

TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL/SENSITIVE ISSUES

American academic tradition stresses the free contest of ideas as a vital element both in the development of curriculum and in classroom teaching.

Teaching Controversial Issues

Training in reflective and responsive thinking may be incorporated in course offerings at all grade levels. This training is impossible, or at least severely hampered, if the community does not respect the principles of freedom and recognize that dissent does not necessarily mean disloyalty. However, one form of dissent which is incompatible with freedom is that which attempts to end freedom. Irrational fears do just this, and thereby may block the school in its efforts to handle controversial issues in an atmosphere of freedom and thoroughness.

- A. It is the responsibility of the schools to make provision for the study of controversial issues.
 - 1. The policy on controversial issues should be defined in terms of the rights of students rather than in terms of the rights of teachers.
 - 2. The study should be emphasized in the high school, when most students are mature enough to study the significant controversial issues facing our society.
 - 3. The study should be objective and scholarly with an emphasis on factual information.

- B. In the study of controversial issues the students have the following rights:
 - 1. The right to study under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice;
 - 2. The right to free access to all relevant information;
 - 3. The right to study any controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at the appropriate level) he/she should begin to have an opinion; and
 - 4. The right to form and express opinions on controversial issues without thereby jeopardizing relations with the teacher or the school.

- C. The teacher employs the same methods in handling controversial issues as characterize the best teaching at any time.
 - 1. The teacher, in selecting both the content and the method of instruction, is mindful of the maturity level of the students.
 - 2. The teacher can defend that the controversial subject to be discussed belongs within the framework of the curriculum to be covered. The subject must be significant as well as meaningful for the students, and the students will have the opportunity to:
 - a) examine their own prior knowledge and opinions;
 - b) participate in classroom discussions;

- c) reflect on new information in their oral and written practices; and
 - d) develop new understanding and/or appreciation for various sides of a controversial topic.
3. The teacher handles the classroom presentation in ways which will ensure a wide range of information and interpretation for the students' consideration and strives to present a balance among many points of view.
 4. The teacher's role is to be a facilitator in helping students discover and interpret all sides of an issue. The teacher must ensure that facts are true and as current as possible.
 5. The teacher encourages keeping an open mind, basing one's judgement on known facts that have been examined for relevancy, and encourages students to be ready to change one's opinion should new facts or understanding come into light.
 6. The emphasis should always be on the process of forming an opinion.

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