

Controversial Issues and Democracy

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:

Substantive 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:

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.

Exercise:

Brainstorm a list of controversial issues that you think should be included in your civic education curriculum. From this list, select one that you think is very important to your outcomes.

Evaluate the appropriateness and teachability of this issue using both the criteria outlined above. Which of the criteria is met and which criteria seem to be problematic? Would you still teach this issue? Why or why not?