

CHAPTER 4

Teaching Controversy

Some classroom discussions are easy: comparing different mathematical proofs, assessing community service projects or weighing various interpretations of a poem. And while they may teach basic skills of civic participation and democratic engagement, these discussions may not be enough to create advanced competence in students learning to engage others on controversial issues. To build better discussions, as Hollihan says, we must learn to debate riskier issues and ideas:

“There are many obstacles to effective classroom discussion, of course, but in my opinion one of the most troublesome is the reluctance to encourage students to discuss the truly complex and vexing public issues that divide us. Certain topics are literally walled-off and considered too controversial to risk discussing in a classroom for fear that they will make some participants uncomfortable.”

Many teachers feel constrained by district-mandated pacing guides that squeeze out this kind of content, while others feel that they wouldn't even know where to start with such a project. Still others are concerned with the controversies that might be created by including more divisive current events in their classrooms.

Fortunately, improvement can be accomplished on an incremental basis. For example, teachers can integrate current events discussion into a unit plan, using examination of current events as a way to reflect on the past (social studies, history) or as a way to teach basic literacy skills through reading, writing and speaking about nonfiction texts (language arts). Teachers can effectively use current and controversial events instruction to address a wide variety of standards and even mandated content. To do so, however, teachers must work carefully and incrementally to integrate this new approach in their classrooms.

Teachers can plan for current events instruction just as they might plan to teach a novel or any other content. Here are seven suggestions for planning to teach current or controversial events.

1. Select an issue. Try to choose current events that have meaningful connections to other course content. For example, if you are reading *Farewell to Manzanar*, you might consider following this with a short unit on Guantanamo Bay, encouraging students to compare and contrast the different decisions to detain individuals. Alternately, you might use materials to explore the broader issue of civil liberties in wartime, such as the materials available from *Justice Learning* (www.justicelearning.org).

In integrating current events instruction into your classroom, start with less controversial issues. If you are determined to teach “flashpoint” issues such as gay marriage or stem-cell research, it is best to start small so you can handle controversies as they arise in class; otherwise, these controversies may extend beyond the class, becoming issues that attract parental, administrative or even media attention. Keep in mind that you’re trying to teach students how to be effective democratic citizens, and that a good way to begin is with more manageable issues as “training wheels.”