



[\(../index.html\)](#)

▲ [Home](#)

[\(../index.html\)](#) ◀

[Contents](#)

[\(index.html\)](#)

## **Daring to Debate: Strategies for teaching controversial issues in the classroom**

*By Nicole Fournier-Sylvester*

### **Abstract**

Have you ever avoided discussing controversial issues in the classroom? Teachers report often avoiding these types of discussions due to concerns about the unpredictability of student reactions, accusations of trying to push a political agenda, and insufficient knowledge or skills to work through complex issues. Debates, however, have been shown to have a direct and positive impact on students' critical thinking skills and democratic commitments. With some preparation and facilitation techniques, teachers' concerns can be addressed and open discussions of current events and social issues can become an extremely rewarding experience for both teachers and their students.

### **Introduction**

...there is an exhilaration that we experience in the best of discussions that is not unlike the thrill we enjoy in the most challenging of outdoor activities...In remaining open to the unexpected, we feel engaged and alive. So our commitment to discussion is not just moral and philosophical but also deeply personal and importantly self-gratifying (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p.4).

Have you ever avoided discussing controversial issues in the classroom? According to the Civic Mission of Schools, teachers often shy away from these types of discussions because they do not feel like they have the knowledge or skills to work through complex social and political issues. Many teachers also report feeling ill-equipped to deal with the unpredictability of student reactions as well as being concerned about accusations of trying to push a political agenda. Several other studies reached the same conclusions, including a 2004 study by Galston and a 2007 study by Oulton, Day, Dillon and Grace.

With a bit of preparation, some ground rules, and a selection of facilitation techniques, these concerns can be addressed. In fact, facilitating controversial debates in your classroom can become an extremely rewarding experience for you and your students.

### **Why is it Important to Teach Controversial Issues?**

Given the time and effort that goes into planning for and facilitating discussion on political and social issues, teachers need to be clear on the reasons why this is a worthwhile endeavor.

### **Reason 1: It's in the Curriculum**

Most ethics, social science and citizenship education curricula place a prominent role on teaching about controversial political and social issues. These curricula emphasize the need for youth not only to explore their values and articulate their positions, but also to consider the positions of others. By understanding social issues from multiple viewpoints, students challenge their own beliefs and develop critical thinking skills. Most importantly, they can be made aware of the complexity of these types of issues and the necessity of discussion in order to learn to co-exist and negotiate with people who have differing views.

### **Reason 2: It Works**

Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz's seminal 2001 international study on citizenship education revealed how open discussions of controversial social issues have a positive impact on the democratic commitments of youth. Feldman, Pasek, Romer and Jamieson's studies from 2007 and 2008 as well as McDevitt and Kiousis' 2008 study also demonstrated that classroom discussions on current events and controversial issues lead to a measurable increase in the following areas: critical thinking, tolerance, civic knowledge, political interest, confidence, social integration and intentions to vote.

### **How to Tackle Controversial Issues in the Classroom**

Certain strategies for addressing controversial issues in the classroom have been demonstrated to help reduce unpredictability and structure an informed debate.

#### **Step 1: Set the Stage**

To ensure a productive and respectful discussion, it is important to take the time to work on developing students' deliberative skills and establishing an environment in which students feel safe enough to speak their minds.

- **Establish an open and respectful environment.** Having students get to know each other can enhance students' abilities to communicate as well as minimize conflicts. Flinders University suggests starting with ice breaker activities which focus on similarities rather than differences. For example, a teacher could ask students to discover three things that they have in common with individual classmates.
- **Help students move beyond their opinions and emotions.** Students should get into the habit of identifying the structure of an argument, evaluating the strength of arguments as well as looking at how their values, beliefs and emotions contribute to their own

perspectives. Tips for identifying a weak argument are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: How to identify a weak argument**

**Tips for identifying a weak argument:**

- Attacks the person instead of the argument;
- Is based on assumption rather than fact;
- Gives the impression that there are only two possibilities when there may be more;
- Appeals to emotion, tradition, popularity or patriotism;
- Scapegoats or avoids responsibility by placing blame;
- Presents a caricature of a person or group;
- Relies on an extreme example to justify a position;

(Brown & Keeley, 2010)

- **Establish ground rules as a group.** Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest starting by asking students to think back to the best discussions they have been involved in and to take notes on what they think made these conversations so successful. Ask the same questions about the worst discussions they have taken part in. Suggestions of the types of guidelines that might result from these discussions are listed in Table 2. Making this process collaborative can serve as an introduction to debate and negotiation.

**Table 2: Suggestions for discussion ground rules**

**Tip:** Oxfam (2006) suggests that any set of ground rules for classroom discussions should include: don't interrupt; be respectful; challenge ideas and arguments not people; back up your position with reasons; use appropriate language (no swearing, sexist, racist or homophobic comments). You can also require speakers to paraphrase what was said by the person who spoke before sharing their position.

- **Anticipate the social and political issues that your students might be have the most interest in and have the strongest reactions to.** When selecting issues, Hardwood and Hahn (1990) recommend that teachers should consider students' interests, maturity level and the relevance to their lives. Anticipating how you want to deal with potentially sensitive issues is a key element of preparation on the part of the teacher and student.
- **Let all members, teachers and students alike, have the opportunity to voice their concerns.** It is impossible to anticipate all the reasons that people might refrain from participating in these types of discussions. Teachers and students alike express concerns about the unpredictability of reactions to controversial issues (Civic Mission of Schools, 2003). Students withdraw from these conversations due to shyness, feeling ill-prepared and not having enough time to think of a response. Concerns

about looking stupid in front of peers and teachers have also been widely reported. In many classrooms students also shy away from saying anything that could elicit criticism and put their peer relationships at risk. This is particularly true for students from non-dominant groups who may feel easily discredited (Hess, 2001; Lusk & Weinberg, 1994). One strategy to alleviate these tensions is to have students write their concerns anonymously on cue cards. These cue cards should be placed in a box that the teacher picks from and then shares and addresses them one by one. Students can also brainstorm solutions together. This process helps set the stage for sensitive and mutually respectful discussions.

## Step 2: Prepare for Discussion

Ensuring the broad and productive participation of students in discussions can be accomplished through preparation by both teacher and student.

- **Clarify your role.** Although there is a fair amount of disagreement about the extent to which teachers should share their views on controversial discussions, the reality is that students are going to be pretty curious about them and it can sometimes be pretty hard to hide. Table 3 outlines different roles a teacher can take during a discussion. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest that the key is to explain your role as that of a facilitator. Emphasize that you are not an expert on these topics and that the goal of these discussions is not to find *the* answer, but rather to underline a multiplicity of viewpoints. Wales & Clarke (2005) suggest that one way to take the focus off yourself and reinforce the idea of mutual responsibility is to reconfiguring the classroom into a circle and sitting with your students.

### **Table 3: Different roles a teacher can take during a discussion**

**Tip:** One way to address concerns about impartiality is by taking on different roles such as:

- *Committed:* teacher expresses own view while attempting to be balanced;
- *Objective or Academic:* teacher presents all possible viewpoints;
- *Devil's Advocate:* teacher adopts most controversial viewpoint, forcing students to justify their own.

(Wales & Clarke, 2005)

- **Encourage participation by having students choose the topics up for discussion.** Controversial issues can be local or global and range from bullying and religion to vegetarianism and privatization. One way to choose topics is to have students generate a list as a group or rank a list that you have selected and then having

student vote on the topics that they find most pertinent or interesting to them.

- **Allowing students to have a say in the topics of discussion** and directing discussions to political and community issues that are relevant to student contexts has been demonstrated by Feldman, Pasek, Romer and Jamieson (2008), Kahne, Chi and Middaugh (2006) and Komalassari (2009) as a strong predictor of the civic commitments of youth.
- **Have students conduct research before participating in classroom discussions.** Hardwood and Hahn (1990) caution that a productive discussion necessitates preparation on the part of the student. Background information on the topic being discussed, ideally from a variety of perspectives, helps set up a debate that is grounded in facts and balanced. You can either assign your students specific readings or ask them to conduct research on a particular position or positions. Weir (2009) warns that teachers should never assume that students will come to a discussion prepared and that to ensure proper preparation on the part of the student a good strategy is to require a short written assignment due on the day of the discussion. A possible assignment could require students to interview someone with an opposing viewpoint of their own. Wales and Clarke (2005) recommend that before engaging in discussion, students should have the following information:
  - What is this issue about? How are terms defined?
  - What are the conflicting views or values?
  - What are some of the arguments on both sides?

### **Step 3: Facilitate the Discussion**

Once the groundwork has been laid for a respectful and productive discussion there are many formats and techniques that you might want to consider.

- **Have students write down their views before engaging in discussion.** This can help maximize participation and encourages students to think before they speak.
- **Start with small group discussions.** Starting discussions of controversial issues in small groups allows students to test out their opinions before facing the whole class.
- **Accept silence.** Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest that teachers refrain from jumping in when students are silent on a given topic. Instead, teachers should give a chance for students to process information and sit in silence for a bit. If the silence persists, rephrasing a question can be helpful or asking students why they think the issue is challenging to discuss.
- **Stage a debate.** Wales and Clarke (2005) point to the number of ways that debate can be used in the

classroom. It can be planned ahead of time so that students come to class prepared to represent a particular viewpoint. The positions that students will defend can be chosen by the student or assigned. A teacher might force students to take on positions that they do not agree with. A teacher might also want to choose to apply a debate structure to a discussion that is either heated or needs a push in which students alternate arguing for both sides of the argument.

- **Setup a “Town Hall Meeting”** and assign different roles/perspectives or special interests to individuals or small groups. Hess (2009) suggests having students defend their interests and try to find a resolution. Affirmative action, immigration policy or racial profiling would work well in this format. These “meetings” can be moderated by the teacher or a student.
- **Invite speakers** that represent particular positions on an issue. A consideration for teachers is to find people who are willing to talk openly about the issue at hand. These speakers can be politicians, community leaders or members of a particular group that is fighting for a particular right or coming out against a policy. In case of the sensitive issues such as religion or sexual orientation, it might be appropriate to provide students with the opportunity to submit questions anonymously.
- **Move some discussions on-line.** This venue has been shown to be particularly beneficial for students who may typically be introverted or self-conscious in a traditional classroom setting and may feel more comfortable sharing ideas in the written form (Johnson, 2001). Websites such as TakingITGlobal are designed specifically to facilitate these discussions between students from around the world.

#### **Step 4: Close the Discussion**

Regardless of how the conversation went it is important that a teacher takes control of the class and deliver a summary or conclusion so that students leave with a feeling of accomplishment (Weir, 2009).

- **End on a positive note.** Even if a solution or resolution has not been identified, it is important that students do not leave discussions feeling powerless or demoralized. To end on a positive note, teachers should emphasize the importance of engaging in debate as an end in and of itself. Acknowledging student preparation and participation is also important. Flinders University suggests that, in the case of very contentious issues, one strategy for closing a discussion is to have students work together to build an action plan.
- **Evaluate the discussion.** Students may be asked to evaluate their own participation or the progress of the discussion overall. This is a good opportunity to review the guidelines in Table 1 regarding what makes a weak argument. Students can be asked what they thought were the strongest arguments and why.

- **Provide an opportunity for students to debrief.** It is important that they have the opportunity to have a say in what and how these issues are discussed. There is no way of determining what issues your students are dealing with in their personal lives. That being said, it is safe to say that they, or someone they are close to, has been bullied or abused, or faced some level of discrimination, whether it be due to their sexual orientation, race, gender, religion, class or weight. Wales and Clarke (2005) highlight the important role of debriefing in the learning process. Students should be given the opportunity to provide verbal and/or written feedback on how they felt the discussion went, what worked well, what could be improved and whether their own views had changed. Anonymous feedback forms or journals can also be an important way to get feedback regarding the discussions and addressing feelings of safety and inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

There are few things we can be certain about when working to prepare students for the future. That being said, as citizens of a multicultural society, they are likely to face decisions that have no easy answers and conflicting priorities or values. When teachers validate the perspectives of their students and facilitate deliberation between them, they effectively move away from teaching students about citizenship and instead treat them as the citizens they already are.

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◀ **Contents** ([index.html](#))

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