

Spring 4-24-2024

Educating Boldly: Enhancing the Social Studies Classroom with Real-World Examples and Safeguarding from Negative Indoctrination

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Educating Boldly: Enhancing the Social Studies Classroom with Real-World Examples and
Safeguarding from Negative Indoctrination

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements

for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Micah Brown

May 2024

Murray State University Honors College

HONORS THESIS

Certificate of Approval

Educating Boldly: Enhancing the Social Studies Classroom with Real-World Examples and
Safeguarding from Negative Indoctrination

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April 2024

Approved to fulfill the
requirements of HON 437

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Approved to fulfill the
Honors Thesis requirement
of the Murray State Honors
Diploma

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Examination Approval Page

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Project Title: Educating Boldly: Enhancing the Social Studies Classroom with Real-World
Examples and Safeguarding from Negative Indoctrination

Department: Adolescent, Career, and Special Education

Date of Defense: 4/24/2024

Approval by Examining Committee:

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to describe the tradeoffs teachers face using current events and politics as examples in middle school history, government, and civics classrooms. It will discuss strategies to implement current events into the classroom and the careful balance we face in guarding against indoctrination, while also having students learn potentially politically-charged topics from a professional instead of through media or peers who might not be as well informed.

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Vignette

Imagine a world where America's youth is not taught about the controversial issues that the country currently faces. Teachers live in fear of being protested or fired to the point that they cannot provide proper instruction on relevant issues that children will face. The very people who are licensed and trained to teach these issues in a tactful manner are effectively silenced, while anyone with any method of explaining something, accurate and in context or not, has a readily available means of getting that out to our youth. This is the new frontier of childhood indoctrination.

It all starts when "visionaries" blast teachers online for "not teaching relevant material," yet those same people cry foul as soon as a teacher brings a nuanced topic into the classroom. After enough personal attacks, teachers shy away from even covering material remotely related to current events or government. Without educational professionals teaching these topics, social media influencers and random people in video game chat rooms become the primary politics teachers for our next generation.

In this world, we see a startling trend begin to form: these radicalized children grow up into emboldened adults. They do not find information from multiple sources for themselves, yet they exist inside of an echo chamber for their certain side. Instead of getting the news, they get someone else's reaction to the news. Now adults, these people grow less tolerant of people who disagree with them. They try to destroy any new piece of information that they come into contact with that does not fit within their personal list of "facts." What were once just a few radical people with cell phones are now a large faction of their political party who will not compromise with the other side or listen to an opposing viewpoint. Instead, this group sets out to destroy any voice or opinion that differs from their own. They refuse to befriend, talk to, or even be civil

around someone who disagrees with them on political issues. As people on both sides begin to radicalize others, these factions gain power.

This shift is not without pushback. Older generations and those who find themselves in the middle end up as outcasts. They are not accepted by either side, seen as a pawn for the political enemy. Without the resounding support of one of these polarized groups, the older generations and middle grounders are pushed out, replaced by someone who fits the new mold.

All of a sudden, news-denying and political spinning become the law of politics. The general public does not want the truth, nor would they accept it if they heard it. Open Discourse is replaced with a war for air time and sound bites, while politicians fight for absolute control over the populus. The two political wings no longer wish to solve problems together. Their only goal is to annihilate the other. Since the teachings of orderly disagreement, and the etiquettes of partisan politics were silenced in public schools, they now cease to exist in this dystopian society.

Introduction

This vignette paints a scary picture, and many will discount it as a slippery slope. The problem is, however, as Americans, we have already started sliding down it. Facebook and other social media sites have turned into sounding boards for parents' complaints about the schools. Teachers and administrators are personally attacked for doing a fine job well within the rules, so principals, school boards, and teachers alike begin to run away from anything that is the least bit “controversial.” Sadly, much of the time, this includes current events and anything remotely related to politics.

We also know that, as the most impressionable and under informed group of people, children are the most vulnerable target for political indoctrination. Mainstream political parties battle intensely to make someone a loyal voter years before they are even old enough to enter a ballot box employing fallacious methods that range from targeting youth in media to trying to set morality that only fits in their own political agenda in the youth

We also see this on a much smaller, yet arguably far more effective medium: online. The explosion of influencers on all social media platforms in the last decade has caught the media by storm. Their entire job is based around being paid to post content on these social networks, and some of their biggest paydays come from politicians and political action committees. In short, the people with the easiest access and largest following of children are getting paid to support candidates and issues that, much of the time, they themselves are not properly educated about.

The online gaming community is also one of the largest and potentially most dangerous methods of indoctrinating our youth. Apps like Discord and other online chat rooms connect gamers all around the world of any age. This can be easily weaponized by ill-intending people

anywhere. They can start off masquerading as any type of person that they want, gain a child's trust, and then convince them of anything.

“Youth are increasingly connected to one another, and to adults, through the Internet; in turn, the Internet can be an active vector for VR (violent radicalization) because of its ability to facilitate the proliferation of extremist ideologies among low-cost, fast, decentralized, and globally connected networks. Extremist groups build engaging, interactive platforms and enter into private communications to attract young audiences and to develop their sense of belonging to the group” (Rousseau, 2019, p748).

It has never been easier for someone to reach kids and “educate” them on the world from their perspective. They can find them on video games, phone apps, social media, chatrooms, email lists, websites, or whatever else and indoctrinate them on all kinds of extremist, violent, blatantly lying, or damaging ideas that they want to. The “old man in the white van with candy” is out, replaced with the nice whoever you want them to be on the other side of a computer screen who gives you fun games and cool graphics for free.

Many call Washington D.C. an “echo chamber” of everyone saying the same things without knowing what is going on outside of The Capitol, but the fact of the matter is that almost everyone lives in their own echo chamber today. “Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook employ an algorithm to analyze words, phrases, or hashtags to create a list of topics sorted in order of popularity... The existing narrative and the true believers who subscribe to it are endogenous, so any propaganda must fit that narrative to penetrate the network of true believers” (Prier, 2017, p4).

This means that these companies make money off of learning what society likes to hear and what elicits a strong reaction and shows more of that same reaction, which is often one-

sided, lacks content, or biased in some sense of the word. However, this is many childrens' primary educators on current events and the world around them. Without teachers and licensed professionals bringing up topics of debate and sharing unbiased information on all sides of the political compass, social media, incomplete information, and radicalization become the status quo.

When someone is locked in an “echo chamber” created by the social media algorithm, it often leads to a sense that their information is the only information out there. This causes an illusion of being well-informed. They fill their heads with information regarding political topics, but do not look at the big picture. They select political commentators and websites that they like to get their news from and never question anything involving what these sources tell, or, more commonly, do not tell them. This false feeling of being “in the know” is emboldening, and it makes people want to get out and push their beliefs. They see others as ill-informed, or any news or commentary that is not in their circle as fake, while never truly critically thinking and questioning their own sources of news and history. When there are so many people on both sides thinking the same thing on opposite sides of the spectrum, we see what has happened in our own country, where politics become far more polarized, and people are unwilling to talk to each other. We also can observe that few people wake up to the fact that they are only seeing one part of the whole picture, because political education and the art of the debate are usually taught in these social studies classes over controversial topics, yet these opportunities to engage in these powerful learning moments have been removed from most classrooms.

When sides become more extreme, they also become less tolerant. The art of the debate is usually taught in these social studies classes over controversial topics. When teachers run from this and do not teach how to disagree with someone without personally attacking, insulting, and

name-calling, we end up with an “educated” population that lacks the ability to engage in their civic duties in productive ways. Thus, ensuring that students receive a complete and well-rounded social studies experience becomes even more essential. However, teachers can also make this issue worse. Teacher beliefs, manifested in the form of political and civic indoctrination by teachers, often stands in the way of creating productive social studies environments.

Defining Indoctrination

Before I delve into indoctrination itself and how to effectively avoid negative indoctrination, I must first define the word itself. Webster’s dictionary defines the word “indoctrinate” as “to teach (someone) to fully accept the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of a particular group and to not consider other ideas, opinions, and beliefs” (Merriam-Webster). At first glance, this seems straightforward. However, considering it in the context of education, any and all teaching technically falls under this umbrella of indoctrination. Math teachers require students to fully accept the idea that two plus two equals four without considering other ideas. I know that I could easily find people belonging to the flat-earth belief set who beg children to consider opinions and beliefs dissenting to those taught in school, and yet we still only teach the heliocentric model of the solar system. When teaching children to read, the first thing that teachers do is ensure that they all understand that there is a certain sound or sounds created by every letter, and any attempt by a student to consider that a ‘K’ makes a “shhh” sound would be shut down by any teacher instantly. By definition, all of these previously stated incidents are technically indoctrination, as well as any lesson taught to anyone that states concrete fact or is not left open ended.

In my chosen area of social studies, there is more debate on the line of indoctrination than in any other place. Every teacher introduces controversial ideas daily. History is not only learning the facts. It is also learning how to engage in historical thinking, historical study, and creating your own perception of things. These are skills that take time and conscious effort to refine. The art of studying and creating one's own perception can be trained through repetition, but there must be an educator somewhere who fosters this. Similarly, "historical thinking, at its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development" (Wineberg, 1999, p4).

Teachers are encouraged to prompt deep thinking into history, and it is part of their jobs to provide insights, but one could also argue that this is indoctrination as well because it is a teacher asserting their personal beliefs on a particular group in history upon their students. In a civics or government classroom, teachers are supposed to practice the "proper pedagogical approach" and differentiate the content of the lesson to the readiness of their students by using real-world examples of politicians, debates, speeches, and breakdowns. This provides an exemplar for how the system that they are teaching works. Since they would be opening up their students to hearing partisan words from only one side of the aisle, that would technically be indoctrination. Even if they try to offset that by using partisan words from both sides of the aisle, they are just indoctrinating twice.

"Though the word 'indoctrination' in the English language originally had a neutral meaning almost equivalent to educative teaching, it gradually assumed the connotations of coercive teaching and became disassociated from the emerging concepts of democratic education" (Puolimatka, 1996, p1).

This now begs one simple question: “Is all education technically indoctrination?” The simple answer is yes. Teachers must place concrete ideas into their students. There are certain topics that teachers must just teach with no room for budging. However, that does not make education evil or anything that is taught without being left up for debate fascism. Instead, it simply shows that, as a culture, in the last century, we have given the word, “indoctrination,” a misleading connotation. “Though the word ‘indoctrination’ in the English language originally had a neutral meaning almost equivalent to educative teaching, it gradually assumed the connotations of coercive teaching and became disassociated from the emerging concepts of democratic education” (Puolimatka, p1). Though at its extremes, indoctrination is a true problem and a concerning trend in some educational niches, it has existed in every venue where learning takes place because, technically, all education is indoctrination.

Education is Indoctrination

It might sound insane, defining the two concepts that I have differentiated to this point as synonymous with each other, but, as I previously stated, by definition, all education is some form of indoctrination. Since some topics must be directly taught without room for debate, indoctrination does exist and always will exist in any form of education. Math students must know the rules of addition; science students must understand the laws of motion; English students must understand the proper conjugation techniques, and for social social studies, there are some chronological events that every student must understand. At its roots, the entire point of teaching is to make people know certain pieces of information that is why educational standards exist. If students do not know a very rigid and measurable amount of knowledge, teachers are fired, and schools are shut down. Certain standards must be taught in a certain way; that is the basis of education. It is also the basis of indoctrination.

Where is the Line?

With education and indoctrination technically being intertwined by definition, it is increasingly clear that the two are as good as opposites in the court of public opinion. Though education is a form of indoctrination, it is not the only form of indoctrination. It is also not part of the accepted connotation of the word indoctrination in our culture. The connotation that many point to is this idea of teachers with ill intent in their heart pushing their opinions upon their students with the intent to push their own agenda on the next generation and force them to think as their teacher does.

Obviously, no one is arguing for indoctrination in this sense of the word. The concern that parents have with indoctrinating teachers that started this whole slide away from relevant education is a valid one. There has to be some solution that is between taking any power of assertion away from teachers and allowing ill-intended people to have free reign over the brains of our youth.

To most, there is no problem with general indoctrination in the case of things perceived to be hard fact. As I mentioned before, no one is going to protest a kindergarten teacher for making a child pronounce “K” correctly. On the other hand, any teacher who tells their students that the Earth is flat would find themselves the subject of angry emails to the school board and administration almost instantaneously. Though both of these examples would be considered indoctrination, many would draw the line between the two as “good indoctrination vs. bad indoctrination.” However, the terms “good” and “bad” are also subjective and can vary greatly from person to person. We see this with the debate over religion in schools. Some parents argue that this is such a “good” thing that they are willing to pull their children out of public schools and pay tuition for their child to receive a religious education, while other parents are so starkly

opposed to the idea of their child receiving that same type of education that they are willing to sue a school system that so much as mentions a religious ideology because it is such a “bad” thing. Using the subjective terms “good” and “bad” are simply ways of saying that you align yourself with a certain viewpoint on one side of a controversial issue.

Keeping in mind the fact that people do not seem to mind their idea of “good indoctrination” occurring in schools, and the fact that “good” and “bad” are relative terms, and, when used together, are a litmus test for controversy, Many will make the jump that controversy is that “big red line” in education that needs to be drawn. They argue that education that can be seen to some as “bad indoctrination” needs to be cut out and removed, or that there should be a populist approach, where the general atmosphere of the area on certain issues determines whether or not the issue is talked about. My belief is that these two practices have caused this damage to the accepted pedagogy of controversial topics in our schools.

The “Super Tool” of Pedagogy

How effective would Marvel’s Iron Man be without his suit, or Thor without his armor, or DC’s Batman without all of his expensive toys? They might still be effective at their jobs in some facet of the word. They might even successfully defeat their nemeses and still save the city every now and then. However, you would be hard pressed to find someone to argue that these superheroes would be near as effective without their “super tools.” Similar to this, educators of the last twenty years have been running from their most powerful “super tool”- controversy. This thing that is supposed to be a dirty word, and that many argue teachers should run from entirely is one of the absolute best tools that a social studies teacher possesses: controversy.

One of the largest battles teachers face on a daily basis is fighting to keep their students engaged, and we know that there is nothing that adolescents and teenagers love more than

arguing. There is a very easy solution that combines engagement with participation: utilizing controversy and allowing students to produce their own knowledge while also encouraging deeper guided research into these topics to form and challenge their own opinions on controversial topics. “When invited to participate in planning and presenting information and reflecting on the process, students' investment in the curriculum is strengthened, thus they become more receptive learners and more aware of their own personal growth” (Weasmer and Woods, p1).

Controversy is this super tool for opening up student-led instruction. With controversy being the gateway to engagement, students will be more apt to participate in lessons involving a major controversy.

Teaching and Bias

Teachers are humans, and all humans have their own set of experiences that lead to implicit biases and certain beliefs. It is also not a crime for a teacher to be politically active. This does complicate the matter with certain parts of education, though. First of all, it has been observed in other countries where involvement in partisan politics can affect teaching effort. “They participate in political meetings and forums. They openly express their political views and show their active support for particular parties... Teachers are proud to show their support for particular political parties in the country. The problem that was explored in this study was the way the act of teacher engagement in national partisan politics influenced their classroom professional practice” (Shidikke, 2019, p15). Dr. Shidikke explains that these professors are ineffective not because of their specific engagement in the party or that they use this in the classroom, but because they allow elements of their partisan involvement to detract time away from their duties as teachers, and, in Bangladesh, it is not frowned upon to distribute partisan

propaganda in a classroom. These actions, however, are not what I am arguing for. There is a distinct difference between using politics in the classroom for educational purposes and a teacher shoving their personal agendas down the throats of their students.

We must remember that teachers are trained professionals in their craft. It is not easy to become a teacher, and many have three degrees from up to a decade of formal pedagogical education. This is not something to be taken lightly. People trust medical doctors to operate on the body, veterinary doctors with their pets, and doctors of other fields' research into the world is the basis of higher learning and the advancement of both science and society. Doctors of almost any field are accepted as experts to be trusted, so why don't educational doctors and masters receive the same respect?

As I have stated before, I am not arguing for blind trust in all educators or claiming that they should be allowed to run free and teach anything that they want in any way that they want, but it also must be realized that professional educators are the most qualified to handle these topics in classrooms to avoid indoctrination from less informed people or people with less than pure motives. Children will experience controversy and there will come a time that they have to figure out what they truly believe, and the most qualified person to guide them along this journey is an educator in a class meant to deal with controversy, such as social studies.

The Road Ahead

There is no controversy on whether or not children should be taught how to handle controversy. I have also yet to find someone who does not believe that the current methods of teaching controversial issues leave room for improvement. This issue is not a person versus person problem. Instead, it is an issue that people as a whole want to solve and improve upon.

Though the methods proposed might vary, there is no variance in the belief that we cannot keep going down the same path that we are on right now as an educational system.

My belief is that the solution involves children learning from experts, with a curriculum that is designed to encourage discursion when listening or reading materials, taking power away from free-for-all media and not allowing the minds of children to be playgrounds for extremists any longer, and, in the long run, have a higher, but, most of all, more educated voter turnout with citizens who are more open to civilized discourse and more active in the future of their own locale, state or commonwealth, and country.

Build the Culture

It is worth noting that, before even thinking about getting into the deep of controversial topics, a teacher must build a positive classroom atmosphere and culture by forming trust with their students through building relationships. “Building relationships” has become one of those zinger phrases in pedagogy that every teacher in the world wants to say that they do. Let me be clear. In this case, building relationships is not a small task. It is not playing games on day one of class. It is not taking your students outside for positive behavior. It is not begrudgingly dragging yourself to a Saturday afternoon soccer game just so you can get some “brownie points” with your kids.

Building relationships is a commitment that you make as a teacher every day. It is taking an interest in your students outside of the classroom and test scores. It is doing your best to meet those individual needs of every student. It is being yourself and letting your kids get to know you, while also presenting a welcoming environment that shows that you genuinely want to get to know your students. Having fun activities, going to sports games, and reinforcing positive behaviors are all ways that you can show this, but these are effects of a caring teacher creating a positive classroom environment and not causes. Too often, teachers forget how inquisitive their students are. Students can spot who genuinely cares and who is just trying to look good a mile away, and you will never achieve a positive classroom climate by pretending. As a teacher, you must fully buy in for yourself first, and then your students will follow suit only after seeing that you are genuine in your care.

In order to have successful and mutually beneficial discussions on controversial subjects in a classroom, every student must feel like they are not only valued, but an integral part of the classroom. As a teacher, you must first become a trusted adult before you can foster these

discussions. Students must feel comfortable around you and know that you are not going to judge or make fun of them for what they say. Without these relationships, an environment that is meant to be constructive can very quickly become confidence-shattering.

One of the teacher's greatest tools in creating this environment is the physical classroom. A classroom must be welcoming and inviting if a teacher wants children to feel that they belong. Sadly, in many lower-income and impoverished areas, it gets to the point where a classroom can feel more like a home than many students' actual houses. Some simple wall decorations, colors, and inspirational quotes go a long way in making students feel more at ease. To improve interpersonal relationships among students, it is often a good idea to have something that helps unify students and allows them to celebrate each other. This could be achieved through many methods such as creating a classroom decoration that every student has a part in, such as a door decoration with individual artwork, a Christmas tree with decorations that the students create, or a picture board with students' pets. This can greatly contribute to the feeling of comradery and respect that is necessary to teach controversial issues.

The physical classroom can also be an excellent tool for teachers to establish connections with their students. The classroom is just as much the teacher's "home" as the students'. By decorating your classroom with things that interest you, students pick up on similarities and initiate conversations. For example, I am a former football player and fan of the NFL team, the Seattle Seahawks. I do not make it a big deal in classes, but I have a small pennant that I hang up in my classroom. It goes completely unnoticed by non-football people, doing no harm to them. However, to a football player, NFL fan, or fan of a rival team, it is something to go and talk about. Shared interest builds instant rapport with students, and allowing yourself to become humanized in their eyes by letting them see that you have similar interests to them is a great way

to encourage them to communicate with you and have real conversations that do not always revolve around the book or the “school stuff.” In doing this, though, teachers must be mindful to not be disclusionary in this. My Seattle Seahawks pennant is not the only personal effect I have in my classroom. I also have pictures of my family and dogs, posters and play bills related to plays and musical theater that I enjoy, and I often play instrumental versions of songs that I like. Things are so subtle and go largely unnoticed by students who do not care or do not share this interest, but they are excellent conversation starters for kids who do. Also, if you can employ enough variety where you can reach many students through your physical classroom, this can set the tone day one for a welcoming, accepting, and safe environment where students are not only allowed but encouraged to voice their opinions and beliefs.

With all of this being said, the teacher and a certain student are not the only two people involved in classroom discussions. Oftentimes, the more difficult variable to control is the interpersonal relationships between students. “Although we may think of our students principally in their role as students, students themselves typically view each other as much more...Moreover, concerns about their relationships as peers may take precedence over their concerns about their roles in the class, and may create a reluctance to say anything in class which might jeopardize their relationships” (Lusk and Weinberg, p2). It is ignorant and careless to believe that, as a teacher, you have the power to turn your entire class into best friends. By the time they get to middle school, many of them have had more than half a decade to form their own friendships and lack thereof with certain classmates. Certain kids just are not going to get along with certain others and that is okay. Friendships should not be forced and are not technically necessary for a classroom culture. What is necessary, however, is respect among students. Oftentimes when students have an opinion on a matter, “concerns about their

relationships as peers may take precedence over their concerns about their roles in the class, and may create a reluctance to say anything in class which might jeopardize their relationships” (Lusk and Weinberg, p2). If one is to succeed in fostering the climate necessary for these discussions to take place, the teacher must instill that respect among students and the teacher alike is vital and maintain that politics and matters that it involve are all matters of opinion, those opinions are valid, and that political disagreements are good and need to happen and be talked about, but most of all, political differences are no reason to make fun, judge, or lose friends over. This cannot just be said, but enforced, reinforced, and practiced every day, with teachers leading by example.

Strategy 1: Teach Children to Sort Through Information on Their Own

The scary part of the word “indoctrination,” and the reason why a teacher must be careful is where students are not seeking other ideas and points of views. This is part of my aforementioned beliefs on Wineberg’s views on historical thinking as an unnatural act (Wineberg, p1). Seeking information is not as simple as asking someone a question or typing up a Google search. This method revolves around students finding information for themselves, and, while talking to a trusted adult or an Internet search can be a great resource, students must learn how to sort through information for its relevance, reliability, and source structure. The purpose of this lesson is to teach students how to discern between information that is more trustworthy to take into account, while also understanding that there is no such thing as a totally reliable and honest source, while understanding that the history that is taught to them is not always totally accurate due to the simple loss of information over time.

For example, in this activity, (Appendix A) students are required to sort through multiple sources and accounts of the same event, using their critical thinking skills to try and figure out an

answer without any way to totally validate their conclusions. When I taught this activity, I told my students that there was a correct answer and a wrong answer and let them debate their answers once they were finished. The debate quickly erupted into two different factions vehemently disagreeing over what actually happened in the lunchroom. Students on both sides had carefully scoured the sources multiple times, rebutting each other and presenting evidence that almost directly contradicted each other.

This is exactly the goal of this lesson. I wanted them to work alone so that they could find their own set of information and use their skills in critical thinking to discern between sources as best they could. In order to figure out what they believed actually happened in the cafeteria, they had to discern between relevant and irrelevant information, take into account primary and secondary sources, and sort through varying qualities that could make each narrator unreliable. The ladder is where the aforementioned “Secret weapon” of history comes into play. It is the reason why every student can receive the same lesson, read the same source, and think just as critically, but still get wildly different responses: personal perception. Based on students' experiences, personal thought processes, and biases, every student weighs the unreliability of these narrators differently. There is no correct answer because it is within the eye of the beholder what voice they believe is true.

After I finally revealed that there is no true correct answer to an army of angry 12 year olds, that opened up the door to talk about these things. We talked about how certain both groups were that they were right, and how they saw the other group as dumb, or thought that they did not look at the facts closely enough. We talked about why certain people related to one character over the other or believed certain people over others. We talked about how, once they had decided that they were on one side, they did not really listen to the other side or what they were

saying. Finally, I asked the simple question that I always ask after a parabolic activity such as this, “Why did I have you do this? How is this similar to real life and social studies?”

This is a simple and fun activity that can open the door into the second step of building a classroom set up for controversy. It has students form their own opinion without hearing anyone else’s. They can see firsthand how their personal feelings, past experiences, and biases cause them to feel so differently about the exact same thing, even when given the exact same information. “When teaching controversial issues, never start with the ‘toughest’ issues, rather teachers should scaffold learning just as you would with any other content” (Gomez, 2019, p9). With students understanding that all of them are not always going to agree on everything, that that is a good thing, and that it does not make you right and someone else wrong or vice versa, you can then move to more controversial issues, slowly inching your way up after several assignments and small debates like these.

Strategy 2: The Art of Discourse in Current Events

In the age of pacing guides, standardized tests, and the constant pressure on teachers to stay on schedule, it is very easy to get tunnel vision as an educator where all that you look at is the next chapter in the book or the next standard to check off. Add this to the already prevalent pressure on educators to tread softly as not to get protested or receive angry phone calls, and you have teachers who ignore what is going on in the world outside of their classroom. Instead of taking advantage of the teachable moments right in front of them, teachers are ignoring them. In response, student engagement suffers, and questions such as the infamous “when will I ever need this in real life?” are mumbled among classmates. When children do not have access to see how the things that they learn in the classroom translate into real life, they grow disgruntled and disengaged with the material because they do not see how it applies to them.

This strategy is based around using the teachable moments that the calendar and news cycle give you to teach your class. Using these events and moments is not only helpful in having students interact with the material and see how it affects them in their real lives, but it also can help them relate content and have a higher level of engagement with the material..

This strategy revolves around election education first. The unit must begin with the general processes by which a U.S. Election works, if this is not already assessed as prior knowledge. There also must be a strong culture in place in the classroom, with respect between students and between the teacher and students. This should also not be the first experience in the classroom where disagreement and debate are implemented. The art of discourse should have been slowly built up. I would advise starting with small and unimportant things in August, such as “is a hot dog a sandwich or a taco?” or “are cats or dogs better pets?” Teachers should use small prompting questions like these to model civil discourse and deal with any problems with student behavior that might come up. This way, when problems arise, it will not be over a heated discussion that can bring about trauma and real-world triggers.

The next step in preparing for a classroom discussion over politically charged topics is slowly ramping it up. Once you feel that your students have a solid grasp of the general art of respectful debate and discourse, you can slowly start to increase the difficulty and controversy of the topics talked about in class, using the same formative methods to assess how maturely your students can handle it, and moving the group farther into controversial territory as they prove that they can thoughtfully interact with the material, express their beliefs in an eloquent way, and respect and thoughtfully respond to what the other students have to say.

Eventually, you will work your way up to the controversial issues surrounding elections and current events. However, the work is not done once the discussion is over. As a teacher, it is

important to model meta-cognitive strategies in the classroom as well. An easy way to include this into a debate or discourse unit is to leave time at the end for students to write a brief reflection. This should not be graded or shared. The purpose of this activity is to both give students a chance to reflect on their behavior and things that they said, and also disclose anything that made them uncomfortable or upset during the discussion. As a teacher, it is imperative to always know where your kids are emotionally, and let that guide you in your instruction of how best to meet individual needs. Little check up reflections are often a great strategy, and can be used outside of the debate and discourse setting just for life updates or private comments that a kid might not be willing to share in class or face-to-face.

The real-world event that most people think of when there is a mention of controversial current events is an election. These are absolute gold mines of teachable moments: many parents are invested and talking about it, it is all over students' social media, and it seems that there is some form of campaigning for someone who is running for something every year from March until November. As I mentioned earlier, this means that our youth is hearing a mountain of information and news, unfiltered, all of the time from seemingly everyone except the professionals who are trained and licensed to talk about it in an unbiased manner. Teachers are scared that elections are "too controversial," so they avoid them entirely. In doing this, they run from what can be the richest of teachable moments. This is the only time in a year that civics and government are mainstream, so this is the time of the year that student engagement, and therefore the effectiveness of this lesson, will be at its highest.

With teaching the art of discourse, the goal is to give the students a method to express their beliefs on political and controversial matters. In having students exercise discourse, they must have first formed their opinions on matters of controversy. Especially when teaching of

narrators and the reliability thereof, politicians and campaigns are an excellent subject to have students dive into. Campaign advertisements and speeches are masterful at presenting technically truthful information in a persuading and sometimes misleading manner. When students apply these aforementioned critical strategies to campaign and election topics, this will create the discourse needed for the desired learning environment because, just like the lunchroom activity, (Appendix A) there is no perfect answer to this activity on who is right on these issues. This is what makes many political issues controversial in the first place, with people being able to experience the same sensory information, and come to wildly different conclusions.

Elections are not always readily available for a teacher to use in the classroom. However, there is another readily available source of controversy daily: the news cycle. Even when it is not election season, there is always some kind of controversy in the political world. This creates a virtually endless string of teachable moments that an educator has at their disposal. The methods employed in previous steps can once again be applied with slight variations to your classic news story.

Political spinning and inconsistencies in commentary do not only occur in election years by campaign teams. On the contrary, it happens every day with every news story that unfolds. When digging through the many different ways in which sources can be unreliable, a news article can be a classroom example for almost every single one.

For starters, similarly to “indoctrination,” the term “news” is a very broad one that is left up to interpretation in many ways. Since the only requirement for something to be news is that it needs to be “a report of recent events” (Merriam-Webster) everything that happens in the world can be news. However, much of it is deemed as irrelevant or unimportant to the general public as a whole, and never reported on. The job of a news company is to report the most relevant and

effective news to the general public. However, since both “news” and “relevance” are objective terms, and can vary person to person, news companies often cherry pick stories that they feel can incite a strong reaction from their viewership base or pander to a certain political or social demographic. Educators who are trying to teach the reliability of sources for relevance do not even need to assign readings to their students. Just looking through the headlines and top stories of different news companies will lead a student to notice that many pieces of news are rather added or omitted by these organizations over issues of relevance. Teachers can also prompt students to think deeper on why this might be outside of general objectivity of what news is, leading students to connect this idea with unreliability, because editors and authors could easily decide to not run a story that paints a side of a certain controversy that they align with in a poor light, while headlining or adding less relevant stories that paint that same side in a better light.

Teachers can also implore their students to read, watch, or listen to the same news story from multiple sources. Students will quickly realize that, even though they all report on the same event or topic, their coverage of said topic is wildly different, especially on an issue that can be considered controversial. This could be differences in language used to describe people involved, how they set up the story in terms of cause and effect and chronology, or even just the overall tone of the piece. No matter how they choose to cover the same story, every source’s coverage of the same event leaves students with wildly different feelings about it.

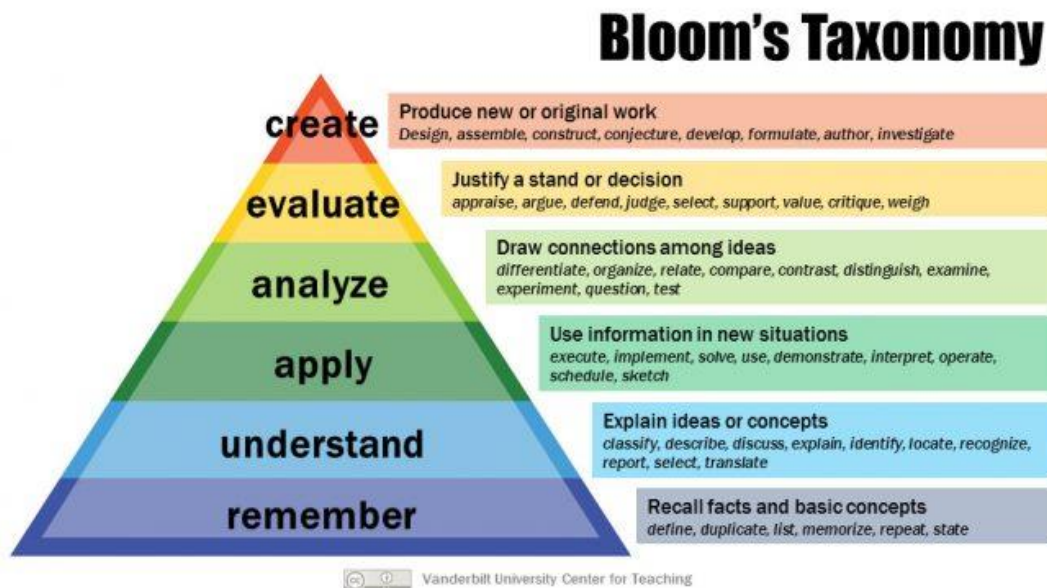
The point of teaching current events in this light is not to create an overly cynical generation who refuses to trust anyone or anything. On the contrary, it is designed to teach students how to prove things for themselves, instead of relying on somebody else who might not have the purest of interests at heart. In using current events in the classroom, educators are

shifting the leadership in learning back to the students, and preparing them to become lifelong learners who think critically about all information that is presented to them.

Strategy 3: Make History Relevant to Today

Figure 1

Bloom's Taxonomy



(Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>)

Social studies is often a difficult subject to teach. The goal of a teacher is not only to have their students understand and remember content, but to produce knowledge in meaningful ways. The staple of the social studies curriculum is the history classroom. Memories of history class for many of us is sitting at our desk with a chalk board or projector going through slides and listening to a verbal recount of history while taking notes, with reading to do for homework. These assignments often do fall lower on retention percentages and on the above Bloom's Taxonomy. These tasks and methods are necessary at times, but are often used almost

exclusively in the history classroom. At the same time, students quickly become disengaged due to having a lack of ownership in their learning, while also failing to see how this affects them in the present and in their own current lives. With civics and government classes, it is easily evident why it is important and, when teaching those classes, you do not have to go out of your way to make it relevant as long as you teach about the issues and events going on in real life and seize those teachable moments. However, when teaching history, you must take the extra step to make history relevant in your students' lives.

The first step in this goes back to Strategy 1. Right away, this method of teaching your students to sort through sources of information for themselves. Primary sources can and should be used in history classes. This moves up in the taxonomy to the “analyze” and “evaluate” sections, teaching students how to look at sources and other documents like a historian, draw conclusions, and defend their points of view. As a teacher, you can also use discussion and seminar-based instruction from these sources and information. Though you may not be able to use the calendar and news cycle to your advantage like in strategy 2, you can still use many similar strategies, such as classroom debates and critical thinking about narrators and sources once you have made history relevant to your students' lives.

One method of bringing history into the present day classroom is through simulations. Students tend to forget that history is still being written, that they are part of it, and that things might not be remembered and recorded the exact same way that they happened. This activity (Appendix B) is a great way to simulate the current creation of history. This can also synthesize a teachable moment to connect the activity and how history is recorded to the history that they learn, encouraging them to think deeper about the source and narrator that they are dealing with. It is also a very memorable activity, prompting recollection and connection of history to real life.

Teachers can also create discussions and reactions from students by prompting them to ponder how that specific part of history affects them today. For example, it might be initially difficult for students to connect the history of Ancient Sumer and Mesopotamia to their own lives, but, if during a lesson, a teacher were to remove Sumerian innovations such as written language, maps, and literature, while moving students outside with no desks, brick shelters, or means of recording notes, students could very quickly connect just how much their day-to-day lives are altered by this ancient civilization.

Strategies like these are game changers in helping students connect to history and see how it is still connected to how we live today. However, it is not the strategies themselves that make the teacher. Teachers must apply more than a simple activity or two to bring about the desired higher retention of knowledge through personal interaction with the content. They must immerse themselves also. If the teacher does not buy into a method or has the necessary excitement for learning and enthusiasm for activities, the students will not take that on either.

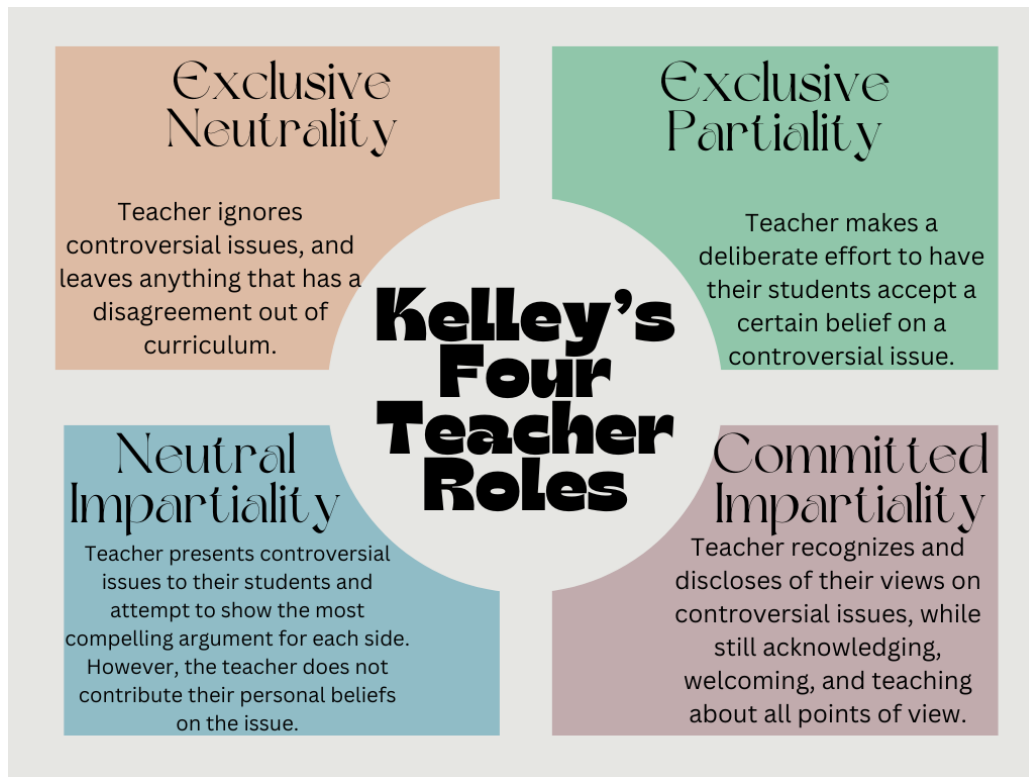
The Role of the Teacher:

The entire point of these strategies is to empower teachers with strategies and methods to most effectively educate students on controversial issues without running from them. There are many strategies that teachers can employ to effectively educate for controversial issues without negatively affecting students. This gets more difficult when you factor in the trickiness of defining indoctrination and differentiating it from standard education. Though in some cases, an educator has to be assertive and not allow argument and other viewpoints, issues that can be considered controversial must be identified and carefully thought upon for the best method for an educator to approach said topic, but there are some strategies for seizing the teachable moments that many teachers are afraid to touch. According to Thomas E. Kelley, there are four main

teaching styles when dealing with potentially controversial topics: exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality (Kelley, 1986, p1).

Figure 2

Kelley's Four Teacher Roles



(Figure of Thomas E. Kelley's Four Teacher Roles. This is my own work)

Through his arguments for committed impartiality as the best role of a teacher controversy. Kelley argues for committed impartiality for many similar reasons that I argue for what a teacher should do in teaching controversy. As I have previously stated, students need to not only have a standing respect for each other, but they also need to know their teacher very well. In the current literature, Kelley has received some dissent from peer reviews (Miller-Lane, 2006) regarding his stance that committed impartiality is the best of these four teacher roles. My stance on this once again varies depending on the environment.

First of all, the status quo of the last twenty years for educators has been that of filling the role of exclusive neutrality. It is well established that this has not worked. Hence, the extensive literature on this topic and my current writing on it. We can also not look past the reason that exclusive neutrality became the status quo, though: a small group of teachers choose to practice exclusive partiality. This is where educators on the “far-negative” side of the indoctrination spectrum end up. Teachers like these are as big of a threat to our country’s civic future as those who go out and seek out children to indoctrinate on forms of electronic media. They are essentially doing the same thing, but with readily available children to attempt to sway every year. There is no room for teachers who fill this role.

There is a strong argument for both committed and neutral impartiality, so I feel that a varied approach between the two is best suited for the classroom. For starters, the classroom should always be about the children and not the teacher. With this still holding true, if a teacher is asking their kids to share their opinions and find their own beliefs on a certain matter, it can be very helpful for a teacher to share their personal journey on how they formed their own beliefs. With that being said, though, there must be a red line here where the teacher also ensures that they are careful that when they share their personal journey, they make it very clear that their voice is once again another one in the classroom. It is to be respected and thoughtfully analyzed, but also respectfully challenged, with no fear of students being embarrassed or belittled for openly disagreeing. In using this approach for building opinions, the teacher must always be mindful that they are showing how they came to a certain belief and modeling the critical thinking, not arguing or campaigning for the belief itself.

Once again, the classroom is about the students and should always be centered around them. This cannot happen if the teacher always puts the first word in and makes their beliefs

known. Even while practicing proper strategies to effectively fill the role of committed impartiality, teachers must be careful to avoid identity politics forming around them, as the head of the classroom. Especially once students have had practice in forming opinions and open discourse, the teacher is far more effective in opening with a more neutrally impartial approach. This forces students to form their own opinions and debate openly in the classroom before the teacher shares what they think on an issue.

It is also to be noted that, in forming relationships with students specifically in older grades or who may have already formed strong opinions on controversial topics, a teacher expressing a differing opinion can create a negative bias against them in a student. This is another reason why it is necessary to slowly build up into the higher levels of controversy in the classroom. In order to create this space of respect and free speech, teachers must form relationships with their students and among their students that rise above sectionalism, identity politics, and this “us vs. them” mentality that some students come in with before anything else.

As I stated before, teachers are still humans too, and, though we try our best to be fair to all of our students and treat issues in history and politics with an even voice and level head, we still have our own set of biases and personal beliefs. This is not a crime and it does not create a terrible teacher. However, the best teachers are often the ones who recognize their own shortcomings and biases and are more than willing to share them with their students. Employing committed impartiality in issues like this can also safeguard against the indoctrination that we are trying to fight. By simply admitting to your students that you feel a certain way about an issue and that your points of view may not always be theirs, you are keeping that chain of dialogue open. Just by humanizing yourself as a teacher and admitting that you have thoughts and feelings too, you can continue to foster this environment of freedom of speech, while also putting up a

safeguard to hold yourself accountable to not slip into that role of exclusive partiality and not pass on your own biases to the students you teach.

Every classroom and every teacher is different, and, therefore every balance between these two roles that an educator will choose to take will look different. These two roles used in unison provide a powerful tool for encouraging students to go and find their own beliefs on issues, continuing to foster the desired classroom environment every day that kids are in your classroom, and holding themselves accountable with a safeguard against their own biases and lines of thinking.

Vignette: (Cont.)

Imagine this same world, but America's youth is taught about the issues that the country currently faces. Teachers are held accountable, but also allowed to do what they are trained for and are not restricted in their methods of teaching. They are allowed to speak about the real world and provide education relevant to their students' lives. With the duty of educating our youth back in the hands of those who are certified to do so, those who peddle propaganda and child radicalize experience the power that they once had over society dwindling.

Parents and administrators support teachers, and encourage them to present information that is relevant and useful in the day to day lives of their kids. As a result of this, teachers can once again talk about issues that can be labeled as controversial, just better equipped on how to handle issues that might arise. The grip of those who "educate" with ill-intent is loosened, and in its place, is a generation who thinks critically about what they hear and do not blindly believe everything that they are told or that they read on the internet.

Over time, we see the desired effect of higher educated voter turnout. People are not just listening to what people are telling them to vote for. They are instead doing their own research, having intelligent discussions with their peers on the issues, and they have a love and a passion for the politics and future of their country. This was all started by a few good teachers who used real-world examples in class and differentiated lessons for students interests and readiness. Free speech is upheld without limitations, but the buck stops with the power of the vote. Citizens keep up with politicians and hold them accountable for wrongdoing and misrepresentation of their district with the citizens' best weapon: the ballot box. Radicalized flanks of parties and special interest lobbying becomes far less effective. After all, most of the power that these groups had in the past was for campaign finance money to pay for propaganda anyway.

The generations that shifted to radicalization look silly, and are forced to follow suit and come to their senses. They realize that they have been manipulated, and join younger citizens in critically examining all sides of an issue without blindly following a singular person or mascot.

Disagreement is not gone, nor should it be. People are not scared of voicing an opinion different from others. Teachers used disagreements in classrooms not to silence, but to teach how to have a civilized discussion on the issues without name-calling, losing friends, or listening just to turn something around in the other person's face. Civilized political discourse has returned, and the world is a better place because of it.

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Appendix A:



Lunchroom Fight: The Evidence

Name

Date

Background Information

You are a principal who is trying to figure out the truth about a lunchroom fight. The fight was between Justin and Max. Justin is a new student. He is shy, quiet, and does not have many friends. He moved to town last month because his father was hired to take over the town's main business. Justin's father fired many people, including Max's parents, when he reorganized the business. Max is a popular student, who is known for his friendliness and good humor. In the past few weeks, however, he has been withdrawn and somewhat depressed.

The Sources

Justin: *"That kid started it. Max. I was just standing in line waiting to pay for my food, and he shoved me super hard. And, like, for no reason. He just freaked out on me. I don't even know the kid, and he's been weird to me ever since I started going to this school. He and his friends glare at me in English class for no reason."*

Max: *"That kid is psycho. He turned around and punched me out of nowhere. Me and my friends were standing in line just joking around, and he turned around and punched me for no reason. He's messed up and creepy. Ask anyone."*

Eric (Max's good friend): *"The new kid definitely started it. He really just attacked out of nowhere. He's a freak, and he seriously thinks he's better than everyone because of his dad."*

Anthony (bystander): *"I was pretty far back in the line, but Max and his friends were being kind of loud and joking around. I couldn't really hear what they were saying. And then all of a sudden I saw people pulling Justin and Max apart."*

Megan (Max's girlfriend): *"I wasn't there. All I can say is that Max has been really different lately and kind of mean. I don't know what's going on, but he's not himself."*

Cafeteria worker: *"The group of boys were pushing each other around. I think it was an accident, and one of them pushed into the new boy, and he took it the wrong way."*



Max's mother: *"Max would never start a fight. He's the sweetest boy. I know he's had a hard time lately with me and his dad losing our jobs, but he still would never start a fight with anyone. He's a mentor to the younger boys and helps out at church. You can ask anyone in this town."*

Justin's father: *"I can guarantee 100% that Justin would never lay a finger on anyone unless he was really provoked. Trust me. And I know because we've had to move around quite a bit in the last few years because of my job, so unfortunately, Justin knows what it's like to be the new kid. And I've watched him go through these adjustment periods at each new school. He just lies low, and pretty soon the other kids see what a great kid he is. So I know as a fact that Justin wouldn't stir up trouble. It's really not in his nature."*

Jamie (student in English class with Max and Justin in the period right before lunch): *"I wasn't in the cafeteria today, and I'm not friends with any of those guys, but I've seen Max and his friends be mean to Justin in the hallways and in class when the teacher isn't looking. Not physical or anything, but they'll like say jokes under their breath and then laugh and stuff like that. They make him uncomfortable."*

English teacher: *"To be completely honest with you, I'm not surprised that this happened. There has been a lot of tension in the school and in the town, in general, with the reorganization plan. A lot of people are very upset with the decisions of the new management to fire people, and I must say that I myself am very surprised that they've done this. It's a tremendous strain on the community, and I feel for all the boys."*



Lunchroom Fight: Evidence Context

Name

Date

Directions

Use the evidence from the Lunchroom Fight Evidence sheet to complete the table below. Each row in the table should have at least two pieces of evidence.

Town Context: What is happening in the town that might explain the lunchroom fight?	Who said this?	Explain if this source is reliable or not and why.

School Context: What has been happening in the rest of the school (for example, in English)	Who said this?	Explain if this source is reliable or not and why.

Cafeteria Context: What happened in the cafeteria?	Who said this?	Explain if this source is reliable or not and why.



Lunchroom Fight: Suspension Report

Name _____

Date _____

SUSPENSION REPORT

1. What happened in the cafeteria? (Please identify sources of information.)

2. In my judgment, the following student should be suspended:

_____. My reasoning is as follows:

Principal Signature

Date

Appendix B:

Stage	Task	Description
Planning stage	Select “random interrupter” Identify “missing students”	Identify someone who can play the role of the “random interrupter” during the simulation Identify 20% of your students as the students who will be missing from the classroom during the simulation
Simulation stage	Gather materials for simulation Remove “missing students” Begin class as normal Signal for the “random Interrupter” End the simulation	You will need to have available, markers, blank paper, scissors and water in a spray bottle Before class begins, as the students you have identified enter class, ask them to wait outside with you. Once you have them all, send them to a separate location, like the library and tell them to wait until they are called for. Explain that it might be a while Start class as normal, but as you talk to your students perform a few random acts. Open a window, draw a few shapes on the board, move a chair and so forth Using your cell phone, signal for your random interrupter to come into your classroom. They should perform something for at least 1 min and no longer than 3 min. You should act surprised and unsure about what is happening. The performance should be funny, silly and memorable Continue to play along for about 1 min after the random interrupter leaves. Do one or two more random acts in your classroom during this time and then announce to the class for everyone to be silent and not to say a word
Primary source stage	Create primary sources Define primary sources Apply “history” to primary sources Return primary source	Hand out one piece of paper to each student. Inform them that there will be no talking at all. They will have 7–10 min to write down everything that has happened in the classroom since class started Have students place their names on their papers and collect them. Then define what a primary source is for students and give examples With all of the papers (students’ primary sources) in your hands, start asking students what can happen to primary sources over time. As students give examples, apply the effects of history to their primary source papers Hand back the primary source papers, after they have been modified to their owners. Explain that the other students will be brought into the classroom and they are not allowed to say anything to them when they enter
Secondary source stage	Explain primary source activity Release students to work in groups	Divide the class into groups and assign one of the “missing students” to each of the groups. Explain that each group member is allowed to read their primary source only twice. They must read exactly what is on their paper and nothing more. The “missing student” must on their own paper, try to come up with a narrative story of what happened while they were missing from the classroom Release your students to work in their groups on the activity. Make sure each group is in an isolated area, so that they cannot hear other groups. Allow 10–15 min for groups to work on the activity

(continued)

Table 1.
Primary source
simulation: step-by-
step guide

Primary
sources

SSRP

age	Task	Description
ecap stage	“Missing students” presentations Engage in questions and answers about primary and secondary sources	Once the activity has concluded and everyone has returned to the classroom, have the missing students read, one at a time, from their narrative (secondary source), about what took place during their absence Engage the class in a discussion about the differences between the narrative the “missing students” wrote (secondary source) and the actual events that happened during class. Tease out and discuss why there are differences between the actual events, the primary and the secondary sources. Ask students how this impacts our understanding of history?

