

Scaffolding Classroom Discourse in an Election Year: Keeping a Cool Mood in a Heated Season

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Abstract:

Once the outcomes of a national election are announced, the confetti is on the floor, the balloons have deflated; one group of people is very happy; another group is disenchanted with the outcome and maybe with the whole process. The next day in the elementary school, the principal might mention the results over the intercom to cheers and groans. Just when emotions are highest, the excitement ends -- and students take out their math books. Something seems to be missing from this picture.

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Article:

Once the outcomes of a national election are announced, the confetti is on the floor, the balloons have deflated; one group of people is very happy; another group is disenchanted with the outcome and maybe with the whole process. The next day in the elementary school, the principal might mention the results over the intercom to cheers and groans. Just when emotions are highest, the excitement ends -- and students take out their math books. Something seems to be missing from this picture.

During a presidential election year, discussions in the class- room often become more politically and emotionally charged than usual. Research has shown that teachers' fear of parent and community pushback causes some schools and districts to censor aspects of instruction about American government and politics.¹ Often, these fears are fueled by a few highly-publicized examples of teachers being reprimanded for appearing to go too far in their support of a political figure, as was the case in 2009 after a video of elementary students in a New Jersey public school singing songs praising President Obama was posted on YouTube and sparked a national controversy.² Despite legitimate concerns about avoiding political indoctrination, we believe that hesitancy to teach foundational democratic practices is troubling, given that a core tenet of the American democratic system is that people have the liberty to talk openly about their beliefs and opinions. Even more troubling is the idea that students are being denied opportunities to learn because of this fear.

Practicing Civility

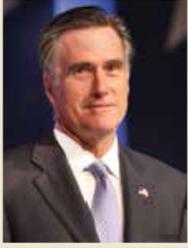
Certainly, teaching about politics can be daunting, especially as the political climate in the United States becomes increasingly partisan as a result of heated political rhetoric amplified through a variety of media outlets.³ However, elementary teachers can help students develop the respectful dispositions they will need as young adults living in an increasingly pluralistic society. These dispositions can be fostered only if teachers are willing to engage their young learners in discussions of politics as part of the curriculum. In this article, we discuss ways in which teachers can promote political tolerance and respect during coverage of a presidential election, a high-profile event that social studies educators Mary Haas and Margaret Laughlin describe as “the quintessential example of teaching social studies.”⁴

Elementary students are far from blank slates; research by political scientists and educators suggests that students begin to develop political efficacy in the early primary grades and are able to recognize that governmental officials, especially the president, hold considerable power within American society.⁵ Teachers have the opportunity to build upon this prior knowledge so that their students are better able to understand the election process and the reasons why Americans vote for one candidate over another. In the sections that follow, we describe instructional strategies designed specifically for the upper elementary grades, although we note ways in which teachers can adapt these strategies for younger learners as well.

Establishing Ground Rules

During social studies, the job of the elementary teacher encompasses more than just teaching how civic processes work. The teacher must also develop “emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings.”⁶ We believe that cultivating a community of civic discourse is essential not only to teaching elections, but also for preparing students for the democracy in which they live. Thus, we advocate setting ground rules before discussions begin.

Table. Language Chart for a Presidential Election

Candidate and Party	What We've Heard	Main Positions on Important Issues	Children's Biographies	Candidate & Party Websites	Other Multimedia Sources
Democrat Barack Obama 					
Republican Mitt Romney 					
3rd Party Candidate* 					

* If applicable

While it may seem as though there is never enough time in the elementary classroom, it's vital that students be able to think about and practice conversational skills such as listening, taking turns, and expressing disagreement respectfully. Those skills (which can be listed as

rules for classroom discussion) have application across the disciplines and in real life. Research has shown that guidelines such as these are most effective when students can contribute to their creation and implementation.⁷ After students discuss and help create a list of ground rules for discussion, key components of effectively using them include 1) publicly posting them for constant reference, and 2) providing opportunities to revisit them periodically to ensure that they are still working for the classroom participants. For younger students, it may also be helpful to “fishbowl” these strategies by having a small group of students role-play examples and counter-examples of the ground rules for the rest of the class.

Discussions Using Language Charts

Some students will enter your classroom knowing quite a bit about the candidates. It has been our experience that, when students are invited to share their thoughts, they often surprise us with all that they know. In addition to being able to recognize the candidates by name and face, students have often picked up other information from popular media sources, friends, and family. As teachers, it is important for us to recognize that, although there is often a fear of what might come out when children are allowed to share openly about political candidates, the information is on their minds regardless. We are able to mediate the content only when it is visible (or, in this case, audible). Through the use of language charts, students can gather information about the candidates and the issues and then check it against reputable sources.⁸ The table above offers one example of how teachers can structure a language chart for the 2012 Presidential Election.

In addition to addressing the candidates’ backgrounds (some of which can be acquired from biographies written for children) and leadership potential, it is also important that students understand that candidates usually have significant differences in ideology (belief) and policy proposals (how best to reach a goal). Especially in the upper elementary grades, students can benefit from general discussions of each candidate’s top campaign issue as a way of better understanding why individuals prefer to vote for one candidate over another.

- Is all of the information you have read consistent? (Do different sources say basically the same thing)? If not, what are the inconsistencies?
- How do you decide which sources of information are the most reliable?
- What other sources do you need to examine to get a more accurate portrait of the candidates and their positions?

Committed to Impartiality

Whether the candidates are introduced to students via biographies written for children, class discussions, or other sources, it is important to discuss with children that no source is neutral. When researching books written about President Barack Obama, we found considerable variety in how biographies written for children described the president. Even though most biographies appeared politically neutral at first glance, the authors apparently worked from distinct ideologies. These positions could be seen through the inclusion or

omission of particular events in Obama’s life and how these events were framed in the book.⁹

Just as no source is completely neutral, neither is any teacher completely neutral. Teachers who strive for political neutrality in their classrooms often do so with the best of intentions; however, research has shown that teachers who proclaim to be politically neutral are not neutral in practice.¹⁰ Instead of neutrality, we recommend what Thomas Kelly calls “committed impartiality” as the ideal stance for teachers to take when broaching controversial issues in their classes.¹¹ A committed impartiality stance allows teachers to articulate their political views in the classroom while encouraging opposing views by their students and explaining that no person’s political positions, including teacher’s, are automatically any more or less “correct” than anyone else’s. Positions and opinions should be tested with reason and evidence. It is the clarity of the argument and the quality of the evidence, not the status of the speaker, that should affect our opinion about any statement or policy proposal.

Leadership and Teaching

Yet, there is no mistaking the authority that teachers hold in their classrooms. Even when adopting a committed impartiality stance, teachers ultimately decide which issues should be discussed and which do not have sufficient evidence to be deemed controversial and, thus, worthy of discussion.¹² For example, in the first author’s study of high school classrooms during the 2008 presidential election, some students doubted both that Barack Obama was a Christian and that he had been born in the United States—despite being presented with strong evidence that these statements were true. It seems reasonable to assume that some elementary students came into their classes four years ago with similar misconceptions.¹³ Because no legitimate evidence has ever been brought forth to suggest that President Obama lied about his faith or place of birth, we would argue that teachers have a responsibility to present the evidence on an issue of such importance and then label a rumor as a falsehood. From such an experience, students can learn that the teacher strives to ground his or her opinions in rational thought and factual knowledge, and so should every citizen.

Facilitating Discussion of Candidates’ Positions

A student typically enters a discussion about an upcoming election not as a “blank slate,” but with his or her own viewpoints, positions, and arguments (which have possibly been adopted from adult family members). As the discussion facilitator, you can help students examine and consider perspectives that they may never have thought about before. The National Issues Forums materials, although created for high school students and adults, have questions in their Moderator’s Guide that can help discussants at the elementary level explore and “try on” different positions. The questions below are derived from one such guide:¹⁴

What things are most valuable to people who support this position?

What is appealing about this position?

What makes this position a good idea — or a bad one? What would result from doing what this candidate proposes?

What could be the consequences of doing what the candidate is suggesting?

Can you give an example of what you think would happen?

Does anyone have a different estimate of costs or consequences?

What do you see as the tension between the candidates' positions?

Where are the conflicts that grow out of what we've said about this issue?

Why is this issue so difficult to decide? What are the "gray areas"?

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other people's views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this discussion?

Keeping the Conversation Going

Throughout the election, classrooms will buzz with conversations about candidates, issues, and students' opinions. In lieu of a traditional bulletin board, consider creating a "conversation wall" that documents key points shared during class discussions and activities. After a classroom discussion about an issue in the election, students can collaborate with the teacher to determine how to best represent key points, posting on the wall a photocopy of a page from the picture book shared and discussed, news articles that prompted conversation, or quotations or writing samples from classmates.

Students can create captions for posted items that allow them to rethink what was shared in whole- or small-group conversations. Yarn could be incorporated to denote connections between statements, or a sequence of examination. Questions could be posted by the teacher or students and serve as conversation extenders. Ultimately, students and teachers alike can continue adding to the conversation wall as new discussions arise and activities take place. Doing so will create a record of what discourse occurred, what tools were used to prompt thinking, how opinions evolved, and what learning took place.

Final Considerations

Perhaps the two most important political lessons elementary students can learn are to critically analyze sources of political information and to develop political tolerance for those with whom they disagree.¹⁵ Today's students are growing up in an era in which negative political discourse seems ubiquitous. Political action committees spend millions of dollars on negative "attack ads," with no legal limits on the amounts that they can spend due to the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United*.

Given the current political climate, it is understandable that the social studies classroom, particularly during a presidential campaign, can seem like precarious terrain. The path of least resistance invites teachers to avoid political discussions altogether or to create imitative activities that sidestep meaningful conversations about the complexities of our democratic system and the dispositions such governance requires.

Rather than ignore the learning potential of such a moment, teachers can use it to help students understand and practice the tolerance required of the voting process. In addition, a presidential campaign provides opportunities for students to look critically at the information available to them—from the books they read, to the newscasts and ads that they watch, to the conversations in which they take part—and to analyze it from the perspective that no source, not even a trusted teacher, is neutral. Such discussions set the stage for increased critical awareness and discernment that children can build upon as they develop into tolerant, informed, and engaged citizens.

Notes

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11. Thomas E. Kelly, “Discussing Controversial Issues: Four Perspectives on the Teacher’s Role,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 14, no. 2 (1986): 113–138.
 12. Determining which issues are worthy of discussion and which are not can be considered, in itself, controversial. See Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York, NY, Routledge, 2009) and Michael Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 2 (2008): 213–228.
 13. Wayne Journell, “Teachers’ Controversial Issue Decisions Related to Race, Gender, and Religion During the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 3 (2011): 348-392
 14. “National Issues Forum Moderator Guide,” (Dayton, OH: National Issues Forums Research, 1997), store.nifi.org/guide/our_nations_kids_mg.pdf.
 15. Although we believe political tolerance is necessary in a democratic society, we realized (during discussions while writing this article) that a citizen might be morally praiseworthy for being intolerant of another person’s discriminatory opinion concerning gender, race, creed, and/or sexual orientation. Certainly, behaviors that infringe upon another citizens’ rights as guaranteed in the Constitution do not deserve to be tolerated, but there is a grey area. When should offensive attitudes or behaviors be tolerated, and when should they be confronted? How can I, as a citizen, express my disagreement with another person’s intolerant opinion? These questions can present a challenge for teachers when they surface in the classroom. For more detailed discussions of this topic, see Jennifer Hauver James, “When Missions Collide: Theological Certainty and Democratic Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 93, no. 4 (2011): 28-32; Elizabeth Yeager Washington and Emma K. Humphries, “A Social Studies Teacher’s Sense Making of Controversial Issues Discussions of Race in a Predominately White, Rural High School Classroom,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 1 (2011): 92–114; and Wayne Journell, 2011 (note 13 above).

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