Social Studies

WALTER C. PARKER

Discussing Controversial Issues

A number of inventive social studies programs are aimed at developing citizens who can critically reflect on society and participate justly in public life. One such program brings students face to face with controversial issues drawn from the regular social studies content they are studying. The best example of this is an eagerly awaited collection of lessons called Reasoning With Democratic Values: Ethical Problems in United States History (Lockwood and Harris, in press).

Designed to supplement existing U.S. history courses in junior and senior high schools, each lesson features a controversial episode from one of seven historical eras. Each episode reflects the theme of its era and presents for student discussion a difficult conflict between two or more democratic values. For example, an episode about Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce Indian struggle with the federal government reveals the problems of westward expansion, and raises for student scrutiny the persistent conflict among four values: property, life, promise-keeping, and legitimate authority. In each lesson, students situate the episode historically, analyze its values, facts, and conflicts; and then express in writing and discussions their reasoning about the issues. These lessons provide important insight into U.S. history while motivating students to develop their own sense of justice and social responsibility.

Key strengths of the collection are:

1. It was field-tested by teachers before being incorporated into lesson design.

2. Evaluation instruments are available to assess the effect on students’ moral reasoning.

3. The lessons supplement, rather than replace, teachers’ existing course plans and texts.

4. The instructor’s manual suggests ways to conduct open discussions.

Another kind of program engages students in rigorous inquiry into a contemporary controversy. A popular unit developed last year to help students explore nuclear weapons (Totten, 1985) exemplifies this approach. The unit involves students in open dialog about our nuclear “situation” while engaging them in historical and literary analysis, encounters with controversial guest speakers, and investigations of citizen action organizations.

A third kind of program takes students out of the school and into various community settings where diverse perspectives and controversy come with the territory. These include involvement with political campaigns, working with political action groups, consumer advocates, and legislators; working in health clinics and youth hotlines; producing a community newspaper; and surveying community attitudes about controversial issues for newspapers, the city council, or school board (Conrad and Hedin, 1977). The success of these action programs depends on careful follow-up discussion back in the classroom.

A fourth program focuses on decision making and conflict resolution. Citizenship Decision Making: Skill Activities and Materials (La Raus and Remy, 1978) contains 25 lessons for 4th through 9th grade students. Using the classroom as a microcosm of society, the activities build students’ skills in making, judging, and influencing decisions about controversial issues.

In one lesson spanning three class periods, students discuss and simulate a controversial issue and the effects of alternative decisions, then use information to influence the decision-making process. This teacher’s manual, field-tested and evaluated by over 60 Ohio teachers, contains learning materials as well as bulletin board ideas and teacher inservice suggestions.

References


Lockwood, Alan L., and Harris, David F. Reasoning With Democratic Values: Ethical Problems in United States History. 1, 2. New York: Teachers College Press, in press.

