



Politics, Partisanship, and Pedagogy: What Should be Controversial in the Classroom?

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Timothy Eiger was the last to arrive at the history department office, joining his three colleagues on the 10th grade social studies team. After exchanging a few initial greetings, they dove right into the agenda.¹

“Let’s get planning for the rest of our PoP topics. We have three more planned for this year,” Tim reminded the group, as he wrote the remaining months of the academic year on the board. Power of Persuasion—better known as PoP—was an assignment that challenged students to research an issue, critically evaluate it, take a position, and present their argument to classmates. It had been a core element of the 10th grade social studies curriculum for the past six years.

Tim had been at Northern High School for 25 years and had served as chair of the history department for the past eight. Students appreciated his carefully structured, student-centered classroom, and his commitment to making time for students to explore their own ideas. “I know we all agreed to brainstorm some possible topics before the meeting. With all the network issues we’ve been having, I couldn’t access the shared document, so let’s just go around the circle and I’ll write them up on the board.”

“OK, we have eight topics to work from,” Tim concluded once they had all shared their ideas. “What seems most promising?”

“I’ll start us off,” offered Patricia Perry. “I really think the trade war with China should be top of the list.” Patricia had been at Northern nearly as long as Tim. In addition to teaching 10th grade social studies, she taught AP US History and AP Government, and had a reputation for being tough. Students frequently reported back that their time with “Ms. P” prepared them for college-level work more than any other class.

Tim chuckled. “Well, that’s certainly leading the news cycle. But do you really think that our students will be excited about the trade war with China? We know that these work best when the students are really engaged in the topic.”

“Well, it might not be at the top of their list. But it’s important, and probably even more important than we realize,” challenged Patricia.

Jack Beale jumped in. “I agree that it’s an important and relevant topic, but not for this setting. Do I need to remind you about the Iran Nuclear Deal PoP last year? They were so disengaged. It was awful. Let’s try to pick something closer to home, something that affects their everyday lives.” Jack was newer to Northern, but had already carved out a big reputation at the school. He was an unabashed activist and seemed to have a real gift for engaging students in community affairs. Although he was more forthright about his politics than other teachers, he was known to be fair and respectful to all of his students.

“You’re probably right,” Patricia conceded. “I’ll just weave it into my classes when we study other trade wars. So can we cross that one off the list?” She got up and put a line through “trade with China” on the board. “Which one should we discuss next?”

Melissa Mendoza, the newest member of the team, spoke up. “What about DAPL?” Sensing that not all of her colleagues were familiar with the acronym, she added, “The Dakota Access Pipeline—the oil

pipeline that has prompted huge protests at Standing Rock, North Dakota.” Melissa was in her second year teaching at Northern, having come fresh out of college. Her first year was hard, but she received great reports from her mentor teacher as well as the District Instructional Coach. She was becoming increasingly confident and vocal, both in her classroom and on the team.

Tim immediately responded, “This seems like a perfect topic for PoP. There are strong, evidence-based arguments on both sides, multiple stakeholders, and several relevant and important issues: the environment, Native American rights, the economy...” Tim’s enthusiasm for such a controversial issue made sense, since he was known for telling students that his job was to teach them how to think, not what to think. His classes frequently featured facilitating lively and respectful debates about major controversial issues.

Jack, too, was visibly excited by the idea. “It’s also a really interesting context to learn about political protest and organizing.”

Melissa was bolstered by the enthusiasm but was not convinced that it was unanimous. “Patricia, you look hesitant.”

“Well, I guess I’m worried I don’t know enough about DAPL to facilitate PoP effectively,” Patricia responded slowly. “I know the kids do the research and so forth, but I need to understand the different sides in order to push their thinking.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Melissa responded. “Take a look at this and see if it helps.” Melissa turned her laptop to show the others a list of resources for middle and high school teachers interested in teaching DAPL. “My former methods professor sent me these last week. What do you think?” she asked.

“Wow,” Patricia replied. “That looks amazing. DAPL still wouldn’t be my first choice, but I like the many possible areas that students can explore the balanced nature of it. I’m willing to try it.”

Tim immediately jumped on the agreement. “Great! One topic down. Maybe this won’t be as difficult as we thought. Melissa, can you put those resources in the shared folder?”

Melissa gave a thumbs up as Patricia circled DAPL on the board. “What’s next?”

They all pondered the remaining topics. “What do you all think about the creation of a Muslim registry?” Jack ventured. “At least two people had that on their list, but I don’t know...” he trailed off.

“I think we should include it,” replied Tim. “It’s a major piece of policy being discussed at the highest level of government, and it’s something I think we need to prepare our kids to think about. Do you just think you don’t know enough about it, Jack?”

“No, that’s not it,” Jack responded. “I’ve been following the news—and it’s certainly in the news a lot. But just because it’s being debated, doesn’t mean it *should* be. I mean, I can’t imagine supporting PoPs in favor of a Muslim registry. How did we get to religious discrimination as something that is controversial, not just wrong?”

“I’ve got to say, I’m a bit surprised, Jack,” Tim said, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re not usually the one in the room advocating to take an issue off the table.”

Tim was right. Jack wouldn’t normally shy away from discussing controversial issues. He certainly didn’t when the district pushed back on the department for letting students debate Black Lives Matter. But the election changed things. “It feels different now,” Jack replied. “The tone of the political rhetoric, the partisan rancor—it’s a lot less clear to me what’s considered out of bounds anymore.”

"It feels different because it is different," Tim responded. "But our job is the same. It is our responsibility—and, frankly, our privilege—to prepare our students to be informed and engaged citizens. Regardless of what we personally believe, this is a topic being debated on a national stage."

Patricia chimed in. "Tim's exactly right. For better or worse, a registry of new Muslim immigrants is controversial today. It's leaped into the mainstream media. Our President has discussed it, even advocated for it. You don't have to like it, but it's out there and we need to prepare our students to think about it critically."

"Hold on. I get that this is empirically controversial. People are definitely arguing about a Muslim registry. That doesn't mean it's a legitimate topic for debate," said Melissa. "I mean, look at the Japanese internment camps. Those were empirically controversial in 1941, but we'd never treat them as open for debate today, and I don't think anyone should have treated them as open for debate back then either."

Tim spoke. "I think we would all agree that we have to be careful here. Trump's rhetoric, from his tweets to his speeches, represent a kind of incivility that I haven't seen or heard at a national level in my lifetime. But our focus ought to be on how to facilitate this conversation--or any difficult conversation--in the classroom, not to prevent the conversation from happening in the first place. Frankly, I would argue that our inability to engage with both sides is part of why we are in this mess in the first place."

Patricia added, "And a good citizen needs to be a critical consumer of media, especially today. We must create a learning environment that fosters critical thinking and sound reasoning, not censor or limit students' academic investigations. Weren't those our goals when we started PoP?"

"I hear you," Jack conceded. "Inquiry and critical thinking and persuasive writing and speaking are incredibly important to me. But I just don't think that the creation of a Muslim registry is ethically reasonable, especially with so much hateful rhetoric attached to it. And I don't think as a school we should be encouraging students to treat this as having multiple reasonable perspectives."

"So you would impose your own judgment on everyone else?" Patricia responded incredulously. "That's a total violation of our duties as teachers! It is our professional responsibility to remain neutral."

"Is it professionally responsible to condone discrimination on the basis of someone's religion? I call that hate," Melissa shot back.

Patricia fired back, "Hate? Really? I mean, would you have us open our borders? It's called state sovereignty - ask my AP Government students about it." In a different tone, Patricia continued, "Look, these are emotional issues. I get that. But censorship of mainstream political issues is not the answer. That's partisanship masquerading as protecting our students. I appreciate your concern for the young people of Northern, but I don't think you're giving them or ourselves enough credit; I think we can handle it. Also, deciding these issues are somehow off the table here at Northern is not in line with our mission, our duty as educators to prepare the next generation of citizens."

"It's also our responsibility to ensure that we are upholding basic democratic principles like tolerance, equality, and human rights," Jack countered. He looked physically pained as he tried to imagine how an open, balanced debate on a Muslim registry squared with his commitment to helping students become empathetic, engaged citizens. "A registry of new immigrants based on their religious beliefs is not in line with the democratic values that we as educators are tasked with instilling in our students as future citizens. I'm happy to talk about this issue in class. In fact, I think we should talk about it, but I can't present the two sides of the debate with balance."

“And let’s not forget, there are Muslim students and families at Northern,” reminded Melissa. “What do we say to them?”

“That’s exactly why we should be addressing these issues in our classrooms! *Especially* for students who feel most affected by these policies, we should create a safe space to discuss the arguments and counterarguments they’ll need to discuss these issues out in the world,” answered Tim.

“Yes, I agree we should discuss the Muslim registry, to equip our students to respond to the hate,” Jack affirmed. “But with PoP, we can’t do that since students could take either side. So we can talk about it in class, but not through making it a PoP topic.”

“No, your reasoning is totally backwards! The best way way to show respect for our students--all our students--and to prepare them as democratic citizens is to recognize they can handle adult questions. The Muslim registry is a controversial issue that affects our students. I think it’s a perfect PoP topic,” Patricia countered.

“This disagreement is starting to seem bigger than just Muslim registries,” Tim remarked. “I guess I’m starting to wonder: what *are* our guiding principles in picking PoP topics? Should we treat anything as off the table, or is everything fair game if it’s in the news and people are taking different sides? What weight, if any, should we give to our own political and ethical beliefs, versus our general obligations as professionals? How should we be preparing our students for democratic citizenship in what feels like an increasingly uncivil world?”

¹ This is fictional case.