

Think Piece – Values and controversial issues

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This paper is adapted from one of the 'Think Pieces' written as part of the GA's GTIP project with the Teacher Development Agency in 2008/9. The project intention was to develop geography materials for PGCE courses, to inform and to encourage reflection on a range of themes and issues in geography education. Students' 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. In this Think Piece, Nick Hopwood (Oxford University) explores a range of ideas and activities that can help developing teachers think through their practices.

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 Fair Trade 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 students 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 2007 National Curriculum for all subjects included 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. 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 (HCP, 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 students 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 of students' 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 students 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 use a more differentiated framework to explore how teachers might think through their approach (Butt 2002; Biddulph et al 2021). The approaches they outline may be summarised as follows:

- **Values inculcation** Aims for students to adopt a pre-determined set of values
- **Values analysis** Students investigate and assess evidence which may support value judgements
- **Growth of moral reasoning** Provides opportunities for students to discuss reasons for adopting particular value positions
- **Values clarification** Helps students 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).

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 students 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 an 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.

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