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Teaching Controversial Issues in a Populist and Post-Truth Context

SARAH M. STITZLEIN
University of Cincinnati

Many teachers and education scholars are quick to endorse discussing controversial issues in classrooms, especially in the context of "divisive concept" legislation that proposes bans or limitations on how contentious matters are taught in schools. This approach, however, may not be the best choice in a post-truth and populist setting that challenges the values of liberal democracy and the norms of discussion that are endorsed in deliberative democracy. Rather than recommending doubling down on traditional approaches in this new context, this article proposes a form of pragmatist inquiry as a better pedagogical method. Pragmatist inquiry shares some tenets with aspects of populism and post-truth, yet heads off some of their worst tendencies. It offers a more suitable pedagogical approach than the liberal democracy approaches more closely aligned with typical classroom discussion and related forms of deliberation and debate.

While much has been said among philosophers of education about which criteria should be used to determine whether or not something should be taught as being controversial, many of those teaching in classrooms and our colleagues who prepare them in universities have been quick to suggest that controversial issues, whatever they may be, should be matters of discussion in schools (Kauppi & Drerup, 2021). While there are variations, the dominant form of discussion entails teaching students about opposing perspectives on an issue, and sometimes then requires students to take a stand and provide reasons for their preferred perspective (Barton & Ho, 2023). That call seems rather justified given how discussion contributes to the development of good citizens, prepared for living in a contentious world, by helping students develop knowledge of and tolerance for perspectives with which they disagree; increases students' ability to provide reasons for their own perspectives; and even improves civics scores as measured on some national tests, including the US National Assessment of Educational Progress (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013; Saetra, 2021). This go-to approach, however, may not be the best choice in a post-truth and populist setting that challenges the values of liberal democracy and the norms of discussion that are endorsed in deliberative democracy. Rather than recommending doubling down on traditional approaches in this new context, I propose a form of pragmatist inquiry as a better pedagogical method (New Jersey Education Association, 2021; Pace & Journell, 2021; Teachers College of Columbia University, 2021).

In this paper, I set aside concerns with criteria for controversial issues and focus instead on how changing epistemic, civic, and political practices demand improved approaches to how we teach controversial issues. Staying true to present circumstances, though, I have in mind here controversial issues of the sort related to recent legislation that has been sweeping the United States to ban the teaching of "divisive concepts" (Schwartz, 2023). These concepts include aspects of race, gender, and sexuality, and matters of oppression related to them.[1] One reason given for banning these concepts is because they are believed to bring about

[1] While called "concepts," they might more accurately be understood as political, moral, and sociological beliefs about aspects of race, gender, and sexual identity, as well as injustices related to these aspects of identity. To stay aligned with the language of the laws, I will use the term "divisive concepts." These concepts could be seen as controversial using an array of criteria. Most simply, they may be objectionable *topics* but may not have more than one "side" to them, or, as

discomfort, guilt, or anguish among students (as expressed in Iowa H.F. 802, Sec 2.1.a.8 and Oklahoma SB803, Sec.1.A.1.h). Many of these laws were created in reaction to critical race theory, which emphasizes the enduring and ongoing role of systemic racism, and the 1619 Project, which centres Black Americans in the historical narrative of the United States, including their contributions and their experiences of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hannah-Jones, 2019). With the example of "divisive concepts," we see that struggles over how to teach them in our current context are magnified because the histories and values related to those concepts are themselves contentious matters of truth and partisanship. The term "divisive concepts" gets at the understanding of controversial issues as those that cause divisions among citizens because there are significant differences in the way that people explain, solve, or value those issues.

I argue that, in the context of populism and post-truth, rather than merely *discussing* divisive concepts, teachers should engage students in pragmatist *inquiry* into them.[2] Pragmatist inquiry shares some tenets with aspects of populism and post-truth, yet heads off some of their worst tendencies. It offers a more suitable pedagogical approach than the liberal democracy approaches more closely aligned with typical classroom discussion and related forms of deliberation and debate. Because classroom discussion is a well-known, though varied, technique and because many of its limitations have already been noted, my focus here will be more on introducing pragmatist inquiry and the benefits it offers in today's social and political context. I will begin by summarizing some key aspects of populism and post-truth and their implications for teaching controversial issues, before offering a pragmatist account of truth and inquiry. Then I will describe how one might employ inquiry to teach controversial issues. Along the way, I will show how the pragmatist approach addresses key problems posed in our current context.

Defining Populism

Scholars have categorized populism as an ideology, a discourse, a form of expression, and a movement (Sant, 2021). I understand populism to be a thin and rather vague ideology, one which is often expressed through discourse (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Sant, 2021). This broad definition sets aside the particular policy positions and leaders that may arise from "thick" ideologies that are sometimes affiliated with populist groups (Laclau, 2005; Sant, 2021).[3] A key feature of populism is that it sees society as divided between the people and the elite, two homogenous and antagonistic groups, an "us versus them." The people are favoured because they are seen as hardworking, good, and pure, while the elite – found primarily in the media, academia, and government – are viewed as motivated by power and propelled by corruption. Populism maps competing political groups in the world and denies the possibility of working across them (Geurkink et al., 2019). Populists celebrate the "common sense" of the people, which comes from first-hand experiences and opinions, and they deride the expert knowledge of elites. Populism taps into citizens' affect – emotional reactions which are "relational, political and embodied" (Zembylas, 2021, p. 6). Affect drives action, often prompting likeminded citizens toward each other and away from other groups, thereby nurturing their group identity and reifying their distinction from others.

Populism takes aim at liberal democracy, exposing it for failing to live up to its promises of justice and well-being for all. It reveals unfairness and hierarchy, in which elites reap rewards that other hardworking people are denied (Sant, 2021). Populism arises when trust in the political system and its leaders is low (Geurkink et

issues, there may be some aspect to them up for debate, which could include matters of interpretation or policy that have competing "sides."

[2] It is challenging to know how to write about populism and post-truth, in part because these titles are read as pejorative, the assumption is often that the audience is unsympathetic to them, and many people who endorse aspects would not proclaim the titles for themselves. To be clear, I am not endorsing populism and I am quite aware of some of the serious threats in may pose to democracy, especially when viewed with a more maximalist lens. Rather, given its pervasiveness, I claim that we need to understand it and equip students to live in an increasingly populist world. While I do not discuss it here, those students should also be educated to challenge some aspects of populism that are particularly worrisome.

[3] Sant and Laclau warn against maximalist definitions and ascribing particular social content to populism. Importantly, I recognize that preferences for authoritarian leaders, nationalism, and xenophobia are increasingly appearing among Right populist groups that have been on the rise.

al., 2019; Laclau, 2005; Sant, 2021). United by their shared experiences of being ignored or suppressed by the elite and fuelled by anger, resentment, and other powerful emotions, populists bring forward the demands of the people.

Defining Post-Truth

Back-to-back "words of the year" (Cambridge Words, 2017; Oxford Languages, n.d.), populism and post-truth have arisen alongside each other, with many populists demonstrating aspects of post-truth even if they do not overtly proclaim it as their epistemology.[4] In a post-truth setting, "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford English Dictionary). Populists question the objective correspondence theories of truth upheld in liberal democracy, in which there is one accurate representation of the way things really are. Post-truth holds that it may be impossible to agree about our assessment of reality (Waisbord, 2018). Opinions, then, take on heightened significance, and are sometimes even proclaimed as "facts," as a way to further declare authority for one's views, especially when they may not be aligned with the assertions of experts. Scholars claim that "The root of populism's opposition to [a traditional notion of] truth is its binary vision of politics" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 17). They conclude that this binary outlook denies the possibility of a truth that is shared across the people and the elite because they have different experiences and values. Yet, populism needs shared narratives in order to unite the people. Because of this, populists assert "facts" that are used to compose those narratives and foster loyalty to one's political group. These narratives help to explain the unjust outcomes of liberal democracy, in which the elite obtain more power and wealth because of their supposed access to truth (through advanced degrees, high-tech study, etc.). Those narratives, instead, uphold the knowledge of the people and castigate the corrupt elite who devalue that knowledge as they maintain an unfair system.

Populists are concerned with how facts and narratives are sincerely shared, where one's performance of them produces an affective response in others that makes them *feel* true. Edda Sant (2021) connects sincerity back to the binary division, noting that "accuracy does not have primacy, sincerity does. Knowledge is a matter of trust." (p. 107). "Truth decay" describes the collapsing of the distinction between fact and opinion. It is exacerbated when traditionally respected sources of facts (scientific organizations, newsrooms) are no longer trusted or are trumped by personal experiences (Hodgin & Kahne, 2019).

Populism and post-truth are furthered by recent trends in psychological and sociological tendencies whereby citizens increasingly seek like-minded peers in their physical and digital communities and are guided by confirmation bias to seek evidence that already aligns with their views. Filter bubbles, in which competing voices have been left out, or echo chambers, in which other voices are intentionally excluded or discredited, are on the rise (Baehr, 2021b; Nguyen, 2018). Citizens may also engage in motivated reasoning, in which they ignore or downplay viewpoints that conflict with their own, or directional motivation, in which they justify views that align with their prior beliefs because it "feels right."

Problems Posed by Populism and Post-Truth

Populism and post-truth – together privileging emotion and opinion in battles between the people and the elite – pose significant problems to typical ways of discussing controversial issues in schools. Whereas discussion emphasizes rationality and giving clear reasons for a position, today a key driver of political participation is affect, and controversial issues often give rise to strong emotional reactions. Whereas discussion requires informed understanding, populists focus on opinions, personal experiences, demands, and taking action with little effort to first thoroughly understand the issue at hand. Whereas discussion calls for an engagement that is civil, polite, and mindful of established rules, populist sentiments are liable to provoke an anger that is expressed through outbursts, rudeness, and ad hominem attacks. Whereas discussion presumes mutual respect and an

[4] Indeed, some populists, particularly religious evangelicals, are quite clear in asserting that they do believe in one, clear truth and that they alone possess it.

ability to work through disagreements with an eye toward the common good and achieving consensus, populists distrust others, focus more on ensuring the well-being of their political group above all else, and find goals of consensus to be naïve at best. Whereas discussion presumes a commitment to truth and facts as shared starting points for deliberation, today citizens increasingly tout their personal opinions and celebrate the experiences of "the people" over the knowledge of experts and institutions previously trusted as sources of evidence.

Collectively, populism, post-truth, and trends in psychological and sociological behaviour not only make classroom discussion difficult, they also pose significant epistemic threats, lead to groupthink, and put our ability to make wise civic decisions about controversial issues at risk. Even while populism may pose justified challenges to traditional liberal democracy, we know that matters of truth and honesty (how we seek and share the truth with forthrightness and accuracy), which guide assumptions of liberal democracy, are essential to a vibrant democracy. Citizens must be able to rely on information and trust each other, their leaders, and their institutions as they address shared problems and go about living their lives together.

Pragmatist Truth

To begin to offer an alternative pedagogical framework in pragmatist inquiry, I must first explain how pragmatists conceive of truth, which will set the stage for showing similarities between pragmatist and populist post-truth and highlighting how pragmatism may offer a suitable alternative that responds to the present context (Misak, 2008).[5] Pragmatists are concerned with the consequences of our beliefs. Those that are true are those that "work" for us because they enable us to understand and act in the world in ways that satisfy our personal needs and enable communities to flourish (Dewey, 2008b). Pragmatists reject "the spectator theory of knowledge," in which knowledge is an accurate representation of a fixed reality apart from human influence (James, 2002, p. xi). They argue that we cannot distinguish an objective world apart from our experience of it. Pragmatist truth is not entirely subjective, however, for we determine "what works" through empirical experimentation, in which we test our beliefs in the world and assess them in light of our personal experiences (Dewey, 2008d). Through verification, we determine whether our beliefs stand up to the evidence and thereby demonstrate "warranted assertibility" for the truth of a belief (Dewey, 1998). We test them formally through scientific procedures as well as informally by examining how our well-being is impacted by particular beliefs. Given the interdependent nature of modern life, we must consider the impact on others also, for our ability to thrive is often shaped by the conditions of others.

Our focus, then, is best spent on inquiry, which is the process that gets at truth. Facts for a pragmatist, then, are not something that is certain and permanent, but rather are always open to changes brought on by new evidence. Facts are objects, propositions, and the referents of propositions that stand up to ongoing experimentation and community dialogue. Facts result as maxims of such inquiry, as that which ongoing experimentation is trending toward and which can be asserted with rather strong assurances at this point in time. Facts are better supported than personal beliefs or opinions, in part because they are confirmed by an array of people in varying contexts. Pragmatists value fallibilism because they recognize that not only may anyone be mistaken at any given time, but nothing is likely true always. When a belief no longer helps us navigate the world or no longer holds up to the evidence, it is no longer true and should be revised or discarded.

Pragmatist Inquiry

For pragmatists, inquiry is not just a way that we verify truth; it is the way that we figure out how to solve problems together in a democracy. Inquiry helps us both arrive at answers to our shared problems and sort through the evidence that leads to those answers. Inquiry starts when we encounter what Dewey calls "indeterminate situations." These are situations in which we are no longer able to smoothly move through the

[5] There are considerable differences in the accounts of truth supported by various pragmatists. For the sake of time and space here, I offer only a general overview in order to provide a general definition. I build most on the work of John Dewey, while also drawing considerably on Charles Sanders Peirce.

word. It may be that we don't know the right "answers," but it is not just (or even primarily) a rational experience; it is one of affect, in which we may feel baffled, confused, or unsure how to proceed. We employ inquiry to get us out of those situations by helping us to find solutions that enable us to move forward and flourish (Dewey, 2008a). We typically are not alone in facing indeterminate situations, rather our fellow citizens are also implicated. When we identify shared interests in the problem we are facing, we can become a public that takes up that problem. We then focus our attention on understanding the situation. We investigate our world to make sense of our predicament, including gathering empirical evidence, as well as the related opinions and experiences of other citizens.

Once we have a good grasp of the problem, the next phase of inquiry entails developing potential hypotheses about what we might do to solve the problem. We then test those ideas to figure out if they alleviate our struggles and help us to restore coordinated action so we can move forward smoothly. Finally, solutions are implemented and continually assessed, for they may be falsified or only work in certain contexts. Pragmatist inquiry applies not only to verifying truth in the natural world, but also when considering ethical and political issues, which are tested as hypotheses to see which prove to be most satisfactory, for whom, and to what extent (Dewey, 2008e).

Bringing together Populism and Pragmatism around Truth and Inquiry

For both populists and pragmatists, truth is constructed, partial, and revisable. Both care about truth because it helps people fulfill their needs. Both rely on humans as arbiters of truth and take seriously their first-hand experiences as important criteria when doing so. Both value the common sense that humans derive from their experiences, including that which arises from feeling and acting, not just rational understanding. Pragmatists consider the affective impact of beliefs and look to see whether they lead to beneficial consequences, such as whether a belief sparks anger that debilitates groups or supports them through productive change. In a way, the pragmatist emphasis on personal experience also aligns with populist concerns for sincerity because what "rings true" to us is that which matches with our personal experience.

Pragmatists, however, do not just stop with personal accounts; rather, the process of determining truth connects individuals to others as we seek evidence, verification, and "what works."[6] This process presents opportunities to share struggles and bear witness to those of others. This is significant given that in today's populist context many populists feel not listened to by elite leaders. At the same time, many historically marginalized populations (some of which fall in populist camps) are also overlooked or ignored. Pragmatism urges citizens to attend to each other in order to achieve flourishing. When people are goaded by populist sentiments to "choose a side," they may double down on the facts proclaimed by their side in order to demonstrate solidarity. But pragmatism expands political groups, showing through the process of inquiry that some facts are not really facts because they do not hold up in other contexts or do not work for other people.

As a part of that expanded community of epistemic and civic resources, pragmatists turn to some of the very elites that populists would likely exclude: scientists, academics, and other experts. Pragmatists would warn against going too far in celebrating personal experiences and opinions without confirming them, or being overconfident in the claims that are made from them. While both pragmatism and populism foreground personal experiences and beliefs, pragmatism offers a more balanced approach. Populists value the sort of everyday knowledge that arises from one's experiences without mediation because they see it as being authentic. This common sense is juxtaposed with expert knowledge, which is viewed as illegitimate because it is disconnected from real life. Aiming to be objective or neutral, many experts speak without emotion, drone on in detail, and seem to lack sincerity. They speak almost exclusively within the ivory tower or the walls of government agencies to others who share their credentials, frustrating populists who feels their own perspectives are undervalued and denigrated (Sant, 2021). Some populists are left seeing our liberal democracy

[6] I do not mean to imply here that populists stop only at the individual, for populists share their opinions with (typically likeminded) others to affirm them. For example, Trump's Truth Social is a social media platform on which opinions are "ReTruthed" by participants as a way to assert their legitimacy and for them to come to be seen as fact.

as more of an expertocracy. Many pragmatists also share these concerns, arguing that all citizens have a place at the table when it comes to building and assessing knowledge. But those pragmatists note that, in many cases, this also includes the experts who populists are quick to write off because those experts are likely to have specialized insight that may help us better understand our world and improve it.

Dewey (1954) places experts in the service of the public through his famous use of the metaphor of the shoe that pinches: "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (p. 207). It is the common person and the publics they compose who should set the agenda for inquiry, thereby keeping it tied to the real-life needs, values, and emotions that relate to them. Dewey warned that when we become overly reliant on experts, citizens become alienated. We drive them away from participating in inquiry. Instead, Dewey argues that, with the right conditions, such as quality education, citizens can be entrusted to be key players in inquiry. Importantly, quality inquiry requires more complexity than that of populist sentiments that are too often oversimplified or of the sort of quick "Google-knowing" that many people find sufficient today (Lynch, 2016). Pragmatism seeks a fuller and more sophisticated understanding that brings together expert insight and common sense (Dewey, 2008c). Pragmatists pair advanced scientific inquiry with everyday investigations, an inclusive approach in which scientists and citizens learn *with* and *from* each other (Dewey, 2008a).

Liberal democracy in contemporary society tends to operate with elitist forms of leadership and intelligence. Pragmatist inquiry enables social intelligence, in which increased and widened participation in inquiry improves the quality of the knowledge produced. Moreover, like populism, the process of inquiry brings individual people and their personal experiences and opinions together, often leading to political movements and action. David Ridley (2021) concludes that this "intelligent populism" is "an emergent, bottom-up and essentially democratic process of public self-education and mobilization" (p. 52). This pragmatist framing should not be seen as a mere middle ground between liberal democracy and populism, for it aims to be more inclusive. It goes beyond listening to both "sides," as we try to figure out how to live together in ways that are fruitful for everyone involved.

Pragmatist Inquiry into Controversial Issues

While pragmatist inquiry into natural phenomenon may be more straightforward to imagine, what would it look like to engage in inquiry when it comes to controversial issues like divisive concepts? Such inquiry would be aimed at understanding those issues, determining the truth about them, and proposing solutions for dealing with them. While many practitioners of discussion about controversial issues turn to such an approach to help students amass information about an issue and become more knowledgeable about the various stances on that issue that others take, pragmatist inquiry, when situated in the context of social and political tension, is more concerned with figuring out how to live together, perhaps in spite of the divisive issue and perhaps in ways that bring an end to it (Saetra, 2022).

Inquiry would begin with the real problems that students face and the emotions they raise. These might be moments of prejudice they encounter in their school or moments of doubt about their gender identity as they mature. Identifying and naming the problem can help to make it more meaningful to students, enabling them to see what it is about and how it is connected to them or their communities. To shed light on the problem, students would gather information about it, including seeking out the opinions and experiences of an array of stakeholders. This may include students sharing narrative accounts of how they have experienced identity and discrimination, or their desires for harmony and unity. This is a way to validate their experiences. But, even in these early stages of inquiry, teachers must be on alert for problematic tendencies, such as confirmation bias, in which students may only seek out the opinions of likeminded peers. Teachers may need to introduce common positions on a controversial issue (particularly if they do not arise from the students on their own) or alternative viewpoints that differ from popular ideas expressed by students, through incorporating guest speakers, polling data, historical accounts, or literary examples. While classroom discussions of controversial issues tend to exhibit a rush of individual students asserting their own stance on the issue, the starting point for inquiry is a slow and outward-oriented process, seeking other views and working to thoroughly understand the problem at hand. It builds publics, bringing people together around shared concerns.

Pragmatist inquiry also requires considerable content knowledge. For example, historical and political knowledge may be needed to determine what has been tried before, what has worked, and what might work in this case (Clark & Grever, 2018). Such knowledge, combined with skills of historical interpretation, can help students begin to distinguish myths from facts, as they consider evidence (Barton & Levstik, 2015; Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2015; Reisman, 2012; VanSledright, 2015; Wineburg, 2002). These include identifying legitimate sources, attributing a source to an author who is contextualized historically, understanding that author's perspective, and corroborating the source to assess its reliability (VanSledright, 2015). Recognizing that seeming facts may be used to bolster the narratives of competing political groups, bringing multiple accounts to the table and working to verify each can expose those seeming facts for what they are.

Next, students should gather or generate potential solutions for deliberation. Solutions and the evidence that supports them must be validated to determine whether or not they "work" to bring about individual growth and community flourishing. Of course, when students encounter evidence, they draw on their background experiences, directional motivation, and emotional reactions as they assess its quality and trustworthiness (Jacobsen et al., 2018). Teachers can guide students through analyzing these contributing factors, while also equipping them with scientific criteria for judging evidence in terms of validity and reliability. Simply giving students more information or loading them up with facts is an insufficient and wrong-headed approach to battling post-truth. Students must be engaged in practices of truth determination, especially if we want them to develop lasting civic inclinations for when they encounter problems in the future.

As they seek and construct solutions, students may suggest new ways to make sense of their struggles around matters of identity and justice. They might create a new language or locate existing terms that best capture their experiences, some of which may include divisive concepts themselves. For example, students may determine that "White privilege," an often banned divisive concept, not only accurately reflects their experiences in the world but also helps to provide them with a way to respond to race-based favouritism. Students should then assess whether proposed solutions serve their needs. During this phase of inquiry, teachers should foreground the shared fate of classroom participants, showing how they must all face the implications of a chosen solution, thereby working against populist tendencies to limit one's embrace only to those in one's political group. Then, students must consider long-term assessment procedures to help them determine when solutions prove no longer useful or true, requiring them to be discarded or revised.

Benefits of Inquiry over Discussion in a Populist, Post-Truth Setting

Of course, discussion is a part of pragmatist inquiry, but inquiry goes well beyond discussion, offering additional benefits and heading off some potential limitations of discussion, particularly those exacerbated by populism, post-truth, and recent psychological and sociological trends.

First, pragmatist inquiry attends to and values populist affect. Many traditional discussion approaches try to curtail expressions of emotion, urging students to stay calm and rational in their contributions. Pragmatist inquiry views affect as a significant source of information and as motivation for taking up and addressing civic problems. In fact, affect (including frustration, tension, and, especially, doubt) may help prime the psychological conditions for engagement that lead to quality learning experiences that integrate new learning with existing experiences. That is because emotions may help students appreciate why an issue is genuinely controversial and why it matters – they sense its heft in their embodied responses to it. This affect may better position students to "think controversially," as Douglas Yacek (2018, 2019) says. Within inquiry, teachers can help students see how affect (especially as it operates in populism) leads them toward or away from other people or evidence, pushing them to interrogate how emotions work in both beneficial and harmful ways (Keegan, 2021, 2022). In the case of discussing divisive concepts, in particular, inquiry can provide an avenue for working through feelings of guilt and anguish, if or when they do arise. The intention here is to help students better understand how affect influences themselves and others, which might enable them to understand how others have equally strong but differing emotional responses, become more comfortable living in positions of uncertainty, become better at assessing their own perspectives, and open up new understandings (Garrett et al., 2020). Inquiry can show for students *how* emotions matter, while also helping them channel their emotions into learning and

growth, rather than stagnating in resentment or attacking others in outrage, as populists too often do today (Zembylas, 2020).

Second, inquiry encourages complexity and deeper understanding. In part, this is because inquiry does not present controversial issues as either/or matters, as discussions, and especially debates, tend to do. Instead, they are indeterminate situations, problems to be understood and resolved through action. With those aims in mind, inquiry requires citizens to make careful decisions, rather than to quickly locate information or state opinions. It can help to push back against tendencies toward confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and filter bubbles. When students rush to conclusions or fail to check their assumptions, teachers should interject to introduce nuance, raise alternative views, challenge overly simplified claims, and provoke curiosity. Teachers should push students beyond mere "Google-knowing" to welcome a deeper and more complex understanding, which may include having to hold or tease out competing views (Lynch, 2016). In an era in which many students are content with the quick information provided through easy outlets, inquiry may help students see how such accounts may be limited in ways that are not only epistemically harmful (because they are inaccurate, shortsighted, distorted), but also civically harmful (because they are exclusionary, biased, or oppressive). Inquiry may help to nurture students' capacity for cognitive complexity and their desire for it, in part by demonstrating that it leads to better outcomes.

Third, pragmatist inquiry offers important opportunities to nurture intellectual humility, which may be absent from or downplayed in traditional discussions and yet is increasingly needed today. Intellectual humility entails being aware of and owning one's intellectual limitations and errors. It takes on heightened significance at a time when its opposite, intellectual arrogance, is widespread. In a populist, post-truth setting, people tend to overconfidently assert their opinions and belittle the knowledge offered by experts or longstanding sources of information, like traditional news media. Inquiry, unlike discussion, exposes the risks of arrogance, understanding that it can lead to faulty solutions that, when implemented, may bring harm to participants.

Teachers should begin with direct instruction, overtly defining intellectual arrogance and humility, explaining what they are and why they matter. Teachers should then model intellectual humility by sharing examples of times when they or other exemplars realized that they were wrong and retracted their views. Sometimes, when dealing with controversial issues, it can be helpful to showcase historical examples, when a particular belief might have been held at the time but was later debunked. Teachers might next focus on the personal fallibility of each student. One technique endorsed by some leading citizenship educators is to accustom students to asking themselves: "Could I be wrong?" (McAvoy et al., 2014, p. 253). This question helpfully introduces doubt that may propel further inquiry, that embraces fallibilism, and that keeps one open to the possibility of needing to learn from others. Adopting a pragmatist stance of fallibilism may help to head off the extremist dogmatism and fanaticism that we see in our age of conspiracy theories because it changes how citizens hold their beliefs: with passion, but tentatively. Metacognitive exercises can be built in to inquiry through journalling or verbal debriefing, exercises that are seldom included in discussions. These can help students clarify not just the content of their particular beliefs but also *how* they come to believe what they do and when it's best to change their minds. For example, asking, "What makes you say that?" pushes students to consider what leads them to believe what they do and may prompt them to be open to reconsidering the beliefs they hold (Baehr, 2021a). Inquiry offers insight into how knowledge is developed in ways that are not as overt as with classroom discussion. Importantly, this process can showcase for students the value of establishing true information and how trust is built by sharing it honestly.

Fourth, inquiry fosters a sense of shared fate that works against the tribalism of populism and hyperpartisanship that we see today. Classroom communities often possess important connections between students by virtue of their growing up together and coming from the same neighbourhoods.[7] When controversial issues are framed as shared problems, inquiry can further nurture relationships between classmates and a sense of how their shared fate relies on making wisely informed decisions together (Kakutani, 2018). Viewing citizenship as shared fate pushes us to foreground how we are linked together by location, history, and culture, with an eye toward how the outcomes of our inquiries impact us as members of communities. It nurtures an inclination to care for others, in part because we recognize that our futures are bound up with each

[7] Notably, schools are increasingly segregated along lines of race, class, and even political parties. This makes it harder for an array of perspectives to occur naturally among a class.

other politically, economically, and geographically. Sharing a fate is not the same as having a common fate because a shared fate requires a more active and cooperative role in shaping the mutual impacts of decision-making rather than just letting things play out. Practices of shared fate can build a sense of "us," but, notably within classroom inquiries, they also cast a bigger tent, bringing in an array of people inclusively, thereby moving beyond just looking out for one's political group (Ben-Porath, 2006; Lin & Jackson, 2019). When groups with competing views form within a class, teachers can affirm those outside of the group as being citizens with whom other students can learn. This entails pushing back against the tendency in populism to essentialize people in neatly ordered and opposing groups, often juxtaposed as good versus evil. Teachers must expose the faulty drawing of those lines, looking instead to reveal politically significant differences where students can disagree as adversaries, with a focus on the issues dividing them rather than on defeating each other as combatants in a political war (Mouffe, 2018; Tryggvason, 2018).

Fifth, inquiry helps students learn how to use disagreement to arrive at better-informed solutions and opens up new possibilities. In our populist context, battle lines are drawn and opposing groups are seen as enemies to be defeated. But when a shared fate exposes our need to work together to generate mutually satisfactory solutions, groups may be better poised to treat each other as adversaries they can work with, even if they remain in deep disagreement about some issues. Too often classroom discussions, especially in the form of debate, not only encourage students to quickly "pick a side" that they need to defend, they also further entrench students into polarized positions and merely leave students to learn to live with disagreement across opposing positions (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021). But inquiry is a slow and more careful process in which participants are urged to remain open to new evidence before reaching an informed conclusion. Inquiry also presents opportunities for students to be moved by others to change their stance on an issue, their reasoning regarding the issue, or how they view other people impacted by the issue (Warnick et al., 2018). Inquiry can even lead to "civic epiphanies," in which students can be surprised by each other and come to see the world, our shared problems, and the divisive concepts related to them in new ways (Yacek, 2019). Additionally, dominant forms of discussion limit thinking, laying out only a small number of already articulated stances on a controversial issue that students must grasp and defend. These limitations may be exacerbated by the biases students already hold about the presented options. But inquiry, which first identifies shared interests, may prevent such close-mindedness. It generates ideas, positions, and solutions, thereby providing greater opportunities for new ideas to come forward and to be tested or implemented. Inquiry may also then open up new ways of living and engaging in democracy that may challenge and revise some aspects of liberal democracy that frustrate populists today.

Sixth, inquiry enables communities to build trust, thereby providing a safer and more welcoming environment for classmates to share personal experiences about sensitive topics, including counternarratives that may challenge more widely held views or that may speak from the margins (D'Olimpio, 2018). This affirms recent populist trends of valuing everyday experience, especially that which pushes back against forms of elitism, while heading off growing mistrust and ad hominem attacks, which are on the rise among populists. These settings can provide the sense of relational safety and mutual care that can overcome, or at least work against, self-serving motivations toward being dishonest and the tendency to distrust (Porter & Baehr, 2020). When moments of conflict or tension arise, a caring environment can help to sustain conversation. In these moments, teachers can encourage civility, not as polite rule-following, which has long guided liberal democracy discussions, but rather as a way of sustaining relationships and dialogue across divisions that promotes a spirit of wholeness that can unite students (Allen, 2004). It may also be important to emphasize relationship and care for each other in order to head off the potential for students to experience inquiry as an attack when it comes to matters of personal identity, with classmates recognizing the potential for hurt and working to support each other. This relational civility is fostered in an environment that protects what Eamonn Callan calls "dignity safety," in which students can participate without fear of being attacked or demeaned. Notice that this differs from "intellectual safety," which shields ideas. Instead, dignity safety allows for key ideas to be questioned or challenged while still preserving the humanity and participation of all students (Callan, 2016). Teachers can set norms that affirm this approach by emphasizing the need to "challenge ideas, not people." Inquiry also meets most of the conditions needed for reducing prejudice between opposing groups (of the sort magnified by the Manichean populist divides) laid out in Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis insofar as classmates have equal

status, common goals, work cooperatively on an issue, and are guided through their interactions with institutional support from teachers (Allport, 1954; Duong et al., 2023).[8]

Finally, in a post-truth context, inquiry helps us to foreground the value of honesty as truth seeking and truth telling. While post-truth and pragmatism both value a version of truth that differs considerably from the traditional one celebrated in liberal democracy, we still need honesty within a democracy to help ensure that we seek and tell the truth in trustworthy ways so that we can function together well. Pragmatist inquiry may offer a pathway for shoring up honesty and combating tendencies toward lying, inaccuracy, and other forms of deception that seem to be on the rise. Inquiry, more than discussion, requires engaging in processes of truth determination as students investigate the world, evidence, and the consequences of their beliefs. Teachers can guide students through learning how to distinguish fact from opinion, as well as how and when to celebrate each. When an inquiry proves to be successful in restoring coordinated action and fruitful living, teachers can point to how honesty helped participants get at a fuller and more accurate account of the problem in order to solve it.

Conclusion

Pragmatist inquiry is better suited to attend to populism and post-truth. Pragmatist inquiry nurtures honesty, fosters intellectual humility, encourages greater inclusivity, provides a more level epistemic playing field, builds trust, and uses affect and narratives in constructive ways. Moreover, inquiry provides opportunities to confront ambiguity and engage with complexity as students negotiate and produce new ideas together. It better prepares them for taking up future problems in which meanings and histories are unknown, unclear, or contested. Most importantly, inquiry positions students to not just talk about the stances that other people have offered on controversial issues, including divisive concepts, but to develop new ideas that may help communities better navigate the world.

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[8] Here I am assuming opposing groups/individuals within a classroom, but I recognize that this is increasingly less likely in our segregated society.

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About the Author

Sarah M. Stitzlein is Professor of Education and Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati. She is the president of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, former president of the John Dewey Society, and co-editor of the journal *Democracy & Education*.