

# How to teach controversial issues

## Why teach controversial issues?

### 1. Student development

- Controversial issues are a **fact of life**. Students will form opinions on many issues during their lives. Dealing with controversy maturely is a life skill teachers are uniquely placed to help students develop.
- Tackling controversial issues encourages **independent thinking**. By thinking critically, suggesting justifications, and voicing their opinions in the face of disagreement, students become better speakers, listeners and thinkers.
- Your classroom can provide a space to **challenge misconceptions** students may have acquired from home or the media. You can provide counter-points and balanced information to make students re-consider biases or prejudices.

### 2. Teaching practice

- **Teaching standards** (following the Education Act 1996) compel teachers to offer a 'balanced presentation of opposing views' in classrooms. Teaching controversial issues is a **demonstrable** way to do so.
- This applies to other legislative/Ofsted criteria such as **SMSC, Prevent** and curriculum **enrichment**.
- Controversial issues develop **subject-specific** skills e.g. speaking and listening (English), providing justification (R.E.) and balancing arguments (Geography).
- Your subject can come to life through controversial issues, which can **boost engagement**.

## Knowledge is power

It's important that **all** students have enough knowledge to engage with a topic and form their own opinions.

### 1. Homework

*Before the session*

- Ask students to **do their own research**. They will come to the lesson with enthusiasm and facts to share, but also with misconceptions to address and questions to answer.

*After the session*

- Ask students to **'write up'** their opinions, perhaps in the style of an exam question. Has their opinion changed?
- Students could submit **anonymous questions** at the end of the lesson, which you can answer next time. If collecting questions, ask all students to hand in a slip of paper, even if they only write 'I have no question'.

### 2. Teaching the Issue

- Include a **starter** activity and a closing **plenary**. For practical suggestions see our opinion elicitation activities below.
- Build knowledge in a participatory way. An **interactive quiz** can involve the whole class at once, provide new information and re-cap on student preparation/homework.
- Increase accessibility by using a **range of mediums**, including text, spoken information, video (with subtitles), images or kinesthetic tasks.
- Make information **relevant** to students to avoid the issue seeming 'dry'. See our 'secondary resources' section below for extra ideas.

### 3. Using role-play

By stepping into character, a potentially **overwhelming issue is briefly held at a distance**, so that students can engage with it more. Role-play gives students time to explore, before reflecting critically. This can **build empathy**, as students may need to think about an issue from a different perspective.

## Practical suggestions for eliciting opinions and facilitating discussion

### 1. Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down

Ask the class a yes or no question. Students respond with either a thumbs up or thumbs down.

*Tip:* Students close their eyes so they are not influenced by others. Ensure this by asking them to rest their heads on their desks.

*Tip:* Students may choose a thumb position 'in the middle', if they're unsure.

### 2. Stand Up/Sit Down

The same principle as above. Ask all students to stand but this time students sit down if their answer is 'no'.

*Tip:* Ask subsequent, escalating questions e.g. 'Sit down if....', 'What if....?' for a longer inquiry.

### 3. Spectrum line

Students stand on an imaginary line to represent their answer. One end is '100% yes' and the other '100% no'.

Ask students to explain why they have stood there. Students can respond to each other's points.

*Tip:* Leave time for students to tell the person nearest to them why they took their current position.

*Tip:* Allow students to move during the activity if their opinion is changed during the discussion.

### Challenges and strategies to overcome them

#### Challenges

**Trivialisation/humour** Some fear that making controversial and sensitive issues 'fun' means that students won't appreciate their seriousness. Humour can help students to begin engaging with an overwhelming topic. We recommend balancing 'fun' activities like role play with a contextualizing activity or plenary.

**Shock** Shock, like humour, may be a useful tool to engage a class, but teachers must be mindful of the age and sensitivity of their students.

**Personal experience/sensitivity** *Before the lesson*  
Some students may have first-hand experience of a controversial issue, for example war or abortion. You can flag the content of an upcoming lesson ahead of time, or by notifying parents. Allow students to 'opt out' of a session in advance, and reiterate this at the beginning of the lesson.

#### *During the lesson*

Group work is a good opportunity to check on a student, whether they seem distressed or not. Other strategies (below) will help you manage discussion to minimise the risk of distress. If a student appears upset, check in with them, and your school's safeguarding lead after the session.

**Disrespectful language** Students might repeat ignorant language without realising, and harm other students. Consider discussion and keep the tone respectful. Consider how/whether you will reprimand students for this. A class agreement (below) can help manage discussion and keep the tone respectful.

**Teacher confidence** Presenting new or extra-curricular material confidently can be difficult. Using materials by those affected by an issue can provide authenticity and avoid misrepresentation. Third-party resources and guest speaker programmes like ours can do much of this work for you!

**Parental disagreement** Gain support from your school's SLT or Head of Department. Be prepared to explain to concerned parents that your lessons are unbiased and balanced, referring to teaching standards (see 'teaching practice' above). Parents may withdraw students for many reasons. Don't take this personally, and prepare work for these students.

#### Other strategies

**Class agreement** At the start of the year/term, let the class know that they will explore controversial issues. Ask students what they would like to include in a group agreement for these sessions, e.g. 'not talking over each other' and 'being respectful'. Displaying this agreement helps manage discussion by reminding students of their rules.

**Depersonalise language** It's important that students explain why they hold an opinion, using facts where appropriate. Talking about issues and evidence, rather than people, means fewer students will feel judged by others' remarks, and will be more likely to participate. This could be part of a class agreement - some language is simply unacceptable.

**Know your class** This guide is merely suggestive. Anticipate how certain students will react to a given topic. Plan accordingly and choose activities that help you best facilitate learning e.g. assign different tasks to different students, or offer different ways to feed into discussions.

**Teacher's opinion** Disclosing your personal opinion may create an imbalance in your discussion, or make some students feel that their opinion is 'wrong'. Try substituting 'I think...' with 'some say...'. This way you can balance conversations either by stating your opinion or by playing devil's advocate.



#### For further information:

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