



How to Create a Political Classroom: A Practical Guide for Teachers

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This instructional guide for teachers provides practical guidance on how to structure a political classroom. This guide was developed from research outlined in two books that resulted from one longitudinal study: *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* by Diana Hess and *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy. In each book, the major findings are showcased through case studies. This guide draws from six case studies—three from each book—to outline key features of a political classroom.

A central argument of *The Political Classroom* is that schools are and ought to be political sites. The authors use the term “political” as it applies to the role of citizens within a democratic society. They assert that citizens are political when they are democratically making decisions about questions that ask *how should we live together?* And by extension, the authors argue, “The political classroom is one that helps students develop their ability to deliberate political questions.”

The theoretical grounding of the longitudinal study was deliberative democracy. In this theory, a government or policy is considered legitimate if the decision-making process is open to public deliberation. Deliberative theorists argue that when the public can openly discuss policy, knowledge is expanded and self-interest is diminished. And they argue that the resulting policy from open discussion is one that a community or governing body can legitimately expect members to follow.

This guide is split into two documents. This document guides the aims, purposes, and characteristics of a political classroom. The other outlines how teachers can create political classrooms.

Aims of a Political Classroom

The authors articulate six aims of the political classroom:

Political Equity

Political equality maintains that all citizens should be allowed to contribute to decision-making. Deliberating as equals is one way for students to develop an appreciation for this principle.

Tolerance

Political tolerance is the recognition that citizens should not unjustly outlaw or persecute individuals or groups for having reasonable views that others find objectionable. When students consider policy questions, they must consider their personal preferences and whether their views are in line with the principle of tolerance.

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to citizens being allowed to direct their own lives—i.e., the values of liberty and freedom. Teaching toward autonomy helps young people develop the skills and knowledge to make well-reasoned decisions and engage in deliberation. In deliberation, they will encounter views different from their own, reflect and respond when their views are interrogated by others, consider relevant evidence, and practice argumentation.

Fairness

Fairness asks citizens to enter policy conversations to find the best solution, considering their personal preferences and the views and rights of others. This requires students to articulate reasons they hold particular views, listen, and reconsider their preferences, given other people's concerns.

Political Engagement

Political engagement means that citizens are informed and concerned about particular issues and political outcomes. The political classroom aims to increase interest in political issues and democratic activities through deliberating the controversies that students will confront outside of school.

Political Literacy

Political literacy requires citizens to weigh the evidence and understand how issues align with fundamental disagreements about the ideal democratic system. When students understand competing ideologies underlying controversial issues and competing views about democracy, they can place the arguments they hear and their own views into the larger political picture.

Characteristics of Political Classrooms

The political classrooms in the longitudinal study were social studies classes for either middle school students or high school students—only one case study was from a middle school class, the other five were from high school classes. All but one political classroom was a required course, and none of the political classrooms were tracked—i.e., they were open to all students in the school. Non-tracked political classrooms provide equal access to a high-quality curriculum, which leads students to see one another as political equals. They teach the skills of “civil discourse” and foster political engagement that normalizes political difference and conflict.

The case study classes either focused on policy issues, the Constitution, the judicial branch of government, or the legislative branch of government. The controversial topics covered in class were modern-day or current issues, and the political classrooms used primary source texts, not textbooks.

Purposes of Political Classrooms

The teachers featured in each of the six case studies had a specific purpose for constructing their political classroom. Each purpose was embedded within the goal of creating a political classroom that was as authentic as possible to the real-world political environment.

1. To help students understand multiple perspectives and communicate effectively with people with opinions contrary to their own.
2. To develop critical thinking in students through critical analysis of the Constitution and by developing an understanding that embedded in Supreme Court rulings are controversies concerning the *interpretation* of the Constitution.
3. To improve students' abilities to effectively discuss controversial issues within a free marketplace of ideas to practice fundamental aspects of citizenship, including mutual respect, free speech, and participation.
4. To teach toward inclusive participation, which requires citizens to see each other as political equals and to engage in the process to arrive at a solution that promotes the common good.
5. To teach students to reflect critically on the political values they hold while maintaining their personal beliefs.
6. To structure learning to promote the principles of political tolerance and fairness to help students move from holding views based on self-interest to considering how fellow citizens are affected by various policies so students will consider what costs they are passing on to others when they hold particular views and advocate particular positions.

Characteristics of Teachers Who Facilitate High-Quality Political Talk

The most important factor in determining whether students learn how to engage in high-quality political talk and discuss controversial issues effectively in the classroom is the quality of the teacher's practices. Teachers skillful at engaging students in political talk have these characteristics:

- They have a sophisticated understanding of the purpose of discussion and its link to democracy writ large.
- They can carry out their theoretical commitments and goals because they have sound ideas about what they are trying to teach.
- They can translate the purpose of discussion and theory into practice by constructing well-thought-out and thorough lesson plans about controversial issues.
- They are continuously learning and staying abreast of the social, cultural, and political questions that are up-for-debate in the public and political spheres.

The Role of Teachers in Political Classrooms

Effective teachers of political classrooms facilitate the discussion but do not dominate it, and they encourage students to speak to one another directly.

Facilitators begin discussions with a focus question.

For example, “what was the most compelling argument in the Supreme Court case?” The focus question should follow specific criteria: It cannot be answered without using the text; it is open-ended in that there is no right or wrong answer; and it is a question about which the teacher, as the facilitator, has some genuine curiosity.

Facilitators ask clarifying questions and raise new issues.

When factual disputes need to be clarified, they ask short questions to probe for factual evidence; for example, when discussing affirmative action, the teacher may ask: “are quotas legal?”

Facilitators help students with difficulty expressing their points by rephrasing their questions or comments.

This keeps the discussion moving forward and helps students learn how to clearly state their viewpoint.

Facilitators give airtime to minority views.

When facilitators show that minority views are valued, students will feel more comfortable giving their true opinions.

When there is a dissenter among the student, facilitators shift focus to that argument, then ask all students to pretend to support the opinion of the dissenting student.

This is an important part of developing critical thinking skills—the ability to take a different position and to argue it with credence and credibility.

Facilitators do not explicitly state their opinions.

By not disclosing their opinions, a safe environment is created in which students are not trying to impress their teacher by aligning with their views, and the students do not feel rejected if they have the opposite opinion of their teacher. Plus, this approach helps students take ownership of the process. Instead of sharing their opinions, facilitators, when necessary, play devil's advocate. Facilitators should teach students what it means to be a devil's advocate so students feel comfortable challenging the teacher when they are in this role.

Sources:

Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*. Routledge.

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