

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS

GTC Workshop, February 5th, 2008

Introductions

Name, department, and what controversial topics were/are/will you be teaching?

Goals:

- To reflect upon our role as teachers in dealing with controversial issues in the classroom and the challenges they raise.
- To explore concrete strategies for teaching these issues in the classroom, and utilizing them as positive pedagogical opportunities.

Agenda:

- What makes an issue controversial?
- Perspectives on the role of the teacher when teaching controversial topics
- Concrete Classroom strategies
- Group brainstorming activity

What makes an issue controversial?

- there are competing values and interests
- people strongly disagree about statements, assertions, actions
- political sensitivity
- emotions/protest become strongly aroused

Controversial issues can be about:

- what has happened
- the causes of the present situation
- desirable ends to work toward
- the likely effect of action

Examples

- Universal health care
- Evolution
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Perspectives on controversial topics:

1. Liberation pedagogy: Teachers should help to develop “critical consciousness” among students.
 - a. Teachers should allow the students to bring their own experiences and perspectives to the problems investigated in the class, with the aim of having students come to a new understanding of their place in the world. On this view, the classroom should not be seen as a world

- separate from wider society, but as enmeshed and invested in the problems of the social and political world.
- b. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
2. Civic humanism: Teachers should prepare students for democratic citizenship.
 - a. Teaching should prepare students for the responsibilities of active citizenship. Teaching should be concerned, in part, with developing moral virtues, such as religious and cultural tolerance, a sense of social responsibility, etc.
 - b. Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*
 3. Academic detachment: Teachers should academicize.
 - a. Rather than discussing head on what should be done, the point of academia and teaching is to inquire as to the origins of the controversy and the structures of competing arguments. Make controversial topics into objects of academic investigation and analysis. “Detach it from the context of its real-world urgency, where there is a decision to be made, and re-insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an analysis to be performed.”
 - b. Stanley Fish, <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/?p=19>
 4. Ideological balancing: Teachers (and universities) should balance against the liberal academic bias.
 - a. Academic freedom is essential to both faculty and students. Due to the prevalence of liberal or left-leaning teachers at colleges and universities, teachers and students must be vigilant of liberal bias in one-sided lectures, unfair grading, etc.
 - b. David Horowitz, Students for Academic Freedom (slogan: “You can’t get a good education if they’re only telling you half the story.”)

Discussion: what are the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches to controversial topics? Which do you think is the best way to handle such issues in the classroom?

Strategies for teaching controversial subjects:

- establish ground rules
- establish a civil atmosphere in the classroom
- moderate your own and students' overattachment to ideas and oversensitivity to criticism
- moderate negative thinking and strong emotions
- keep it tied to the material

Ground rules:

What are good ground rules for discussing controversial topics? Possibilities include:

1. You and students only make statements about an issue, person, or group if you are prepared to make the statement directly and respectfully to a person to whom the issue is important.
2. People must have evidence for what they say, and draw coherent/logical conclusions as a result.
3. Cultivate "tentativeness" among students -- encourage them to explore their fixed ideas and prejudices, and have them recognize that confusion and uncertainty are stages in their development toward independent opinion
4. Encourage critical diagnosis through techniques such as: learning to recognize rhetoric, and challenging the authority of information and sources by asking who does (not) benefit from them

Establish a civil atmosphere in the classroom:

1. Set the TONE of section from the first session.
2. Adopt "prosocial" motivators, such as encouragement through verbal and nonverbal cues
3. Develop and model civil behaviors -- e.g. arrive on time, be prepared for class, listen to students and respond positively, treat students with respect.
4. **Is it appropriate to share your background/perspective with students?**

Moderate overattachment to ideas and sensitivity to criticism:

1. Use DEBATES, esp. encouraging students to take sides different from their own
2. Have students BRAINSTORM in groups -- this can be a useful means of incorporating shy students
3. Use ROLE-PLAYS to help students develop empathy with others' points of view -- e.g. "take a moment in history"
4. Encourage distance through use of ANALOGIES to other less-contentious, less personal situations

Keep the discussion tied to the material.

- While controversial topics can inspire overly heated and unproductive debate, they can also be quite helpful as teaching tools by getting students interested in the concepts of the class. When students believe that what they are studying is irrelevant, too abstract, or removed from the real world, using a controversial issue can help to spark interest. The key here is to keep it tied to the material. You don't want section to devolve into a discussion of current events. Rather, use real world problems to investigate what is at stake in the concepts of the class. For example:
 - Rights vs. utility in utilitarian philosophy: the controversy surrounding the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in Danish newspapers. Distributed a news story that gave some background on the controversy – the cartoons, the protests and boycott of Danish products, etc. – and ended with this line: “Pakistan hopes the Danish government would ‘try to resolve this issue because you cannot hurt the sentiments of billions of Muslims in the name of freedom of the press.’”

Moderate negative thinking and strong emotions:

1. Monitor your own thoughts and feelings before, during, and after classes
2. Attempt to reframe negative thoughts and feelings
3. Depersonalize

Brainstorming: elicit examples of controversial topics the participants will be teaching and brainstorm ideas for how to approach them in class (a la the learning styles exercise).