

Teaching Controversial Issues

In our increasingly divisive and polarised world, young people frequently face making decisions about a wide range of issues on which there are many different views. Issues such as sexuality, religion, bullying and war can provoke strong, varied and often contradictory responses. With the ever-growing influence of social media and 'fake news', the need for young people to feel confident in tackling controversial issues is more pressing than ever.

Teachers have a key role in enabling young people to develop the skills they need to do this. As educators, we are not expected to have all the answers. Rather, developing effective approaches to discussing controversial issues enables teachers to challenge their own views and explore ideas in greater depth with young people.

The Global Learning Programme (GLP) is providing this free short resource to support teachers in enabling young people to engage appropriately with controversial issues in the classroom and beyond. The resource includes two activities (taken from Oxfam's recently updated [Teaching Controversial Issues](#) guide) along with some useful links for further support and guidance.

Activity 3 – Social justice and equity

Captions (7–11 years)

Aim: By using photographs as stimulus material, this activity encourages the use of critical thinking skills. Learners will: develop their understanding of the nature of prejudice and ways to combat it; detect bias, opinion and stereotypes; assess different viewpoints; recognise and start to challenge unfairness; and promote a sense of justice.

Resources

- Magazines and newspapers, or access to online media platforms.
- Scissors, glue and sheets of plain paper.
- Some examples of photographs and captions that promote stereotypes such as gender roles, generalised or racist views, such as 'Africa is...', 'Asylum seekers are...'

Note: *It may be useful to model some example captions with the class before starting this activity.*

1. Ask learners to select and cut out five photographs from magazines or newspapers (or print out images from the internet) and stick each picture on a plain sheet of paper. Ask learners to write one negative and one positive caption for each of the images.
2. Display the work around the classroom and discuss the impact that the different captions have on learners' perceptions of the places and any people in the photographs.
3. Then discuss as a class the examples of photographs and captions that promote stereotypes, generalised or racist views.
4. Encourage learners to question the captions and to suggest or write more suitable ones. For example, if the captions are generalised or stereotyped, ask learners to think of alternative captions that explain in which place, or among which particular group of people, something has happened. As an extension to this activity, learners could write letters to the editor of the newspaper outlining their concerns about one of the captions.

Activity 6 – Media stories and ‘fake news’

Critical Analysis (11–16 years) (adapted from Schools for Future Youth: www.fys-forums.eu)

Aim: This activity encourages learners to critically analyse the media and explore issues around ‘fake news’. The ‘5Ws and 1H’ activity is a method for thinking critically about an issue. It can be used with learners to ask six key questions about any topic or issue.

Resources

- A range of media coverage on a topical issue or news story. This can include news articles, images, social media posts and online video clips.
1. Organise learners into pairs or groups of three. Give each group one of the pieces of evidence and ask learners to discuss and answer the following questions:

Source

- What is the source of the article/image/post/comment/clip?
- What sort of organisation is it from?
- Who is the organisation owned by?
- Who is its audience?
- Does this organisation hold particular views/biases?
- Is the organisation accountable (to rules and regulations)?

Who

- Who said it?
- Was it someone you can trust?
- How do you know that you can trust them?

What

- What did they say?
- Are these facts or opinions?
- Did they leave anything important out?

Where

- Where did they say it?
- Was it in public or in private?
- Were people allowed to express different opinions?

Why

- Why did they say it?
- Were they trying to get other people to think or do something?

When

- Did they say it in response to a previous event?
- Did they say it to influence a later event?

How

- How did they say it?
 - Did they use biased or emotive language?
 - Does it use inflammatory or sensationalist language?
 - If you watched a video, did it use any emotional music or effects?
2. Invite each group to present the news story to the rest of the class. Discuss whether there are differences between the sources presenting the same story. Learners could suggest examples of the same news event being presented differently from recent examples, such as during an election campaign or after a natural disaster.
 3. Ask learners to consider whether their opinions and judgements about the topical issue or news story have changed as a result of thinking more critically.

Useful links

- Guidance, recommended reading and links to suggested teaching resources:
<http://glp.globaldimension.org.uk/pages/11355>
- Support for critical thinking from the GLP:
http://clients.squareeye.net/uploads/glp/Guidance_on_controversial_issues_2018.pdf
- Revised and updated, Oxfam's Teaching Controversial Issues guide provides practical strategies for exploring controversial issues both in and out of the classroom. It seeks to support educators in developing essential skills that allow learners to constructively discuss their own values and ideas, and develop as active global citizens:
www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/teaching-controversial-issues
- Support for, and exemplification of, critical thinking from the Geographical Association:
<https://www.geography.org.uk/critical-thinking>
- Additional support for teaching about controversial issues:
 - From the GLP: <http://glp.globaldimension.org.uk/pages/11355>
 - From the HA: www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/controversial-issues

Resource created by Oxfam for the Global Learning Programme (GLP).