

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM: A  
HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS

A Project

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by

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Graduate and Professional Studies in Education

Abstract  
of  
TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM: A  
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Sara Awan

The project addressed the problem of instructors struggling to teach and discuss controversial issues in their classrooms. Through the literature review, a variety of practices and strategies presented a means for productively exploring volatile and passionately felt topics in the classroom without endangering or offending other students. Overall, the literature regarding the instruction of controversial issues is very limited, but from the available resources that exist, the handbook is a compilation of mini-lessons and suggested resources. The mini-lessons in the handbook comprise of literature based teaching methods, other handbooks, and literature suggestions by social studies researchers. The focus of the research regarding teaching controversial issues was based on the severe need for the discussion of controversial issues in the lower grades like middle and high school. In addition to providing resources, the literature consistently revealed many of the shortcomings of the topic.

Finally, the research concludes with a sense of confusion amongst the many stakeholders of education. This confusion revolves around teachers' personal perspective of controversial topics, their own comfort level, and their own internal struggle serving the topics justice.

\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Chair  
Porfirio Loeza, Ph.D.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the Project

A classroom filled with an open format of discussion and awareness is the key to a productive learning experience. Having this same format apply to a topic that requires multiple views and perspectives is what makes it wholesome and multi-layered discussion. Students should be able to apply this to any type of topics, especially those that are in a pressing need to be discussed. The average classroom teacher avoids such topics because usually they are labeled as controversial topics. Due to the perplexity and the intricate nature of the topics many issues are haphazardly mentioned and therefore resultant of many misunderstandings or entirely overlooked.

The purpose of this project is to create an objectively tangible resource that teachers can use for teaching controversial issues in their classrooms. This resource will be an informative handbook with lesson plans to demonstrate how best to handle and teach topics that are usually ignored or just vaguely mentioned. The intent is to provide both students and teachers a more wholesome and an integrated curriculum that will allow students to experience the diversity of perspectives and points of views within their own classroom. Where students feel safe and comfortable enough to share and express what they truly believe, without fearing social, psychological, or physical harm. The goal of this project is to make history a dynamic and a dimensional topic by exposing students to topics usually ignored or purposefully skimmed to avoid any form of “controversy.” Students in classrooms all over America are constantly complaining about the uselessness

of history. Most commonly students protest the history curriculum, due to the lack of relevance to their own personal lives or even their own communities.

The handbook is going to consist of research based teaching methodologies for best practices and strategies to use in the classroom instruction. It will address issues of cultural sensitivities, multiple views in a comfortable and open classroom environment with freedom of expression to allow for a productive classroom discussion that enables students to critically analyze different issues in order to cater to a democratic and pluralistic society for the future. The handbook will address some issues and methodologies teachers can comfortably implement into their curriculum to not shy away from difficult or uncomfortable issues. According to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (2009), Standard 1, students are to be engaged and supported in their learning. Meaning, teachers are required to engage students in their learning by linking it to the students' background knowledge, their personal experiences, and their interests. Through these connection teachers are able to contextualize students' own milieu for learning and teaching critical thinking, empathy, and reflection. Additionally, according to the California State Standards for 7<sup>th</sup> grade history classes students are expected to analyze the dogma of belief. They are to analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of Islam in the Middle Ages.

The handbook will focus on various themes to explore students' perception and understanding of minority and majority groups within the larger society. Students' prior and background knowledge will utilize their own connection to increase students' involvement in their knowledge acquisition. The ultimate goal revolving around the

handbook will be to create an interactive curriculum which will require more student involvement and investment in what is being learned and taught, thus enabling students to a personalized learning experience. After all, prior knowledge determines what we learn from experience, and also it is what guides our intentions and interests (Roschelle, 2013). The key elements of the instruction will consist of initially teaching historical content and then moving that historical content into contemporary modern time periods. The focus on the contemporary period will allow students to formulate connections to the content through interactive activities requiring students to discuss, reflect and critically analyze each theme through a connection within themselves.

#### Statement of the Problem

Education that is of debate or differing perspectives usually is avoided or too carefully taught, rendering it unjust coverage in its content presentation. A lot of the controversial topics are altogether ignored or briefly skimmed over without delving into the detailed dynamics and complexities of the discourse. An example of the topic that is usually covered too quickly is the topic of Islam. In many schools, Islam is taught as a fact based learning experience, that only presents the major tenants of what Islam is without presenting the religion in its current state or any cultural political impression of the religion in the western societies. Even though this is difficult to do without arriving at some sort of stereotype or offensive content; however, the issue is the fair presentation of a topic in a wholesome view with its differing perspectives.

The unit on Islam in History Alive: The Medieval World and Beyond presents Islam in a very ancient view, meaning Islam is a 6<sup>th</sup> century religion with no content of

the contemporary time periods or having anything to do with it being a global religion that has traveled out of Saudi Arabia centuries ago. The book presents the geography of Arabian Peninsula, biography of the Prophet Muhammad, basic beliefs and practices of Islam, crusades and empires of Muslims, and the 6<sup>th</sup> century contributions of the Muslim world. All of this is very factual without ever entering into the modern contemporary times. It lacks all connections to believers of the religion, of present day. In a very factual manner, the unit is all facts from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, but no connections are made to the modern times or to the students that might be practicing the religion. The issue with this is the face of Islam is presented in a very ritualistic manner of practice and belief, without a spiritual demonstration of personal connections of the believers of the religion or how it has developed to function in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Essentially, the content of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade history book is truly the ancient history of Islam without any links to the students or how the belief in the religion impacts their everyday life, while living in a Western nation.

### Significance of the Problem

As a teacher who teaches in a private school and being a keen observer of students' reactions to the current events related to Islam, the students are receiving mixed messages about the religion of Islam. The perceptions of Islam at home, in school, and in the community in comparison to the message received by the media do not match. The portrayal of Islam and the way it is being taught in the media is causing a lot of confusion for the students. This topic needs to be discussed, impartial awareness needs to be brought, controversial topics need to be discussed, and the impact of religion and media

needs to be analyzed minus the preaching of its idealistic ideology. Far too less is known about this impact on the students, so the purpose of the handbook is to use it as a medium to have students discuss and analyze controversial issues that are linked to their everyday experiences. In the 7th grade history class, the students learn about medieval history and one of the units in their book is all about Islam. Seeing as how Islam is such a controversial topic right now, it can really use some correct awareness, rather than just stereotyped hype and fear as it is conveyed by the media.

The chapter in the history book poorly portrays Islam, it fails to make connections with the students or the current events related to Islam, and lacks critical thinking and questioning about how current events influence the students' daily lives. The handbook will be a supplemental tool and a resource for teaching controversial topics. The handbook will implement background retrieval strategies, discussion based learning, and critical thinking instruction to provide a democratically wholesome view of controversial topics. The aforementioned strategies will be universal, meaning they could be applied to any controversial topic being taught in a classroom. This will mean a lot of student involvement, background building activities, discussion of current events, and it will be taught to my Muslim students next year. The purpose of the handbook is not to preach or make claims, but rather inform and bring awareness through a learning experience via standard based history curriculum.

### Methods

For the last two years, I have been teaching the same unit and questioning the purpose of it. Students' reactions and the lack of their interest has motivated me to

design an interest based learning experience which will require the students to share their thoughts, expressions, and experiences to personalize their learning. The guiding research question for this work is:

“How is learning differentiated and enhanced as students apply critical thinking, discussion, and personal and prior knowledge into their own knowledge acquisition?”

Some of the areas to be focused on are: classroom environment, discussions, empathy, critical thinking, and point of view. The following two sub-questions will be explored to promote the central research question:

1. How will the connection of history content to students’ personal experiences and prior knowledge result in clarification or understanding of their own identity?
2. How can understanding the objective and output of social stereotypes help students to sift through the misrepresentations regarding controversial topics?

The anticipated outcome is that students will be more engaged in their learning and aware of the portrayals and misrepresentations by the society at large. Lastly, another expected outcome is to demonstrate understanding and tolerance of differences through varying perspectives.

#### Limitations

The first limitation is students’ connection or interest to the topic may be limited due to parents’ permission. Some parents may not feel comfortable having their child discussing such issues in school. The second limitation may be the number of students willing to participate in the handbook’s instruction. The third limitation may be the

willingness of the administration in allowing the instruction in the classroom. The fourth unfortunate, but true limitation may be the availability of resources such as Wi-Fi in the school for videos, availability of a projector from the library, and/or the availability of copy machine for printing out content articles and information.

To avoid going into the preaching or teaching aspect of controversial topics, there will be clear parameters set on bias and one sided view of a topic, instead students will receive content information will all the different perspectives of the controversial topic.

Due to the vastness of the topic of controversial issues and all of the issues related to them, I will limit the handbook to three to four main themes which will function as launching point for teachers to use the template to create their own curriculum. I believe that by limiting the number of themes, it will allow for a realistic amount of time spent on the handbook as accordance to the pacing guide of the history classroom. The timing of the lessons will vary due to the nature of the topic and the breadth a teacher may decide to delve into.

#### Definitions of Terms

**Islam** – a religion with varying levels of believers practiced all over the world. The key components are the belief in one omnipresent God, messengers/prophets, the Quran (holy text), angels, and the Day of Judgment.

**Multicultural/Multilingual Muslims** - Muslims from varying backgrounds

**Practicing Muslim & Non-Practicing Muslims**- Muslims like other people of differing beliefs vary in their level of belief.

**Empathy**- The ability to understand another perspective without judgment.

**Controversial Issues-** These are issues that have differing points of views which people feel strongly about.

#### Description of the Innovation/Intervention

I want to add a supplemental resource to my seventh grade history book by creating a handbook that ensures a feasible learning experience and discussion of controversial topics in history classes. The handbook is going to explore the topic of controversy in a nonfactual manner to prevent only content based learning, but to rather assist in critical thinking, initiate open discussions, and allow variance of perspectives through the use of multiple learning and teaching strategies. The handbook will have multiple themes with accompanying lessons. It will explore how teaching controversial issues can be made easy through classroom structure, setting up parameters, creating whole class ground rules, and using interactive methodologies can ensure a safe and productive learning experience. Additionally, it will cater to student interest and their own expression. The focus of the handbook will be to acquire students' background and prior knowledge to discuss the mass perception of controversial topics through their immediate society. Student experiences, reflections, and background knowledge will triangulate a focus on how the society impacts student perception.

#### Organization of the Project

Teaching teachers to not shy away or cringe from controversial topics is one of the main purpose of the project. This research is going to equip teachers with a handbook of tools to use while they are teaching the controversial topics in their classes. These controversial topics are not limited to religions, but rather can be adopted for other topics,

such as the ones in Science, Language Arts, Government, History, or any classroom subjects taught in the school.

#### Handbook Organization and Contents

1. The handbook will begin with a rational and explanatory research behind the need for controversial topics instruction in diplomatic classrooms. The rational will emphasize the need for creating and producing democratic citizens for the future of a diplomatic nation with all of its diversity.
2. Setting or creating a classroom environment of open discussion, comfort, trust, and judgment free atmosphere of tolerance.
3. Creating and arriving at the main objectives of the learning experience. To be created by all of the stakeholders such as teachers, students, and the CA State Standards.
4. Mini-Lessons for instructional strategies to have: Discussion Based Learning, Empathy, Objectivity, Diversity, and Citizenship Skills. These will be lessons created for teachers, instructing them on the how-to of physically and mentally setting up a classroom environment for teaching a controversial lesson, making ground rules for discussion as a whole class, creating a discussion environment where every students is heard, using various methodologies to implement a controversial teaching lesson, and finally an example lesson.
5. Lastly, the Handbook will accompany resources for further research or accessing more information.

### Summary

This handbook is made for the sole purpose of enabling teachers to discuss controversial social issue in their classroom. The handbook will provide many resources for teachers to use while they are planning out a controversial issues lesson. The next chapter will delve into the literature related to the teaching of controversial issue in the classroom. The research will review some of the theoretical aspect of the topic and offer research based pedagogical practices for instruction.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### Introduction

In our current educational institutions the topics of controversy can be a source of discomfort or altogether avoided for the sake of convenience or constraints either personal or communal to an instructor. When crucial discussions, debates, and role-playing are ignored and a pretense of neutrality lulls the educational discourses, the dire consequences of ignorance and anonymity take hold and continue to rename topics “controversial” and therefore unapproachable. The purpose of this literature review is to explore research related to the teaching of controversy in educational structures such as middle, high school, and college classrooms. It will focus on some of the major factors that result in the hindrance of controversial issues from being taught in the academic settings such as classrooms. Another purpose of this review is to explore some of the major constraints and limitations many educators feel in teaching controversial issues, how teachers can mend the gap through creating various learning opportunities such as a climate of trust in the classroom, through discussion based learning, utilizing critical thinking skills that enable students to view others’ perspectives from an understanding of variation of milieus, and lastly, instilling democratic citizenship skills in students that will allow them to appreciate conflict and differences through objectivity and culturally responsive curriculum (Straddling, 1985). These learning strategies can be the mediating factors for learning about topics that are otherwise considered controversial and therefore irascible.

If topics that present a source of disagreement, or argument result in teachers avoiding them, then it means that a whole generation of unaware citizens are being raised, without any awareness of what is going on around them. Topics that really matter and cause a conflict amongst the population because of their strong dichotomous nature need to be discussed, analyzed, understood, and viewed from multiple angles and lenses in order to maintain a democratic population. This principle of democracy is the foundation of our nation, but with the avoidance of such crucial issues, it is losing its essence to anonymity, complacency, passivity, and creation of divisions.

This chapter will explore the different strategies and requirements necessary to instruct about issues of controversial nature. A review of effective strategies to encourage and implement a climate of trust within a classroom. In order to have a positive learning environment, it is crucial to have an environment that is allowing of opinions, wonderings, and questions. A classroom that has a good mood, safe environment, with respectful behavior towards others is an open environment for learning acquisition. The second part of the chapter will review relevant literature on discussion based learning, which is only feasible after the creation of a certain mood and environment is created within the classroom. The third part of the chapter will analyze critical thinking skills. Lastly, in order to create a democratic society, students are to have good citizenship skills that enable students to be productive members with healthy identities. Finally, the chapter will close with further recommendations for this field.

### Background for Teaching Controversial Topics in Classroom

The California standards for social studies require students to learn about the religion of Islam. As according to the social studies content standards of state of California, students are to analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of civilizations of Islam. After that they are to trace the origins of Islam and the life and teachings of Muhammad, including Islamic teachings with the connection to Judaism and Christianity. Next, students are to learn about the basic teachings of Islam. Following that, students learn about the contributions of Muslims to the world civilizations to the crusades to New Muslim Empires. Lastly, the standards conclude with the Muslim Empires of Africa.

The difficulty with the current state of the California standards is, they are ancient and in the context of historical content that only allows discussion of the past without any allowance of the contemporary history or the effect of modernity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another concern is that the “textbook writers portray Islam in light of the Arab nomadic society and the life of the Prophet of Islam while deliberately downplaying the Abrahamic legacy in Islam” (Douglass & Dunn, 2003, p. 52). Additionally, due to the current state of Islam, its image in the West and especially after the tragic events of September 11, the topic is usually avoided to resort to a state of prejudice and ignorance. The media formed a singular image of Islam as a backwards and oppressive religion with militant tendencies. Therefore, this same view is applied to the Islamic education of children in schools as well through the use of outdated and biased curriculum that is

based on crusades. In fact many states have extracted the topic from their curriculum altogether (Islam in America, 2008).

### Controversy of Teaching Controversial Issues

There is much disagreement among researchers about the definition of controversy. The issue of defining exactly what is considered controversial has been featured in the work of many scholars such as McKernan (1982), Philpott, Clabough and Turner (2011), and Milbrandt (2002). One of the challenges of controversial issues lies in defining exactly what is considered 'controversial' and how should it be taught. One of the oldest definitions of controversy was defined by Fraser (1986):

A controversial issue involves a problem about which different Individuals and groups offer conflicting courses of action. It is an issue for which society has not found a solution that can be universally or almost universally accepted. It is an issue of sufficient significance that each of the proposed ways of dealing with it is objectionable to some section of the community and arouses protest...when a course of action is formulated that virtually all sectors of society accept, the issue is no longer controversial (Fraser, 1986, p. 153).

Fraser views controversial issues in a manner of problems that require a "solution," however due to diverse views a single solution is difficult to settle on, therefore labeling the issue as a disputable issue that does not have a clear cut solution. In a more recent work, Harwood and Hahne's (1990) definition of controversial issue consists of a dialogue between people having differing points of view, which creates disagreement

among the members of a discussion. Harwood and Hahne, define the term controversial as a debatable dialogue between two opposing points of views. However, from a scientific perspective Rooy (1993), defines controversial issues as the “data, the collection of data, the empirical evidence, or the ethics of the experiment are open to a various interpretations and viewpoints.” So, Rooy places an emphasis on the various interpretations of data. However, in the chronological order of the defining characteristics, Baily (1975) defines controversial issues in elementary manner of disagreements leading to assertions being made. However, six years later, Dearden (1981), refutes Baily’s description explaining that contrary views can exist, but through rationality, however the rational has to occur through full evidence and credibility for it to be devoid of a biased perspective (Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). Fifteen years after Dearden’s definition, Straddling (1985), defines controversial issues with an emphasis on the clear division in society amongst various groups within society advocating for their explanations and solutions based on their own values (Oulton et al., 2004).

Yet, other researchers have used similar terms to redefine the same concept, Milbrandt uses the term “social issues” instead of controversial issues and defines it as “collective concerns that exist in the public or social arena” (Milbrandt, 2002). Philpott, et al. (2011) defined controversial issues through the oral definitions of six teachers. Most teachers used the terms “sensitive subjects” that are “embodied in opposing viewpoints and conflict” (Philpott, et. al., 2011, p. 35). Another researcher simply defined it as an issue that divides the society (McKernan, 1982). Similarly, Pace defines

a controversial issue as something that stems from a deep-rooted conception of how the world works while being emotionally charged in the form of many single issues (Pace, 2003). Overall, most researchers defined the term differently and through their own understanding and observations, however there is one similarity in all, most defined a sense of contestation of beliefs and ideas. From viewing varying research it seems like there is no standard definition of exactly what is considered a controversial topic, it is unclear and based on very broad and generalized differences. Therefore a similar sense of variance is seen in the perspectives of teachers in their attempt or effort to teach controversial issues within their classrooms.

#### Teacher's Perspective on Controversial Issues and the Constrains they Experience

Ultimately, besides the core defining characteristics of a controversial topic, the teachers' principles and perspective of teaching a controversial issue play a defining role inside the classroom and eventually in society at large. Hess and Posselt (2002), and Harwood and Hahne (1990), all agree on neutrality on behalf of the teacher as a harmful agent to the development of young adults who are learning to become citizens of a diverse world. Along the same lines as Harwood and Hahne, (1990), Oulton et al. (2004) declared that the starting point or the focus should be on the nature of controversial issues with an emphasis on differences in perspectives of the group members to reach a reflective awareness.

To add to this, then there is an issue of the instructor's perspective of what they consider as controversial versus what they believe is a non-controversial issue.

According to Hess, the teachers' response to controversy is usually outlined in four

manners. The first reaction of a teacher to controversy might be “*denial*,” meaning they do not perceive an issue to be controversial. The second reaction is of “*privilege*,” the teacher might promulgate a biased view. Thirdly, the teacher might just “*avoid*” it altogether, due to acknowledging a strong personal bias influencing their teaching. Lastly, the fourth reaction is “*balanced*” where the controversial issue is taught as truly a controversial issue. Along the same lines of genuine controversial topics being taught in a balanced manner, Harwood and Hahne (1990) explain the following needs to be considered for a controversial discussion; 1) the true nature of controversial issues and discussion, 2) the importance of this discussion in social studies classes’ curriculum, 3) analyzing the history of such discussions in social studies classrooms, and 4) and to implement and strongly suggest the use of such discussions in classrooms.

In a descriptive study, author Milbrandt (2002), investigated the attitudes and practices of public school art teachers focusing on the social issues through their art curriculum. Some of the question asked were; 1) “Do public school art teachers value addressing social issues and incorporate that approach into their own teaching?”, 2) “What are the broader educational goals for such as a curriculum?”, 3) “How social issues are currently incorporated into the art education curriculum?” and lastly with another open-ended question educators were asked how their pre-service education could have prepared them to better integrate social issues in their instruction (Milbrandt, 2002). The teacher perception of how important it was to address social issues in their art curriculum ranked at 74% ranging between “extremely” important to “very” important for their classrooms, which signals a general support by the majority. Yet, their

reasoning for this importance varied from personal responsibility to social issues being a thematic extension of art history. However, some teachers feared being conceived as political or personal agenda pushers in their art classes, resulting in their hesitance to address social issues.

In Milbrandt's (2002) same study another constraint was revealed. Some of the instructors were hesitant in addressing controversial social topics due to the lack of time to substantially cover an issue. They point out the following factors as the inhibitors: meeting objectives, parental reactions, or the school administration's reaction, which usually led to a neutral zone to avoid confrontation. Other constraints that resulted in teachers' apprehension to teach social issues included lack of information, and lack of appropriate experiences from their own teacher pre-service training.

In a nationwide study conducted by M. L. Story (1952), with 1,817 participants, 897 consisted of administrators and 920 of teachers who participated through providing their opinions on variety of questions. The researchers asked a number of questions regarding the school policy and how pertinent the policy is to a democratic curriculum. They also asked how the administration of the public schools make clear, which policies and practices are necessary to achieve the goal of democratic education. The first question asked "How democratic is your school system in its characteristic practice with respect to championing the free discussion of controversial issues in the classroom?" (p. 521). From the responses 68% believed that the policy "satisfactorily" met the "democratic criteria" in their school systems. However, 20% of the respondents felt that their school did not meet the "democratic criteria" in their own school systems. Then, the

researchers asked, how well is “democratic criteria” defined by the respondents? What is considered to be their norm? They were asked to represent their school’s criteria norm from a list of norms. The majority or to be exact 75% of the respondents selected the following statement as their school’s democratic criteria: “teachers should be allowed to make sincere but cautious efforts to deal with both sides of controversial issues” (p. 522); meaning that majority of the participants believed that teachers should be allowed to discuss controversial issues, but through a balanced manner. Interestingly, only 10% believed in the total banning of controversial issues from the classroom curriculum, which leads the teacher perception regarding teaching controversial issues as being very important. After accomplishing the significance of controversial issues the last part of Story’s research asked about the practical aspect of controversial issues from the lens of the school board. They asked the question of whether the school board “upholds the rights of a teacher to discuss freely in the classroom his own personal views on controversial issues” (p. 523). The responses were diverse in their opinion. About 10% of the respondents believed the school board deemed it “essential,” 25% to be “important,” 3.6% to be “immaterial,” 44% to be “undesirable,” and 17% with “no response.” Though the responses are vast and different, a large percent of the participants deemed the school board to be a major constraint in their ability to freely discuss controversial issues in the classrooms. Yet, there were ¼ of the participants who claimed it to be important. So overall, this divergent data indicates a sort of confusion in what and how to teach controversial issues. Whatever the definition of controversial issues

may be, there is little controversy in the value of teaching it in a classroom for the well-being of a healthy diverse society, as many teachers indicated.

In a 2004 article, Griffith and Brem stated that teachers need to be more comfortable and confident in their profession in order to be effective teachers for the future. In their study of science teachers in Arizona, they used focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written surveys to conduct a 15 biology teachers study. The purpose of the study was to collect data on teachers teaching evolution and the stress they were under and the strategies they used to alleviate the stresses. Teachers were qualitatively categorized in three clusters of being “conflicted,” “selective,” and “scientists.” According to the “scientist” type of teachers, they are usually tenured and expressed a deep love for the subject of science. Additionally, these teachers are all business and do not believe that religion has anything to do with belief, it just is as it is. Like for example the belief in physiology or DNA. These teachers use precise strategies to deflect issues or stresses. For example, they denigrate their opponents, use technical language, have solid understanding of the content, and delineate between religion and science in order to prevent pressure or any issues onto themselves (Griffith & Brem, 2004).

The “selective” teachers just like the “scientist” teachers love science, but they also cherish their classroom and community harmony. They are conflicted between religion and science. So in order to cope with their conflict, they are careful in their selection of the materials they teach. Additionally, “selective” teachers cope through avoidance of specific topics and change their teaching styles of discussion to lecture style to get through the topic. While other teachers change the language or simply “sneak in”

the controversial content in order to prevent classroom chaos. An extreme degree of the “selective” teachers are those that completely do not teach the topic, but rather just omit the controversial content from their yearly instruction altogether (Griffith & Brem, 2004).

The “conflicted” teachers experience the most stress. Unlike the “selective” teachers, these teachers actually explored the controversial content without omission, or using a rigid classroom structure. Most of these teachers are rarely tenured due to their inexperience in the teaching field. However, interestingly though, Griffith and Brem’s finding discovered that a lot of the fears and stresses of the “conflicted” teachers were not real, but actually imagined. Many of the teachers never really had stressful situations arise, but they constantly feared them due to their lack of confidence and inexperience in the field of teaching. The coping strategies for “conflicted” teachers seem to be spent on creating meaningful lesson plans, having deep discussions with their students to express their desires to not change the students’ beliefs, but to rather just inform them of the controversial contents as part of their standard based curriculum.

From Griffith and Brem’s study, there seems to be recurring patterns amongst the teachers that were studied, most teachers who were tenured were more confident about the subject they taught. Another recurring pattern was the classroom set up or the language used by the teachers. Teachers that were confident did not utilize particular language or change the structure of their classrooms in order to teach controversial topics.

Most educators sincerely believe in the importance of discussing controversial issues; however a plethora of constraints lead to teachers being apprehensive around the concept of teaching controversial issues. These constraints range from teacher’s own self-

identity to parents to the school district and the superintendent, who may maintain a tight control over the classroom curriculum. In Rex Turner's (1936) study, with the interviews of social studies department heads in Bay Area, California school consisting of about 19 senior high schools of the San Francisco Bay Area of six cities. He found out that teachers did not present controversial social, political, and economic issues because they felt pressure or influence to not discuss controversial issues. A second set of questionnaire was sent to 87 teachers, of the 87, 45% that answered, felt that pressure and restrictions if they discussed the issues in a thorough manner. Of course some controversial issues such as racism are inherently sensitive topics due to the politico-historical context of America. So due to the nature of such topics instructors feel insufficient in their knowledge base to tackle such issues. Yet, still most teachers confess to not having enough academic preparation from their credentialing schools or any previous education.

Philpott, et al., (2011), interviewed 6 social studies teachers with the participants consisting of 2 women and 4 men from five different schools, grade levels ranging from intermediate to high school. These teachers were interviewed regarding their views of teaching controversial issues. Most, if not all the teachers defined the word controversial issues as having opposing viewpoints and conflict. Another commonality in the interview was the issue of religion, which all five of the teachers defined as the most contentious. Racism was another issue made difficult to teach history due to its permeating effects in the present day. For example, the teachers found it exceptionally difficult to teach issues related to the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movements, because

the issue is a sensitive topic because its underlying eminence still exists. Oulton, et al. (2004) listed out several constraints that teachers feel. The first constraint teachers feel is time, it was mentioned several times, that due to the high expectations of the standardized testing, teachers felt that controversial issues consumed immense amount of time to prepare for and to discuss in the classroom. The second constraint felt by most teachers was the length of instructional periods and “examination syllabuses,” which made it increasingly difficult to thoroughly encompass and teach a controversial issue. The third constraint was the lack of appropriate teaching materials necessary for teaching controversial issues. Finally, very few teachers were able to recall any training from a pre-service or an in-service (Oulton, et al., 2004).

#### Principle of Teaching Controversial Issues

“You’ll never see a parents’ group called ‘Americans in Favor of Debating the Other Side’ in Our Schools” (Hess, 2004, p. 258). There should be an appeal made to the cultural sensitivity of diversity and acceptance of learning about topics that are considered controversial and taboo. If students are not educated or at least told something about a controversial religion, ignorance will continue to shadow the general mindset of the American public. Therefore, one of the goals of education should be to allow students to find ways to be respectful to culturally diverse issues and topics. It should be a major goal of education to enable students to critically analyze an issue while separating it from their own personal values. Students should be encouraged to step away from the dichotomous perspective of right and wrong only, instead to view issues with multiple perspectives. Mark Hedley and Linda Markowitz (2001a), explain that such

dichotomous definitions are a result of the students' or the teachers' social construct due to cultural and moral beliefs, which are assumed to be "natural." These personal beliefs are then considered superior and therefore the "norm", while the rest are either "wrong" or "other." As a result students resist and challenge the discussion of alternatives because it is perceived to be morally challenging their own "norm" (Hedley & Markowitz, 2001a).

#### Pedagogical Techniques to Enhance the Examination of Controversial Issues

Due to the disputable nature of controversial issues, it has received scant attention, and both teachers and students rarely consider controversial issues for their research or instruction (Hess & Posselt, 2002). Students deal with controversy in all aspects of their lives ranging from their neighborhoods to global issues to issues on the news, so therefore they should be equipped with appropriate tools to deal with controversy (McBee, 1996). Issues such as indigenous history, wide range of political ideas, cultural differences, environmental issues, and religion usually appear in most social sciences, so therefore should be delved into with careful and methodological pedagogical techniques (Reitano, Kivunja, & Porter, 2008).

#### Setting up the Classroom Environment

Students spend a large part of their day in the classroom, so therefore it seems fitting to have a learning and productive classroom environment. This is equivalent to thousands of hours spent in the classroom, which should be a time period of productive and conducive learning. The importance of what students see, hear, feel, and experience in the classroom makes up for a large part of students' schooling and their learning

experiences. A productive classroom results in a better learning experience for students and teachers themselves (MacAulay, 1990; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995; Walker & Walker, 1991). Through a controversial discussion in the safety of the classroom, it enables students to hear a differing perspective, deal with difficult topics and issues, all while maintaining a restraint over their own emotions, without resorting to anger or frustrations. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1996), promote a classroom where multiple opinions, perspectives, or responses are a source of debate and discussion.

Due to the current state of education with a teaching to the test and results based learning, few teachers spend time on non-cognitive goals such as creating a well-structured and comfortable classroom that is conducive a productive learning experience for all students. A classroom where students are able to comfortably state their opinions with no apprehension of being criticized is a classroom of true learning experience (Savage, 1999; Stewart, Evans, & Kaczynski, 1997; Weinstein, 1992). A classroom where students feel comfortable in explaining their perspectives on varying issues without feeling threatened or embarrassed of sharing their perspective will reversely reduce violence and frustration (Stronge, 2007). Students should be allowed to communicate their ideas with their classmates to a point where it enables them to action learning. Students hear differing perspectives and they are able to empathize or at least understand where that other perspective is stemming from. Many factors lead into such a classroom environment. They range from the physical set up of the classroom to the emotionally supportive role of the teacher and the fellow classmates. Instead of teachers creating an extremely rigid classroom structure, which allows for absolutely no

discussion or opinions, only facts downloading, teachers should foster understanding, tolerance, acceptance and the allowance of differences. As Straddling (1985) points out most controversial ideas are not the disagreements of facts, but rather the values those facts represent. He goes on to explain that if students are to achieve a genuine understanding of controversial issues, they need to examine the motives, interests, beliefs, and intentions of the people who are involved in the controversial issues (Straddling, 1985). As Straddling expresses an ideal method to dealing with controversial issues, it all requires a particular type of setting, without which it is nearly impossible to teach, let alone about issues that are highly volatile.

The role of a teacher is an important one. A teacher's own behavior is reflective in the classroom mood and the environment. To avoid the great debate of whether teachers should or should not reveal their own personal perspective regarding controversial issues, Oulton et al. (2004), declares that teachers should make an explicit declaration of their perspective regarding controversial issues. Besides, Kelly (1985), points out that it is difficult to conceal one's perspective regarding an issue due to non-verbal cues or the remarks made by the teachers. Kelly goes on to explain that if these cues are decoded incorrectly, it can result in students misunderstanding or being confused. Oulton et al. points out that if teachers expect students to be open about their feelings, it's only fair if the teachers are doing the same.

In conclusion, teachers need to provide the students with a classroom environment that is stable, physically well structured, and all-encompassing of divergent and dissenting expressions, while providing evidential validation. Another more physical

aspect is to create a strategic physical arrangement while being cognizant of student location and teachers' accessibility to students, all while providing students with clear view of the teacher at all times of the classroom (Bettenhausen, 1998; Cummings, 2000; Quinn et al., 2000).

### Discussion of Controversial Issues

One of the key pedagogical components of examining controversial topics is to have a discussion about it. In order to demystify or to extract controversy from an issue, it requires a dialogue or a discussion in order to bring about awareness. A controversial issue discussion is defined as a "reflective dialogue among students, or between students and teachers, and about an issue on which there is disagreement (Harwood & Hahn, 1990, p. 2). It is any issue that might divide or cause a disagreement between varying members of the society. These points of disagreement will vary from place to place depending on the socio-economic and political points of view of its population (Straddling, 1985). However, that difference is beside the point, the purpose is to provide students with a comfortable class climate in which they feel safe to state an opinion, comment, or observation that is otherwise considered unpopular, 'inappropriate', or disliked by the majority or popular view.

Larson and Keiper (2002), analyzed the difference between a face to face discussion and an electronically threaded discussion through a study of 20 class sections of pre-service methods course that used both formats of discussion. They have discovered that students' responses and behavior is similar each time to that of other unrelated classes. In the face to face discussions, it required interactive skills of high

cognition, meaning students had to listen in order to pay and retort to their classmates, thus making it highly effective. Students used the higher order thinking skills to interpret analyze and manipulate information. Other than the shy and silent students, most discussants were active participants who receive immediate feedback from their classmates, whereas in the threaded discussions, it had some limitations along with some great positive characteristics. According to Larson and Keiper (2002), they noted some positive attributes as well as some limitations. Due to the delayed required response, there was less pressure to speak eloquently or even get involved in the dialogue. According to the researchers, most students that did not speak up in class ended up participating in the online discussions, which was referred to as a form of “teledemocracy” (London, 1995). London coined the term to mean it is a form of democratic participation through computer technology, which he defined as a “marketplace of ideas,” where a collection of input is collected and seen by the masses, therefore producing “instant public opinion” (Larson and Keiper, 2002). However, some of the limitations of the online threaded discussions included less time spent on face to face discussions, so therefore less time spent on clarifications and missing out on the tonality of the conversation.

Larson and Keiper (2002), found two very interesting finds; first that most of the online discussion was declarative without validating the classmates’ comments. Meaning, the discussants usually just made their own declaration without providing validity or acknowledging their peers’ input. Their second finding indicated a void of conversational passion because of the difficulty of communicating tonality and intonation

through typed expression. This lack usually resulted in self-interpretations of the reader and sometimes even the misinterpretations.

The whole purpose of such a discussion is to bring about awareness, understanding, acceptance, and tolerance of differences. With a well-structured classroom, students and teachers benefit from a more wholesome in depth analysis and allow an exploration of controversial issues. The class discussions of critical and pending issues such as controversial issues, allows for critical understanding that sustains the development of ethical and moral reasoning (Cherrin, 1992-93). Simultaneously, these values are better instilled while students are in a diverse environment with chance of discussions in an educational setting. “Schools should help their students to handle questions of value, to learn to make judgments which are truly their own, as well as learning to take responsibility for their own lives,” as Dewhurst points out that controversial issues cannot be left to their core only, but rather need to make a connection to the students’ lives (Dewhurst, 1992). Preparation for productive citizenship and sustainability in a pluralistic and ever changing environment begins in the classroom, where teachers have the chance to capitalize on the context of students’ own social world. Through the provision of a safe and comfortable environment, climate of trust, and respect and appreciation of diversity and differing views, teachers can serve justice to the intricacies of controversial issues.

In order to serve justice to such intricate issues, the Center for Teaching and Learning at Queen’s University provides some practical tips for how teachers can have discussions about controversial issues in their classroom: Establish ground rules for

discussion, set a tone for the discussion, and find strategies to promote discussion.

Firstly, to create a classroom that is safe, nonthreatening, and tolerant to difference, rules need to be established. Straddling et al. points out that often the goal is not to make a topic “clearer,” but rather more “confusing” in order to move towards a more wholesome understanding and opinion of the concept (Straddling, Noctor & Baines, 1984).

Straddling et al. goes on to explain that complex issues do not exist in clean cut dichotomous understandings, but rather in very complex and intertwined series of notions that build on each other to result in an independent opinion. Using the work of Straddling, Noctor, and Baines, the Institute of Flinders University (n.d.) researchers go on to suggest in depth strategies of setting up “ground rules” for a discussion. First, the instructor and students should determine the guidelines and parameters for the interaction. The rules should first set up a respectful tone where students are informed not to use “emotive” or “inflammatory” language. Essentially, students are to think before speaking, to assure prepared and presentable thoughts devoid of derogatory or generalized assertions. Second, in the design of discussion teachers need to fuse in accountability, students should be made to provide evidence for their discussion input. Thirdly, students are to critically analyze the information they are presenting, meaning they should analyze their sources thoroughly in order to recognize a balance. Lastly, they suggest students should be encouraged to recognize and embrace their own process of learning to form their own independent opinions (Straddling, Noctor, & Baines, 1984).

Harwood and Hahn (1990), offered additional suggestions for preparing a successful discussion session for controversial topics in the classroom. They believe that

the first process of selecting the issue should revolve around the student. Teachers need to analyze the interest, expertise, and experience of their students in order to have a fruitful and beneficial discussion. The second process requires a lot of prep work that requires setting up the classroom and the students for civil discussion that allows the feeling of safety and openness to make statements that would otherwise be considered wrong. The third process requires the teacher to provide students with adequate informational resources. It is suggested that in order to allow students to be fully informed and have sufficient background knowledge, the teachers need to provide information that is based on well-grounded and impartial sources. The fourth process for the discussion is the climate of the classroom; this may be the most integral indicator to whether or not students would participate in the discussion. Students must be made to feel safe in making a statement that is of divergent or differing nature from the majority of the class. Teachers or the discussion leaders should guarantee “intellectual safety” in the classroom, by encouraging freedom of expression and point of view (Harwood & Hahn, 1990). The fifth process sets up the parameters for discussions, meaning to prevent veering off of topic. Harwood and Hahn, explain that often too many discussions are thwarted off topic. They suggest to keep on task and on topic, the discussion leaders should create an agenda, meaning to have a visual reminder for the whole class of what is being contributed and what still needs to be discussed. The sixth process necessary for a productive discussion is the moderation of perspectives being shared. In order to have a full range of points of views, teachers or the discussion leaders need to monitor the “intellectual balance” (Harwood & Hahn, 1990). All sides need to be expressed, and if

they are not, then role play or careful teacher questioning should elicit the unmentioned perspectives. It is suggested to enhance a more multi-viewed or the whole class participation, teachers should create participation systems that essentially compel students to participate in the class discussion. Lastly, Harwood and Hahn stress, that the teachers' or the discussion leaders' personal views should be shared with students, but they have to be defended with evidence and backed up once they are challenged with reflective rhetorical stance (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

#### Development of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has abundant research, usually many educational theorists suggest it as an essential skill for higher education, in order to have students become active and productive citizens and it promotes higher level of thinking. According to ProCon.org, 93% of the higher order educational faculty deems it as an essential learning component of true acquisition. Critical thinking skills that enable students to view other's perspectives from an understanding of variation through milieus are an important skill most students should be taught in schools. Critical thinking is a conscious process of gathering information to resolve an issue. However, the information collection process is a reflective procedure that in return affects the resolution or the outcome of a social issue, as opposed to the preemptive decision making of narrow thinking in a dichotomous manner, much like the reaction most controversial issues receive. It requires the use of purposeful reflective judgment through using core cognitive skills of evaluation, explanation, analysis, self-regulation, and interpretation of the controversial topic at hand (Facione, 1998). Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) defined the goal of education as quality

of developing a mind that is characterized as “having an ongoing, contemplative, and creative relationship to a multitude of ideas” (Milbrandt, 2002, p. 144). The emphases on the multitude of ideas, meaning students are exposed to variety of perspectives. It is the process of “learning to learn” so that students are able to analyze an issue or a problem from their own background with their own observations, reflections, and realizations, rather than a higher authority telling them what to believe or feel (Facione, 1998). According to Facione, critical thinkers are able to defend their thinking by explaining their arrival at their own judgment or perception and on top of that they are able to self-regulate if need be according to the addition of new information.

Milbrandt’s (2002) study 28% of teachers demanded a need for students to develop critical thinking skills in their art classes in order to reflect on the social issues to lead towards a tolerant, democratic and diverse society. The discussion of controversial topics in the students’ learning results in students becoming more informed and eventually active students in their future lives (Hahn, 1998). In their thought provoking article, Barton and McCully (2007), explain that students who are actively involved in class discussions that analyze and discuss multi-angled issues and topics are likely to vote later on in life, support democratic values, take part in political discussions, follow political news in the media, be interested in the political process, and have confidence in their ability to influence public policy. Additionally, not only does critical thinking encourage political participation, but rather it is through positive efficacy and results in political trust, social integration, and political participation (Ehman, 1977).

Ennis (1993) points out that critical thinking is essentially the process of reflectively thinking through reasonable means to decide what to do, but he goes on to elaborate his earlier definition and provides a list of things a person has to be able to do in a later publication:

1. Judge the credibility of sources.
2. Identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions.
3. Judge the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions, and evidence.
4. Develop and defend a position on an issue.
5. Ask appropriate clarifying questions.
6. Plan experiments and judge experimental designs.
7. Define terms in a way appropriate for the context.
8. Be open-minded.
9. Try to be well informed.
10. Draw conclusions when warranted, but with caution.

#### Developing Democratic Citizenship

Democratic citizenship enhances the norms of a society to cultivate cooperation, participation, awareness, and assimilation to the values of the masses. Democratic citizenship skills allow students to appreciate conflict and differences through objectivity and culturally responsive curriculum. Democratic thinking can be enhanced through the discussion of controversial issues that are pressing and relevant to the students' lives. The Civic Mission of the Schools Report (2003) recommends that schools should:

Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school (p. 6).

According to Hess (2004), research indicates that involvement in political discussions of varying nature influences the development of tolerance of different perspectives. Students need to be challenged in their way of thinking and their norm based generalized one-sided perspective of their points of view. In a paper called *Creating Effective Citizens*, the National Council for the Social Studies, defined an informed democratic citizen as one who “seeks information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions” (Clabough, McConkey, Philpott, & Turner, 2011, p. 32).

A democratic classroom is a place of healthy open dialogue about issues of varying degree. It requires a discussion. Hess (2004), points out the need for democratic education that utilizes points of debate as learning experiences for positive and productive democratic citizens.

### Summary

This literature review has gone over the various definitions of the term controversial. It is not yet clearly defined as to exactly what is considered controversial

according to most educational entities, which is one of the reasons for why the topic receives scant attention in education. Due to the many misunderstandings, subjective nature of the topic, and lack of standardization, the topic of controversy is made difficult to teach. Therefore, due to this uncertainty, many teachers are either hesitant due to their own personal agency or do not feel prepared enough to tackle such dynamic issues. In addition to lacking resources and standardization, many educational entities like educational policy makers, districts, school boards, or the school administrations have not yet clearly defined the parameters of teaching controversial issues in the classroom.

Aside from all of the discrepancies and ambiguities the literature review is concluded with various types of pedagogical instructional techniques to implement and enhance the teaching and learning of controversial issues in the classroom. Finally, the long term effect of teaching controversial issues was analyzed to make a case for teaching controversial issues in the classroom due to all of the positive outcomes. The purpose of this paper was to review how to teach controversial issues in classrooms. However, the literature review provided a bleak view of this topic needing a lot more attention and standardization in order to make it into pillar of American democratic education. The teaching of controversy is a fundamental necessity of this nation, which is ensuing pluralism and the spread of democratic ideals in the twenty-first century.

### Chapter 3

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

This handbook was created based on the needs of a seventh grade classroom of medieval history. The curriculum and the standards related to the unit about Islam only dealt with the historical aspect of the religion, without any practical aspect of the contemporary issues regarding the controversy of the religion. In order to create the handbook, it required a curriculum that integrated the standards and the research based practices. The literature review was an excellent source of new information; it demonstrated and revealed many different teaching and learning methods for an instructor. In creating the handbook, all of the research was fitting of different parts of the handbook. Lastly, the handbook has not been presented to students yet, but will be presented to them in the upcoming year.

I have been teaching at a private Islamic School for the last two and half years and every year, the unit related to the Islamic history has always bothered me. The curriculum lacks all connection to the students or all of their experiences living in America. Since this school is in America, the students experience the backlash of the media and they do not understand why their religion, friends, acquaintances, and family members are being singled out. Most of my students are born in the early to mid- 2000s, so majority of them are quiet confused about the events of September 2011, because when it took place they were really young and many of them were not even born yet. Due to the confusion in their everyday questions and comments, this handbook was made to pacify some of their qualms. I have done an extensive amount of research regarding

the presentation of controversial issues in classrooms, but most of my research came up short due to the fact that majority of the controversy was imbedded in scientific controversy regarding issues like evolution, stem cell research, or creationism.

The underlying question for my research was: “How can a controversial topic or issue be introduced into a middle school classroom curriculum in a productive manner in order to bring awareness?” The focus of the research was based on first, defining exactly what is considered controversial. The second focus was to learn about some of the major trends in the research discourse regarding teaching controversial issues in classrooms. The third focus of the research was to find and collect instructional strategies and methods for teaching controversial issues within the classroom. Finally, the last focus of the research was to learn about the long-term social impacts of teaching controversial issues within classrooms.

### Literature Summary

A majority of the research revealed that when students are exposed to varying degrees of difference, opinions, and perspectives, they in return become more tolerant and understanding of differences of society.

### Project Design

The Project design is going to be based on an informational how-to type of handbook. This handbook will allow teachers to plug in their own curriculum or issue into it, in order to make it useful for their own classroom. The compilation of the handbook is going to be made from the collection of tension points within the classroom, such as awkward silences, the heated moments, the confusing moments, and all the

moments where a discussion should have taken place, but due to lack of protocol the topic was dropped and the class attention is diverted or transitioned into a different topic. The handbook will provide teachers with different methods of creating a climate of trust in the classroom, setting up the stage for discussing controversial issues within the classrooms, providing background knowledge, and mini-lessons featuring the following: classroom discussion, critically analyzing an issue, developing a wholesome multi-leveled and multi-perspective understanding for one controversial issue. Lastly, the handbook will feature some further resources.

#### *What is Controversy?*

The first part of the handbook is going to begin with a brief introduction, in which the concept of controversy is going to be defined in its precise sense for a classroom. The severe need for the discussion of controversial issues is going to be reviewed. It will discuss the importance of teaching controversial issues and the long term impacts of *teaching* and *not teaching* it in the classroom.

#### *Classroom Environment*

In the second part of the handbook it will share with teachers the specific environments that are necessary in order to create classroom, within which students can feel comfortable, trust their classmates and be able to express their point of view. In order to enable and encourage students to participate in discussions that require their input and their perspective, students have to be made to feel safe and confident in order to have a conducive learning experience. Lastly, the role of the teacher will be discussed as

well, meaning what stance a teacher should take on controversial issues being discussed in the classroom.

### *Teaching Controversial Issues Methodologies and Resources*

The third part of the handbook will provide learning strategies through the use of collaborative classroom activities that allow both majority and minority views to be heard.

### *Mini Lessons: Controversial Issues*

In the fourth part of the handbook, it will have a number of mini lessons, demonstrating and providing teachers with resources necessary for teaching a lesson on controversial topics. Each lesson will be accompanied with California state standards, objectives, and interactive activities. These mini lessons will make the students think about and come up with their own controversial issues. After students frame controversial issues and topics, discussion is going to be encouraged through the various discussion methods such as Think Pair Share, Jigsaw Discussion, Walking Debate, and etc.

### Plan for Implementation and Dispersion

Initially, the intent for this research was to correct a disconnect in my seventh grade history class, however, with the progression of the research it became about filling in a gap. So rather than just teaching about the controversial nuisances related to Islam, I expanded the research to just the general broad topic of teaching controversial issues. The handbook is going to be used next year to teach a variety of controversial topics within all of my history classes. The dispersion of this handbook will be made to the

school office and other English and History teachers in my school next year. I believe it can be a really helpful resource in my particular school site, due to the fact that, it is a private religious school, meaning multitude of perspectives exist and sometimes become a hindrance to progress.

## Chapter 4

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has reviewed the different aspects of controversy, ranging from the beliefs of teachers' perspective on the importance of teaching controversy in the classroom to the long term effect of implementing controversy in the curriculum. Teachers everyday feel different constrains and stressors in school, which become the inhibiting factors to the discussion or the opening up of the dialogue regarding controversial issues in the classroom. The convenience of being able to teach and discuss a controversial topic in a classroom is a fairly new concept, due to the fact, there is not a lot of available research regarding it. Due to the lack of information regarding the topic of teaching controversy in the classroom, the process of developing this handbook was really difficult and limiting. The initial goal of the handbook was to provide concrete lesson plans on various controversial issues, but that was made impossible due to the limited amount of curricular resources concerning issues of controversy. So, instead the mini lessons at the end were reformatted to be used for any topic that is deemed controversial with some universal pedagogical instructional techniques to tackle controversial issues. This chapter will conclude the whole project with some final thoughts, discussions, limitations, recommendations and the final conclusion.

### Discussion

The research related to teaching controversial issues is a limited one. Most of the research concluded with recommendations for additional and further research regarding the topic of controversy. Milbrandt (2002), points out that despite the potential risk of

involving students in controversial issues, the risks of not engaging students in controversial issues far outweigh the safety and comfort of a structured classroom. She points out the structured classroom comfort leads to complacency, which replaces critical inquiry, connection with authentic and meaningful discussions to eventually produce unintellectual moral actions and intolerance in an upcoming pluralistically democratic society.

The integration of controversial issues in the teachers' everyday curriculum is crucial. Hess (2004), points out that preparation of students in critical inquiry positively contributes to the multicultural and diverse nature of American democratic society.

#### Summary

The purpose of this handbook is to provide teachers in upper grades an ability to teach issues of diverse nature, especially those that may have multiple points of views and come with passionate beliefs. The pedagogical strategies implemented in the mini lesson are constructed on research based strategies. The teachers who use this handbook will be better able to implement more constructive and productive lesson plans into their classrooms and thus have better informed and aware students for the future. By using the handbook teachers will ensure a smooth transition in and out of difficult situations and prevent or manage escalated situations. They will be able to set up their classrooms based on suggestion and strategies recommended from educational researchers and instructors. Additionally, the research allows teachers a firm control of their classrooms without being liable to any stakeholders regarding their classroom activities and practices (Milbrandt, 2002).

### Limitations

The limitations of this project are going to include the willingness of the teachers to want to tackle issues of controversy and their own personal comfort level with the controversy. Aside from the comfort of the teacher about a controversial topic, the other stakeholders like parents, the administration, or students themselves might be the inhibiting factors to discussing a controversial topic. Another limiting reason for being unable to discuss controversial topics in the classroom may have to do with the fact that the handbook will be taught in an Islamic School and some topics may conflict with the religious doctrine and the Islamic standards of the school.

The availability of time and resources may be another constricting factor to teaching the handbook. At the beginning of the school year, every teacher is expected to turn in their whole year plan to the administration and so teachers are expected to keep pace with their whole year plan. Additionally, the school is a private school, so therefore run on extremely limited financial assistance, making it difficult to access to a lot of resources.

Another limitation to implementing the handbook in the school may have to do with the developmental level of the students due to either their sheltered or limited background knowledge regarding the controversial topics. However, whatever the allowance is in the school, the handbook provides research based pedagogical strategies for all levels of issues.

### Recommendations

One of the biggest constraints to working on this paper and handbook was the lack of resources available about the topic of teaching controversial topics in the classroom. This topic needs a lot more research. Not many researchers delved into details or conducted research about the long term effects of teaching controversial topics in the classroom.

Empirical researchers need to become more daring and risky in order to attempt at a discourse that enables teachers the appropriate manners and strategies to be able to teach controversy in order to have a healthy pluralistic society.

There is a severe need for the establishment controversial issues curriculum in lower grades. Too many students graduate out of elementary, middle, and high schools with very rigid, one sided views of their beliefs. The unfortunate truth is, many do not go on to upper education, or others learn of differences too late in their lives to make a productive difference. Introducing students to differences of opinions or alternative views at younger age allows them to reflect upon and ultimately alter their own rigid point of view to think in a more multiple perspective based view, rather than in a rigid and narrow view.

Educational policy needs to be more protective of students and teachers that attempt the learning of new controversial issues in the classroom. Policy makers need to make more accommodating laws and rules to protect teachers.

APPENDIX

Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers

Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom:  
A Handbook for Teachers

By Sara Awan

California State University, Sacramento

## DEDICATION

This handbook is dedicated to my amazing husband who has been incredibly supportive and patient throughout the making of this handbook. It is also dedicated to my family for all of their help and understanding.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of the handbook

The purpose of this resource is to be a guiding source for teachers of social studies and to encourage intellectual growth regarding topics that are often considered controversial. The intention is to have it used for teaching controversial issues of all types and all degrees. The expectant hope of this handbook is to allow students and teachers to discuss issues in detail with multilayered perspective of varying controversial topics. Too many amazing topics of discussion are avoided or superficially analyzed to avoid the heart of issues. The use of the handbook would allow teachers to create lesson plans that would allow them to comfortably discuss, critically analyze, and overall just bring awareness to the issues at hand. Lastly, the long term goal of this handbook is for it to be a building block for a pluralistic and truly democratic society.

From my past three years of teaching, I have allowed too many teachable moments to slip by to only realize way too late that there could have been a productive dialogue. Not knowing my own stance on issues or being too afraid of administrative consequences has led to topics being dropped or completely ignored. A lot of great opportunities to have a discussion about current events and the events from the past have been bypassed in order to continue on task with the planned lesson of the day.

As a social studies teacher, I want to be able to comfortably discuss issues that need to be discussed without fearing a violent outburst from students or an administrator walking into the classroom, or a parent complaining about the content of my classroom (Griffith & Brem, 2004). In order to help other teachers who feel the same constraints, I

have made this handbook to provide them with some guidelines of approaching such volatile, yet sensitive topics in methodical manners.

The first section of the handbook discusses what in general are considered controversial issues, then it goes into why they are important to the everyday educational needs of the students. After that, the handbook explains why the teaching of controversial issues is relevant to students' lives. Finally, the first section concludes with a listing of some useful resources.

The second section of the handbook is going to move closer to the practical aspect of controversial issues instruction. In this section the pre-requisite to any productive learning is discussed, the classroom environment. First, it explains the many constituents of a productive classroom, then it goes on to explain why it plays a key role in students' acquisition. Then, it moves on to discuss the benefits of a productive classroom and how students can benefit from it. Finally, the last section concludes with additional resources for teachers to use in their classrooms.

The third section of the handbook delves into the possibilities of discussion for exploring and discussing controversial issues in a classroom environment. The importance of discussion is stressed to emphasize the exposure to variations and differing points of views to build up to empathy, understanding, and maybe even tolerance.

The fourth section then diverges to one of the influences of the controversial issues discussion – critical thinking. Due to the nature of critical thinking of being a widely misunderstood concept, an attempt is made to clarify exactly what is critical thinking and its importance to the learning process of students.

Finally, the fifth and the last section of the handbook concludes with another influence of controversial issues instruction.

## Teaching Controversial Issues

### What is it?

A controversial issue is any issue that brings forth disagreement and multiple perspectives of disagreeing nature. Dublin and Slemmons (2001) define controversy as the result of group's ideas, conclusions, theories, or opinions that are in opposition to those of another group. According to the "Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom," handbook, controversial issues usually divide the society, challenge many personally held values and therefor result in conflicting explanations which can evoke very emotional responses or result in threatened and confused feelings. Even though controversial issues in their nature can be pervasive, yet they still hold value and necessity to a democratic society.

### Why is it important?

Teaching about controversial issues in the classroom is really important because it allows students to discuss and analyze issues that are usually thought to be too awkward or uncomfortable to discuss in an academic setting. The teaching of controversial skills allows students to contribute to a healthy society by having to firstly collecting information of multi-angled perspective, and then to examine all of the information for the purpose of trying to understand. The 5 key reasons why they are considered to being important are:

- 1) They are relevant to students' lives
- 2) Discussing these topics is an essential part of education if education is to fulfill its purpose in a democratic society.
- 3) They allow student and teachers to reflect, develop, to practice, and to fulfill their role in the society.
- 4) Helps in the development of ethical, social, moral, and democratic values.

- 5) Allows for more free flow of ideas, while exposing the wants and demands of minority groups.

**How does it apply to students?**

The graders study the history of three different continents. Through their study of different people and their place in history, students also learn about the belief system that influenced them to settle in the areas they did and then carried on to ancient socio-political civilizations. The seventh graders are introduced to two of the three major religions in the book.

**Where to find additional information/resources?**

- Dunn, D. (2013). *Controversy in the psychology classroom: using hot topics to foster critical thinking*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hedley, M., & Markowitz, L. (2001). Avoiding Moral Dichotomies: Teaching Controversial Topics to Resistant Students. *Teaching Sociology*, 29(2), 195-208.
- Hedley, M., & Markowitz, L. (2001). Theory Into Practice Strategies: Inclusive Practices for Managing Controversial Issues Teaching and Learning. *Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice Toolkit*, 29(2), 195-208.
- Philpott, S., Clabough, J., & Turner, T. (2011). Controversial issues: To teach or not to teach? That is the question!. *The Georgia Social Studies Journal*, 1(1), 32-44.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (n.d.). *National Council for the Social Studies*. Retrieved November 15, 2013, from <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/effectivecitizens>.

- Lockwood, A.L. (1996).  
Controversial issues: the teacher's  
crucial role. *Social Education* (60)  
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- Stradling, B. (1985) Controversial  
issues in the curriculum. *Bulletin of  
Environmental Education*, 170, 9-13.
- Story, M. (1952). Controversial  
Issues and School Administration.  
*Journal of Educational Sociology*,  
25(9), 520-523.
- Harwood, A. M., & Hahn, C. L.  
(1990). *Controversial issues in the  
classroom*. Bloomington, Ind.: ERIC  
Clearinghouse for Social  
Studies/Social Science Education

## Classroom Environment for Controversial Issues

### What is it?

Classroom environment is the social, physical, and emotional aspect of the classroom. All of these come together to impact student learning. A typical classroom environment should be productive in nature students should be of the mind to respect their peers and have the innate want to learn. The way a teacher sets up the classroom and places certain groups and students near or next to each other should act as an “invisible hand” in the classroom which enables students to cooperate and learn (Bierman, 2011).

### Why is it important?

In order to have an inclusive classroom, where all students feel like they are part of the classroom, or united for a cause, teachers need to set up the classroom with a positive vibe which fosters cooperation and acceptance of dissenting or differing views (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

### How does it apply to students?

The following attributes reflect a well-set up classroom:

- Designated areas correlate with associated behaviors of defined purposes and defined behaviors, meaning students are aware of their surroundings when they are in those select areas (Quinn, Osher, Warger, Hanley, Bader, & Hoffman, 2000)
- A quiet area for students that require independent work or for those students who are in need of

personal space whether it being for learning or behavioral issues (Rinehart, 1991). Or alternatively, as Bettenhausen (1998) suggests such students could be placed in close proximity to the teacher desk to better monitor and/or praise the accomplishments of such students.

- While sitting students in columns or rows may be good for lecture style learning, however, it is not a good design for active learning. In order to allow for more social exchanges amongst students, the seating arrangement should be made to facilitate group work (MacAulay, 1990).
- Lastly, the classroom should be neat, organized and orderly in order to maximize student attention span and learning at a school environment (Steward, Evans, & Kaczynski, 1997).

#### **Where to find additional**

- National Council for the Social Studies:  
<http://www.ncss.org>
- <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept08/vol66/num01/Seven-Strategies-for-Building-Positive-Classrooms.aspx>

## Discussion of Controversial Issues

- What is it?** A discussion of controversial issue is a dialogue of opposing views. It occurs in classroom settings between classmates and teachers. According to Harwood and Hahn (1990), discussions by nature are: “interactive endeavors, and reflective dialogues that engender listening and responding to ideas expressed by one’s peers.”
- Why is it important?** A discussion of controversial issues is an important aspect of a productive social studies classroom. It is an important element of instruction because its associations with the acquisition of critical thinking, development of participatory citizenship, and building a classroom community (Engel & Becker, 1988). Many reasons have been presented for the importance of discussions, but they claim the three most prevalent ones have been first the preparation of their roles in a pluralistic society, second to develop critical thinking, and lastly to improve the students interpersonal skills (Harwood & Hahn, 1988).
- How does it apply to students?** Having controversial issues discussion applies to students in terms of their natural social behavior. Students like to talk and interact with their peers, so why not make it productive, where they leave the classroom having learned something new or being part of awareness. Additionally, these students will be leaving the classroom having gained interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills and lastly citizenship preparation skills. All of the above mentioned are crucial skill for the future, both in terms of responsible citizenship and for personal use, for such endeavors as working in an cooperative

environment.

John Patrick, the forerunner of research in the arena of political socialization research noted that educational programs would have greater impact on the learner's democratic attitudes if they were indoctrinated in an environment of inquiry and open-mindedness (Patrick, 1967). Additionally, according to Long and Long (1975), students that discussed controversial issues in classrooms, reported being more involved and up to date with current events. They shared and discussed the events with family and friends (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

There is a sample of guidelines for a productive and conducive discussion developed by the Center for Faculty Excellence of North Carolina Chapel Hill (n.d.):

- Always listen carefully, with an open mind, to the contributions of others.
- Ask for clarification when you don't understand a point someone has made.
- If you challenge others' ideas, do so with factual evidence and appropriate logic.
- Always critique ideas or positions, not people.
- If others challenge your ideas, be willing to change your mind if they demonstrate errors in your logic or use of the facts.
- Point out the relevance of issues that you raise when their relevance might not be obvious to others in the class.
- If others have made a point with which you agree, only repeat it when you have something important to add.
- Be efficient in your discourse; make your points and then yield to others — take turns speaking.
- Above all, avoid ridicule and try to respect the beliefs of others, even if

**Where to find additional information?**

they differ from yours.

- <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/classroom-environment-demonstrates-caring-learning-elena-aguilar>
- Scott, J., Leach, D., & Bucholz, J. L. (2008). Organizing the inclusive classroom for grades K-3. In M. LaRocque & S. M. Darling (Eds.), *Blended curriculum in the inclusive K-3 classroom: Teaching all young children* (pp. 91-127). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- <http://education.odu.edu/esse/docs/classroomenvironments.pdf>
- <https://www.teachervision.com/classroom-management/decorative-arts/6506.html>

## Critical Thinking

### What is it?

According to Ennis “Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 1987).

Critical thinking is the reflective process of evaluating and analyzing one’s way of internalizing concepts based on evidentiary, rational, multi-angled, and clear, or sometimes unclear thinking.

### Why is it important?

Critical thinking is the rational or logical connection of ideas, rather than the mere memorization. A person who is can critically think is not a negative person as the popular connotation the term has taken, but actually the critical thinker is able to deduce and infer from their know knowledge in order to arrive at well informed decision or resolution. Being a critical thinker requires a person to have the life skills required in not only their schooling years, but in their later life. According to Ennis’s (1987) elaboration of his own definition of critical thinking, he expounds in a detailed list exactly what is critical thinking. The following list is a further developed elaboration of Ennis’s definition of critical thinking:

1. Judge the credibility of sources.
2. Identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions.
3. Judge the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its

reasons, assumptions, and evidence.

4. Develop and defend a position on an issue.
5. Ask appropriate clarifying questions.
6. Plan experiments and judge experimental designs.
7. Define terms in a way appropriate for the context.
8. Be open-minded.
9. Try to be well informed.
10. Draw conclusions when warranted, but with caution.

### **How does it apply to students?**

Developing critical thinking in students is important because it transfers out of school into their everyday life activities. Students will have to seek out information, compare and contrast the alternative choices, judge their options based on their own standards and then independently select or settle on one choice or option. According to Facione, the following is a list of skills that most experts believe define the skills and sub-skills of critical thinking:

- 1. Interpretation**
  - a. Categorization
  - b. Decoding Significance
  - c. Clarifying Meaning
- 2. Analysis**
  - a. Examining Ideas

- b. Identifying Arguments
- c. Analyzing Arguments
- 3. Evaluation**
  - a. Assessing Claims
  - b. Assessing Arguments
- 4. Inference**
  - a. Querying Evidence
  - b. Conjecturing Alternatives
  - c. Drawing Conclusions
- 5. Explanation**
  - a. Stating Results
  - b. Justifying Procedures
  - c. Presenting Arguments
- 6. Self-Regulation**
  - a. Self-examination
  - b. Self-correction

**Where to find additional information?**

Additional information regarding critical thinking can be found in many online scholarly sources such as:

- <http://www.edutopia.org/stw-kipp-critical-thinking-10-tips-for-teaching>
- <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/high-school-teachers/807>
- <http://www.wikihow.com/Teach-Critical-Thinking>
- <http://academic.udayton.edu/legaled/ctskills/ctskills01.htm>
- <http://www.criticalthinking.net/howteach.html>
- Ennis, R. H., Millman, J., & Tomko, T. N. (1985). *Cornell critical thinking tests level X & level Z manual* (3rd ed.).

Pacific Grove, CA: Midwest  
Publications.

## Democratic Citizenship

**What is it?** Democratic citizenship is the process of students being more involved in their community and in the political affairs (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004). It is the process of humans not being compliant citizens, but rather being active critical citizens that are thoroughly invested in their community to resolve issues (Portelli & Solomon, 2001).

**Why is it important?** Democratic citizenship and practicing the rights it warrants is a type of checks and balance system that allows citizens to manage and control their government. Total compliance and non-participatory behavior in the government can result in the stripping of rights and freedoms our forefather of this nation worked really hard to ensure. In essence, the preservation of the hard earned right is only valid through the participation of average citizens and their keen observation and participation of the political going-ons.

**How does it apply to students?** An educator, Jesse Goodman (1989) said, “The key to transforming society lies in transforming the consciousness of its citizens, especially children.” The students of today are the adults of tomorrow, they are in training for their futures. The democratic participation of students is an essential component of society, because the alternative seems to be the privilege of a select few.

### Where to find additional information?

- Brown, J. (2012). *Democratic citizenship in schools teaching controversial issues, traditions and accountability*. Edinburgh: Dunedin.

- Ross, H., & Mannion, G. (2012). Curriculum Making as the Enactment of Dwelling in Places. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 31(3), 303-313.
- [Http://foreverfamilies.byu.edu/article.aspx?a=80](http://foreverfamilies.byu.edu/article.aspx?a=80)
- Multimedia Supreme Court Cases: <http://oyez.nwu.edu/>
- Forum for National Issues: <http://www.nifi.org/>
- Educational Site on Law, Democracy, and Human Rights: <http://www.streetlaw.org/controversy2.html>

## **Mini Lessons**

**SUBJECT AREA:** Social Studies  
**SOCIAL STUDIES GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**LESSON PLAN TITLE:**  
Setting up Classroom Environment for Teaching Controversial Issues

**CONTENT PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this lesson is to help teachers set up their classrooms for productive instruction that is conducive to discussing controversial issues within the classroom without resulting in disrespectful, violent or chaotic behavior (Stronge, 2007). Due to the unpredictable nature of controversial issues, it is pertinent that teachers really set up their classrooms for controversy in the first few weeks of school with additional policy and procedure reminders as they delve into the unit. Second important component of being able to teach controversy is the physical layout of the classroom, providing multi-perspective background knowledge, and detailed rules and regulations about a whole class discussion. In summation, students should be able to work together to learn in a positive and cooperative environment.

**KEY CONCEPTS:**

Physical environment, routines, policies and procedures, class rules, starting class, getting students' attention, ending class, materials management, and lastly the review process.

**RELEVANCY TO STUDENTS' LIVES, NEEDS AND INTERESTS:**

While at school students are in training for their adult lives. The purpose of schooling is to nourish thinking, cooperating, and understanding adolescents, who need to be made aware of differences and contested issues of their society.

**INTEGRATION WITH OTHER CONTENT AREAS:**

Correctly setting up the classroom is relevant to all class subjects taught in the classroom. It does not have to only apply for subjects that are relevant for controversial content.

**CSTP STANDARDS: 2: Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning**

- 2.1:** Promoting social development and responsibility within a caring community where each student is treated fairly and respectfully
- 2.2:** Creating physical or virtual learning environments that promote student learning, reflect diversity, and encourage constructive and productive interactions among students
- 2.3:** Establishing and maintaining learning environments that are physically, intellectually, and emotionally safe
- 2.5:** Developing, communicating, and maintaining high standards for individual and group behavior
- 2.6:** Employing classroom routines, procedures, norms, and supports for positive behavior to ensure a climate in which all students can learn
- 2.7:** Using instructional time to optimize learning

**OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of this lesson is to help teachers set up their classrooms for productive instruction that is conducive to discussing controversial issues within the classroom without resulting in disrespectful, violent or chaotic behavior.

**PROCEDURES:****Physical Class Set-up**

1) Create a warm and well organized classroom, that makes students want to maintain and be part of the classroom. Bucholz and Sheffler (2009) explain that the classroom environment or the setting of students' learning is a very personal matter to students and they are sensitive to their atmosphere, so in order to bring about ownership in their classroom, students should be provided access to all areas of the classroom (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

2) Scott, Leach, and Bucholz (2008), suggest making the overall classroom design and theme warm and inviting because the reality is the students do spend a large percentage of their day in the classroom, so therefore it should feel comfortable and inviting, rather than a place of confinement.

3) The furniture and other props in the classroom should be similar to a comfortable cozy environment, to stimulate warmth in the classroom ((Rutter, 1979).

4) The arrangement of desks in the classroom should garner maximum productivity. The movement of students should be easy and effortless, so as to prevent rigidity or physical harm. The seating arrangement should allow for interaction with their classmates for cooperative activities and to build an inclusionary community like feeling in the class (Bucholz and Sheffler, 2009).

**Setting up Class Traditions and Procedures**

5) Setting up class activities that unite the class is an excellent way to build bonds between students. Bucholz and Sheffler (2009) provides three beautiful examples of traditions: Some teachers start the day with motivational pledges or mantras, others begin with a whole class interpretation of a poem or a quote, lastly, some teachers conclude their day with an evaluator review like assessment of asking students one thing they learned and one thing that confused them (Bucholz and Sheffler, 2009 and Sterling, 2009).

6) Another way to tighten the bonds of a classroom community while hearing out the students' concerns and complaints is the classroom meeting. In this whole class or small group activity students are able to address their social and personal issue regarding their classmates or the school in a vocal manner. Additionally, according to Nelsen, Lott, and

Glenn (1997), class meetings are an excellent form of conflict resolution. Students learn to resolve issues without resorting violence or other antagonistic methods.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

## Evaluative Review

### **Student learning:**

1. What was the main idea of the lesson in which you just participated?

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1. What did you learn today that you did not know before?

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2. What else would you like to know about this topic?

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3. What about this lesson helped you understand science better?

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4. How could this lesson have been more effective for you?

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\*Borrowed from Sterling (2009)

**SUBJECT AREA:** Social Studies  
**SOCIAL STUDIES GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**LESSON PLAN TITLE:**  
Controversial Issues Discussion

**CONTENT PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this lesson is to enable teachers to discuss issues that may heavily divide a classroom. According to Harwood and Hahn (1990), a discussion is usually sparked by a question or a disagreement. They propose that a discussion is innately an interactive and reflective dialogue that is part of a healthy democracy and therefore a necessary part of education. Aside from the global preparation, everyday young adults deal with difficult issues, so they need to be prepared to deal with their emotions and become able minded individuals who can learn to think for themselves.

**KEY CONCEPTS:**

Controversial topics, class discussions, student involvement, differing opinions, citizenship in a pluralistic society, democratic citizenship, improving interpersonal skills, and critical thinking

**RELEVANCY TO STUDENTS' LIVES, NEEDS AND INTERESTS:**

School aged students of today living in American- a vastly diverse nation- are going to be the future of tomorrow, so they need to learn to listen, understand, and respect differences in order to have a successful pluralistic society.

**INTEGRATION WITH OTHER CONTENT AREAS:**

Controversial topics occur in most subjects that are taught in school, so this lesson holds relevancy to most content areas, especially for higher education.

**CSTP STANDARDS: 2: Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning**

- 2.1:** Promoting social development and responsibility within a caring community where each student is treated fairly and respectfully
- 2.2:** Creating physical or virtual learning environments that promote student learning, reflect diversity, and encourage constructive and productive interactions among students
- 2.3:** Establishing and maintaining learning environments that are physically, intellectually, and emotionally safe
- 2.5:** Developing, communicating, and maintaining high standards for individual and group behavior
- 2.6:** Employing classroom routines, procedures, norms, and supports for positive behavior to ensure a climate in which all students can learn

**OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of this lesson is to have a productive, safe, and respectful discussion about a controversial topic where students acquire awareness about a new topic with multiple perspectives.

**PROCEDURES:****Selecting Issues**

- 1) The initial step of selecting a controversial issue may be the most difficult step because it requires a teacher to be aware of the context in which the topic will play a role in the classroom and the students' interests, experience, and background (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).
- 2) The teachers have to be aware of the controversial issues' role within the school, local community, and society at large (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

**Reframing Controversial Issues**

- 3) The way an issue is framed makes a huge difference in how students respond to it in their exploration of the issue. The rationale behind this is to take the burden off of students' personal response to a more of public response. The framing of an issue can be converted from a personal to a public one via reframing it in either a human right framework, a legal framework, or a social responsibility framework ("Tackling Controversial," 2012).

- **Individual Private focus** —————> **Structural Public focus**

Ex) "How would **you** respond if someone told a racist joke? → How might an **individual** respond if someone told a racist joke?" ("Tackling Controversial," 2012)

**Preparing the Students for Discussion**

- 4) Teachers need set up ground rules for the discussion in order to provide a safe environment for themselves and the rest of the class. These discussion rules can either be set up together as a class or the teacher can provide them to the class (Harwood & Hahn, 1990). According to Oxfam GB (2006), they suggest the following as the ground rules for initiating a controversial discussion:

- Only one person to talk at a time- no interrupting.
- Show respect for the views of others.
- Challenge the ideas not the people.
- Use appropriate language- no racist or sexist comments.
- Allow everyone to express his/her view to ensure that everyone is heard and respected
- Pupils should give reasons why they have a particular view.

- 5) Students should be provided with a plethora of information about the controversial issue. This information has to be multi-perspective based information that ensures a full

range of perspectives (Harwood & Hahn, 1990). These sources have to be provided *before* a discussion takes place in order to have an adequate bank of information.

6) Encourage a critical diagnosis of the resources. Students should be encouraged to analyze the content of their information for bias (Straddling, Noctor & Baines, 1984).

7) Create an agenda for the discussion in order to stay on focus. In order to make the discussion more wholesome and meaningful to the students, Oxfam GB (2006) suggests that students should be involved in the creation of the agenda.

### **Maintaining Focus and Direction**

8) Harwood and Hahn (1990) emphasize the need to stay focused during the discussion. They explain that due to the diverse nature of controversial topics, it is easy to trail off on a tangent, but it is the job of teachers to stay on target with the objective of the discussion.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

9) Researchers differ on their view of how involved the teacher should be in the discussion, however, most suggest some sort of participation backed by evidence especially if teachers are requiring the students to participate.

10) Encourage students to question their own fixed beliefs and to cultivate an independent opinion based on evidence provided or discussed in the classroom.

11) The teacher may also play the role of a moderator who, when necessary redirects or calls for a time out in the class discussion.

### **Summing it up**

12) The end of class discussion should be a summation of the discussion with the teacher wrapping up the main ideas to have student realize that controversial content was discussed and it was a productive class session. Lastly, personal reflections to sum up the whole discussion.

**SUBJECT AREA:** Social Studies

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**LESSON PLAN TITLE:**

Teaching Controversial Issues

**CONTENT PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this lesson is to provide teachers with a lesson that demonstrates the process of teaching a controversial issue in the classroom. This lesson will implement methodologies that are conducive to teaching controversial issues successfully. Due to the fact that teaching about a controversial issues versus discussing it, it is suggested to teach in small groups.

**KEY CONCEPTS:**

To sufficiently set up for the classroom, in order to teach a controversial topic of varying nature or degrees.

**RELEVANCY TO STUDENTS' LIVES, NEEDS AND INTERESTS:**

Developing critical thinking in students is important because it transfers out of school into their everyday life activities. Students will have to seek out information, compare and contrast the alternative choices, judge their options based on their own standards and then independently select or settle on one choice or option.

**INTEGRATION WITH OTHER CONTENT AREAS:**

Controversial topics occur in most subjects that are taught in school, so this lesson holds relevancy to most content areas, especially for higher education.

**CSTP STANDARDS: 1: Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning**

**1.1:** Using knowledge of students to engage them in learning

**1.2:** Connecting learning to students' prior knowledge, backgrounds, life experiences, and interests

**1.3:** Connecting subject matter to meaningful, real-life contexts

**1.4:** Using a variety of instructional strategies, resources, and technologies to meet students' diverse learning needs

**1.5:** Promoting critical thinking through inquiry, problem solving, and reflection

**OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of this lesson is to teach about a controversial issue.

**PROCEDURES:**

1) In order to start a lesson about controversial issues, there needs to be time and planning spent on some building blocks that would support the lesson. According to the “Tackling Controversial Issues Handbook” a teacher must build the following 3 blocks: raising awareness of the issue, developing empathy, and lastly exploring different ways to respond to it.

A) Building Block 1: Raising Awareness of the Issue- Present information through multiple perspectives and resources. Teachers can work with students to analyze the legitimacy of the information to look for bias.

B) Building Block 2: Developing Empathy- According to the handbook mentioned above, developing empathy can be cultivated through many small class activities like for example: role play, using a photograph or silent conversation- where students write their response to a text or an issue rather than saying it.

C) Building Block 3: Exploring how to Respond- It is strongly suggested for teachers to reframe the questions or issues in a general public manner, rather than private and personal manner in order to maximize participation and to avoid possible unsafe situations.

2) While planning a controversial lesson, teachers should make a detailed outline of their lesson entailing their overall *aim* for the lesson, what *values* they want to address, what *key aspects* and *questions* they want to ask, and finally through which *methodologies* are they going to teach the lesson (“Tackling Controversial,” 2012).

3) Usually, it is helpful to begin a controversial issues teaching lesson with a discussion of what students define as a controversial issue. As a whole class or in small groups students can outline what they believe is a controversial issue and what makes it controversial.

**ACTIVITY #1:** Ask students to make a list of issues that can be considered too controversial to be taught in the context of their school. Then ask students to list out all of the different factors that might make an issue controversial. This list can include the following: students’ background, teachers’ background, students’ age, social and religious climate, political climate, school location, events that take place in and around the school, or the media (“Tackling Controversial,” 2012).

**ACTIVITY #2:** Having reflected on the list of factors that are too controversial to teach in the school have students create a spectrum with one end being “Too controversial to even think about it” to the other end “No problem, give it a try.”

The above two activities would provide the teacher with an aim to teach the controversial issues.

4) Next, the teacher should reflect on their own goals and values of why they are teaching the particular lesson. These could include such values as tolerance, empathy, or respect and equality. As to the targeted goal, it can be simple as being critical thinkers.

5) Classroom ground rules need to be designed as a whole class in order to have a safe, productive, and conducive learning session.

6) The teacher needs to decide what role they are going to play in the instruction of the lesson.

7) Next, the framing of the question has to done in a very careful manner in order to make it into a public controversial issue rather than a private and personal controversial issue, which would result in students being put on the spot and therefore being embarrassed or opposite hurt or angered.

8) Next, the right kinds of methodologies need to be plugged into the instruction in order to encourage maximum interaction amongst the students.

9) Some methodologies from the “Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom” handbook are provided below:

- |                                 |   |                                     |
|---------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Think Pair Share             | } | <b>Discussion</b>                   |
| 2. Circular Brainstorm          |   |                                     |
| 3. Carousel Discussion          |   |                                     |
| 4. Jigsaw Discussion            |   |                                     |
| 5. Speed Debate                 | } | <b>Debates</b>                      |
| 6. Walking Debate               |   |                                     |
| 7. Spectrum Debate              |   |                                     |
| 8. Yes and... Debate            |   |                                     |
| 9. Five Whys                    | } | <b>Developing Critical Thinking</b> |
| 10. Analyzing Newspapers        |   |                                     |
| 11. What’s the Point?           |   |                                     |
| 12. Comparison Alley            |   |                                     |
| 13. Thinking through Challenges |   |                                     |
| 14. Role Play                   | } | <b>Developing Empathy</b>           |
| 15. Conscience Alley            |   |                                     |
| 16. Using Photographs           |   |                                     |
| 17. Silent Conversation         |   |                                     |
| 18. On the Margins              |   |                                     |

- 19. Other People's Shoes
- 20. Consequence Wheel

An in depth description of how to incorporate all of these methodologies into a lesson can be found in the following link ["Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom" Handbook](#) .

**10)** To conciliate students with extremely dissenting or minority views a venue to express themselves through other mediums such additional physical spaces provided in the classroom. Some really good examples are provided in the handbook. For instance the authors suggest creating a "No Easy Answers Board" – this is the board to record point that are heavily contested or students were not able to find a solution or some sort of compromise on ("Tackling Controversial," 2012).

Another idea suggested by the handbook is to create a "Graffiti Wall" in the classroom, where students are able to express their thoughts on the content of the class lesson or their thoughts on controversial issues ("Tackling Controversial," 2012).

**11)** Have a system of taking a break, if the situation in the classroom becomes too heated.

**12)** Lastly, at the end of the lesson, there should be summative exercise led by the instructor to briefly review everything that was learned or discussed.

**SUBJECT AREA:** Social Studies

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**LESSON PLAN TITLE:**

Animal Rights (Borrowed from

[http://www.channel4.com/learning/programmenotes/inset/teachcontrv\\_credits.htm](http://www.channel4.com/learning/programmenotes/inset/teachcontrv_credits.htm))

**CONTENT PURPOSE:**

The content purpose of this lesson is to show a sample lesson of how to teach controversial issues. In this lesson students will understand the meaning of animal rights, issues relating to the use of animals as food, and explore their own understanding and view on animals as food.

**KEY CONCEPTS:**

The key concepts of this lesson are to have students analyze a topic that most of them are very familiar with and it is an everyday part of their lives. Additionally, students will analyze the treatment of animals in a society whose meat industry plays a large role in its economy.

**RELEVANCY TO STUDENTS' LIVES, NEEDS AND INTERESTS:**

The issue of animal rights is near and dear to many students at the current developmental stage of their lives. At this age, many students are exploring the world around them and in search for their personal identities.

**INTEGRATION WITH OTHER CONTENT AREAS:**

Social Studies and Health

**CSTP STANDARDS: 3: Understanding and Organizing Subject Matter for Student Learning**

**3.1:** Demonstrating knowledge of subject matter, academic content standards, and curriculum frameworks

**3.2:** Applying knowledge of student development and proficiencies to ensure students understanding of subject matter

**3.3:** Organizing curriculum to facilitate student understanding of subject matter.

**3.4:** Utilizing instructional strategies that are appropriate to the subject matter

**3.5:** Using and adapting resources, technologies, and standards-aligned instructional materials, including adopted materials, to make subject matter accessible to all students.

**3.6:** Addressing the needs of English learners and students with special needs to provide equitable access to the content

**OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of this lesson is to have students gain awareness about a common controversial topic, such as animal rights.

**PROCEDURES:**

1) Set up classroom rules and procedures either with the class or on your own.

**Carousel Discussion:**

2) Arrange the classroom for a carousel discussion- arrange chair in two circles, one inside the other, so they are both facing each other.

3) Pose the question and only allow 60 seconds of discussion: “What are all the different ways that humans use animals?”

4) Ask the outer circle to rotate clockwise three places and the inner circle to rotate anticlockwise three places.

5) Pose the questions and allow 90 seconds of discussion: “What are all of the different ways that humans use animals?” and “Why do you think humans use the animals in the way that they use them?”

6) Ask the outer circle outer circle to rotate clockwise three places and the inner circle to rotate anticlockwise three places.

7) Pose the questions and allow for 120 seconds of discussion: “What are all the different ways that humans use animals? Why do you think humans use the animas in the way that they use them? And finally, Whether they think it is right to treat animas in the way they are treated?”

**Whole Class Discussion:**

8) Come together to discuss as a whole class what was discussed in the carousel discussion activity. The following points should be mentioned by the students:

- Different ways that animals are used
- All the different influences that impact people’s views of how animals should be used
- Judgments made by the listeners in the discussion and whether that is a right that belongs to the listeners.
- Lastly, is there a right or wrong view? What constitutes the “right” view and what constitutes the “wrong” view?

**Role Play Carousel Discussion:**

9) Divide the class into six groups with six members in each then assign each member of the group the following roles:

1. A vegan
2. A vegetarian
3. Someone who is thinking about vegetarianism
4. Someone who only eats organic or free-range meat
5. A regular meat eater who is not concerned with the origins of meat.
6. A pescetarian – someone who only eats seafood as their source of meat.

10) Provide each group information about their topic. Make sure that the content of the information is not biased and consists of multiple perspectives regarding the issue. Additionally, the information should be of multiple formats such as newspapers, scholarly articles, videos, commentary, websites, books, pamphlets, handbooks, or flyers.

11) Students should be allotted ample amount of time to review all of the resources in order to gain a thorough understanding of their issue. Also students should be encouraged to jot down any questions or comments they might have.

12) After each group has gone over the provided information, they should select one person from their group to be the speaker to represent the role of they were assigned.

13) Again student should be seated in the carousel like discussion form with an inner and an outer circle. The inner circle however should only have the six speakers with the assigned roles and the rest of the class should be the audience in the outer circle.

14) Convey to the students that people who are role playing a certain belief or ideas should strongly support their view through the content information that was provided and they should not surpass the discussion decorum that was created as group. If necessary, strict parameters and ground rules for discussion need to be reviewed or re-established before continuing the role playing activity.

15) Set up the role playing scene by initiating the conversation with the following statement... “You should not eat meat because...”

16) The role playing conversation in the inner circle can be continued or interrupted by the members in the outer circle to help their group mate in their role. The speaker can even call for a break in order to solicit advice from their group mates.

17) When it seems like the roleplaying activity is tapering out, the teacher should bring the whole class together to sum up or review the different viewpoints of each member in the role playing activity.

**Human Extremes Spectrum**

**18)** To conclude the lesson, have students create a spectrum of where the students stand in their view on the topic of animal use for food. At one end, have the vegan student sit on one end of the classroom and the other student who did not care about where the meat comes from, on the other end of the classroom. After this is established have students position themselves in between the two extremes. This is a safe way to set up a range of opinions without expecting students to explicitly state their views.

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