guidance about how to recognize these tradeoffs and the tools for evaluating whether a tradeoff is a good one. For example, social studies teachers should not be asked to ignore a student’s misunderstanding of historical content and focus only on sentence structure and composition. To do so is to reward students for not learning. Pace shows that Ms. Berger is aware that she often gets caught between designing engaging activities and deep learning, a problem Ms. Berger attributes, in part, to her thin knowledge of some topics within the ambitious world history curriculum. Trying to work through these competing demands will likely be something that Ms. Berger struggles with for some time. This does not make her a bad teacher; it simply makes her a teacher. Indeed, the fact that she is aware of the issue and that she is continuously trying to figure out how to strike the right balance between these competing aims makes her a good teacher. *The Charged Classroom* will be a great help to others who are learning to do the same.

## References

- Pace, J. L. (2015). *The charged classroom: Predicaments and possibilities for democratic teaching*. London, UK: Routledge.