



Teaching ... a controversial issue? or Teaching a controversial issue

Clive Harber, and Jeff Serf revisit 'Towards Ubuntu' and consider whether it can help inform current debates.

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Both have been involved in the Tide~ network since they were young teachers.

What goes on inside a school, and what doesn't, has always been controversial, and key to managing and exploiting that controversy is the teacher-learner relationship ... a relationship that itself is fraught with controversy.

When schools reconvene in whatever form, Covid-19 will be at the forefront of the minds of learners, teachers and parents for some time to come. It will be a major factor in the context of how teaching is transacted, as well as being an 'item on the curriculum' - be it the hidden or the explicit curriculum. Yet it is essentially a controversial issue.

Although the debates around Covid-19 are rightly informed by scientific and social scientific evidence, many questions arise for which there are no clear cut answers or universally held views, and where opinions will widely differ. For example, Where did the virus originate? What are the best measures to control it? How prepared were we, and other countries, for the pandemic? What should have been in place in preparation for such a pandemic? Why are some groups affected more than others? Are we really "all in it together"? Should we simply go back to where we were or are there significant lessons to be learned?

Such questions do not have 'easy answers'.

This is a feature of dealing with controversial issues as recognised by the Crick Report [1998]. See box. There are clear implications for what teachers do in the classroom.

How do we see that now?

“ Education should not attempt to shelter our nation’s children from even the harsher controversies of adult life, but should prepare them to deal with such controversies knowledgeably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally.

Of course, educators must never set out to indoctrinate; but to be completely unbiased is simply not possible, and on some issues, such as those concerning human rights, it is not desirable. When dealing with controversial issues, teachers should adopt strategies that teach pupils how to recognise bias, how to evaluate evidence put before them and how to look for alternative interpretations, viewpoints and sources of evidence; above all to give good reasons for everything they say and do, and to expect good reasons to be given by others. ”

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The Elephant Times

It is, we suggest useful to revisit the section in 'Towards Ubuntu' that addresses the role of the teacher [page 71] and different approaches to handling controversial issues [page 72] ... and **consider afresh the challenges of engaging learners in the realities of contemporary controversial issues with appropriate professionalism.**

Teaching controversial issues in the classroom has always been important but difficult.

Has the advent of such fundamental and divisive issues such as as Covid-19, climate change, Black Lives Matter and Brexit made this task even more difficult?

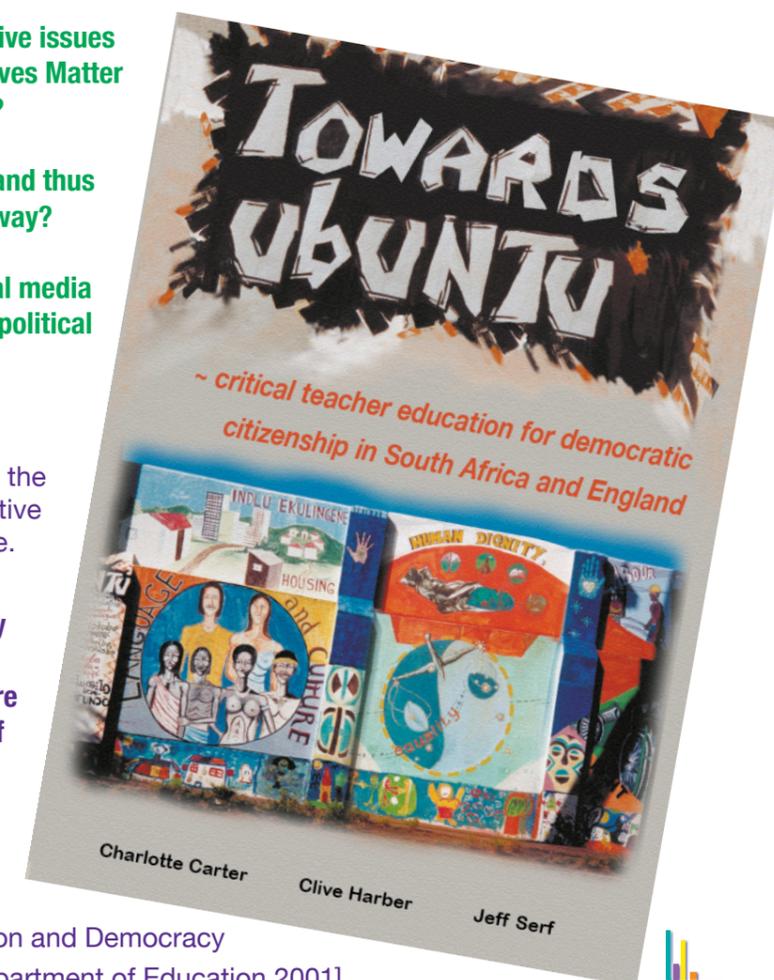
Has the tone of political discourse in society, and thus in the classroom, also changed in a negative way?

What are the implications of anonymous social media and the rise of populist politicians across the political spectrum internationally?

Towards Ubuntu takes its title from the Zulu phrase for human dignity. Ubuntu embodies the concept of mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference.

“ Out of the values of Ubuntu and human dignity flow the practices of compassion, kindness, altruism and respect which are at the very core of making schools places where the culture of teaching and the culture of learning thrive; of making them dynamic hubs of industry and achievement rather than places of conflict and pain.

Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy [S.A. Department of Education 2001]



Could we learn useful lessons from the South Africa experience?

Could we adopt an Ubuntu disposition to curriculum?

Much that is presented to us as information or 'fact' through the media is in reality often presented in a biased way and reflects the values of those constructing the article or programme. This is done through what is chosen or omitted, the language used to present information and even the pictures and captions used as illustrations.

This is also true of the material used in schools. **Teaching learners to be critical readers of texts of all kinds is therefore an important aim of education.**

History, for example, is a school subject that has received special attention in the new South Africa, though it takes time to change established ideas when they have been taught for many years. That process started with a disposition to change stimulated by the dismantling of apartheid. The question is:

what will it take to generate such a disposition in Britain?



Clive & Jeff have suggested some updated focus questions.

References: see [page 34](#)