How do school culture and context support democratic education?

Australian society is diverse, and our classrooms reflect this. Teaching using contemporary issues gives us the opportunity to discuss matters that students care about, and this poses its own challenges. Managing student safety when discussing culture, religion and history can feel very complex. The activities in this module help us to understanding our own impact as teachers in this space and to consider the implications of school context so that we can make informed decisions about next steps for implementing contemporary issues in Civics and Citizenship teaching.

‘Young people who find their own voice in a supportive school environment   
are more likely to develop a confident voice, a capacity to act in the world,   
and a willingness to lead others. By empowering students, we enhance   
student engagement and enrich their participation in the classroom,   
school and community.’

Empowering students and building school pride,   
Department of Education and Training (2019)

We all strive to create safe classroom environments for our students, to nurture wellbeing and ongoing development. Research tells us that supportive classroom environments are required for the effective teaching of contemporary, real-world issues (Hess 2008; Seigel-Stechler 2020). In this module we will explore school context and the role of the teacher in supporting contemporary issues learning.

An open and safe classroom where students feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their ideas helps students to learn in civics education (Flanagan et al. 2010; Geboers et al. 2013; Hess 2009). The backgrounds, experiences, conditions or identities of many students make them particularly vulnerable to discrimination. Comments that target individuals or groups of students send a signal to the whole group that safety is not a priority. It is therefore important to consider school- and classroom-level planning and responses to these situations. It is helpful for teachers to consider the school-level expectations and supports that underpin their classroom practice and review them in the context of contemporary issues.

Establishing a safe school and classroom culture early on and practising respectful class collaboration and discussion with less-divisive issues can help to create a positive climate in which to attempt teaching controversial issues (Seigel-Stechler 2020; Kerr and Huddleston 2015).

Teacher political perspectives

Individual teachers have their own values, lived experiences and political perspectives. Perspectives are the points of view and experiences of individuals and groups in relation to a contemporary issue. It is the position from which they see and understand events and issues going on around them. People may have different points of view about a particular event or issue, depending on their culture, age, gender, social position, beliefs and values.

Apprehension about being accused of bias is frequently identified as a potential barrier to using contemporary issues when teaching Civics and Citizenship. So how can teachers navigate contemporary issues and political content in a way that encourages critical thinking and exploration of topics, and avoids real or perceived bias?

Initial guidance comes from the Department of Education and Training policy on [Political Activities](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/political-activities/policy) (2022), which focuses on the purpose of any political activities. Teachers should be private about their own political activities and only engage in political discussions for educational purposes. Teachers are free to use resources in the classroom such as political media coverage and material related to lobbying or political parties, provided it is done for educational purposes. Alongside this advice, teachers can be guided further in [selecting suitable teaching resources](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/selecting-suitable-teaching-resources/policy) (2021). The Department’s policy on ‘Teaching and Learning Resources – Selecting Appropriate Materials’ is to support teachers in avoiding potentially offensive topics.

It is important for teachers to build awareness of their own political perspectives and values. Tools such as the [ABC’s Vote Compass](https://votecompass.abc.net.au/) and reflective exercises such as Activity 2.3 in this resource are particularly helpful.

When discussing contemporary issues, teachers should prompt students to consider the perspectives of a range of stakeholders. By exploring diverse and competing perspectives, students can be supported to understand and respect different beliefs, values, points of view and reasons for action, and how these influence different people’s perspectives.

A related challenge is how to manage situations when students have strongly opposing or extremist viewpoints. Building an open and respectful classroom culture (Activity 2.2 and Module 3), in which students are expected to engage in respectful civic discourse supported by robust evidence, can help mitigate this.