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## Producing and Consuming the Controversial – A Social Media Perspective on Political Conversations in the Social Science Classroom

Teachers find it difficult to conduct political controversial conversations in the social science classroom and due to an increased use of social media in educational settings new challenges and possibilities are raised. The use of social media causes fundamental changes to the role of the learner who becomes a producer and consumer – a prosumer – of educational content. With a social media perspective and a didactical focus on learning in democracy and political action the article discusses didactical conditions and possibilities of political controversial conversations in social science education and derives a set of didactic strategies. When approaching the classroom as a diverse ideological public space, recognising the students as political agents and using a social media perspective it is possible to balance the function of education – socialisation, qualification and subjectification – and at the same time stimulate societal engagement and political action.

Los profesores tienen dificultades para llevar a cabo conversaciones políticas controvertidas en el aula de ciencias sociales y debido a un mayor uso de los medios sociales en los centros educativos nuevos retos y posibilidades se plantean. El uso de los medios sociales provoca cambios fundamentales en el papel del estudiante que se convierte en productor y consumidor - un prosumidor - de contenidos educativos. Con una perspectiva de los medios de comunicación social y un enfoque didáctico en el aprendizaje en la democracia y la acción política el artículo discute las condiciones didácticas y posibilidades de conversaciones polémicas políticas en la educación de las ciencias sociales y concluye un conjunto de estrategias didácticas. Al acercarse a la sala de clases como una diverso espacio público ideológica, el reconocimiento de los estudiantes como agentes políticos y el uso de una perspectiva de los medios de comunicación social, es posible equilibrar la función de la educación - la socialización, la cualificación y la subjetivación - y al mismo tiempo estimular el compromiso social y la acción política.

### Keywords:

social science education, controversial issues, social media, agonism, political action, prosumer

### 1 Introduction: Political controversial conversations in social science education – a social media perspective?

In order to retain the classroom as a public space of critical inquiry teachers face according to Boler (2004), a tall order: “We need to continue to improve our skills in facilitating difficult and risky conversations; we must continue to theorize our ethics regarding how to engage voices so that differences are heard” (p. x). A societal situation marked by cultural diversity in which individuals try to live together, separated by traditions, values and life attitudes but equal as humans raises democratic challenges for education and society. In this situation, the ability to deal with controversial political topics and issues are at the fore. If young people are presumed to be engaged and participate in different parts of society an educational change in social science education is needed (cf. Selwyn, 2007). Biesta (2011a) argues for a shift, from teaching citizenship to learning democracy. Learning democracy makes it possible to situate the learning in young people’s ongoing everyday lives and to address how this life is integrated in cultural, social, political and economic relations. It is in this wider context that young people are given the opportunity to grow as

democratic citizens. Young people must be given the opportunity to live their citizenship and learn from it. An opportunity, for example made possible in the social media.

Social media not only influences young people’s lives and societal change, the use of social media makes it possible for the participants to influence society (Mossberger et al., 2008; Olsson & Dahlgren, 2010; Andersson, 2013 etc.). *Social media*, a type of digital media, are systems with different types of digital content, links and artefacts which are socially and culturally embedded and based on the content production and consumption of the participants which in many cases require subject knowledge, argumentation, analytical and evaluation skills. A *social media perspective*, that is taking the perspective of the learner and the knowledge construction and communication experiences built up by participants when using social media, is one of various possible perspectives in understanding the teaching and learning practice in social science education as a process in democracy.

In social science education, the increased use of social media changes the condition for teaching and conducting *political controversial conversations* containing political interest and perspectives that can never reach consensus. When students try to understand and make meaning of the world, the changing political cultures of our societies, experiences and the everyday political life of the students need to be embraced. Thus, teachers face didactical challenges in balancing between subject specific knowledge, socialisation in to democratic citizens and the students’ needs of meaningfulness, political action and their use of experiences (cf. Biesta, 2006,

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2010a, 2011a; 2011b; Sandahl, 2015). Based on a social media perspective within the Swedish educational context, *the aim* of the article is to discuss didactical conditions and possibilities of political controversial conversations in social science education and to derive a set of didactic strategies. If the goal of democratic political classroom conversations in social science education is to allow students to openly and critically examine society, create meaning, express their own opinions and feelings, analyse and evaluate current affairs, *which didactic strategies will then be suitable for political controversial conversations?* Using a social media perspective, previous research and the theory of agonism the article contributes with didactic strategies for conducting political controversial conversations in the social science classroom.

First, a background is presented which contextualizes social science education and social media use in Sweden. Secondly, research on democratic classroom conversations with an emphasis on social media is introduced. Thirdly, a research overview regarding teachers' strategies in dealing with controversial issues is presented. Fourthly, the theory of agonistic philosophy of education is put forward. The article concludes with derived didactic strategies in teaching political controversial issues and topics for the social science classroom.

## **2 Social science education and classroom conversation in a social media perspective**

In order to be knowledgeable as a student in social science education several scholars in Sweden argue for the importance of the teachers' ability to use the interest of the students and make the educational situation meaningful (Schüllerqvist & Osbeck, 2009; Oscarsson & Svingby, 2005). Connection to the experiences of the students is a fundamental didactic reference point for achieving good outcomes. Despite this, social science education in Sweden has been portrayed as a subject in crisis because the majority of teaching has been devoted to reproduce facts (Sandahl, 2015). In national and international research it has been shown that teachers have a low level priority in regard to allowing dissident students to discuss current and controversial issues with each other (Ljunggren et al., 2015). Swedish educational research shows that students are asking for an increase in participatory approaches, such as discussions in groups combined with plenary discussions with the teacher (Oscarsson & Svingby, 2005). The students are wishing for opportunities in discussing important issues with adults who are competent and dedicated. Teachers' ability to create an open, positive classroom climate, making the content meaningful and open up for interactive forms of meaning exchange are vital factors for a positive study outcome in social science education (Oscarsson & Svingby 2005; Bernmark-Ottosson 2009).

In a changing society teachers' knowledge about and experiences of new ways of communication, like social media, raises new possibilities and challenges when approaching the interest and experiences of the students. The Swedish primary and secondary school have

since the 1950s' had a tradition of conversation and *learning about* democracy in the classroom, a tradition facing new conditions due to partly new forms of political engagement and participation in the public sphere (Andersson 2013; Andersson & Olson 2014). Schools and teachers need to manage and open up for those types of communication experiences and skills that young people, in their everyday life, cultivate and bring to school. The use of social media and digitally mediated conversations in teaching increases, challenges and puts new perspectives on fundamental didactical questions, it introduces new ways of understanding the processes of learning, socialisation, communication and becoming a person.

The classroom, as a public space for conversation, becomes more open and permissive, making time and space for all the participants to express their voice when using digitally mediated conversations (Rossi 2006; Kim et al., 2007; Andresen, 2009). New conversational patterns are created, making it possible to deepen and develop thoughts and arguments, to carefully choose the right words and develop a critical approach to the educational content (Kim et al., 2007; Guiller et al. 2008; Xu, 2008). When students use social and digital media it has been shown that the interface of the digital device and the content on the screen becomes a common concern – a third conversation space – in the interaction of the students, creating a cooperative teaching situation (Kjällander, 2011). With a careful didactical design of the 'third space' the students could become actively involved in the task of learning. This type of social media use challenges traditional ways of approaching knowledge building and learning, the content is liberated from the text book introducing different ways of dealing with the content and what should be regarded as relevant knowledge (Wang & Woo 2007; Andersson 2012b). The use of social media increases the demands on the teaching profession, as a teacher you need to be media and information knowledgeable, to be able to understand and deal with the role of media and information and their function in democratic processes and the participants' needs of expression in different forms (Forsman, 2013). Social media holds potentials and threats; the use of social media could relativize established and widely accepted truths and knowledge by challenging subject specific knowledge. This is especially challenging in social science education which deals with questions regarding human togetherness, as well as political and social relations. Having knowledge about yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's society is a complex, pluralistic and contingent task which requires extensive and continuous didactic work with framing and choosing content, choice of perspective, interpretations and evaluations. Thus, teachers face didactical challenges and possibilities when trying to deal with societal change in which social media is but one of several contributing factors.

The educational democratic assignment of our schools and the democratic paradox it entails – that is, the contradiction in, based on democratic values of freedom

and equality, foster students into becoming democratic citizenship – has long been a subject for Swedish education research (e.g. Liljestrand, 2002; Englund, 2007; Sandahl 2015). When it comes to students' opportunities of making their voices heard in the Swedish classroom research shows that the teacher dominates the conversation space in plenary activities (48 to 75 percent) (Liljestrand, 2002; Sahlström, 2008). Similar findings are reported in international research (Nystrand et al., 2003; Rossi, 2006; Michaels et al., 2008 etc.). Deliberative conversations is one example which has contributed to a change in this pattern, leading to a more student active participatory approach and practice in Swedish schools (Englund, 2007). If the purpose of conducting political conversations in school is to allow for personal positions, responsibility and valuations, the change in conversational pattern is continually needed. In a social media perspective it has been shown that participants willing to engage in political conversations online and face-to-face are the ones that express the greatest willingness to engage in political conversations face-to-face in the future (Baek et al., 2011). These findings have consequences when it comes to political conversations in the classroom.

Using both face-to-face and digitally mediated conversation could be viewed as a type of hybrid communication and learning, creating conversational patterns and opportunities which makes it possible for participants to express their voice by means of different types of communication. New public spaces for communication are created in teaching. Only choosing to employ face-to-face conversations may result in few students participating due to power relations, the dominant voice of the teacher, nervousness and uncertainty, difficulty in expressing oneself verbally and so on. Digitally mediated and written conversations allow the students to think before expressing themselves and the conversational space is not as limited as when having to express their opinions verbally. However, at the same time, according to Baek and others (2011, p. 367): "Face-to-face settings might generate empathy and increase perspective taking ability to greater extent than online settings, because interlocutors are physically present and interact on an interpersonal level". Accordingly, a hybridization of communication in the classroom – a blended learning approach – could be suggested in order to open the conversational space for different relations, communication and participation for all students. Dealing with political conversations, and especially those that are controversial, is however not an easy task. Research shows that teachers find it difficult to deal with politically controversial issues in a strategic communicative and transparent manner (Boler, 2004; Larsson, 2007; Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2010a, 2010b; Ekman, 2011; Arneback, 2012; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Ljunggren et al., 2015).

### 3 Controversial conversations in the classroom – challenges and teachers' strategies

In order to promote democracy, it is important for young people to participate in passionate and heated political conversations (Hess & McAvoy 2014). In order to organize and conduct political conversations, specific skills and qualifications are required by the teacher. Regardless of the school subject, there are topics, problems and issues that oblige teachers to deal with these in a sensible way, with great caution that require teachers to think if, how and why they should be brought to the table – that is, *controversial issues*. According to Hand, "to teach something as controversial" is to:

present it as a matter on which different views are or could be held and to expound those different views as impartially as possible. It is to acknowledge and explore various possible answers to a question without endorsing any of them. The intended outcome of such teaching is, at least, that students should understand a range of views on a topic and the arguments in their support, and, at most, that they should hold and be able to defend considered views of their own; it is emphatically not that they should come to share the view favoured by the teacher. (2008, p. 213)

This is but one way to describe what it means to deal with controversy in teaching, a definition that I will contest in the final section.

Teaching controversial issues is a daunting task which teachers find difficult. They find it hard to achieve the goal of educating students to be nuanced, tolerant, empathic and listening individuals (Sandahl, 2011). Students are aware of what kinds of political views and positions are politically correct and which are not, which explains why students do not express them even if the teacher knows they exist. This kind of collective self-censorship constrains the conversations on controversial issues, making it difficult to give perspectives and qualify the political thinking of the students (e.g. Larsson, 2007; Sandahl, 2011). Other challenging aspects are when only a few students dominate the conversation and others are quiet, students that do not take the conversation seriously and students that feel that they cannot express their views because the teacher puts 'the lid' on (Boler 2004; Larsson 2007). According to the findings of Larsson (2007) teachers express two main challenges in conducting these types of conversations. The first challenge is to make space for all the students to express themselves and to balance students' views and positions which lie on the borders of what could be regarded as the democratic value foundation of society and a country's educational system. The second challenge concerns separating personal identity from the opinion or the question in itself, to separate person from action. Thus, the teacher faces a didactical challenge in making space for the individual right to have an opinion, to ensure that students do not feel offended and at the same time create a conversational space in which the students do not feel that the teacher puts 'the lid' on.



Education as a democratic institution carries the burden of having to continuously test the teachers' sensibility and ability to deal with controversial issues.

### 3.1 Teachers' strategies of communication – from debate to rejection

In a Swedish research survey it was shown that teachers deal with controversial issues in a borderland between mediating norms and teaching the right knowledge and that teachers mainly react rather than strategically act in regard to issues that bring norms to the table (Ekman 2011). Based on an analysis of empirical data from the Swedish part of ICCS 2009 (the International Civic and Citizenship Study) Ljunggren and Unemar Öst (2010a, 2010b) have identified four categories of teacher strategies when dealing with controversial issues. The categories fall within a tension field between on the one hand teachers' strategies of communication (norm dialogue or norm mediating) and on the other hand the teachers' degree of acceptance of controversies (high or low). The categories are: The Debate Leader; The Tutor; The Norm Mediator; The Rejector. Three similar but still different categories of teachers' strategies have been identified in another study: The Avoider; The Digger; The Tactician (Långström & Virta 2011). *The Rejector* and *The Avoider* are the two categories that are most similar. These teachers have different ways of dodging controversial issues, avoiding dialogue regarding issues in which they feel discomfort and that require more work and time. *The Tutor* prevents ensuing comments from the students. Instead she/he discusses the issue in private with the student after class. *The Digger* deals with controversial issues as didactical potential areas, as new exciting ways to explore human life in community. *The Debate Leader* provides opportunities for students to comment and argue for their opinions and presents her/his own opinion in a neutral way. *The Tactician* has dealt with the issue beforehand, she/he has identified advantages and disadvantages to address the issue and what could be reckoned as controversial and then chooses the 'safe path' in order to neutralize the controversial aspects of the issue. The dominant strategy used, according to the participating teachers' statements in Ljunggren and Unemar Öst (2010a, 2010b), is *The Norm Mediator*. This is a strategy which opens for discussion and at the same time makes clear what she/he thinks about the opinions and views expressed by the students. The Norm Mediator makes clear what society and the curriculum say about the students' opinions and views and what is allowed according to national law. Accordingly, there are at least seven different teacher strategies in dealing with controversial issues. Depending on the situation and context, which strategy is the most desirable in relation to its consequences? The choice of strategy is a question of what we want to achieve in political controversial conversations.

### 3.2 Education as democracy – ideological diversity and the classroom as a public space

Teachers should, according to Hess (2009), strategically activate already existing ideological differences within the class and use them as educational resources in order to make conflicts visible and show that conflicts are and should be naturally occurring dimensions in democratic life. The normalization of conflict has shown to be directly related to an increased political engagement and participation among the students. As the most important individual to secure learning opportunities, the teacher becomes the democratic political director of the public space in the classroom. If the teacher succeeds in designing a conversational space that is open for different political views and positions, it is most likely that the students develop political knowledge and understanding of democratic values and ideals (Almgren, 2006). This didactical concern is a question about making teaching relevant, meaningful and concrete – creating an educational situation that concerns the students and their everyday political life. Or as Bennet (2007, p. 62-63), notes:

Civic identifications and practices, if they are to be adopted, must have some anchors and inducements in the lived experiences of individuals both inside and outside of the education and socialization settings in which they are introduced.

Consequently, political conversations have to be anchored in the everyday life of the students in order to promote meaningful learning. That is, learning through conversation has the purpose of deepening the students' understanding of a topic, building democratic action skills and to consider alternative courses of political action. Thus, the topic and the teaching method could both be considered as educational content in a school built on democracy. When considering this type of purpose of teaching the students could be offered educational situations in which they could develop and elucidate democratic and political meaning – learning *about* and *in* democracy, *as* democracy. This raises three functions of democratic education – *socialisation*, *qualification* and *subjectification* (Biesta, 2006, 2010a, 2011b) – functions that could be understood in the theoretical light of agonistic philosophy of education.

### 4 Agonistic philosophy of education

Agonistic philosophy of education is a theoretical approach to education for democratic citizenship emphasizing the importance of conflict. This is not to say that consensus in terms of deliberative understandings of education for democratic citizenship is not needed. Deliberation and consensus-building is important in education for democratic citizenship (cf. Englund, 2000; Englund, 2007; Ljunggren, 2007; Ruitenberg, 2010 etc.), but a concept of democratic education that treats disagreement and conflict, not as a problem to overcome but as a necessary possibility, is also needed.

Agonism, in the light of Arendts political philosophy (1958/1998), sees the world as a stage where people appear, meet and confront each other. What takes place on this stage is a communication act that creates the conditions for social life and human survival (Ljunggren 2007). Agonism assumes that human life, ontologically, rests on conflict and controversy – the possibility of growth and change are produced when different forces collide. This is the basis for maintaining human and ideological diversity – the very heart of democracy. In what I label *agonistic philosophy of education* (cf. Ljunggren, 2007; Todd & Säfström, 2008; Biesta, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b), education is framed as a communicative practice, communication and participation are viewed as the preconditions for social life and survival (cf. Dewey, 1927). When students know what they have in common and show interest in it – *participation* (Biesta, 2007) – educational situations could arise due to the participants owning the social environment. Accordingly, as the words of Ljunggren (2007), the activities of the students have given and give rise to connections with others. This type of educational situation could be defined as *will-based* – it is carried forward by the participants, their actions, wills and abilities to cooperate and find solutions (Ljunggren, 2007; Andersson, 2013). This is, in light of Arendt (1958/1998) and Dewey (1927, 1916/2010), a situation of communication and socialisation that creates the conditions for social life and human survival – a situation in which education becomes a political and social system for conservation and transformation of human life in community. The students, as participants in the public space of school, are viewed as political subjects capable of and responsible for making their own voices heard (Andersson 2012a, 2015). Treating students as human beings, as political subjects and not objects or future citizens in the making (human becoming), makes their voices relevant in the teaching situation and acknowledges that students (and teachers) are carriers of potential controversies themselves. All participants, as individuals and citizens, represent equality and diversity not only in the way they understand and evaluate controversial issues but also in the way they relate to each other (Ljunggren et al., 2015). This shift – seeing students as political subjects – makes it possible to treat the educational content in a pluralistic and meaningful way which marks a change in the way teaching is conducted, from being taught to being educated. Consequently, the educational situation could be described as a process and situation of socialisation and subjectification and, with the addition of the subject specific knowledge content, as qualification.

#### 4.1 The function of education in school: socialisation, subjectification and qualification

*Socialisation*, based on the definition of Biesta (2011b), is a major function of education which concerns “the many ways in which, through education, we become part of particular social, cultural and political ‘orders’” (p. 20). Through its socialisation function education “inserts

individuals into existing ways of doing and being” (p. 20). The role of learning and education is one of reproduction, an adjustment of individuals into the existing society and the socio-political order (Biesta, 2011a). Thus, socialisation is the working mechanism in education for the continuation of society, its preferred and non-preferred culture and tradition. The *subjectification* function of education could be viewed as the opposite to the socialisation function, an orientation towards political agency when an individual relates to others and becomes a person. Hence, it is “precisely *not* about the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing orders, but a way of being that hint at independence from such orders” (Biesta, 2011b, p.21). Subjectification is a process of becoming a subject, a person, as an ongoing and future open process (Biesta, 2011a, 2011b). Thirdly, *qualification*, as a major function of organized education aims at providing knowledge, skills and understandings as preparation for working life, political literacy (knowledge and skills needed for citizenship) or other aspects of life (Biesta, 2011b). These three functions of democratic education are analytical concepts applicable in understanding the purpose, aim and content of democratic education.

#### 4.2 Controversial issues and the political

In agonistic philosophy of education *the political* is a vital dimension – an ontological condition for human coexistence. The political is constituted by different needs, life views and perspectives which force humans to make choices between competing alternatives, a process that creates groupings focused on fighting for the world that is preferred. The political is cohesive in all levels of society; it is a part of all human social organization in which every ethical, moral, religious, economic or technical conflict can be transformed into a political one if the conflict is strong enough to group humans into friends and enemies, or in an agonistic vocabulary – into political adversaries (Mouffe, 1993/2005, 2013). Something becomes political when it contains decisions and organization of human social life, competing alternatives that are not compatible (ongoing conflicts – controversy), feelings and affections of inclusion and exclusion and a divide between us and them (Mouffe 2013). In this way, the political shows that every social practice contains political dimensions and building blocks. In consequence, continuing conflicts – controversy – is a vital dimension of human life. But what counts as controversial?

A practical starting point in understanding controversial issues is the classic definition by Strandling: “Issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems, are considered controversial” (cited in Harwood & Hahn 1990, p.1). It is, however, contested on which grounds an issue should be counted as controversial (Oulton et al., 2004; Levinson, 2006; Hand, 2007, 2008; Hess, 2004, 2009; Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2010b etc.). Hand (2007, 2008) describes three different and separate criteria that could be used in order to determine if an issue is controversial: the behavioral criterion, the epistemic

criterion and the political criterion. Hand argues in favor of the epistemic criterion. I will contest Hand's position with help from Ljunggren and Unemar Öst (2010b) and the theoretical position of this article – agonism. I will argue in favor of a combination of the epistemic and the political criterion.

According to *the behavioral criterion* an issue could count as controversial when it is possible to observe a disagreement between two or more large groups of individuals. Thus, when it is empirically possible to identify the disagreement due to separate value systems, competing explanations and solutions it is possible to count the disagreement as controversial. However, the criterion, according to Hand, incorporates too much. The problem is that every little disagreement could be counted as controversial. The epistemic criterion, however, evades this criticism. *The epistemic criterion* tells us that:

a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason. By 'reason' here is not meant something timeless and unhistorical but the body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures which at any given time has been so far developed. (Dearden, 1984: 86 in Hand, 2007, p. 71)

Thus, differences of opinion and disagreement are not sufficient grounds to label an issue as controversial. The disagreement has to be reasonable and rational, "that more than one of the conflicting views held by parties to the disagreement is rationally defensible" (Hand, 2007, p. 71). In *the political criterion* moral questions should be counted as controversial "when answers to them are not entailed by the public values of the liberal democratic state" (Hand, 2007, p. 71). Hand questions this criterion: why count an issue as controversial based on certain rights and freedoms? Why should the state define suitable borders for what could be considered as controversial? Hand states that "important areas of moral life would simply lose their point if good conduct were enforced by an external agency" (2007, p. 74). Ljunggren and Unemar Öst argue that it is reasonable to accept the epistemic *and* the political criterion in order to count something as controversial.

When labelling an issue as controversial it is important to recognize the context and the situation. A one-sided focus on the epistemic criterion, and thereby on 'reason', excludes contextual important aspects such as human relations, experience, affections, passions and self-understanding (Ljunggren & Unemar Öst 2010b). Controversial issues are not isolated: "it cannot be true that rational solutions are at hand in all kinds of moral or political controversies" (Ljunggren & Unemar Öst 2010b, p. 14). It is not possible to reduce personal positions on a controversial issue to only being a question about epistemology, something that is supposed to be learnt and taught. It is also a question of experiencing and living controversy in a social and cultural context. It is a question of being educated, making personal statements in a complex and risky world. Consequently, it is the

situation and the context in which the issue is placed which could determine whether the issue should be counted as controversial. An issue is not controversial a priori, it becomes controversial. However, this is not to say that controversy, as a theoretical concept, cannot be defined.

Controversy could be defined as a consisting conflict, a residual difference regarding an issue for example financial situations, subject knowledge, religion, morals etcetera. Adding 'the political' brings a component of struggle between adversaries, a struggle about how society and human life in a community should be understood, organized and dealt with. Thus, *political controversy* could be described as an issue containing decisions and organization of human social life, competing and never compatible views enclosing feelings and affections of inclusion and exclusion, which creates a divide between us and them. There will always be a remaining difference, social tensions illuminating the political and ontological dimension of human social life in community. Accordingly, political controversial issues can never be solved or eliminated. What is possible, however, is to accept them in order to reduce the tensions and thereby avoiding political violence. In order to deal with the tensions without violence, a democratic framework is needed which is built on two democratic ideals, human freedom and equal human value. According to Mouffe (1993/2005, 2013), agonism provides such a democratic framework in which antagonism could be transformed into agonism. Antagonism is a combat between enemies but agonism is a struggle between adversaries. In sum, a political controversy divides humans into adversarial groups, us and them. A political controversial issue could be defined as an emerging uncertainty that arise in society which turns into a continuing conflict consisting of incompatible political interests, ideas, positions and solutions independent of evidence, knowledge claims, moral, ethical, affective, rational or irrational claims. As mentioned earlier, participation is vital in agonistic philosophy of education – that is, political participation.

#### 4.2 Political action as subjectification

The concept of action is central within agonistic philosophy of education; it has consequences for education as a practice of communication. Action, based on the political philosophy of Arendt (1958/1998), could be understood as a beginning of something new together with others. Thus, actions contain a political dimension, a responsibility by taking place in the public sphere and create opportunities together with others in order to address issues and problems which are central to the organization of society. To perform political actions is to connect to others, to be subjected to others and to act in concert.

To act is to make an appearance and to take responsibility for the world by words and deeds based on a disposition of the individual to act on knowledge-based considerations, habits, traditions and will-based motivation that cannot be reduced to a rational reason

(Ljunggren, 2007 p. 206). Moral beliefs and passions, in terms of likes and dislikes, are thus viewed as central to action. From this perspective, communication becomes a matter of exchange of meaning between the participants but also a matter of self-understanding – a communication directed inwardly and outwardly as a way to relate to oneself. Who do I become and who do I want to be in front of others, and when I view myself? This is a question about *subjectification* that is “the process of becoming a subject” (Biesta, 2011b, p. 21). When entering into communication, personal experiences are given an unfamiliar depiction of the world, an opening for new possibilities, change and influence. The participants are given the opportunity to realize that their personal experiences lack dimensions that would be possible if they were someone else (Ljunggren, 2007). Thus, the possibility of the student to define her/himself through action becomes a necessity for communication in education as a way to open for new impressions, knowledge, experiences and to become a subject – a person subjected to other persons.

Political action opens for new possibilities as a part of a person’s active membership of a society. According to Arendt, humans are free as long as they are given the opportunity to act. To be free and to act is the same thing. Political action is linked to human diversity, a basic condition of human life. This diversity rests on natality, the fact that humans are continuously born into the world as strangers and newcomers, becoming new beginners and beginners. This understanding of human life entails a vision of every individual as unique, individuals are seen as *persons*. This is also why the person her/himself is the starting point for political action: “in Arendt’s agonism the person itself, an agonistic subjectivity, is the starting point in the procedure” (Ljunggren, 2010, p. 22). It is personal affections, emotions and passions – the particular and not the general public interest – which are determinative for the starting point of the political action. This is not to say that all types of political actions are possible: “understanding oneself as a member of a specific community is similar to aspiring to certain values and virtues” (Ljunggren, 2010, p. 30). Solidarity and membership in a community, which is maintained through *socialisation*, require acceptance of human diversity and uniqueness which limit what humans could possibly do to each other. This is a double bind of political action stating that political action requires a personal beginning and completion through acceptance and actions of others – political action is always a public action which contains subjectification and socialisation, it is to act in concert with others. Thus, political action is always dependent on the constant presence of others – it comes into existence when others react to it. In agonistic philosophy of education, which builds on human diversity and diversity in thinking with an emphasis on difference and dissidence, education has to create a space for action and the possibility of renewing the world. Participating in a political controversial conversation is an opportunity to act, to be free as a

political subject. In the next section this possibility will be discussed and concluded from a social media perspective on social science education.

### **5 Didactical conditions, possibilities and strategies in political controversial conversations**

As a teacher, in order to conduct good teaching you have to be explicit in relation to others and yourself in the way you handle and view the functions of education; qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2011b). The problem with today’s teaching in school, according to Biesta, is its one-sided focus on socialisation and qualification. This is problematic because the meaning of being human and a democratic citizen has been determined from the beginning, before education has even taken place. The possibility for students to become independent thinkers and political agents is reduced when society (through the teachers’ instruction) tells them how they should be, think and act – that is, they are being taught. This approach is highly visible in the *The Norm Mediator* when dealing with controversial issues (cf. Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2010a). However, education, in agonistic philosophy of education, should be characterized by communication, relations and learning which are not possible to calculate in advance – it should be possible to learn things that you did not think were possible. Teaching has to contribute and make it possible to solve, problematize and question perspectives that the participants take with them into the classroom – bringing new and unexpected perspectives on the world. Education is not about marketing a specific world view or one’s own world view. Rather, democratic education concerns working in concert, it is a collective and thus political practice in which different world views can meet and confront each other. Consequently, it is the teachers’ task to create a safe conversation space in which questions, political preferences, feelings, affections and experiences could be expressed and at the same time offer the students resistance and perspectives. In Arendt’s terms this could be understood as freedom, the possibility to act politically, to appear on the world stage, breaking into the world and taking responsibility for it (and at the same time learning something from it). Hence, the vital didactical challenge in social science education is to allow political agency.

#### **5.1 Becoming a person – the prosumer**

A predefined framework for what it means to be a good democratic citizen is counter-productive, it does not count the experiences, perceptions, political preferences and interest of the students as important (Andersson, 2012a; Sandahl, 2015). Predefined frameworks only answer to socialisation and qualification and overlook the subjectification function of democratic education. Coarsely, teaching should ‘produce’ democratic citizens based on predefined democratic values and norms (socialisation) and students should learn proper subject knowledge and capacities (qualification) while developing a trust in societal institutions and traditions.



They should also be given the opportunity to grow as political agents with the freedom of creating their own lives and identities (subjectification). In practice, these three functions of education are (of course) interwoven but also further challenged when introducing social media and digitally mediated conversations.

Digitally mediated conversations in teaching reveal a number of changes in the teaching situation which increases the possibility for subjectification, expressed in new communication patterns, management of the educational content, user experience among the students, the depth of the conversation and possibilities in making one's voice heard (Rossi, 2006; Kim et al., 2007; Guiller et al., 2008; Xu, 2008; Andresen, 2009; Andersson, 2012b). The public conversation in the classroom faces didactical challenges when aiming at involving all students in communicative processes dealing with political controversy. Through an increased use of social media, inside and outside school, young people increasingly come to be both producers and consumers of educational content. As participants, the students become *prosumers* (Andersson, 2010), active co-creators of the educational content. Thus, a shift in communication patterns has occurred due to the introduction of digital and social media in school. The student is no longer only a recipient, consumer or user of educational content but also a participant and content producer. Consequently, a social media perspective questions what could be considered relevant knowledge, it provides new perspectives on the qualification function of education: from transmission of knowledge to construction of knowledge. A shift in teaching is then emphasized, from instructing and learning about democracy (being taught) to learning through and in democracy (being educated), a shift from a traditional teaching of information about democracy to a teaching directed towards knowledge in democracy and learning through democracy. A social media perspective could be useful to understand the teaching practices in social science education as a process in democracy directing the teachers to consider how they could use and create participatory approaches in teaching – that is, how they could increase the level of subjectification (cf. Biesta, 2006, 2010a, 2011b).

## 5.2 Blended learning and shared managements of disagreement

When teaching is a collaborative concern it is possible to learn from and in democracy. The students become participants (Biesta, 2007) making it possible to deal with the content in a pluralistic and meaningful way, opening for the use of experiences and preferences within the classroom. As participants the students are able to define themselves through action, a crucial condition for communication that could open for new impressions, knowledge and experiences which challenge individual positions and affect the person. Previous research shows that this type of teaching could be conducted when combining face-to-face conversations with digitally mediated conversations. This kind of blended learning

approach, as research has shown, makes it possible for all students to participate in the conversation which becomes characterized by genuine questions from the students, more time available to develop thoughts, arguments and deepen the understanding within agreed forms of communication. A mutually arranged digitally mediated public space for conversation may enable a safe, honest and topic-oriented treatment of politically controversial issues (e.g. Andersson, 2013) while allowing political action that could lead to more perspectives, dissent and difference – a political conversation in terms of I- and we-identifications. Thus, the didactical task of the teacher in political controversial conversations is then to arrange an open, creative and positive conversation climate, to frame a topic and make it interesting, to open for interactive and participatory forms of communication with a distinct conversation structure with pre-established rules.

## 5.3 Didactic strategies for conducting political controversial conversations

In controversial issues, teaching needs to go beyond a conversation framed as right or wrong, good or bad. Time for thinking and for the eager questions of the students is needed. It will be difficult to achieve the aim of social science education – to create opportunities that could contribute to the students' ability to critically examine, experience, analyse and evaluate complex societal issues and phenomena – if the conversation is framed and limited to what is stated as politically correct. The possibility to give perspective, challenge and qualify the political thinking of the students will then be omitted. A healthy democracy demands a shared management of disagreements (Hess, 2009). Communicating disagreement and conflict makes people knowledgeable and tolerant. Agonistically, this could be explained by the fact that powerful ideas are produced when humans reciprocally are given the opportunity to express their ideas. Schools are vital and qualified institutions and public spaces in which society's common issues can be handled reciprocally – a reciprocity which is challenged and at stake when dealing with political controversial issues.

Teachers find it difficult to conduct political controversial conversations in the social science class-room. If the goal of political democratic conversations in social science education is to allow students to openly and critically examine society, create meaning, express their own opinions and feelings, analyse and evaluate current affairs, *which didactic strategies will then be suitable for political controversial conversations?* Based on previous research and agonistic theory it is now possible to derive certain didactic strategies:

- Create, together with the students, a clear framework for participation in the conversation.
- Use blended learning opportunities in order to create a public space for conversation in which all students can make their voices heard.



- Be open for the unexpected and unpredictable, give space for action and use communicative strategies adjusted to the situation.
- Differentiate between person and action and balance the person's right to have different political views with the risk of offending other individuals.
- Make conflict a norm and use controversy and ideological diversity within the class as a didactic resource.
- Know your subject, be non-judgmental, perspective oriented and know your own discernments and political preferences.
- Approach the students as prosumers in order to increase and balance the level of subjectification.

This is not an imprint on how political controversial conversations should be conducted. It is not possible to calculate political conversations in advance, they are contingent. Consequently, the strategies should be viewed as an educational approach and attitude in balancing the educational function of socialisation, qualification and subjectification. The approach is a contrast to what Hand expresses as 'to teach something as controversial' (2008, p. 213). Teaching controversy, in Hand's definition and his defense of the epistemic criterion (2008), becomes a question of qualification and being taught. Teaching controversy is framed as a teacher's introduction and presentation of different views on an issue and their related arguments and subsequently the students are supposed to understand them and then make a choice. Thus, controversy is framed as a matter of epistemology. Students are to be taught different views that they in turn are supposed to choose from. Contextual dimensions of culture, political affection, emotions, experiences, attitudes and interests of the students are not counted as important. The teacher needs to use and be open to the questions and concerns of the students in order to create conversational spaces which encourage and support 'thinking activities' that could produce a critical dialogue beyond simple answers of right and wrong or making 'epistemological choices'. To deal with these challenges, and in order to understand the impact of social media on social science education and political controversial conversations on a deeper level, further empirical classroom research would be useful.

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