

# Rethinking Schools *Online*

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## How To Teach Controversial Content And Not Get Fired

*By Kelley Dawson Salas*

A classmate in my master's degree program explained to our class: "I really want to talk with my students about why it's wrong to discriminate against gay people. I had one conversation with them about it, but then my principal found out, and ever since then he's been watching every move I make. I feel like I can't teach about this any more."

After working for weeks to write units on such topics as gender bias, racism, and the criminalization of youth, our class discussed what it would be like to actually teach these units in our classroom. We wanted to teach the lessons we'd written — in fact, we had chosen this master's program because it explicitly focused on anti-racist teaching. But while many of my classmates strongly believed in the lessons we wrote, at the same time most expressed doubts about actually being able to teach these lessons in our classrooms.

Our professor prompted us: "Tell me about your fears. What do you think could happen if you were to teach these units in your classrooms?"

We called out our concerns and our professor wrote our laundry list on the board:

- "I'll get fired."
- "My principal won't fire me, but will retaliate against me in other ways."
- "Other teachers in the building won't want to work with me."
- "I'll end up being totally isolated at my school."
- "Parents will challenge me."

These fears exist and are very real for teachers who decide that curriculum needs to integrate a strong social justice focus, one that helps kids learn about multiple perspectives and develop critical thinking skills.

Even after completing my fifth year of teaching, I still experience fears and insecurities when it comes to implementing a social justice curriculum. But it's gotten a little easier each year.

### Out On A Limb

During my first year of teaching, I was inspired by an article in *Rethinking Schools* magazine by Kate Lyman about teaching the Civil Rights Movement to elementary students. (To read the article visit [www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher).) Using Kate's article as a starting point, I decided to teach a unit on the Civil Rights Movement and have my third-grade students write and prepare a class play for presentation at our February all-school assembly, which had a "black history" theme.

I knew that I was going out on a limb, because I wrote the unit myself, and I really didn't know whether I was "allowed" to deviate from the third-grade social studies textbook I was supposed to be using. As I began teaching the unit I felt isolated: I had asked my partner teacher to plan the unit with me and to teach it simultaneously in his classroom, but he'd decided he wasn't interested in doing that.

Despite my feelings of uneasiness, I went ahead with my teaching and found that the students responded very well to the content and the projects that we did. But I still wondered what

consequences I might face if someone walked into my classroom and began to question what we were studying.

The story had a happy ending. My partner teacher — although he politely declined my request to co-teach the unit — saw that I needed some help, and so after school one afternoon we built a life-sized "bus" for the play. The kids wrote the play, learned their parts, and in the process showed a good understanding of the events of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott.

The students presented their play at our February assembly, and as a final touch after the performance, they sang Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up" and got the whole school up and singing along. A strange feeling washed over me. I had embarked on this unit with a sense of fear and insecurity, yet with a kind of determination that what I was doing made sense. Things turned out much better than I had expected. It was a far cry from "What if I get fired for this?"

This was a good lesson for me. I was at a school that was not particularly progressive, yet I learned that it wasn't repressive, either. It was mostly a "teach and let teach" environment. I never took any flak for teaching about the Civil Rights Movement, though neither did I get any earth-shattering compliments. Teachers didn't start knocking down my door asking to team-teach social studies units with me, but neither did my principal ask me to go back to the textbook. In short, what I had done was OK.

### Seeking "Permission"

Since then, I have talked to lots of veteran teachers and asked how I should go about teaching from a social justice perspective, given that I am a new teacher with many things to learn. I want to teach my students to think critically, analyze our world, and learn to change it, but I am not always as confident about my approach as I wish I was. And I often second-guess myself, wondering whether I am "allowed" to teach the way I want to teach. At the end of my first year of teaching, I asked veteran social studies teacher Bill Bigelow a question that had been on my mind all year: "Who has the authority to decide what I teach?"

He answered simply: "You do."

It was a critical moment for me. All year I had been searching for someone who would grant me permission to teach the way I wanted to. In my school community, I had not experienced resistance, but I was looking for more than the absence of resistance. I needed someone to tell me that it was OK to do the kind of social justice teaching I was trying to work toward. My conversation with Bill made me understand that the person who has the greatest control over what happens in my classroom is me. Waiting for someone else to give me permission or authority to teach the way I wanted to was not necessary.

But that's not to say that those of us who wish to teach from a social justice perspective don't need to explain our curriculum and methods to others in our school community. We need to be prepared to respond to questioning or criticism from other teachers, administrators, or parents who don't want us to teach in this way. Peter Brown, a teacher-educator from California, gave me some great advice that he said he shares regularly with those he mentors: "Before you start a unit that you think may be controversial, inform the parents and principal about what you'll be teaching and explain how it fits into the school's curriculum and standards."

For example, the Milwaukee Public Schools' Teaching and Learning Goal #1 states: "Students will project anti-racist, anti-biased attitudes through their participation in a multilingual, multi-ethnic, culturally diverse curriculum." This provides an excellent rationale for many of the activities I do in my classroom, and since my district is formally committed to it, it's hard for principals and parents to argue.

At times I have used an approach of notifying parents and my principal ahead of time. Other times, when I was fairly certain there wouldn't be resistance to my teaching, I have followed a philosophy of "teach first, answer questions later." For example, I used this approach with a video called "That's a Family." The video is an excellent resource in teaching about family diversity. It presents several types of families, including adoptive families, single parent families, foster families, gay and lesbian

families, and divorced families. (For more information see [www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher).)

Before I began using this video with my class, I cleared it with my principal (I needed her permission to purchase the video for our school library). I also considered whether I should notify parents that I would be teaching about different kinds of families, including gay and lesbian families. I predicted there could be some resistance from parents who are opposed to homosexuality. I asked one parent what she thought I should do. "Do you notify parents of every single thing you teach?" she asked. "If not, it would be inconsistent to notify them about this, and could raise more alarm than necessary." I agreed with her analysis and have taught the video two years in a row without complaint from anyone.

## Other Suggestions

Part of the process of deciding whether to use a video (or any other material or lesson) also involves having an understanding of the school community where you work. After my first year, I switched schools and I now work at a very progressive school with teachers and families who are, for the most part, committed to diversity and social justice. At this school, people are much more likely to be tolerant.

As with any kind of curriculum you teach, a unit you write yourself should be of high quality and well-prepared. In planning units that address specific issues of social justice, I have found it useful to start by researching what other teachers have done in this same area. There is LOTS of social justice curriculum out there. Rethinking Schools and Teaching For Change are two great resources, where I have regularly found and "borrowed" from other teachers' teaching ideas. (For links visit see [www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher).)

Another very important rule of thumb is to always preview any materials that you are going to use, even if they have been recommended by other teachers. I found that when I taught my unit on the Civil Rights Movement, much of the PBS *Eyes on the Prize* video series was useful and appropriate for my third graders. Other parts were not as crucial and some, such as graphic images of the corpse of lynching victim Emmett Till, were not age-appropriate.

In my first few years as a teacher, I have tried to teach about several different issues that some people might consider controversial. They include immigrants' experiences and rights, union organizing, the Civil Rights Movement, Mexican-American organizing, resistance to slavery, the U.S. government's removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands, the U.S. war on Iraq, the budget shortage in our schools, bullying, stereotypes, xenophobia, homophobia, racism, and sexism.

By no means have I done a full "unit" on each of these topics. Some, such as slavery and the removal of Native Americans from their lands, I teach through literature. Others, like stereotypes and racism, require a long-term conversation with my students. And some, like our study of the U.S. war on Iraq and the budget shortage in our schools, come up during our regular classroom discussions of current events.

Each year I try to improve and add on to the units or concepts that I've taught in the previous year, but I still feel I have a long way to go to reach my goal of having a year's worth of solid curriculum that integrates a social justice perspective and teaches about specific issues of justice. Knowing that I am making progress and that I have the support of like-minded teachers keeps me energized to continue working toward my goals.

Engaging my students in social justice issues is, for me, at the heart of my teaching. I have learned that developing curriculum is a long-term process that often happens very slowly. But I wouldn't do it any other way.

*Downloaded from the website for The New Teacher Book, published by Rethinking Schools, 2004.*  
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Last Updated Fall 2004