



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

MICRO-DILEMMA

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Micro-Dilemma

The 10th grade social studies team at Northern High School is meeting to identify topics for this year's Power of Persuasion (PoP) assignments, a core element of their curriculum. PoP required students to research an issue, critically evaluate it, take a position, and present their arguments to classmates. After agreeing on the Dakota Access Pipeline as their first topic, one teacher proposes the creation of a Muslim registry as another. There seems to be general agreement that the topic is empirically controversial—that is, an active debate in the current political landscape. However, the teachers disagree that a Muslim registry should be treated as an open topic in their school. Just because something is being publicly debated, does that mean it *should* be? On the one hand, they are a department that is committed to preparing students to be informed and engaged citizens who can think critically about complex issues. On the other hand, some had trouble imagining how an open, balanced debate on a Muslim registry squared with a commitment to democratic ideals of tolerance, equality, and human rights. How had religious discrimination become something that is controversial, not just wrong? Some argue that it is ethically problematic to present both sides. Others argue that it is ethically problematic to present it in an unbalanced way or to avoid it altogether.

Discussion Guide

1. *How should the team determine appropriate PoP topics? What criteria should they adhere to? Does the creation of a Muslim registry meet that criteria?*
2. *Here are some possible teacher responses from teachers at Northern High School, inspired by *Controversy in the Classroom* by Diana Hess. For each response, identify the ethical considerations surfaced by the position:*
 - a. *“We should avoid the issue of a Muslim registry. It’s too risky and it threatens to cause harm to individual students and to our school community.”*
 - b. *“This is not a legitimately controversial issue, even if some people say that it is. There is a right answer and to present it as an open topic is irresponsible. I will teach about a Muslim registry, but I will teach it as something that is wrong.”*
 - c. *“We should include the Muslim registry, but we should not stay neutral about the positions that students take. My goal will be for students to adopt the position that a Muslim registry is wrong; ultimately, however, students will be able to adopt a different position.”*
 - d. *“We should include the Muslim registry and present it in a balanced way. It is important for*

students to understand the various positions and decide for themselves what is best. 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."

3. *Does this case change for a school with a large population of Muslim students, a few Muslim students, or no known Muslim students? Why or why not?*
4. *What else would you want to know or have included in a case like this?*
5. *What are your takeaways from having talked through this case?*

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