

Teaching how to think, not what to think

At every grade level, it is essential that Laboratory Schools students are taught *how to think, not what to think*. This precept dates back to our founding. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey declared that the measure of a student’s growth lies in “the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers.”¹ Dewey’s declaration aligns with the values of the University of Chicago. The University works to free young people to learn by refraining from taking a position on a social or political issue, lest it have the effect of “censuring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted.”² But the task of ensuring that the youngest members of the University community, our Lab students, are taught how to think, not what to think, extends beyond institutional leadership into our classrooms. Former President of the University of Chicago Robert M. Hutchins said of education’s purpose in 1935 “[i]t is to teach them to think, . . . and to think always for themselves. It is of the highest importance that there should be some places where they can learn how to do it.”³

For the Schools to realize this fundamental institutional commitment, Lab faculty members bring to the classroom the excellent teaching practices for which they are deservedly well known. Different disciplines have different methods of inquiry, and Lab School teachers will teach them to students in relevant and in an age-appropriate way. Our goal is to help students develop an autonomous and intellectually fruitful ability to ask questions, seek, and evaluate answers. In addition, faculty bring an ethical and pedagogical commitment to fostering their students’ developing capacity for freedom of thought. From its beginning, Lab has focused on pedagogy created from the study of children.⁴ Faculty actively work to create classroom environments with Dewey’s sense of purposeful freedom⁵ in mind: knowing and valuing students, encouraging student collaboration, modeling and explicitly teaching curiosity, critical thinking and reasoning, and civility and mutual respect.⁶ Eschewing teacher-centered environments, faculty act as facilitators and guides to students working together in learning how to think. Just as everyone gets to play in physical education, faculty ensure everyone in class gets to visualize and articulate their thinking, such as by mediating group and power dynamics playing out among and between students.

¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1916, 126.

² Kalven Committee: Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action, 1967, *reprinted in The Chicago Canon on Free Inquiry and Expression*. (Tony Banout & Tom Ginsburg eds., University of Chicago Press, 2024), 116.

³ Robert M. Hutchins, What Is a University? 1935, reprinted in *The Chicago Canon on Free Inquiry and Expression*. (Tony Banout & Tom Ginsburg eds., University of Chicago Press, 2024), 38.

⁴ Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (Columbia University Press 2002), 199.

⁵ Ida DePencier, *The History of the Laboratory Schools: The University of Chicago, 1896-1965* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 11. DePencier found that Dewey’s conception of “purposeful freedom” empowered students with the “freedom to investigate, to experiment, to move about, to exchange ideas, and to challenge.”

⁶ University of Chicago Laboratory Schools Faculty Evaluation – Expectations Document Middle School/High School July 1, 2023, https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1696865194/chicagolab/bctc0gl3kmuds0bzoyb0/MS_HSFacultyExpectationsDocument2023.pdf

Teachers practicing in N-12 education today inevitably have convictions, often strongly held, about social and political issues. Their commitment to supporting young people may well spring from the same well as these beliefs. Yet, the obligation to teach children how to think, not what to think, remains paramount. When teaching topics which elicit strong views — topics about which they themselves may have powerful convictions — Lab teachers are also obligated to exercise a considerable degree of personal restraint. Given the power differential between teacher and students, teachers must remain mindful of the fact that merely sharing their personal opinions has the potential to forestall students’ intellectual explorations or chill opposing views in the classroom and beyond. This obligation is enshrined in the collective bargaining agreement between Lab and its faculty, which states that “...teachers shall be entitled to freedom of discussion within the classroom on all matters which are relevant to the subject matter under study and within their areas of professional competence, assuming that *all facts concerning controversial issues shall be presented in a scholarly and objective manner.*”⁷

The wisdom of this provision is supported by a panoply of authorities. Arlene Gardner, President of the New Jersey Center for Civic Education at Rutgers University, cautions teachers: “Remember, the goal is to help students develop their own well-informed positions. Be mindful of your position as the ‘classroom expert’ and the potential impact on the students.”⁸ In *Enhancing Professional Practice*, the essentials of which have been adopted by Lab for the purpose of teacher evaluations, Charlotte Danielson defines effective engagement of students as “intellectual involvement with the content or active construction of understanding,” in contrast to an approach mediated entirely by the teacher.⁹ *A Framework for Schools*, produced in 2023 from a partnership among ten independent schools, notes: “Teaching and learning are distinct from advocacy and activism, and nonpartisan teaching is vital to creating an intellectual climate within schools that promotes, sustains, and deepens courageous inquiry.”

A scholarly and objective approach in the classroom should not be confused with what the *Framework* calls “‘bothsidesism,’ a superficial balance of views uninformed by scientific or scholarly consensus.” Instead, the proper balance of views should be informed by the actual scholarship on an issue. Good scholarship requires us to (1) slow our process down; (2) return to the research; (3) be curious; (4) vet our sources for bias and selectivity; (4) assume a spirit of impartial detachment; (5) take a long view, surmounting setbacks to our research; and (6) have humility with our conclusions. “Objectivity,” in turn, has been much debated. Scholars Zimmerman and Robertson reviewed forty school district policies nationwide and found the term *objective* “variously [understood] as being free of bias, impartial, scientific, fair, balanced — and not direct students toward any particular conclusion, especially not the teacher’s view.”¹⁰ Fair or impartial, for example, might be understood as an obligation not to

⁷ The University of Chicago and the Faculty Association of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Local 2063, American Federation of Teachers, *Collective Bargaining Agreement, Term of Agreement: July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2027* (emphasis added).

⁸ Arlene Gardner, “Teaching Controversial Issues: Teachers’ Freedom of Speech in the Classroom,” New Jersey Council for the Social Studies, 2020. Accessed April 17, 2025. <https://teachingsocialstudies.org/2022/03/11/teaching-controversial-issues-teachers-freedom-of-speech-in-the-classroom/>.

⁹ Charlotte Danielson, *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teachers* (2nd Ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007. Page 83, 82.

¹⁰ Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson, *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

misrepresent, exaggerate or torpedo opposing arguments. Students need to be able to appreciate and evaluate for themselves the reasons knowledgeable people, serious people, or at any rate many people, have held various and conflicting views on the same topic. Sound pedagogical reasons for faculty to share their opinion or model thinking may exist,¹¹ yet faculty should take care that their aim is helping students learn how to think, not what to think. This goal can often be accomplished without faculty sharing their own position and, especially when students are still at the beginning stages of developing intellectual self-confidence, often preferable. Zimmerman and Robertson have found that where school districts expressly authorize faculty to disclose their own opinions to students, it is often with the caveat that faculty are upfront with students “that it is their opinion, . . . do not push students to share it, and . . . fairly present the alternatives.”¹² Hess and McAvoy’s research findings on student preferences for teacher disclosure echoes this approach.¹³

What is a “controversial issue?”

At the Laboratory Schools, our collective bargaining agreement uplifts a teacher’s obligation to teach controversial issues in a “scholarly and objective manner,” but this begs the question: what is a “controversial issue?” To some extent, controversy is in the eye of the beholder. An issue may seem settled within one circle of professionals or ordinary citizens, while it is hotly debated elsewhere. Furthermore, over time, through advances in research and scholarship, evolving public discourse, and the introduction of a variety of influences into the culture, topics that were once controversial become essentially settled.

This is an important question for N-12 educators at Lab to consider. Among graduate and undergraduate students, the University’s administrative approach is represented by Professor Geoffrey Stone’s statement that “as a general matter we should not regard ourselves as the truth deciders as an institution” — and this admonition applies without regard to whether an issue is controversial.¹⁴ Gholdy Muhammad, Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois Chicago, challenges teachers to include in their lessons material that “builds social-political consciousness, so students are not passive learners, but rather empathetic, critical thinkers”. At Lab, we are clear that this goal is to be accomplished not by prescribing answers, but by posing open-ended questions and inviting critical thinking.¹⁵ The prescription of answers risks establishing institutional orthodoxies, while open-ended inquiry promotes free thought and creative problem-solving.

However, given the economies of the daily and weekly schedules in a N-12 school like Lab, and the developmental needs of young children and teens, it may not be possible or expedient to treat any number of “settled” matters as open to extensive debate. In order to foster understanding of the subject matter, faculty must make choices as to which matters to address. When the matter is not settled, the presence of controversy should put a teacher on alert that teaching must be scholarly and objective.

¹¹ Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 182-202.

¹² Zimmerman & Robertson, *The Case for Contention*, 66.

¹³ Hess, *The Political Classroom*, 187.

¹⁴ Leila Brammer (moderator), “Free Expression on Campus: How to Build Space for Inclusive and Productive Campus Discourse,” University of Chicago Center on Democracy, April 27, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/542686368>

¹⁵ Gholdy Muhammad, *Unearthing Joy* (New York: Scholastic, 2023), 75.

So, who decides when controversy subsides and an issue has become settled? If an issue is settled among scholars but controversial among laypersons, how do we treat it in the classroom? Our work suggests that no question is more important — or more difficult — in a school community’s work on free expression. Where strong feelings are present, it may be wrenchingly difficult for a community (or any of its members) even to acknowledge that a statement, position, or conclusion is controversial.¹⁶

There is no clear litmus test. In some cases, we can look to scholarly or scientific consensus; human activity has been the main driver of climate change since the onset of industrialization.¹⁷ Simply because an issue has been politicized, it is not necessarily “controversial” for our purposes. Likewise, no reasonable disagreement may be had that racism is wrong.¹⁸ On the other hand, situations developing in real time, which have not been subject to careful scrutiny let alone the benefit of hindsight, are almost inevitably controversial: contemporary or recent government policy initiatives, events on the global stage, for example. As well, where differences of opinion remain among scholars, where moral, ethical, or religious considerations predominate, or with regard to topics that are not amenable to objective inquiry, controversy is almost surely present. We don’t need to look far to find innumerable issues that both implicate the values of a school community and many of its members, and yet elicit enormous controversy on a broader stage.

Key questions for the teacher include:

1. Is the issue amenable to objective or empirical inquiry? How much is known about it?
2. Is there a scientific or scholarly consensus? How strong is that consensus?
3. Does the issue pertain to a developing or freshly recent situation?
4. Is the issue essentially a matter of moral conviction, ethics, or religious belief?

The commitment to teaching students *how to think, not what to think* is of such paramount importance at Lab that we urge teachers to err on the side of caution. As painful as it might be, if there is any “gray” to a topic, we should consider it as yet controversial, and must teach it in a scholarly and objective manner.

Is there an obligation to teach controversial issues?

Teachers should consider whether their duty to their students includes the obligation to include controversial issues in lesson plans, or whether they may in good conscience avoid such topics. Hess and McAvoy, for example, note that faculty often “avoid issues that may be especially sensitive to some students . . . for reasons of safety, fairness, or personal discomfort, as well as from a desire to create an environment that is as safe as possible for all students.”¹⁹ Yet, Zimmerman and Robertson argue the case for teaching controversial issues in schools — especially by high school — and wonder if avoidance risks a condescending attitude to students and a dereliction of critical public policy issues, including disproportionately those affecting marginalized communities.²⁰ Illinois has leaned to the latter approach,

¹⁶ Zimmerman & Robertson, *The Case for Contention*, 97.

¹⁷ “What Is Climate Change?” United Nations. Accessed May 22, 2025.

<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>. See also Zimmerman & Robertson, *The Case for Contention*, 3.

¹⁸ Zimmerman & Robertson, *The Case for Contention*, 55.

¹⁹ Hess, *The Political Classroom*, 174.

²⁰ Zimmerman & Robertson, *The Case for Contention*, 97-99.

incorporating a high school graduation requirement for civics instruction that includes “discussion of current and controversial issues.”²¹ Our schools’ agreement with our faculty does not insist that “controversial issues” must be taught; it only prescribes the manner in which they must be taught if the teacher chooses to include them. This decision will depend on a variety of factors, including the discipline, the developmental age of the student, and the objectives of the course.

²¹ Illinois Civics Mandate Guidance Document grades 9-12, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Guidance-Doc-Civics-HS.pdf>.