

## **RGS-IBG KS3 CPD Tutorial – Teaching controversial issues**

**Slide 1: Introduction.** Welcome to the Action Plan for Geography’s online tutorial on teaching controversial issues. Teaching controversial issues can be daunting, particularly if you haven’t taught the subject before. The aim of this tutorial, along with accompanying teacher notes and student handbook is to give you tips and advice on approaching controversial issues. Controversial issues frequently surface in Geography, from teaching about international development to whether a coast should use hard engineering to protect the coastline. Ensuring that students get the most out of debates where there are no easy answers is important to help them learn to formulate their own opinions and help prepare them for life as adults. Controversial issues are often cross-curricular in nature, so these ideas can be used within Geography and other subject areas.

**Slide 2: Overview.** This tutorial will consider:

- What are controversial issues?
- Why should I teach controversial issues?
- How to handle controversial issues
- The role of the teacher
- Examples of controversial issues

The tutorial will then outline some tips for teaching controversial issues within four of the Geography Teaching Today website’s Key Stage 3 resources:

- The Geography of Conflict
- Who wants to be a billionaire?
- The Geography of my stuff and
- Who do we think we are?

**Slide 3: What are controversial issues?** Controversial issues may be questions, subjects or problems which can create a difference of opinion. They can include issues which may have political, social, environmental or personal impacts on pupils and/or the wider community: locally, nationally or internationally. Often they have no easy answer, in part, because solutions may be based on an individual’s personal values and beliefs.

**Slide 4: Why should I teach controversial issues?** Teaching controversial issues provides a great opportunity for students to think for themselves and to clarify their own opinions about important political, social, ethical and moral issues. Students’ self esteem may also improve, as they become more confident in expressing views or formulating ideas. Teaching and learning about controversial issues may support enquiry and analytical thinking. It may also encourage pupils to become more aware of current debates, helping to connect them with real life situations and contexts and unpacking a range of confusing, frightening and mixed media messages that they might have encountered outside school.

**Slide 5:** The government has attached a strong importance to the teaching of controversial issues through the publishing of various government initiatives. The Race

Relations Amendment Act of 2000 stated that schools must “eliminate unlawful racial discrimination”. The subsequent Education Act of 2002 stated that schools should “promote spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development” and since 2007, schools have been responsible for promoting “community cohesion” which should be seen as *a common vision and sense of belonging; a society in which the diversity of people’s backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued*. The aim of each of these three initiatives has been to promote inclusion and a sense of belonging, to foster ethnic, social and religious tolerance and to prepare young people for the challenges ahead.

**Slide 6: How to handle controversial issues.** When handling controversial issues, consider how you will provide a balanced view of the issues, in order to avoid bias. Do you have the right knowledge and resources? Think about what learning strategies you will use which best suit the teaching of controversial issues. Active learning strategies may provide good opportunities for discussion and debate. Consider what ground rules you can set to provide a classroom environment in which pupils feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Some ideas include ensuring that one pupil speaks at a time, pupils listen and respect the views of others, individuals do not feel pressured to give their opinion if they don’t want to, and pupils use appropriate language. You might consider splitting the class into smaller groups to ensure that less confident pupils are included in the discussion.

**Slide 7: Role of the teacher.** As teacher you have an important role in addressing controversial issues. Here is a checklist of ideas to consider:

- Ensure that you provide a ‘safe’ and comfortable classroom environment for discussing sensitive issues.
- Give equal importance to opposing views and opinions, and similarly to both the prevailing public opinion and minority views.
- Be careful not to present opinions as facts.
- Try to refrain from preaching or acting as if you are the authority on the subject.
- If a one-sided consensus develops early on in the discussion, ensure that you challenge it.
- Be sensitive to individual pupil needs. Some discussions may have negative impacts on those affected by the issues raised.
- Take care not to reveal your own opinions inadvertently, for example through gestures or facial expressions.
- You might choose to share your own opinions with the class, but if you do, emphasise that your views are as a private citizen rather than as a teacher.
- Finally, although you should not actively promote your own views, you should still challenge views that are against community values such as racism.

**Slide 8: Examples of controversial issues.** Many of the Key Stage 3 resource modules on the Geography Teaching Today website feature controversial issues. The slides which follow outline three of these examples along with tips for tackling them. However, the tips, ideas and skills are transferable and could easily be applied to other topics or subjects. The examples given include: *The geography of conflict*, a unit which considers

a variety of different conflicts and their impacts, *Who wants to be a billionaire?* which tackles the uneven distribution of global wealth, *The geography of my stuff*, where teenage consumers can connect with the people and places involved in the manufacture of their possessions, and *Who do we think we are?* a unit which examines and challenges perceptions of identity, diversity and global citizenship.

**Slide 9: The geography of conflict.** When teaching about conflict, it is advisable to watch media reports and study the resources beforehand to anticipate any difficult questions or emotions. Likewise, media reports can be loaded with bias, especially concerning war, so preparing pupils can help them gain a more balanced view. Although it is important for pupils to cover the main objectives of the lesson, watch out for oversimplifying the issues as many aspects of war can be very complicated. Using current and topical material based on conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan will enable students to feel connected with the material but may also ignite emotion. Think about how you would respond to these emotions or any difficult questions that might arise. How will you provide a counter argument? Finally, students may hold preconceived ideas about some of the places mentioned, for example Afghanistan, so be prepared to challenge them.

**Slide 10: Who wants to be a billionaire?** This module aims to give a realistic view of the world economy. However, pupils are likely to be influenced by the media and may have preconceptions about less developed countries that you may need to plan for. Uneven distribution of wealth can provoke ethical discussions, but be careful not to provide a one sided view – even if it is what you believe! You might personally have principles and care about injustice, but it may appear that the students do not seem to care. Even so, refrain from preaching as you may alienate them. Students may change their mind later, or may require further information to help them formulate opinions. For role play activities, ensure that you set ground rules and highlight the skill of being able to give an opposing view.

**Slide 11: The geography of my stuff.** This topic, which focuses on the interconnectedness between teenage consumers in the UK and producers worldwide, has the potential to evoke a mixed variety of emotions. Ensure you have set ground rules and the classroom feels safe for pupils to air their concerns. Students may feel emotions such as anger, guilt and helplessness. Think about how you will handle these emotions, as you don't want to make students feel helpless but rather, empowered to have a positive impact on the environment and others. Equally pupils may feel that they don't care, which you may find frustrating. Beforehand, think about how this would make you feel and devise some strategies to deal with such situations. When tackling issues of child labour, think how you can make the issues balanced, so they can make up their own minds. However, equally, you have a moral responsibility to highlight that child labour is considered to violate human rights.

**Slide 12: Who do we think we are?** This final example explores identity in a cross-curricular format, linking geography with citizenship. Issues around identity may provoke heated debate so ensure that you set clear ground rules to respect others' ideas

and feelings. When considering identity and 'Britishness', sensitivity to individuals is imperative to avoid feelings of exclusion or alienation. A careful choice of dialogue and communication can help to ensure that pupils feel at ease considering and sharing thoughts about their identity and personal sense of place. Although this module gives an opportunity to celebrate difference, it may also be used by the teacher to encourage a uniting sense of community and sense of belonging. Sensitivity may also be required for the work on the Democratic Republic of Congo. Students may have been affected by this conflict or other conflicts which may evoke painful memories. You may also consider encouraging students to be sensitive to others' needs.