GTIP Think Piece – Values and controversial issues (Nick Hopwood)

Pupils' experiences of school geography, and their abilities to understand and participate in their worlds are often enriched by encounters with controversial issues in geography lessons. However, dealing with controversial issues is not straightforward. Nick Hopwood (Oxford University) explores a range of ideas and activities that can help developing teachers think through their practices.

Menu
- Introduction, p1
- Controversial issues and geography education, p1
- Can geography teachers be 'neutral'? P2
- Ideas for exploring controversial issues in PGCE sessions, p4
- Bibliography, p4
- Links, p5

Introduction
We are frequently confronted with controversy in various forms - political debates reported in the media (immigration policy), street protests and demonstrations (prior to the most recent conflict in Iraq), impromptu national debates (Jade Goody's comments in Celebrity Big Brother). We are encouraged to buy FairTrade produce but at the same time urged to reduce food mileage by eating locally grown foodstuffs. We want to enjoy spectacular landscapes but by visiting them can be implicated in their demise.

Geography can help pupils navigate such complex and sometimes unsettling issues and dilemmas. Some key questions to consider are:
- How do controversial issues relate to the teaching and learning of geography?
- What are possible approaches that geography teachers can adopt when dealing with controversial issues?

Controversial issues and geography education
Where values arise, controversy follows. Frances Slater (1996) argues that both geography as a discipline and the process of education are 'shot through with values'. The QCA website explains how the national curriculum for all subjects is based on a statement of values of which several seem particularly pertinent to geography:
- Respect for others including children
- Refusal to support values or actions that may be harmful to individuals or communities
- Accepting responsibility to maintain a sustainable environment for future generations
- Understanding our responsibility for other species
- Ensuring that development can be justified
- Preserving balance and diversity in nature wherever possible
- Preserving areas of beauty and interest for future generations
- Repairing whenever possible habitats damaged by human development and other means.

Links between geography and controversial issues are also explored in relation to the global dimension, particularly in terms of conflict resolution, global citizenship, values and perceptions (TeacherNet website). Fien (1996) lists acceptance of and respect for others, compassion and kindness, open mindedness, respect for human rights, concern for justice, commitment to
sustainable development, and willingness to be involved as values that are applicable to geography education.

Problems arise because these values are often in tension with each other. Morgan (2000) discusses how the seemingly innocent idea of protecting greenbelt land can be complicated when considered in relation to the pressing needs of deprived groups for accessible housing. Morgan and Lambert (2005) ask ‘who are Western European school children (under the guidance of their teachers and textbooks) to argue to Brazilians that they should stop cutting down the forest (for ‘environmental’ reasons) when forests in Europe were destroyed some centuries ago?’ (p.62).

Can geography teachers be neutral
In the late 1960s Lawrence Stenhouse led the Humanities Curriculum Project (or HCP; Nuffield Curriculum Centre website; Stenhouse 1975), which explored ways of teaching children about controversial issues. Stenhouse advocated a teacher role of neutral chair (not revealing his or her views) rather than a committed advocate. It was argued that teacher authority in a classroom is strong, that pupils are vulnerable to following a teacher’s view as the ‘right’ one, and that this can create the impression that controversial issues can be settled by recourse to higher authority – i.e. ask the teacher.

The neutral approach was promoted by the HCP on the understanding that this would enable a range of opinions to be expressed, and that the questioning pupils’ assertions and recourse to evidence and reasoning would model a more appropriate way to teach and learn about controversial issues. Suggestions that teachers should be neutral when teaching about racism (rather than committed to anti-racist agendas) sparked a major debate, demonstrating how even though most people would accept that racism is socially unacceptable, issues of how to teach them quickly bring the controversy back to life.

How we approach teaching about controversial issues, and how we would like pupils to learn about them at school, are at least partly dependent on the sort of outcomes we envisage. A geography teacher might feel their role is to advocate strongly on behalf of environmental agendas (i.e. adopt a committed approach) because we need a generation of environmentally committed people if any serious headway is to be made in these respects.

Alternatively it might be argued that simplistic associations between geography and green agendas do both the discipline, and the exploration of controversial issues as a part of the educational process, a disservice.

While neutrality and commitment are undoubtedly important dimensions to take into consideration when teaching about controversial issues, it is important not to get stuck in binary either/or scenarios. Two books written for trainee geography teachers use a more differentiated framework to explore how teachers might think through their approach (Butt 2002; Lambert and Balderstone 2000). The approaches they outline may be summarised as follows:

- **Values inculcation** Aims for pupils to adopt a pre-determined set of values
- **Values analysis** Pupils investigate and assess evidence which may support value judgements
- **Growth of moral reasoning** Provides opportunities for pupils to discuss reasons for adopting particular value positions
- **Values clarification** Helps pupils become aware of their own values in relation to those of others
- **Action learning** Focuses on students having a reasoned base for whatever actions they might take in relation to specific social or environmental issues
The original sources also list examples from geography education, consider drawbacks and provide further references. It might be interesting to compare these to the suggestions made in Oxfam’s *Teaching Controversial Issues* publication (available on their [website](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)).

Studies by Oulton and colleagues (2004) and Cotton (2004) suggested that geography teachers associate many different controversial issues with their subject (often relating to the environment and development), and that they adopt a wide range of approaches in their classroom practice.

An edited collection by Halstead and Taylor (1996) contains several chapters exploring values education in schools, and Stradling, Noctor and Baines (1984) provide an accessible synthesis of ideas relating to teaching controversial issues, and a good digest of the arguments put forward by Stenhouse and the HCP. Huckle (1983) and Slater (1996) have written extensively on values, controversial issues and school geography with an emphasis on teaching. Focusing more on curriculum and historical changes, Rawling (2001) discusses different approaches and envisaged outcomes of school geography with reference to different (sometimes competing) values sets.

Debates surrounding controversial issues in geography are lively and ongoing. Lidstone and Gerber (1998) suggest there is a need to challenge ‘conventional wisdom that the main purpose of geography education is to promote the environmental ethic’ (p.87). Concerns have been raised about ‘green fatigue’ (Chalmers et al 2002), and ideas of pupils being ‘greenwashed’ in geography lessons have been reported in both newspapers (Harrison 2002) and also academic literature (Standish 2003).

Standish claims that 83% of the teachers he surveyed believe geography endorses and environmental agenda. Morgan (2003) and Ellis (2003) both wrote responses to Standish’s article in Geography journal, expressing concern should this be the case. Evidence from other studies (Summers, Childs and Corney 2003) indicates that teachers may have a wider range of views than was suggested by Standish.

Morgan and Lambert (2005) express similar concerns to Marsden (1995) and suggest the following might be examples of what they suggest would be ‘morally careless' geography teaching:

- As if examinations were the only thing that matters in an overbearing ‘answer culture’
- As if there were ‘no right or wrong answers’. This is where a teacher, in his or her desire to muddy water by trying to show that there are competing perspectives and different points of view, carelessly gives the message that any answer will do. Perhaps he or she meant to say that there are ‘no clear-cut answers’.
- As if the teaching were too strongly associated with a mission to change society or create a ‘better world’. There is a great danger in teaching with an overt mission that it ... runs the risk of indoctrinating rather than educating students, by which we mean leading students to conclusions rather than providing them with the means to evaluate a range of possibilities.

Characteristics of more ‘careful' teaching, would include:

- Teaching to generate a ‘culture of argument’, where different accounts are listened to and where appropriate countered
- Trying to encourage a tone of ‘confident uncertainty’ - i.e. confident learners, who know that there is invariably more to know
- Addressing the most difficult questions, including conflicts, forced population movements, growing inequality and environmental sustainability
- Providing opportunities to practise making informed decisions and expressing viewpoints

---

geography.org.uk
Ideas for exploring controversial issues in PGCE sessions

1. Discussing process and outcomes in teaching and learning about controversial issues.
This activity focuses students' attention on planning lessons related to controversial issues. It centres on exploring a range of learning outcomes and processes that might lead to their achievement.

2. Geography teachers, PGCE students and controversial issues.
This activity encourages students to explore the position of geography teachers in relation to controversial issues.

3. Sources and concepts about controversial issues in school geography.
This activity encourages students to look resources and opinions critically, and to think about links between particular resources and wider debates in geography education.

4. Moral geography teaching and how to achieve it.
This activity encourages students to think about morally careless and morally careful teaching.

5. Controversial issues and links to curriculum concepts.
This activity encourages students to relate the teaching about issues in geography to wider curriculum aims.

Further details about specific activities and resources linking to each of the suggestions are provided in a separate document which can be downloaded below:
Ideas for Exploring Controversial Issues in PGCE Sessions (67k)

Bibliography

geography.org.uk

Links
Oxfam Cool Planet for Teachers - an interesting perspective on teaching controversial issues from a non-governmental organisation, with a downloadable publication devoted to these issues (but not specific to geography).

Staffordshire Learning Net - a popular online resource supporting many aspects of geography teaching, extensive discussion forum which covers many controversial issues - God is green, distortion on world maps, climate change, child labour etc.

Engaging Pupils in Controversial Issues through Dialogue
Warwick, P and Andreotti, V (2007)
In this article, Paul Warwick and Victoria Andreotti, (University of Leicester) present an innovative dialogue based approach to engaging Post-16 students with controversial issues in Citizenship Education.

Geography teaching is so infused with values and controversial issues that many of the other GA Think Pieces in this section offer additional resources that are highly relevant, especially those on Citizenship, ESD, ESD (Primary), Children's Worlds, The Global Dimension (Primary), and The Global Dimension (Secondary).