

Good Citizenship and Controversial Discussions Make Social Studies Essential – Let's Talk About It



by
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*H*arry Truman, when asked what he would do when he left the Presidency, said he was looking forward to assuming the most important job in the United States - that of citizen. Our founding fathers recognized that too. An informed and responsible citizenry, being necessary for the functioning of our democracy, was the reasoning behind the setting aside land for schools in the Northwest Ordinance. An essential piece of schooling, therefore, is education for democracy - preparing students to be good citizens.

As a law-related educator my role for the past 25 years has been to work with the various disciplines within the social studies to enhance the "citizenship" strand. Law-related education is designed to help students understand our legal system and responsibly participate within that system by providing students with practice in key areas of citizenship.

One key area is the ability to examine controversial issues from multiple perspectives. This is indeed a difficult task for social studies and there are few good models in public life. The public debate is often shallow and lacks civility. Hot topics as abortion, bilingual education, violence in the media, prayer in public schools became politicians' pawns in their quest for elected posts.

However, the common belief among us is that, certainly by college, students learn this skill and spend hours deep in conversation about important societal issues. A recent Grinnell study, however, should give us all further pause for concern. This study indicates that many students are unwilling and uncomfortable in engaging in controversial discussions. Several students only wanted to talk to people who thought as they did or, when conversing with people of differing views, only wanted to convince them of their point of view.

There are at least four reasons why discussions of controversial issues are so important for both social studies and democracy.

- 1) To have a deeper understanding of the issue
- 2) To develop interpersonal skills
- 3) To resolve conflict peacefully
- 4) To sustain an open, democratic society

I want to stress that I am focusing on discussion, not debate. This may appear curious. Law-related education is most often characterized by advocacy - one attorney pitted against another attorney sounds more like debate. The best advocate, however, is one who thoroughly understands the other point of view. Further more, LRE recognizes that the courts and the legal system in general should be the last resort. Thoughtfully constructed legislation and implementation along with a variety of non-governmental institutions can help avoid the courts. Discussion can help produce better legislation and implementation.

The characteristics of an effective, focused discussion on an important controversial issue, whether it is in or outside of the classroom, include:

- 1) Participants have and use relevant background knowledge, including, but not exclusively, personal experience;
- 2) Multiple perspectives are expressed, heard, respected and challenged;
- 3) Points are discussed thoroughly;

- 4) Participation is even and widespread and not centered on any one person, especially the teacher;
- 5) Participants evaluate the discussion overall and their own contribution; and
- 6) In a classroom, the issue is connected to the curriculum in a significant way and represents an historic and/or ongoing conflict. Social studies provides rich opportunities. The inclusion of discussing controversial issues in social studies highlights the essential nature of social studies to both the curriculum and our democracy. However, as teachers know, a good classroom discussion is all too rare.

The remainder of this article will discuss topic selection and describe one method that can help students develop and practice their discussion skills - structured academic controversy - originally developed by the Johnson Brothers at the University of Minnesota.

Topic selection raises several concerns which are most appropriately addressed by the teacher. The teacher in reviewing the criteria for an effective discussion must also consider the skill and maturity of the students, the school and community climate, and the availability of good instructional materials. The more divisive the issue, the more carefully must the ground work be laid, and the more reason for doing it. Students need safe places, like social studies classes, to practice the art of public discussion.

For example, one topic which is currently hot, and, about which, there is much public talk, is Gun Control. It illustrates large practical and philosophical problems of the relationship of citizen to the state and the complicated relationship between individual freedoms and public safety. The issue would, of course, fit easily into a government, U.S. history, law, sociology, or American problems course. Unfortunately this has become all too relevant to students and schools with the outbursts of gun violence in schools. No matter what school, there would be challenges in discussing this well. I'd like to describe one possible approach using structured academic controversy. The material used in the discussion is from *The Challenge of Violence* developed by the Constitutional Rights Foundation.¹

¹ See Johnson, David W. & Roger T. Johnson, "Critical Thinking Through Structured Academic Controversy," *Educational Leadership* (May 1988), pp. 58-64.

The Procedures

1. **GROUPING** - Divide class into groups of 4 to 5.
2. **GROUP ASSIGNMENT** - Group should read a common piece of background material and as a group decide how to summarize the most important information. Each person in the group should pick out something he/she thinks important and share the information and the reasoning. They are not to take any position. Information gathering only. The suggested reading is page 51 from the *Challenge of Violence*, which examines the topic from multiple perspectives. The cartoon imbedded in the page can also be interpreted to represent multiple perspectives on the topic. Would the community be safer if the good citizens had guns, if the bad citizens did not have guns?
3. **QUESTION FORMULATION** - Once the reading has been digested by the groups, the specific question needs to be posed to the class along with the larger question. This may be the job of the teacher or can be done in collaboration with the students. The question needs to be carefully formulated and displayed so that the groups can continue to refer to it to help them keep on track. In this case we used: **Under what conditions, if any, should government regulate guns?**
4. **LEARNING POSITIONS** - Divide each group into two teams - each assigned to read a piece supporting one side of the argument or select arguments from a piece in support of the side they have been assigned. (It may be the same piece as originally read. However, the conversation will probably be greatly enriched if the piece is different.) In this case we used the arguments pro and con listed on p.49, giving each side only the arguments they were to master and teach. The teams are responsible for selecting the most compelling arguments and making sure that everyone on the team is prepared to give at least one argument.
5. **PRESENTING POSITIONS** - Team A presents to Team B with Team B asking CLARIFYING questions only. (Only again this is not adversarial - it is informational). The process is repeated with Team B presenting to Team A with CLARIFY-

ING questions. Each group should take careful notes to be used in the next step.

6. **REVERSING POSITIONS** - Team B then summarizes what Team A has said followed by A summarizing B's arguments. The theory is that they understand the positions and are validated by hearing their own stuff come back to them.
7. **TEAMS DISCUSS** - The teams can now drop the roles and begin discussion of the issue(s) using what they have learned and their own personal experiences can enter into the conversation. This step involves trying to reach consensus on something even if individuals only articulate points of disagreement.
8. **TEAMS DEBRIEF** - Teams talk about the discussion. Review the list of effective characteristics. Did everyone gain a deeper understanding? What new insight was gained? Who said something that you felt was important? What do you need to work on to become a better discussant?

Social studies is essential to the maintenance of a healthy democracy and certainly suited to vibrant, controversial discussions. Structured academic controversy is one way to help develop those vibrant, controversial discussions.



Biography

Carolyn Pereira had been the Executive Director of the Constitutional Rights Foundation in Chicago since 1974 and has designed, written facilitated, and implemented numerous law-related curricula for elementary and secondary social studies classrooms. Of particular interest is her work on discussion and service learning. She was the 1992 recipient of the Isidore Starr Award.