

Dealing With Controversial Issues

Issues in Social Studies Video: All Grade Levels

Introduction

Summary

What role does social studies play in helping students deal with controversial issues? How provocative should social studies topics be? Some educators believe that certain issues are best addressed privately—at home, for example—and that social studies should focus on objective facts. Others argue that public controversy is characteristic of a healthy democracy and that working with others to address multiple perspectives is a skill that students need to develop in a classroom context.

All social studies teachers must inevitably deal with controversial issues, ranging from basic ideas of fairness and equality in a democracy, to immigration, to the distribution of world resources. Controversial issues require students to conduct thorough research, master concepts on both sides of an issue, and develop a perspective of their own.

The most difficult issues often have a profound impact on students, and class discussions about these issues can leave teachers feeling like referees. However, in a democracy it is critical for students to learn how to listen to opposing viewpoints, and the teacher's role must be to create an open forum that allows opposing viewpoints to be fully expressed. The challenge for all teachers is finding the fine line between engaging students' interest and maintaining a sense of objectivity that lets students master the material and develop their own perspectives.

Overview

How can teachers help students understand the ideas and values behind historical controversies, competing ideologies, and changing laws? In the video, "Dealing With Controversial Issues," teachers and students explore issues in social studies by:

- conducting research using several resources,
- discussing the facts linked to the controversy,
- determining points of view,
- supporting a point of view with evidence gathered from research,
- listening to opposing points of view and engaging in a debate, and
- proposing solutions.

Exploring the Issues

Identifying and Clarifying an Issue

“Students are developing their knowledge base, but too often social studies is taught as a series of facts. But knowledge is more than that; it’s understanding the ideas and values that form an ideology.” —Susan Adler, Director of Teacher Education, University of Missouri, Kansas City

Wrestling With the Issue

- Why is it important for students to develop a knowledge base about an issue? How do you assess students’ knowledge?
- How do you help students build their understanding of a controversial issue?
- How do you ensure that students distinguish between fact and opinion in their research?

Understanding Various Perspectives

“These issues will help students develop the skills needed to consider multiple viewpoints, consult multiple sources, articulate ideas, and support opinions with facts. These are the skills that will make them effective citizens.” —Wendy Ewbank, Seventh- and Eighth-Grade History Teacher, Edmonds, Washington

Wrestling With the Issue

- Why is it important that students use multiple sources, including primary sources, when studying controversial issues?
- How does role-playing help students understand multiple viewpoints—especially ones they oppose?
- How do you ensure that students consider different points of view?

Supporting One’s View

“We want students to approach an issue in a fair-minded way. Critical thinkers consider opposite viewpoints and ask themselves, ‘Is that view more coherent than mine? Is it more precise?’ and they’ll change their perspective if necessary.” —Michael Yell, Seventh-Grade History Teacher, Hudson, Wisconsin

Wrestling With the Issue

- How can a teacher ensure that students explore multiple viewpoints?
- How do you encourage students to revise their viewpoints in light of new knowledge?
- When should you express your opinion on an issue? What are the risks and rewards of revealing a bias?

Applying What You've Learned

As you reflect on these classroom activities from the video, think about how you might adapt and extend them to your own teaching.

- Fifth-grade teacher Libby Sinclair personalizes the concept of stereotyping by having students recall examples of stereotyping that they have encountered. Later, Ms. Sinclair asks the students to find examples of stereotypes in literature they have studied on the Negro Leagues. The lesson ends with students writing letters to encourage a publisher to include more information about the Negro Leagues in baseball history books.
- Gary Fisher's eighth-grade students are studying the historic *Amistad* case, in which slaves took over a slave ship. The case resulted in a controversial trial that centered on the issue of property. Mr. Fisher provides background information about the case, then students read history books, watch a video, and review trial transcripts in preparation for a mock trial.
- Cynthia Vaughn introduces her first-grade students to the controversial issues that can surface in a community and shows students how to take action. Working in small groups, students use a model town to identify their concerns and discuss solutions with the each group's designated "mayor."

Consider your own classroom as you answer the following questions. Write down your answers or discuss them as a group.

- What skills can students learn from dealing with controversial issues in social studies?
- What guidelines do you use for class discussions of controversial issues?
- How do you deal with different skill levels in discussions?
- What issues in your curriculum lend themselves to teaching and researching different perspectives?
- When teaching about a controversial issue, what is your goal for students?

Links to the Lessons

“Dealing With Controversial Issues” features the following teachers and lessons from the *Social Studies in Action* library:

- Libby Sinclair: Understanding Stereotypes
- Gary Fisher: The *Amistad* Case
- Justin Zimmerman: The Middle East Conflict
- Wendy Ewbank: Landmark Supreme Court Cases
- Cynthia Vaughn: Leaders, Community, and Citizens
- Steve Page: Economic Dilemmas and Solutions
- Brian Poon: The Individual in Society
- Mavis Weir: Migration From Latin America

Standards

Each video lesson in the library is keyed to standards and performance expectations. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. Teaching controversial issues relates specifically to the following NCSS themes:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environments
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Global Connections
- Civic Ideals and Practices

Resources

Print Resources for Teachers

Evans, R. W. and D. W. Saxe, eds. *On Teaching Social Issues*. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 93, Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996.

"Teaching Controversial Issues." *Social Education*, 60(1). Washington D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, January 1996.

Parker, W. C., ed. *Education for Democracy, Contexts, Curricula, Assessments*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2002.

Soder, R., J. I. Goodlad, and T. J. McMannon, eds. *Developing Democratic Character in the Young*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2001.

Web Resources for Teachers

National Council for the Social Studies: <http://www.ncss.org>

This site identifies the NCSS standards-based themes and ways of implementing them in the classroom.

Multimedia Supreme Court Cases: <http://oyez.nwu.edu/>

Northwestern University's Oyez Project provides a multi-media database on U.S. Supreme Court cases and judicial issues.

Forum for National Issues: <http://www.nifi.org/>

This non-partisan network of educational and community organizations promotes the debate of current issues.

Educational Site on Law, Democracy, and Human Rights: <http://www.streetlaw.org/controversy2.html>

Streetlaw.org provides strategies for teaching controversial issues.