

Teaching Controversial issues

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Session objectives

- Discuss the potential challenges and opportunities of addressing controversial issues in the classroom.
- Explore existing guidance on teaching controversial issues.
- Share critical thinking techniques for tackling controversial issues in the classroom.



What are controversial issues?

Warm-up activity



What makes an issue controversial?



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What makes an issue controversial? (continued)

1. Because there is insufficient evidence to support an explanation or theory – e.g. anthropogenic climate change in the 1980s
2. Due to disputed claims about underlying facts, or differences of interpretation – e.g. the impact of the British Empire: good or bad?
3. There are different opinions about what should be done, due to uncertainty or conflicts of interests, values, or ideology – e.g. Is Aid the answer to recurrent famines in Africa?
4. For moral or ethical reasons – e.g. should we buy clothes made by child labour?

Roberts M. (2013)



What is a controversial issue?

A controversial issue is any issue that 'arouses strong feelings, and divides opinion in communities and society'.

Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT), 2015



A challenge and an opportunity

- What are the **challenges** of teaching about controversial issues in the classroom?
- What are the **opportunities** for teaching about controversial issues in the classroom?



Controversial issues – the benefits

1. Boost cognitive development
2. Preparation for life in democratic society.
3. Moral duty (provide safe space / help pupils make sense of the world).
4. Learn to engage in dialogue, accept multiple perspectives and worldviews, so are less likely to share extremist views.
5. Tackling controversial issues helps engage pupils with real-world issues, and makes teaching and learning more interesting and relevant.



1. Boost cognitive development

...innovators of the future will be students who can formulate the “right questions”, sift through overwhelming amounts of information, and clearly communicate knowledge they have recombined in original ways...When students practice higher order thinking – when they question an initial assumption or answer and explore it further – more connections and pathways are created in the brain. Challenge fuels this growth... learning won’t happen when learners are in defensive mode...neurological reason behind classroom community and creating safe space to learn. (Pillars 2016)



2. Preparation for life in democratic society

Learning how to deal with sensitive controversial issues in a structured setting...can be a rehearsal for dealing with more immediate controversy in the playground, home or community. It's also part of preparation for living in a democratic society where controversial issues are debated and discussed without recourse to violence. Claire and Holden (2007) in ACT (2015)

Teaching about controversial issues gives children the experience of being involved in complex discussions informed by different values, or at least different interpretations of values, and thus requires them to understand democracy and experience it...ACT (2015)

...important that controversial issues are taught in schools in order to compensate for the one-sided or confusing ways in which some issues are presented in the media. Scarratt and Davison (2012) in ACT (2015)



3. Moral duty

It is important to remember that talk can be cathartic in itself. There will be occasions, therefore, where schools might need to provide opportunities for pupils to express their fears and concerns, e.g., through circle time, assemblies or discussions promoted on a whole school basis. Citizenship Foundation (2003)

...schools which addressed children's concerns (including climate change, poverty, and terrorism) helped them to be less pessimistic and have a more positive outlook. Alexander et al (2010) in ACT (2015)

The number of children seeking help for anxiety has risen sharply in the last year, a leading charity has said, with increased exposure to global affairs on social media suggested as a possible cause Guardian (2016)



4. Learn skills of dialogue / be less susceptible to violent extremism / fundamentalism

...schools should provide a safe space in which children, young people and staff can understand the risks associated with terrorism and develop the knowledge and skills to be able to challenge extremist arguments. DfE 2015

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. QCA 1998

The GLP encourages teaching methodologies such as Philosophy for Children that promote democracy and dialogue (including around contentious issues). Sharing and understanding multiple perspectives on global issues makes it less likely that young people will subscribe to one fundamentalist view of the world. The GLP helps schools develop an ethos promoting tolerance, fairness and respect.” GLP (2015)



5. Makes teaching more interesting for teachers – engaging with real world issues

The professional development that staff have received through the GLP has promoted critical thinking and had therefore made lessons more exciting and interesting - Primary school teacher

The GLP provides a wider context for improving standards in core subjects. Children become passionate and engaged, and you, as a teacher, rediscover that spark that drove you to become a teacher in the first place. – Primary school teacher

The GLP has helped me to let children ask the difficult questions about the world and explore them together. - Primary school teacher

The GLP has come along at a good time for me. I have been teaching for 25 years and needed a change of direction from the SATS production line! (..) From the beginning, the conference in Warwick excited me and the enthusiasm from other teachers and course leaders was infectious. Funnily enough, the feedback from my GLP sessions has mentioned my enthusiasm throughout. - Primary school teacher (GLP)



In teaching about a controversy, we become the controversy (?)

We live in a time of general decline in the protocols of civil discourse: television talk shows bristle with outrageous behavior, which teachers are understandably reluctant to see reproduced in their classrooms. And, too, teachers sense that we are living in particularly cantankerous times when their actions as teachers are under close and often uninformed scrutiny...in teaching about a controversy, we become the controversy... growing belief that a good contemporary education is a “global education...We could well ask, what are our chances of providing our students with a global education if we remain averse to taking on controversial public issues as part of our teaching practice? Green Teacher (2013)



Reality check

In an era of 'fake news' has every political issue become a controversial issue?

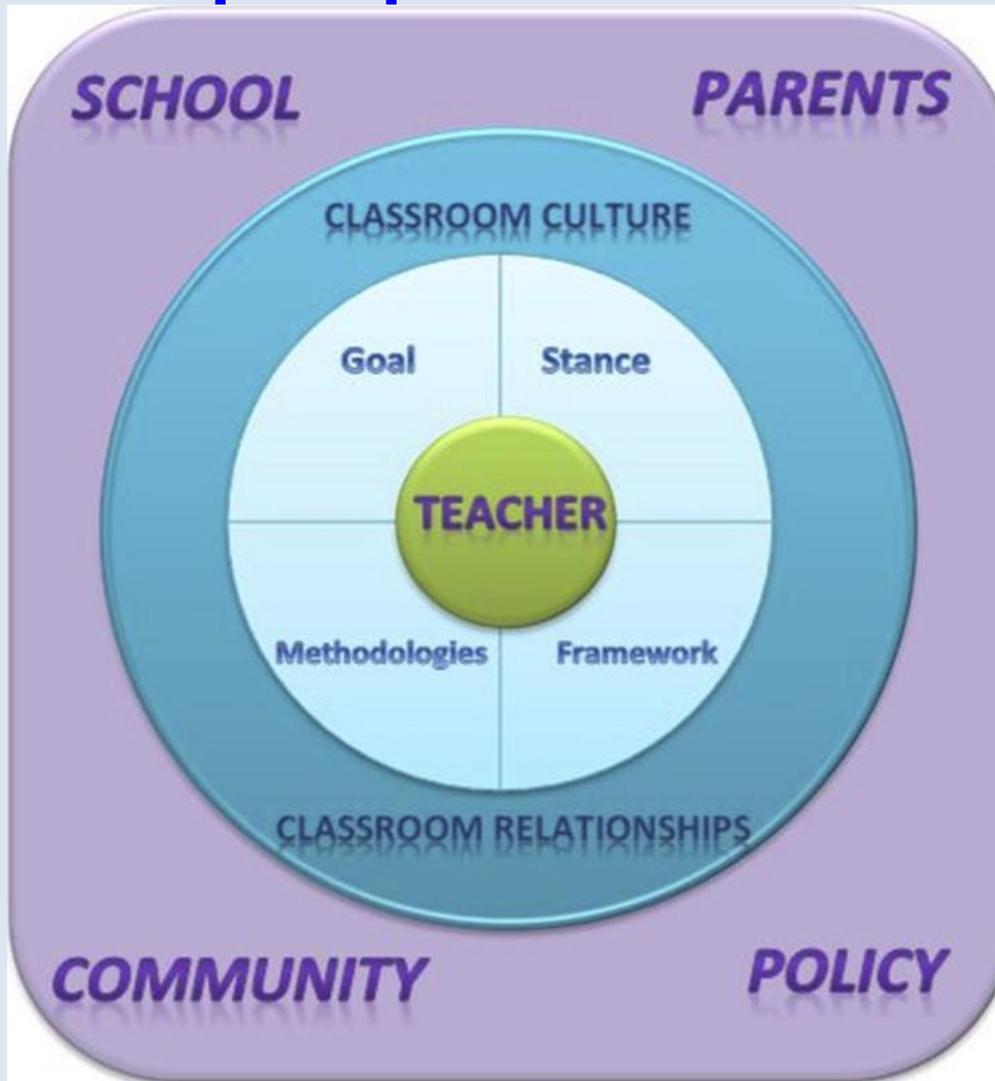


How do you create a classroom climate to discuss controversial issues?

- Have you established round rules for discussing controversial issues?
- Do you know the children well enough to understand what issues are likely to be sensitive or difficult?
- Do children know how to let you (and others) know if they are feeling uncomfortable?
- Are you clear where you should draw the line and how you will communicate this to children?
- Does everyone understand their right to participate and their right to be quiet or keep information private?
- Have you already practised debates and discussions and reflected on how to make them successful?
- Is there a departmental / school policy which supports teachers in tackling controversial issues?
- Are you and the pupils clear where you will draw the line and what will happen if this is crossed? ACT (2015)



Be prepared!



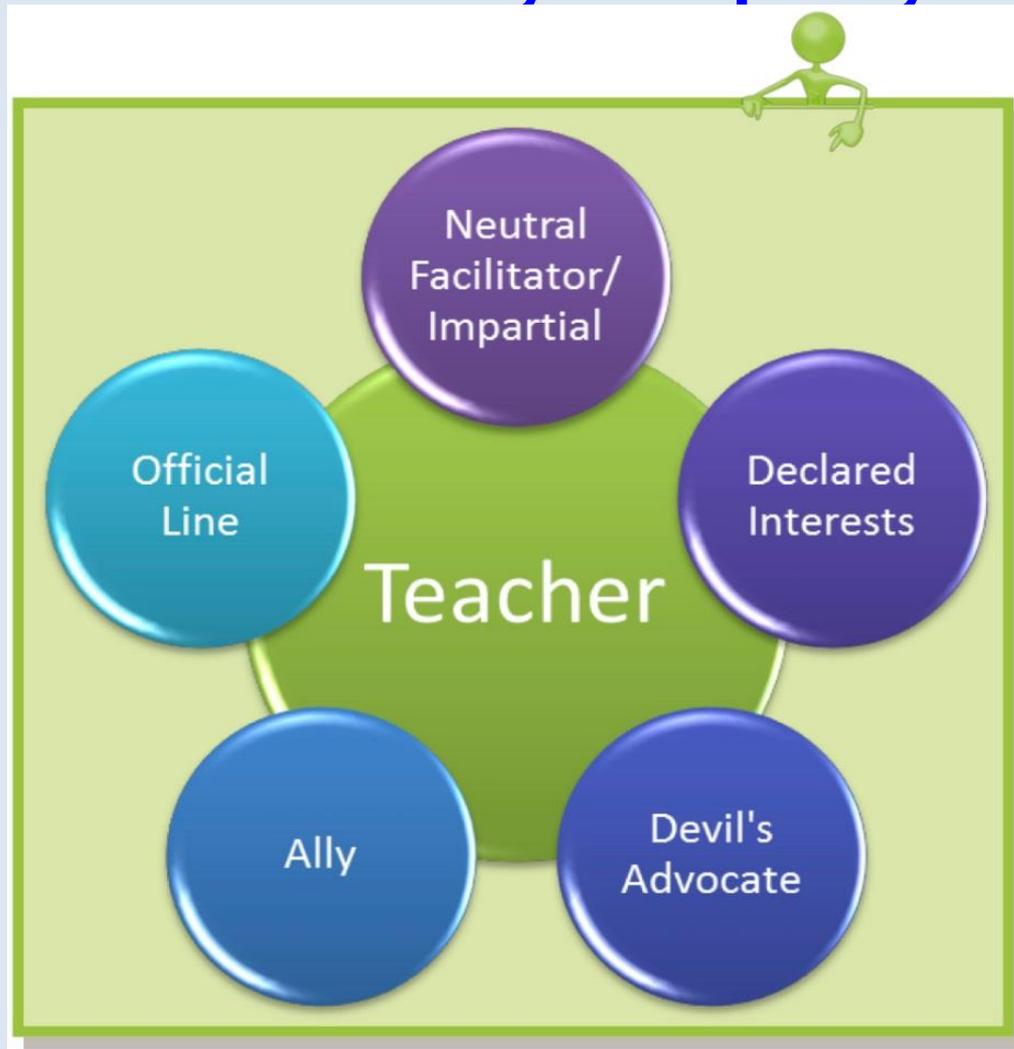
Is there something missing here?

Your pupils!

CDVEC 2012



What role will you play?



CDVEC 2012



Be aware of legal context

- The right to freedom of expression needs to be balanced with the rights for all children to feel safe and secure, and to access education.
- Freedom of expression does not mean you can say what you like.
- See Handout 1: the legal context.



Where to draw the line?

Laws cannot prevent people from holding extreme views provided these are kept private and do not lead to extremist or violent action. However, freedom of speech is not unlimited and there are some views which are publicly forbidden, e.g. incitement to racial hatred. It is common to have restrictions placed on our freedom to speak in the workplace, in the media, in parliament and indeed, in school, and this is a valuable lesson for pupils to learn in itself. ACT (2015)

the correct place to draw the line is not when an opinion causes offence, but is rather when it causes harm, or indeed when it is illegal (as in the case of inciting racial hatred). ACT (2015) quoting Davies (2008)



A question of balance...

...the idea of balance is not problem-free. 'Balance', for example, could mean that every individual lesson is balanced or it could mean that there is balance over a whole topic. 'Balance' could mean that it is the teacher's responsibility to give the opposing view more prominence if the media presentation or the overall class perspective is somewhat one-sided. Oxfam (2003)



Ten critical questions

1. Where is [immigration] an issue?
2. What are the effects of [immigration] on people/environments/jobs, etc.?
3. What things can people do in relation to [immigration]?
4. Who has the power to make decisions about [immigration]?
5. Who does not have the power to make decisions about [immigration]?
6. Are there people who will benefit from [immigration]?
7. Are there people who will lose out from [immigration]?
8. How does your life/work link to [immigration]?
9. How do we talk about [immigration] in our community?
10. How can the effects of [immigration] be shared equally?

<https://globaldimension.org.uk/ten-critical-questions/>



Ten critical questions (continued)

- Could you use these ten critical questions in any of your lessons?
- Could they support teaching controversial issues?
- In what context? Which subjects?
- How would it differ doing this with primary and secondary pupils?
- Would you change, add or adapt anything?



The Demystification Strategy: A framework for teaching controversial public issues

1. What is the issue about?
2. What are the arguments?
3. What is assumed?
4. How are the arguments manipulated? Clarke (2013)



What strategies will you use?

- Distancing
- Compensatory
- Empathetic
- Exploratory
- De-personalising
- Engaging



Summary of key points from guidance

- Set ground rules.
- Consider the most appropriate role for you to play as a teacher.
- Discussions should balance the right to freedom of expression with the right for all pupils to feel safe and secure.
- Make sure you know where to 'draw the line' (refer to government and school policies, and legal context).
- Be aware of the sensitivities of your class.
- Ensure multiple perspectives are shared.
- Be aware of your own views and how this might influence the balance of the debate.
- Be careful about sharing your own view, especially with young children.
- Encourage further research from trusted sources of information.



Group activity 1: scenarios in the classroom

Scenario 1

It's break time and Year 6 boys are fighting in the playground. A white British pupil has accused an Afghan pupil (who is a refugee) of being a terrorist.



Group activity 1: scenarios in the classroom (continued)

Scenario 2

Before reading a story to your class at the end of the day, a Year 4 pupil asks: 'My mum is Spanish. Will she have to go back to live in Spain soon?'



Group activity 1: scenarios in the classroom (continued)

Scenario 3

A pupil whose parents are from Yemen asks in a Citizenship lesson why the U.K. is arming Saudi Arabia when the Saudis are killing people in Yemen, including 40 children on a school bus. Many parents of pupils in the school are employed in a local factory that makes weapons.



Teacher's response

- Is this situation controversial?
Why? Why not?
- What would your initial response be?
- What would your long-term response be?



Group activity 2: critical thinking

- Consider the critical thinking quotes around the room – which one do you identify with the most?



Critical thinking – definitions

- Critical: Making careful judgments about how good or bad something is.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

- ‘Active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.’

John Dewey, 1909

- Critical thinking: self-directed thinking that produces new and innovative ideas and solves problems. Reflecting critically on learning experiences and processes and making effective decisions.

British Council: Connecting Classrooms free CPD programme



Philosophy for Children (P4C)

Philosophy for Children (P4C) aims to encourage children and adults to think:

- critically
- caringly
- creatively
- collaboratively.

'I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think.'

Socrates (469–399 BCE)



Group activity 3: tools for critical thinking in the classroom

- Each group considers one of the following controversial issues:
 - famine in East Africa
 - Brexit
 - immigration.
- Which critical thinking tool(s) would you use to address this issue? Which age group(s) could you use it with/adapt it for?



Group activity 5: tools for critical thinking in the classroom

A couple of activities to illustrate...

- Speed debate
- Diamond Nine



Berrymede Junior School case study

Tackling extremism in a Year 6 literacy lesson, using the ten critical questions

- *'British values of tolerance, democracy and the rule of law are very well promoted by the school. Pupils' social, moral and cultural development is actively promoted through debates, pupils' participation in school council and opportunities to take on responsibilities, as well as through assemblies, personal and social development lessons, and the school's "restorative justice" system. As a result, pupils fully understand the consequences of their actions; they discuss relevant subjects linked to local and world events, including extremism and radicalisation. They understand well the wide range of faiths and cultures found in modern Britain and advocate the need for tolerance and acceptance.'*
- Ofsted report for Berrymede Junior School, 2015



How open-minded are you?

The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.

Dogmatism and scepticism are both, in a sense, absolute philosophies; one is certain of knowing, the other of not knowing. What philosophy should dissipate is certainty, whether of knowledge or ignorance. Bertrand Russell



Useful handbooks

- CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit (2012) *Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom* *Citizenship Classroom: A Resource for Citizenship Education* <http://www.ubuntu.ie/media/controversial-issues.pdf>
- *Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3* (2015) CCEA, Northern Ireland Curriculum
http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/curriculum/area_of_learning/CCEA_A_Controversial_Issues.pdf
- *Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE)* (2015) - Training Pack for Teachers Council of Europe
<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/teaching-controversial-issues-developing-effective-training-for-teachers-and-school-leaders>
- *#ReclaimRadical: Toolkit for professionals to explore PREVENT with young people* Leicester City Council and partners
<http://www.leicesterprevent.co.uk/reclaim-radical/>



Further resources

- Amnesty International (2011)
https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/teaching_controversial_issues_2.pdf
- Childnet International / London Grid for Learning *Trust Me: Think critically about what you see online* <http://www.childnet.com/resources/trust-me>
- Citizenship Foundation: *Controversial issues: guidance for schools* 2003
<https://www.youngcitizens.org/controversial-issues-guidance-for-schools>
- Pat Clarke (2013) *Teaching Controversial Issues* Green Teacher *A four-step classroom strategy for clear thinking on controversial issues*
<http://greenteacher.com/teaching-controversial-issues/>
- Coventry University / Aziz Foundation (2017) *What the Prevent duty means for schools and colleges in England: An analysis of educationalists' experiences*
<http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/research-news/2017/what-the-prevent-duty-means/>
- Doing Good Leeds – Leeds Third Sector
<https://doinggoodleeds.org.uk/challenging-conversation-toolkit/>
- European Commission (2017) *The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and violent radicalisation*



Further resources (cont.)

- Julia Fiehn (2005) *Agree to disagree - Citizenship and controversial issues* LSDA http://www.activecitizensfe.org.uk/uploads/2/2/9/1/22910514/agree_to_disagree.pdf
- Stephen Hull (2015) *On top of worrying about exam results and inspections, should teachers have to respond to complex global issues?* TES / British Council <https://www.tes.com/news/top-worrying-about-exam-results-and-inspections-should-teachers-have-respond-complex-global>
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue <https://www.isdglobal.org/> (*Extreme Dialogue* <http://extremedialogue.org/educational-resources/>)
- Miriam Hyman Memorial Trust./ IoE at UCL *Miriam's Vision: A Response to the 2005 London Bombings* <http://miriamsvision.org/>
- DfE / Home Office *Educate against Hate* <http://educateagainsthate.com>
- Oxfam (2018) *Teaching Controversial Issues* Global Citizenship Guide, <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/teaching-controversial-issues>
- Don Rowe (2015) Citizenship Foundation *Talking about values in the classroom: A professional development unit*
- Stockton-on-Tees <https://www.stockton.gov.uk/community-safety/prevent/prevent-teaching-and-learning-resource/>
- UCL Institute of education *Since 9/11* <https://since911.com/911-education-programme>



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<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/teaching-controversial-issues-developing-effective-training-for-teachers-and-school-leaders>
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http://clients.squareeye.net/uploads/glp/GLP_pdfs/Resources/Topics/Values/glp_british_values.pdf
- Guardian (2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/31/childline-anxiety-calls-spike-uk-children-express-fears-global-events-brexit-syria>
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Thank you!

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