

Strategy: Teaching Controversial Issues

Teaching controversial issues is difficult. If you approach these issues in a formal and methodical way, your class can focus on the issue instead of creating controversy.

Origin

Clarke, P. (2005). Teaching controversial issues: A four-step classroom strategy for clear thinking on controversial issues. Retrieved from <http://bctf.ca/global/teachingresources/clarkepat/teachingcontroversialissues.html>.

Application

This is a straightforward teaching strategy for controversial issues. This four-part approach provides students with a set of questions to examine multiple points of view.

1. What is the issue about?

Identify what about the issue is sparking controversy. Virtually all controversy turns around three types of issues:

Values: What should it be? What is best?

Information: What is the truth? What is the case?

Concepts: What does this mean? How should this be defined?

This will help students begin their analysis by identifying the nature of the controversy. Additionally, students may identify cases in which issues are being defined differently by different groups and may be able to relate those differences back to the type of issue being examined.

2. What are the arguments?

Students need to determine just what is being said and what kinds of support exist for the claims being made. The type of issue driving the controversy may raise questions about the evidence.

Values: What criteria are being used to make a judgment? Moral (how will this affect the whole group) or Prudential (how will this affect my group)? Would you like that done to you? What if everybody did that? Are there any situations where you would feel differently about this value?

Information: Is there adequate information? Are the claims accurate? Is the information appropriate to the issue? Are the sources primary or secondary? Are the conclusions reasonable given the information?

Concepts: Are the meanings and definitions clear? Are they consistent? Are they used in appropriate context?

3. What is assumed?

Strategically asking this question teaches students that not all opinions, positions, or points of view are equally valid. The legitimacy of an argument is closely tied to the assumptions and/or

attitudes behind the argument. For example, if the assumptions are prejudicial, this is grounds for criticism and reduces the legitimacy of the argument.

Students need to question the following:

What are the assumptions behind the argument? Is the position valid?

Who is the voice of the argument? Insiders or outsiders? Is there a difference in what these two groups are saying?

4. How are the arguments manipulated?

Context matters and students need to examine how arguments are presented in specific and strategic ways. Students need to examine:

Who is involved and what are their positions on the issue? What are their reasons for taking their position?

How is information being selected, emphasized, or ignored? To what extent is the media creating an issue or manipulating an argument?

Reflection

- How does this compare to what you are already doing?

- What issues in your course could students use this strategy to explore?

- What are some possible formats for this activity/assignment?