

The Educational Purpose of the Taking Sides Series

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As a long-time user of the *Taking Sides* books, I have seen first-hand their educational impact on students. A student we will call “Brittany” is a prime example. Until her role in a *Taking Sides*’ panel discussion, she had not participated once in class discussions. It is probably fair to say that she was sleep-walking through the course. However, once she was assigned to a “side” of the panel discussion, she vigorously pitched in to, as she put it, “do battle” with the opposing team. She described a “kind of energy” as she and the rest of her team prepared for the upcoming debate. In fact, she found herself and her teammates “talking trash” good-naturedly with the opposing team before the actual discussion, despite her usual reserve. Because she wanted to “win,” she “drilled down” and even did “extra research.”

The panel discussion itself, she reported, was “exhilarating,” but what I noticed afterward was probably the most intriguing. Not only did she participate in class more frequently, taking more risks in class discussions because she knew her “teammates would support me;” she also found herself “having a position” from which to “see other positions” in the discipline. Somehow, as she explained, her championing a position on the panel, even though she knew I had arbitrarily assigned it, gave her a stake in other discussions and a perspective from which to contribute to them. Brittany’s experiences nicely illustrate the unique educational impact of the *Taking Sides* Series.

This essay’s purpose is to describe and account for this impact. *Taking Sides* is designed quite intentionally to shore up some of the current weaknesses of many contemporary educational settings. As we will see, the unique energy that Brittany experienced is because *Taking Sides* is specifically set up to focus on the controversial side of academic disciplines. For several good reasons, as I will discuss, instructors and textbooks have focused almost exclusively on the more factual or settled aspects of their disciplines. This focus has, in turn, led to educational strategies that can rob the subject matter of its vitality and passion.

Taking Sides, on the other hand, is uniquely structured to highlight the more issue-oriented aspects of a discipline, allowing students to care about and even invest in the subject matter, as we saw with Brittany. Many instructors may hesitate about such involvement, because they assume that student positions are naïve or not properly objective. As we will see, however, this involvement can spur a deeper understanding of the topic and help students to appreciate how knowledge advancement is sometimes driven by passionate positions in addition to sound reasoning.

Two Sides of a Discipline: Facts and Controversies

To understand the unique educational impact of the *Taking Sides* series, it is first important to recognize that there are at least two “sides” or facets to any discipline. The first and perhaps better known side, especially to students who are beginning to learn about a particular discipline, is the *factual* or relatively settled side. This side consists of basic agreements within the discipline about the meaning of certain phenomena and the terms needed to explain them. The second and less known side, at least for many beginning students, is the controversial or relatively unsettled aspects of the discipline. These aspects often refer to fundamental disagreements among even leaders in the discipline. These disagreements can be about many topics, including the meaning of certain phenomena and information as well as the terms or methods needed to understand them.

Many students might expect both of these sides in the “softer” disciplines or fields of study, such as philosophy or religious studies. However, they might also expect the “harder,”

perhaps more scientific disciplines to be less prone to controversy and more adept at producing “just the facts.” Both expectations could be true to some degree, but this does not mean that even the more “objective” disciplines do not have a strong component of controversy.

In the science of psychology, for example, there are many terms and understandings of the psychological world that are relatively settled, and hence considered “factual.” Intelligence, for instance, is generally thought to be an interaction between one’s nature (biological inheritance) and one’s nurture (learning through life). Yet, the precise nature of this “interaction” is quite controversial (Gardner, 2006). Parallels can be drawn in the even harder sciences (e.g., Slife, Wilson, & Judd, 2007). Indeed, it is the controversial side of these disciplines that often defines factions within the field as well as drives a large amount of knowledge advancement.

Focusing on the Factual. Beginning students, however, are typically exposed to the factual side of the discipline almost exclusively. The dominance of this side is understandable, because disciplinary educators typically assume that the settled side of the discipline, especially its conventions and vocabulary, is a necessary background to understanding the discipline, including any controversies it might have. In fact, there is a sense in which the term “discipline” itself connotes some sort of settled sense of what the discipline is.

The educational problem with this dominance of the factual is that these facts are often considered “boring” for the beginning student to learn. Because these facts are relatively undisputed and already organized, they are often viewed as “what is” rather than “what could be”, straightforward rather than messy, thin rather than thick, logical rather than emotional, and something-to-be-memorized rather than something-to-identify-with. Most students understand the need to know these settled aspects of the discipline, but these facts are often presented in disciplinary texts in a structured and dispassionate fashion. Students experience no stake or investment in these settled aspects. They simply are what they are—the rudiments of the field.

Unfortunately, these rudiments and their often dry presentation in authoritative texts often lead instructors to deploy variations on what is sometime known as the “banking concept” of education (Freire, 1993; Slife & Yanchar, 1996). The banking concept assumes that students are basically “banks” where disciplinary facts or bits of information are “deposited.” Because these more settled aspects of information are relatively undisputed features of the field, students do not view them as the cutting edge or the basic problems of the field. They are, in a sense, a necessary educational evil, required to eventually understand the cutting edge and the basic problems.

This educational strategy leads instructors and textbook authors to become fact distributors or information transmitters. Classes are more monologues where the “expert,” the instructor, distributes or transmits these information bits into the mental banks of students. At test time, these instructors make informational “withdrawals” to discern how well students have maintained or even drawn “interest” on the instructor “deposits.” This banking approach to education is not, of course, inevitable, even with the more settled facets of a discipline. The point here is that the factual side of any discipline can too easily lend itself to this type of educational philosophy.

De-emphasizing the Controversial. The net effect is that many undergraduate courses emphasize almost exclusively the information transmission of these more settled aspects of the discipline, almost as though the controversial aspects of a discipline were less important or even less disciplinary. There are many important reasons for this de-emphasis of the controversial. First, as noted, it is completely in keeping with some meanings of the term “discipline.” Second,

some disciplines, perhaps especially fields of science, may consider controversies to be embarrassments, because they constitute something the experts in the field have not resolved. I say “experts” because it is not unusual for eminent authorities within a particular discipline to dispute one another, even in interpreting the same information or data.

In this sense, many within the field may view these controversies as instances of disciplinary impotence, points where the discipline has failed to solve its problems, and thus not the best exemplars of the discipline itself, especially for beginning students. For this reason, some instructors may perceive *Taking Sides* books—filled as they are with 18 to 20 such controversies—as an airing of their “dirty laundry,” more about the field’s lack of power than its power, more about its errors than its truths.

Perhaps more pertinent to education, many instructors may see disciplinary controversies as educationally “messy” or worse, emotional. In other words, it is because experts dispute these aspects of a field, frequently in emotional ways, that there are fewer guidelines for the students to understand them. Indeed, the experts often not only disagree about the answers or resolutions to a particular disciplinary issue; they may also disagree about how the issue should be characterized or what terms and methods should be used to understand it. Many thoughtful instructors are reluctant to lead students into this kind of apparent chaos. They would probably question the *students’* ability to negotiate these issues, especially when the experts themselves cannot seem to do so, but they may also question their *own* capacity to bring about a truly “educational experience” for their students.

Including the Controversial. Nevertheless, a case could be made that a complete understanding of any discipline includes its controversies. Controversies may not be considered “knowledge” per se, depending on the discipline, but there is surely no doubt that they are part of the process of advancing knowledge. The conflicts generated among disciplinary leaders often produce problem-solving energy, if not disciplinary passions. In fact, they can drive entire disciplinary conferences and whole programs of investigation. In this sense, disciplinary controversies are not just “error” or an indication of the absence of knowledge; they can be viewed as a positive part of the discipline, a generator of disciplinary energy and even direction in the sense of solving the problems at hand.

If this is true, then de-emphasizing the controversial elements of a discipline is de-emphasizing a vital part of the discipline itself. Students may learn accepted aspects of the discipline but they may not learn, at least directly, the disputed aspects. This de-emphasis may not only produce an incomplete or inaccurate sense of the discipline; it may also mislead the student to understand the field as more sterile, less emotional, and less “messy” than it truly is. The more rational, factual side is clearly important, perhaps even the more important. The question, however, is: do these more settled and perhaps rational aspects of the discipline have to monopolize courses for beginning students?

Another way to put the question might be: couldn’t some portion of the course be devoted to the more controversial, thus allowing the student to engage the field in a more affective manner? In some sense, the more settled and accepted the information is, the less students can feel they are truly participating in the disciplinary enterprise. After all, this information is already decided; there is no room for involvement in developing the information. Students may even feel punished for challenging the disciplinary status quo.

Taking Sides as an Educational Complement

The *Taking Sides* series, I believe, is uniquely situated to provide an educational experience with disciplinary controversy, and thus serve as an educational complement to the

teaching of disciplinary facts. Its main premise is not only that there are important controversial issues in any discipline but also that *beginning* students, such as Brittany in our initial example, need to learn about these issues. Its educational impact obviously depends on how it is used. Still, the structure of *Taking Sides*' books, with their simple juxtaposition of disciplinary experts, cannot help but put an educational spotlight on disciplinary controversies.

Again, this spotlight does not have to mean that facts are irrelevant; the best controversies, at least educationally, involve an understanding of the settled aspects of the discipline. However, these controversies can also *drive* the understanding of disciplinary facts. In other words, to understand the controversy, students will need to "drill down," as Brittany put it, to understand better the points of view as well as the terms and methods involved. The controversy provides the emotional tension or energy, in a sense, and the discipline itself provides a channel for that energy, if not a way to articulate and value the tension. For this reason, students are not so much learning *about* the factual or settled aspects; they are *experiencing* them.

But this is just one example of the many educational benefits of *Taking Sides*. There are at least five unique benefits of a *Taking Sides* educational experience, depending obviously on how the books are used in the classroom. These benefits include:

- 1) greater student engagement in the subject matter,
- 2) an active understanding of the more "messy" facets of the field,
- 3) increased resistance to prematurely closing an important issue,
- 4) an experiential sense of the dialectic in their education, and
- 5) important skills in critical thinking.

Let's explore each of these benefits in turn.

Engagement. When controversy is placed in the foreground of an educational experience, it gives disciplinary novices (students) permission to participate in and perhaps even form their own positions on some of the issues in the field. After all, some issues have not been resolved; some problems have not been solved. As Brittany put it, she was ready to "do battle" with the alternative position, even though she was quite aware of the arbitrariness of her own positional assignment. She was aware that something was at stake; something was to be decided.

In other words, it is the very *lack* of resolution in a controversy that can invite students to make sense of the issues themselves and perhaps even venture their own thoughts. Obviously, students should be encouraged to be humble about these positions, understanding that their perspective is fledgling, but novice positions can facilitate greater engagement with the materials. In a sense, the controversy, and thus a vital part of the discipline, becomes their own, as the example of Brittany illustrates. She not only "owned" a disciplinary position, she used it as a conceptual bridge to engage other settled and unsettled aspects of the discipline.

Messiness. Students can also experience the messiness of disciplines using *Taking Sides*. I use the term "messiness" because conventional texts are notorious for representing the field too neatly and too logically, as if there were no human involvement. If disciplines are more than their settled aspects, there are also *unsettled* elements, including poorly defined terms and inadequately understood concepts, that also need to be appreciated. This messiness is what led Brittany to "drill down" and do "extra research" in her preparation for her panel discussion. She knew that some of the basic terms and understandings were at play.

Good conventional texts can attempt to include these unsettled aspects, but they typically do so in a deceptively logical fashion, as though the controversy is solely rational. This depiction may not only misrepresent these aspects of the discipline; it may only tell students *about* them. By contrast, *Taking Sides* books—in pitting two sets of authors against one another—facilitate an *experience* of actual disciplinary authorities who are struggling with the issues, from sometimes completely different perspectives. In reading both articles, students cannot help but struggle *with* the authors. They do not need to be *told* that the terms of the debate are problematic; the students *experience* these terms to be problematic *as* they attempt to understand what is at stake in the authors' positions.

Premature Closure. The *Taking Sides* structure also serves to prevent students from prematurely closing controversies, such as underestimating their depth or deciding the controversy without the proper appreciation of the issues involved. It does this by helping the student to experience how two reasonable, educated, and respected members of the discipline can so thoroughly disagree. In other words, premature closure is discouraged because experts are countering each other, often point by point.

A student would almost have to ignore one “side” of the controversy to prematurely close the issue. Brittany, for example, reported that she became “absolutely convinced” of the validity of the first authors' position, only to have the second reading put this position into question! Obviously, if the issue could be closed or settled so easily, presumably the experts or leaders of the discipline would have done so already. Controversies are controversies because they are deeply problematic, so it is important for the student to have an appreciation for this, and thus have a deeper understand of the disciplinary meanings involved.

The Dialectic. One of the truly unique benefits of the *Taking Sides* experience is its rehabilitation of the age-old educational tradition of the dialectic. Since at least the time of Socrates, educators have understood that a *full* understanding of any disciplinary meaning, explanation, or bit of information requires not only knowing what this meaning or information is but also knowing what it isn't. The dialectic, in this sense, is the educational relation of a concept to its alternative (see Rychlak, 2003). As dialectician Joseph Rychlak (1991) explains, all meanings “reach beyond themselves” and are thus clarified and have implications beyond their synonyms. It may be trivial to note, for example, that one cannot fully comprehend what “up” means without understanding what “down” means. However, it is not trivial when the meanings are disciplinary, such as when the political science student realizes that justice is incomprehensible without some apprehension of the meaning of injustice.

One of the more fascinating educational moments, when using *Taking Sides* books, occurs when students recognize that they cannot properly understand even one side of the controversy without taking into account another side. Brittany described “learning very quickly” that she clarified and even became aware of important aspects of her own position only *after* she understood the alternative to her position. As we will see, this dialectical awareness is also pivotal to truly critical thinking.

Critical Thinking. I say “truly” critical thinking because critical thinking has sometimes been confused with rigorous thinking (see Slife et al, 2005). Rigorous thinking is the application of rigorous reasoning or analytical thinking to a particular problem, which is surely an important skill in most any field. Still, it is not truly *critical* thinking until one has an alternative perspective from which to criticize a perspective. Recall that Brittany did not participate in class until she developed a perspective to view other perspectives. In other words, one must have a

(critical) perspective “outside of” or alternative to the perspective being critiqued. Otherwise, one is “inside” the perspective being critiqued and cannot “see” it as a whole.

As many recent educational formulations of critical thinking attest, this approach means that critical thinkers should develop at least a dialectic of perspectives (one plus an alternative). That is to say, they should have an awareness of their own perspective *as facilitated by* an understanding of at least one alternative perspective. Without an alternative, students assume either they have no worldview or their worldview is the only one possible. A point of comparison, on the other hand, prevents the reification of one’s perspective and allows students to have a perspective on their perspectives. A clear strength of the *Taking Sides*’ juxtaposition of alternative perspectives is that it facilitates this kind of critical thinking.

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