

Preservice/ Inservice Teachers and Controversial Content: Teaching Tough Topics

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Abstract

In the current "anti-woke" era, discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in education have become increasingly politicized, creating challenges for teachers at all levels of academe as they try to balance their instructional content with new state-mandated laws, without risking their jobs. Pre- and in-service teachers are particularly vulnerable as they have been threatened with immediate termination, fines, or even jail time, yet it remains critical that teachers at all levels (particularly the middle and secondary) can discuss their state-approved content with students while working within the newly adopted, state-mandated course curriculum changes. This project aimed to define several activities and strategies that can help teachers discuss tough topics while staying within the boundaries of each state's legal mandates.

Key Descriptors: Teacher preparation; Political polarization; DEI training; Teaching Tough Topics

Preservice/Inservice Teachers and Controversial Content: Teaching Tough Topics

In 2020, Florida universities were directed by the state's Board of Governors to make diversity and inclusion plans a priority. Universities throughout the state aligned their strategic pillars to include diversity and inclusion as a metric that measures equity for all students (DeSantis, 2023). Traditionally underrepresented students were welcomed into the university community through clubs, student organizations, and university programs that were aligned to promote cross-cultural understanding and celebrate student body diversity.

However, in 2021, proposals were made in the Florida legislature that sought to abolish those same plans by prohibiting universities from mandating courses on "racism, sexism, female studies, gender studies, African American History, and other concepts," but would require schools to survey students, faculty, and staff about their political beliefs to ensure "intellectual diversity" was allowed. Opponents of this legislation argued that politicians were attempting to suppress conversations about systemic racism and inequality (Anders, 2021), while proponents

argued that this legislation was necessary to protect free speech and prevent indoctrination of students (Education Matters, 2021).

Legislative Policy Shifts in Florida

The state of Florida recently passed a continuous series of legislative bills aimed at K-12 education that sparked significant controversy and debate. One such bill, (FL House, 2022), also known as the "Stop Woke Act," was adopted in 2022 as the Individual Freedoms Act (IFA). This bill places strict limitations on the topics that an employer can discuss during diversity training in the workplace, to prevent what some lawmakers view as the teaching of divisive or controversial topics related to race and ethnicity. The bill has been criticized (NBC Miami, 2022) as an attempt to stifle important conversations about systemic racism and other forms of oppression.

Another legislative bill (FL Senate, 2022) known as the Curriculum Transparency Bill, passed in the Florida legislature and requires school districts to be transparent in the selection of instructional, reading, and library materials. The legislation seeks to preserve parents' rights to decide what materials their children are exposed to in school. Media specialists are responsible for ranking, eliminating, or selecting instructional materials, with selections open to the public and parents of district students.

A third bill, (FL House, 2022) has been dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. This bill puts the power back in the hands of parents by prohibiting classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3 classrooms. After 3rd grade, conversations about these topics need to be "age-appropriate," which is an arbitrary designation. Critics of the bill argue that it is discriminatory and harmful to LGBTQ+ students, while supporters argue that it is necessary to protect the values and beliefs of families (Putnam, 2022).

Legislative Policies and The Impact on K-12 Education

These legislative bills related to K-12 education in Florida have raised significant concerns and generated heated debate among educators, parents, and lawmakers. While some argue that they protect individual freedoms and promote transparency in education (FLDOE, 2022), others contend that they are discriminatory, limit important discussions about social justice issues, and violate academic freedom (Feingold, 2023). While the long-term impact of these bills on K-12 education in Florida remains to be seen, their immediate effects have terrorized educators with the threat of immediate termination, fines, or incarceration, and the ramifications of this legislation will likely continue to be the subject of debate and scrutiny in the years to come (Griffith, 2023).

Florida's Laws: Protect Individual Freedoms and Transparency in Education

Preservice and in-service teachers in Florida classrooms during this polarizing and divisive political climate have been forced to navigate these challenges all the while preparing their students for success in a highly competitive and academically demanding future. Preservice teacher educators, who are teaching subject matter content deemed controversial or socially challenging, are under particular scrutiny. While some may be able to traverse these challenges successfully, others may be discouraged from engaging in these important discussions, potentially limiting their students' exposure to important ideas and perspectives.

During a series of personal conversations with preservice teachers and educational personnel, the authors asked them to reflect on their current instructional predicament. When asked their opinions about how the new legislation affects them, preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and k-12 media specialists, have legitimate questions:

- *What is going on? How am I going to teach relevant information to my students with the threat of going to jail if I say the wrong thing?* (Jonah, preservice teacher, personal communication, April 8, 2023).
- *Our school still makes us feel like we are in control, however, I have colleagues who teach US history and are planning how to teach about Reconstruction and post-Civil War history. They are afraid to say the wrong thing and upset the parents.* (Andrea, 7th grade history teacher, personal communication, February 23, 2023).
- *I always feel like I am tiptoeing around what is okay, in terms of what the state allows me to say. I am always scared that a student might take what I say wrong, and I will have an angry parent at my door. Of course, I keep my opinions out of the classroom, but it is so difficult when you have to teach about Civil Rights history.* (Kelsey, 8th grade history teacher, personal communication, March 7, 2023).
- *We were called into a meeting and the AP (Assistant Principal) looked at her notes... 'Well, folks, we have been told to have all our books vetted before we can display them in the classroom. Any questions...check with Tom.' I looked up and saw 100s of eyes looking at me. What the heck? I had no idea what to do!* (Tom, Media Specialist, personal communication, January 24, 2023).

Legislative Policies and Their Impact on Higher Education

In higher education, these recent policies have made a significant impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and initiatives. Politicians called for the elimination of these programs (which had previously been mandatory in 2020), and in January 2023, an order was issued prohibiting Florida higher education institutions from using any state funding to support

DEI or critical race theory, which were deemed "discriminatory initiatives" (Diaz, 2023, p.1) Students were granted the right to report a teacher to the administration (in higher education, as well as elementary and secondary school) if the topics discussed in class offended them, unwittingly or unintentionally, and could be grounds for immediate termination for the educator.

These policies have created a fearful and challenging environment for higher education officials who work on DEI committees, with some educators reporting that their emails were searched, and others stating that their institutions canceled all scheduled DEI programs (Griffith, 2023).

The elimination of DEI programs and initiatives in higher education could have negative consequences for diversity and inclusivity on campuses and limit opportunities for students to learn about important topics related to social justice and equity. This policy is also in direct opposition to the initiatives for DEI practices as stated in the university's strategic plan, the Florida state social studies standards, and the statewide Consent Decree (passed in 1992) which mandates that all public school teachers in the state of Florida have ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) endorsement to be capable of teaching content to English learners in the mainstream classroom.

These policies also raise concerns about academic freedom and free speech in higher education. Many educators argue that these policies could stifle academic inquiry and limit the ability of professors and scholars to explore controversial topics and express their views without fear of retribution (Griffith, 2023). This stance could have a chilling effect on the intellectual climate in higher education and limit the ability of institutions to attract and retain diverse and talented faculty and students.

The Injunction

On November 17, 2022, Judge Mark E. Waller of the US District Court for the Northern District of Florida issued an injunction that prohibits public and private universities from enforcing the Individual Freedom Act (IFA), which espoused limited academic freedom and silenced discussions on certain topics. The decision is considered a major victory for the academic freedom of professors when speaking in their university classrooms and it acknowledges the right to receive speech as well as the right to free speech. This decision implies that students and faculty members have the right to engage in discussions and debates on controversial issues without fear of censorship or punishment. The ruling also emphasizes the importance of academic freedom and its critical role in promoting intellectual inquiry, academic excellence, and the advancement of knowledge.

Most importantly, the injunction provides significant legal protection for academic freedom and the right to intellectual expression in the university classroom. It also sets an important precedent for future cases involving free speech and academic freedom in higher educational institutions. Meanwhile, teacher educators, who are also university professors, must navigate the tenuous academic system gingerly as they are responsible for preparing K-12 teachers to teach in a divisive political climate. Consequently, educators need to utilize new approaches and strategies so that content instruction can still take place during this fragile period. These new instructional approaches should be considered as building blocks for preservice teachers as they prepare to teach controversial topics within their own classrooms.

Redesign Approaches to Instruction

Instructional design must include instruction that prepares preservice teachers to handle tough topics in the classroom. To achieve this goal, while operating within the legal boundaries, teachers need to have a well-defined alignment with research that supports their instruction, a

deep understanding of state standards, and a vast knowledge of instructional strategies that can facilitate academic success and comprehension of information. Building on this paradigm, the authors identified four major elements that help create a classroom environment that can appropriately deal with and address tough topics, including knowing our students and their home communities, communicating goals and objectives, being thoughtful when selecting topics, and guiding discussion using appropriate instructional tools. The ultimate goal is to create safe, inclusive, and non-threatening classrooms where learning can take place.

One critical aspect of knowing students is to develop a culture of trust and respect within the classroom. Teachers need to understand students' perspectives and what they care about, which can be achieved through preliminary surveys, interviews, and thoughtful discussions.

Additionally, it is crucial to know where the community stands on sensitive issues such as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer plus) communities and their rights, as members face societal challenges ranging from invisibility in the classroom to abusive language, negativity of self, and physical attacks (Heinze, 2021). It is the role of teacher educators to train preservice teachers to create a safe, non-threatening classroom for learning to take place. Inclusive classrooms that provide a safe learning environment that shuns verbal and physical harassment are essential. Where many classrooms were designated safe places with symbols like the gay pride flag, and Gay-Straight Alliance meetings, these symbols are no longer permitted. Still, educators are responsible for safety and must provide non-threatening classrooms for all students, regardless of the law.

Instructional approaches must be redesigned and revised when considering teacher training.

Participants in the field of education must be able to survive the controversial bans while providing students with rigorous research-based instruction, effective implementation of state

standards, and application of instructional strategies that will facilitate academic success and comprehension of knowledge.

Using Clear Communication

When introducing potentially controversial topics within classroom discussion, teachers need to be thoughtful and shrewd when selecting topics and guide the discussion with appropriate instructional tools using the recommended recipe for success: research-driven instruction, effective implementation of state standards, and applicable learning strategies that allow students to reflect on their learning and formulate personal positions using tools such as writing logs and related literacy strategies.

Another key element of successful instruction is communicating goals and objectives. We stress again the importance of strategic selection of topics to be addressed, as well as the need to state plainly the objectives of the lessons. The objectives should be written on the board daily so students and any visitors can see how state-approved standards and objectives are addressed in the lesson and taught to students.

Encouraging Critical Thinking in the Classroom

The goal of instruction within the classroom should not be to convince students to adopt a particular stance or belief (which could be construed as indoctrination), but rather, to encourage students to think critically about important issues and topics and arrive at their own conclusions based on their own critical analysis and evaluation of ideas. Teachers need to be transparent about their rationale for teaching a particular issue, explain how they intend to approach the topic and be certain that it is age-appropriate, standards-driven, and supported by engaging learning strategies. In addition, parents and administrators **MUST** be made aware of classroom

discussions and feel welcomed into the learning environment before beginning this type of instruction. The Florida State Standards should shelter the content, because it is what educators are obligated to teach, according to the Florida Department of Education.

Selection of Appropriate Topics

The authors cannot stress enough how important it is that teachers select their instructional topics judiciously. As stated, the key to neutralizing potentially risky discussions is to include practices that are proven effective, such as research-driven instruction, and effective implementation of state standards. With skillful strategies and thoughtful assignments that foster critical thinking students engage in learning and formulate their personal positions and conclusions as a result of their individual constructivist self-discovery.

Research-driven Instruction

Critical literacy is a popular research theory that has met with a great deal of success when effectively introduced during classroom instruction (Hagood, 2002). Critical literacy involves the questioning and examination of ideas, and requires students to synthesize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and respond to the texts they read or listen to (Cox et. al., 2017). With critical literacy, students are more apt to learn when the information has relevance to their lives, especially as they bring their prior cultural knowledge and multilingual practices to the equation. Relevance will help learners to better understand the curriculum across the content areas as they read common texts critically. Students can make sense of sociopolitical systems by bringing their own cultural knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006) to the discussion, in addition to their individual multilingual practices (Lau, 2015). Their own worldviews and their unique

understanding can be brought into current social issues (e.g., inequities of race, class, gender, and inclusion), and other sensitive topics that need to be introduced and tackled.

Selection of Appropriate State Standards

Preservice teachers need to be cautious when applying state standards to lessons and recognize that some state standards, although mandated by the state, may conflict with some of the newer state laws. For example, a social studies teacher may be asked to teach a lesson on the 15th Amendment and the Reconstruction Era. Students would be asked to recount the progression of civil rights accomplishments and challenges that led to the right of African American men to vote and later, to run for political office. One of the lesson's objectives might be to determine whether the 15th Amendment was universally adopted throughout the United States. Students might be asked to evaluate the impact of Jim Crow laws on the lives of African Americans and other racial/ethnic minorities (Florida State Standards, SS.912. A.2.4; and SS.912. A.2.5) to recognize the impact of the threats, violence, and unethical practices, like poll taxes and literacy tests, that these Americans were forced to endure. Although these benchmarks are annually evaluated on the United States History End-of-Course Assessment, the topics might be now considered illegal to study, according to the new Florida laws that reject an Advanced Placement course on African American studies.

Other major Supreme Court decisions can be discussed that include sensitive topics such as integration, busing, affirmative action, the rights of the accused, and reproductive freedom (SS.912. A.7.8) Assignments can include steps to analyze, assess, and weigh the merits of the results of significant Supreme Court decisions (e.g., SS.912. C.3.10). Students and teachers can plan for instruction where participants may consider alternative choices by selecting from appropriate learning strategies, fortified with images, utilizing guiding questions that consider

many perspectives. Useful learning tools include student reflection journals or logs, and extended interactive projects that cultivate effective literacy strategies (Daniels & Zemelman, 2014).

Effective Learning Strategies

Daniels and Zemelman (2014) claim that students learn best when their learning has importance and relevance in their lives, when they read everyday texts, and when they can critically make sense of the sociopolitical systems by focusing on social issues. They stress the importance of selecting literacy strategies that support and guide students' reading comprehension and critical thinking so that learners can use text to shape their understanding of complex structures and challenging content issues. For example, when using images and visualization as literacy strategies, it highlights and enhances the written text, which is an excellent tactic to further heighten learner engagement on a wide variety of content-area topics. Visual images can provoke emotion, and sensory stimulation, which dovetails with the idea of mental images that are conjured in the brain as the reader's prior knowledge and background experiences connect with the text as it is being read. These facets help the reader to form a more personal overview of the topic, as guiding questions that examine multiple perspectives are presented. Thoughtful extension activities can include student reflection logs, with prompts that encourage critical analysis and reflective contemplation. Teachers can create intensive collaborative projects according to student interest, which extends the learning environment, fosters critical thinking, and leads to eventual academic improvement. Powerful mental images increase comprehension and meaning for students (Daniels & Zemelman, 2014; Gambrell & Koskinen, 2002).

Examining Multiple Perspectives in a Text

Effective readers recognize the importance of examining multiple perspectives found within the text. Specifically, critical readers need to understand that different characters within the text will interpret events through different and unique perspectives. Examining the components of texts is a strategy that can be assisted through the application of frontloading a comprehension activity with images from the book, *Lillian's Right to Vote* (2015). Teachers would direct students' attention to look at multiple perspectives of the story and complete the chart (see Table 1).

Table 1. Examining Multiple Perspectives of a Story

Examine Multiple Perspectives	Image/Text	Guiding Questions	Reflections
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Teachers will point out to students that effective readers must consider that characters may interpret events in different ways, emphasizing the role of point of view in shaping one's understanding of a story. Additionally, students are encouraged to acknowledge that there is no single version of a story, and gaps and contradictions may arise in the telling of a narrative. Such critical thinking skills are valuable for effective reading and comprehension, and help students to develop a more nuanced understanding of complex issues (Comber, 2001).

Next, students would be asked to draw a picture (image) or provide evidence within the text that highlights one of the perspectives expressed by a character within the book. Graphic organizers

and images depict the discourse structure by representing the interrelationship among ideas and patterns of the text. Encouraging students to use images found in text allows students to find reading passages more engaging and serves to enhance comprehension (Jiang, 2012).

Students would then be asked to respond to guiding questions, which encourages students to think more deeply about the text. When teachers ask well-designed guiding questions during instruction, it can significantly enhance student learning outcomes. Additionally, well-designed questions guide student thinking, help them connect what they already know to new information, and develop a deeper understanding of the material. Moreover, by using guided questions, students are encouraged to become more active participants in their own learning, as they are required to think critically and come to conclusions about the information being presented to them (Nieto, 2018). Guided questions can help to scaffold student learning and enable them to tackle more complex material by breaking it down into manageable parts (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Guided questions include helping students to connect their prior knowledge to new information, developing a deeper understanding of the material, encouraging active participation in learning, and scaffolding student learning to tackle complex material.

Guiding Questions

Examples of guiding questions in the story *Lillian's Right to Vote* (2015) might include lower-level questions like recall, and increasingly more complex levels by asking intellectual questions that require higher-level critical thinking, as found in Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002).

Who is the main character in this story?

What is Lillian trying to accomplish?

Why has Lillian decided to vote in this election?

Why does she have to make such a stressful journey? Why can't she vote somewhere closer to her house?

How are voting precincts decided and by whom?

Write an alternative ending to this story. What would you have done to help Lillian?

Reflection Logs

To further explain the benefits of reflection logs, research supports their use to encourage students to reflect on their reading (Roberts & Westville, 2008). Careful crafting of prompts guides students to reason and contemplate new information thoughtfully and deliberately.

This method of guiding the format of reading logs provides clear guidelines, useful feedback, and opportunities for revision. The use of reflection logs in education has been effective in promoting metacognitive skills, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning (Tofade, Elsner, & Haines, 2013). Reflection logs provide a space for students to think about their learning, assess their progress, and make plans for future learning. They also provide an opportunity for teachers to gain insight into their students' thinking processes and adjust their instruction accordingly, which offers a more accurate formative assessment.

Additionally, reflection logs are particularly effective in promoting deep learning when used in conjunction with other active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning and collaborative learning. Essentially, research supports the use of reflection logs as an effective instructional tool for promoting metacognition, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning in students.

Reflection logs for the book *Lillian's Right to Vote* (2015) could be based on Boud et al (2013) reflective log plan based on the reader's reflections where the participant thinks

critically about what happened in the text, determines what it means to the reader, and decides if the experience was valuable. Educators can modify the chart to include the desired perspectives and objectives to be studied (see Table 2).

Table 2. Reflection Log for Lillian's Right to Vote

Book Title: <i>Lillian's Right to Vote</i> (2015)	
Describe: What happened?	Lillian's trip to the polling location is difficult. She is over 100 years old!
Interpret: What does it mean?	Her main concern is that she won't be able to reach her destination.
Evaluate: How valuable was the learning experience?	The main character is determined to vote in the upcoming election. I wonder if she would have voted for Barack Obama.
Plan: How will you apply what you learned?	I need to study more about voting rights and learn how it works today.

Another reflective activity is called the S-I-T strategy, a reading reflection technique created by Kylee Beers and Robert E. Probst in their book "Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading" (2012), which prompts students to engage with a text critically. S-I-T stands for "surprised," "interested," and "troubled," and encourages students to reflect on what they find unexpected, captivating, and challenging in their reading. By doing so, students can develop a deeper understanding of the text and engage in critical thinking. The strategy can be used in various academic settings, such as language arts, social studies, and science classes, and is effective in promoting thoughtful and engaged reading.

The S-I-T strategy aims to promote critical thinking and reflection in the classroom. By engaging with a text emotionally and considering different perspectives, students can deepen their understanding of the material. The S-I-T strategy asks three questions to guide reflection: (1) What Surprised Me? (2) What Interested Me? and (3) What Troubled Me? The first question encourages students to identify unexpected information or ideas in the reading, helping them to think beyond their initial assumptions and biases. The second question helps them to connect with the reading on a deeper level, finding meaning in what they have read. The third question encourages them to confront difficult ideas and develop a more nuanced understanding of the reading. Students may find it useful to reflect on their critical thinking by responding to the questions on a 3x5 card (see Table 3).

Overall, the S-I-T strategy is an extremely effective tool for promoting critical thinking and reflection in students. By encouraging them to identify what they find surprising, interesting, and troubling in a text, students can begin to develop questions and ideas for further exploration. This strategy helps them to engage with the material more deeply and to consider different perspectives on the text. As such, the S-I-T strategy can be a valuable addition to any classroom, promoting thoughtful and engaging reading practices.

Table 3. S-I-T Strategy Card

S-I-T Card: After reading this (article, short story, novel, book, or watching a video), I found the outcome (shocking, outrageous, or counterintuitive) because.....	
Surprising	
Interesting	
Troubling	

Classroom Libraries

Classroom libraries have been identified as an essential component of any K-12 classroom. However, teachers and educators in certain states are baffled about what is allowable reading material in classroom libraries. In the article "There's Confusion Over Book Bans in Florida Schools. Here's Why" by Education Week (Pendahkar, 2023) the writer discusses the recent controversy surrounding book banning in Florida schools. The article examines the legislative action taken to ban certain materials and topics from being taught in schools. This has led to concerns about censorship and restrictions on academic freedom.

To address this issue, the article suggests that educators should be aware of any potential restrictions or guidelines related to book banning in their district or school. Educators can consult with their school's library or administration to understand any relevant policies or regulations (Pendahkar, 2023). Additionally, educators can consider working with organizations or groups that advocate for free speech and academic freedom to support the inclusion of a diverse range of materials in their classroom libraries.

Preservice and inservice teachers need to be encouraged to create a comprehensive classroom library that can provide students with great access to a wide variety of reading materials, including books, magazines, and other materials that cater to students' varied interests and reading levels. This diversity of reading materials has been found to motivate students to read more often and with greater comprehension precisely because they appeal to a wide variety of specific interests (Krashen, 2004).

Moreover, classroom libraries provide opportunities for students to engage in independent reading and self-directed learning, which can enhance their overall academic performance

(Allington, 2002). Students who are allowed to select their reading materials from a classroom library tend to be more engaged in reading and have better comprehension skills (Krashen, 2004).

Finally, classroom libraries have been shown to provide significant benefits to K-12 students such as improved reading motivation, greater engagement, and higher academic performance. Teachers should make sure that their classroom libraries are as complete as possible, organized, and culturally relevant, and that they offer a wide assortment of reading materials that cater to students' interests and reading levels. With an abundant library, teachers can create extended projects, and show material that demonstrates the historical precedents for all citizens. Without giving a personal opinion on either side of a controversy, teachers can promote an intellectually exciting classroom when students make their own considerate conclusions after weighing all the facts.

In conclusion, as with all assignments, be sure to leave room for reflection. Graphic organizers can help students classify information, gather their thoughts, emotions, and ideas, reflect, and debrief. Writing is a wonderful tool for individual reflection, with guided prompts to organize their thoughts and conclusions. Additionally, as a wrap-up strategy, exit surveys or tickets are excellent tools to ascertain what students have learned, as well as gather information for teachers to plan further study, determine what questions students are left with, and reveal what potential future activities can be carried out that will expand knowledge and extend comprehension.

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