

Developmental Readiness and Classroom Debates

A certain student in your class may not be ready for a particular debate topic. Each student has his or her own developmental readiness level and there are some “hot” topics that are risky even with the most mature students. Some students might have personal backgrounds that make certain topics very uncomfortable for them.

Developmental psychologists will tell you that adolescents have a “2-track” mind, which is also known as “dual-processing” capacity. This means that they are sometimes capable of reasoning rationally, deductively, and logically, but they can easily slip into emotionally-reactive “reasoning,” which can override their intellects. This is more likely to happen when the problem at hand is of a personal nature, which is why teachers are advised to begin debate practice with remote, impersonal topics that are unlikely to trigger emotional responses.

[Of course, it’s not only adolescents who are capable of slipping into illogical, emotional reasoning when confronted with an emotionally-charged, personal topic. It is for this very reason that ethical codes for professions such as medicine proscribe treating family members. One’s reasoning capacity is likely to become impaired when making decisions that involve the wellbeing of a loved one.]

The goal of teachers is to provide appropriate challenges with sufficient levels of support. Educators seek to assign tasks in the “zone of proximal development (ZPD),” providing the next task for which the student is ready, while supplying the necessary scaffolding. The ZPD is the “sweet spot” between boredom and frustration, where the student feels that the task is achievable and within their capacity to master, with effort and proper assistance. Teachers then monitor the situation and adjust as needed, when signs of struggle emerge.

Preparation is, of course, crucial to reducing anxiety in a debate situation. Students equipped with solid research and sound points to make will be able to maintain academic composure, whereas those who feel unprepared may resort to personal attacks as a defense mechanism.

We want to encourage strength and resilience in our students, but we balance this with reasonable levels of sensitivity towards individualized concerns. That being said, there is a current trend toward hypersensitivity in academia that can squelch productive and meaningful open discourse. Generally speaking, it is unreasonable for the most sensitive student in a class to be deciding what can and cannot be discussed by everyone else. If you are dealing with a sensitive class that is new to debate, it is reasonable to stick to impersonal discussion topics such as those available on the Public Debate Forum website and to encourage outlier students claiming offense at trivial issues to seek additional outside support, such as through the counseling office.

