

## Teaching All Sides

Agustina teaches a high school social studies class that discusses many controversial subjects. For example, in this class they discuss topics involving race, gender, disability, the environment, and more. Agustina has a certain amount of freedom to assign topics and perspectives that she thinks will serve her students well. However, she also wants to teach this material in an objective manner, and she wonders what that means when it comes to topics that people can have very different views about. Should she teach all sides of every issue, or should she favor some sides over others?

Agustina thinks that she has good reason to teach all sides of every issue. This would allow her to avoid bias, and it would also create space for people to consider a variety of perspectives about a variety of issues. However, she also has concerns about this approach. One concern is practical: There are too many sides about too many issues for her to teach them all. Another concern is moral. Yes, people disagree about everything. But surely a teacher should treat at least some issues as settled. For example, Agustina should treat it as settled that the Earth is round even though some people still believe the Earth is flat. Similarly, she should treat it as settled that slavery is wrong even though some people still practice slavery. And indeed, Agustina reasons, if she treated these issues as open for debate, then she would be misleading her students about which questions are still worth asking with a fully open mind.

But Agustina feels confused about how to decide what to teach and what not to teach. One option is that she can focus on topics that people are most talking about in society and perspectives that people are most defending in society. That would allow her to narrow things down while still avoiding bias, since she would be deferring to society for guidance about what to teach. Then again, Agustina thinks, society is wrong about many issues too, and therefore this approach might mislead students as well. For example, if 97% of climate scientists believe that human-caused climate change is real<sup>14</sup> but only 65% of the U.S. population agrees<sup>15</sup>, should Agustina defer to climate scientists and treat this issue as mostly closed, or should she defer to society as a whole, treat this issue as mostly open, and express neutrality about it?

Another option is that Agustina can focus on topics and perspectives that she thinks will be most instructive based on her own training and best judgment as a teacher. This would have most of the benefits of the previous option, and it would also allow her to make an informed judgment about how to approach controversial topics such as climate change. However, Agustina worries that if she takes this option, then she risks bringing too much of her own personal bias into the classroom. She wonders if it might be best for her to simply leave her own opinions at the door. But is it even possible for her to do that? And if so, is it morally better than her other options?

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is it morally permissible for teachers to treat some questions as open and other questions as closed in the classroom? If so, how should they determine which is which?
2. Is it morally permissible for teachers to use their own personal judgment about which topics or perspectives are best? If so, how should they mitigate the risk of bias?
3. Should teachers treat questions about facts differently than questions about values in this respect? Why or why not?

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<sup>14</sup> <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/190010/concern-global-warming-eight-year-high.aspx>

