

**Introduction: Why discuss controversial issues in class?**

There are so many demands on teacher time and student time that it can be daunting to consider adding one more thing to an already full instructional plate.

However, the reasons to take on the study of controversial issues in the classroom far outweigh the objections against them. Recent research from the Civic Mission of Schools shows that when “schools incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events in to the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. When students have an opportunity to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have a greater interest in civic life and politics as well as improved critical thinking and communication skills.” There are other more tangible academic gains as well when discussion takes place in the classroom.

There is a great deal of information and research that you can use to help you explain to your community, parents, and administration why you are discussing controversial issues in class, the list below is just a sampling of what is on offer. You can find more resources on how to improve your practice in this area in the recommended reading section at the end of this lesson plan.

- Do discussions, debate and simulations improve NAEP civics performance? This article discusses how using discussions, debate, and simulations improves student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

[http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CIRCLE\\_NAEPBechtelFactSheetApril30.final\\_.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CIRCLE_NAEPBechtelFactSheetApril30.final_.pdf)

- “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement.” This report from CIRCLE describes the problems in engaging youth and why teachers must engage young people in the processes of democracy as well as solutions and supports that classroom teachers need from their communities and schools to do this important work.

<http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>

- “Teaching Democracy-What Schools Need to Do.” This article discusses the reasons why schools are important to student learning about democracy since they are ideally situated to impact students early on to teach them how to do democracy and adopt practices that they will continue as adults.

<http://www.democraticdialogue.com/DDpdfs/TeachingDemocracyPDK.pdf>

- Teaching Controversy. Diana Hess gives concrete reasons for the teaching of controversial issues in the classroom and how using issue centered education helps students develop political efficacy and skills that citizens in a democracy need.

<http://onwisconsin.uwalumni.com/uncategorized/teaching-controversy/>

In addition to familiarizing yourself with the research, there are many ways that you can help parents, administrators, community members, and others from your school both learn more about and feel more comfortable with discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. Sometimes parents, community members, or administrators may worry about politicizing the classroom and you may worry as a teacher about being seen as having a bias on controversial issues so it is important to prepare your students, school, and community. Here are a few tips to help out:

- Consider inviting members of the community representing different sides of the issue to talk with your class. This could mean members of a town council, school board, or people representing different organizations with different opinions about the issue. Don't limit yourself and your students to two perspectives—learning that issues have many sides and are not always black and white is an excellent teachable moment. By employing this strategy you can put fears to rest that you may be sharing your point of view with the class, or that the issue isn't being given a fair hearing.
- Consider inviting the community or school together to hear a presentation about the issue. During lunch time or at a school sporting event you could have an information table staffed by students with differing views on the issue or a presentation about the many sides of the issue, consider a town hall moderated by your students, a school assembly could work for some communities as well.
- Take the time to explain to students why you are discussing controversial issues and be well prepared with information from a variety of perspectives for students to access that helps them understand and form opinions about the issue.
- Be sure to frame your discussion as a public policy issue. Asking students how they feel about racial profiling could elicit a variety of responses that are very emotional. Asking students to discuss a court case involving racial profiling or a new law about police profiling being debated by the city council gives students a chance to explore policy options as citizens.
- Set ground rules for discussion with students. People spend less time face to face discussing current issues with their friends and family each year, and even those conversations are often difficult. Discussing issues with classmates who have very different ideas can be challenging. Before discussing current issues we suggest taking a class period to set ground rules using a lesson plan like the one included here. The lesson is designed to build student capacity for discussing controversial issues by creating and setting ground rules to help discussions be passionate and civil.

**Time:** 45-50 Minutes

**CCSS.ELA Standards Addressed:**

**Comprehension and Collaboration**

9-10.1 and 11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

9-10.1A and 11-12.1A

Come to discussions prepared having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

9-10.1B

Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision making (e.g. informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, and presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines and individual roles as needed.

11-12.1B

Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

9-10.1C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

11-12.1C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

**College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework areas included:**

D2.Civ.7. 9-12

Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.

D2.Civ.9.9-12

Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D4.8.9-12

Apply a range of deliberative and democratic strategies and procedures to make decisions and take action in classrooms, schools, and out of school civic contexts.

## Materials:

- Blank flipchart for students
- Markers
- Blank notebook paper
- Pens

## Procedures:

Let students know that they will be undertaking some very important work to the health of our democracy right here in class by learning how to discuss controversial issues with each other. Most people tend to discuss issues with people who agree with them on the issue, which is easy because it reinforces our own thinking. In a democracy, citizens and elected officials are asked to discuss issues that they have strong opinions about in order to make the best policy choices. What are the costs and benefits of political parties in our democracy?

### **Students build familiarity with the kinds of issues that will be discussed during class** .....(8 minutes)

- Have students work in pairs, triads, or quads and write down answers to the following prompts:
- *What are two public policy issues facing our country today?*
- *Why do you believe these issues are so important?*
- *What are some different opinions or idea that people have about these issues?*
- As students list issue areas (such as “the economy”), help them reframe their ideas as specific issues (such as “too many business are moving overseas” or “small businesses are closing because of too much regulation”).

### **Establish the variety of opinions on current issues** .....(3 minutes)

- Write down some examples of issues that students have brought up as well as a few of the different opinions that exist about these issues.

### **Thinking about how to discuss controversial issues** .....(6 minutes)

- Students should answer a few questions: How do you define productive discussion? OR What does good discussion look like? Why is it challenging to discuss issues like this? What information would be necessary to discuss issues like this? What happens when things become disrespectful or gridlocked? (If time permits, examples could be shared from media sources about problems that policy makers have had in the past—no discussion, lack of information or wrong information, shouting matches on the floor of congress)
- Show examples of some high quality discussions and low quality discussions using the be low video links. Have students weigh in on what they saw happening in the videos and how people met the challenges of discussing controversial issues. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7DMukYkW-4&list=PLVBwOTV4oArBY-am0ebOP82E4YecIXqBl&index=4> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vn4BX9Pes3c>.
- Ask students to think about what kinds of rules would help a group of people to learn everything they could about these issues and to have a civil and reasoned conversation about them.
- Have students write down on their own, or as a pairs or small groups what these rules would include.
- If there are other things that the group thinks they may need (information on multiples sides of an issue, access to experts on the issue—be sure to add that)

**Establishing rules for the group .....(15 minutes)**

- Have students in either a whole group or smaller group (depending on the size of your class) discuss what rules they will need to productively discuss current issues like the ones that they talked about earlier in the class. (If it is done in groups those smaller groups will need to eventually reconvene so that all the rules are discussed and agreed upon by all the students in the class).
- Have students use an appropriate deliberation technique to discuss and decide on their final rules. Students may vote on each rule, or they may discuss each rule, tossing out or amending some and keeping others as written. (If students seem to be leaving some things out, remind them of the many different opinions that people have about the issue at hand, and remind them that sometimes the class may seek out more information on an issue before they can discuss it fully if the issue is new to many of them in class—they can suggest what ways may be effective in acquiring that information. For some classes, easy access to the internet may be the answer, other classes may prefer to do deeper reading across a variety of media sources and still others may want to take advantage of primary sources and invite experts on both sides of the issue to class—virtually or in person).
- Have a student write down all the established rules once they have all been approved. Be sure that the rules are somewhere that students can see them during issue discussions. Using flipchart can be helpful for this so they can be displayed when needed.
- Students should be allowed to amend the rules throughout the semester/year if there are rules that were forgotten and need to be established.

**Reflection on process .....(5 minutes)**

- Have students reflect on their own deliberative process. Ask them the following questions:
- *How well did they work as a group?*
- *What kinds of processes did they use to make decisions? (Voting, persuading peers etc.)*
- *At this point, do they feel comfortable discussing these issues with their peer group?*
- Let students know that the process that they just started and will continue throughout the year is one that many people use to conduct discussions on challenging issues and is one that will help them not only this year but later on in college.

**Explain the importance of discussing controversial issues with others in our democracy .....(5 minutes)**

- Take time to reflect back on the beginning of the lesson—What are the costs and benefits of political parties in a democracy? Students will face some of the same issues that policy makers face when they discuss issues that are controversial, the goal will be to keep conversations productive and fair.

## Resources for Teaching and Discussing Controversial Issues

Close Up Foundation. (2015). *Current Issues. 39th Edition*. Close Up Foundation. Alexandria, Virginia. Offers excellent material for students to discuss in an easily accessible format. Each chapter focuses on one issue and explains why the policy area is controversial and complicated; examines enduring tensions throughout history; and focuses on issues that highlight the tension today. Debate sections includes quotes from current politicians, political thinkers and political commentators for students to use in classroom discussions. The format makes it easy for teachers and students to discuss current issues even if students have different ability levels or background knowledge. To purchase visit: <https://www.closeup.org/currentissues/current-issues>.

Brookfield, S. & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. Jossey- Bass. San Francisco.

Offers a wide variety of techniques for discussion in classrooms. Great reading for teachers that have never tried discussing issues in their class before because it gives excellent examples of discussions that go well, how to avoid common pitfalls, and how to use discussion across a variety of subjects.

Evans, R. & Warren, D. (1996). *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues. National Council for the Social Studies*. Washington, DC.

NCSS offers a variety of strategies to use when discussing sensitive social issues in a classroom. The book offers examples of how to frame discussions for teachers in an easy to understand format.

Graham, B. (2010). *America The Owner's Manual*. CQ Press. Washington, DC.

Former U.S. Senator Bob Graham of Florida wrote this book based on the challenge he took from a high school teacher to come and teach their Government class as well as his passion for strengthening our democracy. The book is a guide to help citizens understand why it is important to be informed about current issues and how to discuss them and act on them so that our democracy is made stronger.

Hess, D. (2009). *Controversy in the Classroom*. Routledge. New York, New York.

Lays the groundwork for why teachers should discuss controversial issues in the classroom, includes thoughtful approaches to classroom situations that occur during facilitated discussions and how to manage them.

Hess, D. & McAvoy P. (2014). *The Political Classroom*. Routledge. New York, New York

Contains a comprehensive, longitudinal study of students with exposure to traditional teaching methods compared to students with teachers that used discussion of current issues in their classrooms. Examines why our democracy needs engaged citizenry in the political process, and argues why schools are the best place for that preparation to occur. Discusses the problem of polarization in our government and how bringing in discussing viewpoints combats the pressures of polarization that are part of our current political system.

Niemi, R. & Junn, J. (1998). *Civic Education What Makes Students Learn*. Yale University. New Haven.

Examines why discussion of current issues works in civics courses to promote student learning about not only the issue at hand but also our system of government.

Palmer, P. (2011). *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Explores a variety of ways that different institutions can play a role in healing our democracy, with a few chapters that focus specifically on schools and how the learning and environment within schools can enhance or detract from our desire to strengthen our democracy.

Parker, W. (1996). *Educating the Democratic Mind*. State University of New York Press. Albany.

Discussion of how to teach students to be thoughtful and engaged citizens by preparing them in school to learn how to think about the problems of democracy so that they can participate in finding solutions.

Raskin, J. (2000). *We The Students*. CQ Press. Washington DC.

Examines a variety of court cases relating to students. With arguments included from multiple points of view the book offers material that students can discuss in a classroom setting.

Rubin, B. (2012). *Making Citizens*. Routledge. New York, New York.

A thorough exploration of the role of education in the creation of efficacious citizens, beginning in classrooms and schools where democracy is not only taught but practiced.