




# Discussions That Drive Democracy

*Schools are ideal sites for preparing students to honor diverse viewpoints.*

**Diana Hess**



A democracy without controversial issues is like an ocean without fish or a symphony without sound. Discussing controversies about the nature of the public good and how to achieve it is essential if we are to educate for democracy; it's not going too far to say that without controversy, there is no democracy.

Clearly, educators need to prepare students to discuss controversial issues. This means teaching young people that they should not shun, fear, or ignore such issues. Students need to have experiences respectfully discussing authentic questions about public problems and the kinds of policies that can address those problems.

The precise content of controversial issues differs by time and context. Here are some contemporary questions that U.S. students might grapple with: Should the federal government grant amnesty to people living in the country without legal documents? Should my state guarantee health care to all its residents? How should the international



community combat terrorism? Should my district build a new school?

Often, highly debatable issues are directly linked to the lives of students in our classrooms. Students need to recognize that their views matter—not because there is something special about young people, but precisely because there is not. Their views matter because *all* views matter in a democracy.

### Undoing “The Big Sort”

Discussing controversial political issues in schools is nothing new, but the need for such discussions has a new urgency because adults in the United States increasingly interact and socialize in ideologically homogeneous communities, a phenomenon that journalist Bill Bishop (2008) has labeled “the big sort.” People increasingly talk primarily with people who already share their views, access media that reinforce what they already believe, and ruminate on what they hear within an echo chamber of like-mindedness.

Although schools alone cannot fix “the big sort,” they can be part of the solution. Schools are good venues for discussing controversial political issues—in some ways, better than locations outside school. Not only do schools offer courses in which controversial issues fit naturally (such as civics and social studies), but they also feature ideological, religious, and social class diversity among students. Students are more likely to encounter diversity in school than out.

Discussing controversial political issues is a demanding form of teaching that has high payoffs. Students who engage in discussions learn how to make and defend an argument and analyze others’ positions in constructive ways. They develop a better understanding of important content knowledge, especially content that is so difficult it can’t be learned by merely listening to a lecture. Such discussion requires and produces intellectual rigor.

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At the same time, students who take part in high-quality discussions of controversial issues become more interested in and tolerant of views different from their own.

### Lively and Respectful

During the past 10 years, I’ve witnessed many exchanges that strengthened secondary students’ skills and tolerance as I researched how teachers foster discussions of controversial issues. I saw teachers who were exceptionally good at teaching students how to participate in such discussions. Yet in many schools, it’s difficult for teachers to engage in this kind of teaching. Barriers abound, ranging from teachers’ lack of sufficient preparation, to recent trends in schooling that privilege low-level knowledge, to community climates that hinder consideration of differing viewpoints.

Another reason deserves special mention because it pertains to respectful classrooms. Many teachers want to create environments in which students feel safe, valued, and respected. Controversial issues, by their very nature, can create passionate responses. This passion often degenerates into silence, anger, disrespect, and name-calling—the very opposite of the interactions teachers hope to promote. Teachers want discussions to be lively, but they may not have had success leading discussions that are lively *and* respectful. Faced with this choice, many opt for respect over passion and avoid heated discussions.

But teachers don’t have to make this choice. It is possible to talk about controversial issues in civil and productive ways so that students bring a healthy amount of passion to the classroom without treating one another harshly. From 1998 to 2008, I visited middle and high school social studies classrooms to identify what teachers who are good at this kind of teaching do and how their students learn from the discussions. I’ve paid particular attention to how teachers can create a climate of respect, especially when students discuss topics about which they passionately disagree (Hess, 2002, 2009).

Ann Twain is one such teacher. When I observed her classroom, Ann had taught social studies at a magnet middle school for five years. She had created a curriculum for her mixed 7th and 8th grade class that combined U.S. history, civics, and world geography with whole-class discussions of controversial issues.



Ann had developed a format called town meeting. In these large-group discussions, each participant assumed the role of a person with a particular perspective on a contentious issue. Ann encouraged students to represent positions other than those they currently held. She also made sure that role-plays covered a relatively equal distribution of viewpoints.

At the time I observed, the local community was hotly debating a state initiative banning affirmative action programs, set to be voted on in the upcoming election. Ann chose this topic for one of her eight town meetings, in part because discussing ballot initiatives gets kids talking to their parents about the importance of being informed on an issue that's headed for a vote.

### Town Meeting in Action

Ann taught the town meeting model to her students by explaining the assessment rubric she'd developed, which measured students' content knowledge of the issue, their role portrayal, and their effectiveness as a discussion participant. She showed students a videotape of an excellent town meeting from the previous year. She occasionally stopped the videotape and pointed out contributions that met the rubric's "Exemplary" standard, in particular how participants showed one another respect by listening carefully and not engaging in personal attacks. She noted the ways in which students built off one another's comments, used one another's names and respectful terms for direct address, asked others to participate, stayed in character, thought on their feet, and used facts as the basis for their statements.

Ann followed up this positive example with a negative one, a videotape of adults participating in an ineffective policy discussion. She had students identify what the adults were doing wrong, such as monopolizing the discussion, not using evidence to

support their opinions, and talking over one another.

In conjunction with the video, Ann took time to prepare students for respectful discussion in other ways. She reminded them that disagreement during discussions is completely normal and that it can and should be civil. She distinguished between disagreement *while* thinking and disagreement *without*

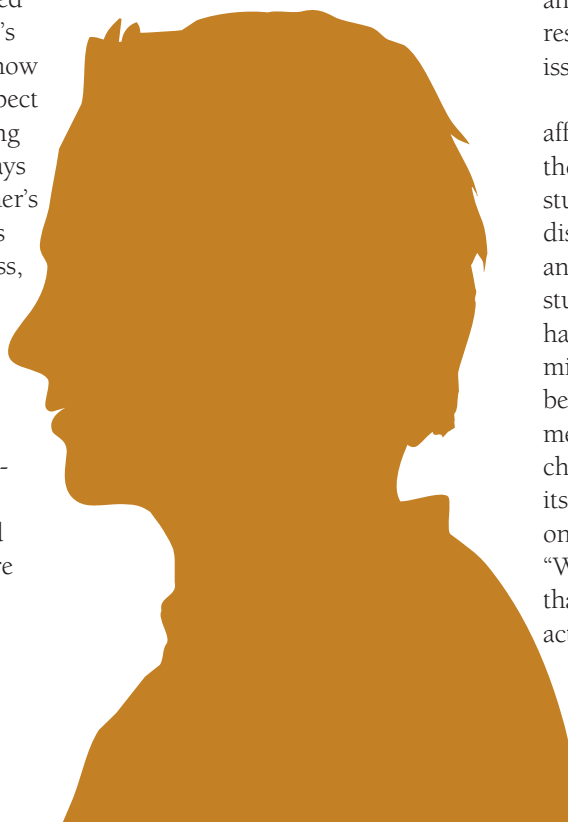
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thinking, encouraging the former over the latter. She also provided them with opportunities to practice reflective listening and conflict mediation language like "I statements" ("When you do \_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_"). Although these lessons were certainly important to engage in before the town meetings began, Ann was not averse to intervening with more instruction if students' discussion started to disintegrate.

One week before the town meeting, Ann gave each student a packet of background material. After one class period of instruction on the issue, Ann and her students created the roles, which included the state governor, a university admissions officer, a reporter, a white business owner, a minority student, and representatives of education and advocacy organizations. Once students had selected their roles, Ann gave each one a packet of information focused on his or her adopted position and a sheet that required students to state "their" positions and identify arguments for and against the policy. For the next three days, students prepared for their roles by reading articles, watching videos, listening to speakers, searching for information online, and interviewing representatives of relevant organizations.

During the 90-minute discussion I observed, all but two of 29 students took part in the exchange. Throughout, students raised their hands and Ann called on them, going back and forth between roles that supported and opposed the initiative. About two-thirds of the way through class, Ann asked students to drop their assigned roles and continue the conversation by representing their own perspectives on the issue.

Students' conflicting opinions on the affirmative action initiative paralleled those in the larger public debate. Some students thought there was still a lot of discrimination against racial minorities and women; others disagreed. One student, Lenny, quoted from a study he had read to the effect that a woman or minority has only a 2 percent chance of being hired by a company run by white men. Another student immediately challenged that statistic and asked for its source. Lenny pointed to an article on his desk. A third student asserted, "Well, if the statistic Lenny cited is true, that's why we need to keep affirmative action."





Some students made comments that contextualized the initiative in terms of tension between competing goods and values, such as equality versus safety. Steve, for instance, said, “I don’t think we should risk people’s lives. Fire departments are forced to hire women because of affirmative action, and women can’t do the job.” Carol backed him up: “Many women couldn’t pass the physical tests that men had to pass . . . so the department changed the tests. That’s risking people’s lives.” A third student countered by saying that even when women scored highest on the local fire department’s test, they were still discriminated against.

Ann was incredibly busy throughout the discussion. She called on students, assessed students by marking her

spoke. Effective participation includes respectful listening, building on one another’s arguments, and demonstrating content knowledge through asking questions and providing more elaborate responses, rather than simply stating factual information that isn’t used to build an argument.

### **Key Practices**

Ann’s format is only one model. I’ve observed a lot of variety in how teachers successfully prepare students to discuss controversial political issues. Teachers use different forms of discussion, ranging from small-group models like structured academic controversy, to whole-class discussions, to simulations of state legislatures that combine several classes.

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tally sheet each time someone spoke, and occasionally redirected the discussion by asking clarifying questions and raising new issues. When factual disputes needed to be clarified, Ann inserted short questions, such as, “Are quotas legal?” At other times, she helped students who were having difficulty by rephrasing their questions or comments. The town meeting ended with Ann directing students to turn to their neighbors and say anything about the initiative that they hadn’t had time to contribute.

After town meetings, Ann’s students generally talk about what went well and what did not, and Ann gives students her assessment of the town meeting as a whole, focusing on the traits listed in the rubric. She assesses students’ individual participation on their role sheets. Students understand that “participation” is not simply the number of times they

Some teachers formally evaluate students’ participation in the discussions and count it toward a student’s grade; others do not. Some teachers elicit students’ participation in selecting the issues to discuss, whereas others make that decision on their own. Some teachers share their own views on the issue at hand; others never do. There is no single approach to follow. However, I’ve uncovered key similarities in the practice of teachers who demonstrated pedagogical skill and inspired the best discussions.

### **Mix It Up Early and Often**

Successful teachers are extremely attentive to the need to create a classroom climate that honors both controversy and respect. One way they do this is to insist that students learn and use one another’s names, starting early in the year. This may seem trivial, but high

school students frequently tell me how unusual it is for a teacher to insist that they learn their peers’ names.

Many teachers take this further, going to great lengths—again, early in the school year—to ensure that all students work with one another. Allowing students to select their own work or discussion groups is generally not a good idea. If given the opportunity, most students will create homogeneous groups, which diminishes one of the key assets in most classes—diversity. Teachers also explain to students why they insist that students have a chance to work with everyone in class, reinforcing the idea that diversity is an asset that should not be wasted.

### **Prepare Students**

Skillful teachers know that discussions will not happen without careful preparation about the issues involved. Teachers tell me that giving all students background information and preparation time is necessary to achieve both quality and equality of participation.

In Ann’s case, she often elicited what students knew (or thought they knew) about a topic before assigning any preliminary readings. This helped address initial misconceptions they had as a group and alerted her to gaps in their knowledge base that she could help fill. She also asked questions like, “Why might some people disagree about whether illegal immigration is a problem?” as a way to take the heat off students who might feel pressured to articulate an opinion right away.

Teachers need to prepare themselves as well. Because teaching through issues discussion is so tricky, it’s best if a school provides its teachers with professional development specifically on this pedagogy, with ongoing support available as they begin to try it.

### **Respect: Tell and Show**

Many secondary students don’t arrive in class with solid discussion skills. Effective teachers take care to teach



students how to interact respectfully. The process often starts with building a conceptual understanding of what discussion is and how it differs from other forms of classroom talk, such as recitation. Ann Twain accomplished this by showing students videotapes of high-quality and poor discussions so students could see what to aim for and what to avoid.

Ann made it very clear that she would not tolerate the disrespectful discourse demonstrated on the “bad discussion” video, both because it was rude and because it produced low-quality talk that generated more heat than light. Teachers who achieve great discussions set norms. In many cases, they involve students in establishing and enforcing rules to follow, then post them prominently in the classroom or list them on rubrics.

Such actions won’t prevent all instances of disrespectful or rude participation. Sometimes students know full well they have crossed the line, and they need to be held accountable for these transgressions. But many teachers told me that their students didn’t understand the boundaries of civil discourse. Teaching norms for respectful exchange is simply part of the job of teaching young people to participate in discussion.

When Ann Twain’s students laughed at one another during a town meeting, Ann organized the class into mixed groups of three to create a list of what respect and disrespect looked like. Sharing their conclusions with the class helped everyone realize how much people’s views varied regarding what constituted respectful interaction.

Finally, effective teachers show a lot of respect for students. They recognize that they can teach as much by showing as by telling. They model respectful discourse themselves and take responsibility for their actions when they make mistakes. I heard one teacher publicly apologize for a quip that a student had interpreted as a breach of the norms of

respect. Later, this student told me how important it was that the teacher held himself to the standards he’d established for the class.

I encourage teachers to take up the challenge of teaching students how to deliberate controversies by creating a climate of respect, holding students accountable for norms of civil discourse, and teaching the skills at the root of civil exchanges. Each teacher will find his or her own best way to accept this challenge, depending on the unique community and—possibly—local obstacles. But each must start by showing respect for students and for the intrinsic relationship between controversy and democracy. **cl**

*Author’s note:* All teacher and student names are pseudonyms. See my book, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, for more detail on Ann

Twain’s teaching and more examples of teachers who successfully foster discussion of controversial issues.

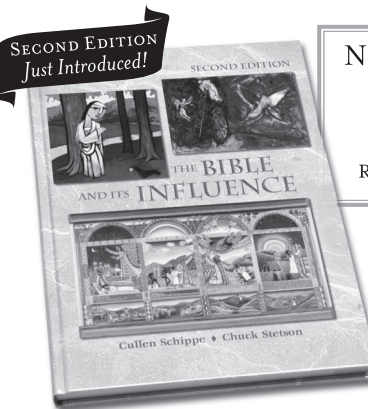
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