**Script: Teaching Controversial Issues – How to handle personal “baggage” when working on TCI in the classroom?**

**Introduction**

Welcome! My name is Ingrid Aspelund and I am a senior advisor at the European Wergeland Centre.

This video is a part of a series of videos looking at Teaching Controversial Issues (TCI) in the classroom. In this video we are going to explore the question:

***How to handle personal “baggage” when working on TCI in the classroom?***

How should teachers deal with their own experiences and opinions when addressing controversial issues? Should you share your own experiences and opinions with your students?

**First, we will look into identifying bias**

“(…) the risk of bias has been seen as one of the major problems of teaching controversial issues." In some instances, it is not just the risk of bias but anxieties about allegations of bias that is seen as the problem.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, bias is:

“*the*[*action*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/action)*of*[*supporting*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/supporting)*or*[*opposing*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/oppose)*a*[*particular*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/particular)[*person*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/person)*or thing in an*[*unfair*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/unfair)*way, because of*[*allowing*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/allow)[*personal*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/personal)[*opinions*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/opinion)*to*[*influence*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/influence)[*your*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/your)[*judgment*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/judgment)*”*

Since we know that controversial issues arouse strong feelings and are often connected to values, *how* a controversial issue is presented or explored in the classroom, might be biased. However, it often happens that teachers not necessarily are worried about the actual teaching being biased, but rather fear *allegations* of bias from students, colleagues or parents. That might lead to teachers avoiding addressing a particular controversial issue.

The Council of Europe manual “Teaching controversial issues” points out that: “*An element of personal self-reflection by teachers on their own beliefs and values, and how these influence the way they address and interact with students both individually and collectively, is seen as crucial to the sensitive teaching of controversial subject-matter*”.

**Second, let us explore cultural baggage**

Everyone carries around with them a set of beliefs and values which affect the way they see the world and operate in it. This could be defined as “cultural baggage” and is usually something we take for granted. Our cultural baggage – such as upbringing and local community or religious background, most likely influence how we perceive a controversial issue. You might find an issue to be highly controversial and difficult to address, while your students do not. Or the other way around.

It is advisable for the teacher to reflect on their own beliefs and values both in general and connected to a specific controversial issue.

Possible questions for reflection before teaching controversial issues are:

**Should teachers share their own opinions and experiences when teaching controversial issues?**

The relationship between teacher and learner is important for the learning process, which means that teachers should provide both subject-based and emotional support to students. Mutual respect and trust are crucial.

Thereby, in a lesson addressing a controversial issue, students might find it artificial if the teacher acts as a neutral chairperson, not sharing any personal views or experiences on the matter. While the purpose of being **a neutral chairperson** is to avoid bias in order not to jeopardize the student- teacher relationship, the students might in fact end up not trusting the teacher, which might damage the learning process.

However, sharing your opinions and experiences should be done with care, also considering your authority as a teacher, and making sure that students know that they do not necessarily have to agree with the teacher or feel their personal experiences being attacked.

**Reflecting on your role as private, personal and professional or public might be useful when teaching controversial issues.**

Teachers are public officials. Teachers do bear legal responsibilities through formal legislation and official policy as well as through the expectations of school leaders and inspectors. There are also moral imperatives that come with being a member of the teaching profession.

At the same time, being *personal* is also a part of the role of the teacher and might even be pedagogically interlinked to maintaining your ***public or professional role***.

Sharing your experiences connected to a certain issue could help support the learning process – helping students understanding and deepen their perspective. Typically, controversial issues or questions do not have any right or wrong answers, thereby teaching controversial issues might also be an opportunity for students and teachers to explore the issue together and share experiences.

However, being *personal* is not necessarily the same as being *private.* Being *private* quickly removes you from your official, public position as a teacher. For instance, if you have experience with cyberbullying it might help the students understanding of the seriousness of the issue to share your experiences. However, to share detailed, private information about the experience might not be advisable.

To conclude: What is important to consider is the **balance** between the teacher as a public official and as a person.

**I will end this video with some questions for reflection when exploring your personal baggage when teaching controversial issues in the classroom:**

* How easy do you think it is for teachers to identify their own prejudices and assumptions?
* Where do you see your beliefs and values as coming from?
* Identify a controversial issue in your practice: How does your own ‘baggage’ give implications for how you approach this issue in the classroom and school?

Thank you!

Ingrid Aspelund

December 2020