

# Kicking the Hornet's Nest: Teaching Controversial Topics in Social Studies

by Laura Varlas

Any time you tell the full truth about a topic, that automatically makes it controversial, says Beth Sanders, a 10<sup>th</sup>- and 11<sup>th</sup>-grade American history teacher at Tarrant High School in Birmingham, Alabama.

Her students have investigated topics such as civil disobedience, covering a range of perspectives from Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent resistance to Malcolm X's ethos of "by any means necessary." A teacher who is deep with in historic civil rights country, Sanders says that when young people and their teachers engage with these topics and apply them to current policies such as Alabama's immigration law, they are "kicking the hornet's nest."

In October 2013, Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), released *All Together Now*, a report on how to educate young Americans for political participation in a time of deep polarization. Says Diana Hess, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison:

**High school is a time when kids are developing as political beings. We want them to develop in the most democratic environment possible while they're in school, because we want them to be able to contribute as citizens to improving what is clearly a highly dysfunctional democracy.**

**One of the fundamental principles of a democratic society is having a robust exchange of multiple and competing views. You will come up with qualitatively better decisions when views have gone through a rigorous inquiry and evaluation process. That can't happen if you have only selected or dominant perspectives represented.**

If you set up the space for differences right from the start, says Brown University's Susan Graseck, you will encourage a natural diversity of viewpoints. Graseck is the director of the *Choices Program*, a nonprofit that develops curricula and training for high school teachers on current and historical international issues.

To ensure representative discussions, each Choices Program unit presents different perspectives on an issue—perspectives which students then role-play. "This gives legitimacy to the student who really does see things differently from the rest of the class," notes Graseck.

Stephen Lazar, a social studies teacher at Brooklyn's Harvest Collegiate High School, teaches a freshman course called "Looking for an Argument," a curriculum developed by two teachers at New York's Urban Academy. Each week, the curriculum introduces a new controversial question, for example, "Are New York City's 'stop and frisk' laws just?"

On Monday, two teachers model a debate, presenting opposing sides of the issue, and students discuss this debate. They then read and research the topic thoroughly, and by Friday, they use evidence gathered from their research to take a stance in an argumentative essay.

**Role-playing opposing views gives legitimacy to the student who sees things differently.**

When a majority of students line up on one side of a discussion, Lazar says that he introduces more evidence to challenge their made-up minds. "If kids walk out of my classroom questioning what they think, then I've done my job," he says.

## Beyond the Textbook

Graseck says, "When you teach critical thinking, students need to be thinking about something. They need enough historical content and context to grow their understanding and to whet their appetites for more knowledge."

Plenty of online resources are available for teaching critical approaches to social studies content (visit [www.ascd.org/eu0214-resources](http://www.ascd.org/eu0214-resources) for a sampling).

"Textbooks make a great target [for critical thinking]," says former social studies teacher Bill Bigelow, now curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine. He recalls how he used *The Line Between Us: Teaching About the Border and Mexican*

*Immigration* and a role-playing activity to supplement a U.S. textbook that devoted only two paragraphs to the U.S. War with Mexico. He comments:

**I want kids to think of themselves as activist readers, rather than consumer readers. Checking the adequacy of textbook coverage is a good way to do that.**

Beth Sanders says that Twitter has been a game-changer by allowing her not only to teach controversial topics but also to get her students' voices heard on those controversial issues. Her class has its own Twitter hashtag (#standardsTHS), creating a 24/7 backchannel for dialogue that spills beyond class space and time.

Sanders advises teachers to share their curriculum with parents in order to show that the resources for controversial issues are credible and fact-based.

## Meeting the Challenge of Assessment

Standardized testing need not be an impediment to making critical thinking a classroom priority. Sanders comments:

**The beautiful thing about a critically thinking class is that a standardized test is easier when kids have had experience with higher-order dialogue, doing close readings, and teaching each other.**

Currently, Tennessee is piloting portfolio assessments in civics, in which students choose the topic and present their portfolios to peers.

## Classrooms of Courage

Students are demonstratively more engaged when there's a real question in front of them, says Graseck. "Fight the temptation to simplify history and social issues, and kids will come back for more."

Bill Bigelow adds, "Students are drawn to controversial topics, but controversy alone isn't enough. We need to help them learn how to be critics, thinkers, and evaluators—to be able to question the curriculum."

Lazar comments, "We want to give kids an understanding of the world they live in and the courage to confront it." ■

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