

Civic Education and Public Controversies

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In this article, the influences of President Donald Trump's comments on a group of teacher candidates are discussed. Socratic seminar is offered as one teaching method that can help the students gain a better understanding of the diversity of viewpoints that exist regarding US citizenship, immigration policy, and other important public controversies.

Challenges to Civility Norms

Schools are unique civic places where children can learn about public controversies while practicing such civility skills that include listening to the views of others, questioning claims, and expressing their assumptions. Schools are not immune from what goes on in the larger society because children repeat in school what they hear at home, and often exhibit their parents' attitudes and values. Teachers strive to create a safe environment in their classrooms for students to study important historical events and participate in shared inquiry by having meaningful discussions about topics that are worthy of examination, such as the meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance, the Gettysburg Address, and the Preamble to the US Constitution.

Current discourse is ripe with public controversies, such as building a wall along the US-Mexico border and granting citizenship status to the children of undocumented immigrants known as DACA children or the Dreamers (1, 2). Arguably, the public discourse reached a new low when on September 22, 2017, President Trump used profanity to describe the NFL football players who were kneeling during the national anthem, calling for their firing by the team owners (3, 4). How has this new public discourse influenced teacher candidates' perceptions about the health of American democracy, and their concerns about issues facing the United States?

Liberty and Justice for All?

Based on a fall 2017 survey of 54 teacher candidates enrolled in a teacher training program, only two of them identified the changes in the American democracy as "improving." However, over 52 percent of the participants expressed concern over the breakdown of the country's civility norms, and they mentioned the comments and tweets by President Trump and the media reports as the main factors shaping their perceptions. They also expressed alarm over perceived widening divisions in the country between the two main political parties, failure to provide affordable healthcare for all Americans, and the growing federal debt that is expected to reach 24.19 trillion dollars at the end of fiscal year 2018. (5)

The survey revealed an urgent need to examine and discuss important public issues so that students could feel safe expressing their views and learn to disagree with their peers, in a civil manner. Also, the participants in this survey expressed discomfort sharing their thoughts in their classes and felt free speech was an ideal that they really could not practice for fear of being negatively perceived by their peers and instructors.

As one participant put it, “Everything is hyper politicized! I don’t feel comfortable saying what I really think.” Others talked about the feeling of “walking on egg shells” when expressing views that may be different from the majority in class. These and similar comments showed the need for meaningful exchanges of ideas, especially in social studies classes. Dr. K, one of the article’s authors, deployed the Socratic seminar method, in hopes to see meaningful interactions among these teacher candidates as they examined the text of the Pledge of Allegiance.

After explaining how the Socratic seminars are set up and what was expected of the participants (e.g., listening with interest to the views of others, sharing their own ideas, referring to the text often, completing the self-evaluation at the end of the seminar, etc.), we engaged in a meaningful discussion about a ritual that millions of American children experience at their schools: Standing up for the Pledge of Allegiance! During the discussion of the Pledge with a group of 17 teacher candidates, several of them said, the notion of “liberty and justice for all” was exclusively reserved for the Americans only, and omitted all the undocumented immigrants and foreigners. After three people expressed similar ideas, no one challenged this interpretation, despite my prompting to hear alternative perspectives on the question, “Who are the people included in ‘liberty and justice for all?’” With several Hispanic students in class, I was surprised to see them silent, and even a few kept their heads down. The nonverbal body language I was seeing was evidence of major discomfort that these Hispanic students were experiencing. What was more surprising to me was the silence of the other non-Hispanic students in the class. Did their silence mean, these non-Hispanics were in support of excluding undocumented immigrants and foreigners from the benefits of “liberty and justice,” or were they too afraid to challenge the views of their peers? Two other discussion groups, comprising of the remaining 37 teacher candidates, had different outcomes. They believed that the United States had an obligation to ensure all people, regardless of their citizenship status or where they lived, deserved “liberty and justice.” Several argued America had a moral duty to uphold human rights in the world. Additional analysis and follow-up studies of these three cohorts could reveal nuances about group dynamics, and what motivates someone to speak up against the perceived majority opinion.

The result of this limited survey suggests the existence of a belief among the overwhelming majority of these teacher candidates that the health of American democracy is deteriorating, and teachers need more strategies exposing their students to views that are different than theirs. Thus, the need for reinvigorating civic education! (6) Teaching students to warrant their claims, and clarify the concepts that have shaped their perceptions are among the essential skills that schools should teach, if E Pluribus Unum (Out of Many, One) is to have any real meaning. Too much emphasis on the Many can lead to a fracturing of the community, and too much emphasis on Unum can lead to silencing of the dissenting voices.

Here are two lessons that bring out divergent viewpoints when preparing students to discuss the Pledge of Allegiance. Organizing a mock naturalization ceremony or showing a short YouTube video about it, can set the stage for the main discussion. Before the discussion, the seats are arranged in a circle, with a name-tent in front of every student. The seminar purpose and norms are displayed for all to see. The teacher should check for completion of the assignment prior to allowing the students to join the discussion. Those who have not completed the assignment will sit outside the circle and take notes of the discussion. The assignment can have three questions: (1) To what are you really pledging allegiance? (2) What is the most important idea in this text? (3) Should all school children be required to recite the Pledge?

After the discussion, the teacher goes around and asks every person how their understanding of the text improved, and what they liked or observed about the seminar. A follow-up writing assignment can be a choice: (A) Should all school children be required to recite the Pledge? Or (B) When you say, “with liberty and justice for all” to whom are you referring? As an exit ticket, the students are asked to complete a short self-evaluation. A sample exit ticket is provided at the end of the lesson 2 of 2.

Lesson 1 of 2: Can you pass the US citizenship exam?

Every person applying to become a US citizen has to pass a background check, pay the fees, and provide a series of documents before being considered for US citizenship. As part of the US naturalization process, the individual must pass the Citizenship Test by correctly answering 6 out of 10 questions. An online version of the Civics Practice Test can be found at: <https://my.uscis.gov/en/prep/test/civics/view>

See if you can pass this test by answering at least 60% of questions correctly.

After the test, have a conversation with class about the pros and cons of having such a test for citizenship. Is this a meaningful test for US citizenship? Explain.

Source: <https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/teachers/educational-products/100-civics-questions-and-answers-mp3-audio-english-version>

NAME: _____

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

A: Principles of American Democracy

1. What is the supreme law of the land?
2. What do we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution?
3. What is one right or freedom from the First Amendment?
4. What are two rights in the Declaration of Independence?
5. What is the “rule of law”?

B: System of Government

6. Who makes federal laws?
7. What stops one branch of government from becoming too powerful?
8. How many US Senators are there?
9. We elect a US Senator for how many years?
10. If both President and Vice President can no longer serve, who becomes President?

C: Rights and Responsibilities

11. What is one responsibility that is only for United States citizens?
12. What do we show loyalty to when we say the Pledge of Allegiance?
13. How old do citizens have to be to vote for President?
14. When is the last day you can send in federal income tax forms?

AMERICAN HISTORY

15. What group of people was taken to America and sold as slaves?
16. When was the Declaration of Independence adopted?
17. Who is the “Father of Our Country”?
18. Name the US war between the North and the South.
19. Name one problem that led to the Civil War.
20. What movement tried to end racial discrimination?

Answers:

21. 1. The Constitution; 2. The Bill of Rights; 3. Speech, religion, assembly, press, petition the government; 4. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness; 5. Everyone must follow the law, leaders must obey the law, government must obey the law, no one is above the law; 6. Congress, Senate and House (of Representatives), (US or national legislature; 7. Checks and balances, separation of powers; 8. 100; 9. 6; 10. The Speaker of the House; 11. Serve on a jury and vote in a federal election; 12. The United States, The flag; 13. Eighteen (18) and older; 14. April 15; 15. Africans, People from Africa; 16. July 4, 1776; 17. (George) Washington; 18. The Civil War, The War between the States; 19. Slavery, economic reasons, states’ rights; 20. Civil rights (movement)

Lesson 2 of 2

(Socratic Seminar: A Shared Inquiry)

Purpose: To better understand the ideas and issues in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Norms: (1) Don’t raise hands. (2) Address one another. (3) Refer to the text often.

Source: <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>

The Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was written in August 1892 by the socialist minister Francis Bellamy (1855-1931). It was originally published in *The Youth's Companion* on September 8, 1892. Bellamy had hoped that the pledge would be used by citizens in any country.

In its original form it read:

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

In 1923, the words, "the Flag of the United States of America" were added. At this time it read:

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

In 1954, in response to the Communist threat of the times, President Eisenhower encouraged Congress to add the words "under God," creating the 31-word pledge we say today. Bellamy's daughter objected to this alteration. Today it reads:

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Section 4 of the Flag Code states:

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag: "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." should be rendered by standing at attention facing the flag with the right hand over the heart. When not in uniform men should remove any non-religious headdress with their right hand and hold it at the left shoulder, the hand being over the heart. Persons in uniform should remain silent, face the flag, and render the military salute."

Exit Ticket

Name: _____

(Highest = 5, Lowest = 1)

How do you feel about your participation today?

Quality of contribution 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Ability to express ideas 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Referring to the text 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Appropriate responses to others 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Level of involvement 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

New insights you gained today 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

After this discussion, I still want to know...

Notes:

1. Praise for President Trump's Commitment to Border Security – Immigration, *The White House*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/praise-president-trumps-commitment-border-security-2/>
2. Statement from President Donald J. Trump - Immigration, *The White House*, September 5, 2017 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-7/>
3. Johnson, Jenna, "‘I love Alabama – it’s special’: At rally for Sen. Luther Strange, Trump vents frustrations in rambling speech." *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/23/i-love-alabama-its-special-at-rally-for-sen-luther-strange-trump-vents-frustrations-in-rambling-speech/?utm_term=.adeefc161cff

4. Colvin, Jill, "NFL commissioner, players' union angrily denounce Trump," *Washington's Top News*, September 23, 2017, <https://wtop.com/nfl/2017/09/trump-says-protesting-players-in-nfl-should-be-fired/>
5. Chantrill, Christopher, *Federal Debt Clock*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.usgovernmentdebt.us>
6. Crittenden, Jack and Levine, Peter, "Civic Education," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civic-education/>