

# Appendices 12–13

## Appendix 12: Teaching Controversial Issues

Many teachers steer clear of controversy in the classroom and do not discuss environmental issues, which sometimes are controversial, with their students. Yet controversy can provide opportunities for increasing the quality of students' thinking and students' ability to solve problems.

Although controversy is often uncomfortable, it also tends to be intellectually stimulating. As long as students clearly understand that controversial issues are controversial precisely because they are too complex to have clear-cut “right” and “wrong” solutions, they can focus on the process of clarifying their own viewpoints through debate and reflection.

Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and other learning theorists address the importance of cognitive disequilibrium in intellectual and moral development. Students benefit from opportunities to consider other viewpoints and defend their own. Productive conflict appears to promote the development of cognitive and moral reasoning; it thus has a valid place in a learning environment.

### The Role of the Teacher

Teaching about an environmental issue in the classroom may require a shift in your role as teacher. The teacher operates more like a conductor orchestrating opportunities for students to think about complex issues in a safe, supportive atmosphere, rather than focusing primarily on teaching information to be learned. Teachers need to allow ideas to develop, understanding to deepen, and judgments to be made and tested.

Teachers can support student learning by encouraging and facilitating discussion, by providing accurate factual information, and by providing sufficient time to study a multifaceted environmental issue.

### Instructional Strategies

Activities should emphasize strategies that minimize polarization of viewpoints and maximize quantity and quality of ideas. Through frequent class discussions and cooperative learning experiences, students should examine their thoughts and opinions without pressure to come to the “right” conclusion. Emphasis is on the process of sharing opinions, acquiring and judging new information, and making and reflecting on those decisions. The following suggestions support a classroom climate that allows for this kind of thinking and learning:

- Establish clear rules for behavior during class discussions. These rules should first and foremost preserve the integrity of the individual. Personal attacks and name calling should be forbidden, and students

should be reminded that any conflicts that arise must be conflicts of ideas, not people. Conflicts of ideas can be positive ways of advancing one's thinking.

- Pay attention and respond to feelings underlying expressed ideas. Sometimes students are afraid to voice personal beliefs and convictions; they need to be reassured that this is okay.
- When a conflict arises, observe the group, describe what you observe, and provide time for students to describe what they observe and feel. Engage students in conflict resolution techniques such as reversing roles in arguments or negotiating a win-win resolution (so that everyone wins in some way). Provide support for students who are anxious throughout the conflict; many people are uncomfortable with disagreement.
- Use questioning strategies to clarify and advance students' thinking. Ask students to restate an idea in another way, to elaborate, or to reiterate what they hear in order to confirm or clarify. Questions can also be used to advance thinking. Ask students to apply an idea to a real or hypothetical situation, to consider discrepancies in their thinking, or to reassess their idea in light of new information.
- Take time after each class discussion to analyze your students' and your own thinking so that you value the evolution of thinking rather than only the views expressed. By identifying individual biases, defense strategies, and styles of argumentation, a group can operate more consciously as it tries to fully understand a controversial issue.

### Working with Parents and Administrators

A primary reason that many teachers avoid teaching about controversial issues is fear of resistance from parents and administrators. The following suggestions will help you avoid resistance and gain administrative and parental support.

- Examine community attitudes about environmental issues in local newspapers and listen to public discourse on these problems. This will help you anticipate potential concerns and choose how and when to teach a particular environmental issue.
- Consider the occupations of parents in the community. Will any of them be particularly sensitive to certain environmental issues? If so, think through how to best work with these parents so they do not feel threatened by your lesson unit.
- Determine if any lesson or part of a lesson will raise concern among parents or administrators and modify the lesson accordingly.
- Choose a method to inform administrators, then parents, of your plan and to gather their input. Include examples of lessons. Emphasize that the teacher's role is to facilitate discussion and to help students find

out how to think about an issue—not what to think.

- Provide plenty of time for feedback from administrators and parents. Incorporate their ideas in ways that make the lessons more instructionally sound.
- As you teach the lessons, keep parents and administrators informed. Describe for them the students' activities and your observations as students learn about an environmental issue.
- After you have taught the lessons, provide administrators with a concise assessment of student learning. Describe ways that you would modify the lessons in the future.

*This article was adapted, with permission, from Toxics: Taking Charge (1989).*

## Appendix 13: Two Hats

*Many years ago John Hug, Environmental Education supervisor for the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio PLT coordinator, wrote the following article. Hug's advice is still valid and bears repeating. It also follows the Project Learning Tree philosophy of teaching students how to think, not what to think, about complex environmental issues.*

### Two Hats

It would appear that environmental educators have a bad case of the “two hat” problem. We have come by the problem naturally and therefore, we have paid little attention to it.

The problem is simply that industry, utilities, labor, business, media, and other segments of the population and the general public have consistently recognized only one hat when talking about environmentalists and environmental educators. It is not uncommon for dedicated environmental educators to be summarily dismissed as troublemakers—environmentalists. Perhaps definitions will help clarify the problem.

Any world citizen who advocates with greater or lesser action that wrongs against our environment must be stopped is an environmentalist. Perhaps the negative reputation environmentalists have stems from the dramatic and radical actions of a few.

An environmental educator, on the other hand, is any world citizen who uses information and educational processes to help people analyze the merits of the many and varied points of view usually present on a given environmental issue. The environmental educator is not the “mediator,” “trade-off specialist,” or “negotiator,” but a developer of skills and an information analyst who prepares the people (from any segment of the population) who will participate in environmental decision making.