

Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom

“...our history is neither an unbroken march of progress nor a doom loop of despair. It’s a complicated mess, just like the present. And having a sense of curiosity about where we came from is an act of civic pride.” Eric Johnson

Teaching history includes addressing complex topics. To ensure effective and successful teaching and learning, preparation is key, otherwise, as Thomas Edison wisely said, “A good intention, with a bad approach, often leads to a poor result.” In addition to the recommendations listed below, teachers should consult vetted sources for additional recommendations. For example, the [US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust](#) are beneficial to follow when covering any difficult histories.

Educate Yourself

Before covering sensitive topics, research and read as much as you can, from as many different vetted sources as possible. Seek out professional development and reach out to area universities and/or historical organizations (museums, preservation organizations, etc.) to gain as much comprehensive knowledge as you can. When preparing to cover issues pertaining to slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, etc., it is important that you consider your own biases and/or discomfort surrounding the issues. When you know better you do better, so be willing to re-think, re-learn, and reflect. Reach out to other faculty members and colleagues who you think may be interested in exploring these themes with you, and develop partners and advocates with strong standing both within your school, the community, and at large. This can prove to be helpful not only in keeping you motivated during your learning, but also in having a vetted support system should your pedagogical methods or content be challenged in anyway.

Cover a Comprehensive Narrative, Acknowledging the Complexity

Teach students to think critically about history so they can develop a more comprehensive understanding of all peoples’ experiences.

Critical thinking includes examining diverse primary sources, considering the common ways in which history is presented, questioning sources, looking for bias or propaganda, etc. Teachers must always also ask whose stories are being elevated in the lessons one chooses to teach. Whose stories are invisible, missing and/or secondary and why? The answers to these questions are often where you will find the stories that need to be included.

“History, when taught well, shows us how to improve the world, but when taught poorly tells us that there is nothing to improve.”

Certain parts of history (i.e. Civil War, Reconstruction, lynching, Jim Crow, etc.) raise very difficult and complicated questions about human nature and behavior. Despite the sensitive nature of these subjects, do not sanitize or simplify the past or present for your students. This is not as simple as good versus bad or white versus Black; rather, it is much more complex. Help students understand that the history of the United States is long and complicated, and that grappling with it is one way to move our nation forward. As John Oliver smartly said, “History, when taught well, shows us how to improve the world, but when taught poorly tells us that there is nothing to improve.”

Being able to cover a comprehensive narrative also involves being a life-long learner. Many teachers were not taught a comprehensive history themselves. And while the realities of teaching mean that time

is a limited commodity, it is imperative to maintain your connection to being a scholar. Take courses, read, join a discussion group, write/blog – find ways to continue expanding your own foundational knowledge and perspectives.

And always remember that as a teacher, it is acceptable (and in many ways quite powerful) to say to your students, “I don’t know,” or if you make a mistake, “I apologize.” This can be a teachable moment in showing them what it means to be a life long learner, how to seek out vetted sources, and also, sends an important message that you are humble.

Teach with Hope

Dr. Hasan Jeffries wrote in his preface to “Teaching Hard History” that “the saga of slavery is not exclusively a story of despair; hard history is not hopeless history.” Our past is filled with complex and terrible narratives. But it is imperative that we not teach history as a recounting of victimization only. While it is certainly our responsibility to teach the “hard history,” we must also teach the ways various individuals, groups, organizations, etc. have resisted throughout each and every time period. Help students see that in today’s world, which is still grappling with so many of the same issues, they are our future leaders

Remember that it’s not just the choices you make about which histories to teach that matters. It’s also about how you make your students feel while learning it. We can all agree that no student of any race should feel shame, blame or guilt in a classroom – because those are not empowering emotions. But they should *feel*. By leading students to analyze history from multiple perspectives, and elevating less-known voices and narratives, you can create a more inclusive and empathetic classrooms where all students feel seen and engaged as our nation’s future leaders.

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Integrate Primary Sources

Teachers should utilize primary sources & historical documents (beyond the typical and more common narratives) to represent the diverse voices and experiences of past people. This allows students to “DO history” and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of history. However, primary sources (imagery, in particular) that are graphic should be used very judiciously. With any primary source selected, it is important to understand its direct connection to your lesson objective. Select primary sources that do not “exploit the students’ emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful to the victims themselves. Do not skip any of the suggested topics because the visual images are too graphic; instead, use other approaches to address the material.” (USHMM)

Use Sound Pedagogy

In studying complex human behavior, many teachers rely upon simulation exercises or role plays meant to help students “experience,” empathize with or better understand unfamiliar situations. While hands-on, engaging activities and projects make for some of the most memorable learning, we must also be very mindful to never trivialize or put students in experiences that are meant to simulate oppression, injustice, violence, or other negative aspects of history. For example, students should never be put into the position to simulate slavery or any other situation pertaining to violence and/or hate. Classroom activities such as these fail to meet learning objectives, lead to incorrect assumptions regarding the understanding of suffering and trauma, can actually perpetuate racial tensions, and can cause harm.

Likewise, while creative writing activities can be used in meaningful ways, teachers should ensure the learning objective(s) of the activity is/are clear and instructions specific to meeting such objectives.

See <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines> for additional details. Even though these are written for the topic of the Holocaust, the recommendations are transferable to any histories involving hate, violence, genocide, etc.

Focus on Humanity & Individuality

It can often be hard for students to wrap their minds around the fact that history involves individual lives. Individuals with hopes and dreams and favorite foods—are within the broad categories, dates and statistics we discuss. Always emphasize the diversity of personal experiences within the larger historical narrative, which breathes life back into otherwise less impactful history. When learning history, and when considering the actions and views of various groups (i.e., “Enslaved people,” “Women,” “lawmakers,” etc. – no group is a monolith. (Meaning, each group in reality was/is comprised of millions of individuals with differing perspectives, experiences, opinions, etc. So while our historical discussions are usually spent grouping people into one position, it’s worth remembering that it’s actually much more complex.

Find the Right Balance

With all difficult topics, it is important for educators to teach a comprehensive history, but at an age-appropriate level that empowers students, rather than overwhelms them to the point that they “check out.” As the Equal Justice Initiative says, “The ongoing challenge for teachers will be finding a balance between engaging and confronting the reality in its difficulty, while also supporting the emotional experience of students.” Be mindful that each student, depending on their own heritage, race and lived experiences, may be impacted and effected in different ways by the same lesson.

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Know Yourself. Know Your Students. Know Your Community.

Who are you as a teacher and who are your students? What type of relationship do you have with your students and their families? What are the racial demographics of your classrooms? What is your race and how does it compare to the racial demographics where you teach? How do you think your students see you or interpret what you say? What assumptions might they make? What assumptions might you be making? These can be tough questions to ask and answer honestly, but it is up to each teacher to draw on relationships with students and a strategically built foundation of classroom respect and communication in order to know how to (and how much to) engage students in hard history and controversy. Be cognizant of the makeup of your classroom, from race to background, and how this compares to your own and/or might impact your messaging. Understand that this work will look different in every individual classroom, based on who you are, who your students are, and what kind of relationships you have with them and the overall community.

When selecting lessons, ask yourselves, “Can all students see themselves in what I am teaching? Will they learn with hope and feel empowered as future leaders?” As journalist Eric Johnson wrote,

Always consider the grade level and maturity of your students when selecting content, and always be prepared to support students if they become upset or emotional in ways they aren't able to articulate. Time for processing and reflection together is key so that you don't send a student home extremely upset and/or confused about something that took place in class. Implementing "exit tickets" can be helpful in knowing where students are at with the material you are covering.

Also, considering what your role and standing is within the school community and beyond can help inform your approach. Do you have strong relationships within the school and with your students and their families? If the answer is no, it doesn't mean you can't teach this. It just means you just need to think about how to carefully teach this. Always ensure students, families and the school community understand your rationale and the clear learning goals you have set.

Set Your Students Up for Success

"By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail." It is imperative that teachers work with their students to create a safe, classroom space with clear standards and shared expectations for language, behavior, participation, discussion, etc. This doesn't happen naturally and can only be guaranteed through diligent preparation. Before embarking into any hard history or controversial issues, it is important that students are first taught specific classroom procedures for appropriately conversing, and that they are given the chance to practice effective ways of participating in small group and class discussions. (For sample activities, see Carolina K-12's [Classroom Management & Setting Expectations activities](#), located in the Database of K-12 Resources.)

Also, ensure students understand WHY this is important. Be honest that while it might be easier to skip this type of content and conversation all together, you want to prepare them for success in life and empower them to make a difference.

Consider Your Classroom Space

Does your classroom feel inviting and safe? Do all students, of all races and backgrounds, feel represented in your classroom décor and resources? Is your classroom set up for productive controversial issues discussions? Space and how it makes you feel can impact the success of teaching and learning about sensitive issues, so take an honest look at your classroom and consider whether you can make any improvements. Consider how student seating is arranged and experiment with flexible seating and configurations that will allow students to see and speak with one another, whether in small groups or as an entire class. You might want to create writable spaces for students, from covering student desks/tables with butcher paper, to having dry erase easels or boards for students, so that they can process material both verbally and in writing. Enlist student assistance in designing bulletin boards to make your classroom more representative and inclusive, and even seek their opinions and suggestions on making the space more comfortable and/or inviting.

Start Small

It's easy to become overwhelmed by all the content and skills we are expected to teach alone, without adding in the extra work it requires to teach hard history and controversy in the classroom. But remember, it's not all on you and you don't have to turn your entire lesson plan book upside down immediately. You can start small and take it step by step. Perhaps you add a new bulletin board or poster to your classroom walls, try out a new lesson or activity, or integrate a more [inclusive practice](#).

Rather than becoming a deer in headlights, start with one thing – and likely, that one thing will lead to more great things.

Be an Active Facilitator

When covering sensitive material, be a balanced facilitator. Create a climate that refrains from shame and blame, and rather calls students in rather than calling them out. Actively facilitating in this climate means neither dominating or passively observing. Your role as the teacher includes the duties to:

- Provide reminders about respectful communication
- Ask students for clarification on statements that aren't clear or may be problematic
- Re-phrase questions when needed
- Correct inaccurate information
- Summarize and review main points
- Lead students in reflecting
- Immediately refute/condemn any hateful language
- Remind students why what they are learning about is important
- Always provide time for processing, reflection and debriefing

Try Viewing Your Students as “Co-Teachers”

In an article by Dr. Christopher Emdin of the Teachers College at Columbia, he discusses the importance of teachers embracing “reality pedagogy,” which interrupts the classic notion that teaching is about managing students and policing their behavior in reactive ways. Instead, he encourages a shift to the mentality of viewing students as “co-teachers,” learning from them as much as they learn from you, by creating a classroom space for connection and dialogue about how students are experiencing your classroom and the world beyond it. As he explains, “Co-teaching requires that teachers be humble enough to become students of their students—especially the students who have been most harmed, and will benefit most from a teacher listening to their experiences. In my first years of teaching [in NYC after 9/11], I never asked to hear my students’ thoughts about having to sit and learn while the world around them was going crazy. I didn’t make space for my Muslim students to heal from being targeted. But if I had started that dialogue, I would have learned a lot from them about how I could have been a better teacher.” ([Source](#))

“Lean Into It” – And Never Leave Upset

Allow students to share what makes them nervous about broaching these subjects in class. But make them understand why it’s important to do this work anyway. Keep an open dialogue regarding how students are feeling as they process the information shared and be prepared to deal with emotional reactions and tense moments. Dr. Tim Tyson recommends teachers and students (and anyone broaching hard conversations) “lean into it” rather than getting angry, defensive, and retreating. “I just tell people to *lean into it*... We're so afraid to speak in front of each other - we're afraid we're going to say the wrong thing, phrase things badly, bring up something awkward, then we're going to feel bad, and people are going to get angry. As far as discomfort goes, we have to lean into it. Rather than fleet discomfort, be willing to step into it just a little bit and experience it. It's a good learning environment... You can learn a lot about yourself and other people in that environment, if you're willing to endure it a little bit -- it's rarely fatal, really.”

Make Local Connections

As we work to better educate ourselves about less-known state and national history, making connections to local history is imperative. Uncovering the local stories that have shaped where students live can help them develop a strong sense of connection (to history and to their present community), historical relevance, and empowerment. For example, every North Carolina county has numerous schools; the study of education is fertile ground for making connections to history in your own backyard. This might mean researching the history of the closest Rosenwald School to your present school location; finding and inviting local education leaders into your classroom to speak about the history of education in your area; asking your students to research their own questions, such as “Who are your local schools named after and why?”; and more. Take students down pathways to show that “history happens here.”

Words Matter

When studying history, it is imperative to use language that recognizes all people's humanity, elevates the concept of survivors and resisters rather than victims, and cultivates empathy. The words and terminology we use in the classroom matter. For instance, terms such as “enslaved,” “enslaved person,” or “freedom seeker” are more humanizing than the word “slave.”

Prepare students for historical language that they may be unfamiliar with, particularly when examining primary sources. For instance, while terms such as “Negro,” “colored,” or “Indian” were utilized during certain periods of history, these words are not considered respectful or appropriate to use today. Always prepare students for the sources they will investigate and set clear expectations regarding language.

Make Connections to Today

James Baldwin said, “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.” Involve students in finding connections between the struggles of the past and what is happening today. Empower students to consider the ways they can work to highlight, grapple with and solve today’s problems.

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Summarize & Reflect

At the end of any discussion, summarize the main points, which helps students recall, review and reconsider the content of the discussion. Always allow time for final reflection, which is critical for students to process comments made by others, as well as intensify their own awareness/learning and/or develop changes in attitudes and opinions. Opportunities should be provided for both verbal and written responses, which can allow more quiet students to respond. This also provides the important chance for everyone to unwind and calmly consider all diverse views presented on the issue. Ideally, teachers will student responses to develop extension activities that will build community and support differing viewpoints.

Transparency & Vetting

Plan for the worst and teach for the best. Unfortunately, it seems that just about any topic can be deemed controversial today. It is thus important that you are proactive and prepared when delving into “hard history” and current events. Expect to get questions at a minimum. Plan, align to the standards that you teach, and remain transparent:

- Discuss your plans with your administrators and show how your plans directly connect to the teaching standards and skills you are charged with covering. Ideally, you will have the support of your administration.
- Seek out partners and advocates with strong standing, both in the community and beyond. Such resources (individuals and organizations) can help you with everything from vetting the content and approach you share, to legitimizing your reasoning for covering such content. This could include a local history museum, community college and/or university professors, community organizations, etc.
- Form a school-based curriculum committee. This committee can include school staff, as well as potential community partners like those just mentioned above. The committee can serve as a sounding board when integrating “hard history,” helping to vet pedagogy and content. If an issue arises, rather than being one teacher faced with a challenge, there is a committee in place to provide a fair review.
- When delving into sensitive history or current events, give parents/families forewarning in a positive manner with a letter sent out on school letterhead. Explain what you intend to cover, your teaching and learning goals, why this is important, and how it connects to teaching standards.
- Talk through your lesson planning with trusted individuals and experts. News stories abound with teachers, who likely had the best of intentions, doing something in class that was deemed terribly inappropriate for the content they were hoping to convey. By collaborating with others, an advisor can offer other perspectives on how your ideas and strategies might be received and help vet the pedagogical soundness of your approach.

If Challenged or Questioned

If you receive any kind of questioning about your materials or methods, how you respond is critical. Do not be defensive or respond in anger. Try to listen first. Explain your reasoning and teaching methods, but also acknowledge that you are willing to improve and do better if you do make a mistake. Before responding, weigh and consider the inquiry you’ve received. Seek counsel from a trusted advisor and respond with transparency and warmth. For instance, “Thank you so much for contacting me and providing this important feedback. I would love to discuss my methodology and how this relates to the NC Standard Course of Study, as well as hear more about your concerns. Together, I’m sure we can figure this out.”

Start any conversation with something positive. For instance, if the person you are speaking with is a parent, ensure you begin by sharing something authentically positive about the person’s child. And always thank the person who has contacted you for taking the time and interest to come to you. After having a face-to-face conversation, always follow up with a summary of what was discussed in writing (i.e., via e-mail.)