

Framework for Teaching Controversial Issues

Teachers in every subject area face the challenge of teaching content that may be controversial in some way. In English language arts it may be the actions of a particular character in literature. In social studies it may be a historical or current event. In science it may be a disagreement over the results of two scientific studies on an emerging topic. Many local school boards have adopted policies to guide teachers. Teachers should consider local expectations and board policies, the age and maturity of students, advice from fellow teachers and the material covered in the Academic Content Standards when planning instruction of controversial topics.

Purpose

The guidance provided here is intended to assist teachers in making sound decisions that meet local board policies when teaching controversial issues. Teachers should consult local policies before planning lessons so that their selection of topics, materials and activities are consistent with local expectations. This paper includes additional guidelines and research that teachers should consider so they may:

- Identify classroom skills and attitudes that should be cultivated through engaging controversial issues.
- Set protocols regarding:
 - The behavior of students.
 - Methods to create an environment conducive to learning from divergent viewpoints.
- Identify student skills from Ohio's Academic Content Standards which may be addressed while discussing controversial issues.
- Find additional web-based resources.

Each area is discussed more fully below.

Classroom Skills

Students learn valuable skills when they research and discuss controversial issues. Teachers should therefore be familiar with methods for addressing controversial issues in ways that impart knowledge; enable discussion; ensure students' physical and emotional safety; and build the critical faculties of students. Addressing controversial issues can teach special skills, as the National Council for Social Studies (1969) notes:

The study of controversial issues should develop the following skills and attitudes:

- 1. The desire and ability to study relevant problems and to make intelligent choices from alternatives.*
- 2. The desire and ability to use rational methods in considering significant issues.*
- 3. The willingness to recognize that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal.*
- 4. The recognition that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process.*

5. *The skill of analyzing and evaluating sources of information – recognizing propaganda, half truths, and bias.*¹

Pink (2005) identified six skills that Americans will need to be competitive in a global society. These three are learned through the discussion of controversial issues:

- **Story** – Place facts in the proper context so that they are understandable. Students must be able to contextualize facts, especially when dealing with controversial issues, with competing interpretations.
- **Symphony** – See relationships between seemingly disparate pieces, and place them together to create or invent. Controversial issues require students to sift through information and build arguments.
- **Empathy** - Identify with and understand other peoples' needs and desires. Students learn empathy through open discussions that are conducted so that students feel safe and understand other opinions more fully.²

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004) listed additional skills that students should demonstrate which relate to the discussion of controversial issues, such as:

- *Critical Thinking & Systems Thinking: Exercising sound reasoning in understanding and making complex choices, understanding the interconnections among systems.*
- *Problem Identification, Formulation and Solution: Ability to frame, analyze and solve problems.*
- *Creativity and Intellectual Curiosity: Developing, implementing and communicating new ideas to others, staying open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives.*³

Classroom Protocols

There are a number of strategies for handling controversial issues in the classroom, depending upon the age of the students and other factors. High school students can generally be given more control over discussions of controversial issues than elementary students. Similarly, high school students can analyze more complex issues and those which are especially charged with contentious debate and emotion.

Teachers and the Classroom Climate

Teachers should introduce or reinforce the principles of rhetoric, reasoning and logical fallacies (*see endnote 4 for examples*) before or during discussions of controversial issues, as needed.⁴ Teachers should also:

- *Create a classroom climate that is conducive to discussion and disagreement, which means that the rules of discourse need to be established early and followed by everyone, especially the instructor.*
- *Although students may have agreed to follow the discussion ground rules, they may need to be reminded of the guidelines from time to time during their debates.*

- *Once students have reached consensus on a particular point, make sure they acknowledge and record the fact so they don't recycle their arguments over old ground.*
- *If necessary, call "time outs" to allow tempers to cool. The instructor might use the time to summarize the discussion or ask students to write down their thoughts at that point so they can be shared and used to re-start the discussion.*
- *Reserve time at the end of the discussion to provide a wrap-up of the session in which students can report what they learned and examine any conclusions that might be drawn from the exchange.⁵*

Student Decorum Guidelines

No student can be expected to engage controversial issues without being in a safe, respectful environment. Here are some sample guidelines developed by the Center for Teaching and Learning (2004) to give students before classroom discussions:

- *Always listen carefully, with an open mind, to the contributions of others.*
- *Ask for clarification when you don't understand a point someone has made.*
- *If you challenge others' idea, do so with factual evidence and appropriate logic.*
- *Always critique ideas or positions, not people.*
- *If others challenge your ideas, be willing to change your mind if they demonstrate errors in your logic or use of the facts.*
- *Point out the relevance of the issues that you raise when their relevance might not be so obvious to others in the class.*
- *If others have made a point with which you agree, only repeat it when you have something important to add.*
- *Be efficient in your discourse; make your points and then yield to others – take turns speaking.*
- *Above all, avoid ridicule and try to respect the beliefs of others, even if they differ from yours.⁵*

Three Roles Teachers Can Play

Lockwood (1996) developed a few models for teaching controversial issues at the high school level, which teachers are encouraged to consider and modify to meet their classroom needs, along with district policies. They include:

1. **Presiding Judges** organize debate, sets rules, end impermissible lines of argumentation and focus almost purely on process, rather than the outcome.
2. **Nurturant Facilitators** allow students to discuss issues in an open setting, with few pre-set rules, and an emphasis on free expression of thoughts within the bounds of respect.
3. **Socratic Cross-Examiners** question assumptions and challenge the validity of evidence, seeking to expand the range of debate and test the soundness of reasoning.⁶

There is no clear-cut method of determining the most appropriate methods of classroom management in discussion of controversial issues. The preceding roles can be integrated into the regular classroom as the teacher deems appropriate.

Each role has strengths which may recommend them for a specific topic or setting.⁶

Presiding Judges

May be useful when:

- evidence offered by students is of poor quality;
- discussion moves away from the stated topic;
- facts are sought.

Nurturant Facilitators

May be useful when:

- student involvement requires encouragement;
- students' values are being discussed;
- broad discussion (rather than forced specification) is desirable;
- teacher direction may be inappropriate due to the topic.

Socratic Cross-Examiners

May be useful when:

- evidence offered by students is of poor quality;
- student involvement requires encouragement;
- specific concepts or facts are being assessed;
- a thought process is being taught or a guided thought process is sought.

Constructive Controversy

If a teacher desires a student-led, structured discussion, there are additional modes of classroom management. Debates offer students the opportunity to work within a defined framework of discussion, where logic, research and clear expression of thoughts are rewarded and straying from the topic is discouraged. One model of student debate encourages students to examine different viewpoints and find compromises and areas of agreement, rather than adversarial competition traditionally associated with debate. In an adaptation of Johnson, Johnson and Smith's (2000) "constructive controversy," a controversial issue is discussed by dividing the students into two small groups, then:

1. The teacher announces the controversial issue to be discussed.
2. Students in each group research the affirmative and negative of the issue.
3. Each group presents their arguments and attempts to refute arguments from the opposition group.
4. Groups reverse positions and argue the best case possible for the opposing position.⁷

Academic Content Standards

Ohio's Academic Content Standards anticipate the need for teachers to help their students sort through many sources of information in order to form their own opinions. They list skills that students need in order to be able to discern credible information from hyperbole or sift through the evidence around two opposing points of view. They

challenge them to use the methodologies of researchers in each of the disciplines. Some examples from social studies, library guidelines, English language arts, mathematics and science are included below.

Social Studies, Grades 9-10

In *Social Studies Skills and Methods*, for example, the standards require that high school students be able to:

Thinking and Organizing

1. Detect bias and propaganda in primary and secondary sources of information.
2. Evaluate the credibility of sources for:
 - a. Logical fallacies;
 - b. Consistency of arguments;
 - c. Unstated assumptions;
 - d. Bias.
3. Analyze the reliability of sources for:
 - a. Accurate use of facts;
 - b. Adequate support of statements;
 - c. Date of publication.⁸ [Grade Nine]

Thinking and Organizing

1. Determine the credibility of sources by considering the following:
 - a. The qualifications and reputation of the writer;
 - b. Agreement with other credible sources;
 - c. Recognition of stereotypes;
 - d. Accuracy and consistency of sources;
 - e. The circumstances in which the author prepared the source.
2. Critique evidence used to support a thesis.
3. Analyze one or more issues and present a persuasive argument to defend a position.⁹ [Grade Ten]

Communicating Information

Library, Grade 9

Since the study of most issues will involve research on the part of the student, the high school library guidelines on *Information Literacy* should be considered.

Evaluating Resources

1. Define terms which determine information validity:
 - a. Accuracy;
 - b. Authority;
 - c. Objectivity;
 - d. Currency;
 - e. Coverage.
2. Determine the author's authority for all resources and identify points of agreement and disagreement among sources.¹⁰ [Grade Nine]

- Decide 1. Determine the essential questions and plan research strategies.
2. Utilize basic and advanced search strategies to obtain topic-appropriate resources.
- Find 3. Select and evaluate appropriateness of information from a variety of resources, including online research databases and Web sites to answer the essential questions.
- Use 4. Integrate copyrighted information into an information product, following appropriate use guidelines (e.g., quote using proper citation format, request permission for use).
5. Identify relevant facts, check facts for accuracy and record appropriate information.
- Check 6. Analyze the information gathered through note taking, organize information into a logical sequence, and create a draft product (e.g., report, research paper, presentation).
7. Incorporate a list of sources used in a project using a standard bibliographic style manual (e.g., MLA and APA Style Manuals).
8. Create and communicate findings through an appropriate format.
9. Evaluate the research process and product as they apply to the information need (e.g., does the process reflect the actual information need?).¹¹
- [Grade Nine]

English Language Arts, Grade 12

The English language arts standards identify critical skills that students need to be able to apply in order to sort and interpret information fairly and accurately.

2. Analyze and critique organizational patterns and techniques including repetition of ideas, appeals to authority, reason and emotion, syntax and word choice that authors use to accomplish their purpose and reach their intended audience. . .
4. Distinguish between valid and invalid inferences and provide evidence to support the findings, noting instances of unsupported inferences, fallacious reasoning, propaganda techniques, bias and stereotyping.
5. Examine an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

6. Evaluate the effectiveness and validity of arguments in public documents and their appeal to various audiences.¹²
[Grade Twelve]

Mathematics, Grades 9, 11 and 12

The mathematics content standards also require several skills which can be applied in discussions of controversial issues.

Statistical Methods 4. Describe and compare various types of studies (survey, observation, experiment), and identify possible misuses of statistical data.
5. Describe characteristics and limitations of sampling methods, and analyze the effects of random versus biased sampling; e.g., determine and justify whether the sample is likely to be representative of the population.
6. Make inferences about relationships in bivariate data, and recognize the difference between evidence of relationship (correlation) and causation.¹³ [Grade Nine]

Data Collection 1. Design a statistical experiment, survey or study for a problem; collect data for the problem; and interpret the data with appropriate graphical displays, descriptive statistics, concepts of variability, causation, correlation and standard deviation.
2. Describe the role of randomization in a well-designed study, especially as compared to a convenience sample, and the generalization of results from each.¹⁴ [Grade Eleven]

Statistical Methods 9. Evaluate validity of results of a study based on characteristics of the study design, including sampling method, summary statistics and data analysis techniques.¹⁵
[Grade Eleven]

Probability 6. Use theoretical or experimental probability, including simulations, to determine probabilities in real-world problem situations involving uncertainty, such as mutually exclusive events, complementary events, and conditional probability.¹⁶ [Grade Twelve]

Science, Grade 10

The *Scientific Ways of Knowing* standard clearly spells out how scientific knowledge should be considered.

- *Benchmark A: Explain that scientific knowledge must be based on evidence, be predictive, logical, subject to modification and limited to the natural world.*

- Nature of Science
1. Discuss science as a dynamic body of knowledge that can lead to the development of entirely new disciplines.
 2. Describe that scientists may disagree about explanations of phenomena, about interpretation of data or about the value of rival theories, but they do agree that questioning, response to criticism and open communication are integral to the process of science.
 3. Recognize that science is a systematic method of continuing investigation, based on observation, hypothesis testing, measurement, experimentation, and theory building, which leads to more adequate explanations of natural phenomena.¹⁷ [Grade Ten]
- *Benchmark B: Explain how scientific inquiry is guided by knowledge, observations, ideas, and questions.*

- Scientific Theories
5. Justify that scientific theories are explanations of large bodies of information and/or observations that withstand repeated testing.
 6. Explain that inquiry fuels observation and experimentation that produce data that are the foundation of scientific disciplines. Theories are explanations of these data.
 7. Recognize that scientific knowledge and explanations have changed over time, almost always building on earlier knowledge.¹⁸ [Grade Ten]

Further Options for Preparation

Some teachers may want to prepare students before delving into current controversial issues. There are a variety of possibilities for preparing students, such as reading or watching famous debates, critiquing arguments made in ancient or modern philosophical texts, or analyzing the use of supporting data in magazines and newspapers. Organizations, such as **Debate Central** (<http://debate.uvm.edu/>),¹⁹ **Commission on Presidential Debates** (<http://www.debates.org/>),²⁰ **Critical Thinking Community** (<http://www.criticalthinking.org/>),²¹ **Mission: Critical, San Jose State University** (<http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/itl/graphics/main.html>),²² **Thoughts on Problem Solving** (<http://www.engin.umich.edu/~problemsolving/>)²³ and **STATS** (<http://www.stats.org/>),²⁴ offer information useful to teachers and students as they approach controversial issues.

Conclusion

The goals of discussions of controversial issues are for students to have a better understanding of the issue and form a reasoned judgment that is based upon a critical analysis of the facts and arguments and is open to revision as conditions change. A second purpose is to refine students' higher order thinking skills, including analysis, problem-solving and synthesis, as those described in the academic content standards.

Endnotes

- ¹ Academic Freedom Committee, National Council for the Social Studies. (1969). *Academic Freedom and the Social Studies*. Available online at <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/freedom/>
- ² Pink, D. (2005). *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*. River Head Books: New York.
- ³ *Learning for the 21st Century*. (2004). Partnership for 21st Century Skills: Washington, D.C.
- ⁴ The following examples are a good starting point:
- Red herring – any time an irrelevant premise is introduced as an argument for the purpose of distraction.
 - *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* – the suggestion that there is a causal relationship between two or more events without demonstrating anything beyond correlation.
 - *Argumentum ad hominem* – a personal attack on the opposition that is not based in the discussion.
 - Straw man – an argument made against a weaker or corrupted version of the opponent’s argument, rather than addressing the actual position of the opponent.
 - Circular reasoning – a form of argument that has the conclusion as one of the premises.
 - Argument of example – Turning the discussion to a dispute about an example given, rather than focusing on the central issue.
- More information can be found at Mission: Critical, San Jose State University (<http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/itl/graphics/main.html>)
- ⁵ Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Carolina. (September 2004). *For Your Consideration #21: Teaching Controversial Issues*. Available online at <http://ctl.unc.edu/fyc21.html>
- ⁶ Lockwood, A.L. (Jan. 1996). Controversial Issues: The Teacher's Crucial Role. *Social Education*, v60, n1, 28-31. Available online at <http://members.ncss.org/se/601/600105.html>
- ⁷ Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T. & Smith, K.A. (Jan./Feb. 2000). Constructive Controversies: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict. *Change*, 32, no1, 28-37. pp. 30-31.
- ⁸ Ohio Department of Education. (2001). *Academic Content Standards: Social Studies*. Columbus, Ohio, p. 100.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.
- ¹⁰ Ohio Department of Education. (2003). *Academic Content Standards: K-12 Library Guidelines*. Columbus, Ohio, p. 159.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160-161.
- ¹² Ohio Department of Education. (2001). *Academic Content Standards: K-12 English Language Arts*. Columbus, Ohio, pp. 260-261.
- ¹³ Ohio Department of Education. (2001). *Academic Content Standards: K-12 Mathematics*. Columbus, Ohio, p. 105.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ¹⁷ Ohio Department of Education. (2001). *Academic Content Standards: K-12 Science*. Columbus, Ohio, p. 237.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- ¹⁹ Debate Central is provided by the Lawrence Debate Union at the University of Vermont. Creating a debate team, coaching and preparation are all included.
- ²⁰ Commission on Presidential Debates is the body which arranges and oversees presidential and vice presidential debates. It has transcripts and videos of debates, along with educational materials and suggestions for organizing events.
- ²¹ Critical Thinking Community is sponsored by the Foundation for Critical Thinking and is located at Sonoma State University. There are a wealth of lesson plans and readings for students on critical thinking.
- ²² Mission: Critical, San Jose State University is a repository of articles on reasoning, argumentation and fallacies offered by San Jose State University.
- ²³ Thoughts on Problem Solving is a web adaptation of a book by University of Michigan Professor H. Scott Folger and University of Toledo Professor Steven E. LeBlanc; both in chemical engineering. It covers concepts relating to creative thinking, critical thinking and methods for solving problems.
- ²⁴ STATS is a project of George Mason University to analyze the use of statistics in the media.