

Workshop 7

Controversial Public Policy Issues

Key Concepts

- Controversial public policy issues are at the heart of our society. By teaching students how to approach them, we create citizens who are capable of making thoughtful choices about complex topics.
- A discussion of racial profiling allows students to get to the root of the tension and complexity that exist in the United States between creating a safe society and protecting individual rights.
- The methods seen in this lesson start with students' own opinions and experiences and help them develop a deeper understanding and more complex picture of key public policy issues.
- Beginning a unit with an opinion poll quickly gets students involved in the subject matter, acts as a catalyst for them to develop their own study questions, and motivates them to do the research that will help them more fully understand the issue.
- A structured controversy engages students in defining, explaining, and evaluating an issue; presenting well-supported arguments; and reaching a consensus. It creates a safe environment in which both teachers and students can examine highly controversial public policy issues.

About the Lesson

Overview

In this 12th-grade law class at Champlin Park High School in Champlin, Minnesota, JoEllen Ambrose engages students in a structured discussion of a highly controversial issue—racial profiling—and connects student learning both to their study of due process in constitutional law and to police procedure in their study of criminal law. She begins by having students individually complete an opinion poll, which they then discuss as a group, realizing that the issue of profiling becomes increasingly complex as examples of it get closer to their personal experience. By physically engaging the students (they move around from “Agree” to “Disagree” to “Undecided” positions as the discussion proceeds), they get both a visceral and visual sense of the controversy. The poll is primarily a motivating activity to engage students’ interest. Next, working in pairs, they delve into studying a research packet that Ambrose has prepared, reading local and national sources on the topic of racial profiling. The next activity pairs students in a structured debate. The framework for this debate, which comes from the Center for Cooperative Learning at the University of Minnesota, is highly specific with regard to both time and task and is designed to have each partnership argue both sides of the issue. Each group of four is next charged with the task of developing a consensus position on the issue and presenting it to the class. A debriefing discussion completes the lesson. The methodologies highlighted in this lesson include role playing and structured academic controversy.

Context

Teacher: JoEllen Ambrose, who has taught social studies for 23 years, currently teaches the ninth-grade U.S. Government course and the senior-level Law course at Champlin Park High School in Champlin, Minnesota. While at Champlin Park, she has been a department chair, worked on several curriculum committees, supervised student teachers, and developed a mock trial team. Previously, she taught political science and geography at a local junior high school and was co-director of the Minnesota Center for Community Legal Education at the Hamline University School of Law. Ambrose holds a Bachelor of Science degree with high honors in secondary social studies education from the College of Education at the University of Minnesota and a Juris Doctor (*magna cum laude*) degree from the William Mitchell College of Law in Minnesota.

School: The school district that includes Champlin Park High School is one of the most rapidly growing areas in the nation with a population whose average age is 29.9. It is primarily a blue-collar population with the lowest per capita income in the metropolitan area. The school enrolled 3,028 in 2001–2002 and is among the largest high schools in the state; 16 percent of its students are people of color. Its four-period day schedule (also called a block or extended-day schedule) allows students to take the equivalent of 16 full courses each year. The school has won many state and national awards and has an extremely low student drop-out rate (roughly 3.5 percent).

Course: The law course covers both constitutional and criminal law and is taught daily over a nine-week period in 85-minute periods. The course text is *Street Law: A Course in Practical Law*, Sixth Edition, by Lee P. Arbetman and Edward L. O’Brien. (West Educational Publishing, 1999).

Workshop Session

Before Viewing

Make a list of three to five controversial topics that are related to your social studies curriculum. Tell how (if at all) you have approached these topics in the past. Discuss any concerns you have about addressing controversial issues in your classroom.

Watch the Video

Watch the video, stopping at the end of each segment. Use the following questions as a basis for discussion and reflection. If you are not attending the workshop with other teachers, use your workshop journal to respond to at least two questions per lesson activity.

Activity 1. Student Opinion Survey

- What makes this activity constructivist?
- Identify aspects of this activity in which students engage in comprehension, explanation, and analysis.
- What is the value of having students physically change their positions throughout this exercise? What are its potential drawbacks? How might you overcome the drawbacks?

Activity 2. Teams Prepare for Debate

- Discuss the pros and cons of preparing a research package for students rather than assigning them to conduct their own research.
- What role might your textbook play in this activity?
- If students conduct their own Internet searches on controversial issues, they may be led to sites that you or your community would rather they did not visit. How do you handle this? How would you teach students to evaluate Internet sources for factuality and bias?
- What guides or procedures would you have students follow to help them make wise, informed decisions while using the Internet for research?
- How much time would you give this part of the lesson in your classroom?

Activity 3. Academic Structured Debate

- Evaluate the role the teacher plays in this debate. How does it compare to the role you would play?
- Would you be willing to try this methodology in your classroom? Why or why not?
- How would you assess students' performance in this activity?
- What is the difference between a discussion and a debate? Consider the following definitions: Debate implies arguing a point of view with the goal being to get someone to agree with your position; discussion implies sharing ideas and information. How are each of these strategies used in this lesson?

Activity 4. Develop Team Consensus

- Why is this activity important in this lesson? In social studies in general?
- How does Ambrose bring students back to the big picture when they begin to get bogged down in discussion?

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Activity 5. Teams Present Consensus Positions

- In this activity, as in the polling activity, Ambrose physically and visually engages students in grappling with complex issues. What are some other ways this goal might be accomplished?
- What democratic values emerge from this discussion?

Activity 6. Large-Group Discussion

- How does this discussion differ from the one in Activity 1?
- What essay question would you include on a unit test to evaluate students on their learning of the topics covered in this lesson?

Before Next Week

Assignments

- Choose two of the following:
 - Develop and, if possible, teach a lesson in which students learn how to evaluate research sources for bias and point of view. Write about your experience in your journal.
 - Create a research package of articles for one of the controversial issues you identified in the Before Viewing activity.
 - Create a five-question opinion poll on a current controversial issue.
- Review those sections of the Web site that you have not yet read, e.g., Essential Readings, Other Lessons, Teacher Perspectives, and Student Perspectives.

www.learner.org/channel/workshops/civics

Notes
