Using Ephemera, Artifacts, and Monuments to Teach Controversial Social Issues

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Goals of the session:

In this session we will share

- Strategies for integrating discussion of controversial social issues in your classroom
- Ways to use ephemera, artifacts, and monuments as an anchor for conversation
- Resources for finding artifacts and ephemera (both tactile and web-based) that can be used in the classroom.
A classic definition of the phrase “controversial issue”

“A controversial issue involves a problem about which different individuals and groups offer conflicting courses of action. It is an issue for which society has not found a solution that can be universally or almost universally accepted. It is an issue of sufficient significance that each of the proposed ways of dealing with it is objectionable to some section of the community and arouses protest”

Fraser, B. J. (1986). Classroom environment. London: Croom Helm
Teaching these issues is important.
Relevant NCSS C3 Standards

- D2.Civ.10.K-2. Compare their own point of view with others’ perspectives
- D2.Civ.10.6-8. Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- D1.2.9-12. Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.
- D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.
We use the Four P’s to guide our thinking and to help students build respectful dialogue and discussion:

Purpose → Preparation → Process → Practice

Adapted from Creel, M. (2019). *Teaching controversial issues in a sharply divided America*. Discovery Education.
Purpose

● Why are you teaching this topic?
● It could be to
  ○ Develop arguments supporting different perspectives
  ○ Determine the perspectives of authors, stakeholders, and/or experts
  ○ Evaluate arguments of authors, stakeholders, and/or experts
  ○ Participate in discussion with people of opposing views
● What standards does it support?

Adapted from Creel, M. (2019). Teaching controversial issues in a sharply divided America. Discovery Education.
Preparation

- What are the various perspectives on the issue?
  - What are the strong arguments on the various sides of the issue?
  - What are the techniques different sides are using to persuade people to view the issue as they do?
- Which components of the topic are developmentally appropriate for your students and which (if any) are not?
  - Are there ideas that students are not developmentally ready to handle?
  - How should teachers respond if these ideas come up in discussion?
- What questions do you want them to wrestle with?
- How will you ensure students have acquired proper background knowledge?
- What resources will students utilize?

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What is ephemera?

- Paper items that may have originally meant to be discarded after use but have since become collectibles.
- Ephemera “inevitably contains facts, prejudices, and other aspects (such as language, art and social organization) reflecting their particular time and place…” (Ephemera Society of America, 2018)
- Ticket stubs, posters, advertisements, lists, programs, receipts
What are historical artifacts?

- Artifacts are objects that give evidence about people’s lives in the past.
- Something made or given shape by humans (Collins English Dictionary, 2014a).
What are monuments?

- A structure created to commemorate a person or event, or which has become relevant to a social group as a part of their remembrance of historic times or cultural heritage, due to its artistic, historical, political, technical or architectural importance (Collins English Dictionary, 2014b).

- Statues, memorials, historical buildings, archaeological sites, and cultural assets.
Why would you integrate these items into your classes?
Where to find ephemera and artifacts?

EVERYWHERE!

But also, the Internet:

- The Ephemera Society of America
- E-Ephemera
- Smithsonian Institute online
- Library of Congress online
- National Archives online

- New York Historical Society
- Local and state history museums and societies
- Libraries
- City and county museums, and regional National Archives branches
Process

- With your class, create a set of guidelines for discussion
  - What might be some examples of classroom guidelines?
- Establish the roles and responsibilities of the discussants/students and the facilitator/teacher
- Post guidelines and reference them

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Practice

● Lead the discussion, and another, and another
  ○ You and your students will grow more comfortable.

● Consider the format and the roles your students will take

● Maintain an active role as facilitator
  ○ Point out student behaviors that exemplify the established guidelines
  ○ Be mindful of enabling all students equal opportunities to speak
  ○ Validate students efforts at speaking out
  ○ Allow unpopular views, but be prepared to respond to inaccuracies and/or bias.

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1. Purpose
   a. Why are you teaching this topic?
   b. How does this topic relate to the standards?

2. Preparation
   a. What resources will students utilize?
      i. Think of ephemera, artifacts, or monuments that you could incorporate
   b. What are the different perspectives people have?
   c. What aspects of the issue are developmentally appropriate to discuss with students?
   d. Are there ideas that students are not developmentally ready for?
   e. How should teachers respond if these ideas come up in discussion?
   f. What questions do you want them to wrestle with?

3. Process
   a. With your class, create a set of guidelines for discussion
   b. Goal: create a safe discussion environment where all can share
Practice for YOU!

https://tsl.mit.edu/project/discussionleader/
Pre-constructed Lesson Plans

https://tinyurl.com/NCSS2019controversial
Applying this in YOUR Classroom

Questions to consider:

● What skills can students learn from dealing with controversial issues in social studies?

● What guidelines do you use for class discussions of controversial issues?

● How do you deal with different skill levels in discussions?

● What issues in your curriculum lend themselves to teaching and researching different perspectives?

● When teaching about a controversial issue, what is your goal for students?
References


Our example controversial topics, questions, and assessments: https://tinyurl.com/ocss2019controversial
Thank you!

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