

Four approaches to handling controversial issues

Procedural neutrality:

In which the teacher adopts role of an impartial chairperson of a discussion group.

Potential strengths

Minimizes undue influence of teacher's own bias.

Gives everyone a chance to take part in free discussion.

Provides scope for open-ended discussion, ie the class may move on to consider issues and questions which the teacher hasn't thought of.

Presents a good opportunity for pupils to exercise communication skills.

Works well if you have a lot of background material.

Potential weaknesses

Pupils find it artificial.

Can damage the rapport between teacher and class if it doesn't work.

Depends on pupils being familiar with the method elsewhere in the school or it will take a long time to acclimatize them.

May only reinforce pupils' existing attitudes and prejudices.

Very difficult with the less able.

The role of neutral chair doesn't suit the teacher's personality

A Balanced Approach:

In which the teacher presents pupils with a wide range of alternative views.

Potential strengths

Essential: I think one of the main functions of a humanities or social studies teacher is to show that issues are hardly ever black and white.

Necessary when the class is polarized on an issue

Most useful when dealing with issues about which there is a great deal of conflicting information.

If a balanced range of opinion does not emerge from the group, then it is up to the teacher to see that the other aspects are brought out

Potential weaknesses

Is there such a thing as a balanced range of opinions?

As a strategy it has limited use. It avoids the main point by conveying the impression that 'truth' is a grey area that exists between two alternative sets of opinions.

Balance means very different things to different people. The BBC's view of balance is not mine. Teaching is rarely value free.

This approach can lead to very teacher-directed lessons. As with BBC interviews you are always chipping in to maintain the so-called balance.

Stated Commitment:

In which the teacher always makes known his/her views during discussion.

Potential strengths

Pupils will try to guess what the teacher thinks anyway. Stating your own position makes everything above board.

If pupils know where the teacher stands on the issue they can discount his or her prejudices and biases.

It's better to state your preferences after discussion rather than before.

It should only be used if pupils' dissenting opinions are treated with respect.

It can be an excellent way of maintaining credibility with pupils since they do not expect us to be neutral.

Potential weaknesses

It can stifle classroom discussion, inhibiting pupils from arguing a line against that of the teacher's.

It may encourage some pupils to argue strongly for something they don't believe in simply because it's different from what the teacher thinks.

Pupils often find it difficult to distinguish facts from values. It's even more difficult if the purveyor of facts and values is the same person, ie the teacher.

The Devil's Advocate Strategy:

In which the teacher consciously takes up the opposite position to the one expressed by pupils or in teaching materials.

Potential strengths

Frequently used by me. Great fun, and can be very effective in stimulating the pupils to contribute to discussion.

Essential when faced by a group who all seem to share the same opinion.

Most classes which I have taught seem to have a majority line. Then I use this strategy and parody, exaggeration, and role reversal.

I often use this as a device to liven things up when the discussion is beginning to dry up.

Potential weaknesses

I have run into all sorts of problems with this approach: kids identifying me with the views I was putting forward as devil's advocate; parents worried about my alleged views, etc.

It may reinforce pupils' prejudices.

Only to be used when discussion dries up and there are still 25 minutes left.