**Dr Marc Pruyn (Marc):** Well, we're here today, chatting with Adam Brodie-McKenzie who's a secondary teacher and we're going to discuss the use of contemporary issues in teaching civics and citizenship.

**Dr Zareh Ghazarian (Zareh):** Thanks Mark, and it's really good to be here. So Adam, if I may start off by asking you a leading question, why is contemporary issues important in civics and citizenship?

**Adam Brodie-McKenzie (Adam):** Well, I think a really important thing is that civics and citizenship is now, right. So unlike history where we're learning about the past or geography where we're learning about say particular biomes or land forms, civics and citizenship is about being a citizen, and citizenship is now. So contemporary issues guide that. There are also things that students definitely know are going on. Like contemporary issues are around them all of the time. So the more that we can make students' lives and the lives that are around them and what's going on in their lives part of what they're learning in this curriculum, the better it is and the easier it is to engage them in it.

**Zareh:** So how do you ensure the selection of contemporary issues is relevant to the curriculum?

**Adam:** Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, to be honest I think like having an expert knowledge of the curriculum is really useful. So there are certain parts of the curriculum that lend themselves to this, particularly in say Levels 9 and 10, where you're asked to look at how the media is interpreting particular issues but at the same time, like in earlier years, you look at the Constitution, you look at the relationship between states and the federal government, and during the pandemic, the relationship between state governments and the federal government was front and centre. So when you know that you're teaching Level 8 and you're teaching those elements, that you know you can bring this into the curriculum that's there.

**Marc:** Adam you've made connections with sort of how teaching contemporary issues is about the now and, in a sense, a bit fresher than history or the past. And I could certainly see how students might engage with those kinds of issues of the now. What opportunities do you think specifically exist for student voice when looking at contemporary issues?

**Adam:** I mean, I think the best thing to do is actually to start with them. So when I'm teaching civics and citizenship, as a component of that, I have a civic action project and that's where students choose an issue that they care about and then try to make change in that issue. And I think that's also important for us to think about, what do we mean when we are talking about contemporary issues? Like, are we talking about the grand things that are going on in the world that might be to do with climate change? Are we talking about politics and relationships between government? Or are we talking about the fact that down the road, you know, the street needs a mend or maybe there's just too much litter at school. And I think where student voice comes in is for us to be open minded about that. And again, having that knowledge of the curriculum, that then means that you're sort of able to link what the students are coming up with, with their chosen contemporary issues. So with littering, you know, is that to do with school rules, is it to do with bylaws? Is it to do with local council? You know, recycling, et cetera, state governments, yeah, find your angle in that way.

**Zareh:** I really like how you're making connections to real students' lives and voices and issues in the school and beyond. So how do you deal with the issue of complexity or potential controversy around contemporary issues when they bring those things to the classroom?

**Adam:** Yeah. I mean, I think one thing that's important to remember is that controversy is subjective. So I've actually thought about this a fair bit in both like my own work in the school that I'm at but also working with teachers in other schools because there are certainly issues at my school which are not issues at others and vice versa. So, I mean, I think one of the things about thinking about controversial issues is for teachers to understand their own context and for teachers to understand their own context and therefore understand what the potential controversies are within their own context. I think you also brought up complexity. And I think when looking at contemporary issues, it's really important to lean into complexity.

**Zareh:** In terms of issues and looking at contemporary issues, Adam, how do you think a teacher could be able to plan to ensure that issues, perspectives and opinions are balanced?

**Adam:** I think you need to ensure that you are providing a diversity of opinions. I think one of the issues with the word ‘balanced’ is it's maybe assuming all opinions are equal. And I think actually going through the process of analysing different opinions and the justification for those is really key to what we need to be doing in civics and citizenship. So developing that critical thinking in regard to judgments. We so frequently hear things that we agree with and therefore think they're right. And often it's really worth interrogating our own opinions and arguments and where we're coming from as well.

**Zareh:** Well, that's an interesting point because when examining a contemporary issue, what types of perspectives then should students engage with? How can you scaffold student understanding of different and competing perspectives and reasons for these differences?

**Adam:** Yeah, well, I think media literacy is actually quite important in understanding political perspectives. So often when I'm teaching civics and citizenship, I'll just do a brief unit even on sort of political ideologies and progressive conservative, left and right. And then straight into media and particular media organisations and just get students to reflect on, well, where do we think these media organisations are sitting in terms of left and right and progressive and conservative? And often that's quite a reflective exercise to the students as well because they might think that they have a particular label. And then when they're starting to go through this process realise that maybe their own political values aren't necessarily what they thought they were.

**Zareh:** And so then, if I may, how might you incorporate democratic decision making processes that consider multiple perspectives to reach consensus on a civic issue?

**Adam:** Yeah, I really like this. I mean, I think, you know, one thing that I think has been clear in the research is that an open classroom environment is key to improving student engagement and further student civic participation. And so sort of what you're describing is like the practice of an open classroom environment. And I guess it really highlights the importance of deliberation as part of the democratic process, right? So deliberation being where different people are talking about different things, but importantly listening to each other as well. So, I mean, one thing I'll often do with students is go through establishing a safe space, right? Where people should feel safe, that they're not going to be targeted but equally people should feel safe in knowing that if they do offer a point of view, that it's coming from a genuine, meaningful and authentic place. And so if someone does say something that another person finds offensive, instead of sort of ending up just attacking one another, taking a step back, dissecting and trying to work out why a person has come to the particular opinion they have. And then once you establish that, you can sort of head towards consensus hopefully.

**Marc:** You know, I think when you were just saying student voice and also connecting it to kind of critical media studies or media studies, I think you dealt with this next question that we want to ask you but with a bit of a different twist. So again, with contemporary issues here, how do you think they can be used to allow students to evaluate the effectiveness of another domain of Australia's political and legal systems, institutions, processes?

**Adam:** Right, so, I mean, I think on the one end, you know, you're learning about the theory of government or the structure of government or the legal system and things like the Constitution and those underpinnings. So I think where contemporary issues come into that is say in government, you might learn how a bill becomes a law but then there'll be something going on in the House of Representatives or the Senate. And that's a contemporary issue, right. And whenever that's happening, and particularly the Senate often, because there's a bit more negotiation going on and a more diversity of voices, there will tend to be something that you can bring in. I mean, one of the things that the pandemic did was just bring the Constitution alive and federalism alive. And we are talking about these things in a way that I never had before the pandemic. Yeah, I think the contemporary issues illustrate the theory and enable that engagement of the theory in what's happening now.

**Marc:** Those are great insights, Adam, and I know, yeah, I mean, I learned along with your students and most Australians I think during those times so much more about the day-to-day functioning, especially at state and territory levels. How have you incorporated contemporary issues into your implementation of the curriculum? Or maybe how do you go about planning that as you do this implementation?

**Adam:** This is difficult, right? Because I know, so I was talking to a chemistry teacher, friend of mine the other day and they were saying how at the end of the school year, they use all of their printing credit to print out their curriculum and worksheets for the following year, at the end of that year. And I was just slack-jawed and gobsmacked, because I can't imagine teaching civics and citizenship and politics and knowing the year beforehand, what it actually is that we're going to be doing in the classroom, because we are going to be using contemporary issues and we are going to be doing whatever is happening at the time. I think though, which sort of builds on the question about knowing government and knowing the legal system, is that just having a very strong foundational knowledge in those areas then allows you to illustrate them with contemporary issues. So, for a term you might look at the legal system and you might look at hierarchy or criminal law, and you know you're doing that for a term. So then you just know that as that term is approaching that you need to get access to instances of criminal cases or hierarchy or whatever it is that you're looking at. So I guess in that way, you've got to make sure that you, like as a teacher, that you are across the news. And that's definitely I think an expectation of the civics and citizenship teacher is to be paying attention to the news. I also teach international relations and I make sure I watch SBS News every night. And that's just part of the job as I see it. So, I mean, I think that's the way of making sure that contemporary issues stay a part of your practice but that doesn't mean that the theory or the particular curriculum or knowledge that you're learning is changing, the contemporary issues just illustrate that and explain that.

**Marc:** It almost sounds like, it's like for you or, and in successful cases, it's a matter of having the experience and knowledge as a teacher and staying up to date and kind of a structure for having your curriculum organised but with spaces left in it so you're not at the end of the year printing worksheets for the following year, but as things happen, and as things come from students in their voices as well, they can kind of be slotted into what you're used to teaching and your system of pedagogical organisation. Adam, thank you so much for chatting with Zareh and I today. Very insightful and helpful. We really appreciate your time.

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