

A controversial issue is one which results in **dispute** and **disagreement** due to a difference of opinion. The *Senior 2 Social Studies: Geographic Issues of the 21st Century* curriculum deals with a variety of issues that may be controversial due to differences of opinions and values held by students. As citizens of a democracy, students will often be confronted with issues that generate a diversity of viewpoints and require **value clarification**, **negotiation**, and **compromise**. Aside from knowledge-based outcomes about the issues themselves, the curriculum includes a number of skill outcomes that relate to debate, articulating viewpoints, and listening to and understanding others' opinions.

Dealing with controversial issues in class may become highly emotional, particularly if they involve values, beliefs and ethical principles. Issues surrounding questions of resource use and management, land use, distribution of food resources, economic activities, preservation of the environment, and climate change may lead to controversy in the classroom. Controversies surrounding these issues should not be avoided; however, teachers and students must keep in mind that it is the **quality of the argument** that is important rather than who is perceived as victorious. Sometimes referred to as creative or **structured controversy**, the focus on quality arguments in a non-threatening and objective setting can promote rigorous debate, lead to a deeper understanding of the issues, and a greater respect for decision-making processes.

When Controversy Arises

- Clarify the nature of the conflict and the potential implications.
- Plan how to deal with discussion and debate of the issue.
- Be sensitive to the students and the community.
- Determine if any student or family will be personally affected.
- Discuss the issue and planned strategies with a colleague or the principal.
- Ensure that information is available to support all sides of the argument.
- Avoid taking sides, remain neutral and objective.

Preparing for Discussion and Debate

- Clearly define the issue.
- Identify outcomes and establish a purpose for the discussion or debate.
- Establish parameters and rules for the discussion (could include student input).
- Remind students that the discussion is focused on the issue, not on personalities (personal attacks should not be tolerated).
- Determine the format or strategy for the discussion (formal debate, persuasive speeches, structured controversy, panel discussion).
- Have students write an individual position paper (can be revised at end of exercise to see if views or understanding of issue has changed).

Discussion of Controversial Issues

- Ensure students understand the issue and can restate it in their own words.
- Assist students in finding reliable information from a variety of sources.
- Assist students in making the distinction between fact and opinion and between informed opinion and bias.

- Help students classify information into appropriate categories.
- Acknowledge that there may be many and diverse views on the issue.
- Listen to each view and respect the student's right to voice it without interruption.
- Allow time for all views to be presented fairly, questioned, and discussed.

Information Gathering Strategies

- A Gallery Walk of headlines, articles, and pictures to familiarize students with the topic.
- A Sharing Circle could be used for initial input by students (allow them to pass).
- Brainstorm and list what students already know about the issue.
- Seek to balance information on the various perspectives.
- Invite guest speakers representing the various perspectives to class.
- Show videos, news clips, or Internet sites representing various viewpoints.
- If appropriate, plan a field study to view the problem first hand.
- Assist students in finding and evaluating information sources.
- Have students make use of Pro/Con Discussion Charts to become familiar with other viewpoints (See BLM G-22).

Presentation of Controversial Issues

- Panel discussion
- Town-hall type meeting
- Role-play of a situation related to the controversial issue
- Writing news articles, editorials, letter to the editor, or cartoons, to highlight different viewpoints
- Persuasive speeches representing the different viewpoints
- Conducting a formal debate or structured controversy
- A television interview to reflect each viewpoint
- Student presentations to the relevant groups involved in the issue (local council, hearings, commission, et cetera.)
- Ensure adequate time to complete presentations, and plan a short debriefing period at the end of each class to review, correct errors, or clarify misconceptions.

Debriefing

- Accept that there may not be a "right answer" or one that will satisfy everyone.
- Encourage some form of resolution to a problem, and seek compromise if possible.
- Encourage students to reflect and "make peace" with themselves and with classmates.
- Consider another Sharing Circle to see if views have changed or what has been learned.
- Have students write a journal entry or Exit Slip to reflect on the issue and how it may have influenced their views.
- Students write (or revise) individual position papers with supporting arguments for their view or how their views may have changed during the discussions of the controversial issue.