



Discussion Guide: "The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools"

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Heterodox Academy invites current K-12 school administrators and teachers and those training to become administrators and teachers to adopt or adapt these discussion questions as warranted by their interests and circumstances. Our one request: within an environment of open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual humility, please encourage disagreement and ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Citation: Zimmerman, J., & Robertson, E. (2017). *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools*. University of Chicago Press.

About the Book

From the publisher: "From the fights about the teaching of evolution to the details of sex education, it may seem like American schools are hotbeds of controversy. But as Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson show in this book, while such topics are widely debated outside of school walls, within school classrooms themselves they are often nervously avoided. And this, they argue, is a tremendous disservice to our students. Armed with a detailed history of American educational policy and a clear philosophical analysis of the value of contention in public discourse, they show that one of the best things American schools can do is face controversial topics head on. With common-sense wisdom, they show how emphasis in the classroom on careful, reasoned debates about hot-button issues—the sorts of debates that are sadly harder and harder to find in today's name-calling political environment—can prepare students for lives as democratic citizens."

Discussion Questions

Should Controversial Issues be Taught?

1. Zimmerman and Robertson provide a historical reflection of how and why controversy was kept out of the classroom. Horace Mann, for example, argued that schools should teach "common political principles that are 'accepted by all'" (p. 11). Richard Rorty claimed that public school teachers in a democratic society should not teach controversial issues: "It is impossible for the public schools of a democratic country to educate youth in areas in which education would call into questions beliefs that are central to the general tenor of public opinion" (p. 57). Why might calling into question central beliefs be impossible in a democratic society, and why should schools teach political principles accepted by all? Do you agree or disagree with these statements?
2. Zimmerman and Robertson assert that controversial issues should be taught in public schools for two reasons: (1) "Sometimes it is impossible to teach a subject properly without taking a stand on controversial issues" (such as causes of the Mexican-American War and evolution). (2) "Civic education as preparation for life in a democratic society should develop the ability to discuss hot-button issues with other citizens who hold positions that compete with one's own" (p. 60). Do you agree with these reasons? Are there other valid or important reasons controversial topics should be taught if you agree that they should be taught at all?

3. Zimmerman and Robertson pose the question: if teachers should not teach about controversial issues, “what would a ‘just the facts’ curriculum look like” (p. 63)? And later in the book, they make the following statement supporting teaching controversial issues: “Public school teachers are entrusted with passing on to the next generation the society’s accumulated store of knowledge” (p. 89). Do you think the passing on of “society’s accumulated store of knowledge” requires the teaching of controversial issues? Or would a “just the facts curriculum” be sufficient to prepare young people for participation in a democratic society?

Which Controversial Issues Should be Taught?

4. Zimmerman and Robertson describe three possibilities for when issues might be regarded as controversial: maximally controversial issues, expert-public disagreements, and disagreements solely among experts (found on pp. 49-50). What are the key characteristics of each type of controversy? Should each type of controversy be taught? If so, how should these controversies be taught? Do your responses to these questions align with or differ from how the authors address these questions, and if so, how?

5. The third possibility for when an issue might be regarded as controversial—maximally controversial issues—often involves moral questions (e.g., Should gay marriage be legal? Is racism primarily structural or individual?) and questions that have no clear right answer. Why discuss maximally controversial issues when they are moral questions with no clear right answer? If discussed, what should be the goal of such a discussion? The deliberation of maximally controversial issues may produce the belief among students that everything is a matter of opinion. How do the authors propose addressing this problem (see p. 72)? Do you agree or disagree with their proposal?

What is the Role of the Teacher?

6. Zimmerman and Robertson described that in the 1930s, most of the public did not want nor trust teachers to handle controversial topics (p. 22). What was the concern of the public at this time? Has the sentiment changed over time? Do you agree or disagree with the sentiment?

7. Zimmerman and Robertson described scenarios in which citizens opposed teaching a balanced approach to controversial issues. In the wake of World War I, the Daughters of the American Revolution declared, “We want no teachers who say there are two sides to every question” (p. 18). This sentiment was reiterated during the Cold War with the question of communism: “We want NOTHING ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE of any of those questions” (p. 25). Are there examples that you can point to today that resemble these arguments that there are no “two sides to every question” regarding questions being debated in the public square? If so, how does this mentality toward issues with which the public holds opposing views affect how the issues are taught in schools?

8. Later in the book, Zimmerman and Robertson described a teachers' association's objection to a one-sided curriculum that took an anti-nuclear stance. "Since the time of Socrates, it has been the charge and privilege of teachers [to] encourage their students to examine all sides of controversial issues." "To do otherwise is to rob students of that freedom of choice which is central to our concept [of] a democratic society ... It presumes that the teacher has an inside track on Truth" (p. 41). Compare this sentiment to the sentiments in the previous question: How do the advocates described in question seven and in this question view the role of the teacher in the discussion of controversial issues? How do the views compare to your view of the role of teachers?

9. Zimmerman and Robertson tell a story of an instructor at a university asking his students to write the word "Jesus" on a piece of paper, then put the paper on the floor and step on it. "The objective of the lesson was to teach students about the power of cultural figures." Zimmerman and Robertson ask, did the teacher cross "an ethical line between education and mandated self-discovery" (p. 44)? In a similar vein, Zimmerman and Robertson quote philosopher Alexander Meiklejohn to state that teachers should be allowed to share their opinion but caution against using the classroom to indoctrinate students: "Our teachers must be advocates, but they may never be salesmen or propagandists" (p. 95). Is it possible for teachers to share their opinions with their students without the risk of indoctrinating them? If so, how should teachers present their opinions while establishing an ethical line they will not cross?

10. Zimmerman and Robertson note that statements by professional associations, school district policies, and legal opinions in court cases have all sought to define academic freedom in public schools. One issue of concern is how to balance teachers as private citizens and teachers as public employees. Because the primary responsibility of teachers is "the education of the young" (p. 88), should public school teachers be viewed as different from other public employees? How should academic freedom be defined for public school teachers?

How to Teach Controversial Issues

11. Zimmerman and Robertson present deliberation as one method for teaching controversial issues. They claim, "If deliberation is a central aspect of civic participation and schools are places with the necessary background conditions for practicing it [i.e., an environment in which young people with diverse perspectives work together and alongside each other], then discussing controversial issues in schools can be seen as a way of preparing future citizens to deliberate" (pp. 61-62). What are the pros for teaching deliberation as a means of civic engagement? The authors provide three examples for why teaching deliberation of controversial ideas might be rejected: What are they? Do you agree or disagree?

12. Zimmerman and Robertson present three approaches that teachers can take toward controversial issues in the classroom: avoidance, directive teaching, and neutrality (starting on p. 67). What does each approach look like in practice? Under what circumstances should each approach be taken up? For example, what is the appropriate approach for maximally controversial issues versus expert-public disagreements?

13. Zimmerman and Robertson provide an example of “avoidance” when describing the response of schools to the killing of Michael Brown by the police: When a controversial issue arises, like the killing of Michael Brown, teachers are told to “change the subject” or only discuss the issue if raised by a student, and “if students became ‘emotional about the situation,’ refer them to a counselor or social workers” (p. 93). What are the consequences of treating students as if they are too fragile to engage in difficult conversations? Conversations about the incident were at the local community college, but, as one student noted, many students “don’t have a chance to talk about race and policing with others who may not share their views” (p. 93). What is the role of the school versus other institution in the community when it comes to discussion about controversial issues?

How to Balance the Interests of Parents and Students

14. Zimmerman and Robertson note that when controversial issues were ignored, students viewed their teachers as foremen, wardens, and robotic apologists for the regime: “Students do not want as teachers ‘plastic people’—colorless, less-than-real figures, who are unwilling to express their own opinions” (p. 34). But later the authors describe that as the teaching force was showing signs of liberal, or sometimes radical, sensibilities, more controversial issues were making their way into classrooms, and “some students as well as parents charged newly radicalized instructors with imposing their dogmas in school.” How should schools go about striking a balance between the wishes of parents and students and the role of teachers?

15. Zimmerman and Robertson pose three questions to interrogate the conflict between teaching controversial issues and the religious, political, or cultural commitments of parents: “Does the parents’ interest in developing a shared life with their children generate a right to ‘ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions?’” “Does meeting the children’s interest in leading a good life require the development of capacities for critically assessing the way of life of their parents and choosing an available alternative if they find it is not good for them?” “Does democratic civic education itself require the development of critical capacities that enable autonomous judgment?” (pp. 77-78). What is your response to these questions?

How to Incorporate Controversial Issues in Public Schools

16. Zimmerman and Robertson quote philosopher Alexander Meiklejohn to claim that teachers cannot teach reasoned deliberation if they are forbidden or afraid to discuss controversial issues: “How can [teachers] expect to teach students to think fearlessly if they are beset by fears?” (p. 23). Plus, teachers have felt ill-prepared to teach about controversial topics and have lacked the time to do so. If teachers are not prepared to lead discussion-based activities, and if there is limited time in the school day to do so, should controversial issues be taught? If so, how should the system, whether teacher training or curriculum, change or adapt to allow for these discussions?

17. Zimmerman and Robertson propose six policy prescriptions: (1) Distinguishing types of controversial issues; (2) Parental rights; (3) Student rights to discuss controversial issues; (4) Determining who decides whether a particular controversial issue should be taught; (5) Due process rights for teachers; (6) Scope for learning how to teach controversial issues (pp. 90-91). Do you agree or disagree with these policy prescriptions? Would you add or omit any?

18. Zimmerman and Robertson close the book by asserting: "Part of the problem lies in the preparation of teachers, who are rarely instructed in how to address controversial questions." "But the bigger obstacle involves the overall status of our teaching force, which has never received the same respect or credibility as other white-collar professions" (p. 99). Do you agree or disagree with the "bigger obstacle" that the authors present? Do you think that there are other issues or barriers to teaching controversial issues in public schools that ought to be addressed?