Teaching Sensitive Subjects

- Civil Rights
- Slavery
- Suffrage
- Gender Issues
- School Prayer
- Reproductive Rights
- Segregation
This tutorial, “Teaching with Primary Sources,” is one of a series produced by the North Carolina State Historical Records Advisory Board with funding from the National Historical Records & Records Commission.
Many events in history produced, and in some cases continue to produce, strong and conflicting emotions. It is important for students not only to know about these events in history but to be able to think critically about them and draw their own conclusions.

Bill of sale for two slaves

Stanly County Museum of History, DPLA
Learning to examine and evaluate the primary documents related to such topics contribute to understanding events in history.

Here are some tips for introducing sensitive topics in your classroom.

Plessy vs. Ferguson, Judgement, Decided May 18, 1896; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; Plessy v. Ferguson, 163, #15248, National Archives.
First, identify which topics may be controversial, so you can be prepared to effectively lead discussions. Consider that some topics may raise other controversial issues. For instance, a study of a court case on reproductive rights may include a discussion of eugenics.

1950 Eugenics Pamphlet

NCpedia
When introducing the topic, ask what students already know about the issue. This may reveal existing biases and viewpoints.
Present multiple perspectives on the topic. Finding quotes from secondary sources may be useful.

I think there are many times when it would be most efficient to use nuclear weapons.

Curtis LeMay

My feelings of revulsion and foreboding about nuclear weapons had not changed an iota since 1945, and they have never left me.

Daniel Ellsberg
Assign background reading in secondary sources.
Before beginning analysis of the document, provide ground rules for discussion.

---

**Rules of Engagement**

1. All opinions are to be respected.
2. No one may interrupt while another is speaking.
3. Personal attacks and sarcasm are forbidden.
4. Focus on issues not on the person expressing an opinion.
Be an effective facilitator

1. Enforce the rules.
2. Intervene if the discussion gets too heated.
Once the discussion has ended, have students provide an objective summary of the different viewpoints presented.
An online search for teaching sensitive or controversial subjects will provide numerous articles. Here are a few:

LearnNC
http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-eg/6633

Yale Center for Teaching and Learning
http://ctl.yale.edu/teaching/ideas-teaching/teaching-controversial-topics

University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsd