



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

**READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**

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Setting	
Northern High School (ages 14-18) in the United States.	
Primary Characters	
<b>Narrator</b> <b>Timothy Eiger (medium role):</b> Chair of the social studies department	<b>Jack Beale (medium role):</b> 10th-grade social studies teacher
<b>Patricia Perry (large role):</b> 10th-grade social studies teacher	<b>Melissa Mendoza (medium role):</b> 10th-grade social studies teacher

**Narrator:** Tim Eiger bounded into Northern High School’s conference room for the tenth-grade social studies team meeting to find his colleagues Pat Perry, Jack Beale, and Melissa Mendoza standing at a white board covered in stickies. As Tim set down his overloaded briefcase, Pat called him over.

**Pat:** “Hey, Tim, we’re just trying to figure out our final PoP topics. As you know, we have two more for this semester, and we need to finalize them before break. You arrived at a good time to help us think through the topics we’ve brainstormed. They’re kind of all over the place, and we’re not sure which ones to choose.”

**Narrator:** The “Power of Persuasion” curriculum, better known as PoP, had been a core element of Northern High School’s tenth grade social studies curriculum for the past six years. PoP challenged students to research and critically evaluate a controversial issue, take a position, and present their argument to classmates. Each social studies class then selected the strongest “pro” and “con” position papers to go to the schoolwide “PoP-Off,” which took place during ninth and tenth grade morning assembly. Before the assembly started, students would complete an anonymous poll about where they stood on the issue. The winning representatives from each class then had 90 seconds each to present their “PoP-Talk” to convince their peers about the desirability of their position. The baton passed back and forth between “pro” and “con” presenters; students in the audience had T-charts to keep track of the evidence for and against. A second poll was taken at the end of the assembly; whichever side managed to convert the

largest number of people was declared the PoP-Off Powerhouse for that topic, and the students' names were announced over the loudspeaker at the end of the day. PoP was popular among students, teachers and parents—but it depended on teachers' selecting the right controversial issue to focus on each time.

Pat continued to bring Tim up to speed.

**Pat:** “I really think trade with China should be top of the list. It’s been all over the news lately, and I think it’ll be a great way for our students to begin investigating US-China relations. They can learn about protectionism and free markets, get some macroeconomic theory; it’s a good prep for my AP Econ course, too.”

**Narrator:** Melissa was dubious.

**Melissa:** “Well, that’s certainly leading the news cycle. But do you really think that our students will be excited about a trade war with China? I know as a new teacher I don’t have as much experience with this as you all do, but it made sense to me when you said earlier in the year that PoPs work best when the students are really engaged in the topic.”

**Narrator:** Jack backed Melissa up.

**Jack:** “Right. Need I remind you about when we tried the Iran Nuclear Deal PoP? They were so disengaged. It was awful. Let’s try to pick something closer to home, something that affects their everyday lives.”

**Narrator:** As Pat conceded defeat, crossing “trade with China” off the list on the white board, Melissa surprised herself by speaking up again.

**Melissa:** “What about free speech on college campuses? There’s been a lot going on at the U this year; I know the Black Student Alliance was occupying the Provost’s office earlier this semester after those e-mails came out mocking safe spaces, and FIRE always has a booth going in the Quad to mobilize students against speech codes. Not to mention all the protests and debates that have been going on at campuses around the country. It seems like every week a new challenge comes up.”

**Narrator:** Tim and then Jack responded enthusiastically.

**Tim:** “Speech on college campuses seems like a perfect topic for PoP. There are strong, evidence-based arguments on both sides, multiple stakeholders, and

several relevant and important issues: freedom of speech, diversity and inclusion, the role of higher education in a democracy...”

**Jack:** “It’s also a really interesting context to learn about political protest and organizing. I’d love for Northern students to get involved themselves—head over to the U to talk to some of the student organizers there. This could be a great opportunity to build some college connections, and for our kids to see people of color advocating for their rights!”

**Narrator:** Melissa was bolstered by the enthusiasm but was not convinced that it was unanimous, as Pat then affirmed.

**Melissa:** “Pat, you look hesitant.”

**Pat:** “Well, I guess I’m worried there’s just not that much to say. Aren’t academic freedom and open debate the bedrock values of higher education?”

**Narrator:** Melissa responded carefully, followed again by Pat.

**Melissa:** “Those are absolutely important values. But there’s an argument to be made that speech can have a real psychological toll that isn’t shared equally across the student body. I think a lot of campus activists are arguing that there’s a tension between supporting free speech and fostering a community that is welcoming to students of all backgrounds.”

**Pat:** “I don’t get how that overturns academic freedom, but I guess that’s the point of these PoP topics, that there are strong views on both sides of the debate. And if you can help advise students on the ‘safe spaces’ arguments, Jack, I’m willing to try it.”

**Narrator:** Tim immediately jumped on the agreement.

**Tim:** “Great! One topic down. Maybe this won’t be as difficult as we thought. What’s next?”

**Narrator:** As the four teachers pondered the remaining groups of sticky notes, Jack ventured a suggestion with uncharacteristic tentativeness.

**Jack:** “What do you all think about including the debate about transgender students’ access to bathrooms? That’s big in the news right now, but I don’t know...”

**Narrator:** Tim responded, followed by Jack and then with a further response by Tim.

**Tim:** “I think it’s a great idea. At least a handful of states have considered legislation on exactly this issue, and I know our district office has had more than a few meetings about our bathroom policies. Like it or not, these questions are something I think we need to prepare our kids to think about. What makes you sound so hesitant, Jack?”

**Jack:** “Well, I guess I’m wondering if we should be treating transgender bathroom rights as a controversial question. Yes, it’s being debated here and around the country, but that doesn’t mean it should be. I mean, I can’t imagine supporting PoPs in favor of the legislation being considered in some of these state courthouses. How can we treat gender discrimination as something that is controversial, not just wrong?”

**Tim:** “I’ve got to say, I’m a bit surprised, Jack. You’re not usually the one in the room advocating to take an issue off the table.”

**Narrator:** 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 he wasn’t so sure this time. Jack and then Tim continued their discussion.

**Jack:** “It feels different now. The tone of the political rhetoric, the partisan rancor - it’s a lot less clear to me what’s considered out of bounds anymore.”

**Tim:** “It may feel different, 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.”

**Narrator:** Pat and then Melissa jumped in.

**Pat:** “Tim’s exactly right. Folks are talking about transgender issues – from CNN to our families’ dining room tables. I mean, we’ve already received two different sets of federal guidelines about who should use which bathroom. You don’t have to like it, but these questions are out there and we need to prepare our students to think about them critically.”

**Melissa:** “Hold on. I get that this is empirically controversial. People are definitely arguing about transgender rights. That doesn’t mean it’s a legitimate topic for

debate. 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."

**Narrator:** Tim was nervous about the direction Melissa was taking.

**Tim:** "I think we would all agree that we have to be careful here. Political debate is more polarized and partisan than I've ever seen it 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."

**Narrator:** Pat was glad to have an ally.

**Pat:** "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?"

**Narrator:** Although he had been the one to suggest transgender bathroom rights as a PoP topic, Jack now found himself allying ever more strongly with Melissa.

**Jack:** "I hear you. Inquiry, critical thinking, and persuasive writing and speaking are incredibly important to me. But I just don't think that debating what are effectively human rights questions is ethically reasonable. And I don't think as a school we should be encouraging students to treat this as having multiple reasonable perspectives."

**Narrator:** Pat was incredulous.

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

**Narrator:** Melissa and then Pat found themselves digging deeper into their respective positions.

**Melissa:** "Is it professionally responsible to condone discrimination on the basis of someone's gender identity? I call that hate."

**Pat:** “Hate? Really? When I was in school I was taught that sex was biological, and I bet the same is true for many of our parents as well. I know some folks may have different ideas today, but we can’t just force these new values down people’s throats—nor should we. [Pause, calmer tone.] 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.”

**Narrator:** Tim, then Pat, Then Jack, then Melissa all responded.

**Tim:** “I think that’s right, Patricia. There are arguments to be made on both sides. I think a lot of folks—our families included—sincerely believe that allowing people to choose which bathroom to use presents a real safety issue. Plus, I know for a fact that at least some of the traditionalists are arguing for schools to make single-person bathrooms available to any student who wants to use them. That doesn’t like an attack on human rights to me.”

**Pat:** “Exactly! Melissa, 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.”

**Jack:** “It’s also our responsibility to ensure that we are upholding basic democratic principles like tolerance, equality, and human rights. Debating a person’s right to be themselves 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 gender identity in class. In fact, I think we should talk about it, but I can’t present the two sides of the debate with balance.”

**Melissa:** “And let’s not forget, there may very well be transgender students at Northern. What do we say to them?”

**Narrator:** Although no student had publicly identified as transgender at Northern, the neighboring school district had two transgender students. The district didn’t have any policies in place for how to support transgender students when they first came out, and the debate about what the district should do raged in the local newspapers for weeks. Tim, then Jack, responded to Melissa’s question.

**Tim:** “That’s exactly why we should be addressing these issues in our classrooms! Especially for students who are questioning, we should create a safe space to

discuss the arguments and counterarguments they'll need to discuss these issues out in the world."

**Jack:** "Yes, I agree we should discuss transgender issues, to equip our students to respond to the hate. But with PoP, we can't do that since students could take either side. And I can't imagine that any of our questioning or potentially trans students would experience the PoP-Off Assembly as a safe space! 300 kids all voting on their bathroom rights and hooting for the anti-trans side? I don't think so."

**Narrator:** Melissa shuddered at the image Jack had conjured.

**Melissa:** "Jack's absolutely right. We can talk about transgender rights in class, including the right to use the bathroom for the gender with which you identify. But we can't make this a PoP topic."

**Narrator:** Pat and Tim were less sure.

**Pat:** "So we pick a side for them? I feel like I'm starting to sound like a broken record here, but that's so partisan! The best 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. Transgenderism is a controversial issue that affects our students. I think it's a perfect PoP topic."

**Tim:** "This disagreement is starting to seem bigger than just this topic. 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?"

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