

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

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## Teaching Controversial Issues

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The massive, much-talked-about 1992 study, commissioned by the AAUW Educational Foundation, coined the term the "evaded curriculum" to refer to matters central to the lives of students, but touched on only briefly, if at all, in most schools. Evaded topics include sexism, race and ethnic discrimination, class stratification, homophobia, and reproductive rights. At the university level, many courses address these issues, and, in some disciplines like sociology, political science, ethics and so on, these issues are the courses.

There is no question that these topics are relevant to students' lives, affect students personally, and frequently produce emotional responses in the classroom. Yet those very qualities can cause students and faculty alike to shy away from an honest confrontation of the issues. An important outcome in teaching about such controversial material would be a classroom atmosphere in which students engage in interesting dialogues, free to express their opinions and relate their experiences, yet remaining respectful of both other students and other opinions. Achieving this combination of "freedom within structure" is not easy, and discomfort can result if the balance between the two is disrupted. The disruption can come from a too-tightly-controlled classroom in which students are afraid to speak or a too-loosely-controlled classroom in which unchecked personal opinion monopolizes class time. The first situation, in which there is little opportunity for discussion and/or a lack of tolerance for dissenting opinions, can discourage active, engaged learning. It can ultimately lead to frustration and resentment by students which will be communicated on the course evaluations. If the balance tips the other way and students are encouraged to say

anything and everything, blatant sexist, racist, homophobic or other biased remarks can embarrass and alienate other students in class and seriously impair learning. This paper offers some ways of moderating discussion to achieve this balance.

**Begin by framing the social and moral issues** Many, though not all, instructors and authors of texts have abandoned a commitment to strict neutrality in favor of a model which contends that one has the obligation to guide thinking in a responsible fashion. This perspective holds that sexism, racism, classism, and other similar isms are wrong because they violate the values of equality, justice, and human decency (Singh, 1989). Framing a guiding principle of this type early in the course is particularly useful for teaching controversial issues because it establishes a non-negotiable foundation from which to build. Some go beyond this to recommend a student-teacher contract, designed to reduce controversy by systematically summarizing and agreeing to shared assumptions.

The first class period is the proper time to communicate the guiding perspective of the course, and to ask for cooperation in implementing its parameters. An example of this framework comes from Women's Studies, where students learn that they will be using a feminist perspective, a value system that favors change toward equality in society. The idea of equality, therefore, is not up for debate. What equality means and how best to achieve it are the controversial issues which require thought and discussion.

In addition to the use of the committed perspective, social and moral issues can be framed in yet another way designed to reduce conflict and promote respect in the classroom. This is achieved by making a humanitarian appeal to students to remember prejudicial remarks made in class may offend or embarrass their classmates. Most students do not want intentionally to hurt others, and, with this reminder, they may strive to couch their remarks in less inflammatory language.

Establishing ground rules for disagreement before biases and factions have formed not only will prevent future problems, but also will provide a model of critical discourse, which will help students develop as adults. As an example, requiring that before one can state

an opposing opinion, an individual must be able to state the position of the other person in a way, which will satisfy that person, encourages careful listening. Students who know they must follow such "fair fighting" rules are less likely to respond thoughtlessly or carelessly.

Whereas these ground rules help to structure and control student interaction when teaching controversial issues, instructors will still have to respond to student discussions. The next set of recommendations focuses on classroom dynamics.

**Proceed by controlling classroom dynamics** *Setting the Tone:*

Although one can find descriptions of ways to teach controversial issues through student exercises, role playing, and formally structured debate (Sargent, 1985; Bredehoft, 1991), many courses rely on lecture and classroom participation as the staple day-to-day instructional method. Because lecture usually precedes discussion, the manner in which information is presented is of vital importance in setting the tone for student interest and subsequent discussion.

The best overall recommendation here is forethought and planning. Instructors regularly should review their ideas alone or with a colleague. Does the lecture convey the desired messages and impressions? Is the vocabulary properly sensitive and respectful when referring to members of disadvantaged groups (i.e., using "woman" not "girl" to refer to an adult female)? Does the lecture present controversial issues in such a way that students will be inspired to explore them further rather than re-enforcing existing biases?

In women's studies courses, for example, a lecture might review the current theoretical views and relevant studies, then discuss cultural myths and stereotypes surrounding an issue. These myths and stereotypes are familiar to students, providing a good place to ask for student input and to make the transition from lecture to discussion.

*Encouraging Initial Participation:* Active student involvement is a crucial element for success in teaching controversial issues. This is also the least predictable aspect of teaching, for no matter what precautions have been taken, student comments cannot be predicted.

We do know students like to be active parts of the learning process, and that they learn better when encouraged to verbalize their thoughts. Furthermore, classes which have lively exchanges and diversity of opinions are more interesting for everyone.

Therefore, the first order of business is to promote discussion. There are several good strategies for conducting discussion (Welty, 1989), each having advantages and disadvantages. Formal, prepared-in-advance questions are desirable when considering complex or abstract ideas and serve to reduce conflict by allowing students to think about and censor an idea before displaying their thoughts publicly. The disadvantage is that structured questions may by-pass students' real concerns. By simply asking: "What are your opinions? What has been your experience?" students are given the opportunity to be involved in the exploration of controversial issues from their own frame of reference. These more informal, extemporaneous methods also energize a class. However, this type of discussion is the one most likely to spawn prejudiced or stereotypical comments which must then be countered.

*Tempering conflict and bias:* Although there is no one perfect method for dealing with biased remarks, the following suggestions should help to guide policy when teaching controversial issues.

- The foremost principle is to respond to all students, regardless of what they say, with respect and dignity. This is essential in setting the tone for all class instruction. Showing respect for a student does not mean sanctioning or rubber stamping the statement. It does model separating the person from the idea. Separating the individual from the remark keeps the focus on ideas rather than personalities and can allow the student to retreat gracefully from a position which later proves untenable.
- It may be appropriate to remind students of the original first day guidelines, both principles and discussion rules and to enforce those guidelines when conflicts flare.
- When necessary, point out how statements being proposed are related to cultural myths or fallacies which have already been discussed and discredited.
- Occasionally, when the situation and the subject matter permit, humor can effectively diffuse tension. Acknowledge that the

- discussion has become heated. Pause, let out a deep breath, and perhaps say, "It's really hot in here."
- Insert a pause for reflection to allow tempers to subside. Stop the discussion and have everyone write a sentence or two in reaction to what has just transpired.
  - One of the best outcomes of a controversial dialogue occurs when it is possible to use the ideas being bandied about to provide academic information. It is satisfying indeed to be able to say, "In fact, there was a study done on that particular issue and...." or to challenge the students to provide such information.
  - Challenge students to consider the implications of their comments. For example: what value underlies a statement? Therefore, what type of resolution would it suggest?

**In conclusion** Controversial issues should not be evaded in university classes. Indeed they are the stuff of academic discourse. If students cannot learn to think clearly about these issues while at our institutions, when will they? Instructors have a responsibility to provide both a forum and a format for learning how to engage controversy and work through it. While this article makes broad recommendations about achieving a successful combination of freedom and structure in discussing these topics, there are no guaranteed outcomes. It is the attempt that makes both teaching and learning so exciting.

## **References**

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