**Script: Teaching Controversial Issues – What, why and the key challenges in the classroom**

**Introduction**

This is the first of a series of 4 videos looking at Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI) in the classroom. In this video we are going to start by answering 3 key questions.

**First: What are controversial issues?**

**Second: Why is it important to teach controversial issues?**

**Third: What are the key challenges for teaching controversial issues in the classroom**

Having the answers to these key questions makes it much easier to teach controversial issues in the classroom and to help to train others.

**First: What are controversial issues?**

Think of a controversial issue in society, it can be anything. Next, think about what makes the issue controversial. Is it the issue itself? What different people think about it? How it is presented in the media? Or is it all these things and more?

Having worked with teachers and trainers in many countries across Europe we came up with a useful definition that has been widely accepted that controversial issues may be defined as:

**‘Issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinions in communities and society.’**

They can vary from **local to global** – from mosque building to the reducing the impacts of climate change. Some are **long-standing**, such as sectarian divisions between different communities in several European countries – others **very recent** e.g. the Islamic radicalization of youth or the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

They also vary with **time and place**. Crucifixes in schools may be highly contentious in one country but an accepted part of life in another – similarly with bi-lingual education or the wearing of Islamic headscarves. Almost any topic can become controversial at any time and new controversies are arising every day.

How far does this definition fit the controversial issue that you just thought of?

So we now have a clear definition of what we mean by controversial issues which is very helpful. This leads us onto our second question.

**Second – Why is it important to teach controversial issues?**

Some people might suggest that because controversial issues are controversial, they are difficult to teach and, therefore, should be avoided by teachers and schools.

There are two main reasons why it is important to teach controversial issues – **‘product’ and ‘process-based’.**

**Product-based reasons** argue that controversial issues are important in themselves because they relate to major social, political, economic and moral problems in modern society and are directly relevant to the lives of students.

‘Controversial issues are important in themselves and to omit informing about them and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people.’

Another way of looking at this is the argument that controversial issues need to be taught to compensate for the one-sided and often confusing ways in which they are presented in the media.

‘The evolution of mass media has increasingly exposed children to sensitive issues, which require demystification and discussion.’

The proliferation of media sources and outlets and the ease with which students can access them from an increasingly young age makes this argument even more important today.

**Process-based reasons** argue that what is important is not so much the controversial issues but more the learning that helps students to develop important competences relating to democratic culture, civic attitudes and behaviours. These competences include

* Understanding that controversy is not to be feared but is part of democratic life
* Learning strategies for engaging in meaningful discussions on controversial issues
* Developing language and communication skills around thinking, reasoning, speaking and evaluating
* Developing attitudes and behaviours around greater political interest and civic knowledge leading to increased civic and political engagement including voting and volunteering.

What are the most important reasons why you would teach students about controversial issues?

So now we know what controversial issues are and the main reasons why they should be taught to students this allows us to answer the third key question namely

**Third - What are the key challenges for teaching controversial issues in the classroom**

Research studies combined with the work we have done in training teachers and trainers across Europe suggests that there are **5 main challenges** of teaching controversial issues in the classroom that teachers face. These are:

**First – Teaching style** – teaching controversial issues is different that teaching subject knowledge in that it is about **attitudes and opinions and is not neutral**. Therefore, there is a concern about the **risk of bias** in the attitudes and opinions that teachers and students bring to the classroom. The issue for teachers is to be aware of a range of teaching styles that they can employ to minimize the risk of bias and/or allegations of bias.

**Second – Protecting student sensitivities** – the risk of controversial issues **impacting negatively on students’ emotions or sense of self-esteem.** There is the danger that allowing a range of opinions and attitudes to be expressed during discussion of controversial issues can lead to some students feeling offended, harassed or marginalized by other students and/or the teacher causing hostilities and divisions in the classroom that can spill beyond the classroom.

**Third – Classroom climate and control** – the fear of discussion **‘over-heating’** and getting out of hand thereby undermining the teacher’s authority and impacting negatively on future student-teacher relations or the fear of discussion **‘under-heating’** leading to a wall of apathy among students. Teachers need to develop strategies to help to defuse confrontation in the classroom as well as break down apathy.

**Fourth – Lack of expert knowledge** – the complexity and dynamic nature of many controversial issues can **make demands on teacher knowledge** not usually experienced in other areas of the curriculum. This is a particular challenge where controversial issues are very recent and in flux. Lack of expert knowledge can be disconcerting for teachers who are used to being seen as the subject ‘expert’ and looked up to by students because of their knowledge and expertise.

**Fifth – Dealing with spontaneous questions and remarks** – the problem of knowing how best to **respond to spontaneous remarks or questions of a controversial nature made by students.** With students having instant access to the internet and social media it is impossible to predict what issues they may bring up next, when they will bring them up or what impact it will have on other students and the classroom atmosphere.

Having reviewed these what are the main challenges for you teaching controversial issues in the classroom?

We also need to recognise that there is no simple answer to addressing the challenges associated with teaching controversial issues in the classroom as they may vary from one class or group of students to another. However, what is recognised is the **importance of training teachers** and providing them with a range of methods and strategies that they can use in the classroom to tackle these challenges when they arise. It is then up to the teacher to use his/her professional judgement considering **sensitivity of context and flexibility of response** to decide what works best when, why and how.

I hope you now feel that you have clearer answers concerning

**What are controversial issues?**

**Why it is important to teach them/**

**What are the key challenges for teaching them in the classroom?**

And that armed with this information you feel more confident in Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI) and sharing your learning and experience with others to help them.

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December 2020