

Touchy Subject:  
Thinking Better About  
Sex Education

TEACHING GUIDE

## USING THIS TEACHING GUIDE

The Center for Ethics & Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. This teaching guide is intended for use in undergraduate and graduate education classes. The curriculum includes a teaching guide for one week of curriculum. We assume two 75-minute class meetings in one week.

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## SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN

### Day 1

- **Readings:**

- "Touchy Subject" podcast
- *Touchy Subject*: Introduction, Ch. 4
- Before class: Discussion post

- **In-class:**

- Readers Theater

### Day 2

- **Readings:**

- *Touchy Subject* Ch. 5, 6, Conclusion
- Non-ideal theory article

- **In-class:**

- Discussion: Non-ideal theory
- Case study

# OUTLINE

**Topic:** Philosophy of Sex Education

This study guide explores thinking about sex education in schools using non-ideal theory using interactive case studies and a variety of in-class and online discussion prompts.

## **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will understand what ethical values are at stake when thinking about sex education.
- Students will be able to think more clearly about the differences between what they would like to see in ideal conditions and what should happen in the real, imperfect, world.
- Students have scrutinized their own ethical assumptions concerning what sex education should aim at and how it should be conducted.

## **Readings & Audio:**

- **Book:** Bialystok, Lauren, and Lisa M. F. Andersen. *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education*. University of Chicago Press, 2023.
- **Podcast:** Welsh, Carrie (host). "Touchy Subject: Thinking Better About Sex Education." With Lauren Bialystok and Lisa Andersen. *Ethics and Education*. Podcast audio, December 12, 2023. <https://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/podcast/touchy-subject-thinking-better-about-sex-education/>
- **Reading:** Brighthouse, Harry. "Non-Ideal Theory." Touchy Subject study guide, (p.10-11). Center for Ethics & Education, 2024.

# READERS THEATER OVERVIEW

## IMPROVING SEX ED CURRICULUM

### Discussion post:

Discussion post prompt for your Learning Management System:

- **Reflect on the reading (Introduction, Chapter 4) and write a few paragraphs about something you found interesting, confusing, or wrong.**

### In the classroom:

Print this Readers Theater and assign the roles below to students. After you have read through the entire Readers Theater aloud as a group, organize students into smaller groups to talk through the discussion questions. (If you have plenty of time you might want to assign all questions to all groups. Depending on time, you might want to limit each group to discussing one assigned question, and then do fishbowls with groups, by assigned question). When the small groups are finished discussing, bring the class back together to share out in large.

### Discussion questions:

Small group discussion, large group share out.

If you have plenty of time, you might want to assign all questions to all groups; if time is limited you might want to limit each group to discussing one assigned question, and then do fish bowls with groups, by assigned question.

1. **What responsibility do schools have in teaching sex ed (versus learning from family, friends, etc)?**
2. **What should the aims of sex ed be?**
3. **Keeping in mind that students will enter the classroom with different backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge around sex, how should teachers adjust their curriculum or teaching methods to account for this?**

### Questions specific to the readers theater:

1. Who from this readers theater would you want to continue this conversation with? What would you want to ask them? Do you initially agree or disagree with their responses?
2. Which two characters do you want to continue the conversation between themselves? What issues do you want them to discuss? What do you think X would say about [insert issue]?

# READERS THEATER

**Context:** This is a snippet of a longer conversation with recent high school graduates whose school has asked them for help in improving their sex ed curriculum.

## **Characters:**

- Grace
- Toland
- Gabe
- Quinn
- Nelson
- Trinity
- Kellen

## **Script:**

**Toland:** I don't care what else gets taught, as long as they're teaching prevention of STIs and pregnancies!

**Grace:** Yeah, but that's the bare minimum for sex ed. We need to be including way more than that, like the emotional aspect of sex. That's not something I ever got taught about.

**Nelson:** I didn't really get that in school at all either, but I do feel like my parents taught me about the emotional part. And I would rather hear it from them than a teacher.

**Grace:** I don't know, I had sex way before my parents knew I did, so we didn't ever talk about it. I basically learned everything from my friends, but I don't think they taught me very well. One of my friends just sent me a link to porn, and I can tell you that was not realistic.

**Toland:** But porn is actually how I learned about queer sex. Otherwise I would have been completely in the dark.

**Gabe:** I think there can be accurate porn, though. Maybe porn should be used in sex ed.

**Grace:** Woah woah, porn literacy would probably be helpful, but watching videos of sex in class? Oh my god, I'd be so embarrassed, I feel like I would melt if we had to watch those kinds of videos with other people.

**Toland:** Yeah, that would be super awkward. But I have learned a lot from talking about sex with my friends.

**Quinn:** I mean, I actually really did learn from other students. In my high school, there was a student-led sex ed program and I feel like it did a great job. I mean, power dynamics are so important to sex, and there are power dynamics in who teaches sex ed too, which is also an important thing to consider.

**Gabe:** But peers just aren't qualified to teach everything. There are some things I would so much rather learn from adults with life and teaching experience.

**Quinn:** Yeah, but I don't think life experience is necessary. And the students in the program were actually trained by a sex ed organization and I felt like I could ask them anything.

**Gabe:** I just don't know if I could trust my peers. I feel like it would be way more informative coming from an adult.

**Quinn:** So you're saying you enjoyed learning from your 65-year-old gym teacher?

**Gabe:** Well, no, that's not what I meant. If they were good teachers, they would be able to handle topics that aren't so black and white. I mean, sometimes there's no right answer, right? Sex ed should be a conversation, not a lecture.

**Quinn:** I mean, come on, there's no way that they would be able to talk to us about stuff like dating apps and hookup culture. I don't think teachers could understand nuances like that from our generation.

**Kellen:** Yeah! I wish we could learn about all of the nuances of relationships and dating. Sex looks different in different relationships.

**Nelson:** So you're saying you'd rather learn from a 17-year-old? No offense, but I don't want Gabe teaching me sex ed.

**Kellen:** Well maybe not 17. I don't think just anyone could teach sex ed, but personally, I learned from my older sister. It wasn't exactly structured, but she did answer whatever questions I had.

**Nelson:** I'd be okay with learning from a college student, but I would want them to be trained in teaching sex ed, not just sexually experienced.

**Trinity:** I don't know, high school me only would have taken advice from somebody who had a lot of experience. But now, I think it takes way more than being smart or knowing a lot to be a good teacher. Like, I've had professors who seem really accomplished but their lectures are so boring and confusing.

**Grace:** Same! Last year I had a professor whose research was brilliant. She had degrees from, like, Harvard and Yale. But in class she would just read off the slides and I'd be zoning out. At that point, just give me a book.

**Nelson:** Yeah, I'd rather just have the good content. I don't want to have to deal with awkward joke questions or act like I'm too cool to care. Like, let's just cover the basics and anatomy.

**Gabe:** There's more to sex than just anatomy. And books can't give personalized answers to students. So, like I said before, I think sex ed should be a conversation!

**Trinity:** I agree, but can't we just get information about anatomy, birth control and STIs from the internet? Like, there are doctors on TikTok! So shouldn't we be teaching kids about stuff like the emotional aspect that they won't be able to find on their own?

**Kellen:** In what world is TikTok a reliable source? If we used TikTok, sex ed would just turn into a media literacy course.

**Trinity:** And? That sounds good to me!

**Kellen:** But if all we learn is media literacy, we're just learning how to interact with media, not with other people.

**Trinity:** Okay, I meant, we should include media literacy amongst other things. Schools also have a responsibility to teach students how their decisions affect other people. I mean, these are our future politicians, parents, and like, people who will be having sex.

# NON-IDEAL THEORY: SETUP

## **SUGGESTED IDEAS FOR IN-CLASS REVIEW BEFORE CLASS DISCUSSION:**

1. Have one student explain the main idea.
2. Ask one student to give an example of a feature of society that makes it impossible to implement the kind of sex ed they would like to implement.
3. Where do you see yourself already practicing non-ideal theory in your everyday life?
4. Ask each student to write down one sentence based on what they learned/main idea/what it makes them think of in their life (what now comes to mind when you think of non-ideal theory) and then pair-share, etc.
5. Put students in small groups to discuss for 5-7 minutes about what they've read.



# NON-IDEAL THEORY

Moral and political philosophers like to distinguish between **ideal** and **non-ideal** theorizing. **Ideal theorizing** is exactly what it sounds like: trying to figure out what values or ideals should guide us if we were in the best conditions possible. Think about this as the world you want to live in.

By contrast, in **non-ideal theorizing**, we accept certain imperfections, wrongs, or injustices as fixed or static. This isn't because we think they're ok – they're not (they're imperfections, wrongs, or injustices, which is just to say they're not ok!). But we accept them because we are trying to think about what values or ideals should guide us in a society in which we don't, at least as individuals, have the power to change those things. This is the world you actually live in.

Here's an example: most people who support affirmative action in hiring and college admission think that in a society that was already racially just (an ideal society) affirmative action would be unnecessary and possibly unjust. But they think that in our society, with its racialised inequalities of opportunity, income and wealth and continuing racial discrimination, affirmative action is justified as a way of reducing and mitigating those wrongs, even though it can't eliminate them.

Think about sex education in this light: someone might think that in an ideal society, all parents want their children to have a liberated and enjoyable sex life as adults. These people might also think that in that ideal society, sex education would focus not only on “the plumbing,” consent, and avoiding pregnancy, but also on sex in the context of healthy personal relationships and enjoyment. They might, though, want to compromise that ideal in circumstances in which many parents and families either oppose that sort of sex education or just don't trust the school authorities to teach their children well.

Good sex education for the world we live in requires non-ideal theorizing.

**Ideal theory:**  
the world you *want* to  
live in

**Non-ideal theory:**  
the world you  
*actually* live in

# DHSE CASE STUDY: OVERVIEW

## Learning objectives:

- Students will be able to practice interacting with conflicting perspectives and identifying shared values.
- Students will be able to apply non-ideal theory to managing the ethical tradeoffs that arise from decision-making around education policy.

## Recommended Instruction:

Print this case study and read it in class. We like using popcorn reading for this, where each paragraph is read aloud by a different student (either in small groups or large), who (optional) calls on the next student to read.

Begin with the main discussion questions: How should Mr. Jones and Principal Smith address the situation? What should they do?

## Tradeoffs to draw out:

Give adequate time to discussing simply what the characters should do before moving forward into further discussion questions.

- If Mr. Jones allows students to opt out, some may get no education at all (but, the rest of the students will get DHSE).
- If he doesn't, he may face backlash from parents about the curriculum.
- If he changes the curriculum, students would receive less comprehensive sex education.
- If he doesn't, more students will want to opt out.

Then, move to small groups.

## Small group discussion questions:

1. Would your previous thoughts/perspectives shift if this were a private school? A boarding school? A small community school? Why?
2. Would your previous thoughts/perspectives shift if more than half of the parents showed interest in opting out?
3. What are schools responsible for? Should the schools aim to provide a minimal/basic sex ed for as many students as possible, or a more comprehensive and progressive sex ed in which some students will not participate?

## Approaches to large group discussion:

1. **Voting:** After students have shared ideas and discussed each of the discussion questions, bring the group back together and have everyone vote on which question they would most like to discuss as a large group.
2. **Sharing:** Have the students share an argument or idea that they heard in their small group—but didn't make—that helped them think differently about the issue. We like to give students a minute to write something down before they share.

# DHSE CASE STUDY

## Democratic Humanistic Sex Education

aims to raise kids to be respectful citizens in a diverse world who understand how their decisions affect others. It pulls in more human experience than just biology or science, asking: what kinds of sexual choices are going to lead people to a life that they want.

## Case Study

Mr. Jones is a new health teacher at Franklin High. As a part of their mandatory health class, the ninth grade class will have their “sex ed” unit next week. The curriculum was designed to meet the specifications of a Democratic Humanistic Sex Education (DHSE).

As the unit approaches, Mr. Jones receives several emails from concerned parents. The first email comes from a mom on the school board who complains that the DHSE model is too comprehensive, and that she does not agree with some included material.

Another email comes from a parent wishing to opt out from the unit and remove their student from the following week’s material. They do not offer any reasoning. In considering their options, Mr. Jones knows that without the school-provided sex ed, there are students in the class who might receive neither formal sex education nor information from their parents. Mr. Jones decides to approach Principal Smith with the issue.

**How should Mr. Jones and Principal Smith address the situation? What should they do?**

# BONUS ASSIGNMENTS

## **Optional Assignment:**

In the Touchy Subject podcast episode, Lisa says that imagining a sex education classroom “where the final assignment would be students deliberating what should be included in sex ed” would be in alignment with their student-centered approach to sex education. We think this would be a great assignment---having students discuss what should be included, or even having them design their own curriculum based on principles of DHSE.

## **Further Reading:**

This teaching guide focuses more on the philosophy than the history chapters of the book. To incorporate more of the fascinating history of sex education, we recommend turning to (and even assigning) the first three chapters of Touchy Subject, written by historian Lisa Andersen. For a listening assignment, we suggest “How to Make a Fella Feel Relaxed,” an episode from the podcast “The Longest Shortest Time,” featuring Lisa and some great archival footage from midcentury sex ed videos. Podcast: <https://longestshortesttime.com/episode-134-how-to-make-a-fella-feel-relaxed/>

# THE CENTER FOR ETHICS & EDUCATION

We at the Center are committed to encouraging philosophical reflection on contemporary issues in education. This curriculum was developed for use in undergraduate and graduate education, philosophy, and sociology classes. It is available for free.

The Center for Ethics & Education is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

How did it go using this teaching guide with your class?  
We'd love to hear from you!

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The creation of this curriculum was supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

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