

CHAPTER 2

Understanding

Gaining Clarity on the Meaning of Terms

*Words have a magical power. They can either
bring the greatest happiness or the deepest despair.*

—Sigmund Freud

This chapter will help to prepare you to complete the following:

- ✓ Identify potentially contentious topics in your curriculum and standards.
- ✓ Reframe potentially contentious topics to make them less heated or intense.
- ✓ Sort potentially contentious topics by which discourse approach (dialogue, discussion, debate) is best suited to handle student conversations.
- ✓ Work with colleagues to develop a glossary of key terms and concepts related to civil discourse in your curriculum.

LANGUAGE SETS THE TONE

The words you choose are the “magical power” as noted by Sigmund Freud because they signal to students what is going to happen and what is expected of them. This chapter examines essential terms that truly impact the environment of your class. These terms are grouped together to provide guidance to ensure that you, your class, and your colleagues are all on the same page about the meaning of words that will be essential to students engaging in civil discourse. Do you and your students know the difference between dialogue and discussion or misinformation and disinformation? As you support student learning while engaging in discourse, the development of a shared understanding of the key terms in this chapter will be critical to success.

Take a moment and reflect on the following questions:

- Are there words that are used interchangeably with students that may not be interchangeable?
- What does it mean to be controversial instead of contentious?
- When having students engage in conversations, do you have clear goals in mind? How do you scaffold the different types of conversations to meet different goals?
- How do you help students process information that they hear inside and outside of the classroom to determine its reliability?

Words matter when it comes to helping us understand how we see ourselves and how other people see us based on the words that we choose when talking to them. Facing History and Ourselves (2021b, 2021c) has a lesson that focuses on the story of Niin and her experience as a kindergartener. She

is an Anishinaabe woman of both Cree and Ojibway descent. Niin talked about the first time someone called her an Indian and the impact of the word:

They [her classmates] were saying “Indian, Indian, Indian.” And I was like what? I really didn’t understand myself, first and foremost, as an “Indian.” Right in the middle of when they were doing that, the bell rang and everybody just turned toward the door and started walking in. I remember looking down on the ground wondering, what are they talking about Indian, Indian, Indian? . . . I said, “Mom, what am I?” And she looked down at me and said really fast, “Were people asking you what you were?” I said, “Yes, they were calling me Indian.” She said, “Tell them you’re Canadian.” . . . I think that’s when I started learning that there were different kinds of people. (Facing History and Ourselves, 2021b)

Niin’s classmates had an understanding of a word that they used to make fun of her. They wanted to hurt her and the word choice of “Indian” was able to deliver that message in a way that Niin’s name could never do. The power of the word is reflected in Niin’s mother telling her to tell her classmates that she was “Canadian.” Although both Canadian and Indian were ways for Niin to define herself, based on societal discriminations and her classmates’ understanding, Indian was the word that could impact Niin the most.

Have you ever been in a position where the words used impacted the entire conversation? As an educator, you are in a key position to make sure that the words used in your classroom are delivering the intended purpose and understanding. It might not always be as apparent as the teasing in Niin’s story or the use of racial slurs, but this does not mean it is not impacting your students.

Sending a message through word choice is not new to First Nations people in the United States and Canada. The idea that Christopher Columbus “discovered” a continent of “savages” is a story that has been told in classrooms for decades (National Museum of the American Indian, 2018). Unfortunately, the use of words to harm others is not limited to First Nations people. In her essay “Orientation Day,” Jennifer Wang (2001) talks about the confusion of the meaning behind a word: “During that time I also first heard the term ‘chink,’ and I wondered why people were calling me ‘a narrow opening, usually in a wall.’” This is only part of her confusion growing up trying to understand what it means to be Chinese, American, or both.

Wang’s experience related to derogatory terms is not unique to her, individuals of Asian descent, or even those of immigrant families and First Nations people. The power of words is understood by almost all who use them—even as young as kindergarteners, as told in Niin’s story. In order to have students engage in the type of conversations necessary to build and support communities inside and outside of the classroom, an understanding of the words that are used is a must.

Each classroom, school building, and community has to be understood by the educators in order to give meaning to the words that frame the intent of what is trying to be communicated. Dr. Sally McConnell-Ginet (2020), author of *Words Matter: Meaning and Power*, tells us that “it is the socially structured practices and historically situated circumstances constituting our social lives that pour content into words, endowing them with meaning and power” (Blackwood, 2020). This is important to understand even down to a group as small as a classroom of students. McConnell-Ginet writes that each community has their own linguistic practices and “these communities can be small face-to-face ones like church choirs or book clubs, or they can be very large ‘imagined’ ones like nations.”

OR OR VERSUS

It is also worth noting that we use the term *or* when talking about the word choices as opposed to *versus*. While the word *versus* in this context would be used to mean “as opposed to; in contrast to,” the first definition according to Oxford Languages (2021b) is “against (especially in sports and legal use).” This may seem too nuanced; but if students are nudged even slightly into the idea that something like a sporting event or legal proceeding, then this will make a difference. Sporting events and legal proceedings have a winner and a loser or least that is the intent even in the case of a tie. The idea of having a winner or a loser can have implications in how students will approach this work (McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021), as the section on debate, discussion, or discourse will examine more in depth.

Oxford Languages (2021a) defines *or* as “used to link alternatives.” If we step back from using *versus* and the idea of “against” and move toward *or* and the idea of “alternatives,” this changes our classrooms. This change allows students to listen to different points of view not in terms of an absolute right answer with a “winner-take-all” champion, but rather as alternatives to one another without value or judgement being placed on them. For example, Joe’s drive to the office has two choices that take almost the exact same amount of time (yes, he has timed them both multiple times). Are these two options in competition as a *versus* or are they alternatives to be separated by *or*?

The choice of the drive home, like many other decisions we make every day, is an alternative that we can choose depending on variables that may play a role. We do not usually say pizza *versus* burgers when deciding meals, nor should we push students to think that they have done something wrong if they are one side of a *versus*. The issues that our students will address in our classrooms need to come from the place of *or* as opposed to *versus*.

Each word choice that is made in the classroom may be small, but they all add up to set a tone. As you read through the following sections of four word groups, think about where they are currently used in your school or classroom. Decide what message you want to send to your students based on what is the goal of the learning that is taking place. The goal that you have in mind might be in conflict with your word choice, because words matter.

CONTENTIOUS OR CONTROVERSIAL

Are the words *contentious* and *controversial* synonyms when discussing topics to be addressed in your classroom? If you have been paying attention to word choice to this point in the book, you may have noticed a focus on the word *contentious* as opposed to *controversial*. This is intentional as part of subtle word choice cues to gently nudge how you approach what you are reading.

During the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd, we found ourselves reading articles talking about the “controversy” surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests. When the Black Lives Matter movement was framed as “controversial,” we struggled to accept the overarching idea that thinking that someone’s life matters is a controversial stance. It was clear that the movement is a contentious subject for many, but is the core tenet of its motto inherently controversial or is it the how and why of the movement that is contentious?

When you hear the word *controversial*, what type of emotions does it elicit? Take a moment and reflect on the following questions to frame some of your thinking about this section.

- Do you believe that something that is “controversial” can be viewed as positive?
- Would you want there to be a “controversy” about something that you had done?

- Can people disagree about things and “agree to disagree”?
- Are there some topics that should never be discussed in a classroom regardless of context and student age?
- Who should have the final say in whether a topic is discussed in your classroom?
- What role do parents play in deciding what you teach?

We need to have a shared definition of the term *controversial* if we are going to determine which topics should be discussed in schools. A study by Byford et al. (2009) found that 72% of respondents believed that “students need to study controversial issues.” But Ho et al. (2017) found that there was not a common definition for “controversial issues” and explored two potential interpretations.

The first interpretation centered on the idea of topics that some may deem to be inappropriate or objectionable. This idea was connected with the idea of “culture wars” as identified by Zimmerman (2005). The second interpretation explored the idea of topics that were “designed to help students investigate, evaluate, or deliberate issues that have multiple and competing views” (Ho et al., 2017). In this book, we clarify this by separating these two ideas into *controversial* for the former interpretation and *contentious* for the latter. The term *controversial* is often associated with a connotation that is negative, intense, or subject to extreme disapproval. The term *contentious* is associated with disagreement. We do not want students to see discourse topics as negatives, but rather as ideas that need more exploring in a way that is open to acceptance and understanding of those differences.

Something that is controversial will most likely be contentious, but is the opposite true? When a topic is labeled as contentious, does that mean that it has to be controversial? As sports fans, we both have seen plenty of contentious discussions that did not focus on what society would say is “controversial.” Heated

debates about the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) in different sports are a common occurrence among sports fans, as are discussions about whether “this certain team of one year would beat a different team of a different year,” but few people would say these conversations qualify as controversial. Check out the results of a spring 2021 YouGov survey (Figure 2.1) and see if you agree with who is the GOAT and whether or not this list would be considered contentious or controversial (Bruce, 2021).

Looking at these words through a sports angle does not seem to have the two words as equals. Dictionary.com (2021) has a second definition of *controversial* to include “debatable,” and this is what gave us pause in the summer of 2020. Is the idea that Black lives matter truly debatable? What does it mean for something to be debatable? Synonyms listed on Dictionary.com include “arguable” and “questionable,” which seems to imply that if the idea that Black lives matter is controversial, then maybe the idea that Black lives matter is debatable. Do we want to have students debating whether or not a life “matters”?





















If you dig a bit deeper, Merriam-Webster (2021c) lists an antonym of *controversial* as “safe.” Importantly, Merriam-Webster (2021b) does *not* list the term safe as an antonym for *contentious*. Another antonym for safe is “dangerous,” and we certainly want to avoid danger in our classrooms. Regardless of where educators stand on different contentious issues, we can probably all agree that our classrooms should be safe places where students learn to discuss and disagree respectfully on policy issues that are presented to them. Can we disagree in a peaceful manner even when the topic is contentious?

We also need to consider the meaning that students are bringing to the words we use in class. The topics that your students will most likely want to talk about are going to be ones that they are struggling with due to their contentious nature. Whether we are talking about the Second Amendment right to own a gun or the right of same-sex couples to marry, often

FIGURE 2.1 Results of a 2021 YouGov Survey on Who Americans Think Is the Greatest Athlete of All Time

Which athlete is the “greatest of all time” according to American sports fans?

American respondents who are fans of any sport were asked to choose who would be the “greatest of all time” in a series of head-to-head matchups. Figures shown are the % of times each athlete won their matchups.

	Athlete	Sport	Win percentage
1	 Muhammad Ali	Boxing	 78
2	 Michael Jordan	Basketball	 78
3	 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Basketball	 73
4	 Babe Ruth	Baseball	 73
5	 Jim Thorpe	Pentathlon, decathlon, American football, baseball and basketball	 72
6	 Jackie Robinson	Baseball	 70
7	 Jesse Owens	Track and field	 70
8	 Kobe Bryant	Basketball	 67
9	 Magic Johnson	Basketball	 66
10	 Michael Phelps	Swimming	 66

SOURCE: Bruce (2021).

times contentious issues strike at the core of how people define themselves.

It is important to separate people's identities from policy. People are not controversial. We do not want students thinking that someone's life or how they define themselves is controversial. This is why we as educators must be careful to make sure that we are not "debating" whether or not something is right or wrong; rather, we are focusing on how different people approach the policies related to these topics. This understanding is what will help keep students focused on the nuances of the topics instead of trying to pick a winner and loser among people's identities.

The key idea to take away is that using the word *contentious* as opposed to *controversial* may nudge your students in the direction of what you want them to do in your classroom and may help to ease the fears of parents who may be anxious about contentious topics. We encourage teachers to make the distinction explicit to both students and parents.

Action Step for Educators

Look through your curriculum and content standards to identify potentially contentious issues or topics. Consider making a list of potential controversial topics and reframing them as shown in Figure 2.2. Often a broadly framed topic can be more likely to cause intense emotion, while narrowing the scope can bring about a more nuanced conversation. The goal is to help students discuss ideas rather than exchange insults.

TYPES OF DISCOURSE: DIALOGUE, DISCUSSION, AND DEBATE

Once we set clear parameters around the type of topics we will discuss, it is time to gain clarity on the type of discourse

FIGURE 2.2 Examples of Reframing Contentious Topics

POTENTIALLY CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS	REFRAMING TO CONTENTIOUS ISSUES
Immigration	What should we do about unaccompanied minors at the border?
Gun control	How might we reduce the amount of gun-related violence in our communities?
Climate change	What is the role of the government in reducing air pollution in our town?

students will engage in. Too often, the terms *discussion* and *debate* are used interchangeably when they require different structures and result in different outcomes. What students believe they are about to do based on the term that is used plays a role in how they react to both the teacher and peers in the classroom.

When we are clear about the structure and goals, we increase the likelihood of student success. We believe there are three distinct types of discourse that should all be regular parts of social studies classes, but teachers must understand the particular uses of each of them. Figure 2.3 outlines each of the types of discourse, their purpose, student and teacher roles, and important considerations.

Dialogue

The spectrum for discourse starts on the “collaboration” end, with *dialogue* being the most informal and least structured conversation type. According to Wellman and Lipton (2017), “Dialogue promotes a spirit of inquiry within a group. The purpose is to generate multiple perspectives, encourage connection making between ideas and people, and develop shared

FIGURE 2.3 The Three Ds of Discourse: Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

The 3Ds of Discourse

	DIALOGUE	DISCUSSION	DEBATE	
Purpose	Focused on building understanding of a topic; involves exploring it from many angles, active listening, and considering multiple points of view	Focused on idea exchange; participants may already have positions but are still open to hearing new information to shape their opinions on a topic	Focused on advancing a particular position, persuading, and refuting counter arguments; typically more formal with more advanced preparation	C O M P E T I T I O N
Student's Role	Openly explore the topic, including diverse research sources, actively listening, rephrasing, asking questions, and practicing empathy	Share what they are thinking, including research and reactions as to why one position may be the strongest	Requires advanced preparation usually on a particular outcome or position; actively responding to and refuting counter arguments against their position, and identifying holes in their logic, reasoning, or evidence of opposing positions	
Teacher's Role	Model and explicitly teach active listening skills, empathy-building, finding common ground, and considering topics from multiple angles. Prompt students to consider the effects of the topic on multiple stakeholders	Encourage participation from all students, model and explicitly teach source analysis and reasoning skills, and prompt students to summarize each other's points and ask clarifying questions of each other's positions	Craft or guide students to craft the formal motion for debate, explicitly teaching argument and counter argument skills; often serves as the judge of who had the strongest argument based on neutral criteria such as sound logic and evidence	
Things to Consider	Dialogue is best suited for topics where students are still learning about all of the angles and nuance is involved or for topics where emotions run high, so that there is a focus on the goal of understanding rather than identifying winning arguments and losing arguments	Discussion is best suited for conversations around policy topics where students have some background knowledge and opinions but also want to learn more and consider different ways to approach the topic	Debate is best suited for explicitly teaching persuasion skills and is best for topics where emotions do not run high and when students are assigned the sides randomly or take both positions rather than only sticking with their existing positions	

understandings. With dialogue there is no need to influence or agree” (p. 40). The goal of dialogue is a collaborative effort of information sharing to build a shared understanding. Kenneth Blanchard sets the perfect stage for a group dialogue by reminding us that “none of us is as smart as all of us” (Smith, 2011a). In a dialogue, conversation will flow as feels appropriate by the class, with participants working to bring new ideas to the table connected by a search for common ground and building off of the strengths of others.

Although minimal facilitation is usually necessary, educators should promote an atmosphere where “people freely and creatively explore issues, listen deeply to each other and suspend their own views in search of the truth” (Arnold, 2013). The building of a shared understanding occurs when there are clear expectations for students in regard to what type of feedback should be provided to others. “In dialogue, one submits one’s best thinking, knowing that other peoples’ reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it” (Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2008). The environment that allows for students to trust that others are there to support them is the focus of facilitation by the teacher. To achieve this classroom culture, teachers should focus on several key elements, including suspending judgement, listening to others with real concern, asking questions, exploring and reevaluating assumptions, and being willing to learn from new information to change thoughts and opinions (Hastwell, 2020; Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2008).

Discussion

Moving along the spectrum away from student collaboration and toward student competition, we find *discussion*. This is a term that is commonly used in classrooms when students are told that they are going to discuss or have a discussion about a certain topic or idea. In Figure 2.3, we have focused on the idea of a middle group between collaborative and

competitive engagement by students. Using the definition of discussion from Wellman and Lipton (2017), the need for a middle group emerges as the goal of students shifts:

Discussion breaks issues and problems into components and parts. The purpose is to generate and analyze ideas, clarify the distinctions between these ideas, and define success criteria. In discussion, group members critique and advocate, sort, and prioritize. (p. 40)

Therefore, discussion is more than a sharing of ideas and information like we see with dialogue, but is not fully competitive in terms of drawing up sides like in a debate.

Whereas dialogue is an opportunity to “enlarge ideas” (Arnold, 2013) and “find common ground” (Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2008), discussion is where “opposing views are presented and *defended* and the team searches for the best view to help make a team decision” (Arnold, 2013). Thus, discussion is semi-collaborative as participants are all on the same “side” and look to share information and ideas, yet “individual contributions often center around ‘rightness’ and are valued for it” (Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2008) as the group seeks consensus on a “best” answer.

In dialogue, it is key for participants to “suspend their own views” (Arnold, 2013) and for educators to work to facilitate the conversation as such. Since an important part of a discussion is “choosing sides” (Garmston & Wellman, quoted in Brown Easton, 2015) in order to decide a best answer, listening is more focused on being “able to insert one’s own perspective” (Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2008) and defend that perspective. Therefore, the role of teacher facilitation moves from ensuring that all voices are heard without judgement to one of making sure that there is an understanding of what the positions are. Walter Parker (2010) tells us, “When a group seeks understanding together, it works to create, plumb,

and clarify meanings and explanations. When it forges a decision, it weighs alternatives and tries to decide among them” (p. 2826). What starts as a collaborative process moves toward a competitive process, and support is crucial in helping students understand what the intended goal is and that each step along the way will be facilitated with clear processes.

Debate

On the furthest end of the competitive spectrum lies *debate*. This is another word that is commonly used in classrooms, although maybe not always in the proper context. Using the term *debate* out of context may cause issues to arise in the classroom when students bring their own understanding of the word to the conversation. According to Garmston and Wellman,

Debate is an extreme form of discussion, in which the format dictates that people take sides and advocate for that side, rebutting points from the other side. Debates are usually structured and formal; they leave no room for compromise or building on others’ ideas. (Quoted in Brown Easton, 2015)

Whether intentionally or not, if students in their mind believe that the conversation is one that leaves no room for compromise, then this limits the flexibility of the potential interactions between the students.

The idea of what a student may think about a conversation when it is framed as a debate is evident in the sample sentences provided by Merriam-Webster (2021d):

- “Our polite chat about politics became a *heated* debate.”
- “The case sparked a *raging* public debate on property rights.”
- “The subject was *hotly* debated.”

The words associated with debate (heated, raging, and hotly) are all of the things that educators worry about in the back of their mind when they think about contentious topics. The thought of *what happens if...* usually focuses on the topic getting too “heated” and before you know it the “raging” has gotten out of control and potentially the events of your class become a “hotly” discussed topic of administrators and the community. With all of this in mind, we are by no means suggesting that students should not debate, but we do want to be clear about when debates should occur, what topics should be debated, and how they should be structured. The purpose of this section is to help remind teachers about the power of words and the potential ideas that students already have about them.

We believe that debate is best suited for teaching students the skills of persuasion and argumentation, often around topics that are not emotionally charged. The higher the emotional charge, the further away from competition we should go. Here are some examples we like to use as debate topics with students:

- Should the voting age be lowered?
- Should we end daylight savings time?
- Should the school week be four days instead of five?

When the conversation is framed as a debate, the emotional shift immediately begins. In a 2021 interview, Carlee Goldberg, Triangle Debate League President at Duke University, said:

Telling students we’re having a debate versus a discussion dictates the outcome. It’s the difference between students entering a classroom with an us-against-them mentality or ready for a conversation with limitless options and results. Both debates and discussions are extraordinarily important in civic education and in building lifelong civic skills. But they teach fundamentally different

things. Debate teaches you how to persuade, discussion teaches you how to evaluate and understand. Students need both to navigate contentious issues and come out with solutions and not a standstill.

Students entering into a debate have a goal of winning. We see this after every presidential debate; within minutes of the conclusion, there are “instant polls” that determine the winner. The next day, there are a multitude of articles about “winners and losers from last night’s debate.” When students are told that they will debate about a topic, the shift in mindset moves away from any sort of collaborative effort with those on the other side. Students know that “the goal of debate is to defeat the other’s position” and they check in along the way by asking themselves, “Am I winning this argument?” (Indian Prairie School District 204, n.d.).

In a classroom debate it is important for the facilitating educator to be aware of a couple of major dynamic shifts away from dialogue and even discussion. First and foremost, there should be some process for determining how each side is doing and possibly a way to determine which side wins in the end. This might be as simple as “polling” a group of neutral observers, such as other students (similar to a presidential debate), or as complicated as a scoring system (more similar to a boxing match). Either way, when debating, students will look to some sort of answer about how they have done in determining which side won.

It is also key to facilitate the debate with an understanding that it is different from a discussion in terms of cooperation. While a discussion also gives a path to determine the best answer, it is achieved by working together and building off of others’ ideas. In a classroom debate, opposing ideas are countered and opposed as a way to defeat or discredit the opposing side. Students on the same side of the debate will inevitably work

together because they are unified in competition against the other side. Listening to learn is replaced by listening to refute.

Debates also lose the flexibility of ideas and thoughts as the purpose of listening changes. When debating the idea of listening to another person to find strengths across common ground is replaced by listening to find weakness in order to elevate one's own ideas. During a discussion, the goal is to put a wide variety of ideas on the table before deciding—this often means that students may promote multiple points of view about what is best. Due to the structure of a debate, changing positions is rare, as the goal is to show your side has the best answer.

We strongly encourage you to understand the difference between the 3Ds in this chapter (dialogue, discussion, and debate) and to incorporate them in your classrooms. Each of these types of communication has its own unique set of skills that must be highlighted and practiced by students in order for them to be successful. As the educator charged with facilitating these conversations, make sure to understand the differences with the 3Ds and develop classroom structures that support student success.

Students will be successful when they know what type of conversation is happening and what the intended outcome is. The way we communicate with each other is determined by the situation, purpose, and goal of each interaction. In order for our students to be successful in our communities both inside and outside of our schools, we must equip them with the ability to participate in all of these settings.

Action Step for Educators

Consider sorting the list of potentially contentious topics you created in the previous section into the type of discourse best suited for that topic. Figure 2.4 provides an example.

FIGURE 2.4 Example of Topics and Types of Discourse

DIALOGUE	DISCUSSION	DEBATE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Immigration• Gun control• Equity in college admissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inheritance tax• Single-use plastic tax• Vaccine mandates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimum wage• Voting age• Days of the school week

Different communities find different topics to be more emotionally charged than others, so we encourage you to consider your students, parents, and larger community as you are making the list.

MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND FAKE NEWS

The struggles of working to make sure that we are well versed in the “truth” is not a new one. Mark Twain famously said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” With this quote, the American author showed that he understood not only the world in which he lived but also the world beyond his lifetime. But was Mark Twain as prophetic as we make him out to be? Or are we thinking of the wisdom of Winston Churchill?

We have heard this quote attributed to both Mark Twain and Winston Churchill, but it only takes the simplest of Google searches to see the trouble with this accepted “fact.” There is no evidence to show that either Mark Twain or Winston Churchill ever said it. The Quote Investigator (2014) does a great job of showing how this quote evolved over time from Jonathan Swift’s original version, “Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it,” in 1710. The inconvenient truth

about who spoke about truth is so ingrained in American pop culture that the *New York Times* used this “Mark Twain” quote as the headline example when they examined how quotes get misattributed (Chokshi, 2017).

As educators, how are we supposed to know what is the truth when even quotes about the truth are not truthful? At the most basic level, both students and teachers need to be able to know when we are talking about facts and when our individual perspective is pushing what we want to believe. In her book, *The Trouble With Reality*, author Brooke Gladstone (2017) says,

Part of the problem stems from the fact that facts, even a lot of facts, do not constitute reality. Reality is what forms after we filter, arrange, and prioritize those facts and marinate them in our values and traditions. Reality is personal. (p. 2)

We are not ready to accept the idea of “alternative facts,” but we must be ready to confront the reality that each person we interact with brings a unique perspective to each conversation.

The “values and traditions” that Gladstone refers to will drive students and adults to look for information that matches their perspectives. We actively search for information that confirms our beliefs while ignoring information that challenges our beliefs. This includes ignoring strong evidence that goes against what we believe to be true (Journell, 2021a). With this in mind, we will not be able to just tell students to do a better job of fact checking or researching. This does not work with adults, nor will it work with our students.

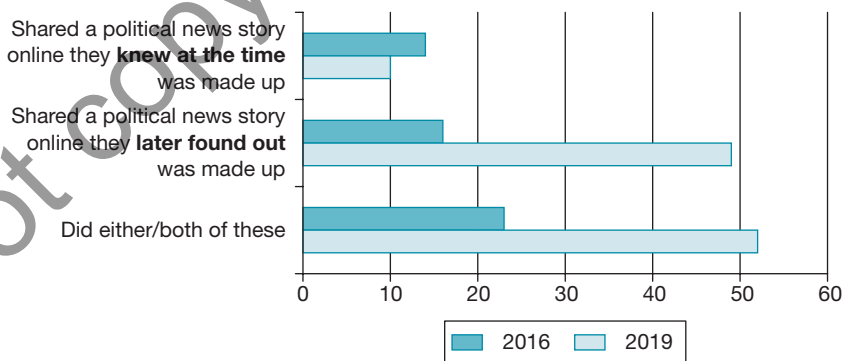
According to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 14% of Americans “shared a political news story online they knew at the time was made up” (Barthel et al., 2020). With so much attention on “fake news” in recent years, the number has gotten somewhat better, but a 2019 Statista survey showed that

10% of Americans had shared news or information online that they “knew at the time was made up” (Watson, 2020). These same surveys showed a drastic increase in the people who had unknowingly shared information that they later found out was made up, with a jump from 16% in 2016 to 49% in 2019 (see Figure 2.5).

Of course, students also bring heavily biased information into the classroom (Segall et al., 2019). This means that teachers, while remaining relatively neutral about contentious topics, do have the responsibility to address poor information or prejudices that students bring to classroom discourse (Journell, 2021b). This challenge must be faced head on by acknowledging that we all have different perspectives and then building a framework of understanding what types of information we have at our disposal.

To understand the issue of wrestling with the inundation of information that our students are exposed to every day (Kwan, 2019), we should start with common definitions for

FIGURE 2.5 Sharing of Misinformation Online in 2016 and 2019



SOURCES: Survey conducted Dec. 1–4, 2016. “Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion.” Pew Research Center.

Pew Research Center data from Barthel et al. (2020), and Statista data from Watson (2020), respectively.

staff and students. As much as society currently looks to Facebook as one of the leading causes of spreading incorrect information, they understand the importance of defining the problem at hand. In 2017, Facebook reported the following:

The term “fake news” has emerged as a catch-all phrase to refer to everything from new articles that are factually incorrect to opinion pieces, parodies and sarcasm, hoaxes, rumors, memes, online abuse, and factual misstatements by public figures that are reported in otherwise accurate news pieces. The overuse and misuse of the term “fake news” can be problematic because, without common definitions, we cannot understand or fully address these issues. (Weedon et al., 2017, p. 4)

What does Facebook mean when they talk about the “misuse” of the term *fake news*?

In the book, *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator’s Guide to Navigating the Media With Students* edited by Dr. Wayne Journell, Dr. H. James Garrett (2019) lays out three distinct types of fake news based on the intent of who created it and the intent of anyone sharing it: tabloid untruths, targeted disinformation and misinformation, and weaponized phrases. See Figure 2.6 for an explanation of each.

Tabloid untruths are the first of these and the most straightforward—they are most famously known as the original “fake news.” Entertainment is the goal of this type of news and it ranges from completely unbelievable to social commentary. Tabloids produce stories about alien abductions, *The Onion* gives us satire and parody, and *The Daily Show*, though researched for accuracy, makes light of issues as a way to drive home a usually politically biased point. Even though there is a spectrum of how much fact is contained in

FIGURE 2.6 Types of Fake News

WHAT TYPE OF FAKE NEWS IS IT?				
	TABLOID UNTRUTHS	TARGETED DISINFORMATION	TARGETED MISINFORMATION	WEAPONIZED PHRASES
Purpose	Entertainment to expand profits	Information that is shared to harm others and have them focus on a point of view	Amplified disinformation that is shared to focus on a point of view	Determining the validity of the information shared
Level of accuracy	Ranges depending on the story	Created with inaccurate information	True to the sharer but not accurate information	Dependent on the sharers' knowledge of content

these different examples, creators of this content purposefully seek to entertain and hope that others share their stories to widen the audience of people who are entertained in order to expand profits.

Things get a lot more complicated when looking at disinformation and misinformation. This type of fake news is “a plausible, though fabricated, story that is disseminated through social media using sophisticated targeting strategies” (Garrett, 2019). While the intent of fake news in a “tabloids untruth” sense is to entertain, disinformation is “false content that is intentionally disseminated with intent to harm” (Wardle, 2019, p. 8). The creators of disinformation know that what they are creating is not accurate, but any pretense of entertainment is secondary to the attempt to influence the consumers of the information to believe a certain point of view.

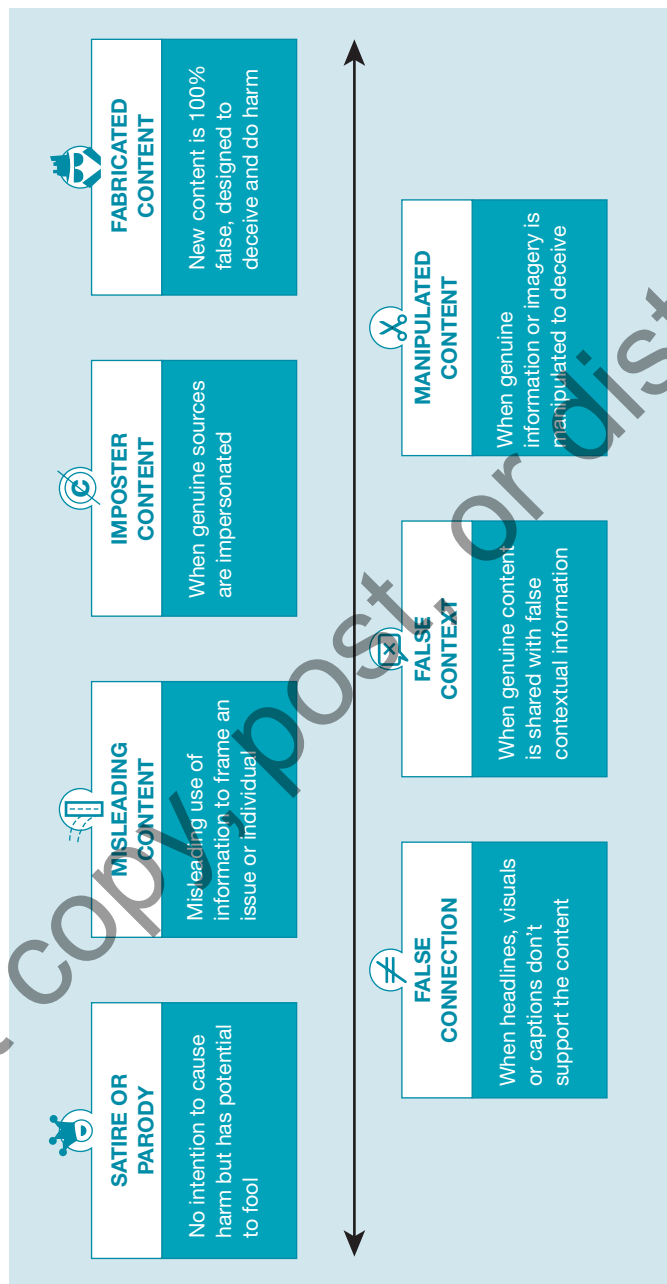
According to Merriam-Webster (2021e), *disinformation* is created “in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.” This is achieved when those other than the creators

share the information. This is mostly done by those who are not aware that the information is inaccurate. When we unintentionally share information that is inaccurate, we amplify its reach. This is when the content becomes *misinformation* as defined by Wardle (2019). Again, not everyone who shares disinformation does it unknowingly.

The last idea of fake news that your students will have to come to understand is the use of “fake news” as a *weaponized phrase*. The issue at hand is not access to information, but rather whether we can sort through and process the information that is available to us. The amount of information at our fingertips can be used to make us either smarter or more ignorant, depending on how we use it (Wineburg et al., 2016). This is the environment where using the term *fake news* to discredit news and information as you see fit has been allowed to flourish. When the term *fake news* carries so much potential to disrupt how our students see the world, we must take measures to make sure that proper use of the terminology is emphasized to truly *deweaponize* the term. Claire Wardle (2019) at First Draft has created a spectrum (Figure 2.7) that shows the seven types of mis- and disinformation and how they relate to each other. If we are going to *deweaponize* the phrase, then we must all know what we are actually talking about instead of throwing around the term *fake news*.

As noted in Chapter 1, we must get our students involved in the world around them, but as Chapter 2 has shown us, we must be careful with the language we use with our students as we encourage these conversations. The speed and pace of change as well as the rapid spread of ideas—including those that are factually incorrect—change the dynamics of civic engagement today and challenge the very nature of democracy (Weedon et al., 2017). These challenges are ones in which schools and educators have a huge role to play.

FIGURE 2.7 Seven Types of Mis- and Disinformation



SOURCE: Wardle (2019), reprinted with permission from *First Draft*.

Even as schools pick up the mantle to do this important work, it does not mean that it will be easy work.

In this time of widespread dissemination of alternative facts and misinformation, teachers have a responsibility to turn classrooms into spaces where reason and inquiry trump ignorance and hyperbole. But doing so often requires teachers to take a stance regarding what issues are worthy of deliberation and what information warrants consideration, and the decisions teachers make may be risky, as teachers are generally expected to be politically neutral, and expressions of their political beliefs can expose them to accusations of bias.

(Journell, 2016)

The rest of this book is intended to show educators and districts how we all—educators, administrators, families, and community members included—can play a role in developing classrooms where this difficult but important work can be safely and properly done.

Action Step for Educators

Now that we've considered several terms and clarified their uses and meaning, consider collaborating with other social studies teachers and leaders in your school or district to make a glossary of key terms and concepts related to civil discourse. This will greatly help you to communicate the purpose and ensure everyone is on the same page about the words we use to foster discourse in our classrooms. Once created, post it on your class webpage, include it in a school newsletter, or share it with parents at back-to-school night or parent-teacher conferences.

CLOSING REFLECTION

- What words are you going to focus on making sure that all students and educators share an understanding of? How will you make sure that a shared understanding occurs?
- How do you anticipate using a progression of dialogue, discussion, and debate to meet the different goals of your classroom?
- Why is it important for both you and your students to be able to discuss the different types of sources of information that are available? What barriers do you anticipate in having these discussions?
- As this book moves into laying out a framework for planning activities in your classroom, what are you most hoping to learn?

Now that you have read this chapter, you should be able to complete the following:

- ✓ Identify potentially contentious topics in your curriculum and standards.
- ✓ Reframe potentially contentious topics to make them less heated or intense.
- ✓ Sort potentially contentious topics by which discourse approach (dialogue, discussion, debate) is best suited to handle student conversations.
- ✓ Work with colleagues to develop a glossary of key terms and concepts related to civil discourse in your curriculum.

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