**Script: Teaching Controversial Issues – How to get teacher students acquainted with the term and develop their capacity to work with controversial issues? Examples of activities**

**Introduction**

This is the second of a series of 4 videos looking at Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI) in the classroom. In this video we are going to focus on 2 key questions.

**First: How can we get teacher students acquainted with the term Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI)?**

**Second: How can we develop their capacity to work with controversial issues?**

I will be offering some example activities that have been successfully used with teacher students to provide answers to both questions

**First: How can we get teacher students acquainted with the term Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI)?**

The main difference in introducing the term Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI) to teacher students compared to teachers is recognising that teacher students are beginning teachers in training. They have **little or no practical experience** of teaching children and young people to draw upon and their **confidence** as practitioners may be low and fragile. They may also have **heightened fears and concerns** of how they can adopt such an approach to controversial issues at such an early stage of their development as a teacher. These fears and concerns are likely to be around the impact on their classroom practice and presence in terms of ability to control students, manage discussion and debate without antagonising or alienating particular groups of students, their lack of knowledge of particular controversies and fears that there will be complaints to the school from students and/or parents.

So my advice having trained teacher students on Teaching controversial issues is to **keep things simple** in planning, conducting and following up training with teacher students. I have found the following approaches to be helpful:

* Spend time understanding the **background** of teacher students, the nature of their training courses and the contexts in which they are carrying out teaching placements in schools.
* Identify and emphasise from the start the **benefits** to teacher students of teaching controversial issues in terms of their professional development as teachers as well as the **competences – skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours** they are providing to students they teach to help them better deal with the controversies they see in their life around them.
* Set clear targets for **intended outcomes** particularly in building their confidence and resilience to teach controversial issues recognising they are unlikely to be successful in their approach first time round and will have to work at it over time.
* Model **‘good practice’** in trainings and also how you expect them to behave and react in the training exercises.
* Provide lots of time for **reflection and questioning** during exercises to encourage professional development and embed their ownership of teaching and learning approaches and methods.
* Set out clearly where they can get further **support and guidance**
* Set a practical **follow up task** that encourages them to plan to teach controversial issues as part of their teaching.
* Build in **follow up training sessions**, both face-to-face and on-line to continue to build their confidence and professional development as they make the transition to their first teaching posts.

A couple of useful starting activities are:

**Review of media images** – collect a few media images of recent controversies in Europe (including the context where the teacher student is learning to teach), including those involving school age children such as climate change protests. Get the teacher students in pairs and then in groups to identify what makes an issue, such as those in the images, controversial and to arrive at a definition. Then introduce the definition of controversial issues from Training Video 1

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

Finish by getting them to consider the implications, as teacher students, of how they might handle these controversies in the classroom with students.

**‘Hot or Cold’** - In small groups teacher students list on sticky notes controversial issues that they think would be:

* currently **too hot/controversial** for them to handle in the classroom
* **lukewarm** to handle in the classroom
* **cold** and fine to discuss with students.

Then all the sticky notes are put on a wall under the appropriate **‘hot’, ‘lukewarm’ or ‘cold’ headings.** In the plenary, the teacher students discuss why they have characterised the issues as they have, the challenges they pose for them as beginning teachers and the support they need going forward if they are to build their confidence to handle controversy in their classrooms.

Having got teacher students acquainted and interested in Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI) it is now possible to move onto further activities that introduce them to teaching strategies and techniques that will help them to teach controversial issues in the classroom.

**Second: How can we develop their capacity to work with controversial issues?**

There are a number of practical teaching methods and approaches that I have found are very well suited for teacher students to **raise their confidence** in their ability to teach controversial issues while teaching in schools and when they get their first teaching posts. They include:

***‘Whose side are you on?’*** This activity allows teacher students to consider the **pros and cons** of several stances that a teacher can take to controversial issues in the classroom. There are **6 stances to consider**. Each teacher student/or group of teacher students looks at one of the stances, considers the pros and cons of using that stance in the classroom and where it can best be used in their practice and then reports back to the whole group. This reporting of the stances cumulatively provides all teacher students with a **repertoire of practical teaching approaches in handling controversy** that they can take immediately into their teaching. This repertoire is greatly appreciated by those learning how to be effective teachers.

***‘The School on the Edge of the Forest’*** The second activity is based on reading a fictitious story about a conflict between 2 groups of people in a rural community about where to build the first school and who should attend. It is very good for showing how stories, fables and role-playing can be used to help teacher students to defuse sensitive issues in the classroom with students through the technique of **distancing.**

***‘Forum Theatre’*** The third activity addresses the very real fear for teacher students of how best to **deal with insensitive and inappropriate remarks in the classroom** which may undermine their confidence and authority as the teacher. Three teacher students are sent from the room while the other teacher students consider a range of insensitive and inappropriate remarks students might make. Each teacher student is asked to return to the room and then has to role play how they would respond as a teacher to the student remark. The group then vote on who out of the three teacher students gave the best response to the remark. Teacher students particularly enjoy the group role-playing aspect as it shows them techniques that they can use to address this fear positively and professionally.

Finally, as part of follow up activity it can be useful to ask teacher students to develop, in their own time, a ***Lesson Plan* Activity** (in any subject for primary and in their specialist subject for secondary teacher students) with learning activities on a controversial issue using some of the strategies and techniques that they have been introduced to during their training.

I hope that you have found this information and these training activities helpful in your training with teacher students on Teaching Controversial Issues. I wish you the best of luck in your endeavours.

David Kerr

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