Why teach contemporary issues?

**What is an issue?**

At its most basic, an issue is a topic or problem about which there are multiple perspectives. A contemporary issue is one that has current and immediate relevance. This might be because it is trending on social media such as TikTok or students are seeing it on TV, online or even, for a few students, in newspapers or on radio or podcasts.

An issue is not simply a case study or an example, although there is some overlap. The main difference from the perspective of this resource is that issues can be divisive, with divergent perspectives. These perspectives on issues can be more or less strongly held, and issues can have varying levels of controversy. Much of the literature around teaching contemporary issues focuses on controversial issues, which have been defined as ‘issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society’ (Kerr and Huddleston 2015). Contemporary issues are not necessarily controversial, although much of the hesitancy to include them in teaching and learning programs is due to their potential to be controversial.

The divergence of perspectives can stem from differences in values, differences of opinion about the correct way forward, or different interpretations of the ‘truth’ of a situation (Kerr and Huddleston 2015). Issues can also belong to one or more categories such as political, environmental, social, or connected to identity or diversity.

‘By investigating contemporary issues and events students learn to value their belonging in a diverse and dynamic society, develop points of view and positively contribute locally, nationally, regionally and globally. As reflective, active and informed decision-makers, students will be well placed to contribute to an evolving and healthy democracy that fosters the wellbeing of Australia as a democratic nation.’

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2017)

Contemporary issues provide an authentic and valuable opportunity for students to learn about the world around them. Yet it can be daunting for teachers to engage with contemporary issues in Civics and Citizenship due to their controversy, their dynamic and unpredictable nature, and the challenge of linking them to the curriculum. This resource examines reasons to teach contemporary issues and discusses some common challenges teachers identify as barriers to using contemporary issues in their Civics and Citizenship classes.

This resource doesn’t define contemporary issues as those occurring within a certain time frame but rather asks you to think about whether a contemporary issue is within the lifetime and relevant experience of students and how applicable it is to learning outcomes. Teachers should consider the relevance of contemporary issues to the three strands of the curriculum – Government and Democracy, Laws and Citizens, and Citizenship, Diversity and Identity – and its relevance to events today, its connection to students’ lives, its importance to society in general, and its relationship to the values and priorities of the school community.

There is some consensus in Civics and Citizenship education literature that best practices prioritise the use of contemporary, real-world examples (Biesta 2011; Hess 2009; Westheimer and Kahne 2004; Schulz et al. 2018). Reasons for this fall into four categories:

* Contemporary issues can help to connect the Civics and Citizenship content to students’ lives, incorporating student voice and agency. Contemporary issues are relevant.
* Contemporary issues help to build student knowledge of the world around them and support active and engaged citizenship.
* Practice engaging with potentially controversial issues in the classroom can help students to make positive contributions to civic discourse.
* Students will engage with authentic texts, building important literacy and media literacy skills.

When considering the points above, it can be helpful for teachers and students to examine how issues have been dealt with in the past, and how society has changed its approach to certain issues over time. This helps students build valuable context and link to prior knowledge, such as topics they may have covered in other subjects.

Many reports have identified that teachers can feel quite nervous about teaching controversial issues (Henderson 2017; Kerr and Huddleston 2015; Ghazarian, Laughland-Booy, De Lazzari and Skrbis 2020). Some of the potential barriers to teaching controversial issues are listed below; many of these are discussed in more detail in other modules in this series.

Choosing appropriate teaching approaches

* How do I avoid perceptions of bias in the classroom?
* How do I find and use different perspectives?
* How can I encourage empathy, respect and critical thinking through my teaching decisions?

These considerations are addressed in Modules 2, 3 and 4.

Protecting student sensitivities and ensuring a safe classroom

* How do I maintain an open and respectful classroom environment when discussing controversial contemporary issues?
* How do I protect vulnerable students from discrimination when dealing with contemporary issues?

Module 2 focuses on these considerations.

Classroom climate and behaviour management

* How do I ensure that the classroom climate is supportive and positive, without tensions running high?
* How do I facilitate a discussion?
* Will I lose control of the class if we start discussing a divisive issue?
* How do I manage students with views that are very different to mine?
* How do I manage students with extreme views?

Modules 2 and 3 provide guidance on these challenges.

Lack of expert knowledge

* How do I teach contemporary issues when I don’t feel like the expert in the room?

This is a complex question around the role of the teacher in the political classroom. Modules 2, 3, 4 and 6 could assist with this concern.

Unpredictability

* How do I deal with spontaneous questions or remarks?
* How do I plan for contemporary issues in my teaching? I don’t know when they will arise.

Modules 3, 4 and 5 will help prepare for the unpredictability of contemporary issues.