Teaching controversial issues:

A four-step classroom strategy for clear thinking on controversial issues

By Patrick Clarke

For the past decade, one of the most popular workshops offered by the B.C. Teachers' Federation has been "Teaching controversial issues—without becoming part of the controversy." The popularity of the workshop reflects a growing awareness of the need to teach social issues. Yet the motivation for teaching about environmental sustainability, limits to growth, animal rights or euthanasia is tempered by an understandable wariness of controversy. So while our workshop on teaching controversial issues is well subscribed, we know that the pedagogical danger zone social issues present is one many teachers avoid.

Teachers may be discouraged from tackling controversial topics by lack of familiarity with the topic. They are uncomfortable if they do not feel "expert" or at least well-versed. Furthermore, teachers may be concerned that complicated issues would take too long to cover and regular curriculum would be neglected.

With increasing standardization and calls for "accountability," teachers are not inclined to venture down the so-called side roads of learning, where social issues can so often lead.

We live in a time of general decline in the protocols of civil discourse. Television talk shows bristle with outrageous behaviour, which teachers are understandably reluctant to see reproduced in their classrooms. We may be disinclined to take on "hot" topics for fear of classroom chaos that might ensue.

Also, we sense that we are living in particularly cantankerous times when our actions as teachers are under close and often uninformed scrutiny. If we teach about an issue, we can easily find ourselves accused of bias or ulterior political motives. In other words, in teaching about a controversy, we become the controversy. Teachers in the Victoria, BC suburb of Esquimalt and the location of the Pacific fleet of the Canadian navy experienced this during the first Gulf War in 1990 when they attempted to have their students consider multiple perspectives on that war. They quickly found themselves at the centre of a controversy when several parents and students with ties to the Navy expressed the view that there were no "perspectives." There was only the right side and the wrong side and they didn't see any merit in spending any time talking about the wrong side.

But in spite of these impediments to addressing controversial issues the fact remains that contemporary teaching presents certain challenges, not the least of which is relevance. The value of a formal education is increasingly measured according to the degree that it is future oriented and to what extent it helps students think critically and act upon social issues and problems.

Further, there is a growing belief that a good contemporary education is an education that concentrates on helping students understand connections and interdependence. A good education is focused on developing an awareness of the planetary condition, and prepares students to act as effective, responsible citizens in a complex world. In that context, the relationship between education and public issues is apparent. Such an education, often described as a “global education,” turns to contemporary issues for its content. We could well ask, what are our chances of becoming global educators if we remain averse to taking on controversial public issues as part of our teaching practice?

What is needed is an approach to teaching issues that overcomes the obstacles—specifically, a concern for the influence of a teacher’s own biases, a fear of becoming a lightning rod for controversy oneself simply because a controversial issue is discussed in a class, and a lack of confidence because of unfamiliarity with an issue.

The approach to teaching an issue put forward here tries to answer at least part of those concerns. It does not deal directly with the role of issues in prescribed curricula. The possibilities for teaching issues as permitted or encouraged by curricula vary from province to province. However, it would not be extreme to suggest that any teacher who wants to can find a way to integrate consideration of issues into regular course work. Every social studies program in the country, for example, encourages consideration of current events.

The teaching approach to controversial issues as described here is a process that should help students make sense of a complex and confusing world. It is a method of analyzing an issue, considering the merits of an argument, and forming an opinion on the basis of critical analysis.

As an essentially inductive process, it is student-centred, and the teacher’s role is primarily that of monitor or resource person. The teacher’s bias should be less of a concern. Public concern over teaching a controversial issue is addressed because the strategy is itself a demonstration of fair consideration. As an inquiry method, it provides a framework for classroom activity that discourages one-sided argument or ill-informed opinion.

The teaching strategy for controversial public issues is based on four steps or elements. Each provides students a set of questions that gives them a number of ways of looking at an issue as well as a sound basis for making a judgment.

To demonstrate how the strategy and related questions might work as applied to a controversial issue, we offer elements of a set of possible lessons on Canada’s role in Afghanistan. The central question would be is this a situation where Canada should have an army engaged in combat?

Step one: What is the issue about?

Identify the key question over which there is a controversy. Virtually every controversy turns around three types of questions: those relating to values—What should be? What is best?; those relating to information—What is the truth? What is the case?; and those relating to concepts—What does this mean? How should this be defined? In short, What is this controversy about: values, information, or concepts?

By responding to these questions, students begin analyzing an issue by identifying the nature of the controversy. In doing this, students can fairly quickly get to the heart of the issue. This element of the strategy helps students get past some frustration that can be experienced in trying to understand an issue. It also gives them a chance to analyze an issue dispassionately before any consideration of the merits of a case.

Applied to the Canada in Afghanistan question the inquiry starts by determining the extent to which this is a “values” issue. Is the controversy in this question centred on what Canada should do in a moral sense? What is the right action for Canada in this case?

The next question has to do with the information regarding the issue. Is this an issue around which there is controversy because it is difficult to know what or whom to believe? What are the contending voices and what are they saying? At this stage of the discussion we are not considering the merits of the information, only what it is and how it represents the issue. Applied to the Afghanistan question there are military information sources, NGOs working in the country, government and opposition sources of information. All of these can give students a sense of how varied views can be on the appropriateness of Canada’s combat role, and the question of “who to believe” is shown to be rather complex.

In the Afghanistan question there could also be controversy that involves disagreement over the concepts involved. What is peacekeeping and peace making? What do we mean by reconstruction? What is the concept of security as it is applied in a place like Afghanistan? Any one of these terms or concepts can be a source of contention in a situation as complicated as Afghanistan. Students can develop a deeper appreciation for the nuances in an issue by realizing that there can be fundamental disagreements over meaning.

Step two: What are the arguments?

Once students have determined what the issue is about or the nature of the controversy, they consider the arguments supporting the various positions on the issue. The key concern here is determining just what is being said and whether there is adequate support for the claims being made. This step is largely analytical in that it calls for some determination of the content of an argument. It is also judgmental to a degree. At this step, students can begin judging the validity of a position on a controversial issue. If students have determined that the controversy surrounding an issue involves information, then they should ask questions about the information available or provided. Is there adequate information? Are the claims in the information accurate? Is the

information appropriate to the issue? Are the sources primary or secondary? In general, are the conclusions presented in the argument reasonable, given the information?

Most controversial issues are about values, and there are critical questions students can ask about the values stated or employed in an argument. Specifically, what criteria are being used to make a judgment? In general there are two: moral and prudential. Moral criteria for judgment are based on a concern for how all people will be affected. Prudential criteria are concerned mainly with how my group or I will be affected.

Other questions students can use to test the acceptability of values claims are well known and universal in application: Would you like that done to you? What if everybody did that? Are there any situations where you would feel different or disagree with this value? These questions give students a set of criteria for making judgments that can take them beyond relativism and, because of their universal application, help them reflect on the validity of dogmatic positions.

If the controversy involves definitions, meanings, or concepts, then students should try to determine if the arguments presented use meanings or definitions that are clear. Also they should test to see if meanings are used consistently or if they are appropriate and used in a proper context.

Afghanistan and the question of Canada's role does raise the moral question of what Canada ought to do. The response to the question of whether or not our role there is prudential or moral will likely elicit a quick decision that it is a moral presence where there is little prudential benefit. On this basis Canada looks like it may be doing the "right" thing. But students might ask to what extent a combat mission in Afghanistan actually serves the prudential interests of the military and commercial interests that benefit from military engagement. They might also reflect on how they might feel if they lived in the country and had this military presence happening to them. There are a range of views on this in Afghanistan and students would be well advised to know those before they decided what the "right" thing to do is.

Step three: What is assumed?

Once students have considered the arguments in an issue, the critical question becomes what are the assumptions or what is taken as self-evident in the presentation of arguments. It is at this stage that crucial matters of principle are employed to determine the validity of a position.

This framework or process has at its heart a fundamentally important aspect: that is that there is no values' relativity.

It is not true that any opinion, position, or point of view is acceptable or legitimate. If assumptions taken to justify an argument are based in prejudice, if the attitudes behind arguments are ethnocentric, racist, or parochial, then the assumptions are grounds for criticism and reduce the legitimacy of an argument. A variation of this in Afghanistan could be the notion that the people there are violence-prone or incapable of self-

governance. The question for students to pose is what are the assumptions behind such arguments? Is it based on a prejudice or on some other attitude contrary to universally held human values such as those set out in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights?

A second element students can use to evaluate assumptions or what is behind an argument is the voice of the argument. Who is saying this? Insiders or outsiders? Insiders may have particular information and interests that could give an argument a certain shape or orientation. If the voice is that of an outsider, do they know the issue or is being an outsider an advantage in this case since they have no special interest? Often the assumptions behind an argument can best be tested by hearing views of both insiders and outsiders. In Afghanistan information is provided by the military. Are they "insiders?" Do they have a particular interest to protect or advance? What about NGOs, often their information is contrary to military information? What are their interests? Are they "insiders" or "outsiders?"

Once the arguments have been analyzed and the assumptions scrutinized, the final step has to do with how the issue or the arguments pertaining to it are presented or manipulated. The final question in the process then tries to help students judge the quality of the information they are receiving.

Step four: How are the arguments manipulated?

This is the stage of the process when questions are asked on the politics of the issue. This step is particularly important for students because it can help them understand how information can be used to influence opinion.

To determine how an argument is being manipulated, students must first determine who is involved and what their particular interests are in the issue. What is the rationalization for their position? What are their reasons for taking the position they advance?

By considering these questions, students begin to see how information can be selected, emphasized, or ignored according to its value to various positions on an issue. The degree to which the parties involved are acting in self-interest and use information only to support that interest could affect the legitimacy of a position. On the other hand, a strongly supported position or one with strong moral reasons could add credibility to an argument. A growing contemporary concern is the role of media in controversial issues and how media can engage in argument manipulation. It is very important for students to have an appreciation of how media are involved in issues. Media literacy has become an essential survival skill as the influence of the media increases. The question for students to address is, How can the media both reflect and create reality? To what extent on any given controversial issue is the media either creating the issue or manipulating the arguments?

Argument manipulation is usually accomplished through such strategies as scapegoating, false analogies, extreme examples, and others. The degree to which media or advocates of a position rely on such strategies is an indication to students of

the validity of an argument. Detecting such tactics gives students a useful tool for assessing an argument and making a judgment on an issue.

As far as the Canada in Afghanistan question is concerned, there is lots of argument manipulation to go around and in the end it may not lead to a conclusion, only an awareness that manipulation happens. That in itself is a worthy learning outcome. Nevertheless, for this issue, it is evident that some time spent looking at examples of statements on the various sides should allow an informed opinion on where the manipulation is found and if one side is more prone to it than the other.

Conclusion

At the end of such an inquiry and discussion process, students may be less certain of their position than when they began. That is entirely an outcome of having more information and going through a process that requires critical reflection and open mindedness. Most importantly, they will have arrived at their conclusions through their own deliberation, and we teachers will have provided the lamp of learning, not the pointer and the answer book.

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2007 issue (Volume 16, Number 2, pages 47–54) of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, www.policyalternatives.ca.

Common strategies for manipulating arguments

- **ad hominem strategy**: Judgment based on who said something rather than on the merit of the statement.
- **either-or tactic:** Forcing a choice by presenting only two possibilities when there may be others.
- **extreme examples:** Used to prove a point, to slant an argument, to support a prejudice.
- **false analogies:** An analogy that makes an inappropriate connection or comparison.
- **irrelevant appeals:** appeals to emotion, patriotism, tradition.
- **leading statements, slogans:** Designed to damage credibility, encourage hostility, create a false impression.
- **polarized thinking:** Us/them, strong/weak, rich/poor, good/bad; encourages distrust, suspicion; presents limited and false choices.
- **scapegoats:** Assigning blame.
- **straw person:** Creating a caricature of a person or group.

This article and the BCTF workshop Teaching Controversial Issues is based on *The Media and Public Issues: A guide for teaching critical mindedness*, by Walter Werner and Kenneth Nixon, 1990, ISBN 0-920354-27-0, Althouse Press, 1137 Western Road, London, ON, N6G 1G7.

Patrick Clarke is Assistant Director in the Professional and Social Issues Division of the B.C. Teachers' Federation.