TEACHING STRATEGIES

How to Explain and Help Students Navigate Today's Polarization

Teachers can be reluctant to address how polarized our society is, but there are ways to do it while (mostly) avoiding controversy.

By *Chris Orlando*

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Myrleen Pearson / Alamy

Democracy, it's been said, has always been a contact sport. Political parties disagree on policy issues, and this conflict, mediated by shared ideals, is a useful tension that drives democracy. But today, partisanship has become mistaken for patriotism, and Democrats and Republicans fear that the other will destroy the country if they attain power.

Wading into these politically charged waters can benefit our students by helping them learn how to listen to one another and by creating a common civic culture. Sadly, though, this rarely occurs in our schools. This is due to fears of parental pushback and losing control of the classroom. But if we want to help students explore the complexities of their world and consider how they might reshape it, it's essential that teachers guide students through today's political climate. They should start with three simple goals to help students understand, reflect, and connect.

UNDERSTAND

Students need help answering the question, why is our country like this? There are many possible explanations, including the fact that those who live in cities are more likely to support Democrats and those in rural areas tend to support Republicans, growing racial and ethnic diversity and the reaction to that, and 24-hour news coverage; but the one that will resonate most with students involves social media and the way it warps debate and makes consensus-building more difficult.

The first step in helping students navigate America's politically polarized climate is to reveal to them that many of us operate in an echo chamber of information. This is an environment in which a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own. Explain to students that echo chambers can create misinformation and distort a person's perspective so that they struggle to consider opposing viewpoints. This is also a fitting opportunity to introduce students to the concept of confirmation bias, which is the tendency to favor information that reinforces our existing beliefs.

Students, like most adults, are in denial that they may live in an echo chamber. In order to have students test this, suggest that they ask the following questions when consuming information:

- Does the source give only one perspective of an issue?

- Is that perspective primarily supported by rumor or partial evidence?

- Are facts ignored whenever they oppose that viewpoint?

To operationalize this for students, introduce the idea of the *filter bubble*. Students may be surprised to learn that personalized algorithms create a predictable space for us online. Websites will then use those algorithms to primarily show us content that's similar to what we've already expressed interest in. This can prevent us from discovering new ideas and perspectives online. Rather than making our world bigger, our world shrinks a little.

Lastly, to best help students understand today's political climate, it's vital that students recognize *bothsidesism*. Explain to students that when a news source presents both sides of an issue as equal when they aren't, the source isn't being objective. It's promoting a bothsidesism that eats away at truth and knowledge, amplifies misinformation, and validates bad actors who make bad-faith arguments and launder disinformation.

The challenge that teachers face is to provide multiple perspectives on an issue, as there's always a danger in just considering a single story, but also to encourage students to operate in a reality in which facts matter. Teachers should make sure to clearly explain the terms *objective* and *subjective* and be prepared to provide sources that demonstrate each. Having students read two accounts of a particular event and suss out the objective information presented, if any, may be a useful exercise. This may also help overall when discussing polarizing topics, as it's important to be able to operate from a shared set of facts.

REFLECT

Education Research You Can Use

After promoting students' understanding of the causes and implications of polarization and then helping them recognize it in their daily interactions in person and online, teachers should create a safe, inclusive space where students can journal about their thoughts and feelings. When given this opportunity, students routinely surprise their teachers with their candor. Journaling is a cathartic process and can help them release their stress by transferring their thoughts and frustrations onto paper.

There is no single journaling strategy that works for all students, but an effective one related to polarization and potentially contentious issues is to assign students a *lifted-line response*. To utilize this strategy, teachers provide students with a line from a quotation involving whatever disagreement or issue may be on students' minds that day. Then, teachers have students answer questions like, "How does this make you feel? How might it make others feel? Why might someone interpret this differently than you? What questions does this line raise for you?"

CONNECT

It's important to explicitly teach about polarizing issues like race, immigration, gun policy, climate change, and others because it can show students what it looks like to respectfully disagree—a nearly extinct form of communication. Establishing ground rules prior to discussion can help make it a productive experience. These include: listen respectfully and actively without interrupting; criticize ideas, not people; commit to learning, not debating; avoid inflammatory language; allow anyone interested the opportunity to speak; and don't ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group. Modeling a healthy discussion around these topics shows students that what matters more than agreeing with each other is that we all feel that others respect us; after all, no one has ever been insulted into agreement.

As we enter a period of increased polarization, it's easy to bemoan the state of our country, but it's important to remember that our students represent a bright future. Each of them is a terrific tangle of what is and what will be. What they are is painfully open to the world and desperately trying to make sense of it. What they will be, someday, are the caretakers of this country. That's why teachers need to show them the fragility of the democratic process, demonstrate to them the historic importance of civic engagement in this great American experiment, and teach like our democracy depends on it—because it does.

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TEACHING STRATEGIES

Blending Direct Instruction and Inquiry-Based Learning

When teachers combine the best parts of these two strategies, they create a learning-centered model.

By *Michael McDowell*

October 31, 2023

Research has shown that both teacher-centered and student-centered instructional approaches have *mixed impacts on student learning*

(https://www.routledge.com/Visible-Learning-The-Sequel-A-Synthesis-of-Over-2100-Meta-Analyses-Relating/Hattie/p/book/9781032462035). For instance, exclusively lecturing, a teacher-centered approach, has a negative effect on the academic performance of students. However, direct instruction, a teacher-centered approach that combines the power of checking for understanding, engaging students with challenging questions, and spending significant time ensuring guided practice before students enter independent practice, has a substantially positive impact on learning.

Student-centered instructional approaches follow a similar pattern whereby discovery-based learning yields little net value, while problem-based learning is a highly impactful strategy. The main difference is the degree to which teachers interact with students with similar approaches to using questioning, providing specific guidance, and constantly checking for understanding.

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Building Better Readers With Scaffolded Read Alouds

By reading books out loud every day, teachers introduce students to higher-level texts and new vocabulary, while modeling deeper thinking and strong discussion skills.

October 27, 2023

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The Science of Classroom Design

Our comprehensive, all-in, research-based look at the design of effective learning spaces.

By *Youki Terada, Stephen Merrill*

November 2, 2023

When a team of researchers led by University of Salford professor Peter Barrett analyzed the *design of 153 classrooms across 27 elementary schools* (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2015.02.013) in the United Kingdom, they went all-in and kept it real, taking measurements and making observations of seating arrangements, wall decorations, and often-overlooked ambient factors such as lighting, temperature, acoustics, and air quality—all inside real classrooms.

Good classrooms should be "designed to make attending school an interesting and pleasurable experience," the researchers enthused, balancing visual stimulation with comfort and a sense of ownership. Combined, these classroom design elements accounted for 16 percent of the variation in students' academic progress.

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Building Confident Educators

In order for educators to develop a sense of self-efficacy, they need sound teaching strategies.

By *Jorge Valenzuela*

November 2, 2023

My confidence in my teaching abilities wasn't always high. I developed it over time by taking small, incremental steps toward mastering specific teaching strategies I could employ at various stages of my daily lessons. Eventually, I accumulated many strategies I knew I could facilitate well, and my confidence grew. This was a direct result of my increased self-efficacy, or believing in myself. A person's perceptions of their capabilities can be instrumental in *goal attainment*

(https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/12/06/how-self-efficacy-changes-your-self-confidence/?sh=7759ed15ff79).

Learning this helped me discover that true self-confidence can be honed and developed over time. Self-confidence and self-efficacy should not be viewed as being the same. The former is more general, an overall positive view of one's capabilities. Self-efficacy is situationally dependent.

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

12 Books About Bridging Language Barriers

These picture books feature characters who find ways to communicate with older relatives or with each other, even when they don't share a common language.

By *Kristin Rydholm*

November 2, 2023

Have you ever played *Pictionary* (https://shop.mattel.com/products/pictionary-gmt97)? How about charades? The general premise of these games is that you have to convey information nonverbally to your partner(s) so they can say a specific phrase or the name of something. While many people enjoy improvisational games such as these, if you were suddenly forced to communicate all of your needs and wants this way, all day, every day, it would be limiting and frankly exhausting.

The games above suggest two strategies for compensating for a language barrier: drawing and gesturing. For most adults, a sudden language barrier would be inconvenient but manageable; for a young child entering a new classroom where they don't know the primary classroom language, a language barrier can make the school day experience seem overwhelming, frustrating, and interminable.

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Integrating Intellectual Property Into the STEM Curriculum

These engaging activities can teach students in grades three through five about patents, trademarks, copyright, and trade secrets.

By *Debra Jacoby*

November 2, 2023

In the past, my technology class eagerly participated in every conceivable invention competition available. As a technology educator, I believe that such competitions offer structured guidance for students in an era when innovative teaching often requires crafting a unique curriculum. Engaging in these types of competitions aligns with the terminology used in tech/STEM classes. As with many STEM classrooms, entering the world of competitions helps students be consistent with much of the vocabulary in engineering and technology lessons.

There was a moment, however, when I started to ask my students, "Who owns the work you submit to these competitions?" The moment came when some students and I learned the hard way that by signing up for the competition, we had basically signed away the students' rights to their work—the company took ownership.
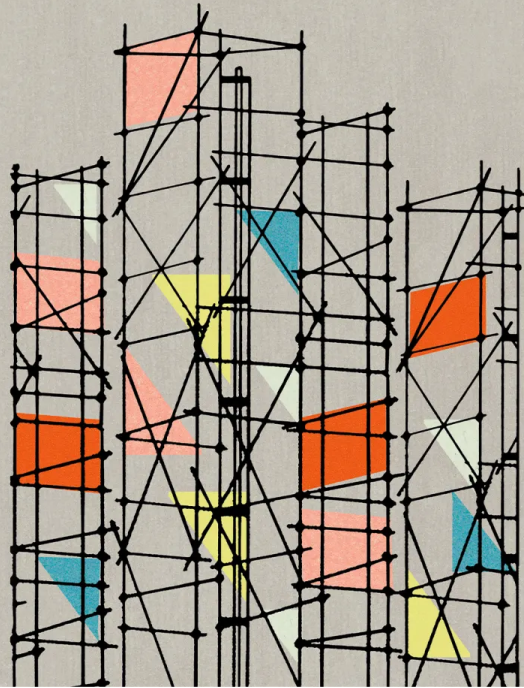
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ADMINISTRATION & LEADERSHIP

5 Steps to Evaluate Intervention Programs

Administrators should carefully evaluate the goals of intervention programs, what they hope to achieve, and how closely they are being followed.

By *PJ Caposey*

November 2, 2023

If you are reading this, your school likely has an intervention program. It may be called Response to Intervention (RTI) or multitiered system of support (MTSS), but some type of programmatic approach to intervention is likely in place. The education community has spent billions of dollars to provide this increased level of support for kids. The issue, however, is that it has not worked, and we don't talk enough about evaluating intervention programs.

In 2008, John Hattie's research showed that intervention had a *statistically significant impact* (https://www.renaissance.com/2017/06/15/blog-the-john-hattie-effect-size-in-educational-research-what-is-it-and-how-is-it-used/#:~:text=Through%20his%20research%2C%20Hattie%20found,What%20works%20best%20in%20education%3F) (effect size) upon student achievement. This became the justification for how intervention programs are implemented. However, *research has found that* (https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2017/09/11/rti-is-getting-a-bad-rap-say-education-researchers/), despite the ubiquitous usage of RTI, not only has it been ineffective, but it has actually had an *inverse effect in some schools* (https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/study-rti-practice-falls-short-of-promise/2015/11).

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CRITICAL THINKING

Encouraging Meaningful Reflection With Creative Digital Tools

Tools for creating digital portfolios, video, and books can help teachers turn meaningful reflection into a critical part of the learning process.

By *Tim Belmont*, *Katie Fielding*

November 1, 2023

Asking learners to reflect on their learning is a *well-established practice* (https://www.edutopia.org/blog/digital-portfolios-art-of-reflection-beth-holland) for boosting student confidence and allowing educators to better understand learners. But did you know it can also *improve critical thinking* (https://www.edutopia.org/article/reflection-learning-tool/), help students develop a growth mindset, and support self-regulation?

During a typical busy class day, however, meaningful reflection often falls to the wayside. Luckily, students can gain both social and emotional and academic benefits through tech-infused multimedia reflections. Using digital tools, many of which are already popular in schools, students can utilize text, video, audio, and more to create a perpetual record of their goals and learning experiences.

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