

Teaching Students to Discuss Controversial Public Issues

By Diana Hess

September 2001

Talking with others, especially people with different viewpoints, about matters of public and common concern is a basic pro-democracy skill and act. For that reason, teaching young people how to participate more effectively in discussions of controversial public issues (CPI) has long been a major goal of social studies educators. In most social studies classes, however, there are few CPI discussions. Those teachers who include CPI discussions in their curricula recognize that it is difficult both to teach and to learn these skills. Drawing on recent research, this Digest examines the meaning of CPI discussions and recommends how teachers can structure their curricula and teaching methods to improve their students' ability to discuss controversial issues.

WHAT IS A CPI DISCUSSION?

A CPI is an unresolved question of public policy that sparks significant disagreement. Recent examples in the United States pertain to national, state, and local levels of government: Should federal funding be used for embryonic stem cell research? Should a state government mandate that students pass a graduation test to earn a high school diploma? Should public funds of a local government be used to build a new sports stadium? Should a curfew for youth be enacted by a city council?

An international CPI could involve negotiations about a new environmental treaty or whether nations with poor human rights records should be allowed to host the Olympics.

There are three attributes of a CPI: (1) the controversy is "live," meaning it is currently on the public platter; (2) some "public" either informs or makes a decision about the issue; and (3) there is significant disagreement about the best solution. For an example of a non-CPI, consider this question: should women have the right to vote in the United States? This issue is not a CPI because it is not a live controversy in the United States (although it certainly is one in some parts of the world).

Although there are numerous ways to include controversial public issues in the school curriculum such as simulations or role plays, the discussion of them has long been advocated by social studies educators (Hahn 1991, 1998; Parker 1996). "Discussion is a form of group inquiry--a consciously-shared form, a listening-and-talking form. It requires a group of people, an aim, a text (broadly defined to include an issue), and a focusing question that is tied to one of the three aims." The three aims are to "reach a decision about what a 'we' should do to achieve an end; to reach an enlarged understanding of a text; or to reach agreement on ends" (Parker & Hess 2001, 281). While most CPI discussions are focused on the deliberative aim (i.e., "what should we do?"), it is important to focus CPI discussions on building a deeper understanding of the issue or considering the ends that a "public" wants to achieve.

At any given time, a plethora of controversial public issues could be included in the curriculum. Consequently, it is important for teachers to establish clear criteria for selecting issues. Successful criteria include: (1) the extent to which the issue involves a clear conflict between competing values (such as equality and liberty); (2) the availability of high quality instructional resources pertaining to the issue; (3) the connection between a specific issue and some larger curricular goal; and (4) the likelihood that students will be interested in the issue and will want

to discuss it.

HOW TO IMPROVE CPI DISCUSSIONS

Two recent studies of middle and high school social studies teachers show that it is important to teach both for and with discussion (Hess and Posselt 2001; Hess 1998). Teaching for discussion means helping students improve their discussion abilities. The outcome of this type of instruction is students who become highly skilled discussants. Teaching with discussion extends to such considerations as the need to develop understanding of a specific issue, to enhance critical thinking skills, and to improve interpersonal skills (Larson 1997). Teachers who consider these needs for using CPI discussions are more likely to devote sufficient time to them and to teach explicitly the skills students need to become better discussants.

Teachers who are skilled at teaching their students to become better CPI discussants do not assume that students come into their classes with those skills already developed. Successful teachers begin by helping an entire class conceptualize what a good CPI discussion sounds and looks like by showing examples in video programs (Miller & Singleton 1997). Then students are asked to co-construct the rules and norms that they will follow when participating in CPI discussions. Specific skills are taught explicitly through modeling and practice, such as (1) how to ask probing questions without insulting someone; (2) how to make a transition to another point; and (3) how to invite the participation of students who have yet to participate. Throughout this process, skilled teachers ask students to assess the quality of their discussions and determine what they are doing well and what still needs work.

Most CPI discussions, especially those with a large group, require the teacher to be a facilitator, someone who knows the issue well and has the teaching skills to spark spirited, widespread, and high-quality participation. A facilitator who stays too quiet is missing an opportunity to help students have a better discussion. Additionally, facilitators should work to ensure that the content of their questions is aligned to the goals of the discussion. For example, one standard for an effective CPI discussion is to strive for a "best case, fair hearing of competing points of view" (Kelly 1996, 10). Facilitator questions, then, should focus on raising different perspectives and ensuring that the discussants stick with them long enough to generate a fair hearing.

Another discussion goal is equality of participation. This does not mean that every discussant will say exactly as much as every other discussant, but that many people will participate and no single person or small group will dominate. A question that would achieve that goal is: "Does anyone else who has not yet had a chance to participate have anything to say about this point?" In summary, facilitators should hold their own participation in check. But they should facilitate strongly enough to work toward both high quality and equality of participation in the discussion.

WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK ABOUT DISCUSSION?

Recent research involving high school social studies students shows that, for the vast majority, discussion is a valued form of learning. For example, a clear majority of the students said they enjoyed class discussions and that participating in discussion helps them learn more. There is, however, an interesting contradiction between the value students place on discussions and whether they think they have a responsibility to participate in them. A strong majority of

students said that they have a responsibility to contribute to class discussions, that verbal expression is an essential skill, and that students should be taught how to participate effectively in discussions. They are, however, divided over whether participation in class discussion is a matter of personal choice and on whether or not it is fair for a teacher to base a part of a student's grade on the quality of her or his participation. The most important factors that influence students' verbal participation in discussion are knowledge about a discussion topic, interest in the topic, and time to think before speaking.

Clearly, peers significantly influence whether or not students participate in class discussions. For example, receiving criticism from classmates during a discussion and fearing that classmates will think an idea is unworthy are more likely to cause students to speak less in a discussion than fear that the teacher will criticize or judge students' contributions. What teachers do and say, however, is still critical to students' discussion participation. By projecting that she or he cares about students as people, asking questions about what students say in a discussion, and basing a part of students' grades on discussion participation, a teacher can stimulate most students to speak more in discussion (Hess & Posselt 2001; Schwingle 2000).

Diana Hess is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.
