

CHALK TALK: Deliberation. Debate. Democracy

By NINA KUNIMOTO

Published in print: May 16, 2017

Jesse Jackson said, “Deliberation and debate is the way you stir the soul of our democracy.” The cornerstone of a democratic society is to be able to tolerate and entertain multiple and competing opinions and ideas without necessarily accepting them.



I appreciate when controversial issues come up in my history class because it is an opportunity for me to teach the skill of academic detachment. The issue is like an object in the middle of the room to be discussed through open-ended questioning and inquiry. Of course, it is not an easy task because students jump for emotion first, meaning they take it personally. I try my best to speak on the matter in a detached fashion regardless of my personal opinion.

Current events usually bring up contentious issues. I assign an Article of the Week to the students in the beginning of the week and at the end of the week they will discuss the issue in the article after having answered some questions. Some issues that have come up are whether students can choose bathrooms based on their own identity. Is that legal and is it a civil right? Does the ban on immigration from certain, mainly Muslim countries, coincide with democratic ideals or does a country have the right to protect itself?

In a lesson, students read anthropological research that said within the 350,000 years of human history gender and class inequalities were not as pronounced as it was after later in the Neolithic or agricultural revolution about 8,000 years ago. A student challenged it by questioning it and my response was, “Excellent! Keep those questions coming!” I kept his challenges as part of our conversation. But things do not always go so smoothly in class. In one class, students consistently became passionately emotional about topics they disagreed with and it was difficult to facilitate an academic discussion.

Currently, in my Modern World History class we are exploring issues in the Middle East and they read a New York Times article about the recent chemical attacks in Syria. And as part of answering their general curiosity about Syria and explaining Islam’s role in Middle Eastern

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

history the topic came, “Who and what is ISIS/ISIL?” I happened to have watched a recent Al Jazeera investigative reporter who went and interviewed ISIS/ISIL members. I showed a clip where the ISIS members discussed building a caliphate and it showed them training children to use weapons. Most students were against the idea of ISIS training children to use weapons for war, but a student said it in a way that implied that showing how to use weapons at all to youth is wrong. Another student raised her hand and said, “I disagree with that. I think that if adults teach children how to use weapons, there would be less accidents.”

What unfolded was a really nice, civil exchange between the two groups of students. I think that in this moment in U.S. history, one of the most important lessons to learn in the classroom is to have civil conversations. My goal is to help students develop critical consciousness by highlighting their experiences and perspectives to the problems being investigated in class with the aim of having students come to a new understanding of their place in the world.

The classroom is not separate from the wider world and when they step into that world, they will be faced with diversity of people and ideas and I hope the students will enter that world empowered and tolerant.

Nina Kunimoto teaches 10th grade history at Mohawk Trail Regional High School in Shelburne Falls, and is affiliated with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.