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Directive and non-directive teaching: a reply to Warnick and Smith

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In recent work¹ I have drawn and defended a distinction between *directive* and *non-directive* teaching. To teach a claim *directively* is to teach it with the intention of persuading students of its truth or falsity; to teach a claim *non-directively* is to teach it with the intention of not so persuading them. I have argued that, for any given claim, teachers should use an *epistemic criterion* to decide between these intentions: *directive* teaching is appropriate when a claim is established or refuted by the available evidence and argument; *non-directive* teaching is appropriate when a claim is not so established or refuted. Put simply, teachers should only teach for belief in a proposition when it is known to be true.

In their article 'The controversy over controversies: a plea for flexibility and for soft-directive teaching',² Bryan Warnick and Spencer Smith appear to advance a radical challenge to my view. They contend that 'the complex nature of educating for reason ultimately suggests that directive and non-directive teaching should be decoupled from a position's epistemic status'.³ They call for pedagogical pluralism and flexibility in the classroom, as opposed to a 'stiff and unyielding' dichotomy between directive and non-directive teaching.⁴ They write:

It seems to us that a pluralism of approaches is going to be necessary to accomplish all of the tasks of reason. Both directive and non-directive approaches might be valuable in different contexts, whatever the status of the controversy... Developing rationality seems to require flexibility on the part of the teacher, engaging in various types of teaching given the particular demands of the moment.⁵

In this brief response, I will argue that Warnick and Smith's challenge to my view is much less radical than it appears. Indeed, I am not sure that there is any real disagreement between us. I think what Warnick and Smith mean by 'directive teaching' and 'non-directive teaching' is different from what I mean by these terms, and this semantic divergence creates the illusion of substantive disagreement. At any rate, if we do disagree, it will not be possible to say exactly how until the semantic confusion has been cleared up.

The problem, in brief, is this: where I understand the difference between directive and non-directive teaching to be a matter of *intention*, Warnick and Smith understand it to be a matter of *method*. What interests me is when teachers should have the intention of

persuading students that some claim is true or false, and when they should have the intention of avoiding such persuasion. I am open-minded, and have said little in my writings to date, about the range of pedagogical methods teachers might use to realise these intentions. What I *have* said, quite explicitly, is that what distinguishes directive from non-directive teaching 'is not a pedagogical method or style'.⁶

Warnick and Smith, by contrast, construe directive and non-directive teaching as two methods among others for the teaching of controversial issues. Directive teaching, on their account, characteristically involves supplementing the presentation of relevant evidence and argument with the exercise of either 'social authority', which they take to be coercive, or 'epistemic authority', which they take to be often unfounded.⁷ And non-directive teaching, as they present it, characteristically involves adopting a stance of 'strict neutrality' and denying students the benefit of 'hearing the teacher think through decisions in discussion in a way that exemplifies the epistemic virtues'.⁸ It is not hard to see why Warnick and Smith believe that insistence on one of these two methods would be pedagogically limiting.

Let me be clear: It is no part of my view that teaching propositions directly involves coercion, or reliance on authority, or preaching, or refusal to acknowledge the possibility of error, or sending students back to their desks with the words 'You missed something, do it again' until they come up with the right answer. Apart from anything else, these methods are fairly unlikely to be effective in securing students' rational assent to the propositions being taught. Nor do I hold that teaching propositions non-directively requires teachers to keep a lid on their personal views and their reasons for holding them. A sincere intention to avoid imparting religious beliefs to students, for example, is quite compatible with a readiness to disclose and defend one's own religious position in the context of classroom discussion. It is true, of course, that the methods a teacher employs when she intends to persuade students of the truth of some claim will differ in important respects from those she employs when she intends not to do this, but the range of methods compatible with each intention is much wider than Warnick and Smith suggest. My view leaves ample room for the pedagogical flexibility and pluralism they favour.

Once it is recognised that the difference between directive and non-directive teaching is a matter of intention, not of method, I think most of the worries Warnick and Smith express in their article evaporate quite quickly. It would be difficult to maintain that the intention to persuade and the intention not to persuade are just two intentions among others, so that insisting on one or the other is unduly restrictive: the only alternative, as far as I can see, is to have neither an intention to persuade nor an intention not to persuade, which is to have no persuasion-related intention at all. Assuming that teachers ought not to be *indifferent* about whether their teaching of a claim results in its acceptance, they have no alternative but to choose between teaching directly and teaching non-directively. And the right way for them to make that choice is by applying the epistemic criterion.

¹ Michael Hand (2007) 'Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?', in *Theory and Research in Education* 5 (1), pp.69-86; Michael Hand (2008) 'What should we teach as controversial?'

A defence of the epistemic criterion', in *Educational Theory* 58 (2), pp.213-228; Michael Hand (2014) 'Religion, reason and nondirective teaching: a reply to Trevor Cooling', in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*.

² Bryan Warnick and Spencer Smith (2014) 'The controversy over controversies: a plea for flexibility and for 'soft-directive' teaching', in *Educational Theory*.

³ Ibid., 2

⁴ Ibid., 11

⁵ Ibid., 13

⁶ Hand, 'What should we teach as controversial?', 213.

⁷ Warnick and Smith, 'The controversy over controversies', 7.

⁸ Ibid., 10