Teaching with Controversy

Educators awaken student voice by providing a safe place for dialogue about immigration, war, and other hot-button issues.

Susan Graseck

In a high school classroom in southern Arizona, students are wrapping up a week of study and discussion on U.S. immigration policy. The students include recent immigrants from near and far as well as students whose families immigrated to the United States generations ago. They have just completed a role-play in which they explored radically different policy alternatives, working in groups to make a case for each. Now it's time to talk—really talk.

Sarah, a U.S.-born student, leads off. "I never thought about why people would risk as much as they do to come here."

Chris, also U.S.-born, turns to Arturo, who has recently arrived from Colombia. "Boy, I never thought how hard it must be for you to leave everything behind and not know if you'll ever get to go back."

Peter, a quiet Asian American, hesitates for a moment and then turns to Michael, who was openly antagonistic when the class started this unit. "I'm American, too, you know. I just don't look like you. But I can't forget I'm Chinese also. I don't want to. You talk about being Irish. Why is it so different?"

"I suppose it's not," says Michael, reflecting on his own roots as a descendant of Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine. He turns to Maria, a recent Mexican immigrant. "And I guess your family came here for the same reasons mine did. We just did it a long time ago. It was easier then—I realize that now."

"Yes, but," another U.S.-born student chimes in, "you have to look at the other side, too. Look at what's happening. Look at
the cost. We’re having to pay for people who just come without permission. Don’t we have to think about that, too?”

There’s silence for a moment and then another student asks, “Do you think we’d be so upset if the immigrants today were coming from Canada?” A lively, but respectful discussion about ethnic prejudices ensues.

**Why Tackle Controversial Issues?**

High school is the last universal stop on the path to adulthood and full citizenship. Here, students can and should learn to wrestle collectively with important public issues they will encounter as 21st century citizens, including controversial issues.

The 2003 report *The Civic Mission of Schools* calls for education practices that will develop competent and responsible citizens who are informed on a range of public issues, equipped to participate thoughtfully in public debates, and aware of their own ability to make a difference. As one of its six key approaches, the report calls on educators to “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” (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003, p. 6).

More recently, Diana Hess (2009) argues in *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* that planned, moderated discussions of controversial political issues teach essential skills for a healthy democracy. Drawing on qualitative data from her longitudinal study, Hess provides advice about how to define controversial issues and teach political discussion in classrooms.

Teachers can introduce controversial issues into the social studies curriculum in multiple ways. In some cases, student interests may shape the issues to be addressed. In other cases, the teacher may use prepared materials that provide the foundation for discussion. One resource for such materials is our Choices Program at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies (www.choices.edu). As director of the program, I have worked with many teachers who are addressing controversial issues in the core high school curriculum. Here is what happens in the classrooms of several such teachers.

**Choices About Immigration**

Barbara Williams teaches at Buena High School in Sierra Vista, Arizona, just 25 miles from the Mexican border. The discussion described earlier is typical of what takes place as her students study immigration policy. Armed with an appreciation of the various roles that immigration has played in U.S. history and an understanding of the forces at work in the current immigration debate, students in her classroom work in small groups to explore four contrasting options for current U.S. policy: (1) open ourselves to the ideas and energy of the world around us, (2) cooperate with others to provide development assistance to poor countries to make emigration unnecessary, (3) be selective and admit the talent we need, or (4) restrict immigration.

This framework of options—each described in a short narrative and fleshed out with an explanation of the resulting policies, underlying beliefs, and arguments for and against—brings tough issues out into the open where they can be safely explored and discussed. Using a role-play of a hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims as the setting, each group argues for one of the options. Addressing a highly contested public issue in this way enables Williams’s students to explore multiple—often difficult—perspectives without having to commit themselves to one point of view before they have explored a range of options and discussed them with classmates.

“Having engaged in this role-play as a way to set the stage,” she says, “they get braver in discussion—less able to hide in silence as we deal with the issues, and less apt to rely on bombastic repetition of extreme talk from one position or another.” A student such as Michael, who was openly antagonistic when the subject of immigration was first raised, may be able to step back and look at the issue from multiple points of view.

Williams reports that, for Michael, the turning point seemed to come when the class was exploring immigrants’ stories early in their unit. As his group pored over the story of Daniel, an illegal Mexican immigrant, he became quieter. When the other groups in the class presented their stories, he listened intently. As a member of the Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims during the role-play, he listened with deep concentration as each group presented its assigned option, then posed thoughtful questions to the presenters. As the class discussion drew to a close, Michael made the last comment: “You know, this isn’t as easy as I thought it was. I keep thinking of my Irish great-great-grandfather. . . . He’s not all that different from Daniel in the stories we read. I’m not changing my mind. . . . but I think I’d better think about all this some more.”

“The students want to understand why the war started and where we’re going from here.”
Choices About Iraq

Sarah Roeske doesn’t shy away from controversial issues either. Roeske teaches a global issues course at Mountain View High School in Stafford, Virginia, located just a couple of miles from Marine Corps Base Quantico. It is not unusual for her classroom to reverberate with the boom of jets taking off or practicing overhead. Typically, a quarter of her students have had family or friends deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

You might think that such a classroom is no place to discuss a subject as sensitive as the Iraq War. On the contrary, says Roeske. The high concentration of military families among her students makes this tough topic one of the most important she has taken on. “The students want to understand why the war started and where we’re going from here,” she says. “To ignore such a contemporary issue would be a disservice to them. It’s important, and especially so because of our location.”

Roeske’s students begin their unit with prepared materials on the history of Iraq from early times through the downfall of Saddam Hussein and the political, economic, and security challenges in the region today. These readings explore from multiple perspectives the controversy surrounding the U.S. decision to go to war and the conduct of the war. Roeske supplements these readings with recent magazine articles bringing these issues up to the present. Students engage in a variety of activities that bring the topic to life; for example, they visit carefully selected blogs that provide a diverse and textured understanding of life in Baghdad today.

With this background in place, Roeske’s students explore three divergent options for U.S. policy in Iraq, each framed in clear terms, complete with goals, policy proposals, risks, and trade-offs. To prepare for a role-play activity in which they will defend one of the three options, students work in small groups. Each student is assigned a distinct role, such as foreign or domestic policy adviser, military expert, or Iraq specialist. The students in each group draw on the knowledge they have gained from readings and classroom activities to develop a presentation for the class that makes the best case they can for their option. The presentations provide a platform for further discussion of the pros and cons of these alternatives, including additional factors the presenters did not consider, after which students decide for themselves what they think.

“As students role-play, they get braver in discussion—less able to hide in silence.”

Discussion of the options can become personal in Roeske’s community. These issues are real to her students. Some students talk about the difficulties their family members have had after returning home. One girl whose parents and older sibling were all deployed to Iraq at the same time says that her father shot and killed a civilian because he was in a situation in which he believed he had no other choice. This leads to a thoughtful discussion about civilians in war and not always knowing who is hostile. Rather than fearing these additions, Roeske embraces them.

Finally, Roeske’s students are expected to propose their own option reflecting their views. They draw from the alternatives presented, their own family experiences, and the knowledge they have gained from the readings and activities. “The students are challenged through this process of role-play and discussion to think more deeply,” says Roeske, “and it is reflected in their options. They take ownership of their beliefs, which is virtually impossible when they’re simply lectured to without the benefit of this active engagement.”

Choices About World Trade

For a unit on world trade, Josh Orlin’s economics students at Hudson High School in Massachusetts read editorials, view videos, and engage in other activi-
ties that provide a basic understanding of international trade, the globalization of the economy, and the effects of trade policies on people around the world. Students role-play economic decision makers to understand the incentives for trade, evaluate changes in the world economic system from multiple perspectives, and analyze and graph economic data on changing global trade patterns.

As the final instructional element of the unit and an informal assessment of student learning, the class simulates a congressional hearing on U.S. international trade policy. Students explore four contrasting options: (1) keep the U.S. economy on top, (2) protect U.S. workers, not the multimillionaires who own the businesses, (3) use trade policy to promote global concerns such as human rights, and (4) work for free and fair trade.

The simulation leads into an assignment in which students write a formal position paper either arguing for one of the four options or presenting a fifth option of their own. Their formal assessment for the unit is participation in a Socratic seminar in which they wrestle with such questions as, What is a just distribution of the costs and benefits of a particular policy, such as a tariff? When workers' interests collide with consumers' interests, whose interests should come first? To what extent, if any, should the "winners" compensate the "losers"? Who has the right to make these decisions? Throughout the seminar, Otlin's students apply their knowledge and reasoning skills, test theories, probe the counterarguments, and adjust their views as the discussion progresses. This process enables them to find their own voice and to take a stand in a safe, nonconfrontational setting.

The Rules of the Road

 Engagement with controversial issues in the classroom provides a powerful vehicle for developing civic skills. However, to meet the full potential and to avoid some of the pitfalls, a few guidelines are helpful. They will be familiar ideas to many teachers who are incorporating discussion of controversial issues into their classrooms. What is new is that emerging research data (see Hess, 2009, for example) now provide evidence supporting the contention that study of controversial issues is important to the development of civic skills.

The most important rule is this: When raising controversial issues, don't avoid the controversy. Instead, put students into its heart, where they can explore multiple perspectives. No student should sit through a discussion thinking there's one right answer. Rather, students should be actively analyzing multiple perspectives in light of solid information and learning to wrestle respectfully with competing values to come to their own considered judgment on the issue.

Ensure Openness to Multiple Views

It's not hard to imagine the problems that could come up when discussing immigration policy in a diverse classroom on the Mexican border. But Barbara Williams's students have successfully tackled this hot-button topic because Williams makes sure to give legitimacy to a range of views, to enable students to ground their discussions in solid content knowledge, and to challenge students to think about and adapt their views in light of new understandings.

What if all students in the class appear to have the same view? In these circumstances, the teacher needs to create an environment in which students understand that reasonable people view the issues differently. There may even be a few students with
students in classroom discussions. He teachers a range of pedagogical deliberation practices in his own classroom in Indiana. Zupin has been working with Community High School in Winamac, says Kevin Zupin, a teacher at Winamac. “I never knew their best friend’s view on immigration took center stage. In this environment, serious discussions in which their views are given the opportunity to engage in without judging them.”

“Students will rise to the occasion when given the opportunity to engage in serious discussions in which their views take center stage. In this environment, civic learning takes place. To make room for this kind of student-owned discussion, teachers must put students at the center.

“I am amazed at how many students never knew their best friend’s view on an issue until we discussed it in class,” says Kevin Zupin, a teacher at Winamac Community High School in Winamac, Indiana. Zupin has been working with deliberation practices in his own classroom and exploring with other Indiana teachers a range of pedagogical approaches to create space for all students in classroom discussions. He and his colleagues have been particularly successful using fishbowls, in which students hold a discussion in a small group of 5 to 8 while other students observe, take notes on the discussion, and have the opportunity to think without the pressure of participation. Students rotate roles until all have been in the fishbowl. This structure gets the teacher off the stage and establishes the expectation that all students will interact with peers. Without a carefully structured format like the fishbowl process, some reticent students who are new to the idea of discussion may be silenced because more confident students take the floor.

We often view critical thinking, public speaking, and problem solving as the domains of high-achieving students. But engagement in student-centered discussion of complex public issues need not be limited to our top students. Students with a wide range of abilities and learning styles can participate in discussions of controversial issues if the resources and teaching approaches are appropriately scaffolded.

Expanding the Circle of Democracy

The new administration in Washington is making efforts to encourage responsible public dialogue, expand the circle of democratic participation, and invite citizens to provide guidance to elected officials so that they make the best choices. This is an invitation that educators should accept.

Students have opinions on public issues, and those opinions are important to them. As educators, it is our job to awaken student voice and to enable students to enter the public dialogue on important policy decisions about immigration, economic policy, environmental stewardship, or war and peace. But our responsibility does not stop there. We need to teach students how to share their thinking with policymakers at every level of society. Structuring discussion of controversial issues in the classroom is a first step in encouraging our students to move beyond the classroom, to bring their knowledge to bear on the world in which they live.

The Choices Program develops teaching resources on historical and current international issues, provides professional development for classroom teachers, and sponsors programs that engage students beyond the classroom. The curriculum units described in this article—U.S. Immigration Policy in an Unsettled World; Conflict in Iraq: Searching for Solutions; and International Trade: Competition and Cooperation in a Globalized World—as well as about 30 others dealing with both current and historical issues—are available for purchase at www.choices.edu/resources. Additional resources are available at no cost.

References


Susan Graseck is Director of the Choices Program at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island (www.choices.edu) and a Senior Fellow at Brown’s Watson Institute for International Studies; susan_graseck@brown.edu.