

Dealing with Controversy (Lessons that Use the News)

Alignment with CC State Standards

Lessons align with all standards under Key Ideas and Details (CCRA.R.1, R.2, R.3 and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (CCCRA.R.7, CCRA.R.8, and CCRA.R.9). The lessons on controversy emphasize point of view under Craft and Structure Standards (CCRA.R.6) and focus on the structure of texts when students read and write different types of stories in newspapers (CCRA.R.5).

Complexity depends on the text that teachers and students use in their analyses (CCRA.R.10). Comics, photos and illustrations present choices. Single stories about a familiar topic offer text that may involve different points of view. Editorials and commentaries on opposite editorial pages may require background knowledge and contain challenging, less familiar words and phrases. A series require students to conduct research to collect stories on an issue or topic, look for key ideas and details in each story and draw conclusions based on more than a single text.

Scaffolding may require that students work from the easiest text (comics) to the hardest text (opinion writing) and from a single story about a familiar topic to multiple stories about an unfamiliar issue to support evidence-based arguments.

English/ Language Arts that follow align with Common Core State Standards for Reading Informational Text:

- R.CCR.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- R.CCR.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
- R.CCR.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- R.CCR.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- R.CCR.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
- R.CCR.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
- R.CCR.10 Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Speaking and Listening Standards in English/Language Arts apply to the discussions on controversial issues, as shown below:

Comprehension and Collaboration:

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade specific topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly (SL.5.1).

Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally (SL.5.2).

Summarize the points a speaker makes and explain how each claim is supported by reasons and evidence (SL.5.3).

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas:

Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace (SL.5.4).

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Title-1: What does controversy mean?

How to prepare:

Discuss the meaning of controversy. Ask students to identify situations in literature and history in which individuals, groups or governments were clearly right or wrong. Those are situations about which civilized people agree, and those situations are not controversial.

Provide examples such as: Should democracy be promoted? Should children be left on their own? Tell students that no one is likely to speak out against democracy or speak in favor of leaving children unattended. Neither is a controversial topic. An issue becomes controversial when significant differences of opinion exist over which possible alternatives can be selected. Explain that you will consider an issue controversial if 70% of students or fewer take one side and at least 30% take another side or other sides.

Discuss questions dealing with democracy or leaving children unattended that are controversial: Should the U.S. offer military support to sustain the rule of a democratically-elected leader? Should the U.S. work with non-democratic governments to maintain order? Should parents who leave their children unattended receive jail terms? Should children be removed from homes where they have been left without caretakers?

Explain that free speech or open discussion of controversial issues characterizes democracy. Let students know that you will provide opportunities for their study and open discussion (collaborative conversations).

What to do:

Have students locate behaviors, attitudes and beliefs in the newspaper that they think civilized people will support or object to. They should share what they choose in writing and explain why. Remind them to be specific, so anyone reading what they have said will know which behavior, attitude or belief they refer to.

Have a small group review the choices. They should identify the most often chosen examples and the reasons given for choosing them and look for examples that may be controversial and not be accepted by 70% of the class or more.

Students should present their findings, using graphs that show how often a behavior, attitude or belief was chosen. If they think any students chose controversial subjects, they should present those and allow the class to vote by secret ballot to see if the subjects indeed are controversial. If students indicate an interest in discussing the pros and cons of any issue that proves to be controversial, apply approaches outlined in subsequent lessons.

Ask students to make their selections in pairs or small groups if you think they will benefit from hearing other perspectives.

Title-2: What's the "should" question? Answer yes or no; explain why.

How to prepare:

Provide newspapers. Choose a current controversy that you feel is appropriate for your students to explore. Use the controversy to help students examine their own reasoning and the reasoning of others by holding discussions of dilemma situation. The controversy will determine the length of time you will need to supply newspapers.

If this is your students' first discussion on sensitive questions, choose a less inflammatory issue. As they become more experienced in dealing with controversy, choose more demanding issues and/or let them nominate appropriate topics. Choose a single story or a comic strip that deals with a controversial subject, if needing simpler reading material on which to base your questions.

Make sure that any dilemma you and your students choose include these five essential ingredients:

1. Focus: Focus on situations that students might face; explore topics covered in school curricula; or focus on contemporary culture or issues.
2. Central Character: Focus on a central character or primary group of characters.
3. Choice: Make sure that the character has two alternatives.
4. Ethics: Involve students in reasoning through age-old concerns—social norms, civil liberties, equal opportunity, life, personal conscience, contract, property, roles and issues of acceptance, authority, punishment or truth.
5. Question: End with a specific "should" question which asks what a character should do in the situation.

What to do:

Follow a controversy in the newspaper. Collect and have students collect tear sheets that include news, features, analysis, columns, letters to the editor, editorials, columns, cartoons, comics, ads and any other related information in the newspaper.

Step 1: Working individually or in groups, have students define important terms, list the major facts, and identify opposing points of view. Have the class share and compile their findings.

Pose a "should" question, such as: Should he/she have fired the gun? Should he lose his job? Should the newspaper have run the comic strip? Should the president send impose sanctions, send troops and/or propose legislation, etc.? Should the Congress pass laws or the Supreme Court make X decision?

Step 2: Give students time to think. Have students state tentative positions and write down their supporting reasons. Take a vote to determine if the class disagrees with at least a 70-30 split. Without disagreement, there is no controversy. If there is no conflict, rewrite your “should” question, or have students write “should” questions and collect them. Choose or work with students to choose an essential question about the core issue

Step 3: Use a variety of small group settings to examine the reasoning. Have students examine different reasons in terms of issues, similar dilemmas or consequences.

Step 4: In large group and whole class discussions, use probing questions such as:

1. Do you agree with what he/she just said about the question raised by the story?
2. Would someone summarize the reasons, which have just been given?
3. Would you respond to his comments about XXXX?
4. You disagreed earlier with (name of person) position. Could you paraphrase his/her position and provide your point of view?
5. Does the person (name) have a moral obligation/ or legal responsibility to XXXX?
6. From a different person’s perspective, how does the situation seem?
7. Should someone always help a friend or relative? Should someone who disobeys a rule or law be punished?

Step 5: Have the class vote again in secret on the question and report the results to the class. Allow undecided votes but throughout the process, encourage students to examine reasons and stake out positions.

A graphic organizer, CHALLENGING QUESTIONS, outlines the steps from coming up with a “should” question to responding.

Source: Galbraith, Ronald E. and Thomas M. Jones, Moral Reasoning: A Teaching Handbook for Adapting Kohlberg to the Classroom, Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1976.

Title-3: Active Listening

How to prepare:

Provide print or digital newspapers and discuss the meaning of controversy. Make sure students have a working definition of controversy. Use the “defining” lesson, “What is a controversy?” if students to review the term.

Explain that discussions require students to listen thoughtfully to each other, even when/ if they disagree.

What to do:

Have students locate photos and stories that show individuals, groups or governments dealing with controversy. Ask them which ones show people listening to each other and trying to establish and follow rules that will help them reach solutions to problems.

Title-4: What are the best reasons or evidence?

How to prepare:

Provide print or digital newspapers and identify or have students help you identify a controversial subject to study. Review the meaning of “controversy.”

Establish ground rules for conducting discussions: Everyone should have a chance to speak. Explain that strong opinions are supported by text or evidence that can be verified. Discuss the goal of the lesson, not to reach agreement but rather to inform students and have them listen thoughtfully to each other, even when/ if they disagree.

What to do:

Using print editions and archived stories, have students collect news and information. They should also search other reliable sources for information related to the controversy.

Ask students to outline all sides of an issue, presented in credible sources. Use reading and collaborative conversations to make sure they grasp the facts. During discussions (or seminars), they should use facts to support any opinions they voice. They should cite sources in news stories and elsewhere and not rely on hearsay and/or emotional appeal.

Have students list ten reasons why something related to the controversy should or should not be done. In small groups, have them improve the list and create broad categories. They should vote on the best reasons and vote again for the side they choose.

Or have the whole class or small groups select the three best reasons for each side. Students should vote before and after discussion, and determine whether the conversations affect their positions.

Ask students to write about the difficulty they have suspending judgment they and other students collect news and information.

Follow-Up: Review what you know and learn from reading about how to judge the credibility of a source. Discuss your conclusions and post checklist on a classroom chart for reference. Add to this source:

<http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/six-critical-questions-can-use-evaluate-media-content/>

Title-5: Mediator, Arbiter, Judge and Jury

How to prepare:

Provide print or digital newspapers and have students collect news and information from the newspapers and other sources on controversial subjects.

If this is a first attempt at having students discuss controversial subjects, you may choose an issue that can be discussed with a single story, a comic strip or a series of stories that can be collected over a short period of time. As students become more independent, they may choose a more complicated issue that is reported over several weeks, or each small group may choose to study a different controversy and conduct research to gather information about it on their own.

What to do:

Organize students into assigned roles. Different persons should assume the roles of mediator, arbiter and judge. You may also choose a group (jury) to review news and information presented in support of the positions.

Other students should take opposing positions and choose someone to speak for their side. Have the spokesperson for each side debate the facts gathered and collected from newspapers and/or other sources before the judge and/or jury. Have the judge and/or jury decide which side prevails. After the debate, students should change sides and go through the process again.

Or have two students debate before the class after having worked together to gather facts. The class should say whether the students provided enough news and information and which side seemed stronger. Discuss the difficulty any student has when/if he/she presents the side of a controversy that he/she does not support. Talk about the fairness of having someone argue a side that he/she opposes.

After hearing all sides, have the mediator or arbiter propose a solution, which is often a compromise. Have the class vote. Does the vote support any proposed compromise?

Title-6: Where do you stand?

How to prepare:

Provide access to print and/or digital editions of newspapers and ask students to collect opinions about a controversy. They should look for reasons given for holding any opinion.

What to do:

After reading and discussing the factual information gathered on a controversy, students should look closely at the varying viewpoints. Have them list all of the opinion statements that they find in quotes, editorials, cartoons, columns and letters to the editor. Take the list and give each opinion to a student. Have students line up with the students holding the most extreme views on each end. Others should line up according to their positions between the extremes.

Present or have students present each statement related to the controversy. Have the student support and/or defend with facts the position he or she has been given. After this student finishes, others with similar or opposing views should contribute on request. Students may change position at any time during the discussion. If helpful, offer an open-ended sentence, such as the one below:

This is where I stand because...

If concerned that students learn to listen to their classmates, have them write down but not sign paragraphs that summarize what they've heard or summarize orally what others have said.

After considering news and information and discussing opinions expressed by various sources, have students write their opinion, using editorials, letters to the editor, columns and editorial columns as models.

Title-7: Mediation Case Study

What is the conflict?

1. Facts:
 - a. What happened or what are the key facts that have led to the dispute?
 - b. Who are the people involved? What positions do they hold?
 - c. Why is the problem or conflict coming up now?
2. Issues:
 - a. What issues are at the heart of the dispute?
 - b. What does each side of the dispute want? How do you know?
3. Brainstorm solutions to the problem or ways to resolve the conflict.
4. Discuss the pros and cons of potential solutions or ways to resolve the conflict.
5. Merge, eliminate, and/or pare down potential solutions or ways to resolve the conflict. Determine whether each is short- and/ or long-term.
6. Determine the two most workable solutions or ways to resolve the conflict.

EXTRA: Vote by secret ballot to determine which of the workable solutions or ways of resolving the conflict received more support in your classroom.

The outline above was adapted from "Teaching Responsibility" developed in 1997 by then NC Dept. of Public Instruction consultant, Doug Robertson.