

**NJS Presents****Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Don't Be Afraid of Controversial Issues in History Education*****By William Gorman****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v6i2.216>**

*In this editorial, Professor William Gorman (an educator with 30 years' experience) lobbies for educators in the state of NJ to embrace controversial issues in history education.*

Often times, those in social studies and history education cringe when controversial subjects are happening in the news and students want to come in and discuss them. They are too bound by the necessity of covering the required curriculum and making sure that depth and breadth issues are addressed with credibility. While one can certainly understand the difficulties faced with time and district-wide standard assessments, history and social studies courses are a perfect place for going beyond the textbook or the relevant district standards.

To not do so, would allow many missed opportunities to go by where students could not only learn how to express themselves better and more credibly, but to also be able to learn how to articulate and defend their positions on issues of the day which can then be directly related to particular curricula being studied in the classroom. This also can be a way to teach tolerance and respect for others' points of view.

Why not use the upcoming Presidential election to do this? How can this be done, with critical-thinking and respect/tolerance taught at the same time? By making sure that such activities are structured and given the appropriate set-up of demeanor and decorum. In particular, with the election coming up, students sometimes tend to parrot what they hear at

home without having any direct knowledge frame of reference. Take the election and turn it into a “teachable moment.” Divide students into groups and have them research the platforms/positions of the candidates and create a formal debate process. This could also be made even more “real” by having students actually be assigned roles that they will play (candidate, running mates, aides, and audience voters). I have done this in my own classroom and the results have been absolutely shocking. Students take their roles seriously and become immersed in the research. This has caused greater appreciation for the electoral process.

Students in an activity like this must demonstrate intelligence and maturity to be able to play their assigned roles. Through the activity, they learn to defend a position and point of view when cross-examination questions are asked. As well, they learn civility and respect, which should be key elements of any learning situation (even though we lack them in our current political climate, unfortunately). This type of learning environment allowing students to reflect, analyze, and be active participants.

All too often, as educators, we are afraid to have faith in students when we place them in a situation and allow controversy to be discussed in the history classroom. Our discipline, in particular, is one that allows for daily lesson and learning activities that can teach students how to be active learners.

From this educator’s perspective, using the above activity is only one small example of how those in our field can make our subject be a place where students learn content, thought, civility, critical-thinking, and become informed citizens.

What is necessary for such learning experiences to happen is for instructors not to be “married to a textbook” or to be so concerned about “standards.” Using my Presidential election

activity as a reference point, one can also cover or address elements of the US History and Civics standards of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) simultaneously.

*Professor Gorman had a career in public education as a Social Studies teacher and Supervisor in the Freehold Regional High School District and has experience in curriculum development and writing and staff supervision. He has served at the State of New Jersey Department of Education level in areas of H.S.P.A. test construction and also was one of those involved in the construction of the Social Studies curricular frameworks for the State of New Jersey in 2005. He has been a member of the Department of History at Monmouth University since 1986. His areas of research interest include: Social Studies Education and curriculum; the Federal Budget; National Security and politics. Besides being co-editor of The American Economy, he has also written on National Security and the Federal Budget, being published in the Oxford Journal Forum on Public Policy. In his time at Monmouth, he has taught Western Civilization, American History Survey, Critical Discourse, and for the last five years has taught exclusively courses in American Economic History. His latest book, a customization of The American Economy titled The American Economy from Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, is forthcoming from Kendall-Hart publishing.*