

A Review of Glen Y. Bezalel's *Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts*

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Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts (2024), written by Glenn Y. Bezalel, aims to engage with teachers who find themselves dreading, avoiding, or boldly confronting controversial issues in their classrooms. Tapping into familiar buzzwords such as “post-truth,” “woke,” and “echo chamber,” this book provides a soft landing for teachers as they reflect on the ways they navigate teaching controversial topics, while also attending to broader aims of education, particularly critical thinking skills and character development. Teachers who are curious about teaching controversial topics in their classrooms may be interested in this book.

Author Glenn Y. Bezalel is uniquely positioned, as Deputy Head and a Religion and Philosophy high school teacher in London, UK and a Ph.D. student at Cambridge University, to offer theoretical perspectives underlying teaching controversial issues and to demonstrate how those theories translate into teaching practice. The book's plethora of theoretical concepts, grounded in substantial research, combined with Bezalel's fifteen years of teaching experience, earns him the right to claim this book as a “complete handbook for teaching and learning about controversy” (p. 2). Bezalel unabashedly tackles contemporary controversial topics with rigour and vigour, not shying away from proposing challenging conversations, nor undermining complex issues with over-simplified solutions. While the intended audience is K-12 teachers, I offer that university instructors, particularly those who teach in undergraduate teacher education, might also appreciate Bezalel's approach to learning how to teach controversial topics to potentially improve their own practice, as well as the practice of the teacher candidates they teach.

The book is divided into two distinct sections: Part I elucidates theoretical approaches relevant to pedagogies of controversy, and Part II applies these theories through an analysis of ten controversial questions relevant to K-12 classrooms. Together, Part I and Part II provide an integrated analysis of pathways and pitfalls involved in navigating controversial issues of importance in contemporary classrooms. Bezalel's animated anecdotes, provocative dilemmas, and references to popular culture that he threads throughout the book offer persuasive clarity to what might otherwise be a thoughtful but uninspired approach to understanding philosophical theories associated with teaching controversial topics.

In Part I, the author explores questions related to why teachers are called to teach about controversy, what theoretical concepts underpin teaching controversy, and how teachers might structure learning environments to recognize biases and develop critical thinking skills. Prior to the first chapter, a comprehensive *Introduction* provides a thoughtful overview of each chapter along with a description of the structure of the book, including a section entitled *How to Use This Book*. Here, Bezalel highlights how Part I and Part II stand independently of each other, enabling readers to enter the book through Part II and return later to Part I if they are interested or have more time. This suggestion is a respectful and intentional nod to busy teachers who may be unable to read Part I before they are faced with addressing one of the classroom controversies analyzed in Part II. The *Introduction* concludes with a *Postscript* illuminating Bezalel's concerns related to censorship. Specifically, Bezalel challenges how, during the 2022 Oscars, the media censored Will Smith's language regarding the f-word, but not the violence that occurred against Chris Rock. According to Bezalel, “the book is a protest against” (p. 5) the message that “saying ‘fucking’ is

somehow worse, more threatening than being physically violent” (p. 5). If the reader has not yet cued in to Bezalel’s direct and candid approach, the *Postscript* provides sufficient foreshadowing of how the content forthcoming may be overly provocative for some readers. To Bezalel’s credit, he often takes the approach of warning readers of what is to come, cautioning “I apologise in advance if you’re a little squeamish” (p. 33) as he presents potentially uncomfortable moral dilemmas. His conversational style of writing, woven consistently throughout the book, creates a respectful dialogue with the reader. Invited into this comfortable reading environment, I grew increasingly curious to learn more about how to teach controversies better, becoming increasingly convinced it is my obligation to do so.

I concur with Bezalel’s decision to make this book accessible to busy teachers by making it possible to enter the book mid-way at Part II; arguably, it is better to read part of the book than none of it at all. However, I cannot recommend overlooking Part I. For me, understanding the theory behind pedagogical decisions offered in Part I is central, not only as I develop a rationale for *why* teaching controversial topics is important, but also as I imagine *how* I might implement it into my teaching practice. With regard to Part I, Chapter 1 provides an important foundation for multiple ideas explored in subsequent chapters. Bezalel begins the book by writing a convincing argument for why teaching controversy in contemporary classrooms is necessary. Using classroom anecdotes and references to popular culture, Bezalel effectively demonstrates how “people are simply unwilling to hear the other side of the argument” (p. 1), often lacking diversity in their social groups and valuing opinion over fact. This chapter also provides the foundation for the development of “polarity management” (p. 18), one of the key concepts integrated throughout the book. Polarity management attends to what Bezalel states are the twin aims of education: seeking truth and developing moral character. By providing the reader with these clear aims, there is space for teachers to settle in and contemplate what it means to move “away from either/or thinking to both/and” (p. 18), making it possible to imagine more than one correct answer to a problem. While I found the comprehensive description of polarity management to be informative, I particularly appreciated how this information is augmented with a diagram, which is one of several figures, charts, and text boxes often accompanying Bezalel’s descriptions or summaries, highlighting key information.

A strength of this book lies in the multiple ways Bezalel loops back to the concept of polarity management, repeatedly emphasizing how attending to controversial issues in classrooms is not only about the pursuit of epistemic truth but also about attending to moral values. Dwelling in the explanation of polarity management in Chapter 1 is worthwhile as this principle relates to the “pluralist criterion” (p. x), a key concept in Chapter 2. The pluralist criterion refers to “when contrary views can be held without those views being contrary to reason, cultural understanding and identity formation” (p. 37). Polarity management also serves as a foundational idea to the “principle of charity” (p. 41), a concept highlighted in Chapter 3. Using a clever moral dilemma, Bezalel explains the principle of charity as “the ability to articulate the other side” (p. 42) and how two opposing viewpoints can be true when both intellectual and moral virtues are activated. Although not directly claimed by the author, the idea of polarity management also relates to ideas discussed in Chapter 4. Here, Bezalel provides an analysis of various forms of bias, demonstrating how people hold positions, partly grounded in reason and evidence and partly based on beliefs and feelings. I appreciate the way Bezalel reinforces the concept of polarity management throughout Part I, supporting readers as they imagine how they can build opportunities for students to consider alternative points of view and engage with intellectual and moral arguments. I also found it to be

an effective strategy to disrupt a common assumption, mine included, that teaching about controversies is merely about teaching students how to win a debate.

Bezalel describes Part II as a “quick cheat sheet on the major issues students are grappling with” (p. 71), acknowledging “time-starved teachers” (p. 71), who need support in this area but do not have time to delve into the theory positioned in the first half. This section begins with a comprehensive description of how Part II is structured, highlighting the consistent template Bezalel uses to discuss the ten controversial questions that follow. This Part II description presents a thorough introduction for readers who enter the book intentionally mid-way; at the same time, it is surprisingly not particularly repetitive for those who have been reading along to this point. In the remainder of Part II, Bezalel poses ten controversial questions and includes a comprehensive analysis of the pedagogy associated with navigating the controversy in the classroom. He offers a range of controversial questions typically posed by elementary students while arguably leaning into some smoking-hot topics for senior students such as “Are transwomen, women?” and “Who’s to blame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?” and “Being ‘woke’ just means being kind to others, especially vulnerable people. How can anyone disagree with that?”. This entire second part of the book follows a template-style approach, guided by consistent headings for each of the ten controversies. These headings or titles represent a range of topics, including: *Age group; How explosive is this topic? How should I teach this topic? Key terms and necessary knowledge; Skills: Students’ oracy and teachers’ Socratic questioning; Some theory; Beware! Sources and resources; Links to other controversies*. I appreciated the uniform structure of this section as it illustrated an efficient way to add both depth and breadth to the analysis of the ten controversies. The structure may also serve as a useful guide for teachers as they explore new or different controversial topics arising in their own contexts.

Recognizing that both teachers and students may feel anxious or be sensitive to some topic areas, Bezalel approaches teaching controversy with professionalism and care. Related to this, I was particularly drawn to three recurring headings in Part II of the book: *Beware!*, *Some theory*, and *Socratic questioning*. For example, under the *Beware!* Heading in the *Being ‘Woke’ just means being kind to others, especially vulnerable people* section, Bezalel points out how both sides of this debate ought to look out for the *ad hominem*. In Part I, *ad hominem* is defined as “gratuitously offensive sloganeering, and extremist language that promotes violence or goes against school policies and even our legal duties as teachers” (p. 83). In this way, Bezalel shows how teaching controversial issues, and education more broadly, is not just about seeking truth but also about attending to how people feel. In addition, I appreciated the *Some theory* sections where theoretical concepts discussed in Part I are connected with practical elements described in Part II. For example, in the “Surely no one can disagree with the idea that ‘love is love?’” section, Bezalel expertly shepherds the reader through an analysis of the epistemic and the pluralistic criteria, citing philosophers such as Michael Hand and Jonathon Haidt alongside quotes from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy.

While no less theoretical or thought-provoking, a few of the *Some theory* descriptions, such as *Do I have a ‘normal’ family?*, are not as explicitly connected to the theory discussed in Part I as some of the others. Having read Part I with great interest, I would have preferred for the information under the *Some theory* headings in Part II to have more explicit links with the theory described in Part I. Despite this minor shortcoming, the book’s main strength is the interplay between theoretical concepts and the ways they inform practice. This attention to praxis enticed me to read and re-read the transcript, highlighting the way Bezalel engaged Socratic questioning

in a dialogue designed to promote critical thinking with one of his students. While I might not improve through osmosis, the transcripts provide a catalyst for improving my Socratic questioning skills. In many creative and intentional ways, Bezalel masterfully draws the reader into professional reflection as he shares relevant theoretical principles in the context of his teaching practice.

I appreciated how each chapter boasted long reference lists; however, not all names were cited. Barry Johnson, for example, is credited with the concept of polarity management, but there is no citation accompanying this assertion. Similarly, while the pluralist criterion is explained sufficiently, it was not clear to me whether the pluralist criterion is a new criterion developed by Bezalel or a more widely accepted one that he has repurposed. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Bezalel states he will introduce three approaches to understanding controversy, but four approaches are presented. On careful examination, he refers to the first three approaches as “major” and notes in the introduction to the pluralistic criterion that he intends to “argue for the need to broaden the range of considerations relevant to deciding whether a moral judgement is justified” (p. 34). Even though Bezalel draws on the work of many philosophers including Shweder’s (1997) “moral languages” (p. x), Earl’s (2016) three “modes of interpretation” (p. 35), and Haidt’s (2013) “Moral Foundations Theory” (p. 36) to *explain* the pluralistic criterion, it appears that the pluralistic criterion is, in fact, a unique contribution by Bezalel. It would have been helpful to make this distinction clear and celebrate his contribution to this concept more directly.

Overall, Bezalel has succeeded in creating a unique book for teachers keen to navigate classroom controversies. It is a particularly relevant topic in a time when substantive controversies are highly accessible to youth through social media, yet few books of this nature exist for teachers. I teach Health Education in a Faculty of Education at a university, and although many of the controversies are not health-based per se, the theories underpinning the teaching strategies Bezalel proposes are transferable to pre-service teacher health education. For example, the descriptions of ad hominem, Occam’s razor, Occam’s broom, false dichotomies, straw men, and iron ladies are just some of the theoretical ideas that could be shared with pre-service teachers, potentially enhancing their confidence and ability to develop reflective and analytical thinking with their students. The wide range of suggested resources would also have great appeal for pre-service teachers looking to advance both their theoretical and practical knowledge. If I had a wish list for the next edition of this book, I would hope for two key additions: a chapter dedicated to addressing controversial health topics and Bezalel’s perspective on potential variations to navigating classroom controversies when the students are pre-service teachers. Whether the reader opts to enter the book through Part I or Part II, Bezalel’s crafty and thought-provoking anecdotes, moral dilemmas, and thinking activities all serve to enrich the reading experience. More importantly, they bring clarity to the theoretical concepts pertinent to navigating controversial issues in classrooms.