

Navigating Discourse through Controversy in the Classroom

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Abstract: Social studies is an evolving subject that encompasses controversial issues including abortion, gun control, substance legalization, LGBTQ, civil rights issues, and more. To elevate discourse, teachers have a myriad of ways to elicit thought-provoking discussions among students. Strategies for discussing controversial issues include creating a positive environment where students do not feel judged for expressing their views, cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, debate, and discussion. Cooperative learning forces individuals to respect the viewpoint and work habits of classmates. Debate and discussion are also effective discourse methods because students must accurately represent positions on issues. This is done through research of reputable sources guided by teacher instruction and moderation to facilitate an inclusive and productive discussion. Instruction and moderation are demonstrated below.

Adjusting to Controversial Topics

Mr. Smith is a government teacher in Florida in 2023. New restrictive laws have been passed banning instruction and conversation about gender and sexual orientation in classrooms. Mr. Smith is concerned as he does not know if this applies to talking about the 21st Amendment which deals with women's suffrage. The teacher also has two students who identify as transgender in separate class periods and does not want to offend them during conversations about the evolution of women's rights. Mr. Smith knows that he must navigate state law while still spearheading thought-provoking conversations on sensitive topics, especially that of women's rights. Upon checking with the school administration, he found that the new laws do not prohibit him from speaking about the history of women's rights or identifying students by the name they choose. Mr. Smith decided that discussing all the rights listed in United States the (US) Constitution is a better way of incorporating an inclusive environment so that transgender students do not feel targeted during the class discussion. The goal is to show the evolution of rights starting with the Revolutionary War. He wants to highlight the origins of search and seizure, quartering, and expansion of the rights of different groups of people. By broadening the focus through a narrative and having the students research using credible sources, he avoids introducing sensitive topics in a manner that would offend the transgender students.

Furthermore, discussion on the topic of slavery and civil rights poses the possibility of offending African American students. Maintaining an inclusive learning environment would be done similarly to the method used in the women's suffrage discussion. It is Mr. Smith's role as a teacher to facilitate and arbitrate the discussion, and he does this by setting the ground rules that students be cordial and respectful to their classmates.

Mr. Smith begins his class by saying that they are going to be discussing sensitive issues, such as slavery, women's rights, and the rights of all people as highlighted in the Constitution. Mr. Smith assigns six groups of four students by numbering them from one through four. There are six groups of four, including one of the students who identifies as transgender. Mr. Smith explains the directions. The students will be tasked with researching the constitutional amendments from a .gov, or. edu website. The next step is assigning a group recorder and researchers to find information about two amendments. The students are to identify what the amendment is, when/why it was passed, and what effect it has on them as citizens. This will be the basis for a class discussion about the origin and effect of the amendments. Mr. Smith gives the students specific discussion instructions. He tells the students that the discussion is to be kept cordial with no interruption from classmates, particularly while the groups are discussing the effects that amendments have on civil rights (particularly women's rights). If this rule is broken, the discussion will stop and be supplemented with an additional individual activity that would prompt students to answer a set of questions pertaining to the topic, and then use research they have found to write a defense to their position (individual work). Giving students the opportunity to write a defense promotes critical thinking which is important for teaching controversy in the classroom.

Introduction

Why teach controversy in a social studies classroom? The Article entitled *The Controversy over Controversy in a Social Studies Classroom*, by Jeremy Litner, contends that divisive topics create divergent views and create a way for students to discover their own views on issues (Litner, 2017). How do teachers promote positive discourse in their classrooms? In addition to creating an inclusive educational environment, this is also done through student research on assigned topics followed by classroom dialogue of findings within a judgment-free environment. Moreover, as students begin to form their own opinions, they take an interest in the laws surrounding them which can create emotionally charged situations. The teacher acts as the facilitator of any discussion or debate setting the expectations such as not interrupting students as they are speaking or belittling their views. A second question to consider is how do educators utilize debate and deliberation in a classroom to discuss controversial issues? Finally, the manuscript asks, "How do we as an educational community spearhead conversations about controversial issues in the classroom?" The answers as well as the obstacles to these questions, are showcased throughout this manuscript by the following strategies (Litner, 2017).

Strategies for Discourse

The New Mexico Department of Education (2022) published an outline detailing classroom discourse strategies. These strategies include think-pair-share, turn and talk, team-centered debate, and deliberation. Think-pair-share is a method that involves students working together to answer a question; or individual work before pairing with a classmate to share their answers. This strategy is not a discussion, but rather it allows each student to share the information they found. This method typi-

cally takes 2-5 minutes. Turn and talk is a strategy that allows all students to take part in discussions for the purpose of developing skills, attaining information, and giving explanations. The strategy of team-centered debate is one in which students are on opposing sides of an issue, and they must use information to find inconsistencies to challenge the opposing side's argument and support their own view. The final strategy that will be discussed is deliberation, which is the thoughtful discussion of controversial issues. This method is a form of scaffolding that requires class-wide participation with the goal of having students become comfortable with hearing opposing views. The vignette above specifically highlights the methods of discussion and deliberation and strategies that assist with navigating challenging discourse.

Navigating Obstacles to Discourse

Controversial topics such as global warming, transgender rights, and abortion tend to generate emotion among students that have strong opinions on the issue which can lead to opposition between students. Teachers must be proactive in handling these situations which detract from productive discussion. This can be done in a multitude of ways. An article entitled *Managing Difficult Classroom Discussions* (Center of Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2023) emphasizes several strategies educators can use to prevent and de-escalate student anger. First, educators can forbid the use of profanity. Secondly, establish the classroom as a judgement-free zone. Finally, if emotions begin to take over discussions, issue an alternative assignment which accomplishes the same purpose, by allowing the students to construct individual thoughts and defend their position. This reduces pressure on the students having to deal with emotionally triggering conversations (Center of Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2023). A final strategy would be to provide a structured discussion in which there is time for each side to share their findings and rebuttal with each other. Consequently, students are given the opportunity to share their thoughts in a regulated fashion so that topics are not derailed by emotionally charged disagreements (Center of Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2023). The strategies provided above contribute to effective discourse, but how is the effectiveness of discourse measured?

Teacher Preparedness for Discourse

A case study entitled *Critical Democratic Education: A Case Study on Controversy, and Deliberation* seeks to answer questions of teacher-preparedness for instruction of controversy in elementary schools (Shouqing, 2023). The study had fourteen participants and found that there was a positive correlation between deliberation and enhancing the civic ideology of the participants. Only four out of the thirteen participants presented a clear definition of what controversial topics are, and how to contend with students' opinions. Conversely, nine of the fourteen teachers believed they were unprepared in dealing with issues and differing opinions of students. The case study discussed the Holocaust, and whether it was a controversial topic. If a teacher believed the Holocaust was controversial, they did not discuss it; however, if it was thought not to be controversial, they discussed the topic with their students. The strategies of deliberation and discussion about the Holocaust were used to

spur student understanding and develop their opinions. Though these strategies were deemed effective, proving that discourse could take place at a young age many teachers feel uncomfortable, or unprepared in finding ways to engage their students in discussion of certain topics. There are many ways for teachers to prepare themselves and their classes for teaching controversial issues that promote dialogue.

Students Want to Discuss Issues

A case study entitled *Students' opinions about teaching of the controversial topics in the social studies classes* (Uygun & Arslan, 2020) sampled 207 seventh-grade students across five schools. The data found that students wanted to discuss controversial issues, but the issues they wanted to discuss were tied to the profession of their mother and father. The students whose maternal education status was used favored talking about multiculturalism and human rights. The study found that 143 of the students wanted to discuss human rights issues, and ninety-three wanted to discuss elections. In terms of the military, only forty-four of the 207 wanted to discuss the military at all. These findings align with the five teachers not wanting to discuss violent issues in the classroom. The question of what teachers and students deem controversial is at the heart of this study, as questions that are seen as less controversial are more likely to be discussed. Teachers often educate students on human rights issues using the US Constitution as a reference for defining the rights of American citizens. Instructors acknowledge that citizens of other countries such as Cuba and North Korea, do not have rights such as freedom of speech, press, or religion. This is seen as fact versus a debatable topic such as abortion, therefore less controversial. This follows the findings of the case study from *Critical Democratic Education: A Case Study on Controversy, and Deliberation*.

Preparing a Class for Controversy

An article entitled *How can educators prepare for teaching controversial issues?* describes the teaching of controversial issues as “demanding work” for teachers and students alike. Teachers must prepare their classes for the teaching and discussion of sensitive topics by cultivating a supportive environment for students to feel comfortable sharing their views (Pace, 2021). Building on this idea, teachers need to be aware of the cultural and personal identities to choose issues that warrant discussion among that audience. In terms of audience, it is also important for the teacher to consider the emotional reactions students may have to certain issues such as abortion, LGBTQ, gun control, and others. To mitigate emotional response during any portion of the lesson the teacher must set ground rules for the discussion and sharing of ideas. These rules may include no interruption of other students when they are talking, using appropriate language, and validating source accuracy to avoid turning discussions into an argument of ideas. The article points out that it is the teacher's responsibility to facilitate any discussion of contemporary, or controversial issues by making sure the students are emotionally ready to discuss difficult topics. To do this, the teacher may decide to send permission slips home for the parents to grant their permission for the activity. Additionally, an instructor may reach out to the parents directly to inform them of the exercise. An alternative activity can be

provided for students who do not feel comfortable or were not given permission to take part in the discussion. Students play a role in the process through active engagement.

To engage in productive discourse, students must be able to analyze sources, including their credibility, perspective, and message. This is enabled through teachers modeling characteristics of credible sources, search engines that are appropriate for their age, and the level of intellectual development of their pupils. Students must be capable of discussing issues subjectively using the information they have to support their position free of emotional entanglements. The goal of this process is for students to form their own views on issues while learning to accept other students' positions to enhance civic-mindedness. This critical thinking strategy translates to sharpened debating skills that are transferable in and out of a social studies classroom.

Application of Discourse in English Language Arts

The ideas of debate and deliberation transfer across the curriculum to the written and spoken language of an English language arts class. An example of this would be students writing a persuasive essay expressing how the new E.P.A. emissions regulations on cars would help reduce air pollution in the United States. The students may use the research skills taught to them in Social Studies i.e., how to find credible sources that offer solutions for reducing car emissions. These could be solutions such as making electric cars more affordable or converting cars to run on other fuels. The students could then present their findings in a persuasive essay. Writing a paper is an alternative form of discourse and still uses the strategy of debate, and deliberation as the students are presenting their positions to an audience (teacher) or classmates if the paper is peer-reviewed. Additionally, students can also utilize information and critical thinking skills to debate the motives of characters from books such as *The Great Gatsby*, *12 Angry Men*, and *A Raisin in The Sun*. Although students acquire important skills for discourse, there are still obstacles in the process.

Conclusion

There are many obstacles to teaching controversy in the classroom including teachers feeling uneasy about handling differing opinions of students to restrictive laws governing how something can be taught. Teachers also face the issue of how to navigate student behaviors, reactions, and preconceived notions about topics while trying to educate them on the appropriate protocols for debate and deliberation-based activities. Teaching controversy in a social studies classroom is important so that students can form their own opinion on issues and engage in thought-provoking conversations while dealing with other people's opinions on issues. The abilities acquired have applications far beyond social studies class but also in other classes such as English language arts. It comes down to the teacher showing students how credible information can support their points while also creating an environment in which students feel safe expressing their views to their classmates. The strategies outlined allow students to be proactive in forming their own opinions on issues in a classroom.

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About the Author

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