



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

FACILITATION GUIDE

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Case Overview/Synopsis

“Politics, Partisanship, and Pedagogy” probes the challenges that emerge when teachers must balance competing democratic commitments to educating critical thinkers who engage with diverse viewpoints, on the one hand, and instilling common civic values, on the other. The case focuses on Northern High School’s tenth grade social studies team as they debate potential topics for an upcoming project, the Power of Persuasion. In deciding whether to prompt students to openly debate Donald Trump’s proposal to create a registry for new Muslim immigrants, Northern’s social studies teachers must weigh their commitments to professional neutrality, civic education, democratic values like religious freedom and respect for persons, and students’ social-emotional well-being.

Agenda

Below is the suggested plan for using the case in a professional development session (or college or high school class) of between 1-2 hours. Different options accompany some agenda items. Use the option(s) that serve your professional development/teaching goals, the interests and inclinations of your participants, and the time you have available.

- 1) Read the Case – Participants read the case in small groups or individually. (This is likely to take about 10-12 minutes. Or distribute the case ahead of time and ask participants to read it in advance.)
- 2) Small Group Character Assignment – The purpose of the session is to help participants identify and closely analyze each character’s teaching objectives, values, and position on the Power of Persuasion (Part a)) and then put these perspectives in dialogue in (Part b)).
 - a) Divide participants into small groups. Assign each small group one of the following characters from the case: Timothy Eiger, Patricia Perry, Melissa Mendoza, Jack Beale. Ask each group to review the case study to answer the following questions about their character:
 - i) What recommendations does your character make to the group? Why?
 - ii) Identify your character’s pedagogical objectives. According to him or her, what purpose(s) should the Power of Persuasion (PoP) activity serve? Why?
 - iii) Different characters in the case prioritize some values and principles over others. What principles or values does your character hold? How do these get

expressed?

- iv) What pragmatic concerns does your character raise? How do these influence her or his view?
 - v) How does your character's values, principles, pedagogical objectives, or pragmatic concerns shape what he or she recommends the group do?
- b) Create "jigsawed" groups by grouping one member from each small group with one member from the other three groups so that all four characters are represented in each new small group. In the "jigsawed" groups, participants should discuss their character's teaching objectives, identify their character's values, and articulate their character's views about PoP. (Encourage participants to use first person pronouns as they represent their character's views.)

If there is time after each participant has presented their own character's perspective, the jigsaw group may then move on to discuss how their different characters might come to consensus (while staying in character). Or they may come out of character and begin discussing the strengths and weaknesses they perceive in each character's perspectives.

- 3) Whole Group Conversation – This portion of the session has two purposes. First, each participant must decide what he or she would do about selecting PoP topics in the Northern High School context. Second, each participant will reflect on their own beliefs, values, objectives, and priorities in the context of deciding with colleagues how to teach controversial issues in our current political climate. Participants may also reach conclusions about more general principles or practices for teaching controversial issues or doing civic education.
- 4) Four Corners (variant) - In three different corners/areas of the room, post signs saying "Use the Muslim registry as a PoP topic," "Discuss the Muslim registry, but not through PoP," and "Do not teach the Muslim registry at all." Explain to participants that they are now "released" from the perspectives of the characters in the case; they can (and should) respond as themselves by standing under the sign that best represents their point of view about what choice the social studies team should make.

Once participants have sorted themselves, give them 2-5 minutes to confer as a group and create a list of arguments to support their position. Then invite each group to make their arguments to the whole group, as well as to question and challenge others. Encourage participants to move around the room if they are persuaded to join another group as they listen to the arguments given. This is likely to turn into a whole-group conversation across groups, which is good. You may also follow this up with a second question about when, if at all, teachers should privilege one side of a controversy versus balance competing views.

- 5) Personal and Whole Group Reflection - Ask all participants to return to their seats. Give them 3-5 minutes to write individually in response to one or more of the following question, then invite whole group discussion. (If you have time, you might have small groups discuss their written

responses before you move to the whole group discussion.)

- a) *What goals, values, or principles do you think are most important to achieve in teaching controversial issues (or teaching about policy or civics in general)?*
- b) *What do you feel sure about? What tensions are you wrestling with?*
- c) *What teaching challenges do you anticipate may arise under the new presidential administration?*
- d) *How should we (as a school or district) address controversial issues with major implications for the lives of students and their families?*

Additional Resources

For teachers interested in the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) teaching material Melissa Mendoza references in the case, please take a look at these resources:

1. <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/helping-students-connect-standing-rock>

This site provides links to a handful of different resources that teachers can use to craft their own DAPL lesson plans.

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/learning/lesson-plans/battle-over-an-oil-pipeline-teaching-about-the-standing-rock-sioux-protests.html>

This account balances the two sides of the debate about DAPL. Students are encouraged to develop their own ideas about how the government should proceed with the proposed pipeline. I suspect this is the resource Patricia Perry would gravitate towards.

3. <http://choices.edu/resources/twtn/twtn-dakota-access-pipeline.php>

More explicitly focused on activism and the #NoDAPL movement. Best for teachers interested in emphasizing the role of social movements in resisting DAPL.

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