

Divisive Subjects in the Classroom

Jordan Begeman

Abstract: This paper focuses on how social studies teachers can improve discourse in the classroom regarding controversial topics. Social studies is a subject that involves many different topics for educators to cover. This includes current events such as the presidential elections, the legalization of substances, bans on abortions, and border control. Teachers need to be prepared to have these conversations and teach these lessons in their classrooms. Things like professional development, modeling respectful dialogue, and making sure the discourse between students is respectful are all ways teachers can keep their classroom a safe and beneficial place for students to be.

Introduction

In a quiet, yet crowded classroom, tension was running high between two students. Emma, with her fiery passion for social justice, stood her ground against Rob, whose skepticism was overwhelmingly obvious. The topic: climate change, a divisive issue that polarized opinions. Emma's conviction was clear as she explained all of her scientific evidence, her voice shaking with determination. Yet, Rob countered with skepticism, questioning the researchers, and their values. As the debate escalated, classmates were silent, caught between discomfort and fascination. Finally, amidst the complicated discussion, a moment of realization came over them. Their arguments, though differing in perspective, shared a common thread of concern for the future. They met eyes, Emma and Rob softened, recognizing the value in each other's viewpoints. In a gesture of mutual respect, they agreed to delve deeper into the topic together, promising to seek understanding rather than discord. And as the bell rang, signaling the end of class, newfound respect and friendship blossomed amidst the clash of ideologies.

Controversial subjects are going to arise in the classroom. Teachers, students, and guardians of students would all benefit greatly if they are all on the same page regarding what is taught in the classroom, and how it is being taught. Many questions go into this topic.

Educators are trying to prepare our students to be successful citizens of our country one day, and avoiding difficult topics in the classroom would do our students a disservice. The topic of divisive subjects, and how to successfully guide students in respectful dialogue is very important. Educating our students involve topics like current events of our world, and knowing how much we educate our students on those events as teachers is important; as well as how we protect them and at the same time show them how to overcome diversity. This conversation is meaningful now; I believe it has always been important and will always be. There is so much going on in the world around us, and our students deserve to be prepared and knowledgeable in regard to what shapes our world, on a large scale down to our cities. This topic is worthwhile to discuss because we are shaping the future citizens of our country. They need to be prepared to go out into the world after school and

be successful, empowered citizens. In my opinion, the better we prepare our students, the better the world around us will be.

Importance of teaching challenging subjects

Controversial conversation and how to represent it in the classroom is worthwhile because we are shaping the future citizens of our country. They need to be prepared to go out into the world after school and be successful, empowered citizens. The better we prepare our students, I believe the better the world around us will be. Even when teachers do not directly introduce controversial topics, they are likely to be raised naturally through activities related to historical, social, or scientific content; hence, teachers must be prepared to support these conversations (Kraatz et al., 2022).

What are controversial topics?

The topics of controversial conversations may include socio-political or other social topics (Muth et al., 2007). This can include topics that they believe will lead to differing viewpoints (religious, political, etc.). Some examples of these topics include but are not limited to critical race theory, immigration, war, religion, and sexism.

Why Some Topics Are Hard to Teach

There are a variety of reasons why controversial topics are difficult for educators to teach. Teachers may not be prepared in their education to feel comfortable teaching these difficult topics. Teachers may feel they need clarification on what topics are age-appropriate for students to discuss and comprehend (Kimmel & Hartsfield 2019; Oulton et al., 2004). Students come from many different cultural backgrounds, they come into the classroom with a foundation of beliefs from their parents and families. Heated debates between classmates are likely to happen when controversial topics arise. While controversial topics may be challenging for teachers and students to discuss, the experience of engaging in these discussions aligns with educational goals and standards (Muth et al., 2007). Multiple states include standards for social-emotional learning, further making the case for discussing a broad range of issues in the classroom (National Conference of State Legislatures NCSL, 2021).

Strategies

There are many different ways to introduce and teach controversial topics in the classroom. This will depend on grade levels and specific topics. Teachers need to be well-equipped with many strategies to teach these topics successfully.

Differentiate Between Topic and Issue

Issues are a matter that erupts, often from a larger topic of discourse. Issues need attention and require resolutions. A topic could be gun control and the issue could be school shootings in the United States. Teachers need to make sure that students

understand that a topic is referring to a theme or a subject to discuss. The issue is a specific controversy within a broader topic.

Modeling Respectful Dialogue in a Safe Classroom Environment

Teachers themselves must model respectful dialogue. It is not a place for them to express their views, but instead an environment where students can express theirs. This does not necessarily mean teachers need to keep completely silent about their own opinions. Classroom discussion can be conducted both when teachers do and do not disclose their views (Hess D.E. 2009) The key is for teachers not to dominate the conversation, but instead maintain an open and respectful tone in the classroom (Cambell, D.E., 2018).

The classroom environment is a big factor when talking about controversial conversations. Classroom context comprises the learning conditions (policies, practices, relationships) in a classroom (Muth et al., 2007). Productive controversial conversations require a space where students feel safe and secure discussing tough topics. Students may feel differing levels of safety and security based on their social identities. Teachers should carefully consider their instructional approaches to ensure that all students, particularly those belonging to minoritized communities, feel safe and supported (Muth et al., 2007). The set-up in the classroom can also impact the effectiveness of controversial conversations. For example, desks arranged in rows may make discussions difficult, as students are not facing each other and cannot see someone's face when they are speaking. Similarly, when grouping students for controversial conversations, it is important to have a small heterogeneous group with diversity in abilities and opinions, and few enough people that everyone can be heard and understood (Muth et al., 2007).

Respectful Discourse Between Students

Helping students become knowledgeable and giving them respectful discourse skills to facilitate effective participation within the classroom and beyond should be a goal of educators (Why It Matters: Teaching Controversial Topics, n.d.). Specifically in social studies, debating is the recommended type of discourse. Facilitating controversial conversations in the classroom is one way teachers can highlight the value of discrepant perspectives (Muth et al., 2007). Teachers need to teach how to debate respectfully, not just do debates in the classroom. Argumentation is connected to social studies. When formulating arguments, students must be explicit about how reasons and evidence relate to their claims. Students tend to have a substantial amount of experience in informal argumentation, usually with siblings, parents, friends, and teachers. When students engage in debates for formal argumentation, they need to have explicit reasons for their argument. It is a much larger crowd, which makes it harder for the audience to ask for clarification. Respectful debate needs to be taught by educators so the students know how to debate educationally. When students are made to think more sociologically about norms and patterns of interaction, they can step back from the point at which disagreements are experienced as personal attacks (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994).

Students are also all very different individuals. They come into the classroom with their own personal norms, personality traits, and experiences. Their personalities will play a big role in classroom participation. Students who participate verbally in class discussions tend to be more extroverted, open to new experiences, and emotionally stable (Caspi et al., 2006). Students who stay quiet during class discussions cite shyness or nervousness as a primary reason. (Eliason & Turalba, 2019). Reserved students may be actively listening, and demonstrating participation in alternative ways, including posture, gaze, facial expressions, and written responses (Rosheim, 2018.)

Professional Development

Teachers being fully prepared to teach complicated subjects is key. Organizations and experts can help prepare educators to be knowledgeable and thoughtful about the classroom environment they create for their students. A supportive classroom filled with students who become a community over the school year is ideal. Having students who respect each other, trust each other, and feel comfortable exchanging ideas is where you want the classroom to be when these subjects are being taught. Teachers also need to help develop students with an appreciation for disagreement, the ability to disagree with each other respectfully, and strategies for dealing with emotional reactions constructively (Commentaries, 2023).

Teachers are less likely to foster an open classroom climate when their students have diverse racial backgrounds because they fear provoking controversy. Yet it is in diverse classrooms that these discussions are needed more than ever (Cambell, D.E., 2018). The Harvard Graduate School of Education is a great place to start for educators - giving advice and strategies on teaching controversial issues.

Communication with parents and guardians, and the community, is also key. The administration as well as the community need to support teachers fully because teaching controversial topics is immensely important. Of course, there is going to be pushback no matter how careful and thoughtful teachers are. Parents may react negatively, which is why administrators need to support their teachers. Teachers who are prepared to deal with backlash, and how to explain to parents and guardians why these subjects are important, will be much more successful in their endeavors with these subjects than teachers who do not have the tools to support their reasoning. If teachers avoid these topics in the classroom, this contradicts what education needs to be - models of civility in the classroom (Cambell, D.E. 2018)

Conclusion

Teachers are responsible for preparing their students in a well-rounded way. There are many reasons why controversial conversations are beneficial to students of all ages. Engagement in appropriately challenging dialogue can increase positive emotions in students (Schweinle et al., 2008). Also, focusing on controversial social issues makes students more likely to vote and engage with political news after their formal education (Tannenbaum, 2013.) Engagement with teachers and peers in conversations can support the construction of knowledge that is inclusive of multiple perspectives (Muth et al., 2007). This is what we as educators should be focusing on.

We want our students to be successful citizens who contribute positively to our world, and including conversation about controversial issues is a well-rounded way to create these types of citizens.

Engaging in academic conversations, especially those centered around potentially controversial topics, requires vulnerability. Educators must create safe spaces that allow vulnerability (Muth et al.,2007). Through the strategies I mentioned throughout, I believe teachers can be successful. This will lead to student learning and moral development.

When teachers are professionally prepared for controversial conversations and debates, the outcome will be a success. Teachers are well aware of topics that will bring on complicated and diverse feelings, and there are many resources out there to prepare educators before they take on those classroom conversations.

When teachers are open with parents and stakeholders regarding what is being taught and how it is being taught in the classroom, families and otherwise will be thankful. Teachers can and should reach out to families and their administration for support, this will help them feel more positive about difficult classroom conversations. Parents may have things they want the educator to add to these conversations and dialogues in the classroom. Different backgrounds that the students come from can be a very positive thing to help open the minds of classmates. When teachers are careful in considering and adapting to their classrooms, these recommendations can support the successful implementation of controversial conversations (Muth, et al.,2007).

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About the Author

Jordan Begeman graduated from the University of Toledo in 2015 with a bachelor's degree in political science. Years later she discovered her love for teaching, returning to the University of Toledo to pursue a master's in early childhood education. She hopes to begin teaching professionally following graduation.