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# Teaching About Controversial Issues

An educator's primary task is to motivate students. In many cases, students possess pre-existing emotions associated with various environmental and social issues. By capitalizing on the emotional response provoked by a controversy, an educator can create a compelling, inspirational educational experience.

Building the skills to understand controversial issues helps students develop in many dimensions of their lives. Social, spiritual, moral and cultural skills and attitudes are all expanded and refined by experiencing the power of multiple viewpoints. By teasing apart the nuances of complex issues, students can improve their political literacy and gain motivation for community involvement. They can learn to feel optimistic about their ability to understand and influence the world around them.

Learning about controversial issues can build skills such as listening, debate, handling conflict, self awareness, distinguishing between fact and opinion, creative problem solving, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, recognizing bias, evaluating evidence, justifying an argument, logical

"We should be teaching students how to think. Instead, we are teaching them what to think." (Clement and Lochhead, 1980, *Cognitive Process Instruction*)

Often the goal of teaching a controversial topic is not 'clearer ideas' but 'greater confusion.' This has to be tolerated as a stage in moving towards an independent opinion. (Stradling, Noctor and Baines, 1984)

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reasoning, etc. These are critical skills for survival in an increasingly complex world. Equally as important, students develop empathy and a willingness to perceive and understand the interests, beliefs, and viewpoints of others.

Addressing controversial issues provides the opportunity to combine knowledge, skills, evidence, theory, application, people, ideas, values, and emotion. Students can experience a small dose of the hard realities of the real world with a safety net of a supportive, encouraging environment.

## Teaching tools

### Effective teaching strategies

Think of controversy as an exciting opportunity for learning, not a problem to overcome.

- Establish ground rules – How may students make contributions? What behavior will not be tolerated? What will the class do when students disagree? What should students do if they feel disrespected?
- Define clear goals and objectives – what will this lesson accomplish? Match the lesson objectives with learners' developmental needs.
- Know yourself. Be mindful of how your own feelings and biases can skew your evenhandedness.
- Regulate the social dynamic – enforce and model basic rules of civility, teach understanding by restating the perspective of others. Model respect through appropriate language.

- Moderate over-attachment to content and overreaction to criticism – separate people from ideas when necessary.
- Temper conflict and bias – respond to each person with respect and dignity. Revisit the ground rules when necessary. Use humor to deflect tension. If the discussion gets heated, stop the discussion and have everyone journal for a moment about what just transpired.
- Represent opposing positions fairly and fully.
- Identify and agree on shared assumptions where appropriate - celebrate areas of common agreement.
- Concentrate on evidence – personal evidence or research evidence.
  - Draw in external expertise where appropriate. Encourage students to research an issue or survey others for their opinions.
- Avoid slogans and sweeping generalities. Use qualifiers: many, often, research shows...
- Talk about concrete issues before raising the discussion to a level of abstraction.
- Encourage participation: prepare thought-provoking questions, invite open discussions with a simple “what is your opinion?” Allow time for students to think, process, reflect.
- Challenge students to identify the underlying values or assumptions in persuasive statements. Uncover the root of the controversy. Appreciate the magnitude of the issue’s complexity.
- Prepare a means of closure. Examine consequences, consider alternatives.

### **Examples of bias**

- Highlighting a particular selection of facts of items of evidence, thereby giving them a greater importance than other equally relevant information
- Presenting information as if it is not open to alternative interpretation or qualification or contradiction
- Setting yourself – or your organization - up as the sole authority not only on matters of “fact” but also on matters of opinion.

- Presenting opinions and other value judgements as if they are facts
- Giving their own accounts of the views of others instead of using the actual claims and assertions as expressed by various interest groups themselves
- Revealing their own preferences by facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.
- Implying preferences by a particular choice of respondents or by not opening up opportunities for all pupils to contribute their views to a discussion, and
- Neglecting to challenge a consensus of opinion which emerges too readily

## **Promote thinking and discussion**

### **Sample questions**

- What are the rights and responsibilities in this situation? How might they conflict?
- Do you think that situation (or rule, behavior, etc.) is fair? Why or why not?
- How could it be made more fair?
- How does this relate to your experience?
- What are the issues here (including the rights and wrongs of the situation)?
- Which moral or legal rules are relevant here?
- What do you think would be the best (or most fair) outcome for all concerned?
- Who do you empathize with (or feel sorry for)? How do you think they feel?
- What might be the consequences of that (for individuals or the group)?
- What should happen to the people who did that and why?
- What would happen if everyone behaved like that?
- What could you say to X to persuade them differently?
- Who had power and/or authority? How did they use it? Fairly? Wisely?
- Who should make that decision? An individual? The whole group?
- How far should these people be treated as equal or different and on what grounds?

- What personal qualities are needed for this role or task?
- What beliefs or ideas are commonly held about this type of situation?
- What kind of society do you want to live in?
- What are the effective arguments here and which are less effective? Why?
- What do we agree/disagree on? Why is this?

### Assessment suggestions

Students can demonstrate their understanding of an issue by:

- making a concept map
- designing a display or Web site
- producing a diary, logbook, or portfolio
- contributing to a discussion or debate
- producing resources for younger students
- role playing or simulation activities
- playing quiz, board, or card games
- writing letters to local authorities, articles for school or local newspapers
- conducting an interview with interest groups

### Guidelines for resolving conflicts

Source: Taken directly from [“Approaching Environmental Issues in the Classroom.”](#)

1. **Define the problem.** State the facts in as calm a manner as possible. Refer to the present situation, not the past or future.
2. **Say how you feel.** Talk about how you are feeling and how the problem has affected you, without making remarks about the other person.
3. **Explain what you want to change.** Consider who is responsible or in a position to make a change. Figure out what you can do to create the change you want, not just what the other party or parties can do.
4. **Explore options.** Consider solutions that will satisfy all participants. Identify the implications of the solution selected.
5. **Clarify and repeat** exactly what people will do to create change. Be specific. Get

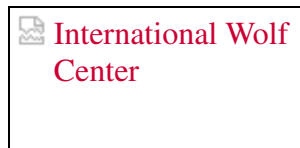
agreement.

## Resources

- Authority of the United Kingdom. [Citizenship: A scheme of work for key stage 3, Teachers Guide](#), 2001, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)
- Carrington, B. and Troyna, B (eds) (1988) *Children and Controversial Issues: Strategies for the Early and Middle Years of Schooling*. London: The Falmer Press.
- [National Consortium for Environmental Education and Training](#). *Approaching Environmental Issues in the Classroom* (part of the Environmental Education Toolbox Series). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1994.
- Teaching Controversial Issues: Teaching for Learning | [www.flinders.edu.au/teach/teach/inclusive/controversial.htm](http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/teach/inclusive/controversial.htm)
- Tips For Teaching Controversial Issues: Street Law | [www.streetlaw.org/controversy2.html](http://www.streetlaw.org/controversy2.html)
- Teaching Controversial Issues: Suzanne Cherrin, University of Delaware | [www.unm.edu/~castl/Castl\\_Docs/Package5/Teaching%20Controversial%20Issues.html](http://www.unm.edu/~castl/Castl_Docs/Package5/Teaching%20Controversial%20Issues.html)
- Foundation and Center for Critical Thinking | [www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)

## Credits

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