

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES



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Much teaching covers areas considered 'known' with closed questions. Teaching also touches on areas which give rise to many different opinions, evoke complicated emotions and lead to difficult discussions. They are controversial and require special consideration.

Controversial issues and human rights education

Human rights are core, moral principles and legal instruments of most societies. Underlying human rights are the principles of equality, dignity and respect for the person which are generally considered to be non-controversial. However some aspects of human rights are controversial and freely debated. Opinions differ, for example, on how human rights should be upheld, when it is acceptable to restrict them, and how to balance conflicting rights. Amnesty International welcomes and encourages the open discussion of these differing opinions. Freedom of speech itself is a human right, and, in part, it is through such shared deliberations that democratic states develop their values, policies and practices.

Aims

Many educators suggest that it is important and worthwhile to tackle controversial issues in schools.¹ Some place greater emphasis on the *cognitive* benefits of such teaching, stressing that issues such as the death penalty and euthanasia are important for young people to know about (indeed it is their right to know about important issues that may affect their lives). Further, learning to reason about such issues is an invaluable personal and societal skill. Others place weight on the *social* importance of teaching controversial issues – learning to express opinion and having your opinion challenged; being aware of the diversity of opinions and to argue in an appropriate manner; learning to accept and tolerate difference. Placing different weight on these aims may affect how the topic is approached, eg by favouring research over discussion.

Teaching methods

As with most teaching a range of different methods are useful when approaching controversial issues.

Setting ground rules at the start of any discussion can be a useful way to ensure that it remains manageable, especially where there are strong differences of opinion. Human rights principles can be used as a framework for the ground rules: young people should be encouraged to recognise the right to freedom of expression of all members of the class, and the participation of *all* should be encouraged.

Facilitator's opinion

Before approaching any topic it is worth the facilitator considering whether or not they will give their own opinion. This will guard against accidental slips and allow the facilitator to reveal their opinion in appropriate manner, should they choose to. The issue of teacher opinion can be used to map out some of the different pedagogical positions.

a) The teacher gives their opinion (sometimes referred to as being a *committed participant*)

In the UK there is no legislation forbidding the teacher from giving their opinion. Indeed relevant guidance mentions the approach as on a par with others (below).² It is worth noting that in the past this approach has itself generated some controversy with some arguing that it is the duty of teachers to give their opinion and so model the skills of critical thinking,³ whereas others argue against this, suggesting the status of the teacher would always mean that their opinion was given too much weight.⁴ The very existence of this debate suggests that this approach should be used with care. Previous guidance for citizenship teachers suggests that the teacher giving their own opinion can be worthwhile but only if certain conditions are met:

- Students have time to challenge the teacher's opinion and to express their own thoughts. Also that students are in a suitable intellectual and psychological position to be able to do this.
- The teacher is comfortable with their opinion being challenged and models good practice in this area, eg does not become overly defensive and is willing to listen to others.
- The teacher is confident that overall balance can still be achieved.⁵

b) The teacher does not give their opinion.

There are many different ways this can be achieved by:

- the teacher situating him or herself as the neutral facilitator of a student discussion – expressing no personal view at all;
- presenting a range of views, including ones the facilitator may personally disagree with, in a balanced way;
- challenging consensus ('devil's advocate') – opposing the position widely expressed in the group to challenge consensus and provoke response.

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► Bias

UK legislation asks that teachers try to ensure balance in the teaching of controversial issues. While a perfectly balanced lesson is unachievable, working toward balance involves treating the variety of arguments in an even-handed way. It is also worth considering ways in which the teaching may be unconsciously biased, eg by selection of source material, the teacher's facial expressions, favouring the opinion of certain students. Teachers can also help to overcome bias by offering non-western sources on controversial topics.

Student opinion

Although controversial issues, by nature, are not resolved this does not mean that all possible answers are equally valid. We should expect answers to be backed up by appropriate reasons which in turn should be open for questioning. Some answers may be based on false evidence or involve faulty reasoning and, as such, should be challenged.

Sometimes a student's opinion may also go against common values that should inform all teaching, for example a student may put forward racist views, and, if so, should be challenged or even censored if offence is being caused.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides some useful wording in this area. Article 13 states that:

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... The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions... for respect of the rights or reputations of others.⁶

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Students engaging in discussion using an Amnesty resource pack.

- 1 For example Hess, D. (2009) *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, Oxon: Routledge, or Hayward, G. (1997) *Teaching About Values: A New Approach*, London: Cassell.
- 2 See QCA (1998) *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* London, section 10 and QCA/DfES (2001) *Citizenship Schemes of Work for key stage 3: Teacher's guide* London: QCA/DfES (QCA/01/776)
- 3 See Siegel, H. (1988) *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking and Education*, London: Routledge (p22) and Warnock, M. (1975). 'The Neutral Teacher'. In M.J. Taylor (Ed.), *Progress and Problems in Moral Education*. Windsor, NFER Pub. Company Ltd., pp. 103-112
- 4 See Stenhouse L (1970) *The Humanities Project: an introduction* London: Heinemann or Bridges D (1979) *Education, Democracy and Discussion*, Slough: NFER.
- 5 Hayward J (2007) 'Values, beliefs and the citizenship teacher' in Gearon L ed (2007) *A practical guide to teaching citizenship in the secondary school* Oxon: Routledge
- 6 UN (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC)