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Teaching Controversial Topics in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Ireland: Using Structured Academic Controversy to Develop Multi-Perspectivity in the Learner

- Educators in all disciplines are regularly confronted with controversial issues in their classrooms.
- There is a gap in the research on how best to deal with controversy in the classroom.
- SAC can support the development of multi-perspectivity in the learner.
- SAC, and similar constructivist approaches, involve significant time commitment by lecturer and student.
- Longitudinal and cross-cultural research on how to approach classroom-based controversy is required.

Purpose: This study had two main objectives: The first was to explore the extent to which a group of University lecturers feel that they are prepared to deal with controversial issues in their classrooms. The second was to elicit their views on a didactic approach known as Structured Academic Controversy (SAC). SAC is a constructivist teaching strategy intended to aid the learner in developing their views on controversial issues and in understanding alternative views with the ultimate aim of locating a compromise position.

Method: A qualitative intervention was designed to introduce six university academics from diverse specialisms to SAC by way of reflective engagement with it in the role of learners.

Findings: The participants in this study deal with controversial issues frequently and several feel ill-prepared to do so. They identified several challenges associated with the use of SAC. These relate primarily to class size and curricular overload. However, despite the challenges, the participants all recognized the potential value of such approaches in developing multi-perspectivity, critical thinking, listening and negotiating skills in the learner. Future larger-scale, longitudinal studies in a variety of cultural contexts are needed to develop approaches which can facilitate those approaching controversial issues in their classrooms.

Keywords:

Teaching innovation, controversy, Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), multi-perspectivity, higher education, didactics

1 Introduction: Objectives and overview

This paper presents a piece of qualitative research designed to explore the extent to which educators feel comfortable dealing with controversial issues in their classrooms, and to consider the potential value and pitfalls associated with one emerging approach, that of Structured Academic Controversy, or SAC. It is hoped that the insights obtained would inform the teaching practice of others.

The paper begins with a definition of controversy as it is understood in this piece of research and as it was defined for the participants. It then describes SAC in more detail before going on to describe a pedagogical intervention designed to introduce six university lectures to SAC in the role of learners.

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2 Defining controversy

There are many definitions of controversy. However, Dearden's (1981, p. 38) definition of a controversial issue as one on which 'contrary views can be held [...] without those views being contrary to reason' remains pertinent today. The key point here is one of perception. From an individual's perspective, their stance on a particular issue is a reasonable one (Oulton, Dillon & Grace, 2007, p. 411) while the holder of a contrary view also considers their position to be valid. As Oulton, Dillon & Grace (2007, p. 411, p. 505) emphasise, protagonists on different sides of a controversy may have the same information at their disposal but may interpret it differently, or may base their views on different sub-sets of the available information.

It is intended that today's school leavers and university graduates should be engaged critical thinkers and, as such, capable of dealing with controversial issues, or indeed 'ill-defined problems' (Cotterill, 2015, p. 407) in a constructive manner. It is also intended that higher education and indeed education generally should not shy away from presenting issues which are controversial in society as controversial in the classroom.

This is one of the pillars of the *Beutelsbacher Konsens* and, indeed, similar principles are at the core of most liberal education systems which are based on the premise that learners should be free to make up their own minds on controversial issues and reach informed



decisions (for example Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998). A considerable body of research laudably, however, the fact that many of these laudable aims remain aspirational and that many school leavers and university graduates lack the critical awareness called for in their respective, national educational policy documents (Bruen, 2013b; Bruen, 2014; Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011; Kerr, Sturman, Schulz & Burge, 2010). One possible approach emerging from the field of political science is SAC. SAC is described in more detail in the following section.

3 Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)

Also known as ‘Structured Controversial Dialogue’ (Zainuddin & Moore, 2003) or ‘Co-operative Controversy’ (D’Eon & Proctor, 2001), SAC can be described as both a constructivist teaching strategy and a cooperative learning strategy (Avery & Simmons, 2008). It is perceived as constructivist in that learners construct their own knowledge via interaction with their peers (Biggs & Tang 2011; Jones & Man Sze Lau, 2010; Jones & Peachy, 2005). Proponents of SAC (for example Hahn, 2009; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2000) stress that it promotes intellectual inquiry in a number of ways which are particularly relevant to developing an ability to deal with controversial issues. These include building coherent arguments based on evidence, formulating persuasive arguments, critically analysing and challenging the position of others and in particular seeing issues from a variety of perspectives in advance of seeking reasoned consensual judgements by synthesising and integrating the best evidence available (Freedman-Her Reid, 2005).

SAC also requires a ‘flipped’ classroom (Berrett, 2012) approach whereby learners are provided with, or required to source, materials to read and internalise on an issue in advance of classroom contact. The materials should include arguments which represent polarised positions on a controversial issue together with additional material on the issue. During the class contact hour (or hours) which follows, the focus is on interaction. The students are generally divided into groups of four. Each pair within the group prepares a polar position on the controversial issue, which forms the basis of the exercise and is usually selected by their lecturer or teacher.

The following series of steps (summarized in Figure 1) constitute the key elements of SAC.

Step 1: The first pair of students presents their argument to the other pair within their group of four.

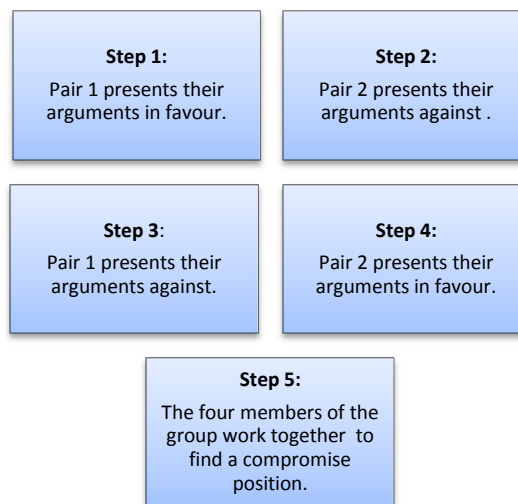
Step 2: The second pair then present their arguments to the first pair.

In Steps 3 and 4, the roles are reversed with each pair representing the alternative position and presenting both the arguments they have heard and any additional points that occur to them.

As such, the aim of the student pairs is not to ‘win the argument’ but rather to uncover the various arguments

around the issue in question. In the fifth and final stage, all four students in the group are asked to attempt to reach a consensus on the issue (Bruen, 2015; Hahn, 2009; Zainuddin & Moore, 2003). If consensus cannot be reached, the team is required to clarify where exactly the differences lie (Pedagogy in Action: the SERC portal for educators, 2015, serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/_sac/why.html).

Figure 1: The core elements of SAC



An additional, optional step, originally introduced by D’Eon & Proctor (2001), involves switching the pairs between teams in the larger class group for the second set of presentations as part of what they describe as a “double switch” (2001, p. 251). The term “double switch” is used to indicate that the participants are switching both group and advocacy position. The addition of this element has the advantage that the students are exposed to richer input in the form of an additional set of arguments.

It is also possible to follow-up on the exercise by setting individual or group assignments based on the controversial issue for students to complete outside of the classroom. These range from essays, to newspaper articles, to reflections depending on the level of the students and the nature of the module.

The role of the teacher or lecturer during the process is that of facilitator. Their primary objective is to ensure the process runs smoothly and in so doing to encourage divergent thinking in the learner. Appropriate one-to-one questioning during the different stages can be used to encourage students to elaborate on their view and/or deepen their thinking. In terms of the classroom environment, it has also been recognised (Hahn, 2009; Zainuddin & Moore, 2003) that there are a number of key features of the classroom environment which should be enforced for SAC to work successfully. These include creating an open, trusting classroom climate in which students feel free to express their views and a genuine willingness among all of those involved to listen to, consider and make an effort to understand alternative perspectives. Participants must also be willing to modify

their position based on supporting evidence in order to find a compromise position where possible.

4 Teaching controversial issues in the higher education classroom and SAC: A qualitative study

4.1 Objectives

This study had two main objectives:

The first was to explore the extent to which a group of University lecturers feel that they are prepared to deal with controversial issues in their classrooms.

The second was to introduce this group of lecturers to a particular approach to dealing with controversial issues in the classroom known as 'Structured Academic Controversy', or SAC, and, following their direct engagement with it as learners, to elicit their views regarding its potential benefits and associated challenges.

4.2 Instruments

Questionnaire

In order to achieve the above objectives, a questionnaire was designed containing the following, open-ended, questions (Figure 2), designed to encourage reflection on approaches to the teaching of controversial issues.

Figure 2: Questions posed

<p>PART 1: EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you deal with controversial issues in the classroom? Yes/No2. If yes, please reflect briefly below on the types of issues and your approach to dealing with them in the classroom. <p>PART 2: STRUCTURED ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Please reflect briefly on this exercise? What did you like or dislike about it?2. Do you think this approach could be useful in any of the modules you teach? Please explain your answer.3. If you were using this technique in class, what would you do differently?4. What (if anything) do you think might prevent this technique from working well in the classroom?
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SAC Materials

As the intention was to engage the participants with SAC, a controversial issue was selected. The topic selected as the basis of the SAC exercise centred on an issue currently under discussion in the Irish media and among educational policy makers concerning the compulsory study of the Irish language in all years of the Irish education system.

Briefly, the Republic of Ireland has two official languages, Irish and English. While the Irish language holds a special place in the Irish constitution, English is the first language of the vast majority of those living in Ireland. According to the most recent census, approximately 1.7 percent, or 77,185 people out of a population of 4,581,269, speaks Irish on a daily basis outside of the education system (Central Statistics Office (Ireland),

2012). Other languages widely spoken among immigrant communities in Ireland include Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Lithuanian, Moldovan, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Vietnamese and Yoruba (Royal Irish Academy 2011). The Irish language is compulsory within the Irish education system with all pupils required to study the Irish language in both primary and secondary school (up to approximately the age of 18 or whenever they leave full-time education). Apart from English, Irish remains the only language enjoying such compulsory status with the study of an additional language other than Irish or English optional within the education system. As such, Ireland remains unique within the European Union as the only country, apart from Scotland, in which the study of a foreign language is not compulsory at any stage in formal education (Royal Irish Academy, 2011).

There has been much discussion in recent years in Ireland concerning the need to increase foreign language capacity and to acknowledge the linguistic diversity already present in Irish society (Bruen, 2013a; Bruen & Kelly, 2016). One element of the debate concerns the compulsory status of Irish, with those in favour of retaining this status emphasizing the importance of the Irish language to Irish history and identity as well as its value in introducing school pupils to language learning at a young age, thus laying the foundations for lifelong language learning. On the other side of the debate are those who feel that the focus on Irish is at the expense of other languages which may be squeezed out of the curriculum as a result of the time devoted to the study of Irish. This topic was considered to be suitable for this exercise as, in line with the definition of controversy above, it is one on which 'contrary views can be held without those views being contrary to reason'.

Despite the fact that the the participants could have been expected to be familiar with the different arguments associated with this issue, relevant materials were nonetheless sourced and made available to the participants in advance. These included a newspaper article¹ and the Irish *National Languages Strategy* (Royal Irish Academy, 2011).

4.3 Participants

The participants were all lecturers in a Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at a Dublin University. They were approached as they lecture on a range of degrees including the BA in Contemporary Culture and Society, the BA in Applied Language and Translation Studies, the Bachelor of Business (International) and the BA in Global Business as well as the MA in Children's Literature and the MA in Comparative Literature. In addition, the participants research, lecture and supervise research students in diverse subject areas in which controversial issues are likely to be present in the course content on a relatively frequent basis. Their particular areas of expertise include Contemporary Cultural Studies, European History and Politics, French Culture and Society, French, German and Japanese as a Foreign Languages, European Children's Literature, Business



Ethics, Global Cultures, Nationalism, Globalisation and Asian Studies.

4.4 Procedure

The six university lecturers (see previous section 4.c.) were asked whether they would participate in a piece of qualitative research designed to explore their approaches to dealing with controversial issues in their classrooms and to engage with SAC in the role of learners. All six agreed to participate and were assured that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that their individual inputs would remain anonymous. The lecturers elected to participate in the role of co-researchers and, following the exercise, to provide input into the drafting of the resultant research paper (for a similar approach, see Chen, Masch & Finze, 2014).

The researcher selected an appropriate controversial topic (see previous section 4.b.) and provided the participants with material on the topic to read in advance. On the day of the exercise, the participants completed the first part of the questionnaire (see previous section 4.b. and Appendix 1) individually. They were then divided into a group of four and a group of two (for a similar approach including video clips of the process in action in the science classroom, see Pedagogy in Action (2015): serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/sac/why.html). The group of four was further divided into two pairs in a set up approximating Figure 3:

Figure 3: Group Work Phase



Source: By User: SarahStierch (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)], via Wikimedia Commons

The group of four was further divided into two pairs. Each pair/individual prepared its arguments, one pair in favour of the claim that ‘The Irish language should be optional within the Irish education system’ and the second pair against. The pairs then presented their arguments to one another.

An extract of summary transcriptions reconstructed from participant/researcher notes from one of the groups is contained in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Reconstructed extract from presentation of arguments by one group of participants

Step 1:
Pair One – Arguments in favour:
[...] I think that Irish should be optional in secondary school in Ireland. I think it’s good that all students should learn some language but it doesn’t have to be Irish. There is a big selection of languages for them to choose from and with different family histories and backgrounds very common in Ireland now, it might be good for them to be able to choose a language other than Irish. Irish is very closely linked to Irish identity and history, for example, place names but the students will have done some in primary school and should be allowed to make a choice in secondary school. [...]

Step 2:
Pair Two – Arguments against:
[...] Speaking Irish is one of the main things that differentiates the Irish from other nationalities. If we don’t make sure that children learn it properly in school then there is a danger that it may die out in the future and that will be something that we will regret. At that stage it will be too late to change what has happened. In secondary school, students are exposed to Irish language literature and can gain a deeper understanding of Irish history and culture and the Irish ‘perspective’ on the world. It needs to be taught well and made more attractive to students. The problem is not that the language is compulsory but maybe that the curriculum and syllabus need to be looked at again as well as the different language teaching methodologies and assessment methods. [...]

The participants were then asked to reverse their advocacy positions and, after a further fifteen minutes of preparation time, to present the alternative position. The double switch option referred to in the previous section was introduced at this point and one individual and one pair swapped with one another before presenting their views. After this step had been completed, the group were asked to attempt to reach a compromise position within their small groups or, where this did not prove possible, to instead clarify the particularly points on which differences remained.

As a result of their particular SAC exercise, two compromise positions were achieved by the two groups (Figure 5).

Once the exercise had been concluded, the participants completed the second part of the questionnaire individually giving their views regarding the usefulness or otherwise of the exercise and its applicability to their individual teaching situations. They also engaged in a short discussion facilitated by the researcher on the value or otherwise of the exercise.

The questionnaires were analysed using descriptive content analysis and the emerging themes identified. These are reported in the following sub-section.

Figure 5: Compromise positions reached by the two groups of participants following engagement with SAC

Negotiated Compromise, Group 1:

Irish and an additional language other than English should be made compulsory within the Irish education system to Junior Certificate state (approximately age 16). Subsequently either Irish or an additional language should be compulsory for the remainder of formal education.

Negotiated Compromise, Group 2:

Both Irish and an additional foreign language should be compulsory throughout formal education with measures such as Content and Language Integrated Learning and a lengthening of the school day, and possibly the school year, considered in order to free up space and time within the curriculum.

4.5 Findings

In their questionnaires, all of the participants reported being confronted with controversial issues in the classroom on a regular basis in, at least some, of the modules they deliver. This applies equally to classes directly devoted to the study of political or social issues as to those concerned with the study of a foreign language. This is owing to the fact that in studying a foreign language, lecturers are in many cases free to select the content which will provide a medium for the study of the foreign language, often choosing to deal with political, social and cultural issues.

Analysis of the responses to the questionnaires also indicates that three of the participants feel uncomfortable dealing with issues that are what they described as 'too controversial'. They report tending to shy away from them as a result of being unsure how best to approach these issues without alienating or embarrassing some of their students or 'putting them on the spot', i.e. 'forcing' them to express their views on sensitive issues to their fellow students.

The issues the participants report covering in their classrooms are particularly diverse. They range from the role and remit of world bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations, controversial issues associated with phenomena such as globalisation (see also Crosbie, 2014), multiculturalism, diversity, and racism, as well as educational issues arising within a module on children's literature including the age from which children should be exposed to subjects such as war, refugees, the Holocaust, homosexuality, sexuality more generally, death etc.; and finally linguistic issues, for example, the term used in Japanese to describe a non-native Japanese person.

In their questionnaire responses, the participants also reported that their approaches to dealing with such issues primarily involve either discussion or debate, elaborating on this point with the explanation that debate involves the lecturer allocating a particular stance to sub-groups of students while discussion allows them to express their views freely. The participants further observed that discussion is often based on a stimulus of some kind such as an image, text, quote or question. For example, a newspaper article reporting on the awarding of the title of *European of the Year* to the Irish *Taoiseach*

(Prime Minister), Enda Kenny (Figure 6), is used as a stimulus for engagement with the currently controversial question of what makes a good European and where the boundaries between loyalty to a country and loyalty to a union such as the EU lie, as well as issues concerning the role and remit of the EU more generally.

Figure 6: Irish Taoiseach [Prime Minister] named European of the Year (2012)

Enda Kenny picks up his European of the Year gong Lise Hand in Berlin



The Taoiseach was presented with European of the Year award at a ceremony in Berlin this evening - and accepted it on behalf of the Irish people.

Source (Article): <http://www.independent.ie> [08.11.2012],
Source (Photo): <http://creativecommons.org/licenses>, via
Wikimedia Commons

The participants stressed in their responses that there was a need for awareness, on their part, of possible approaches and further training in the form of in-service seminars and workshops, exchange of best practice etc., also known as Continuous Professional Development (CPD), in the area. They welcomed their exposure to SAC as part of this study. One, however, who works with large groups of more than eighty students on average, did note that it was difficult in such a context to use any particular approach to dealing with controversial issues. Relatively speaking, the most popular feature of SAC was the requirement to switch sides or advocacy position, with one participant commenting that she '...liked the fact that you had to take both sides and that you had to listen...'. Participants also responded positively to the requirement to listen without interrupting and without taking notes which several felt focussed the mind. Other positive aspects mentioned were the challenging nature of the exercise and the value of working in pairs.

A number of challenges associated with the use of this approach were also identified and teased out by the participants in their responses to the questions posed in the questionnaires. Firstly, it was felt by all six participants that devoting more time (than the one hour devoted to it in this case) to the exercise would enhance the process and prevent 'superficial treatment of the

topic', as well as helping to avoid sweeping, general and unfounded statements such as:

Irish is boring and no longer relevant.
All other countries learn their national language at school, why can't we?
Irish is badly taught in schools.

One suggestion was to conduct the first step in one class contact hour and the second several days later in an additional contact hour, perhaps requiring the learners to engage in further reading or written production on the issue in the intervening period. One participant suggested that, were they to use the approach in their classes, they would '...try to give more time or spread out the activities'. This requirement to devote either one or two contact hours to the exercise was of concern to some of the participants who spoke of the existing time pressure already placed upon lecturers in universities in terms of the material to be covered in short time periods. One participant expressed this view in her questionnaire as follows:

"As usual, lots of great ideas and would love the luxury of having a few hours every semester to do great tasks like this but under too much pressure time wise to cover the course as it is.

A second challenge concerns the potential for the students to get confused by the need to switch advocacy position and in some cases, group. One lecturer commented that she '...would only switch the groups of students once if I were to use this technique', particularly as she has more than forty students enrolled on the module in question. Two others favoured a simplified, two-step approach whereby the students present their views to one another and then simply swap and present the opposite view. In contrast, several participants with smaller groups suggested adding additional elements to the process, time permitting, for example presenting your partner's view to the group.

Another suggested developing a written version of the approach whereby the students would be required to produce a written piece in pairs, firstly in favour and subsequently on the opposing side of a statement relating to the issue. According to such an approach, the lecturer could monitor language accuracy in advance of the pairs exchanging their material and producing a written proposal for a compromise. This suggestion was made by the lecturers interested in using the approach in a foreign language setting (Japanese as a foreign language and French as a foreign language).

The participants all stated in the questionnaires that the exercise would be useful in smaller classes of about sixteen students where there was plenty of time available with one commenting that it 'would be hard to replicate in a big group (with more than twenty five students)' and a second that '...an issue is working with large groups and trying to manage discussions'. The potential for 'chaos' was also mentioned and 'spatial con-

cerns' raised around the need for students to be able to move freely around a classroom.

The need for in-depth preparation in advance, on the part of the students, was also noted in the written responses. The importance of the students carefully reading and reflecting on the material in advance and informing themselves thoroughly about the issue at hand was stressed if 'mainstream 'pub-like' conversations' are to be avoided during the exercise. One participant commented that there was a danger of students, who were inadequately prepared, falling back on simplistic stereotypes when required to switch sides in an argument. It was stressed that a good knowledge of the issue is required for high quality discussion to take place. Three participants commented in their questionnaires that they would therefore ensure that their students had time to engage with relevant material in advance and to prepare their arguments with their partner on the day. Despite the challenge this poses, however, one participant observed in her response that if successful, the use of SAC could 'expand students' knowledge of and approaches to contemporary social or cultural debates'.

Despite the challenges to be overcome, four of the six participants explicitly commented in their questionnaires on how they would attempt to use SAC in the future, for example, 'I could see myself trying this in class next year' or '...will try it with the final years (that is, those students in the fourth and final year of their undergraduate degree) next year!' Content areas where the participants felt the technique might be suitably included modules on *Globalisation and Business Ethics* looking, for example, at issues around migration into Ireland. Several of the participants also noted in their written responses that the technique could have value as an exercise where the students were in a foreign language learning environment. The need for a more explicit language focus at the preparation stage was stressed, however, in this regard.

In addition, the short bursts of intensive activity associated with SAC were, it was felt, potentially suited to students with increasingly 'short concentration spans'. Participants also noted that the approach was superior to the debate as it is challenging but useful to 'argue the other side and disagree with your own opinions or 'pre-conceived opinions'. Indeed, some of the participants felt that engagement with SAC had helped to develop their own ability to view issues from multiple perspectives with one commenting:

"It has certainly made me question the positions that I (un)consciously take and that I need to be more balanced in the approach I take.

5 Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper was to present a piece of qualitative research designed to explore the extent to which a group of university lecturers feel prepared to deal with controversial issues in their respective classrooms. It also reported on an intervention designed to introduce them to a particular approach, SAC, and to elicit their views

regarding the potential benefits and challenges of this approach in practice.

The findings indicate that the participants in the study are faced with controversial issues on a frequent basis. They reported feeling uncomfortable doing so, in some instances, and ill-prepared to deal with such issues.

Following their engagement with SAC in the role of learners, the participants identified a number of challenges and benefits associated with its use: The barriers to the effective use of SAC mentioned most frequently were related to the size of class groups and the number of class contact hours. The participants agreed that the logistics of engaging with SAC would be more difficult with larger class groups who have a limited amount of class-time to spend on such exercises. Despite the challenges, the participants recognized a potential value in the approach and indicated that SAC would be a useful addition to the range of approaches they currently employ in their classrooms. In particular, four of the participants emphasized in the discussion following participation in the exercise that SAC would be useful in helping students develop the ability to view issues from different perspectives.

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Endnote:

¹ Irish language: Enda Kenny's main point is unanswerable, *Politico* [17th June 2005] politico.ie/archive/irish-language-enda-kennys-main-point-unanswerable