Approaches to teaching contemporary issues

A common challenge when teaching Civics and Citizenship, particularly when teaching contemporary or controversial issues, is determining what role to take as the teacher. How should you approach the issue? The following discussion and professional learning activities introduce several common techniques for achieving balance and ask participants to reflect on their own experiences of these styles as well as consider the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Both international research (Lee, White and Dong 2021; Kerr and Huddleston 2015) and local feedback indicate that teachers can feel apprehensive about introducing contemporary, real-world or controversial issues into their classroom because of the risk of ‘becoming the controversy’ or being accused of bias. To counteract this, it helps to have agreement within a school, faculty or learning area about which approaches are used and which issues are tackled. This can also be linked back to school values. This module is intended to support teacher reflection and build self-awareness about the impacts of different teaching decisions. It is intended to highlight that complete neutrality in the classroom is impossible.

The following section describes common approaches that teachers use when discussing contemporary issues in the classroom. You may have used many of these before – sometimes in a single session, as the flow of the class requires you to pivot.

Teaching approaches and teacher roles

* **Neutral chairperson**

A neutral chairperson facilitates the discussion but doesn’t express personal views or allegiances. Using this approach can decrease the likelihood of undue teacher influence but is quite challenging to implement and maintain, especially in the face of student misinformation or extremist views. It could also reinforce the ‘status quo’ of existing attitudes and prejudices. Some teachers may feel that this approach could make the teacher seem less credible, or less of an ‘expert’ to their students.

* **Balanced**

A teacher using a balanced approach persuasively presents diverse perspectives on an issue but doesn’t reveal their own opinions or viewpoints. This is a valuable approach in presenting the contested nature of issues and can help students to understand the evidence and assumptions underlying different perspectives, particularly those that are less familiar to them. If not used with nuance it can give the impression that there are only two sides to an issue. Some criticisms of this approach are that it can give the impression that all opinions are equally valid and grounded in evidence, which can introduce and validate fringe, extremist and prejudiced positions into the classroom.

* **Devil’s advocate**

A teacher using a devil’s advocate approach might persuasively present a perspective that is opposed to that taken by an individual or group of students, or that of another source in class, such as a recorded interview that is being used as a classroom resource. This can help to ensure that a range of perspectives are seriously considered by students but can also reinforce existing prejudices or give students the impression that there is a single correct perspective.

* **Stated commitment**

Teachers using a stated commitment approach can let students know their own perspective on an issue. This can help students to be aware of teacher prejudices and biases while an issue is discussed, supporting critical thinking. This approach provides an opportunity for teachers to model authentic reasoning in response to an issue. Significantly, this approach may lead students to accept a perspective simply because it is the teachers.

* **Ally**

A teacher using an ally approach will explicitly support and build on the perspective taken by a group of students, which can strengthen the voices of weaker or marginalised students. This approach can demonstrate how arguments may be built on and developed. A criticism of this approach is that it can give other students the impression that the teacher is promoting their own viewpoint or ‘playing favourites’.

* **Official line**

A teacher using an ‘official line’ approach will promote the perspective of public authorities, usually the government. This can help to protect teachers from accusations of bias and from recriminations by these authorities but can also stifle discourse about issues. It can create the impression that the official line cannot be questioned and make students feel like their perspective is irrelevant.

Adapted from Stradling (1984) and Kerr and Huddleston (2015)