

Controversy in the Classroom

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- “A fundamental aspect of social studies learning and teaching—at all grade levels but particularly in the Senior Years—is the consideration of controversial issues—issues that involve ethics, principles, beliefs, and values. *Teachers should not avoid controversial issues.* Diversity of perspectives, beliefs and values, disagreement, and dissension are all part of living in a democratic society” (Grade 9 Social Studies curriculum document, Manitoba Education, p. 16, *emphasis added*).

What makes an issue controversial?

- A heated classroom debate emerges whenever a particular issue comes up for discussion.
- The issue is a “hot button” social issue (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, LGBTQ rights, etc.)
- Addressing the issue could challenge the predominant religious/cultural views of the local community.
- The issue has recently been a topic of significant debate in the media, particularly during an election campaign.
- Prominent members of the local community have publicly taken opposite stands on the issue in question.

Why deal with controversial issues?

- 1) The Manitoba Social Studies curriculum directs teachers to address controversial issues.
- 2) Discussing controversial issues can be a great way of getting students engaged in their learning.
- 3) Part of being a citizen is knowing how to live peacefully with people who are different from us. Students can learn how to do this in your classroom.
- 4) Intentionally avoiding controversial issues may be the safe choice, but it is not as authentic as dealing with issues when they are being discussed.
- 5) Students will talk about these issues whether you choose to bring them up or not. It is better that this discussion happens in a classroom environment where the teacher can channel it in a positive direction.

The Most Important Thing is....

- Context
- Context
- Context

Professional Context

- Teachers with recognized expertise in the subject matter will usually get more latitude in dealing with controversial issues than teachers who lack this status.
- More experienced teachers can usually take more liberties than inexperienced teachers. In particular, a teacher who has been in the same school and/or local area for many years has usually built up significant political capital.
- A supportive and understanding principal makes it much easier for teachers to deal with controversial issues.
- Teachers with a permanent contract are in a much better position to dive into controversy than term teachers.

Community Context

- Some topics are more controversial than usual in certain communities (e.g. abortion in a predominantly Christian community, Israeli/Palestinian conflict in a predominantly Jewish or Muslim community, etc.)
- A topic will instantly become controversial if it challenges the livelihood of a significant number of parents (e.g. hog moratorium in a farming community, Indigenous hunting rights in a northern community, etc.).
- Culturally homogenous communities often lead to situations where parents communicate with each other very quickly. Get on their wrong side and word against you spreads like wildfire.

Classroom Context

- Generally speaking, older students are better able to handle controversial issues than younger students. Be extra careful about introducing controversy to younger students.
- More mature students are better able to handle controversy than less mature students. This can be an even more important factor than age.
- Discussions in culturally/religiously diverse classes are going to be very different than in relatively homogenous classes.
- The quality of the personal relationship between the teacher and the particular group of students is also important to consider.

Remember that...

- *Teachers with strong professional, community, and classroom contexts are best positioned to deal with controversial issues in the classroom.*

Some Principles to Keep in Mind

- As much as possible, remain focused on the curriculum. It is much easier to defend a heated discussion about the Israeli/Palestinian dispute that happens in the context of a Global Issues 40S course than one that takes place during a Math 10F course!
- Try to give your administrator(s) a heads up when you anticipate a controversial discussion or issue coming up in your class, especially if you or the administrator is new to the school.
- Make sure you lay out clear ground rules for proper discussion with your students (i.e. showing respect, allowing others to speak, separating issues from persons, etc.).

- Always be willing to talk to parents about what happens in your class. Encourage students to discuss these issues with their parents and ask them to let you know if there are any questions or concerns. Convey an atmosphere of openness and transparency to your local community.
- Discuss controversial issues in as objective and neutral a manner as possible. If you wish to reveal your personal views to students, do it after all students have had the opportunity to speak.
- During discussions, press students to give reasons for their positions and ask them challenging questions. Make sure you put this type of pressure on all students so that you do not appear biased.
- Immediately correct students who use inappropriate language or speak disrespectfully to other students. Do not allow things to escalate out of control.
- When appropriate, use humor to defuse tense situations. Appropriate humor can reduce tension.
- Be mindful of your own language and demeanor at all times. Remain calm and in firm control of your classroom at all times. If you show visible frustration or annoyance, expect students to pick up on it.

- If you are comfortable with it, allow parents and/or other interested community members to sit in on some of your classes and even participate in some of the discussions.
- Make sure students receive accurate information about the topic at hand and use reputable news sources.
- Preview any video clips that you plan to show to your students. Do not show something on the spur of the moment just because a student says it is good.
- If you think that you may have offended a student, pull them aside after class and apologize if you were in the wrong. A quick and sincere apology is a great way to avoid formal complaints against you.
- When a student expresses a viewpoint in an inappropriate way, help them restate it more appropriately.
- While controversial topics should not be entirely avoided, be selective about which issues you choose to engage. Always keep your context in mind. **If delving into a particular topic is likely to put your employment in jeopardy, stay away from it.** Sometimes retreat is the better part of valor!

Questions

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Answers

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