


Chapter 12

Implementing Constructive Controversy in a Hybrid Children's Literature Course

Danielle E. Hartsfield

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4607-9503>
University of North Georgia, USA

Angelica Marquez

University of North Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

Constructive controversy is a cooperative learning approach that invites students to research and present both sides of an issue. This approach has many positive outcomes; these include improving academic achievement and motivation, fostering interpersonal relationships, and encouraging students to consider multiple perspectives. This chapter describes the implementation of constructive controversy in a hybrid children's literature course for undergraduate students in an elementary/special education dual major program. Students in the class investigated and discussed several critical issues in the children's literature field. Students' perspectives of participating in constructive controversy are shared, and recommendations are made to support instructors seeking to implement constructive controversy in hybrid or online classroom settings.

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall 2019 semester, the pre-service teachers in my (Danielle's) class were having a conversation about banned and challenged children's literature and children's intellectual freedom, or the "right to read" (International Literacy Association, 2018a; National Council of Teachers of English, 2018). The discussion occurred within the context of a lesson on censorship in READ 3090: *Children's Literature and Language Arts*, which is taught each fall to seniors in our university's elementary/special education dual major program.

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I had finished reading aloud from *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson et al., 2005), a picture book about two male penguins raising a chick. The book has appeared on the American Library Association's (2021) list of the top 10 most frequently challenged books multiple times since its publication. Its challengers have expressed concerns with the book's inclusion of LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual) characters and questioned its suitability for children. After reading *And Tango Makes Three* to the class, the conversation among the students went like this:

"I don't think I would use this book in my classroom. I would be afraid of what the kids would tell their parents and how I would explain that to them," one visibly worried student said.

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to deal with the parents. And this book wouldn't fit in my curriculum, anyway," another student added.

From across the room, a third student challenged their thinking: "But what about teaching your students that there are different kinds of families? We teach that in kindergarten."

A lively and spontaneous discussion ensued as students contributed their various perspectives of sharing a challenged book like *And Tango Makes Three* in an elementary classroom. After reflecting on the lesson, I realized the controversy surrounding this book had genuinely captured the students' interest and attention, and it occurred to me that I could use controversy in a productive way to engage them with critical social issues through children's literature. As a social justice-oriented teacher educator, I have a responsibility for broadening my students' perspectives and helping them better understand the realities that the children in their future classrooms may face. I have a responsibility to help them see literature as a vehicle for creating a more equitable and just world because literature can change hearts and minds. That discussion on a September afternoon encouraged me to revise the way I teach READ 3090, and in the Fall 2020 semester, I integrated constructive controversy in the course for the first time.

Constructive controversy is a cooperative approach for structuring class discussions about an issue or topic that has at least two competing sides (Johnson et al., 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). When participating in a constructive controversy, students are asked to develop and support arguments for *both* sides of an issue or topic regardless of their personal opinions. Several reasons informed my decision to include constructive controversy in READ 3090. First, I wanted to model the use of a discussion approach that my students, who are pre-service elementary and special education teachers, could one day implement in their own classrooms. Second, I believed that integrating this method in my course would support my students in learning about contemporary issues in the children's literature field, such as the recent attention given to the issue of racially biased portrayals in classic works of literature.

As another reason, I decided to include constructive controversy in READ 3090 to increase my students' comfort with handling controversy, particularly controversial literature. In fact, one of the objectives stated on the course syllabus indicates students will "demonstrate understanding of current controversial issues in children's literature and the role (if any) of censorship in the literature program." However, research has found that educators avoid controversial issues in classroom settings for a variety of reasons. These reasons include lack of preparation for handling controversy; fear of backlash from students, parents, and/or colleagues; and pressure from others to avoid controversy (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019; Misco & Patterson 2007; Patterson, 2010). Even when pre-service teachers have been asked to engage in culturally relevant literacy practices, some avoid discussing topics such as race and racism (Christ & Sharma, 2018; Ciampa & Reisboard, 2020). Despite these concerns, students who participate in discussions about controversial issues are in better positions to enact social change (Misco & Patterson, 2007), and research about approaches like constructive controversy (discussed in the following section of this chapter) suggest a multitude of positive academic outcomes.

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