Handling Sensitive and Controversial Issues

An issues-oriented curriculum is a powerful vehicle for the cognitive and affective development of senior students. At the same time, real-world topics and concerns often involve conflicting viewpoints, values, and moral positions which need to be addressed with sensitivity. The following guidelines will assist you in handling issues in senior classes:

- Find out about your local board and school policies for dealing with sensitive issues. Many jurisdictions have developed guidelines and policy statements.
- Plan programs collaboratively in consultation with other subject teachers, school letters to parents and class newspapers or bulletins to inform parents of classroom events and invite their input.
- Discuss definitions of “issues” and “controversy” with students. Adolescents grow in their understanding when concerns are addressed openly and honestly with them.
- Ensure that students consider all issues from a variety of perspectives and sources. For example, students need to know that each selection in The Senior Issues Collection reflects one, and only one, point of view. And, because it is written by a human being, each selection is, by definition, subjective and biased. Emphasis should be placed on considering issues from a range of viewpoints, sources, interpretations, and worldviews.
- Involve students in ensuring that their classroom is a safe learning environment for everyone. Planning collaboratively with students gives them a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning. Have then consider strategies for: guiding small-group discussion; protecting one another’s privacy; responding to one another with respect, understanding, and empathy; celebrating diversity and difference within a community of learners.
- Ensure that students who hold particular points of view of beliefs do not feel threatened or pressured to change, adolescents can sometimes be very judgmental and quick to condemn; at the same time, they need the security of a risk-free environment which allows them to clarify values without fear of ridicule or ostracism.
- Offer your own viewpoint on a given topic after students have explored and articulated their own views. Students are often deeply influence by their teacher’s views and need opportunities to clarify their own thinking.
- Reassure students that their work will be evaluated on criteria other than the beliefs they hold about a particular issue. Involving students in designing the criteria for evaluation will foster independent learning.
- Invite students to explore issues in ways that are as open-ended and inclusive as possible. For example, if students are creating greeting cards, having students brainstorm a variety of potential cards and audiences will invite all students to participate, regardless of their personal circumstances.
- Ensure that students understand that they speak only for themselves as individuals, not for others who may belong to the same social, cultural, or gender group. For example, if the class is engaged in a discussion of land claims, the viewpoint of one First Nations student does not represent the views of all First Nations people.
- Help all students develop and maintain a sense of pride in their language, their lived culture, their experiences, their families, and their communities. Schools have the potential to empower all learners when they support, and work collaboratively with, the divers communities represented by their students.
Promoting Anti-racist Education

The Senior Issues Collection provides teachers with an effective vehicle for promoting anti-racist education across the curriculum. The process of challenging racism and ensuring equity will prepare all students for full and active participation in tomorrow’s global community. The following points summarize the ways in the Senior Issues Collection addresses the principles and practices of anti-racist education:

- All titles in The Senior Issues Collection consciously address the present and historical existence of racism in society. Selections explore issues related to human rights, social justice, social responsibility, and equity.
- All eight anthologies are permeated by a range of cultures and voices. If students are to understand and respect a variety of world views, it is essential that they experience issues from many different perspectives.
- Issues of race, culture, gender, ability, and age are integrated throughout the entire collection. Students learn to understand racism, not as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as something that pervades all aspects of our lives.
- Readings and photographs affirm the dignity of all cultures and perspectives. They not only avoid negative stereotypes; they ensure that all students experience positive role models and strong characters throughout.
- Equity issues are addressed seriously and comprehensively. Instead of activities that deal only with the superficial aspects of culture, such as ethnic food and festivals, teaching suggestions invite students to explore human values and belief systems in non-patronizing ways.
- Teaching suggestions promote a critical understanding of culture and racism. By addressing issues critically, students learn to question their assumptions, combat racist attitudes, and extend their understanding of our cultural diversity and global interdependence.
- A wide range of open-ended activities capitalizes on students’ individual strengths and ensures that students of all cultures, abilities, experiences, and linguistic backgrounds are welcomed as learners.
- Equity-related activities are integrated throughout the curriculum in all subject areas. As students explore issues from the perspectives of different disciplines, they gain a more global understanding of racism. They also learn how racism is the result of concrete historical, social, political, and economic forces that can be changed. “Life Skills” activities frequently focus on strategies for conflict resolution and help students identify and reduce exploitive and abusive behaviour.
- Activities such as role-playing, simulation, debating, and small-group discussion help students learn empathy, explore various points of view, and gain practice in demonstrating positive race relations. An emphasis on “Talk/Drama” validates the spoken word and oral cultures as important forms of literacy and wisdom.
- Students participate in a variety of heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, grouping arrangements. All students learn to assume ownership of their learning, to work collaboratively with their peers, and to develop a sense of community.
- Students consider and evaluate print and electronic media for gender and cultural representation and for explicit and implicit bias.
- Assessment instruments are sensitive to cultural differences and invite students to demonstrate learning outcomes in many ways. For example, Blackline Master “Evaluating Oral Presentations/Reports” (page 21) avoids such descriptors as “maintains eye contact,” which may be inappropriate for some cultures. Teachers and students can select appropriate descriptors to assess whether or not students have demonstrated “audience awareness” or “sensitivity to audience.”

Resource: