

Bones of Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues

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SHORTLY AFTER THE WAR IN IRAQ started, students in a second grade classroom in Arizona were writing letters to American soldiers for an English/Social Studies assignment. After the students overcame their initial worries concerning the required features and mechanics of their letters, they were overheard to ask the teacher the following questions: *What are we fighting for? Why don't we just nuke Iraq? Girls aren't fighting, are they? How did this war start?*

On September 12, 2001, every teacher in America was a social studies teacher for a few days. Students all over the country were not concerned with standardized tests and graduation requirements. Neither were teachers. Teachers were confronted with questions such as, *Why do they hate us? Are we safe? Will it happen here? Why did they do this? Will any of my loved ones have to go to war?*

These days, teachers are often faced with topics in which there is little public agreement, and that might be considered offensive in some segments of society; in other words, controversial issues. It is unfortunate that some teachers choose not to discuss questions concerning contentious issues such as the attacks of 9/11 or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These teachers may ignore their students' inquires or defer them to parents or other sources. However, the teachers that do attempt to discuss controversial questions must rely on their knowledge of their own students and community as much as their knowledge of social studies content and current events. The following article presents an argument for discussing (and not avoiding) controversial issues in the classroom and offers some guidelines for teachers.

Addressing Controversies

Confronting controversial issues in the classroom is not a new challenge. It is a side of teaching that falls under the umbrella of social studies. Touchy subjects in the areas of religion, politics,

civil rights, as well as strictly local controversies (i.e., school rules, local laws) force teachers to decide whether to discuss these subjects and, if so, how to address them while maintaining decorum and making connections between the topic and the tasks in their lesson plan. Addressing these "bones of contention" in the classroom provides teachers with unique opportunities to adhere to democratic principles and demonstrate the skills needed for engaging in civic discourse.

In this age of standards and their accompanying assessments, teachers may feel "off the hook" when it comes to addressing topics that are not on their state's standardized assessment. Some teachers may be tempted to fall back on the reasoning that it is only necessary to spend time on the matters for which they and their students will be held accountable, and therefore issues such as war or religion or national tragedies shall not be discussed.

Not discussing controversial issues that are the focus of media attention (whether national or local) smacks of the "null curriculum" described by educator Elliot Eisner.¹ Consider what message teachers are relaying to children when teachers do not answer students' questions or respond to their comments (which are sometimes erroneous or prejudicial). Their message is clearly that the school is not the place for discussion of such topics—that these issues are not important enough to be addressed, although they may be the focus of media attention.

Controversies, however, should be instruments of progress in a democracy,² and therefore should be an integral part of the social studies curriculum. The test of a democratic republic is how its citizens handle controversies and disagreements. If the goal of social studies is truly to promote civic competence,³ then teaching students how to deal with a controversy is a major aspect of social studies education. In the context of current events, students can learn that there

are multiple and often competing viewpoints and that there are appropriate and powerful ways to understand them.

The Course of History

One definition of history might be that it is the study of controversies, their causes, courses, and outcomes. Topics that make up the content of history courses (America's break from England or the secession of the South from the Union, for instance) were once the source of much debate. Teaching history without consideration of disagreements as if events were planned or scripted, gives students a false representation.

The topic of religion is often considered taboo in public school classrooms because of its potential to offend someone or violate the idea of the separation of church and state. However, as every social studies educator is aware, religion is a major aspect of life in the past and in the present. The relevance of teaching about Islam in schools became clear after 9/11. It became vital for students to understand that the actions of a few did not represent the beliefs of all Muslims.

Knowing the Material

Not all controversial issues need to be discussed in the classroom. It is important to note that although controversial issues should be openly addressed, teachers are first faced with the decision of whether or not the topic is worthy of discussion and the classroom time that such discussion consumes. Teachers need to decide if discussion of the issue will further the purpose of creating informed and effective citizens⁴ or if the issue can be ignored or deferred to parents or another source.

When choosing to address controversial issues, however, there are a few guidelines for teachers to consider. It is imperative that teachers have an understanding of their students' lives outside of the classroom. Knowing,

for instance, that a student has a relative in the military during a time of war should influence how the teacher addresses questions regarding news reports and rumors concerning the war. In communities that are defined by a predominant religion, teachers need to be aware of families' beliefs concerning issues that may be hot topics on the news (e.g., same-sex marriage), but may be offensive to members of the community. In such cases, teachers should remain as objective as possible concerning the issue, ensuring that any information given to students is accurate and that factually incorrect statements made by students are questioned.

Teachers must be knowledgeable about the standards and curriculum that they are to teach. Using the example of religion, teachers should know whether and how the standards for his or her state address religion. Teachers should be careful, however, not to insert their own beliefs or endorse or denigrate a certain religion.

Self Awareness

In addition to knowledge of students and of the curriculum, teachers must be aware of their own biases, beliefs, and prejudices and how these influence their teaching.⁵ Public school teachers with deeply held religious beliefs, for instance, must be aware of how their beliefs might “leak into” discussions of religion or social issues. While the First Amendment rights of freedom of speech and religion certainly protect teachers as well as the population at large, teachers must realize that they are authority figures and role models for youth (especially at the elementary level).⁶ Teachers also must be aware that they have, in effect, a captive audience, and so must be careful not to abuse that youthful audience.

Ground Rules

The Constitutional Rights Foundation offers advice for teachers in the discussion of controversial issues.⁷ CRF points out that it is imperative to set ground rules before teaching issues that are contentious. In teaching about religion, for instance, the teacher could preface the lesson by explaining that the students will be learning about a religion, and direct the students to not discuss what they believe or have learned at church. The teacher should also specify that he or she would not discuss his or her beliefs as well. In other words, the teacher is going to stick to the curriculum.


The CRF also suggests that teachers make sure that students argue ideas and not personalities or prejudices. Opposing positions should be represented fairly and accurately. Ensuring that opinions are represented accurately requires the teacher to be knowledgeable about the issue at hand. Therefore, teachers should try to keep abreast of issues of controversy. It is still true that teachers are considered sources of truth and knowledge in our society. Students hear reports from their parents, the media, and their peers, yet they go to teachers for their viewpoints as well. Again, consider the message a teacher gives to students when the children hear reports from their parents, the media, and peers, but their teacher says nothing.

Listening to Evidence

Teachers should also make sure that when discussing contentious issues, students learn to focus on evidence. Prejudicial or inaccurate comments are likely to be made by youthful students. Teachers can ask questions and point out flawed reasoning, but there is no need to verbally punish students for making such comments. Students must be able to admit doubts and weaknesses and be allowed to change their minds as they learn more facts. Therefore, it is essential that the teacher provide a democratic and safe climate for his or her students. Students should feel safe from ridicule or any form of harassment during the discussion, and they should be given ample opportunity to air their own views, hear others' views, and examine both.⁸ Finally, students must realize that discussion of a controversy is not a win/lose situation. Often, the best solution to a controversy is arrived at when all points of view have been expressed and considered. The way forward may favor one approach over the other, but that approach has been changed, reformed, or modified so as to answer problems raised by opposing points of view.

Conclusion

Dealing with contentious issues is a part of living in a democracy. Controversies in the classroom range from discussions of fairness regarding playground rules to the rules of “just war.” Understanding that there are multiple and often competing viewpoints is a prerequisite to being an informed and effective citizen. Teaching students to define and express their view-

points in appropriate ways, to listen carefully to opposing views, to insist that all parties adhere to evidence, and to detect flaws in argument and reasoning falls under the purview of social studies education. If we truly want students to someday assume the “office of citizen,” acting on their informed opinions, then teachers must learn how to address controversial issues in the classroom. 

Notes

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2. Walter Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, 12th ed. (Columbus, OH: Pearson, 2005), 205-206.
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, Bulletin 89 (Washington, D.C., National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).
4. National Council for the Social Studies, “Creating Effective Citizens: A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies,” *Social Education* 65, no. 5 (September 2001): 319. www.socialstudies.org/positions
5. Christine Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Allyn & Bacon, 2003)
6. Joanne M. Marshall, “Religion and Education: Walking the Line in Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 85, no. 3 (November 2003): 239-242.
7. The Constitutional Rights Foundation, “America Responds to Terrorism: Handling Controversy” (crf-usa.org/terror/controversy.htm)
8. *Ibid.*

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