

Resource Sheet #4

10-Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues

Developed by Boston educator Susan Jones

- 1.** Raise the initial question and have students brainstorm all their initial responses. Write them down. Don't discuss them; accept all contributions. Teacher asks only such questions as "What does that mean?" "Can you say more about that?" "Does anyone else have anything to add to that information?" and (especially for erroneous or extremely one-sided information) "Where did you learn that?" or "Is that a fact or is it someone's opinion?"
- 2.** As soon as undefined vocabulary words, vague concepts, and unanswered questions emerge, begin a separate list of "Things to find out more about." These will serve as guidelines for the ongoing research, and some may even develop into separate topics to pursue later.
- 3.** Information-gathering assignment (homework): Have students find out everything they can about the initial question. Tell them to "be prepared to share what you can in your own words." It is all right to read articles or watch the TV news, but the best source of information is interviewing parents, other relatives, or friends. Do not copy down anyone else's words -- but it is all right to take notes in your own words.
- 4.** Share again responses to the initial question in a brainstorming session. Again, students must share the information they gathered in their own words. Write down all responses. Teacher can ask the same questions as in item 1, but offers no information and no "answers." Add to the list of "Things to find out more about" from item 2.
- 5.** Continue the process of gathering information, sharing information, identifying things to find out more about, and going out to gather still more information for as long as the topic seems interesting. Encourage students to listen to and learn from each other. They can ask each other to explain what a new word means, to elaborate on a concept, to consider new questions, and to state their source of information. The teacher's role is an active one, facilitating, clarifying, and questioning; but the teacher doesn't impose information.
- 6.** If a concept emerges that sparks much interest or confusion, pose it as a new question about which to seek information. Share and question until a satisfactory base of information has been established. More than one line of questioning can go on at the same time.
- 7.** Periodically, give the children an individual written assignment in class to summarize their thoughts about a particular question. The assignment can be worded as "What you know about X, " "Things you don't understand about X, " "Something X makes you think about," or any other way you can find to help crystallize your students' individual

thinking about the topic. Sharing these compositions aloud or posting them for all to read helps make all the information public.

8. As individual or group projects emerge, follow up on them. The class may decide to write letters to public figures; one or two children may decide to pursue a challenging research topic to report on to the group; or an outside resource may unexpectedly appear. Be flexible.

9. Let others -- parents, your colleagues, the media -- know what you are doing. Invite their participation. Encourage dialogue.

10. Let your project end with something either public or permanent -- a class presentation to the rest of the school about what they have learned, an article for the school paper or the local newspaper, a class book, or individual books for the school library, or class participation in an event. It is important for children to feel that their learning is relevant and can lead to the ability to make a contribution to the larger world.

www.teachablemoment.org/elementary/teaching_controversy.html