

Strategy: Discussion of Controversial Issues

The value of discussion about controversial issues has been well documented as a strategy to promote critical thinking and development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Pairing the strategies of identifying controversial issues and developing questions to guide controversial discussions can increase the quality of class discussions.

Origin

Hess, D. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York: Routledge.

Application

Before engaging students in a controversial issues discussion, determine if the issue is closed, open, or tipping:

- Closed: Questions for which we want students to build and believe a particular answer
- Open: Questions for which we want students to engage in deliberating multiple and competing answers
- Tipping: The process during which questions move between open and closed

Controversy (among the public and/or within the discipline) occurs when:

- Individuals think an issue is closed and therefore not open for discussion
- Individuals think an issue is open and in need of discussion
- Issues are in the process of tipping—moving from closed to open or open to closed

Five key ideas to guide controversial discussion:

There is a difference between (1) topics, problems, and issues (2) current events and issues (3) specific case issues and larger perennial issues (4) public and private issues and (5) political issues and Constitutional issues.

1. There is a difference between topics, problems, and issues

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Problem</i>	<i>Issue</i>
An event, place, an act or process	Item that needs to be addressed; helps to clarify the issue	Policy proposal
What do you think about healthcare?	Does everyone have the healthcare they need?	What should be done to enhance access to high quality healthcare?

2. There is a difference between current events and issues

<i>Current events</i>	<i>Issues</i>
What is happening	What to do about what is happening
Popular information; what is in the news	What is facing society that is important
Did you hear about the local school bus incident?	Should the school board vote to approve a tax increase?

