Professional learning activity: Exploring evidence and attitudes to teaching contemporary issues

**Activity suggested duration:** 55 minutes

**Activity description:** This consensus-building activity aims to synthesise evidence and address challenges associated with teaching contemporary issues. Participants will develop a shared statement on teaching contemporary issues through a consensus-building activity that participants might then use in the classroom with students. It is based on [Consensus Decision Making: a short guide (Seeds for Change 2020)](https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/shortconsensus#process). It models a process that can be used for building consensus around contentious issues in class.

There can be a tension between the learning opportunities provided by contemporary issues and the challenges of aligning them to the curriculum and incorporating them into the teaching program. This activity asks participants to sample a consensus-building protocol to create a statement that summarises your faculty or learning area’s approach to contemporary issues and the teaching group’s thoughts and feelings about it.

The statement will authentically incorporate both the reasons for, and the challenges associated with, incorporating contemporary issues into your Civics and Citizenship program. The goal is to consider teacher thinking and voice about this as well as advice from [Learning in Civics and Citizenship](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/the-humanities/civics-and-citizenship/introduction/learning-in-civics-and-citizenship), the Department of Education and Training, your school sector and your school leadership. This creates a dialogic environment within the learning area and introduces a democratic decision-making protocol that participants can then use with students.

**Required resources:** sticky notes, whiteboard or butcher’s paper and markers (or a digital alternative), the discussion prompts, and the scaffold below

**Learning leader preparation:**

* Read 1.1.
* Read [Consensus Decision Making: a short guide (Seeds for Change 2020)](https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/shortconsensus#process).

**Participant preparation:**

* Read 1.1.
* Read [Consensus Decision Making: a short guide (Seeds for Change 2020)](https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/shortconsensus#process).

Activity steps

1. Introduce and clarify the issue. (5 minutes)

What is our learning area approach to incorporating contemporary issues into our Civics and Citizenship program?

1. Open the issue for discussion. (10 minutes)

The following prompts can help start discussion. There are additional conversation starters underneath these activity steps.

* What are our school values? How can our school values guide our decision on what contemporary issues we use?
* How is this currently being done in the classroom?
* What information in ‘1.1 Why teach contemporary issues?’ was interesting or new?
* What challenges do we see?
* What supports do we have?
* What are our reasons for including contemporary issues?
1. Explore ideas in a broad discussion (10 minutes)

How can ‘1.1 Why teach contemporary issues?’ help to deepen the conversation? Brainstorm ideas and statements that should be included in a document. Consider generating lists of reasons for including contemporary issues in teaching Civics and Citizenship, barriers to doing this, and possible strategies for teaching contemporary issues successfully. The ‘Conversation starters’ listed below may be helpful to ensure a rich discussion.

1. Form a proposal. (10 minutes)

Begin to write a draft shared approach. Look for a solution that meets everyone’s most important needs. The scaffolds provided below may be useful to draft this statement.

1. Amend the proposal. (15 minutes)

Look for changes that make the proposal stronger and more representative of the different perspectives in the discussion.

1. Test for agreement. (5 minutes)

Display the proposal and read aloud. Check if there is real agreement. Start with who is against the proposal. Ask the following questions:

* Any blocks?
* Any stand-asides?
* Any reservations?
* Do we have consensus?

If there is a block or too many stand-asides, repeat step 5. Please note that descriptions of each of these actions are in the Seeds for Change (2020) pre-reading for this activity.

1. Work out how to implement the proposed approach.

This might involve participating in other parts of this professional learning package at a future time.

Please note that this is a complex protocol. Make the instructions available for everyone and provide them as pre-reading to make the process run more smoothly.

Conversation starters

The following statements and questions can be used as part of the participant discussion in this activity.

* Students will engage with authentic texts and build important literacy and media literacy skills.
* Contemporary issues take time to incorporate into curriculum plans. They need to be updated, kept relevant and be responsive to student voice, and they can be challenging to resource.
* Contemporary issues can help to connect the Civics and Citizenship content to students’ lives and incorporate student voice and agency.
* Teachers might be targeted for including contentious issues in their classes.
* Contemporary issues help to build student knowledge of the world and support them to be active, informed and engaged citizens.
* Learning outcomes can also be enhanced when students choose the issues to explore in class because they matter to them (Kahne and Sporte 2008).
* Practice engaging with potentially controversial issues in the classroom can help students to contribute positively to civic discourse outside of school.
* Parents could complain about their child discussing a particular issue in class.
* I am worried that teachers could bring their unconscious bias into the classroom.
* I’m not an expert on every issue. How can I incorporate them into my teaching?
* I’m not confident with the Civics and Citizenship curriculum. How do I incorporate contemporary issues?
* Looking over the curriculum, I can see so many opportunities to incorporate contemporary issues.
* I don’t have time to read the news regularly. How can I do this?
* The students are so much more engaged when they are learning about issues they care about.

Scaffolds for a learning area approach statement

The following sentence stems can be used to draft the statement.

* Research in this area suggests that …
* Our school community and context indicate that …
* Our students are skilled in X and developing expertise in Y so we can start with Z.
* Supports that we can rely on are …
* Risks that we can see are …
* Strategies that we could use to mitigate these risks are …