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Teaching Controversial Issues: Deepening Engagement and Critical Thinking

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<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/50574>

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**Teaching Controversial Subjects
Annotated Bibliography
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Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (2014). Discussion based teaching and handling controversial topics in the classroom. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsd>

A web-based resource with strategies, resources, recommendations, and techniques.

Crosby, Dorian B. (2012). Meeting the challenge: Teaching sensitive subject matter. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 12(2), pp. 91-104. http://www.uncw.edu/cte/ET/articles/Vol12_2/Crosby.pdf

This article discusses the challenges faced by a black female academic when teaching an African American history course. After a difficult term, the course was successfully redesigned using an approach described as Engaging Students Through Connecting and Reflecting (ESTCR). Details about the ESTCR learning activities are provided along with a more general discussion of best practices for teaching challenging courses.

Flinders University (n.d.). Inclusive practices for managing controversial issues in the classroom. http://www.flinders.edu.au/equal-opportunity_files/documents/cdip/TIPS_controversial.pdf

An excellent short tip sheet on how to: plan for inclusive teaching; build trust and a positive classroom atmosphere; discuss the contextual nature of knowledge and encourage critical thinking; use teachable moments for transformation; manage emotions; overcome resistance; and moderate incivility. It also provides a short quiz for self-assessment.

Fournier-Sylvester, N. (2013). Daring to debate: Strategies for teaching controversial issues in the classroom. *College Quarterly*, 16(3), pp. 1-7. <http://www.collegequarterly.ca/2013-vol16-num03-summer/fournier-sylvester.html>

Lots of practical strategies presented including why teach controversial issues, how to do so, identifying weak arguments, establishing ground rules, preparing the discussion, different roles and ways to facilitate, and how to wrap-up.

Lusk, A.B. & Weinberg, A.S. (1994). Discussing controversial topics in the classroom: Creating a context for learning. *Teaching Sociology*, 22 (4), pp. 301-308. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1318922?uid=3739392&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=3737720&uid=4&sid=21105263131713>

This paper explores peer interactions and power differences that may impact successful discussions. It offers insight into how to move beyond student's assumptions, discomforts and fears.

Mason, K.A. & Briggs, L.T. (2011). Myths and moral panics: An active learning approach to controversial topics. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, 5(1), pp2-14.

http://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/Teaching%20and%20Learning/TD.5.1.4_Mason%26Briggs_Myths%26Moral_Panics.pdf

This paper looks at student resistance, power differences and active learning techniques to facilitate better discussion. It also explores how to deal with disruption. The context is criminal justice and criminology, but the ideas expressed are applicable across disciplines.

Oulton, C, Day, V, Dillon, J & Grace, M. (2004). Controversial issues: Teacher's attitudes and practices in the context of citizenship education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(4), pp. 399-507.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0305498042000303973#.VGz53L7hzwM>

This paper focuses on the principles a teacher should adopt when teaching these issues: neutrality, balance, and reason. It provides research on strategies used and principles to guide discussions.

Pace, D. (2003). Controlled fission: Teaching supercharged subjects. *College Teaching*, 51(2), pp. 42-45.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/87567550309596410>

Emphasizing the considerable leeway that instructors have to shape student learning, this article provides ten strategies for planning a course that facilitates thoughtful discussion and debate around controversial topics.

Payne, B K & Gainey, R R. (2003). Understanding and developing controversial issues in college courses. *College Teaching*, 51(2), pp. 52-60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/87567550309596412>

This article provides an interesting multidisciplinary list of common controversial issues along with citations. Also discussed are simple strategies for facilitating discussions. These include verbal cues (calling on students, allowing for silence, empathetic responses, instructor self-exposure) and physical cues (making eye contact, moving around the room, sitting down, showing enthusiasm).

Schmich, T & McMahon, T. (2010). GTF Series Teaching challenging race, class and gender materials.
http://codac.uoregon.edu/files/2011/02/Teaching_Challenging_Materials_GTF_Series-3.pdf

An excellent resource with links to a number of other resources, but also numerous tips and tools on how to teach and discuss controversial issues including strategies, teachable moments, key considerations, managing resistance, self-reflection on one's own anxieties or biases, how to counter resistance to discussions about privilege and power, and tips to consider for success.

Warren, L. (n.d.) Managing hot moments in the classroom. Online Resource from Derek Bok Centre for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University.
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

A brief exploration of how to find teaching opportunities in the moment by managing our own reactions, helping students to think productively about the issues raised during hot moments, getting students to do the work, directly addressing the issue and having a fallback position. Some tips for self-management are offered.

Lampert, J. & Eastman, D.L. (2008). Teaching controversial subjects. Yale Teaching Centre.
<http://www.yale.edu/graduateschool/teaching/controversial>

An online module that helps you explore your role and approach and provides links to other sources.

