Lesson-2: What's the "should" question? Answer yes or no; explain why.

How to prepare:

Provide print and/or digital editions of newspapers. Choose a current that you feel is appropriate for your students to explore. Use the controversy to help students examine their own reasoning and the reasoning of others by holding discussions about the controversy. The chosen controversy will determine the length of time you will need to supply newspapers or use newspaper archives to identify stories.

Choose a single news story or a comic strip that deals with a controversial subject, if needing simpler reading material on which to base your questions and model the process. If this is your students' first discussion about a subject on which students disagree, choose a less inflammatory issue. As they become more experienced in dealing with controversy, choose more demanding issues and/or let them nominate appropriate topics.

Make sure that any controversy you and your students choose include these five essential ingredients:

1. Focus: Focus on situations that students might face; explore topics covered in school curricula; or focus on contemporary culture or issues.

2. Central Character: Focus on a central character or primary group of characters.

3. Choice: Make sure that the character has two alternatives.

4. Ethics: Involve students in reasoning through age-old concerns—social norms, civil liberties, equal opportunity, personal conscience, contracts, property rights, roles and issues of acceptance, authority, punishment or truth.

5. Question: End with a specific "should" question that asks what a character should do in the situation. For example: Should X choose Y?

What to do:

Follow a controversy in the news. Collect and have students collect tear sheets that include news, features, analysis, columns, letters to the editor, editorials, columns, cartoons, comics, ads and any other related information in the newspaper. Search newspaper archives for additional stories. E-editions allow students and teachers to collect stories and share them through email.

Step 1: Working individually or in groups, have students define important terms, list the major facts and identify opposing points of view. Have the class share and compile their findings.

Pose a "should" question, such as: Should he/she have fired the gun? Should he lose his job? Should the newspaper have run the comic strip? Should the president impose sanctions, send troops and/or propose legislation, etc.? Should the Congress pass laws or the Supreme Court make X decision?

Step 2: Give students time to think. Have students state tentative positions and write down their supporting reasons. Take a vote to determine if the class disagrees with at least a 70-30 split. Without disagreement, there is no controversy. If there is no conflict, rewrite your "should" question, or have students write "should" questions and collect them. Choose or work with students to choose an essential question about the core issue.

Step 3: Use a variety of small group settings to examine the reasoning. Have students examine different reasons in terms of issues, similar controversies and/or their consequences.

Step 4: In large group and whole class discussions, use probing questions such as:

1. Do you agree with what he/she just said about the question raised by the story?

2. Would someone summarize the reasons, which have just been given?

3. Would you respond to his comments about XXXX?

4. You disagreed earlier with (name of person) position. Could you paraphrase his/her position and provide your reasons and point of view?

5. Does the person (name) have a moral obligation/ or legal responsibility to XXXX?

6. From a different person's perspective, how does the situation seem?

7. Should someone always help a friend or relative? Should someone who disobeys a rule or law be punished?

Step 5: Have the class vote again in secret on the question and report the results to the class. Allow undecided votes but, throughout the process, encourage students to examine reasons and draw conclusions.

A graphic organizer, CHALLENGING QUESTIONS, outlines the steps from coming up with a "should" question to responding.

Source: Galbraith, Ronald E. and Thomas M. Jones, Moral Reasoning: A Teaching Handbook for Adapting Kohlberg to the Classroom, Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1976.