Teaching Taboo Topics

By Bob Evancho

Educators who broach controversial subjects run the risk of striking somebody's nerve

Although our nation's schools are generally considered bastions of independent thought and the free exchange of ideas, it isn't quite that simple when dealing with the social complexities of 20th century America.

Just ask the three Meridian High School social studies teachers who were summarily suspended by school officials last November for allowing three lesbian parents to speak to their students about parenting.

To be sure, the tumult in Meridian was not an isolated incident; there have been plenty of similar episodes over the years in which teachers — primarily those in the social sciences at the secondary level — have found themselves in hot water for including taboo topics in their lesson plans.

Mindful of the legal restraints, community standards and educational context under which they work, many teachers approach controversial subjects as they would a minefield.

But protests over classroom presentations still arise on occasion. Whether they draw the ire of administrators, school district patrons, outside interests or just one angry parent, teachers who broach controversial subjects in their classrooms run the risk of striking somebody's nerve.

Such adverse criticism can create the so-called "chilling effect" that can make even the most daring of teachers cautious and gun-shy.

And there are plenty of controversial subjects out there. In recent years, red-flag topics have ranged from religion to communism to race relations to drugs, sex education, abortion and homosexuality — subjects that generally would be discussed, if at all, in social studies courses. But parental and administrative interference can sometimes reach into disciplines not generally known for their controversial subject matter.
Some recent controversies include:

- In 1987 a Twin Falls parent objected to his daughter's seventh-grade teacher discussing creationism in science class; the school board eventually rewrote the district standard, clarifying that such discussion is inappropriate in the classroom.
- Around the same time, another teacher in Idaho, seeking to use the spread of AIDS as an example of exponential growth in his high school mathematics class, was cautioned by school administrators to make sure he didn’t discuss how the disease was contracted.
- Recently, the director of the Boise-based Wolf Recovery Foundation was told by some Meridian teachers and principals that they were advised to “not use” her organization’s educational program on wolf recovery because the topic “is too controversial”—even though the director claims the program is presented in a “neutral” manner based on biology more than politics.

Of course, most of the potential classroom powder kegs are found in classes that deal with social issues and value judgments. Two recent examples can be found in the Boise School District’s AIDS-education curriculum and the Coeur d’Alene schools’ “Tec-Aid” sex-education program, both of which came under close public scrutiny. Another recent controversy arose in Coeur d’Alene when a group of parents protested the use of an elementary-level language arts textbook series titled “Impressions,” which the group said “encouraged Satanism and witchcraft.”

Are these examples of censorship or an infringement on academic freedom or just citizens reflecting community standards? Whichever, both can create a chilling effect among teachers.

But that doesn’t mean teachers should eschew controversial topics, says veteran BSU teacher education professor Pat Bieter. In fact, he suggests, social studies teachers should expect to incur the wrath of somebody or some group at some point—whether it’s from higher-ups or patrons, the ideological left or right, or the students themselves.

“Any teacher who is worth a damn has been in hot water at one time or another,” says Bieter, who has been training teachers at BSU for nearly 24 years. “Encourage my students to deal with controversial questions when they teach. The most important issues of our time are controversial.”

Of course, he adds, any issue or topic must be relevant to what is being taught and teachers must follow proper procedures. “Teachers shouldn’t use school for sensational purposes,” he says.

That is one of the arguments advanced by Steve Givens, chair of the Meridian School Board, in regard to the disciplinary action taken against the three teachers—even though they followed the accepted procedure for presenting guest speakers into the classroom. (The school board eventually rescinded all action taken against the teachers, but the controversy swirled for weeks.) Givens, who directed Superintendent Bob Haley to suspend the trio after the lesbians spoke to the students, believes the teachers were “trying to play [Phil] Donahue.”

Although he admits part of the problem was in the Meridian School District’s lack of a definitive procedure for guest speakers, Givens says his objections were based on moral as well as educational grounds.

“I am concerned when we bring lesbians into the schools,” he says. “First of all, homosexuality is a form of adultery, and I don’t think we should advertise bringing in people who commit adultery… I really question the educational benefits to be derived from allowing [lesbians] to speak to the students.”

When asked if the school board’s hasty action against the teachers was a knee-jerk response, Givens says no. The discipline, he says, was a response to questionable subject matter being dispensed without parental knowledge and at taxpayers’ expense.

“First of all,” he says, “you need to establish that we’re talking about kids in high school. I don’t have a problem with diverse views being aired at a university. But what students learn in the public schools is the responsibility of the parents. Sure, teachers need to deem what is appropriate in their classes and they have that right in the high schools. But the ultimate right to determine what kids learn still belongs to the parents, not the teachers.”

Givens acknowledges that his values may not mirror those of every Meridian School District parent, but he believes he speaks for the majority when he asks, “Where do you draw the line?”

That is a particularly valid question within the realm of social studies, says Steve Hauge, a political philosophy, economics and U.S. history teacher at Caldwell High School.

“Social sciences are more conducive to ambiguity than, say, mathematics,” he remarks. “Therefore maximum sensitivity and concern needs to be exercised when you’re dealing in a gray area.”

Hauge, who holds a master’s in curriculum and instruction from BSU’s College of Education, says it is essential for each school district to establish clearly defined parameters in which controversial topics are discussed in the classroom. Such is the case in Caldwell, he says. “I am a servant of the community,” he adds, “but I don’t have any concerns about being censored, although what we may discuss could be controversial.”

The ability to avoid run-ins with parents and administrators when dealing with controversial subjects comes with expertise, says Dan Prinzing, a history teacher at Boise’s West Junior High. “The key,” he says, “is to have a strong curriculum and a strong professional record so you don’t have to justify your decisions. Sometimes I have to explain, but I don’t have to defend, what I do in class.”

Prinzing, who earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at BSU, says, “I am a professional making a judgment call; I take the responsibility.”

He says it’s necessary for a teacher to know his or her audience and “what that audience might take home with it.” Prinzing says he is a proponent of academic freedom, but teachers must consider the potential fallout when dealing with controversial topics.

“There are certain aspects of the history courses that I teach that I could deal with a lot more than I do,” he says. “But the controversy of the subject and the composition of the students have a lot to do with how I approach it. You have to determine if the [potential] controversy will detract from the outcome.”

Both Hauge and Prinzing have years of experience to draw from. But what about young teachers just entering the profession?

“A new teacher can’t help but be aware that there are controversial subjects discussed in social studies classes,” says John Hansen, who earned his teaching certificate at BSU last December and hopes to land a job teaching high school social studies this year. “Sure, [what happened in Meridian] is going to make you think twice. But you can’t get away from it. Students come up with questions about controversial subjects all the time. If it’s on the front page, they’re going to ask about it. A lot of the ability to handle situations like that comes with experience and knowing about the district you’re working in.”

Hauge agrees: “I feel teachers and the community cannot act in disregard of the other. Therefore it’s necessary that parameters are agreed upon between the community and its educators so that we understand what we mean when we say academic freedom.”

Maybe then some Idaho teachers won’t grow cold from the chilling effect.