
TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Introduction

How we effectively teach about controversial issues is a challenge for all KS3 teachers. Such issues can arise in many different contexts and may often be an un-planned consequence of student-led discussion. It is therefore important that all of us as teachers have the opportunity to reflect upon the implications for our role and to develop appropriate techniques and strategies for the classroom.

This material has been put together as a stimulus for CPD discussion, to enable groups to share and reflect upon ideas and experiences. There is no one right way to handle all situations involving controversial issues. There is a need to be flexible and to use the strategy appropriate for the particular situation. The process of talking through different scenarios and dilemmas will help to raise awareness of the issues involved and to build confidence for dealing with sensitive and uncertain territory.

As a support to CPD discussion our material includes:

- QCA guidelines on the teaching of citizenship [2000]
- An overview of four possible approaches to handling controversial issues
- A link to the online report by the Historical Association, '[Teaching Emotive and Controversial History, 3 – 19](#)'

Using the stimulus material ~ possible issues for discussion:

- Should we ever express our own opinion .. and if so in what context?
- How do we deal with racist comments or viewpoints expressed during the course of discussion?
- How might we respond if we feel that the consensus view of a student group needs challenging?
- What should we do if a discussion gets personal, or risks causing offence to individuals in the class?

QCA guidelines on the teaching of citizenship [2000]

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority guidelines on the teaching of citizenship [2000] suggest the following in relation to teachers.

Experienced teachers will seek to avoid bias by resisting any inclination to:

- highlight a particular selection of facts or items of evidence thereby giving them a greater importance than other equally relevant information;
- present information as if it is not open to alternative interpretation or qualification or contradiction;
- set themselves up as the sole authority not only on matters of 'fact' but also on matters of opinion;
- present opinions and other value judgements as if they are facts;
- give their own accounts of the views of others instead of using the actual claims and assertions as expressed by various interest groups themselves;
- reveal their own preferences - by facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.
- imply preferences by a particular choice of respondents or by not opening up opportunities for all pupils to contribute their views to a discussion;
- neglect challenging a consensus of opinion, which emerges too readily.

Experienced teachers would also feel secure in establishing a classroom climate in which all pupils are free from any fear of expressing reasonable points of view that contradict those held either by their class teachers or by their peers.

Teachers will need to consider the following:

- ensuring that pupils have access to balanced information and differing views on which they can then clarify their own opinions and views, including contributions made by visitors to the classroom
- deciding whether and, if so, how far, they are prepared to express their own views, bearing in mind that they are in an influential position and that they have to work within the framework of the school's values
- ensuring pupils establish ground-rules about how they will behave towards each other and how issues will be dealt with
- judging when to allow pupils to discuss issues confidentially in small groups and when to support by listening in to these group discussions
- ensuring they take due care for the needs of individuals in the class when tackling issues of social, cultural or personal identity.

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

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.

A Balanced Approach:

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

Potential strengths

Helps a teacher 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.

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

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.

A useful device to liven things up when the discussion is beginning to dry up.

Potential weaknesses

This approach can lead to problems: students identifying the teacher with the views put forward as devil's advocate; parents expressing concern about the alleged views, etc.

It may reinforce pupils' prejudices.

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