

# Politics in the Classroom

## Instructor Resources

### I. Difficult Topics—Politics and Current Events

The following are from the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at the University of Michigan:

- “Teaching in the Current Political Climate:” <http://crlt.umich.edu/blog/teaching-current-political-climate>
- “Teaching and Learning in a Tense Election Season:” <http://crlt.umich.edu/blog/teaching-and-learning-tense-election-season>
- “Returning to the Classroom After the Election:” <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/blog/returning-classroom-after-election> (published after the 2016 election)

“Let’s Talk Politics: Bias, Dialogue, and Critical Thinking,” Anti-Defamation League.

[https://www.csusm.edu/election2020/images\\_election2016/lets-talk-politics-bias-dialogue-and-critical-thinking.pdf](https://www.csusm.edu/election2020/images_election2016/lets-talk-politics-bias-dialogue-and-critical-thinking.pdf)

- This guide, published before the 2016 U.S. election, presents approaches and activities for teaching about elections.

“Teaching News Literacy in Politically Polarized Times,” by Andrea Baer and Jean Cook, *Faculty Focus.com*, February 13, 2019. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/teaching-news-literacy-in-politically-polarized-times/>

- This article offers perspectives on teaching strategies that foster critical thinking and media literacy skills within a supportive classroom environment; it includes examples of class activities.

“Knowing When to Teach Current Events,” by Noliwe M. Rooks, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 22, 2014. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Knowing-When-to-Teach-Current/148939>

- This article offers five guiding questions to determine when and if it is appropriate to incorporate current and controversial topics into a course.

*Student and Institutional Engagement in Political Life, Special issue of Diversity & Democracy*, Institute for Democracy & higher Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, vol. 18, no. 4, 2015. <https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2015/fall>

- “This issue highlights practices that advance educational goals related to political learning and explores the various roles that students, faculty, and administrators can play in creating a politically engaged and socially just democracy.”

“Beyond Polarization: How to have productive conversations in an era of extremism,” by Jason Jay, *MIT Technology Review*, October 23, 2018. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/612313/beyond-polarization/>

- This article explores how to balance seeking common ground while taking and maintaining firm political stands. It also offers practical tips for engaging with the other side.

“Running Class Discussions on Divisive Topics is Tricky. Here’s One Promising Approach.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 19, 2018. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Running-Class-Discussions-on/243967/#.W1HOvYsanEl.gmail>

- This edition of the Chronicle’s teaching newsletter describes one instructor’s use of Reflective Structured Dialogue to meaningfully discuss current events in the classroom.

“Improving Dialogue Across the Political Divide,” by Laura Hoxworth, *UVAToday*, August 16, 2019.

<https://news.virginia.edu/content/improving-dialogue-across-political-divide>

- In this interview, Rachel Wahl discusses her research on how people learn from each other across deep political divides, including how we can work to cultivate healthy dialogue on college campuses.

“Don’t Ignore Your Republican Students,” by Nikki Usher, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 22,

2017. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Don-t-Ignore-Your-Republican/239297>

- In this article, Usher describes the politically polarized environment that grew in her class post-2016-election, and she urges faculty not to allow their conservative students to feel silenced.

“Professor, Do Your Job,” by Stanley Fish, *Policy Review* (August/September 2008).

<https://www.hoover.org/research/professor-do-your-job>

- This article argues that classrooms and institutions of higher education are not appropriate venues for partisan, political discourse, and political topics should only be discussed in an “academicized” way.

“Politics in the Classroom: How Much is Too Much?” by Steve Drummond, *npr.org*, December 16, 2015.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/12/16/459673575/politics-in-the-classroom-how-much-is-too-much>

- In this interview, Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, authors of *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, discuss how instructors can walk the fine line required to create and maintain a political, but non-partisan classroom.

## II. Difficult Topics and Civil Discourse—General Guides

*Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*, edited by Kay Landis, University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University (2008). (PDF)

<https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/academics/institutional-effectiveness/departments/center-for-advancing-faculty-excellence/difficult-dialogues/handbooks/start-talking/index.cshtml>

- This resource presents “strategies for engaging controversial topics in the classroom, and reflections from thirty-five faculty and staff members who have field-tested the techniques.” It is aimed at instructors who want to “strengthen their teaching and engage their students more effectively in conversations about the most important issues of our time.”

“Fostering Civil Discourse: A Guide for Classroom Conversations.” *Facing History and Ourselves*.

[https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Fostering\\_Civil\\_Discourse.pdf](https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Fostering_Civil_Discourse.pdf)

- This guide describes ideas and tools to help instructors prepare their classrooms and students to practice civil discourse, including detailed overviews of four teaching strategies.

“How to Hold a Better Class Discussion: Advice Guide,” by Jay Howard, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

<https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190523->

[ClassDiscussion?utm\\_source=at&utm\\_medium=en&cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5059347](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190523-ClassDiscussion?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&cid=at&source=ams&sourceId=5059347)

- This thorough guide offers advice and strategies about improving class discussion and student participation in general and includes a section on handling divisive topics.

“Seven Bricks to Lay the Foundation for Productive Difficult Dialogues,” by Annie Soisson, EdD,

*FacultyFocus.com*, October 16, 2018. [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/seven-bricks-to-lay-the-foundation-for-productive-difficult-dialogues/)

[management/seven-bricks-to-lay-the-foundation-for-productive-difficult-dialogues/](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/seven-bricks-to-lay-the-foundation-for-productive-difficult-dialogues/)

- This article focuses on planned, in-class dialogues and presents guidelines for developing the environment and skills that make difficult dialogues effective learning opportunities.

“Managing Difficult Classroom Discussions,” Indiana University Bloomington Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/managing-difficult-classroom-discussions/index.html>

- This article guides instructors through preparation, in-class, follow-up, and potential problems with difficult discussion. While the suggestions focus on pre-planned discussions, many are also applicable to unexpected discussions.

Structured Academic Controversy, at SERC Pedagogy in Action.

<https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/sac/index.html>

- This website offers a toolkit for teaching with Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), “a type of cooperative learning strategy...designed to engage students in controversy and then guide them to seek consensus.” The site includes research findings on the pedagogical effectiveness of SAC, a how-to guide, teaching examples, and additional resources.

“Leading Effective Classroom Discussions on Controversial Issues,” by Nels P. Highberg, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 10, 2010. <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/leading-effective-classroom-discussions-on-controversial-issues/23834>

- This article offers practical guidelines for planning and facilitating discussion on controversial topics in the classroom.

“Civility in the Classroom: How to Encourage Christian Humility,” by Leslie A. Hahner.

<https://sites.baylor.edu/beartracks/2019/11/04/civility-in-the-classroom-how-to-encourage-christian-humility/>

- This short article discusses how to model civility by practicing humility, particularly within a Christian university context, in order “to mold the classroom as a space of equitable engagement.”

“How to Politely Disagree, According to Science,” by Michelle Kinder, *TIME Ideas*, January 27, 2017.

<https://time.com/4648916/talk-someone-disagree-anger/?xid=newsletter-brief>

- This article describes how three key tactics of social and emotional health can reshape public and private conversations.

### III. Relevant Resources for the Classroom

One Small Step Initiative, *StoryCorps*. <https://storycorps.org/discover/onesmallstep/>

- “One Small Step” aims to bring people with different political views together in conversation in order “to break down boundaries created by politics and remember our shared humanity.” The website includes featured stories and a guide for holding your own “one small step” conversation using the StoryCorps app.

ProCon.org. <https://www.procon.org/>

- The mission of this independent nonprofit is “promoting critical thinking, education, and informed citizenship by presenting controversial issues in a straightforward, nonpartisan, primarily pro-con format.” The website includes professionally researched overviews of 80 issues that are controversial and important to many Americans; each overview aims to reflect a broad range of perspectives and opinions that span the breadth of the debate surrounding an issue.

Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

- This nonpartisan fact tank presents information on a variety of topics based on public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis, and other data-driven social science research, including a section on the 2020 election (<https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/2020-election/>).

*Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, by Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Data & Society*, May 5, 2017. <https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>

- This report explores how and from whom disinformation spreads online and the media's role in perpetuating it. The link includes the full report, case studies, and a syllabus for teaching about media manipulation.

Sample ground rules for dialogue, compiled by the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation. <http://ncdd.org/rc/item/1505/>

#### IV. Books

*Breaking Through Gridlock: The Power of Conversation in a Polarized World*, by Jason Jay and Gabriel Grant (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017)

- This book shares “clear-cut and actionable pathways for having difficult conversations that matter...With proven exercises and rich examples, this interactive ‘field guide’ walks readers through a process of transforming paralysis and effecting positive change.”

*How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*, by Robert J. Nask, DeMethra LaSha Bradley, and Arthur W. Chickering (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

- The authors describe the practice of moral conversation—“an open and frank talking together in order to seek mutual understanding and harmony”—as a way to address volatile topics on campus, from the point of view of a faculty member, student affairs staff person, and a senior administrator.

*The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, by Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy (Routledge, 2014)

- The authors explore what good practice looks like in the political classroom, findings about what students experience and learn in these classes, why this work is particularly challenging in today's political climate, and ethical dilemmas that arise during classroom political discussion. The book is based on findings from a large, mixed-method study about political discussions within high school classrooms.