

NOTES TO ACCOMPANY N HOPWOOD PRESENTATION TO GTE CONFERENCE 2007

SLIDE 1

1. Introduce myself, thank you for chance to address this audience ; Say I want to talk about the intersection between pupils, controversial issues, and school geography

3. First I'll consider the sorts of questions that have been asked and could be asked in relation to these issues

4. Then, drawing out a form of questioning from my DPhil I'll explore some examples from my research

5. Finally I'll consider how we might move forward, where the answers to these questions lie

6.CLICK

7. The first thing I'd like to consider is the sorts of questions that have been addressed in the literature and empirical research in this area. I think this is important because doing so can point towards what we don't know as well as what we do know

8.CLICK

9. How should controversial issues be taught and learned in geography? This question has occupied geography educators' minds for some time now, and there is a healthy range of theoretical arguments, informed by generic educational ideas or issues relating to geography as a discipline, alongside some empirical research.

10. An example of theorising these issues in geography education with reference to wider ideas about values education comes in the form of the different approaches to values education presented by Butt (2002) and Lambert and Balderstone (2000). This is shown in the table on your handouts, and suggests different pedagogical approaches (envisaging both teaching and learning in parallel) including values inculcation, growth of moral reasoning, and action learning

11. GIVE AUDIENCE A MOMENT TO READ THAT THROUGH

12. Other non-empirical approaches to what could or should happen in geography lesson in relation to controversial issues are more specifically grounded in the nature and purpose of geography as a discipline or geography education. On the handout is a list of references exploring these issues in this way, and many of the names will be familiar – Frances Slater, John Huckle, John Fien, John Morgan. Some of these discussions are a response to assumed perceptions of geography either among teachers, parents, or pupils. Lidstone and Gerber (1998) suggest there is a need to “challenge the conventional wisdom that the main purpose of geography is to promote the environmental ethic” (p 87). Marsden (1997) has suggested caution against indoctrination, and concerns of moral carelessness in geography teaching have been raised by Morgan and Lambert (2005).

13. Examples of empirical research tend to focus on interviewing teachers about how they approach controversial issues in their practice. Standish (2003) claims 84% of teachers surveyed believe geography endorses an environmental agenda (although insufficient details of sample and methods are given and my attempts to pursue the origins of this claim have proved unfruitful). More transparent research by Slater (1996) and Summers et al (2004)

gives some sense of teachers' ideas about the controversial issues relevant to school geography, and how they believe they should be taught and learned.

14. So these issues have certainly not been neglected in the literature, and we have a rich source of information and arguments to inform the understanding and practice of teachers and teacher educators.

15. CLICK

SLIDE 2

1. However, I think there is a gap in what we have researched and theorised so far, and I'd like to argue that this stems from neglecting a particular form of question in our enquiries.

2. CLICK

3. What happens when pupils encounter controversial issues in geography lessons? This is the question that I'd like to talk around this morning.

4. Before I start to address it, I'd like to say how I came to be interested in, and feel justified in talking about, this question.

5. I spent three years researching pupils' conceptions of school geography more generally, and exploring their experiences of geography lessons. I observed lots of geography lessons in three different schools, and these were not selected as to my own or the teacher's judgements about whether the content of the lesson was controversial or not – this will become important later on

6. After most of these lessons I talked to pupils about what they had been learning and how they felt about it – this afforded me a perspective not usually available to teachers who at best can understand pupils' experiences from an observational standpoint, and rarely have the opportunity to talk to pupils at length about their geography lessons

7. CLICK

SLIDE 3

1. For the next few minutes I'm going to signpost, but not conclusively explore, three issues that emerged from my research that are quite illuminating and I think point towards ways forward in our thinking

2.CLICK

3. The first idea I'd like to raise is that what counts as controversial is in itself contested. Previously adults have tended to assume that the defining characteristics of controversial issues, although complex, can be stipulated by teachers or curriculum planners, implicitly assuming that what is controversial to them will be understood as controversial to pupils. I'd argue that not only are such approaches problematic, but that even within one class, pupils themselves will have different ideas about whether geographical content is controversial or not.

4. I'd like to give an example of how complex these issues are. In a lesson comparing the population structures of the UK and Tanzania (something the teacher didn't consider particularly controversial), Lisa situated her learning in relation to environmental degradation – particularly feeling that people should be encouraged to have fewer babies in order to reduce human impacts on the natural environment. Interestingly, to her environmental issues are not controversial – she only sees one possible way forward – protect the environment – neither does she think that they are controversial within geography as a subject – arguing that geography promotes green agendas above all others. Thus to her, and in the context of a geography lesson, green or environmental issues are not controversial. However these are precisely the sorts of issues that research and other literatures suggest teachers (and indeed other pupils) *do* see as controversial! It's important to remember that these issues arose not in an explicit discussion of people-environment interactions, but in a rather theoretical lesson about population structures.

5. So what counts as controversial is not straightforward, and certainly not exclusively for teachers or other adults to decide.

6.CLICK

SLIDE 4

1.The next issue I'd like to explore, again with brief illustrations from my research, relates to how pupils relate to controversy, how they see their views as fitting into a wider picture of multiple different views and contestations

2.CLICK

3.Jenie explained to me how she sees geography as frequently involving the study of issues about which people disagree. She situated her own points of view and feelings in relation to a range of contrasting and competing views, and explicitly framed her own views as her personal take, acknowledging likely differences between her views and those of other pupils in her class, her teacher, and other people. She added that controversy in the sense of different priorities and points of view – was healthy, so that, for example, economic, environmental and social factors were all listened to and argued for, without any one gaining exclusive rights on an issue.

4.This can be contrasted with Ryan. Although similar in the way he situates his views in relation to those of other pupils, for him it is important in dealing with controversial issues that his view ultimately prevails – success for him involves persuading others to adopt his position.

5.So, what is seen as controversial varies among pupils, and also, the way pupils relate to the issues they see as controversial issues is not uniform.

6.CLICK

SLIDE 5

1.The final set of examples I'd like to table relate to the nitty-gritty of interaction and engagement in classrooms.

2.CLICK

3.An encounter with controversial issues in the classroom can mean different things to pupils and present different opportunities, and challenges to them.

4.Jenie, a member of her school debating team, enjoys debating for its own sake, feels confident in arguing with her peers, drawing on sources of evidence to support her arguments, being asked to argue against her own personal point of view, having her arguments challenged and subjected to criticism, and ultimately accepting that her view may not pervade in the end

5.For Ryan, debates about controversial issues present different challenges and he engages with them differently. Not only is he concerned that his point of view should be adopted by others, but he has a general desire to 'be right' and corresponding frustration with 'being wrong'. Controversial issues by their very nature are often anathema to right answers, and so Ryan often reports experiencing tensions and conflicts in his engagement in such issues. At one point he was accused by a peer of being geographically insecure as he hesitated in his work, anxious to decide what was right before proceeding further, while others were happy to work with their own ideas, often not bringing agendas or right or wrong to bear.

6.Pupils' engagement with controversial issues in the classroom is not, therefore straightforward, and certainly cannot be assumed to take one particular form or another.

7.CLICK

SLIDE 6

1. In the remaining time I'd like to draw things together, and point to an idea I think may be useful in moving forward.

2.CLICK

3. I'd argue that controversial issues in geography are best understood as a property of pupil-geography interaction. What I mean here is that they should not be defined or considered 'out there' independently of the ways pupils encounter and respond to them in geography lessons. The examples I have presented show that it is at this nexus that controversy arises in geography (because pupils themselves have ideas about what is controversial) and it is here that they become meaningful to pupils and act as contexts for learning (as pupils relate to and engage with them differently)

4.CLICK

SLIDE 7

1. Now I'd like to return to the sources and ideas I referred to at the beginning

2. CLICK

3. I don't want to argue that values education literature is without value or validity. It provides us with useful concepts and a practical toolkit. However I do want to argue that its true potential will only be realised when we use it to think about controversial issues as a property of pupil-geography interaction, and when such use avoids assumptions by adults as to what counts as controversial and what engaging with controversy means to pupils – ie we need to combine these ideas with our understanding of pupils as active learners and constructors of geography

4. CLICK

SLIDE 8

1. I'd like to leave you with my thoughts about where we need to head to gain more purchase on these issues

2.CLICK

3. I think these issues strike at the heart of bigger concerns: why teach geography? Why learn geography? And who owns school geography?

4. Teach - think about what the desired outcomes of geography education are

5. Learn - think about what pupils want to get out of geography lessons

6. Ownership - who decides - not just what side to take in controversy, or even what is controversial, but how these issues are dealt with in geography – mention Young People's Geographies project as a good example of new approaches to exploring these issues.

7. Thank people for their attention and welcome any questions.