

Teaching Difficult Subject Matter

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Abstract

When and how is it appropriate to plan, implement and assess difficult /problematic subject matter to adolescent students? The paper assumes both a moral and developmental theoretical perspective when examining the need for students to be exposed to, and learn from, difficult to teach subject content. An applicable lesson plan is provided. Grappling with such issues fosters a greater sense of critical thinking and allows students to make meaningful connections to the world in which they coexist.

Keywords: Education, Elementary, Difficult subject matter.

1. Introduction

Students today, more than ever, are surrounded by conflict. Disagreements arise on a daily basis in schoolyards between fellow students as well as between teachers and students regarding work ethic, time management, and academic performance. Problems often simmer and erupt at home between parents and siblings over everyday matters such as money, responsibilities, and personal space. These multilayered conflicts are part of the fabric of adolescence. Beyond the walls of a child's immediate environment, disputes occur within communities, and more ominously, around the world. Children are inundated with horrific images of geopolitical conflicts through print, the Internet, and television (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Burnett, [7]).

There is a dearth of information regarding how teachers today should deal with conflict and difficult subject matter. Ethical questions regarding an individual's rights and topics that may be inflammatory in nature become problematic. In other words, difficult subject matter could polarize opinions, challenge belief systems, and foster dissension. Often disagreements and

controversial topics are either glossed over or avoided altogether by educators. Ignoring controversial subject matter in the curriculum may be common; however, doing so may be both unwise and illogical even at the elementary school level (McBee, [10]). Omitting difficult to teach subject matter creates barriers that hinder important critical thinking skills in students (Risinger, [16]). If difficult and sometimes controversial subject matter isn't introduced, children are denied the opportunity to learn, strategize, and connect with problematic periods of a nation's immediate present and past. This paper will examine adolescent intellectual and moral development, as this is the time when difficult subject matter may be most appropriately addressed. The role a teacher must assume when addressing difficult subject matter and the environment necessary to initiate meaningful dialogue amongst students will also be highlighted. An applicable example of how to integrate difficult subject matter into academic curriculum will be provided to help guide educators through this process. A sample unit of study for Intermediate level students on the internment of Japanese Canadians will be provided.

1.1 When to Teach Difficult Subject Matter

Developmentally and emotionally, the optimal time to broach difficult subject matter during the academic career may be during adolescence. Adolescence covers the span of years between childhood and adulthood. In Western society, adolescence normally begins at approximately 12 or 13 and ends at either the late teens or early twenties (Papalia & Olds, [14]). According to Piaget [15]), the formal operations stage of intellectual development occurs around 12 years of age (as cited in Santrock & Mitterer, [18]). When this stage is attained, adolescents are able to think of what might be true and are capable of imagining an infinite variety of possibilities (Kohlberg, [8]). In this sense, adolescents are able to think hypothetically; thus, their thinking goes beyond the concrete and now enters the world of abstract reasoning (Kohlberg, [8]). Adolescents are capable of integrating what they have learned in the past with their problems of the present and their planning for the future. If an adolescents' culture and education have not encouraged them to engage in abstract reasoning, they may never attain this crucial stage in their intellectual development even though they have the necessary neurological development (Papalia & Olds, [14]). Thus, it is vital that adolescents are given the opportunity to engage in higher-level reasoning and thus imperative that they be exposed to this through academia.

To grasp subject matter, it is also essential that the learner have attained a specific level of moral development. Moral development involves changes with age in thinking, feeling, and how they act and react to others around them (as cited in Santrock & Mitterer [18]). The evolution of moral development centres on the principles and values that guide an individual in what they should do and how they should conduct themselves (Kohlberg, [8]). Moral development encompasses two distinct dimensions: intrapersonal (an individual's basic values and sense of who they are) and interpersonal (how people should act and interact with other individuals) (Nucci, [13]). Much of the work in moral development has revolved around theories proposed by Kohlberg ([8]). According to Kohlberg ([8]) moral development can be broken into distinct stages and levels. Kohlberg ([8]) believes that most adolescents are in levels 2 and 3 of stages 3 or 4. Adolescents who are at these developmental levels and stages may appropriately comprehend the difficult subject matter being taught and exposure to this information may also refine their morality. A brief discussion of Kohlberg's stages and levels that would optimize the teaching of difficult subject matter is presented below.

At Level 2 (Conventional Level/ Intermediate Internalization), stage 3 (Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships and Interpersonal Conformity), Kohlberg ([8]) proposed that individuals in this stage of their moral development value trust, caring, and loyalty to those around them as a basis for moral judgments. Teaching difficult subject matter to adolescents at this stage of moral development may help students grasp the importance of trust and loyalty through the devastation that has occurred when these values have been disrespected.

Stage 4 of Level 2 is entitled Social System Morality and is defined as a period in an individual's moral development that is marked by judgments based on understanding and social order, law, justice and one's obligation or duty (Kohlberg, [8]). Providing adolescents with adverse historical events and then permitting them to grapple with the concepts of social order and justice will both enhance their own morality while allowing students to understand the potential impact such events may have on others.

At Level 3 (Postconventional Level/Full Internalization) Stage 5 (Social Contract or Utility and Individual Rights), Kohlberg ([8]) indicated that individuals begin to reason that values, rights and principles go beyond the word of the law. Kohlberg's last Stage at Level 3 was entitled Stage 6 (Universal Ethical Principles). In this final stage of moral development, Kohlberg theorizes that an individual has developed moral judgments that are based on universal human rights. When faced with a dilemma between law and one's own conscience, the person's individual conscience is followed (Kohlberg, [8]). Exposing adolescent students to difficult to teach materials at these developmental levels will permit them to think both critically and beyond their immediate surroundings; thus they will be expected to critically examine values, principles, and human rights dilemma's instead of simply recalling important dates and place names.

Therefore, as long as the learner is an adolescent and has achieved one of the higher levels of moral reasoning, teaching them difficult subject matter may not only enhance their knowledge base, but also permit them to think critically and morally. Although it seems reasonable that difficult subject matter would be part of the academic curriculum, this is not always the case.

1.2 Why is Teaching Difficult Subject Matter Avoided?

Several explanations have been presented in an attempt to explain why educators have failed to address teaching issue-related, difficult to teach subject matter. The barriers have included:

1. A strong sense of conservatism among practitioners of social studies curriculum. The result has been a curriculum that highlights the positive, stable features of society and distances itself from areas that are possibly inflammatory and controversial (Evans, [3]).
2. A long-standing tradition of discipline versus issue-based social studies design and implementation (Evans, [3]).
3. Social studies curriculum that is far too heavy in content that stresses quick, fragmented glances of material at the expense of in-depth issue related analysis (Newman, [12]).
4. Social studies classrooms and curriculum that are geared toward a more traditional lecture style teaching approach that emphasizes the transmission of instructor knowledge

versus students constructing their own knowledge and forging their own connects to issues and events in history (Onosoko, [17]).

5. Teachers that possess authoritarian and controlling personalities who are unwilling to engage in a “give and take” mentality when exploring difficult subject matter (Gross, [4]).
6. Teacher education programs that fail to both teach and encourage teachers to engage in issue-based approaches to learning and interacting with students (Shaver, [19]).
7. Teachers’ lack of exposure to issue and inquiry-based courses in their own education and training (Boyer, [1]).
8. Textbooks that are primarily fact-oriented and the relative unavailability of age-appropriate supplemental resources that delve in to issues and difficult subject matter (Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, [20]).

Although a number of reasons for not teaching difficult subject matter as part of the curriculum have been outlined, it is important to note that strategies to implemented difficult subjects have been proposed. It is crucial to establish guidelines for both teacher and students when addressing complex, issue-related subject matter. Onosko ([17]) has established 12 instructional strategies for teachers on how to structure a classroom that promotes meaningful dialogue and critical reflection of the issues being discussed. According to Onosko ([17]) it is vital that educators:

1. *Establish a policy, from the onset, that prohibits disparaging and mean-spirited comments.* Productive discussions must be held in an environment that is inclusive in nature and respectful of all opinions being shared by students. Sarcastic comments, jokes or put-downs should not be tolerated. It is important to clearly define the ground rules before discussing complex issues.
2. *Make it clear to the students that you are interested in their ideas and that you are confident in their ability to think critically.* Sending these two messages to students is essential to building an effective and open learning environment. This type of feedback need not be overly demonstrative in nature. It can include rewarding gestures like a nod of the head, posting written work on a bulletin board, complimenting a student on their progress on a report or reading aloud a student’s response to a thought provoking question.
3. *Give students the opportunity to work in small groups or with a partner prior to whole class discussions.* Small group discussions allow a child with important opportunities to flush out their ideas and to reflect. This also gives students the opportunity to participate more readily in conversations that may be generated. Students can more safely determine if their ideas make sense to classmates and to learn of other ways to think about the issue being examined. Both understanding and a sense of confidence are gained through this type of arrangement. This increases the likelihood that a student will engage more readily in whole group discussions of a topic or issue.
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5. *Small group discussions allow a child with important that may be generated.* Students can more safely determine if their ideas make sense to classmates and to learn of other ways to think about the issue being examined. Both understanding and a sense of confidence are gained through this type of arrangement. This increases the likelihood that a student will engage more readily in whole group discussions of a topic or issue.
6. *Openly encourage students to ask questions, not just offer answers.* A student's ability to work through an issue requires question asking. It is important to cultivate this attribute in student. It must be stressed by the teacher that asking pointed questions reflects a child's curiosity and their growing intelligence. Teachers are able to nurture this dimension by modeling the desired behaviour for students in the classroom.
7. *Promote the idea that changing one's position on a subject is a sign of reflection, and an indicator of thoughtfulness, not one of weakness.* Openly supporting a child when they determine that their reasoning requires further contemplation is vitally important. More students would likely get more actively involved in classroom discussions if they believed their peers and teacher respected and valued such behaviour.
8. *Frequently remind students that their ideas are being challenged, not them as individuals.* Students need to be reminded that when classmates openly challenge one of their assertions, it is not intended to be a personal attack nor will it be a challenge to their friendship. It is important for the teacher to stress that differences in opinion are common when reflecting upon difficult subject matter.
9. *Depersonalize challenges to students' thinking by framing teacher reactions to comments or ideas in a third person voice.* It is important for a teacher to maintain the role as the facilitator of discussion. This strategy can be followed by allowing students to think through their assertions and by shaping the conversation with comments such as: "I hadn't thought of that Tracey, but I would have to disagree for the following reason..." or "that view may be problematic due to the fact that...what do you think?" It may even be even more effective to not comment altogether. If the desired point is not raised, the teacher may choose to enter the conversation using a third-person voice as mentioned above.
10. *Humour can be effectively utilized when discussing issue oriented classroom discussions.* Humour, when it is appropriate, helps make serious dialogue more engaging for students. Humour has the power to smooth over disagreements between students that might otherwise become exaggerated and counterproductive in the classroom. This is not to suggest that teachers become classroom comedians or that teachers are to avoid conflicts that may arise when dealing with problematic areas of discussion. Humour is employed sensitively and as means to periodically infuse energy into the conversation.
11. *Vary the use of dialogue and debate style discussions.* Debates are defined as formats in which students defend a particular perspective or point of view. Although this format is highly effective, they may also create participant resistance to serious consideration of opposing points of view. Dialogue formats should also be employed. Dialogue formats include a discussion scenario in which students pursue a deeper understanding of a topic

or issue without formally adopting or defending a particular point of view. One strategy that promotes this format is to establish a compromise position or middle way that takes into account the perspectives of opposing parties or groups of individuals within the classroom.

12. *Have students assume a position counter to their own.* The teacher's intent here is to encourage more open-minded, reflective analysis by students. Assuming another individual's point of view helps children enter the perspective of others. This type of exchange grants students the opportunity to contemplate and express viewpoints that may conflict with their social self or their peer group affiliations.
13. *Regularly remind students how individual lessons and activities are linked to the central issue being discussed and examined.* This can be accomplished in a number of ways, including the following:
 - a. Displaying the central issue somewhere in the classroom for easy and frequent reference.
 - b. Frequently remind students of the overall unit goal.
 - c. At the beginning of each class, outline to students, or have them explain how today's unitwork fits in to or relates to the central unit issue.
 - d. Often brainstorm with students activities that can or need to occur in upcoming lessons that will further nurture their understanding and appreciation of the unit's central theme or issue.
 - e. Frequently explain how readings and other smaller assignments fit in and contribute to the unit of study's objective of addressing the central issue.
14. *Create, with student input, culminating activities that allow students to share their perspectives.* Culminating activities give students the opportunity to share their understanding of and perspective on the central issue being examined. Culminating activities should include all applicable dimensions of the curriculum (pen and paper assignments, the visual and dramatic arts etc.). The assignments given should reflect student input and should also allow children the opportunity to select assignments that highlight their strengths. The projects assigned should openly encourage group interaction and should allow students to employ multiple learning styles. Assignments may include: a speech, skits/plays, a radio broadcast, a videotaped television newscast, whole class or small group debates, poster displays of art work, newspaper articles/editorials, maps/charts, and student inspired assignments.

The above-mentioned strategies, when in place, should provide the teacher and his/her students with an effective, structured environment in which to explore difficult to teach, issue-related subject matter.

Taken together, the preceding information has provided the basis for teaching difficult subject matter within an academic setting. To draw from what has been reported to date, the rest of the paper will encompass the development of a strategy to teach/implement this subject matter. Thus, the remainder of this paper will focus on developing a unit of study on a difficult subject matter for adolescent students. The unit of study will focus on the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. Prior to developing this unit of study, an examination of The Ontario Curriculum is required in order to shape the unit and its assignments and to provide a framework of instructional objectives to work within and

towards. For the purpose of this unit, overall course objectives will be taken from the History Curriculum for students in Grade 7 in Ontario, Canada.

2. Developing a Unit of Study: The Ontario Curriculum, History, Grade 7

The Ontario Curriculum ([11]) clearly states that it is important to emphasize the relationship of history to the world outside of the classroom so that students understand that the areas of study being examined are not simply just school subjects, but fields of study that affect their immediate lives, the community in which they live in and the world. History, in this regard, helps students make meaningful connections between what they are learning in the classroom and present-day world events and situations. When studying history, students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the rights, privileges and responsibilities of citizens as well as a willingness to show respect, tolerance and an appreciation towards individuals, groups and cultures in the global community. Learning activities should be inclusive in nature and should reflect diverse points of view and experiences that help students to become more sensitive to the experiences and perceptions of others. Through studying history, students also learn that protecting human rights and taking a stand against racism and other expressions of hatred and discrimination are essential components of responsible citizenship. The assignments included will assist students to meet the following objectives as outlined in the history curriculum:

- A) to help students function as informed citizens in a culturally diverse society
- B) to enable students to effectively evaluate different points of view and to examine information critically and to solve applicable problems
- C) to explore various forms of historical evidence
- D) to enable students to learn how lessons from the past can be used to make wise decisions for the present and the for the future
- E) for students to achieve a balanced perspective
- F) to help prepare students to be contributing and responsible citizens in a democratic society.

The above outlined bullets from the Ontario History Curriculum will be used as a guide for the unit's overall objectives. Individual lessons will be shaped around specific expectations from the different areas of the curriculum being examined.

For the purpose of this paper, the lesson ideas presented do not follow the traditional outline prescribed for formal lesson planning. They are abbreviated to suit the needs of the research presented here. The unit lesson plans included in this paper attempt to nurture and enhance a student's moral development. The tasks tap into the ideas hypothesized in Kohlberg's level 3, stages 5 and 6. The work the students will undertake in their examination of this dark part of Canadian history will encourage them to better understand the era and the inherent issues of prejudice and systemic racism. Ideally, the mini assignments that the students will engage in will help them better understand the past through personal introspection and reflection. This, in turn, should provide the students with a framework in which to help them make better sense of the many conflicts that they encounter today and those they may face in the future. According to Hahn ([5]), the study of controversial issues assists students in the development of the skills necessary when dealing and acting on what is happening in their world.

2.1 Teaching difficult subject matter: Lesson Plan

2.1.1. The Internment of Japanese Canadians During World War II

Students in this class have a base of knowledge to work from regarding racism and prejudice. Previous units of study have included work with the film “To Kill a Mockingbird”, Residential Schools in Canada, and Holocaust survivor and guest speaker Eva Persson.

2.1.2 Initial Discussion

1. Review part one of Onosko’s ([17]) 12 Instructional Strategies when teaching difficult subject matter with students.
2. Revisit the idea of racism and prejudice. What is racism and prejudice? Where have we seen racism and prejudice in what we have studied previously in the school year? Why is it important to study racism and prejudice?
3. The goal of good literature is to raise thought-provoking questions, not to necessarily provide students with answers (Woodson, [22]). Powerful literature has the ability to shift students’ perspectives of the real world and it allows them to adopt alternative ideas and emotions (Wolf, Carey, & Mieras, [21]). Introduce the short story “Remember, Chrysanthemum,” (Hatashita-Lee, [6]). The first page on the story itself includes a synopsis of the work. Introduce the word *internment* and its many implications. Hatashita-Lee asks students who are reading her work whether the treatment of Japanese Canadians was justified. I will ask students to keep this question in mind as we read the piece together. I will also ask students to note evidence of racism and prejudice as we explore the short story together. A considerable block of time will be set aside for student questions, comments and discussion.

Discussion questions could include:

1. How does this piece relate to what we have previously studied in class?
2. What motives do you think lay behind the evacuation and internment of Japanese Canadians?
3. How can you use what we have learned from this short story in your life?
Several Language, History, and Art bullets from the Ontario Curriculum (1997/1998) will be covered in the assignments established around the Lee piece. The Ontario Curriculum expectations include the following:
 - reading a variety of fiction and nonfiction materials for different purposes
 - explaining their interpretation of a written work, supporting it with evidence from the work and from their own knowledge and experience
 - identifying the main ideas in written materials
 - making judgments and drawing conclusions about ideas in written materials on the basis of evidence
 - clarifying and developing their own points of view by examining the ideas of others
 - planning a research project and carrying out the research
 - communicating ideas and information for a variety of purposes
 - using writing for various purposes and in a range of contexts
 - producing pieces of writing using a variety of forms (descriptive, narrative, and expository compositions)
 - asking questions and discussing different aspects of ideas in order to clarify their thinking
 - expressing and responding to a range of ideas and opinions concisely, clearly and appropriately

- contributing and working constructively in groups
- expressing ideas and opinions confidently but without trying to dominate the conversation
- interpreting and communicating the meaning of novels, scripts, historical fiction and other materials from a wide variety of sources and cultures
- solving a problem that is presented through drama
- writing in role in various forms showing the complexity of a dramatic situation
- producing two- and three-dimensional art that communicates a variety of ideas (thoughts, feelings, experiences) for specific purposes
- organizing art work to communicate ideas

2.1.3 Nurturing Students Interests

I openly encourage children in my classroom to research their interests around a particular subject, select their work partners and outline many of the assignments we are to undertake as a group. The key to transforming student indifference in their work may be as simple as allowing children to make decisions about their learning (Kohn, [9]). After a lengthy, student-led discussion of the Lee short story, I will invite students to suggest ideas about how to work with the material. I will act as a facilitator/guide when helping students shape assignment ideas that fit within the curriculum we are to work with. It is helpful to record ideas on the blackboard under their specific heading (visual arts, drama, research, geography, reading and writing). In this regard, students begin to understand that they, too, are responsible for their learning (Kohn, [9]). This process requires teachers to not merely cover the curriculum, but to enable students to construct their own knowledge and to develop their talents and interests in effective, powerful and personally meaningful ways (Darling-Hammond, [2]). Ultimately, students are encouraged to connect with the material and draw meaning from what is presented to them. It is evident that students have a higher sense of self-esteem and a greater feeling of academic confidence when teachers bolster their sense of self-determination in the classroom (Kohn, [9]). Once the assignment ideas have been presented and shaped, students would be given the opportunity to select 2 or 3 of the assignments to work upon. They will be asked to share their work on the story read and the central ideas of racism and prejudice when they have completed their individual assignments.

3 Conclusions

It is critically important for teachers to address controversial, difficult to teach subject matter within a safe, structured environment that allows children to think critically, express their ideas and to make meaningful personal connections to what they are learning together. Students are more apt to internalize controversial subject matter when they are given the opportunity to select how they are to demonstrate their understanding of a particular topic. Through this process, students are encouraged to grow both intellectually and morally and to realize that they play an integral part of the world within the classroom and beyond its borders.

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