

**TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES  
WITH  
RIGOR AND BALANCE**

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**Controversial Issues and Democracy**  
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**I. Why address controversial issues?**

Students who discuss controversial issues in school are more likely to understand democracy in action than their counterparts who experience a traditional curriculum. By learning how to reason together about competing ideas in a classroom setting, students gain practice in exchanging information and opinions about the role and shape of government. Through this experience, students will develop skills that their generation can use to address the gap between the goals of democracy and the reality presented by their society and their schools. Confronting controversial issues in the classroom prepares youth for fulfilling their role as citizens in their community and nation.

Research shows that students who study controversial issues are more likely to:

- Take an active role in civic life
- Trust other students and adults in their schools
- Develop an interest in politics and government
- Think deeply and critically about important societal issues
- Understand the reasoning of those who hold opposing views

Conversely, if controversy is avoided or distorted in its presentation, the goal of transparency may be sacrificed. However, developing lessons that deal with controversy effectively is a challenging task. To do so requires a thorough understanding of the barriers and limitations for including controversy. Some of the most important are listed below.

Barriers that cause teachers to avoid controversial issues discussion:

- Conservatism in the dominant culture encourages a curriculum that emphasizes the positive, stable features of society and avoids discussion of problematic areas.
- A lecture/recitation instructional tradition emphasizes transmission of knowledge rather than student construction of content.
- Teachers lack exposure to issue and inquiry-based courses in their own education including their collegiate experience.

**II. Criteria for selecting the content of controversial issues**

Many of the challenges that arise when teaching controversial issues can be avoided through the process of carefully selecting issues and developing materials that meet the criteria listed below:

*A. Substantive criteria for selecting the content of controversial issues:*

**1. Is a balanced debate on the issue possible?**

Will arguments on both sides be given "a best case, fair hearing"? When undertaking a controversial issue discussion, teachers must determine whether or not multiple perspectives exist. Can reasonable arguments be formed to reflect opposing viewpoints? Do the materials provide a balanced presentation of the issue? A test of whether or not you can successfully meet this standard is to ask if proponents from each side were listening in on your class

discussion, would they find that the most compelling arguments for their position were presented.

2. **Is the issue really controversial?**

Framing an issue so that it contains an appropriate amount of controversy can be challenging. Some issues of right and wrong should be taught as such rather than as an issue to be debated. For example, whether or not citizens should have access to basic human rights should not be selected as a controversial issue. All citizens should have such rights.

For example, slavery is not controversial; it is wrong. However, slavery can be presented as a controversial issue if the question is framed as how to correct a wrong. A teacher in the U.S. might frame a controversial issue regarding payment of reparations to the descendents of slaves. However, a teacher would not want to ask "Should we make slavery legal again?" Topics such as slavery need to be addressed in their historical context.

3. **Is the issue important to the development of democracy/rule of law?**

Does the issue illuminate important democratic values that are in conflict? Will addressing this issue result in the development of a more open society? Democratic societies often confront situations in which important democratic values are in conflict. For example, hate speech represents a conflict between a right to freedom of expression and tolerance for people and ideas different from your own. Debating the best way to accommodate competing values through a current issue is an important citizen activity. For example, many controversial issues in emerging democracies involve tension between the rights of an individual and the common good of the whole society.

4. **Do youth view this as an important issue?**

Youth look at issues differently than their teachers. When possible, it is important to involve them in selecting issues that they want to study. Start by finding out what the students already know and believe. Design a selection process that involves them. Have students vote to select topics from a list you have designed or ask them to propose topics for future discussion by bringing newspaper articles and political cartoons.

5. **Is this issue appropriate for the youth in this community/class?**

Some issues may meet all criteria listed above but still not be suitable for the classroom because the community or the class as a whole is too emotionally involved in the issue. What if students all gravitate to the same viewpoint? What if personal conflicts erupt that might carry beyond the classroom? If the teacher feels that the ideas and reasoning of all students will not receive "a balanced best case, fair hearing" in the classroom or the community, the issue should be passed over as a controversial issue. Perhaps some other strategy can be selected to present the issue.

**B. Pedagogical Criteria for Teaching Controversial Issues:**

1. **Is the teacher trained and prepared to facilitate a controversial issue discussion?**

Does the teacher know how to establish a safe environment in which students feel comfortable sharing their opinions and asking questions of other students?

Does the teacher know how to establish rules for discussion?

Has the teacher taught students how to ask questions of other students?

Has the teacher taught students how to use evidence to document an opinion?

Has the teacher taught students how to challenge ideas so other students do not take a remark personally?

Do students understand the criteria by which the teacher will evaluate the success of the lesson?

Has the teacher weighed the costs and benefits of revealing his/her position on an issue? Is the teacher willing to self-critique his/her thinking and to invite students to critique their position?

2. Are high-quality materials available that present each of the important perspectives on the issue?

Is the reading level appropriate for students? If not, is there sufficient time for research so the teacher can create them?

3. Is sufficient time available for an in-depth study?

A superficial discussion may have unintended negative consequences. Sometimes, its better not to address an issue at all than to raise an issue but not help students to develop an understanding of a complex issue. How much time is available for study of the issue? How much time is needed?

4. Will the administration approve this topic as appropriate for your classroom/curriculum?

Does the issue meet an important outcome? Community values or the expectations of authorities make some topics too "hot" and thus inappropriate. When in doubt, discuss your concerns with respected colleagues and perhaps reframe the issue.

Sometimes teachers write a letter to administrators and parents explaining the purpose for the lesson and, if appropriate, ask for permission for their student to participate.

