



Controversial Issues: They Belong in the Classroom

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Abstract

The recent national attention given to a classroom recording of Colorado teacher Jay Bennish reinforces the need for school districts to implement a controversial issues curriculum. Controversial issues are not to be avoided but to be embraced, if done properly. To ensure objectivity and balance, the author proposes teachers engage students with a seven-step analytical process known as Issues Analysis. The author further advises that schools use an “opt-in” communication to persuade parents of the importance of student participation in the Issues Analysis process.

Introduction

The national spotlight on Colorado teacher Jay Bennish and his alleged left-wing politicization of his high school geography class ought to be of concern to all teachers, whether liberal or conservative. Content that deviates from the norm, or which is considered to be “too controversial,” will result in a firestorm of criticism for any teacher who has the temerity to challenge majority opinion or question prevailing values. Many issues are so incendiary that a barrage of criticism from every point on the political spectrum will be sure to follow.

Understandably, public school administrators see no virtue in curricular content that they perceive as needless incitement to controversy. Further, because of the influence of syndicated talk radio, cable television and the Internet, the fallout from any local flare-up affects teachers all across the county. Who can blame educators if they avoid controversial issues at the very time in our history when they ought to be included as a part of every social studies classroom in the nation?

The Need for a Controversial Issues Curriculum

Despite all these problems, the need for a controversial issues curriculum has been imperative for some time. The Bennish case has merely put it on the front burner. The avalanche of disagreement over content, materials, or methods is not only a recent or isolated phenomenon in Colorado. For example, the *Rocky Mountain News*, in a 1990 editorial titled “Academic

Freedom no License to Make Hash of History,” severely castigated an Aurora Public Schools (Colorado) high school teacher for raising a question in her classroom concerning the accuracy of established accounts of the Holocaust.

In 1996, in an assembly at a Denver public school—Montbello High—Jamal X, a disciple of Louis Farrakhan, shocked his audience with a racially and religiously loaded polemic, purporting to reveal historical truth that had been deliberately concealed by the media and the educational establishment. His explosive allegations evoked fallout from regional media, prompting a major editorial in *The Denver Post*. In 32-point font, the headline of the editorial declared, “The Message of Jamal X Needs to be Answered.”

“Other voices need to be heard,” asserted the *Post*. “This is ultimately a contest of ideas and attitudes that has more to do with the future than with the past. . .” The editors then identified leaders in the African-American community who were perceived to possess the credibility to rebut the propaganda of the Nation of Islam. The editorial ended with what could easily be construed as a plea: “Is there any way a student and community assembly can be organized featuring [other perspectives]?”

What the *Post* was advocating is nothing less than a succinct rationale for an “Issues-based” curriculum. Controversial issues are not only desirable content for the curriculum, they are imperative. In the Information Age, no American can escape constant exposure to propaganda. Some of it will be the most hate-generating vitriol imaginable. Extremist groups abound. Their poison is promulgated on the Internet and a host of other outlets. Sound-bite cacophony on the airwaves has, in many instances, replaced rational discourse in the public forum.

Since there is no limit to the variety and type of information that young people can access almost instantaneously, they need new skills in processing what they will encounter. Without specific instruction in how to analyze data critically, evaluate sources, and seek other indices of validation of information, the next generation of Americans will be susceptible to manipulation by skilled propagandists. Ill-advised local and national policy, predicated on limited or inaccurate information brought to bear on elected officials by various pressure groups, can be the result.

Clearly, our students require more than “the basics.” Public school educators need to equip students to become discerning citizens. Jefferson’s declaration that “an educated citizenry” is indispensable to the survival of the republic has taken on a meaning far beyond literacy and an acquaintance with “the facts.”

Since there are compelling reasons for “Issues-based” curricula, why are they not in place? The main reason controversial issues have not been advocated as an explicit course of study in the public schools is that controversy is not for the faint of heart, or for those who seek security in what has always been done. Teachers and administrators need to have a guarantee that they will not be harassed for venturing into arenas of discourse which require critical thinking, and which, by their nature, will evoke controversy. The solution to providing such a guarantee can be achieved in two ways:

1. By teaching and adhering to a procedure that ensures objectivity and the balanced presentation of multiple perspectives;
2. By instituting a policy which ensures that children are protected from being intellectually assaulted, emotionally accosted, or spiritually molested.

Each of the solutions is discussed below.

How to Teach Objectively

In order to effectively address controversial issues in the classroom, all teachers should be able to teach students an analytical process called *Issues Analysis*. *Issues Analysis* is a critical thinking/critical reading procedure that can be applied to any controversial issue in any subject area. The goal of *Issues Analysis* is to prepare students to assume the role of exercising responsible citizenship in a free society. It shows students how to objectively evaluate various perspectives on major issues. It teaches them how to anticipate barriers to achieving acceptance of their point of view. They are enabled to assert their positions in ways that have the highest probability of efficacy.

Issues Analysis incorporates the following elements, or “steps”:

1. Issue
2. Concerns/Allegations: Proponents and Opponents
3. Facts and Sources of Facts
4. Ramifications
5. Avenues of Influence
6. Recommended Action
7. Terminology

A Description of *Issues Analysis*:

Step One: “Issue.” An issue is identified as succinctly as possible (*e.g.*, “Cloning,” “Illegal Immigration,” “The War on Terror,” “Free Trade”). A declarative sentence or proposition is not necessary.

Step Two: “Concerns/Allegations.” In this step, the concerns or allegations of both the proponents and the opponents of a particular position on an issue are delineated as objectively as possible. The concerns and allegations need not be based in fact; indeed, they may be totally refutable and even irrational. However, students do not attempt at this point in an *Issues Analysis* to take sides; rather, they simply try to identify positions as objectively as possible. It is very important that a teacher emphasize the necessity for objectivity in this step; success in asserting a position is enhanced by accurately identifying an adversary’s emotions. Objective discourse is often precluded by fear. If opponents’ fears are not addressed, they can not possibly be won over with facts. Fear—embodied in concerns and allegations—precludes the attaining of reasoned discourse in every arena of controversy.

Step Three: “Facts.” Students list all data that are generally accepted by all participants in a debate. These are data that are not disputed; if they are disputable, they are more appropriately placed under Concerns/Allegations of proponents or opponents. For example, in a topic as highly controversial as “Censorship,” all sides agree with the statement (fact), “Censorship has occurred for political reasons in some societies.”

In the Facts Step, for each datum listed, a “Source of Fact” is also required. The reason is that some sources are more credible than others, and are more powerful than others in buttressing an argument. For example, citing *The New England Journal of Medicine* would be more effective than citing a supermarket tabloid on an issue of public health. Students should be taught how to use *The Encyclopedia of Associations* and *The Dictionary of Organizations* in executing this step, since it is sometimes possible to infer, from descriptions of various agencies, probable biases in sources.

Step Four: “Ramifications.” In this step, the individual conducting an *Issues Analysis* attempts to answer the following questions:

- What outcomes would/could occur if *opponents* get their way?
- What outcomes would/could occur if *proponents* get their way?
- What will happen if the status quo continues?

Ramifications may not be objectives sought by either side; they are merely concomitant phenomena. A consideration of ramifications is nothing less than an answer to the question: “Is this a battle worth fighting?” Ramifications might also be regarded as “unintended consequences.”

Step Five: “Avenues of Influence.” In this step, the individual attempts to identify the avenues by which one’s objectives are most likely to be achieved. Frequently, what is perceived as efficacious action is often nothing more than an opportunity for emotional catharsis. In many instances newspaper letters to the editor, talk shows, Web logs, and other public forums achieve nothing more than providing for emotional release, without effecting real change.

To avoid wasted effort in promoting a point of view, this step requires two separate actions: The first action is to identify the actual agent of change, or the most likely source of power to effect change. The second is to attempt to identify what will motivate the source of power to act in a manner favorable to the asserter of the argument. In assessing motivation, three possible motivators which might elicit favorable action are evaluated: Negative Motivators, Positive Motivators, and Moral Motivators.

- Negative Motivators depend on persuading the power wielder that the liabilities incurred through an unfavorable decision might be such that it is more desirable to respond favorably than to respond unfavorably (*e.g.*, the king loses tax revenue, but quells rebellion—a “lesser of negatives” argument).
- Positive Motivators evoke the persuasive power of benefits accruable to an authority figure. A favorable decision reaps greater benefit than the decision-maker accrues by an unfavorable decision—a “greater of positives” argument.
- Moral Motivators depend upon the sensitivity of the source of authority to moral persuasion: “doing what is right.” However, an argument appealing to what is morally right can easily be rationalized away on the basis of expediency or pragmatism. Moral rectitude is usually not the most persuasive of the three motivators.

In short, “Avenues of Influence” might be administrators, voters, boards of education, politicians, foundations, or any individual or agency with ultimate decision-making power, upon whom carefully considered motivators are brought to bear.

Step Six: “Recommended Action.” This step is closely related to the “Avenues of Influence” step. Actions might include creating graphs and charts, preparing a video, engaging an expert witness, presenting printed testimony, amassing research evidence, etc. This step identifies all actions which might be taken by proponents and opponents to achieve their objectives, reflecting an awareness of Negative, Positive, or Moral Motivators. As in every other step, opponents’ moves are identified and delineated, so that possible counteractions to blunt the effectiveness of opponents’ actions can be easily set in motion.

Step Seven: “Terminology.” “Terminology” is not a step, as such, but reflects sensitivity to the nuances of discourse that, if ignored, can detrimentally influence the outcome of debate. Learners are taught to identify and avoid inflammatory terminology that will generate heat, rather than light.

A Second Solution: Attaining Community Support

To be sure, criticism by constituents is the main reason why public schools have not adopted “controversial issues” curricula. But criticism is not inevitable. In fact, with two simple acts of leadership, even the most volatile issues can be discussed in any school without evoking community backlash.

Besides the simple process of showing teachers how to teach the *Issues Analysis* procedure, which can be used in any subject-matter discipline, a second proactive measure is highly desirable. It makes good sense to go the extra mile to avoid unnecessary hostility and to honor the values and sensitivities of all constituents. Therefore, eliminate current “opt-out” policies which require parents to request permission to have their children excused from participation in certain activities, and in their place, establish an “opt-in” process. School administrators have resisted such a measure, because it’s a time-consuming policy. But it is a lot less stress-evoking than having to respond to a media bombardment, so it’s worth the time.

An “opt-in” communication to parents should include powerfully persuasive arguments that explain how a specific *Issues Analysis* topic will enhance their children’s education and their critical reading/thinking abilities. Parents should also be explicitly apprised of the school’s commitment to fairness and objectivity in presenting controversial topics. But if parents choose not to “opt in,” administrators should honor their choice. A more productive and safe teaching and learning atmosphere will be the result of providing for freedom of choice.

In the author’s experience as a mediator in the public school sector, parents’ criticism of some curricula has been misunderstood by public school educators to be an attack on the inclusion of certain topics of controversy, when, in fact, what has created a problem has been a perception of a lack of balance in addressing controversial topics. *Issues Analysis* and “opt-in” opportunities which provide for genuine community involvement can create a climate in which in-depth learning can take place without forcing teachers into self-censorship, and without inducing stress.

In-depth comprehension, awareness of ideas students will be forced to confront in “the real world,” and advanced skills in critical reading all can be achieved with minimal effort in the public schools. Expenses also will be minimal, since reference materials are already extant and accessible, and staff development is not difficult or extensive. The result will be of benefit, not only to students, but also to establishing rational dialogue in the theater of ideas.

Intellectually honest liberals and conservatives have absolutely nothing to fear from the truth. An *Issues Analysis* approach to controversial issues is nothing more, and nothing less, than preparing our students for the real world by presenting them with the opportunity to analyze a variety of perspectives—but in a controlled and intellectually honest environment. Teachers and students alike deserve, and should be guaranteed, a safe environment in which to pursue sound education.

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