Long ago and far away, as a newbie social studies teacher, I stumbled into the minefield of classroom political divisions. I loved a good argument and thought there was nothing better than sharing that joy with students.

When the leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie for publishing *The Satanic Verses*, I thought it would be a wonderful subject for my students to debate, thus illuminating the beauty of the First Amendment. The lesson, concocted during my brief morning commute, involved students arguing different sides of freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Did I mention my students were mainly twelve-year-olds? Oops, didn’t think of that. Or that my classes were a pluralistic mix of Muslims, conservative Christians, standard American human secularists, several students studying for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and, as I was to find out shortly, one indirect relative of the former Shah of Iran. The students responded well – I thought we were having fun and learning. What could be better? Then during period 5, that tough period after lunch, the aforementioned student of royal Persian ancestry stood up and cursed the ayatollah for what seemed like several minutes. Chaos ensued. Parents and administrators were involved. I learned for the first time in my professional life how to deeply and sincerely apologize to an entire community.

In the decades that have passed, Americans have become even more sharply divided. Whether it is situations related to police use of force or debates about historical monuments in public places, Americans’ differing points of view are creating friction and sometimes boiling over. What can teachers do to address controversial issues and model the civic virtue of respectful debate?

At Discovery Education we found it’s best to address controversial issues directly, so long as instruction is conducted in a careful manner. We use the Five P’s to guide our thinking and to help students build respectful dialogue: Purpose, Preparation, Process, Practice, Perspective.
Teaching students the thinking skills associated with analyzing the arguments on multiple sides of an issue is an important reason to teach controversial issues.

Five Big Ideas to Consider
Reviewing formal policy documents from multiple school systems (including Elkhorn Public Schools in Nebraska, Howard County Public School System in Maryland, and Wachusett Regional School District in Massachusetts) and the references cited throughout this paper reveals five big ideas for individual teachers or for a team of teachers to keep in mind when planning and teaching lessons on controversial issues.

Purpose
When embarking on a controversial topic, the first question likely to be asked by superiors is, “Why are you teaching this topic?” quickly followed with, “How does this topic relate to the approved curriculum?” Many current controversial issues relate closely to approved topics in the curriculum, and students do benefit when these issues are taught. But it is important for the teacher to be able to explain succinctly how the lesson relates to the approved curriculum and how students will benefit from the time devoted to discussing the issue.

For example, when teaching about a controversial topic, one purpose may be to have students explain the First Amendment and how it relates to the specific situation, but the broader skills may include objectives such as:

- Developing arguments supporting different perspectives related to reporters’ use of confidential sources
- Determining the perspectives of authors supporting varied positions related to reporters’ use of confidential sources
- Evaluating arguments supporting and opposing reporters’ use of confidential sources

Teaching students the thinking skills associated with analyzing the arguments on multiple sides of an issue is an important reason to teach controversial issues. In addition to focusing on critical thinking skills, teachers will also often instill strategies for students to use to participate in civil discussion when encountering people with very different views. An important reason for discussing controversial issues in classrooms is to help students develop the communications skills they need to be active and effective members of a democratic society.

Preparation
Many outside of education view teaching as a solitary endeavor, but most modern teachers are members of a team. Planning lessons with other teachers is a strong way to approach the teaching of controversial issues and ensures that potential pitfalls and community sensitivities are handled with respect. When teachers collaborate, everyone benefits from the varied experiences and perspectives that different teachers bring to the tasks associated with planning and implementing instruction.

A major advantage of being a member of a teaching team is the ability to discuss the issue with others who may view the topic differently.

Valuable questions to ask are:

- What are the different perspectives that people have?
- What are the strong arguments on the various sides of the issue?
- What are the techniques different sides are using to persuade people to view the issue as they do?
- What aspects of the issue are developmentally appropriate to discuss with students?
- Are there ideas that students are not developmentally ready to handle?
- How should teachers respond if these ideas come up in discussion?

In addition to being thoroughly familiar with the perspective of people on different sides of the issue, teachers will need to make decisions about instructing students. For example, will students learn about the issue using a set of controlled resources provided by the instructor, or will students investigate the topic and use student-identified resources? If students identify their own resources, will teachers limit the sources they can use? If students can use any sources they choose, what instruction will students receive to help them evaluate the credibility of different sources?
A well-planned discussion of multiple sides of an issue requires an agreed-upon discussion process. With younger students, the teacher may wish to give the students a set of guidelines for discussion. Time permitting, the teacher may develop these guidelines with the students to help the class create a safe discussion environment that allows everyone to share his/her ideas. The class can review the full list of guidelines and decide if any guideline still needs clarifying.

Initially, the teacher should take the role of discussion facilitator. In this role, the teacher would post the guidelines and remind everyone to follow them. As the class gains sophistication and skill, a student may take on the role of discussion facilitator, and the teacher can support or back up the student discussion leader. Additionally, as students become more familiar with the process, they may decide to refine or modify the wording of the guidelines.

Regardless of the approach, the teacher should ensure students have both the background knowledge and the structure necessary for a productive discussion. Before beginning the discussion, the teacher will also want to review the agreed-upon discussion guidelines and ensure that they are posted where all students can see them.

Teachers can use different formats for the actual discussion of the controversial issue. Although one possibility is a formal debate, other formats are also possible. Students may participate in a town hall meeting, simulated congressional hearing, Socratic Seminar, or mock trial. The teacher may have students portray roles or present arguments that may not agree with the student's own personal viewpoint. It is important for the teacher to ensure that the tone of the discussion remains civil and ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate and contribute.

It may help to distance the controversial topic from familiar contexts by introducing it in an earlier time period. For example, you could introduce the topic of immigration by first examining how that debate played out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Changing the context still familiarizes students with the core ideas, but may allow them to view these topics more objectively. When students reflect back on that discussion, ask them if there are parallels between the context in which the topic was introduced and the current debates on the issue.
If the discussion becomes heated, the teacher may need to call a time-out and remind students of the discussion guidelines. The teacher may need to stop the discussion and talk about the process. Possible questions could include: Why do people get emotional when talking about this topic? What makes this topic difficult to discuss?

Toward the end of the discussion, the teacher should summarize the different perspectives and have students identify the strongest points made by people with different perspectives. The teacher will want to revisit the lesson objectives, and if necessary, reemphasize that the point of the lesson is not necessarily for everyone to agree. The teacher should have a planned activity that allows students to synthesize the discussion. It is also a good idea to gather student feedback on the effectiveness of the discussion. The teacher may ask students to summarize in writing what they have learned and rate the effectiveness of the discussion on a numerical scale. Students can also offer suggestions for how to improve the lesson for future classes.

**Perspective**

As the discussion comes to a close, should the teacher share his/her personal perspective on the controversial issue? This is an area in which school board policies vary.

Some policies explicitly state that the teacher must not state a personal opinion, remaining instead in the role of a neutral facilitator. Other policies indicate that teachers may share their personal opinions as long as they identify them as opinions and do nothing to pressure students to end up agreeing with the teacher’s point of view.

When teachers work in a school that does not have written policies on the teaching of controversial issues, this is a question the teacher will want to consider thoughtfully and may want to discuss with others. Teachers may also want to give serious thought to how sharing their personal perspective will impact future lessons. The teacher wants students to understand that the emphasis is on teaching them to think for themselves. Students should not feel that they are required to view issues similarly or differently from the teacher.

In districts that allow teachers to share personal opinions on controversial issues, teachers should also consider how sharing their personal opinions may impact their ability to relate well to all segments of the community they serve.

**Dealing with the Unanticipated**

In addition to planned lessons on controversial issues, teachers will often find themselves dealing with unanticipated situations. When a teacher is presented with a controversial issue and asked to respond on the spot, it is important for the teacher to acknowledge the student who has asked about the issue. Regardless of how the teacher decides to respond to the issue, it is important for the teacher to respond to the student in a way that builds or preserves the relationship the teacher has with the student.

The teacher should take a moment to think about whether the topic is something he/she can respond to immediately. There is no single right answer.

Sometimes the best approach is for the teacher to share how he/she thinks about the issue, while indicating that it is a personal opinion. Sometimes the best approach is to ask for time to think about the question more carefully and then respond later. The teacher’s response should be based on knowledge of the student, the relationship the teacher has with that student as well as with other students in the class, and the specifics of the controversial issue. If the teacher indicates the response will be shared later, it may be appropriate to share with students things they can do or read to prepare to discuss the issue in detail at a later time.

Researchers indicate that now, more than at any time in the past, Americans are less likely to interact with people of a different political persuasion. Although there is much more contentious debate on social media and other online venues, contemporary Americans tend to interact with others who think as they do. On the other hand, American classrooms tend to have a truly heterogeneous mix of individuals. What can educators do within this mélange of discord?
The professional literature identifies the following characteristics to support the discussion of controversial issues in classrooms:

- Schools offer courses in which controversial issues fit naturally.
- Most classrooms include students who are ideologically, socially, religiously, and culturally diverse.
- Teachers have received some training that prepares them to facilitate effective discussions. (Most teachers do not feel that they have received as much preparation as they need.)
- Professional development and teaching resources related to controversial issues are readily available to interested schools and teachers.

**Defining Controversy for the Modern Era**

A classic definition of the phrase “controversial issue” is offered by Fraser:

A controversial issue involves a problem about which different individuals and groups offer conflicting courses of action. It is an issue for which society has not found a solution that can be universally or almost universally accepted. It is an issue of sufficient significance that each of the proposed ways of dealing with it is objectionable to some section of the community and arouses protest.

Diana E. Hess suggests the narrower term “controversial political issues,” which she defines as questions of public policy that spark significant disagreement. The emphasis on questions of public policy is an important component of this definition. Because “the people” have a significant role to play in deciding public policy issues in democratic societies, Hess views preparing students to participate in debate about controversial political issues as an important part of preparing them for life in a democracy.

Hess proposes a classification scheme that identifies issues as open (those issues about which there is significant disagreement), closed (issues about which most experts agree), and tipping (issues that are moving from open to closed or from closed to open).

The discussion acknowledges that what is controversial changes over time and may vary from one place to another. For example, whether or not women should have the right to vote was an open issue that was controversial at one time in American history. The issue would now be considered closed in that almost all would agree on voting rights for women. Finally, to understand the concept of tipping, consider what students learn in social studies class about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. At one time, social studies teachers taught that the internment was a necessity of war, and the issue was closed. Some teachers may have had students debate the necessity of the internment, indicating that those teachers did not see the issue as closed. There was a tipping of public opinion. The issue went from closed to open. Eventually, a government commission issued a report indicating that the internment was not militarily necessary, but that the decision was based on “racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

The shifting of societal perspectives is one reason that teaching controversial issues can be so challenging. Concerns about who gets to decide how an issue is presented compound that challenge.

Especially when an issue has reached a tipping point, there is controversy over whether it should be taught in schools and, if it is taught, what students should learn about the issue. Both practical experience and research indicate that many teachers are hesitant to teach issues that the community considers controversial. Teachers do not want to fracture their relationships with students, parents, school administrators, or others in the community. They are also concerned about the time it may take for students to understand the nuances and complexities of difficult issues that society is seeking to come to consensus on.

Understanding these concerns, some boards of education have local policies that govern the teaching of controversial issues. In such communities, the board of education has determined that educators should teach issues that are unsettled in
the broader society, and they have set out the procedures teachers should follow in planning and implementing a lesson that will address issues that could be seen as controversial or sensitive.

When a teacher decides to teach a controversial issue, a first step is to determine whether or not the local school or school district has policy in this area. If policy exists, it is important for the teacher to review and follow policy guidelines. If a teacher cannot locate policy guidelines, a wise approach is to consult with the principal, curriculum coordinator, lead teacher, or other supervisory personnel to be fully aware of acceptable local practices for teaching about controversial issues.

Contemporary research identifies important benefits to students from participating in lessons that include discussion of controversial issues. These include:

- Greater student interest in politics
- Improved critical thinking and communications skills
- More civic knowledge
- More interest in discussing public affairs

In Conclusion

The ability to think critically and communicate civilly about important issues is a valued outcome of education. Even in challenging political times, it is an outcome that exemplary educators must continue to emphasize.

About the Author

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With over 26 years experience as an educator, Marty Creel leads Discovery Education’s innovative curriculum and instruction team. Marty began his career as an engaging social studies teacher known for creative use of technology to deepen learning. As a districtwide curriculum, instruction, and professional development leader in a large urban/suburban school system, he was the architect for a thoughtful transition to instructional standards that empower teachers and principals as instructional leaders.

Sources

6. Websites with information that may be helpful include The Choices Program (www.choices.edu), Deliberating in a Democracy (www.deliberating.org), TeachableMoment (http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/about-teachablemoment-0), ProCon.org (www.procon.org).