Teaching values and controversial issues

‘To my mind, teachers do no service to their students if they give them the impression that such problems [development in towns, areas of unemployment, pollution] are easily defined, that the processes involved are well understood so that their occurrence can be straightforwardly explained and that there are always practicable solutions available. Issues such as the ones I have mentioned are matters of legitimate dispute precisely because there are often strong disagreements about diagnoses, goals and strategies.’ (Joseph, K. ‘Geography in the school curriculum’, Geography, October 1985, pp. 290–7)

It is interesting to note that as long ago as 1985 a Secretary of State for Education recognised that geography was a ‘value-laden subject’ and thought that ‘factual knowledge on its own is not enough.’ He wanted students to be ‘sensitive to the nature and complexity’ of the issues and problems they studied.

- Refer to the trainee teacher webpage on Values and controversial issues, and the associated downloads and readings, which this guidance supports. In particular, download and refer to Values in geography teaching and Values analysis.
- Refer to the trainee teacher webpage on Critical thinking in geography.
- Refer to the Thinkpiece on Values and controversial issues by Nick Hopwood.

Introducing trainee teachers to this aspect of teaching

Trainees can feel out of their depth teaching controversial issues and can be very worried about their ability to deal with sensitive topics. They often have passionate views on geographical topics and need to know how to approach this in the classroom. Trainees needs to be aware of the challenges and the complexity of teaching controversial issues as well as the particular opportunities for learning they can provide. They need to:

- understand the geographical complexities of the controversial issues they teach
- reflect on, and clarify, their own values
- recognise that their own values cannot be isolated from what they teach
- understand that students bring their own opinions and ideas to the lesson and may have been influenced e.g. by parents, peers, social media and other lessons
- know different teaching and learning approaches they can adopt when dealing with controversial issues.

Before you introduce trainees to teaching controversial issues they should be at a stage in their teaching where they feel confident to manage student discussion. It is not a topic for the early months of training unless they are an exceptional trainee. It might be better for them to teach these
topics first to older students, such as post-16 because discussions about issues can flow more readily with this age group.

Teaching values and controversial issues involves a range of other aspects. You may want to refer trainees to look again at webpages such as: teaching cultural diversity; discussions; media literacy and the Web.

Plan for trainee teachers to discuss with and observe experienced teachers dealing with controversial topics in their school before they teach such lessons themselves. This could be outside of geography, for example religious education, PSHE and citizenship teachers tackle controversial issues regularly.

What controversial issues should we teach about in geography?

Refer to the chapter 12 in Roberts (2013) and discuss questions such as:

- What makes an issue controversial?
- What local issues might lead to different opinions and controversy?
- What are ‘wicked’ and ‘super-wicked’ problems?
- What types of ‘moral dilemmas’ could we investigate in geography lessons?
- Margaret Roberts sets out a range of reasons why controversial issues should be studied in school geography (pp 117-8). Discuss each of these and rank them in order of importance for their geography teaching.

Values and the role of the geography teacher

There is a strong link between how we tackle controversy in the geography classroom and how we approach values. The controversies we select to teach about may well be influenced by our values and trainees need to examine their own values in respect of the issues they are teaching about. This might be a relevant time for trainees to examine and reassess their attitudes towards different cultures and to discuss ‘British values’.

Discuss with trainee teachers how we ensure that in geography lessons we educate young people to think critically about significant issues of our time and how we must avoid indoctrinating them into particular ways of seeing the world. Biddulph et al (2015) p278 discusses teaching for a ‘good cause’ and trainee teachers need to be warned about promoting their point of view above all other and bringing their politics into the classroom.

- Refer to the chapter in Roberts (2013) and to the support sheets that you downloaded on Values in geography teaching and Values analysis. (See links above)

Morgan and Lambert (2005) remind teachers of the need to avoid ‘morally careless’ geography teaching. Trainees must be careful not to ‘preach’ about values and should be encouraged to avoid this danger by presenting a balanced view of controversial issues and giving students the opportunity for discussion to form and present their own views. See the trainee support sheet What is moral geography teaching and how to achieve it?
Discussion with trainee teachers

- Can they define values objectives for some of the topics that they are currently teaching?
- How can you avoid being ‘morally careless’ in geography teaching?
- Could any topic (or part of a topic) trainees are currently teaching be taught as a ‘moral dilemma’. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of doing this?
- What does it mean to be balanced? Can a teacher be neutral?
- Should a teacher disclose their views?
- Is it ever permissible to advocate certain values?

Look at the Ideas for Exploring Controversial Issues in PGCE sessions which is an additional resource with the Thinkpiece.

Teaching controversial issues

Refer to the sections on the trainee teacher webpage on Points to consider when planning topics involving controversial issues and Trainee teacher activities. You might decide to plan together a series of lessons that deals with a controversial issue for a trainee to teach.

Discussion with trainees:

- Did they have experiences of any controversial issues discussed when they were a student that had a memorable influence on them?
- What did they find out from observing lessons?
- What observations do they have from the scheme of work they reviewed?
- What controversial issue/s are they planning to teach? Why did they choose it?
- What is their rationale for the resources and learning activities they have chosen?
- Which of the four teaching approaches (Biddulph p.285) are they going to use and why?
- Are there any particular aspects of the topics that can be considered ‘sensitive’ or ‘controversial’ for particular students, or groups of students, in the school? How will they deal with these?
- Are there any school policies pertinent to this area of which they should know about e.g. discrimination?

Observing and feedback on lessons about controversial issues

Refer to the ITE trainers support sheet Observation and feedback on lessons teaching about controversial issues and use this as an ‘aide memoire’ when you observe a trainee teach a lesson.

Reading for ITE trainers/mentors (in addition to those referenced on the trainees’ web page)

- Corney, G. (2006) Education for Sustainable Development: An Empirical Study of the Tensions and Challenges Faced by Geography Student Teachers, IRGEE, 15, 2, 224-240. This sets out how the student teachers are prepared to teach ESD on the Oxford University geography course and the main challenges they meet when teaching this controversial issue.
- Department for Education, Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in Schools (November 2014) (www.gov.uk).
• Roberts, M. *Teaching controversial issues*: a GA conference lecture 2013 (PowerPoint) (Updated July 2017)

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