

Reflections by Alan Shapiro:

Teaching controversial issues in secondary school

A problem. Conflicting definitions, facts, assumptions, opinions, solutions. Competing feelings and values. Public debate and action. In short, controversy.

A good citizen questions, informs himself or herself, thinks issues through, reaches conclusions, and participates in public life.

A good teacher helps students to understand that controversy is the lifeblood of democracy, to learn how to inquire into past and current controversial issues that are meaningful to them, and to participate in public life.

Some operating principles for teaching controversial issues in secondary schools:

1. Examine yourself.

What do you, the teacher, think and feel about an issue? Why? What are your purposes in having students pursue an inquiry into it? Should you tell students at the outset what your views are so that they can allow for possible biases? Or should you not tell them, but guard against any inclinations to manipulate and propagandize?

2. Create a safe environment.

Fears of ridicule, failing to conform to teacher views, and making mistakes are among the reasons why students can be unwilling to participate frankly and fully in class examinations of issues.

Community-building activities, student participation in decision-making about the classroom, and procedures to resolve conflicts contribute significantly to the kind of environment in which students are more likely to speak and write freely and be willing to take risks.

3. Find out what students know and think about an issue before beginning an inquiry.

Start where the students are. This old adage is ever-new. Of course students may be in different places. Which is all the more reason to find out what they know about an issue, what they think they know but aren't sure about, where their information comes from, and what questions they have. Their responses can come from direct questioning, group discussions, and journal-writing, and provide the basis for classwork and assignments.

4. Examine questions.

After listing student questions on the chalkboard

without comment, the teacher invites scrutiny of them. Which require factual answers? Which call for opinions? What words may require definition before a question can be answered intelligently? Which contain assumptions? Which are unclear and need to be reworded? Which are impossible to answer or useless to the inquiry?

Students need to understand that questions are instruments of perception, that the nature of a question determines the nature of an answer, that not all questions are equal, that question-asking and analysis are essential ingredients in critical thinking.

And then: Where will facts come from? Whose opinions will be considered? If an expert's, what qualifies this person? What biases may he or she have? What definitions can we agree on? Are assumptions warranted? If not, how do we reword the question? Do the questions need to be answered in any particular order? If so, what?

5. Have students experience multiple perspectives and the complexity of public issues.

Exposure to different points of view on a controversial issue is necessary but insufficient. Students may listen, view, or read only to support what they already think or to find flaws, omissions, misinformation.

One corrective is to engage in what Peter Elbow calls "methodological belief," or "the believing game," a "systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything, no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem—to find virtues or strengths we might otherwise miss."

This approach is a necessary complement to the more familiar "methodological doubt," or "the doubting game," a "systematic and conscious attempt to criticize everything no matter how compelling it might seem—to find flaws or contradictions we might otherwise miss," which the close examination of questions and critical scrutiny of information and opinions aim for. ["Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry" in *Embracing Contraries*, Oxford University Press, 1986.]

A key habit of mind the teacher seeks to develop through these processes is thoughtfulness—both a disposition to be open-minded to others' views and the ability to subject them to critical

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The teacher's role is to promote an atmosphere that invites students to reflect on their own values.

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study, both the willingness to suspend judgment and the ability ultimately to reach reasoned conclusions that are open to change—what Zbigniew Herbert calls "uncertain clarity."

6. Promote dialogue.

Students usually need help in understanding the differences between dialogue and monologue, between dialogue and debate. Dialogue aims for understanding, enlargement of view, complicating one's thinking, an openness to change. An excellent way to promote dialogue is to provide opportunities for various kinds of group discussions: pairs, conversation circles, group go-arounds, panels, microlabs, fishbowls.

7. Be responsive to students' feelings and values.

Through such techniques as those outlined above, students' feelings and values are likely to be revealed, for examining a controversial issue is not a bloodless exercise. Just as the teacher's role is not to tell students what to think but to help them learn how to think, so that role is not to tell students what feelings and values to have but to promote an atmosphere in which they can express them without fear, make them explicit to themselves, and consider their validity.

8. Encourage both independent and collaborative work. Students need opportunities to pursue inquiries by themselves and with others. In either case, they need to understand the purpose, what they are going to do and how to go about it, ways to communicate findings and conclusions. The greater their clarity, the more likely there will be a successful result.

If they are to work with others, they may need

help with effective participation. Can they make a fair division of the work? Build on each other's efforts and thinking? Come to consensus? Meet due dates?

9. Provide opportunities for students to act on their conclusions. The idea of taking action may seem pointless and hopeless to students. Confronting and dealing with students' sense of powerlessness then becomes essential. A place to begin is to listen carefully to what students say and how they say it, to open a dialogue in which the teacher also speaks frankly about his or her experiences and feelings.

There are always possibilities for action in the school: preparing PA announcements, writing articles for the school newspaper, organizing a program for a school assembly, forming a study-action group. Outside of school, students can write letters to officials, speak at public hearings, participate in meetings and demonstrations.

Some additional considerations. Throughout these processes, the students in both words and behavior will instruct the teacher on classwork that needs to be done, the individual or small-group help that needs to be given. Can students distinguish between factual and judgmental statements? How clear are they about assumptions? What help might they need in determining the relevance and reliability of evidence? What instruction in active listening can be useful? What skills in reading, writing, notetaking, and group process need attention?

Teaching controversial issues is demanding of both students and teachers. And it takes time. Lots of time.

—Alan Shapiro

Alan Shapiro is a founding member of ESR.

We welcome letters and comments on this issue.