

Teaching controversial issues in schools to prepare children for a sustainable global village

Authors

Studies have shown that positive citizenship outcomes are associated with giving students opportunities to explore controversial issues, in an open and supportive classroom environment. Social Science taught without teaching controversial issues will have little or no effect on students' orientation towards citizenship, social justice and community participation. The study from which this paper is drawn uses unstructured interviews as well as audio and video stimulated recall to elicit participants' understanding of controversial issues, the approaches they use to teach controversial issues in the classroom and the constraints involved. Using Leximancer software to analyse the qualitative interview data, the study concludes that although teachers' understanding of controversial issues is by no means unanimous, there is nevertheless a deep understanding that teaching controversial issues to children makes a positive difference in helping them develop into better Australian and global citizens for the 21st Century.

Key words: Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts Education

Introduction

The *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (MCEETYA, 1999) states that when students leave school they should:

1.3 have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and to accept responsibility for their own actions.

1.4 be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life.

Programs in schools should not only teach Australians how to engage in acts of citizenship such as voting and complying with laws, but also how to become active citizens. The Civics Expert Group (1994) recommended that there should be a coherent sequence of citizenship and civics education across schools up till Year 10. Statements in the Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006), provide students with ample opportunities to study controversial issues. By the same token, teaching about controversial issues prepares students to meet the objectives of HSIE, that is, the “knowledge and understanding, skills, and values and attitudes” needed to prepare students for the 21st Century. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of how teachers of Social Science teach controversial issues and illustrate some of the challenges involved in teaching controversies.

Literature review

Controversial issues are unresolved issues that emerge from events or may be a result of some action (Marsh, 2005, p.133). Some explanations of controversial issues from the literature include:

controversial issues ...involve value judgements, so that they cannot be settled by evidence alone, and consequently teachers and pupils are likely to have their own values beliefs and interpretations (Summers, Corney & Childs, 2003, p.339).

those issues that have a political, social or personal impact and arouse feeling and/or deal with questions of value or belief (Oxfam, 2006).

Recent studies show that controversial issues have received scant attention; only a few students seriously consider controversial issues and that discussion of controversial issues is not a common pedagogical approach (Hess & Posselt, 2002). There are broad suggestions from the literature on how to teach controversial issues, but to our knowledge there is only one textbook (Marsh, 2005) and several journal articles (for example, Gallo, 1996; Oulton, Dillon & Grace, 2004) that give teachers explicit guidance in how to teach controversial issues. We live in an increasingly complex environment, so it is important that teachers have the skills to equip students with the tools to grapple with controversy and ethical dilemmas.

Controversy is a fact in everyday life of young people. Outside the home and school environment, there are controversies that occur in our streets, cities, in our nation and globally, and – on our television sets (McBee, 1996). The social sciences are full of controversial issues - in history and in the contemporary period – between individuals, peoples, and nations. Some of the broad areas of the (HSIE) syllabus where controversies are likely to concern teachers are indigenous studies, politics, culture, the environment and heritage. As Gore (1999) notes, it is not possible to avoid teaching about Aboriginal history, political ideas, cultural differences, environmental change, family heritage, human rights and many other topics. Students, therefore, need the skills to resolve controversial issues, as well as the appropriate classroom instruction to promote the development of an informed, skilled and committed citizen.

These skills involve critical thinking, and reflection about their own perspectives and of others and how one's perspectives are shaped by many different factors (Soley, 1996). According to the National Council for the Social Studies (1991, pp.13-15), a study of controversial issues should develop in students the wish to make intelligent choices from alternatives. It also should help students develop democratic values, such as toleration of dissent and support for equality (Lockwood & Harris, 1985), and enhance their willingness to participate in the political world (Hahn, 1998).

Teaching controversial issues allows students to question and to express their fears in the safety of the classroom, and provides opportunities to develop their social skills such as learning how to listen to one another, to deal with difficult topics, and to handle their anger and frustrations without resorting to violence. Importantly, it is not about teaching students to avoid conflict, because conflict and controversy are part of human relationships (Soley, 1996), but rather where schools provide neutral grounds for rationale discourse and objective study (Gore, 1999).

The advice given to teachers of HSIE in New South Wales is that they should be objective, balanced, and provide an opinion if sought without giving it undue weight (Gore, 1999). However, Stradling (1985) questions this idea of balance, because people usually do not mean all viewpoints, only those that are regarded as safe – and, attaining perfect balance may be impossible to achieve anyway. Being objective or sticking to the facts can be problematic

because issues are likely to be biased, incomplete and contradictory. Teachers will need to make subjective judgements about what constitutes the facts to determine the relevance and importance of facts (Oulton, Dillon & Grace, 2004). Indeed, most controversial issues arise *not* because people disagree over a matter of fact but over conflicts of values. If students are to gain a genuine understanding of the issues, then they also need to examine the motives, interests, beliefs and intentions of the people involved (Stradling, 1985).

Furthermore, students would benefit from knowing the teacher's ideological stance and particular position on issues, and anyway, it is almost impossible to conceal the nature of one's beliefs, since non-verbal cues and the odd stray remark will inevitably be decoded by students, resulting in misunderstandings and confusion about the relationships between behaviours and beliefs (Kelly, 1985). Teachers, then, should make their positions explicit at the beginning so students are aware of the biases and ideological standpoints of their teachers. As Oulton et al. (2004) rightly points out, if we expect students to be open about what they feel, is it appropriate that teachers never give their opinion?

It has already been noted in the "Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schools in the Twenty First Century" (MCEEYTYA, 1999), that, *inter alia*, when students leave school they should be active and informed citizens. Becoming active and informed strongly implies some kind of social interaction, oral participation and exchange of ideas through discussion in classroom activities. Those students who study HSIE at Stages 1-3 Syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006) for example, are expected to engage in discussion at some stage of the inquiry process (see p.12 of Stage 1-3 of the HSIE Syllabus) and indeed, at every Stage if necessary. Discussion is also a key element of the values clarification approach (Banks & Clegg, 1985) that Gore (1999) suggests HSIE Stages 1-3 teachers should also use to help students explore their own values and the value of others. There is a similar expectation that students engage in discussion during the processes of inquiry in the History Years 7-10 Syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2004, p.19) and in the Legal Studies Stage 6 Syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2004, p.13).

Oulton et al. (2004) state that the pedagogical focus in class should be on discussion rather than argument and debate, because discussion is more likely to lead to self-reflection and clarification of values. Debates have an unfortunate tendency to encourage students to make up their mind too soon, and as Oulton et al. (2004) point out, it is not fair to ask students to make up their mind on an issue that adults still disagree on. Teachers and students need time to prepare, and possibly be trained in discussion techniques, if discussions are to be successful.

There has traditionally been a large degree of reticence from teachers to expose students to controversial issues (McBee, 1996). These fears are based mainly on teachers' misconceptions that primary students, especially, lack sophisticated reasoning ability, and that the focus on learning at this level ought to be content acquisition and mastering the basic skills of reading and writing. Findings by Hess (2002) indicate other reasons: the increase in state testing of curriculum including those related to numeracy and literacy make it difficult to include controversial issues in the curriculum. Furthermore, Onosko (1996) points to an overloaded curriculum that tends to necessitate a speedy and superficial delivery of content at the expense of in-depth analysis of issues.

Teaching of controversial issues requires a lot of preparation time, and a lack of time will mean that teachers will not be able to do a professional job (Soley, 1996). Second, increased pressure on preparation time will also mean that there will be reduced time to select a range of resources that are readable and reasonably priced (Soley, 1996). A lack of time will have other consequences. For instance, teachers will not develop the repertoire of pedagogical skills necessary to deliver their topic in ways which students will find interesting and challenging (Summers et al. 2002). Apart from the constraints of time there are other factors involved. Many

school textbooks are inclined to be fact-oriented, and lack the appropriate supplementary resource materials that focus on issues (Onosko, 1996). Teachers lack the confidence in their own abilities to facilitate classroom discussions (Hess, 2002). A number of reasons were given for this: teacher education programs that failed to teach pre-service teachers methods and models of issue-based teaching (Onosko, 1996); the lack of professional development in their schools (Oulton et al. 2004); and a fear of offending students, colleagues, and parents (Soley, 1996).

Methodology

The study used qualitative case study methodology to investigate how six teachers of Social Science teach controversial issues. Data was collected using video stimulated recall since this tool is regarded the least intrusive and yet the most inclusive way of studying classroom phenomena (Pirie, 1996). It allows the teacher to 'relive' an episode of teaching by providing, in retrospect, an accurate verbalised account of his/her thought processes (Calderhead, 1981). Importantly, teachers can be the ones who are in control of stopping the tape at any time when they see themselves making a decision, describe what they were doing at that time, what alternatives they had considered and what they decided (Marland, 1984).

The researchers arranged with participants to videotape them teaching a controversial issue in their social science lessons, ideally just before lunch break or during the last period of the day, so the thoughts of their lessons would still be fresh in their minds for the video stimulated recall interviews. The length of lessons ranged from thirty-five to sixty minutes. A compact VHS camcorder was positioned at the rear of the classroom in order to focus on the teacher, minimise distractions, and to minimise students' identification. Special arrangements were made for those students, such as sitting with another class or working in the library, whose parents did not agree for them to be videotaped. At the conclusion of the lesson, participants were interviewed using either video stimulated recall or audio-stimulated recall. The latter technique was a backup because two teachers did not want their students to be videotaped.

Review of the videotape took place as soon as possible after the lesson either in the participants' classroom, the school library or somewhere quiet in the school. The videotapes were stopped by the researcher or by the participant at selected incidents, or at predetermined times (Calderhead, 1983; Keith, 1988). Interviews were audio-taped, the transcripts of which formed the basis for analysis. The interviews were unstructured, using Nespors' (1985:204) technique, "... I'd like you to stop the tape when you see yourself making a decision and tell me what you were thinking at that point?"

The transcripts were returned to the participants for validation before being analysed with the assistance of the relatively new qualitative software called Leximancer Version 2.25 (Smith, 2007). Employing content analysis techniques this software was used to identify the various themes in the data as well as the concepts within each theme. It provided a numerical as well as a graphical display of all the key concepts in the data in both absolute and relative terms as illustrated in Figure 1. This enabled the researchers to have a bird's eye view of the data and gain an understanding of the top ranking concepts in the data. These became the basis for analysis. The advantage of this methodology, in contrast to traditional axial coding in content analysis, was that no concepts were predetermined at the start of the data analysis. Therefore, the key concepts in the data emerged from what the interviewees said rather than what the researchers thought was important to include.

Figure 1: Leximancer Concept Map for analysis of teaching controversial issues



As can be seen in Figure 1, when interviewees were asked what they think about the teaching of controversies, the top five concepts that emerged in the discussions within this theme, had a relative frequency ranging from 45.7% (teaching controversies) to 62.5% (their understanding of controversial issues). For the purpose of this paper, the researchers decided to discuss the findings on these top five key concepts. The discussion is presented under three categories, namely:

- i) Teachers' understanding of controversial issues
- ii) Teachers' pedagogical stance on whether controversial issues should be taught or not.
- iii) Strategies that teachers used in the teaching of controversial issues.

i) Teachers' understanding of controversial issues

Whereas there was a general understanding on the part of teachers regarding what sorts of things were controversies, it was also evident that some teachers could not distinguish between what was a controversial issue being discussed in the classroom or simply a difficult concept. Three illustrations of the former included a teacher who said:

I think a controversial issue is an issue where there are two, at least two view points on the way it should be. There could be many different views.

I think the thing to remember is that something that is controversial to me might not be controversial to the students or somebody else; and something that is controversial to students might not be controversial to me. So, I think it is up to the individual. I think that a controversy exists because there is more than one way of thinking about an issue, or because what I do might affect somebody in a different way.

And another teacher said “I think controversial issues can be anything that’s happening in one socio-economic group about which there is disagreement or lack of consensus of opinion”. A third example said,

I would define a controversial issue to be socially sensitive to a particular cultural group or something along those lines. It’s probably something current but it may involve historical events that lead to disagreement or differences of opinion. It is an issue where there are at least two different viewpoints on the way it should be. But it is important to remember that what is a controversy to one person might not be a controversy to another.

An example of the latter was a teacher, who in trying to explain what he thought was controversial, said:

some things are beyond the realms of understanding for children. I think we try to teach them some difficult concepts which are too hard. Like we have been doing the continental drift and the plates you know, and you see some children imagine their idea of what a plate is. It’s a dinner plate. I am thinking that no matter how much I demonstrate this and show them, it’s too difficult for little kids.

Another example that was rather vague simply said that “controversies are issues that create a lot of discussion”. Some teachers found it hard to identify a controversial issue they had encountered in their practice. One said for instance:

I haven’t really thought, any time, of a controversial issue in my teaching. I teach HSIE Units each year and there isn’t any controversial issues that I have touched. There is nothing that really worries me where I say, I can’t touch on that.

Another one said, “probably in social science, but I really can’t remember much about controversial issues or things like that”.

The things that participants thought were controversies varied a great deal. They included religion, discrimination, stereotyping, terrorism, cultural differences, sexual assault, Aboriginal people, wearing traditional costumes or clothes, vandalism towards places of worship of certain religions, British invasion of Australia, dispossession of Aboriginal people of their land, displaced children or the lost generation, different culture and racism.

The teaching of religion and sex education were cited by a large number of participants as controversial issues. Others cited the issue of drawing water from the Murray Darling Basin for irrigation as a controversial issue. They said this was controversial because it endangered the long term survival of the Snowy River system. Frequently cited examples of controversial issues included environmental protection and related job loss, ecological sustainability, green house effects, human rights, discrimination, ‘run-away’ children, mandatory detention of refugees, Australia’s support of the war in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, terrorism, the new terrorist laws,

violence, moral values, change and continuity, crime, changing patterns of migration, freedoms of people as well as Aboriginal land rights. Most of these were placed in the HSIE syllabus.

Some interviewees extended the controversial issues to include the fact that in today's families, many children find themselves in a situation where the people supposed to be their greatest carers – their parents – can't be trusted by the children. This, they said creates controversy in the community because, "how could such children trust a policeman or a teacher"? The way interviewees approached this controversy was to tell the children, "look, you have friends; you have relatives that surely you can turn to".

Leaving home was also a controversial issue. A teacher explained, "You can't be seen to be encouraging children to leave home. For example, you can't tell children, if mum and dad are cranky, then you should leave". Controversial issues also included drug abuse, alcohol and sexual abuse.

A teacher who tried to explain the root cause of controversial issues said that controversies were arising in the classroom because children nowadays:

are quite egoistical. They want to say what they have to say and do not listen to others. We can't get them to learn how to be part of a group. Their life is going to be quite difficult. They don't value other peoples' ideas and thoughts.

Another cause that was identified was the "break down in relationships, the result of which some children were told that they are hated". Another teacher said, "Unfortunately, I think that some of those ideas come from home; from parents, TV shows and friends".

ii) Teachers' pedagogical stance on the teaching of controversies

Interviewees said that it was important to talk about controversial issues with students so they would develop their problem solving skills. This was seen as equipping them with the skills they would need after school. Teaching controversial issues was seen as:

helping kids to be able to make a balanced, informed decision. If we are not teaching these issues, I don't think we're doing a good job. You know in the end when a student leaves school, you want them to be able to cope with and understand these issues and have some sort of a background historically, I guess, as to why these things happened.

And "it gives students the opportunity to talk about issues, to developing problem solving skills so that when they leave school, they'll have the tools to be able to deal with these difficult issues".

Teachers said that since they were educating their students to be global citizens, it was important that they taught them about controversial issues so that they "can fit in as a citizen of the world. If you are wrapped up and isolated and you only know about your little thing and nothing else, it makes it hard to accept other people". These teachers went on to suggest that the teaching of controversies gave them the opportunity to take advantage of Australia's multi-cultural nature and to develop tolerance among children as they grow up with greater understanding.

There was consensus that teachers should teach acceptance and tolerance and that they should teach students the important things in the cultural diversity in their community. They also added that it was important for teachers to point out that whereas a few Muslims did a terrible thing on September 11:

there's a lot of people in that culture, in that religion, that are just everyday good people. They're going about their business and doing their own thing without hurting anyone. There are plenty of Anglo Australians that are doing wrong things too and that doesn't mean that all Australians of Anglo origin are going to do the wrong thing.

There was an overwhelming view that "controversial issues are a fact of life". Teachers felt, therefore that in discussing them in class, they would be teaching students problem solving skills and would be helping to "develop a more cohesive society, and would develop in people, an empathy and understanding of other people". A teacher added that teaching controversies provides students with an opportunity to think about important, real life issues. It provides them with the tools to know how to deal with situations and this links very well with citizenship or civics. Some teachers felt, however, that teaching controversial issues in school can be highly dangerous because in a multi-cultural society "we could offend some people. This could upset parents and that sort of thing". However, even the teachers who were of this view, still said that it was preferable to "take advantage of the different students within their classroom and develop tolerance between children so that they grow up with greater understandings".

Teachers explained that if an issue came up it should be discussed openly provided people were fair. It was okay to "agree to disagree" or to say "well, there is more than one answer". A controversial issue should be an opportunity to give students a chance to think and to have an input into the lesson. What the teacher needs to do is to guide the discussion. It would be a mistake for a teacher to get into an argument about a controversial issue. This could lead to a teacher saying things they shouldn't say to their students. One's knowledge of the students was a key factor in influencing a teacher's decision to engage the class in discussion of a controversial issue.

Asked whether there was a link between controversial issues and citizenship, teachers answered:

citizenship is about the world, about interacting with the world and students need to understand the issues so they can take a well-informed stance. Controversial issues are a part of life I think, if we try and problem solve and teach children to problem solve and make the right sort of decisions, then we develop a more cohesive society and we develop in people, I think, an empathy and understanding of other people. I think that's where now society is breaking down because people don't understand or they don't empathise, they don't think about other cultures. They don't understand it, so they don't value it and therefore we have lots of racism, discrimination and that sort of thing.

There was a strong understanding that teaching controversial issues to children helps to make them develop into better citizens. The argument was that such teaching equips the children with a life skill that enabled them to face real world issues. A large percentage of teachers explained that "by teaching controversial issues when the children are very young, we create tolerance and I guess it's tolerance that creates a better social system, and along the way, a democracy".

A number of interviewees suggested that "if we take advantage of the differences among the different students within our classroom, we can learn a lot and be able to develop tolerance among children so that they grow up with greater understandings".

iii) Strategies teachers use in the teaching of controversial issues

Asked what strategies they employed to handle controversial issues participants responded in a variety of ways. Some said they “diverted the issues and followed up later”. If students brought up rather personal issues, participants gave explanations such as:

sometimes little children will come up to you and make some comment about something very personal. Try not to embarrass them or make them feel they have said the wrong thing but just say, there are some things that, you know, we don't need to share. Some things are home things to be left at home, and some things are school things and if you have a problem we do need to discuss it, but not just now. If you want to talk about it, come and see me about it later, but now is not the time for that.

The strategies employed included introducing the topic by getting students' responses to determine what they knew about the issue. Sometimes, the introduction was assisted by showing a video and then starting a discussion. Another strategy was to divide the class into several groups and assign each group an area to focus on. After discussions, each group would come up with a policy, say on immigration into Australia. However, it was important to keep in mind the age group of the class because this often determined whether the class would adopt a “Oh, I don't care” attitude. It was also important to consider the gender composition and age of the class. For example, a teacher said, “If you've got a class of year 10 girls but only one boy like I do, I have to be very, very careful with regard to child protection issues talking about sexual issues. I tend to back off. It depends on what year it is and it depends on whether you know your kids or not”. Another strategy was to invite people from outside the school to come and talk about a controversial issue. For example, a solicitor and a magistrate had been invited to speak about consumerism and sexual references in commerce and some crime in the community respectively. People from the local council had been invited to talk about ecological sustainability of the environment. This strategy was also used to study the controversial topic of native title and racism.

There was also the view that controversial issues often just happen in the classroom and aren't planned for. There was a sense of unpreparedness when such controversies surfaced in the classroom. When this occurred, teachers said it was important to handle such a controversy within the context of the particular class considering the rest of the audience in the classroom. A teacher for instance said, “if they pop up, I allow the kids to talk about those issues providing they are within the framework that I can handle and I know it's acceptable in the school's ethos”. On handling a religious controversy one teacher's strategy was to “give the point of view of the church. And I will say, that this is what the pope and the bishops' beliefs, the Catholics' beliefs are, and I'll put that position forward”.

A strategy that was commonly used in HSIE was well articulated by one of the teachers who was teaching about settlement in Australia. This was a topic in Stage 2 HSIE Units of work document. The way this teacher taught this controversial topic was to read a story about first white settlement in Australia, talk about the first fleet's arrival and then stop and have the children participate in this story, by discussing it and asking questions about it.

Teachers had various strategies for handling students' saying of things that were inappropriate. For example, a teacher referred to a student who said “Muslims are the people who flew planes into the World Trade Centre”. The way the teacher handled this kind of controversy was to quell the student by saying “you know, that's not fair the way you're saying that. You shouldn't stereotype people. Stereotyping isn't a good thing”.

Teachers said they thought it was acceptable to tell students that “it is okay to have different viewpoints and live alongside each other without causing problems for each other.” They explained, for example, that different religious beliefs should be respected and should not cause controversy.

When a controversy came up, teachers suggested different strategies to deal with it. For example, where a matter came up in the middle of a whole class discussion, a teacher could say, “I will talk to you about it later. I am glad you’re saying it but you just need to stop at the moment and we shall talk about it later”. Alternatively, after talking about it, the teacher could say “we’ll have to agree to disagree”, or “there is more than one answer to that”.

A number of teachers said that their students did not understand how their actions hurt others. For example, some students made fun of the Chinese language and “you can hear them talk of ching chong talk and stuff like that” without realising how hurtful this was to Chinese people. Teachers reacted to them by saying, “imagine being the people that were discriminated against. How would you feel”? They also found it useful to share their personal stories or experiences with their students. They thought that this captured their students’ attention and interest.

On the whole, it was clear that teachers felt that controversial issues should be dealt with and “not totally thrown under the carpet”. Teachers said that citizenship is about human interactions in the world and students need to understand that to become a global citizen, you need to be aware of controversial issues and if necessary take a stand. Some teachers saw the teaching of controversial issues as encouraging higher order thinking through analysis, interpretation and evaluation.

Conclusion

The study found some ambiguity among teachers in their understanding of controversial issues as distinct from complex pedagogical concepts. On the whole, however, there was a pedagogical underpinning that controversial issues should be taught in class because they helped to enlighten students as global citizens of the future. Teachers therefore saw the teaching of controversial issues as an opportunity to prepare children for a sustainable global village and used a wide array of strategies in their teaching of controversial issues.

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