

Controversy in the Philosophy-Classroom – A Collective Book Review

Drerup, Johannes (2021a): *Kontroverse Themen im Unterricht – Konstruktiv streiten lernen*. Reclam: Stuttgart 2021.

Drerup, Johannes; Zulaica y Mugica, Miguel; Yacek, Douglas (Ed.) (2021b): *Duerfen Lehrer ihre Meinung sagen? – Demokratische Bildung und die Kontroverse über Kontroversitaetsgebote*. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart 2021.

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Currently, in several spheres of public life, there is a debate about the scope and limits of the sayable in political, cultural as well as in scientific contexts of communication. Particularly, the communication spaces that are enabled by digitalized network structures, have led to a significant pluralization of many unfiltered debate cultures. This transformation of processes of opinion formation may contribute to a strengthened democratic self-concept on the side of participants. But there is also an emergence of new problems for the essential democratic ideas of liberal societies. For instance, the rise of right-wing, conspiracist, and discriminatory opinions has profited from the possibilities facilitated by digital domains of communication. These developments also pose new challenges for subject teaching since the influence of anti-democratic discourses cannot be halted by classroom doors. Debates and discussions regarding current problems, particularly in ethical and political school subjects, may challenge the traditional ideal of controversy. Although this ideal counts as one of the most important features of problem-based learning-settings in the philosophy-classroom, the actual situation of public and half-public communication goes hand in hand with new questions concerning the scope as well as the limits and borders of the sayable within the classroom.

Written by educational scientist *Johannes Drerup* and published in 2021, the book *Controversial Issues in the Classroom – Learning to Argue Constructively* (orig.: *Kontroverse Themen im Unterricht – Konstruktiv streiten lernen*) connects different approaches towards a pedagogically justified determination of the scope and limits of controversy in the context of different school subjects. Drerup puts forward a solution-oriented proposal regarding practical issues of teaching in schools. In the following, we wish to present Drerup's well-received proposal and discuss it critically from a perspective informed by both philosophy and didactics. In a further step, we also wish to address an anthology, published by Drerup together with *Miguel Zulaica y Mugica* and *Douglas Yacek* on the question: *Should Teachers Express their Opinion?* (orig.: *Duerfen Lehrer ihre Meinung sagen? –*

Demokratische Bildung und die Kontroverse über Kontroversitaetsgebote).¹ This anthology attempts to correct questions and answers put forth in the debate on the controversy from the perspective of different school subjects and seeks to put the teacher's role and scope of action into focus.

In his book, Drerup primarily follows three questions. The answers he gives are supposed to contribute to an exploration of a practicable concept of constructive delivery of controversy in school classes. The handling of controversial issues in a specific subject-sensitive learning-setting serves to perform the democratic practice of discourse while also enabling students to have an "argument-based constructive conflict" with an orientation towards consent and compromise (Drerup 2021a: 26). With regards to the processes and aims of this "constructive conflict", the questions revolve around the localization and limitation of the scope in which issues and contents are to be treated as controversial within a classroom setting:

"*Why* should controversial topics be relevant in class? *Which* topics should be discussed as controversial in class and which shouldn't? *How* should controversial topics in class be dealt with pedagogically?"² (Drerup 2021a: 11f.)

Following these questions, Drerup demands to focus on the principle of controversy with regard to its practical utility for orientation in the face of problems and challenges of the political present. Furthermore, he intends to illuminate the extensive room for interpretation regarding the construction of controversy, along with its conceptual and practical implications, so as to win a more precise understanding of the principle and its criteria. Therefore, a central objective of the book lies in the development of a sustainable criterion for the handling of controversial content within school subjects.

The author builds on a "controversy-on-controversy-debate" in the context of "international Philosophy of Education" (Drerup 2021a: 54), in which different criteria for the determination of the scope and limits of controversy in pedagogical contexts have been discussed. The systematic focus of his own approach lies on the debate regarding the established distinction between the so-called *behavioral respectively social criterion*, the *criterion of political authenticity*, and the *epistemic respectively scientific criterion* (see Drerup 2021a: 55-67). He also adopts the prevalent teacher-oriented distinction between a non-directive way of teaching on the one hand, and a directive way of dealing with a subject matter on the other (see Drerup 2021a: 10f.). Identifying both weak points as well as potentials of the criteria listed above, he goes on to introduce a new approach which he describes as a third way, consisting of a linking of a political and an epistemic criterion.

However, Drerup does not incorporate the *behavioral respectively social criterion*, according to which all positions and subjects discussed in the public and politics should also be an open issue within pedagogical contexts. The main problem of this criterion, according to him, lies in the unquestioned transfer of declining forms of political discussion to an educational

¹ For further reading, we would like to mention that there is an upcoming publication in English by two of the three authors in this year: Johannes Drerup, Julian Culp, Douglas Yacek (eds): *The Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education*, Cambridge University Press.

² All cited passages in this text are translated from German into English by the authors of this book-review.

constellation. In contrast, the *political criterion*, which sets a non-negotiable frame for controversy within a school context based on political values and principles that are the core of liberal democracies and at the same time “basis and condition for a good personal and political life” (Drerup 2021a: 68). In a footnote, Drerup offers a list of thick concepts which stand for this idea: “human rights, pluralism of values, separation of powers, minority protection, rule of law etc.” (Drerup 2021a: 68).

In turn, Drerup mentions that likewise the *epistemic respectively scientific criterion* sets rational abilities of reasoning and empirically funded views as a condition for controversial debate of politically relevant questions, referring to established standards of scientific approaches. Both supported criteria, after the presented argumentation “of equal value and reciprocally supporting each other” (Drerup 2021a: 69), are supposed to illuminate relevant normative aspects for a distinction between controversial and uncontroversial contents. According to the author, they also maintain an adequate flexibility for subject- and context-sensitive application. Regarding the initially expressed objective within the context of a deliberative understanding of democracy, he hopes to achieve “an epistemic as well as political civilization of the culture of debate” (Drerup 2021a: 70). This should be relevant not just within a class context but also with regard to society, by implementing these standards of orientation, which he understands to be both alternative and pluralistic.

Overall, Drerup’s book is an important contribution to the international discourse on basic questions concerning the so-called “controversy on controversy” (Drerup 2021a: 54-86). So far, this debate has been grounded on rather national premises of the different respective language areas and shaped by assumptions specific to the educational institutions of the respective countries. In that regard, the author discusses both English and German approaches to the problem that has relevance to educational practice. A continuation of and engagement with the presented ideas from a philosophical and didactical perspective appears to be a productive endeavor. For instance, the meaning and understanding of the term ‘controversy’ could not be explained conclusively in the context of the concise book. For example, Drerup mentions in a footnote that in his approach he does not differentiate between “controversity, debate and discussion” (Drerup 2021a: 25). However, it is suggested that issues were not controversial *in themselves*, but rather became controversial under particular historical and cultural conditions. Consequently, it remains unclear from an epistemological perspective what exactly is qualified as ‘controversial’: Is it the issue *itself* or rather the discourse – in the sense of a ‘debate’ or ‘discussion’ – *on* these? In the case of the latter, which seems plausible from a linguistic and epistemic perspective, the author’s proposition to interconnect a political criterion with an epistemic criterion is at risk of simply reproducing patterns of opinions in teaching contexts that are located in the political and cultural mainstream. This could finally lead to an inadvertent constriction of the spectrum of opinions along with the exclusion of marginalized or utopian positions.

From the stance of didactics of philosophy, problems of the criterial approach can be traced back to the two criteria which the author introduces as a “means of orientation” (Drerup 2021a: 68). Teaching contexts in Philosophy-Courses especially allow for a critical reflection of the normative assumptions made by the *political criterion*. In this respect, there is room and need

for the problematization of the theoretical and practical substance of complex concepts such as human rights or the ideal of autonomy. These concepts, however, are being premised as given uncontroversial within the conception of the book, albeit there are persisting debates on these in political reality and contemporary philosophy. Likewise, in regards to the *epistemic criterion*, it is the task of critical education to philosophically examine the diverging “standards of rationality, methods, and argumentation” (Drerup 2021a: 69f.) of different academic disciplines, which the author also presumes. Especially from the point of view of scientific theory, there is a need to evaluate the different philosophical and scientific methods according to their effectiveness as well as their explanatory demands. For the purpose of Drerup’s objective to achieve a more nuanced controversy on controversy, which is aware of its cultural-historical contingency, consequently, also the presumptions underlying his proposed criterions ought to be discussed and problematized from varying perspectives.

The necessary awareness, which we call for in theory, equally should be implemented on the level of the philosophical discussion in the practical teaching contexts. Other than to define by criteria the limits of controversy from a bird-eye view – as Drerup does –, our basic idea is to performatively develop and evaluate these limits of controversy on the level of the classroom discourse. Based on this premise, then, the question arises whether there are certain forms of speech acts or utterances that despite the bottom-up-approach are to be halted or call for a directive form of value-centered teaching. There are profound arguments for this demand in contexts of democratic education, especially in the case of discriminating utterances with racist, antisemitic, or sexist connotations.

These questions about ways of implementing these demarcations in teaching practice are of importance, especially for teachers and their practice. One basic question is concerned with the teachers’ scope of normative influence and guidance within cultural, political, and ethical controversies in the classrooms. Does a principle of neutrality apply or are teachers allowed to utter their opinion in contexts of constructive argumentation? In its first part, the anthology *Should Teachers Express their Opinion?* (orig.: *Duerfen Lehrer ihre Meinung sagen?*) presents different positions from educational science regarding a criterial definition of the limits of controversies. Here, reference is also made to arguments which we presented from a distinct philosophical perspective above. *Ole Hilbrich* for example criticizes a “pseudo-clarity” of the criterial approaches and their respective concepts of controversy (Hilbrich in: Drerup 2021b: 62). On the one hand, he problematizes the approaches’ lack of engagement with conflict as a structural feature of democracies themselves. An examination of these connections, relationships, and their consequences for teaching practice, respectively, could only succeed in the light of such a political-theoretical analysis. For Hilbrich, controversy is not just a “means for the acquisition of the ability to act rationally” but a “key condition for a democratic lifestyle as well as a structural feature of practice of conflict that constitutes it” (Hilbrich in: Drerup 2021b: 64). On the other hand, the lack of analysis of society on the part of the criterial approaches would finally lead to a theoretical and practical overburdening of the teacher’s role, to whom the “problem of an insecure political culture [...] is being delegated” (Hilbrich in: Drerup 2021b: 62). This focus on teacher action, however, was a misconception, which in practice could even lead to a “self-misconception” (Hilbrich in: Drerup 2021b: 65). Accordingly, our suggestion above to make the setting of limits of controversies an issue

debated within the philosophical exchange of reasons in classroom discourses, in which teachers only participate in a moderating and intervening manner, may serve Hilbrich's goal to depict a more realistic image of the role teachers have to fill in schools and society.

Also, *Miguel Zulaica y Mugica* puts one of the issues of criterial approaches into focus we addressed above, which makes the epistemic criterion a basis of the "theoretical setting of limits" (Mugica in: Drerup 2021b: 48). He points out, referring to analysis of society, that due to pluralistic and postmodern societal structures, on the one hand, certain forms of knowledge are subject to critique, for example from a postcolonial view. On the other hand, the self-conception of scientific approaches always includes "fallibility or inherent self-limitation" (Mugica in: Drerup 2021b: 53), for example in the context of constructivism which is essential for pedagogical theory-building. Equally, the criterial approaches would avoid or cut short an essential debate in democratic theory on the status of controversy and dissent. The author of the article mentions three possible and at the same time diverging approaches being negotiated: radical democratic, political-liberal, and liberal-perfectionist approaches. Our own suggestion in this respect wants to make the philosophical teaching context itself the place to negotiate these questions because the controversy on the basic principles of democracy is and should remain part of our democratic self-understanding as well as of our understanding of education.

The second and the third part of the anthology focus on the issue from subject- and domain-specific perspectives. In these contributions, the role of teachers is examined from an inside perspective of teaching practice. *Anne Burkard*, in this regard, grounds her remarks on the question of a teacher's scope of action between the principle of neutrality and their own normative standpoint within classroom discussions on a qualitative empirical study. The background of the explored results is built up in form of group discussions of teachers. Burkard formulates three basic findings: First, all teachers stress their concern for effects of indoctrination and continuation of power asymmetry on the level of the teaching process in case of their strong positioning or equal participation in a discussion. Second, however, the teachers utter different "objections against philosophical neutrality" (Burkard in: Drerup 2021b: 109). In this respect, concerns for an unintended semblance of arbitrariness of opinion making in the context of philosophical controversies and for a lack of authenticity prevail. Especially philosophy teachers were particularly called upon to show "authenticity" as a philosopher (Burkard in: Drerup 2021b: 110f.). The reasons quoted "against a comprehensive neutrality" hence are not so much ethical or political, but rather refer to an authentic "philosophical attitude" concerning both students and teachers (Burkard in: Drerup 2021b: 112). Thirdly, the teachers portray "wide scopes of action apart from indoctrinating philosophical positioning on the one hand and a neutral restraint suggesting arbitrariness on the other hand" (Burkard in: Drerup 2021b: 116). Some options, in particular, are the adoption of an authentic sceptical attitude towards partial solutions to complex philosophical problems, the multifaceted ways of moderating the classroom discussion as well as the development of basic interests regarding philosophical questions and topics.

Strikingly, one of the participating teachers who is teaching the subjects philosophy and politics points out a crucial "contrast" between these two subjects (Burkard in: Drerup 2021b: 112). Her plea against a comprehensive neutrality of the teacher in both subjects points to the different

relevance of ‘firm opinions’. The latter was of greater importance in politics with a strong link to directive democratic education than in philosophy contexts which allow for a wider spectrum of possibilities for an ‘in between’ and uncertainties (Burkard in: Drerup 2021b: 112).

Dorothee Gronostay’s contribution, interestingly, further elaborates on these implications of a disclosure of teacher’s political beliefs. In doing so, she differentiates between taking sides and partiality. While the former means the statement for a position or political party, the latter means a form of one-sided or directive “depiction of political topics” which would “run contrary to the goal of the student’s opinion formation” (Gronostay in: Drerup 2021b: 147). Gronostay bases her inventory of problems for teacher action in contexts of political education furthermore on an analytical distinction aligning with criterial approaches between a scope of controversial and uncontroversial topics that are still to be determined. This way the necessary political partiality with regard to the teacher’s confinement to the constitution of the democratic state and its uncontroversial system of values is warranted. At the same time, the teacher is and can be a “political and private citizen with their own political beliefs” which, however, are located within the “scope of political controversy” (Gronostay in: Drerup 2021b: 148). Gronostay concludes from this the obligation to arrange an “ideologically neutral, non-partial teaching context” (Gronostay in: Drerup 2021b: 148). Even if the ambiguities of a democratic constitution and arrangement of liberal societies are being omitted as a problem for teaching by this definition, the analytical juxtaposition of taking sides and partiality on the one hand and the scope of controversial and uncontroversial issues on the other hand, allow to generate interesting philosophical questions which are from relevance for the didactics of philosophy. Gronostay, in this context, states: “Controversy is not a constant feature of topics or issues. Rather, it is being defined newly and repeatedly in form of negotiation processes in society.” (Gronostay in: Drerup 2021b: 148)

Hence, as we established above, controversy rather is a feature of specific discourses than of the topics discussed within these. In democratic societies, whether an issue, content or topic is controversial, is being negotiated on a regular basis by all actors involved in these discourses. Accordingly, to us it seems plausible to make specifically these discourses the focus of a critical reflection which thematizes the form, scope and limits of these negotiation processes itself. Thereby, one can also critically evaluate the diverging understandings of the concept ‘democracy’ presupposed by the different educational approaches. Philosophical teaching contexts seem to be the ideal place for this.