

Esther Bateson  
Basha High School  
Chandler, Ariz.

## Teaching Controversial Topics

### I. Overview and Rationale

In the course of a school year, one or more controversial topics may arise during a classroom discussion. Rather than dealing with adversarial debates between a handful of students, create a learning environment/situation for students to hold civil discussions through article analysis. These two activities will decrease the animosity between students who view topics differently and engages students in meaningful conversations. Additionally, this lesson is designed to allow students to answer their own questions through research and discussion with limited input from the teacher.

Side note - this particular lesson came out of a heated debate over Ferguson and the topic of police brutality. Instead of dealing with students exchanging personal and often biased opinions, I made them read various articles about the subject. In doing so, students were able to hold civilized conversations with each other about the topics. Also, it allowed students to solicit ways to correct problems/situations at the local level.

### II. Goals for Understanding

- A. Students will interpret provided information and make inferences.
- B. Students will solicit opinions from peers.
- C. Students will analyze articles for evidence and journalistic qualities.
- D. Students will discuss controversial topics in a civilized manner.

### III. Essential Questions

- A. Why do people hold different beliefs on various topics?
- B. What are the benefits of voicing opposing views?
- C. Will people change their opinions based on presentation of new material?

### IV. Critical Engagement Questions

- A. What are the similarities and differences between the articles provided?
- B. How do these articles affect my opinion on the topic?
- C. Is there a solution to the problem that people can agree upon?
- D. Did your opinion remain the same or change? Explain.

### V. Overviews and Timeline

There are two different activities included in this lesson plan. The first lesson requires students to read multiple versions of the same story in small groups and answer specific questions. The second lesson allows students to discuss the topics using evidence from the reading in a Socratic seminar format.

**Lesson One (40 minutes) - Evidence based learning using small-group, purposeful talk**

*(Refer to the attached handout for scripted questions - only one per group is needed)*

- Divide students into groups of 3-5. Randomize the groups as much as possible.
- Assign one article to each group. It is helpful to provide only one copy to each group at this time to aid in student focus and discussion. Articles should discuss the same topic but come from different sources. Typically, I try to pull articles with differing viewpoints from collegiate, local, national, and international sources. The wider the variety, the better.
- Students read the article as a group and answer specific questions. They are not allowed to discuss the topic outside of the scripted questions. Leave the handout with the article. Students will build off of the previous answers from other groups.
- Rotate articles after ten minutes or so. Continue with the exercise. Repeat. By the end of the activity, students should read at least four articles. (Round 1 may take less time than other rounds.)
- At the end of the activity, students should create three talking points and two questions for upcoming Socratic seminar.
- Do not allow students to engage in any conversations about the topic for the remainder of the class period.

**Lesson Two (30 minutes) - Socratic seminar** *(adapted from an AVID strategy session)*

- Provide each student with copies of the articles.
- Students should pull out their three talking points and two questions from the previous day.
- Divide the class into half.
- Create an inner circle and an outer circle.
- Partner one student from the inner circle with a student from the outer circle. It helps if they are on opposite sides of the room from one another. (Teacher tip: pair students with strong opposing views with one another.)
- Assign two moderators - one for the inner circle, one for the outer circle. Use your most diplomatic students as moderators for the first seminar. From here on out, the teacher should be engaged in the seminar as to ensure authentic student-led conversation. (During this time, I will enter grades or respond to emails. I listen to the conversation but will not impede on their discussion unless absolutely necessary. This encourages my reward-seeking students to answer honestly.)
- Allow the moderator for the inner circle to begin the conversation - they have the ability to ask a question or call on a student to pose one to the group. The inner circle will hold a conversation about the topic posed referencing evidence from the articles to support their stance. Referencing the articles as evidence is essential. Your moderator is tasked to ensure every student has provided feedback to the group.
- While the inner circle discusses the topic, the outer circle is taking notes. Each student should focus on their partner's statements and body language. They are not allowed to speak or solicit any type of feedback until the inner circle has finished their ten-minute discussion.
- Stop the conversation at ten-minutes flat. Do NOT allow students to continue speaking after the ten-minute mark.
- At this time, allow the outer circle to provide feedback to their partner. Usually, I go student by student for this. They need to comment on what the student did well and what they were impressed by.
- After each complement, the partner from the inner circle should thank their partner. Through this exchange, the heated exchange between classmates tends to cool. Students focus on the evidence and the actions of their partner rather than their own personal opinions.
- Rotate groups. Inner circle becomes the outer circle and vice versa. Repeat the exercise.
- Remember to stop at ten minutes flat. Allow students to provide feedback to each other.
- After both groups are finished, open the conversation to the entire class through teacher-led questioning about the seminar itself. I would not ask questions about the specific topic. Great question to start with - Why do you think I did not intervene in your conversations? It may take a few guesses/answers before the students realize they were in charge of their own learning.

- Important point to make, the ten minute mark is important to adhere to. Students want to continue the conversation. By stopping the conversation at a specific time, it forces students to have the conversation outside of your classroom. Through these conversations, your journalism students will engage in dialogue from other parties outside of your class. They will conduct research without really thinking about it. This may lead to some interesting stories and/or leads.
- Wait one day. Ask students as a warm-up question “Did your opinion on the topic change? Why or why not? Be specific in your explanation.” This requires student to introvertly reflect upon the topic and assess their own opinions.

VI. Assessment -There are a few ways to use this as an assessment.

- One way is to count the number of times a student responded during the Socratic seminar.
- Another way is to grade the three talking points and two questions as an informal assessment.
- Yet another option is to use the warm-up question as an assessment tool.
- Using their warm-up question/answer, make students create a twenty word or less lead about the topic. Encourages thoughtful writing, forces students to choose their words carefully, and requires student to apply their journalism skills.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Hr: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Creating and Controlling Controversy - Home and Abroad**

Round 1:

1. What is the title of the article?
2. What is the name of publication? Location of the publication?
3. Who wrote the article?
4. Who is the targeted audience? How can you tell?

Round 2:

5. What facts are presented? Be specific.
6. Are there any opinions incorporated in the article? If so, whose opinion?
7. If you answer **yes** to #6, does the opinion lead to a biasly-written article?  
If you answer **no** to #6, how did the journalist discuss the controversy? What evidence did they use to support their angle?
8. Identify at least two similarities between the two articles?

Round 3:

9. Is the style of this article similar or different to other articles?

10. How does the journalist approach the controversial topic? (Do they state it? Use an anecdote? Reference other similar incidents?)

11. Did this article provide you with new information? If so, what was it?

12. If there is an image provided, does it enhance the story? How?  
If not, what type of image would you suggest the journalist use?

Round 4:

13. Discuss the differences between the articles.

14. What does this tell you about the journalists?

15. What does this tell you about the topic?

16. How could you cover this topic in the school paper? Think about your target audience and angle? What research would you need to conduct? Who would you talk with?