

On BCTF day at Malaspina we attended a session entitled “How to teach controversial issues”. The session leader was Michael Aaku. The main idea for this info session was to create rules of engagement for a safe environment for all in our classroom. This is done without being abusive, without being emotional or defensive and while knowing your community.

Our objectives for the session were to:

1. Understand what a teachable or controversial issue is and is not.
2. Develop a pedagogically sound rationale for teaching controversial issues.
3. Consider some key premises for teaching controversial issues.
4. Anticipate the classroom dynamics of teaching controversial issues.
5. Practice some teaching strategies for teaching issues.

We learned how to discuss issues in our classrooms by participating and carrying out the strategies he shared with us.

One strategy he taught us was to pose a controversial topic to the class. The students decide how much they agree or disagree with that topic. They write their level of agreement on post it notes. The levels of agreement are strongly favour (++), somewhat in favour (+), strongly opposed (--), somewhat opposed (-) or unsure (0). They wear the post it as a badge and find others that have the same level of agreement. In that group, they label four key ideas that defend their position. Next, they find a person who is two away from their position. For example, a strongly opposed person will pair up with an unsure person. They then discuss their viewpoints. The teacher is constantly aware of the discussions, maintaining the positive environment and ensuring that all are being respectful and respected.

The positives of this method are that it allows free discussion in a safe environment. It is student centered thereby allowing the students to voice their opinions with less input from the teacher. The

negatives could be if the students take the discussion too far, leading to violence or confrontations especially outside of class. To avoid this it is best to start the year discussing issues that are slightly less controversial and increase the level as the year progresses. It is fundamental that the class has created a set of rules for how to handle these topics with respect and courtesy to all in the room.

According to Mr. Aaku, a controversial issue has two characteristics:

1. There is no clear resolution on which all parties can agree or there is not a readily available resolution
2. The issue has public prominence and has received media attention over a period of time.
  - a. Examples are abortion (for or against), inclusion or segregation of students with special needs

One question that arose was how we assess these discussions. One student in the class thought that having students write down both sides of the issue might work because it shows that they are attempting to see both sides. Students could find commonalities in both sides, too. That does not mean they have to agree with the opposing side, just be able to recognize that there might be similarities. After discussion, the teacher could have students revisit their original viewpoint and see if it has changed at all after input from others. This will show the possible growth along the way. It is important to realize that their opinion might not change and does not have to change. Yet it is important for students to attempt to see both sides of an issue, whether they agree with the other side or not.

We learned another strategy called “Diamond Ranking”. For this, the teacher passes the students cards with reasons to support an issue. The task for the students is to rank the reasons from most important to least important through group discussion. The group must come to a consensus for the ranking. This strategy enables students to brainstorm, debate, listen, and use critical thinking skills to discuss an issue in-depth.

Why do we teach controversial issues?

- Leads to change for the students
- Teaches/ embraces critical thinking
- Students gain respect for peers
- Students learn that it is okay to have other opinions
- Teaches them to make informed decisions and support their decision
- Students learn to question and not accept everything at face value
- We want our students to become embracing, compassionate and thinking citizens
- We want to give them the opportunity to engage in lively and respectful dialogue and debate.

Such conversation enables them to appreciate the complexity of living in an interdependent yet multicultural diverse world.

Final strategy we learned in the session: Teacher poses a question to students and they write possible answers on three post its. After individual students have answers, they work as a group to sort answers on a piece of chart paper. They then have to create a common title for the separate clusters. If the group disagrees on an answer, they cover that answer with a different coloured post-it note. After this phase, individual students place stickers next to the answer they agree with most on their own chart papers. Teachers can follow this activity with questions to consolidate their learning. One example we were given was “What are the most important issues in this question? Summarize the issue.”

Key premises to remember when teaching controversial issues.

1. A classroom is not a platform
2. Controversy is best taught through discussion.

3. A teacher has responsibility for ensuring proper exploration of the issue so the exercise promotes understanding and is not merely an exchange of ignorance

This session gave wonderful strategies to employ in our classrooms. The presenter gave us ways to teach valuable topics in ways that are reasonable. These strategies will work well in classrooms because the teacher is removed from most of the discussions other than serving as a facilitator. Removing the teacher allows the free flow of ideas from the class. While the teacher will have their opinions on issues being discussed it is important to not allow your own bias enter into the conversation. Your role is to get the students thinking and developing their own ideas on the issues.