Briefing Paper for Trainee Teachers Of Citizenship Education

Teaching Controversial Issues

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Teaching Controversial Issues

The teaching of controversial issues in schools is itself somewhat controversial. Should controversial issues be taught at all? What approach should be taken? Are some opinions unacceptable in the classroom? With this in mind, readers should be aware that this briefing sheet represents the opinion of the author – and is not some sort of legal/definitive guide.

What are controversial issues?

Controversial issues are public issues on which people hold a range of divided opinions. Many will involve moral issues at their core. Controversial issues remain in the public domain for differing lengths of time. Some will come and go very quickly over days and weeks, others are larger issues that society cannot find easy agreement upon. Topics in the latter category include:

- Euthanasia
- Cloning
- Stem cell research
- GM crops
- Policy for refugees / asylum seekers
- Gay rights, e.g. adoptive rights, clergy etc
- Fair trade
- Joining the Euro
- Animal rights.

Should controversial issue be taught in schools?

It is possible to avoid controversial issues in teaching, even when teaching Citizenship (the ‘light touch’ nature of the Citizenship programme ensures sufficient flexibility to veer towards safer ground). However, it is specified that Citizenship ‘knowledge and understanding’ should, where possible, be taught alongside the two sets of skills (skills of enquiry and communication and participation and responsible action). This will involve teaching students to:

2a) Think about topical political, spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues, problems and events…………

and to:

2b) justify orally and in writing a personal opinion about such issues, problems or events

In practice, this involves teaching issues that are opinion based, which, by their very nature will be controversial to some degree.

There is a worthwhile debate on the extent to which controversial issues school be taught in schools, and which (if any) topics should be avoided. It should be noted that there are voices who would claim that teachers should stick to known facts and figures and avoid areas of political/moral dispute. Such voices might also claim that such domains are the role of the parent. However, due to limitations of space, this debate cannot be engaged with here.

In this paper it will be assumed that, in wishing to be Citizenship teachers, most beginning teachers (BTs) will not be resistant to the idea of tackling difficult and sometimes controversial issues in the classroom. Indeed, for many BTs such opportunities may be one of the main reasons for choosing to enter the profession.

The Crick Report, in putting forward a vision for Citizenship is very supportive of the teaching controversial issues and devotes a whole section (10) specifically to the topic:
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 knowledgably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally. 10.1

As a BT should I tackle controversial issues?

There is no definitive answer to this question and much will depend on the BT, the school and the pupils in question. As a rule, I wouldn’t recommend tackling highly controversial issues during your first placement, and certainly not early on in either placement. This is because effective teaching in this area usually involves a fair level of teacher confidence and a good knowledge of the pupils, which, although possible to achieve quickly, is unlikely against a background of other challenges and tasks.

What teaching and learning issues do controversial issues raise?

Key pedagogical issues raised by teaching controversial issues include:

- Creating a good learning environment
- Managing discussion/debate
- Avoiding bias/indoctrination
- Managing your own opinion as a teacher
- Handling extreme/offensive opinions
- Handling overheated and underheated debates
- Dealing with sensitive issues

Creating a good learning environment

Naturally this is the aim of all teaching, but is especially important when teaching controversial issues. A key element of a good learning environment is to ensure that students achieve a level of psychologically safety in the classroom. If a pupil is open to, or even feels open to, verbal abuse by other pupils, then tackling sensitive issues such as immigration or gay rights could be counterproductive. It is important that students feel that they can express their opinion and that their opinion will be not be ridiculed, and, further, that any discussion or debate will not have any negative repercussions after the lesson has finished.

Achieving this requires a teacher that is not overly strict but yet has a fair level of control over the class. It requires a good relationship between the teacher and pupils, which usually develops over time. Undertaking warm up activities, and establishing clear ground rules are also key elements to creating a psychologically safe environment.

Specific tips might include:

Using circle time: Getting students to sit in circle can help to create more intimate and open atmosphere. It is much easier to be cheeky or rude when you are sitting at the back of a class looking at a row of backs. It is harder to do so when you are facing everyone in a circle and the barrier of a desk is removed.

Be prepared to reveal something of yourself: Students are more likely to reveal personal beliefs if the teacher reveals a bit (not everything!) of him or herself. Keeping a strict façade or persona is not always conductive to encouraging good, open debate and discussion. (This is not always advisable early on in a placement – such an approach works best once the students are already familiar with you)

There are no right or wrong answers
Many areas of education focus on closed questions - questions to which the answers are known or where methods of finding the answer have been agreed. In such lessons, the teacher will usually assume the mantle of ‘expert’, in possession of the answers. Controversial issues, however, involve open questions – questions to which the answer is not known and there is no agreed method of establishing any. Typically, such open questions involve moral beliefs and teaching such issues requires the teacher drop the air of omniscience, to some extent. The teacher may be an expert in the factual elements of the lesson, (e.g. how embryos develop or the number of asylum seekers in the UK) but their opinion will simply be one among many in regard to the moral element of the lesson (e.g. should abortion be permissible? should detention centres be built?). Shedding the mantle of expert can sometimes be difficult and may involve structuring the lesson in a way that involves less teacher-focused activities. This change in emphasis of the role can also be difficult for some students who may be accustomed to seeing the teacher as the expert.

Managing discussion/debate

Teaching controversial issues need not focus around debate and discussion. It could, for example, involve research and presentation. However, expressing and challenging opinion is an important element of Citizenship education and good teaching technique in this area is a key part of teaching controversial issues well.

Research has shown that students’ perceptions of debates are often very different from those of teachers. A teacher may claim to be happy with their use of debate and discussion, whilst students might perceive the debate as too rowdy or intimidating, or more commonly, as dominated by just a few individuals. To avoid situations that might lead to these negative perceptions it is worthwhile focusing on the discussion strategies you might use when teaching a controversial topic. Simply opening questions up for general comment is not enough. Key techniques might include:

Snowballing debates - Asking students to think about an issue in pairs and to feedback on just one point – for, against or in any way related – is a good way of involving everyone in discussion. This can lead to a whole class discussion, or the pairs could double up and come up with several new points. Snowballing is way of ensuring that one or two of the more vocal students do not dominate discussions.

Circle time – As mentioned above, using the format of circle time can also yield good results. The formality of desks, with much of the class staring at the backs of their fellow students, is not always the ideal environment to foster discussion.

Role-play – Giving students different opinions to defend or different characters to assume is a useful tool. It can depersonalise contentious issues and not force students to expose their own opinions. It is also a good tactic to use on topics where students don’t as yet have any strong opinions.

Formal debates – A motion is proposed; speakers from two teams alternate in arguing for or against the motion; questions are taken from the floor; the floor then vote. For more details on formal debating (a requirement of the citizenship PoS at key stage 4) see the briefing sheet on communication and enquiry or visit the website of the English Speaking Union website www.esu.org.uk

Although discussion is an important tool in teaching controversial issues, it cannot stand alone. Without injecting accurate and up to date information, debates and discussions can be little more than exercises in airing prejudice.

Avoiding bias/indoctrination

1 ‘Phase 1 report on Key Stage 3 pilot project’, National Foundation for Education Research (available from Institute for Citizenship)
For obvious reasons, consciously introducing elements of bias into a lesson is not acceptable. That is not to say that teachers cannot, or even argue for, a personal opinion (see below), but this is very different from setting out to bias a lesson. There is a range of legislation in place that makes it clear that such an approach would be illegal.

The Education Act 1996 aims to ensure that children are not presented with only one side of political or controversial issues by their teachers. Section 406 of the Act forbids the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in schools, and forbids the pursuit of partisan political activities by pupils under age 12 while in school. Section 407 requires schools to take all reasonable practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are taught, pupils are offered a balanced presentation or opposing views.

Unconscious bias/balance can be introduced in different ways; through inappropriate selection of materials; body language; misrepresenting the views of others, or not presenting alternative points of view. To reduce bias, key questions worth asking yourself include:

Resources: How balanced are they? Are they produced by a pressure group? Will you make students aware of the source or discuss its validity? Are you heavily reliant on one source or a particular newspaper?

Teacher behaviour: Do you present all the sides of an argument fairly? How do you present opinions with which you disagree? Does your body language change? Have you researched all the sides of an issue? Might you be misrepresenting the views of others? Do you value the contributions of students who share your opinion over the contributions of others? Does your body language change in these circumstances?

Balance: Remember that you will never be able to deliver a perfectly balanced lesson. For example, most controversial issues have dozens of different and sometimes complex positions that could be adopted - should you present all of these? Should you devote different lengths of times to the positions according to their popularity? Common sense is often required. Depending on the context, the most you can realistically do as a teacher is to select some of the key positions and present these in order to achieve some sense of balance.

Managing your opinion as a teacher

There is no single approach to this. Different methods have been grouped together as follows:

Neutral chair: The teacher acts as a facilitator acting to encourage informed debate. The teacher never presents any opinion (except to ‘play devil’s advocate’) but facilitates the discussion between different opinions.

Balanced approach: The teacher may present a range of opinions (not necessarily their own) but in doing so try to present the different opinions in a balanced way. Such an approach may involve arguing passionately for two different opinions.

Committed participant: The teacher makes their position known. This is suitable for some issues but less so for others, and it is also less appropriate for younger students. Ideally, a teacher should only make their opinion known in a lesson where opinions are being developed and the exchange of opinions among students encouraged. It is worthwhile thinking about whether to reveal an opinion before entering the classroom, as students are often very interested in your opinion and may put you on the spot. Some opinions are best kept private: (e.g. a liberal teacher’s position on the legalising of cannabis).

Teachers often slip between these different roles when teaching. However, as long as students are aware of the role the teacher is playing then unintended bias can be greatly reduced.
Also, note that the teacher has a choice about whether to reveal their opinion or not. It is important that students also have that choice. Some teachers use an approach of outlining two polarised views and asking students to physically stand on a line between these views, so as to express where they ‘stand’ on an issue. Such an approach has some merit; it is active, inclusive etc. However, it also has some disadvantages – it polarises issues, where often a more complex range of opinion is possible; and it forces students to express an opinion. I would always recommend that a ‘don’t know/no comment’ option is catered for. After all, it would not be acceptable to ask a group of teachers to stand in different corners of a room according to how they voted in the last election - so why should we force students to give opinion on every topic?

**Handling extreme/offensive opinions**

The airing of offensive views is not common in the classroom. However, it is worth being prepared and having a strategy for dealing with such situations. Part of being prepared involves being clear about which opinions are acceptable to air and which are not. To answer this drags us unavoidably into a small philosophical diversion.

We could imagine two highly-polarised stances that could be taken in relation to opinions. First, the view that all opinions are equally valid. This resembles a position known as *relativism* which holds that that there are no moral truths; there are only opinions, and in one sense every opinion is equally valid, as there is no moral truth to which one opinion can be closer to than any other. As no opinion can be said to be ‘wrong’, the role of the teacher would be to help students better articulate their opinions. Teachers may challenge students – not from the position that their opinions are wrong, but rather that other opinions may be worth considering. (Sometimes factual elements of a student’s opinion may be wrong – which would stand in need of correcting.)

At the other end of this imaginary scale, we could imagine teaching from a position of moral *objectivism*. This is the view that there are clear moral truths and against these individual moral opinions can be deemed true or false. We could imagine teaching in a school that believed in such a set of moral truths and here, part of the teacher’s role would be to ensure all students adopt the correct moral position. Under such a system, opposing views would not be tolerated in the classroom, save as to serve as a prompt for teaching the correct moral position. Although debate may be permitted, the overall aim is to reach the moral truth, either by rational enquiry or, failing that, by indoctrination.

Neither of these extremes seems an ideal on which to assume teaching. From one perspective (relativism) it would be unacceptable to have students constantly airing, say, racist views, and from the other (the objectivist), it would be unacceptable not to allow a wide range of opinions on most topics.

What is needed is some middle ground – a position that balances the need for freedom of speech on the one hand with the need to create a psychologically safe environment for students on the other. This is more or less the line implicitly suggested by the National Curriculum. When teaching controversial issues, we should aim to encourage students to develop reasoned opinions and teachers should encourage a wide range of opinions but there are shared values or boundaries beyond which the debate may not transgress.

This raises further questions about exactly where these boundaries lie. In other words, which opinions are acceptable and, more importantly, which might we *not* allow in the classroom?

The National Curriculum contains a statement of shared values (right at the back). These are deemed to be the values commonly held by society and, as such, schools and teachers…

…can therefore expect the support and encouragement of society if they base their teaching and the school ethos on these values.
In other words, the National Curriculum itself suggests that there are commonly held values that should inform teaching, and thus opinions that go against these need not be tolerated in the classroom.

*Don’t students have a right to air their opinion?*

We should first remember that freedom of speech is not an absolute right in our society. Constraints occur, usually when the speech in question would infringe the rights of others, for example in cases involving invasion of privacy or incitement to riot. Also, in other non-public domains such as places of work, other restrictions on free speech will also occur e.g. official secrets act, employment act legislating against verbal harassment at the work place. These seem quite legitimate and uncontroversial constraints on freedom of speech. A school is also a regulated domain. Special laws govern the standards of behaviour expected of students and staff. Less formal codes of conduct also affect the types of behaviour tolerated in the classroom. So there is no special reason why students should have a right to an absolute freedom of speech in school.

The model of work seems perhaps the most helpful in this context. In most places of employment, offensive or threatening language would constitute misconduct and may lead to a warning, or in extreme or repeated cases, dismissal. A similar approach can be applied to the classroom!

Although not specifically about classrooms, the UN declaration of the rights of the child is also helpful in this matter.

**Article 13 – UN convention on the rights of the child**

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.
2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
   (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
   (b) For the protection of national security or of public order or of public health or morals

This act accords with the position outlined above: students should have the right to express opinion - but in doing so they must respect the rights and reputations of others.

**What happens when students do air offensive opinions?**

Hopefully, when such situations do occur, other students will argue that such an opinion is misguided and / or offensive. The student in question may then learn that such opinions are not accepted by their peers, which can often be a more valuable lesson than when a teacher intervenes. However, if this does not happen, or if the situation warrants it, the teacher should feel confident about taking suitable action. Such action might involve asking the student to leave the class or formally reporting and reprimanding the student in accordance with either the school’s guidelines on teaching controversial issues or the general policy on sanctions and rewards. In some cases this may involve the student formally or informally apologising to any students directly or indirectly offended.

**Overheated opinion**

Controversial issues often touch upon deeply held personal beliefs – the sort of beliefs by which people define themselves. In debating such issues it can be hard to separate a criticism of an abstract idea from a criticism of the person holding that idea. Take the case of vegetarianism, which many people might adopt on the basis of moral beliefs. When the idea of vegetarianism is attacked in a debate, a student may feel that she herself is being verbally attacked and hence tempers may fly. In such cases it is hard not to make the issue personal.
Sometimes having students get ‘worked up’ over an issue is not a bad thing and to some extent is part of the purpose of examining controversial issues. However, what is not desirable is that students feel hurt, offended or psychologically bullied, and this may happen if the issue becomes too personal and the lesson results in an unwanted student versus student confrontation. Strategies that can help to avoid such scenarios include:

**Displacement activities**
A term for activities uses to switch the focus away from a particular students’ belief and on to something else. Such activities could involve something as simple as a card sorting exercise - having ideas written on cards makes it much easier to depersonalise the issue and can make students more likely to feel that they are discussing considering the abstract idea rather than a particular student’s belief.

Another strategy is to use case studies, either written or audiovisual, to shift the focus from a particular student’s belief to a ‘third person’ belief - while still retaining a concrete, personal feel.

Role-play can also be a useful displacement activity. By having an assigned role with particular beliefs to defend, students do not feel their own beliefs are on the line and hence there is less loss of face and personalising of the issue.

Focusing on fact-finding and research rather than on debate and discussion will always help to take the heat out of an issue whilst still achieving the important learning objectives.

**Under-heated opinions**
A more common teaching experience is a classroom full of under-heated opinions. It is suggested above that one way of taking the ‘heat’ out of an issue is to make the focus more abstract or less personal. The reverse can be true when dealing with under-heated opinion - issues need to be made more concrete and to some extent more personal, to encourage the students to become more emotionally involved. Strategies for achieving this:

**Role-play**
Again, by being assigned roles students will either start agreeing with or reacting to their roles, and hopefully start generating their own opinions.

**Case studies**
Looking at specific case studies will always emotionally engage more than just abstract debate. Using audiovisual stimuli will also help to make these case studies more vivid.

**In general**
Teaching controversial issues can be highly rewarding for both the teacher and the students.
- Make sure that you are prepared
- Do not tackle highly controversial issues without first getting the go ahead from your school based mentor
- Think about the sensitivities of the students
- Set clear guidelines for expected behaviour
- Have fun
Further information

www.channel4.com/learning/programmenotes/inset/teachcontrv01.htm
Channel Four have produced a training video showing different teacher tackling controversial issue in the classroom. The video is available to buy from Channel Four whose website also contains guidance.

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes2/Citizenship/teachers_guide/
The teacher’s guide that accompanied the publication of the DfES/QCA key stage 3 schemes of work also contains a specific advice on the teaching of controversial issues.

The web site of the Citizenship foundation contains ideas and guidance for teaching about a range of specific controversial issues.