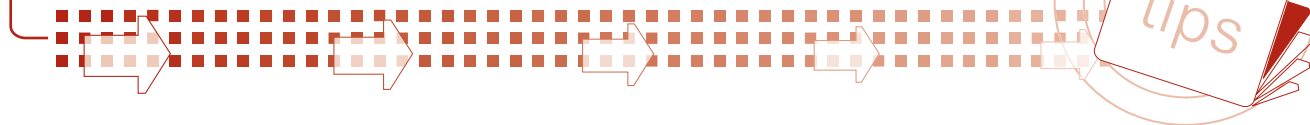# Theory Into Practice Strategies:
Inclusive Practices for Managing Controversial Issues
Teaching and Learning

Helping students to find respectful and culturally inclusive ways of dealing with controversial issues is an important goal of university education. We expect that students will be able to recognise and think critically about various aspects of an argument, separating their own values, beliefs and emotions from its analysis and evaluation. This is reflected by the Education at Flinders policy, in statements that encourage the kind of teaching which develops:
- the capacity to challenge assumptions and embrace new thinking
- social, cultural and economic understanding
- international perspectives that enrich experience

Definitions of the educated person include the ability to change a view in the light of new evidence and better argument. Acquisition of such abilities is developmental and good teaching will support the student to shift from thinking which is of a simplistic, dualistic nature in which things are either right or wrong according to an authority; to the recognition of uncertainty, but with resolution from authority; to relativistic views in which any perspective may be acceptable; to commitment in which choices are made based on standards; and eventually to limited commitments made in the recognition that they are subject to change in the light of new or better information. (Perry, 1999)

When considering these outcomes, it is clear that raising controversies and helping students work through them is an important part of university education and students' intellectual development. However, because of the discomfort discussion of controversies may cause both staff and students, the temptation may be to avoid controversy.

How can we use controversy constructively?

Controversial issues may be included strategically as part of a teaching plan to help students to achieve desired learning outcomes. They may be used to raise the complexity of an issue about which students may believe there is only one perspective. They are an inevitable part of some teaching and learning, such as the discussion of ethical issues and religious beliefs. With an increasingly diverse student body it is impossible to know what backgrounds students have before we meet them.

It is important to anticipate and plan for controversy, but unlikely that we can anticipate it all. Teachers may anticipate that some issues may evoke cross-cultural controversy, for example the discussion of sex education in a child development class. At other times the issue, for example the history/politics of the 1980s wars in the Balkan states or the invasion of Iraq in 2003, may be highly controversial in a class of students including refugees from either side of the conflicts or who have different religious/political affiliations, but entirely uncontroversial in a class of Australian-born school-leavers.

Teachers' own taken-for-granted assumptions may lead them to unwittingly privilege one side of a disputed matter or to fail to recognise that a difference of opinion exists. For example, discussions of history, land use, health care, education, public policy have often omitted any reference to indigenous perspectives.

The discussion thus far is based on the assumption that there is controversial and non-controversial material to be learned by students. A more useful way of thinking about controversial issues may be to accept that given the provisional nature of knowledge, it will be helpful for students' intellectual development for all classroom discussion to be seen as controversial.

An increasingly diverse student body provides many opportunities for the discussion of controversial issues. When such discussion is planned for and managed well by staff and students are helped to gain the necessary confidence and skills, the outcome can be positive and exhilarating. On the other hand, poorly managed discussion of controversial issues can lead to some students becoming more entrenched in their original views and others feeling silenced, belittled or ignored.

Students tend to come to university with an advocacy model of discussion (Trosset, 1998), believing that discussion is for the purpose of advocating views already held. They do not think that it is possible to have a balanced discussion of opposing views, believing that one perspective would dominate and that it would be unsafe to speak out against the dominant perspective. Generally though, more senior students tend to operate from a more exploratory model of discussion, seeing it as a means to seek information or learn a different perspective.

A number of other student characteristics can interfere with the ability to discuss controversial issues. In one study, 25% of female students and fewer male students believed that they have the right to say or think what they believe, without being challenged. This view persisted until senior years of study (Trosset, 1998). Students and staff may have different beliefs about the meaning of tolerance, with staff expecting civil, well-mannered listening and behaviour towards all members of the community and students adopting a relativistic viewpoint, tending to believe that tolerance means approving of all ways of being as equally valid.

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Students can also resist dealing with controversy because they believe that it is important that group members feel comfortable. Students tend not to discriminate between feeling comfortable and being in an environment with trustworthy staff where it is safe to feel uncomfortable. Because students are now likely to see themselves as consumers, they tend to believe that teachers should not make them feel uncomfortable or to participate more than they think is reasonable (Howard and Baird, 2000). Being comfortable, however, is antithetical to grappling with new ideas, listening to opposing views, having someone argue with cherished beliefs. Students who see themselves as part of the dominant culture are likely to be resistant to course material which questions existing power relations and privilege. Resistance is seen by Hedley and Markowitz , (2001:195) as arising because students: (1) tend to reduce moral analysis by dividing it into only two sides or opinions (dichotomous reductionism); and (2) misconstrue empirical and theoretical information provided in class as moral argument (as may happen in the scientific field).

Strategies and Tips for the Management of Controversial Issues in Teaching

If subject matter is considered by students to be controversial, it clearly implies that there is more than one firmly held set of beliefs about the issue. This may often arise in the context of cultural difference, but may occur in learning contexts which appear to be monocultural. While the focus of this TIPS folio is on culturally inclusive ways to manage controversial issues in classroom discussions, the strategies may be applicable to any learning context.

Plan for Inclusive Teaching

- Find out about your prospective students' cultural and educational backgrounds as far as possible before the class. Class lists however may be misleading and student diversity can only be appreciated as the class progresses
- Anticipate material that is likely to cause controversy and actively plan to manage it
- Include statements about classroom processes and expectations for discussing controversial material in the Topic Hand Book. You may wish to include assessment tasks which, for example, require students to reflect on their own development of skills for managing controversy or show they can critically analyse and argue from evidence about an issue utilizing more than one perspective

Build trust and create a positive classroom climate

- 'Getting to know you' activities which focus on similarities rather than differences can reduce barriers between people of different cultures; for example, an activity which demonstrates that everyone carries cultural baggage
- Getting to know each other enhances students' ability to communicate and enhances participation
- Self-disclosure builds trust and a sense of belonging to the group. It is important to model appropriate levels of self-disclosure on matters relevant to the topic; remind students about the importance of confidentiality, eg what

is disclosed in a small group needs permission before being repeated in the large group; remind students to disclose only what feels safe. In some cases the teacher may need to keep secret some information disclosed to them by a student
- Be open with students about your purposes and help them to weigh the costs and benefits of self-disclosure
- Autobiographical journals can be a safe way for students to self-disclose. The journal may be private, with the student writing a summary or reflection, seen by the teacher, or chosen extracts shared with the group
- Model tolerance and respectful behaviour and make classroom civilities such as well-mannered listening one of the expected learning outcomes of the topic
- Develop the art of responding neutrally to statements which you find controversial by listening, paraphrasing, asking for evidence, analysing underlying assumptions and asking for other view points. Challenge the ideas without putting down the person

Discuss the conditional nature of knowledge

- Be explicit about the conditional nature of knowledge in the discipline, by explaining how knowledge is developed; explaining influences on paradigm changes; by soliciting a range of student perspectives, how they come to have them, the evidence for them, their cultural value
- Be explicit about the value of knowing what you don't know and encourage students to explore what they don't know and to set new learning goals
- Model and reward an exploratory model of discussion, for example by the criteria established for participation in the group

Ensure inclusive discussions

- Establish classroom norms with students at the beginning of the semester and use them as a reference point for appropriate behaviour during classes
- Use discussion strategies which encourage students to listen carefully to each other, such as requiring the next speaker to paraphrase the views of the previous speaker
- Require students to cite the quality of the evidence on which claims are made, whether from theory and/or research or from experience, media, family folk-lore
- Ask students to interview a person with a different perspective and report their views either verbally or in a written piece
- Ensure that no student is put into the role of being the 'token other' by being asked to comment on what a particular cultural group thinks. Respectfully use the diversity and expertise in the class room when it is helpful to understand different cultural perspectives

Encourage critical thinking

- Use debates. Have students take one position one week and the opposing position the next week. Then ask them to write briefly about their current position, using evidence; or have students defend a position they disagree with in a debate
- Use critical observation activities, eg of video vignettes, to help students distinguish between observation and interpretation
- Use media items to encourage critique, differences in reporting by different sources, analysis of sources of information and misinformation and the wider socio-cultural context of thinking about issues
- Have students analyse, critique and evaluate the evidence in articles which take opposing positions on an issue
- Bring in credible guest lecturers to put opposing views or discuss different perspectives
- Avoid assessment tasks which require one right answer, such as true or false questions and multiple choice questions

Use the teachable moment to encourage intellectual transformation

- Use controversy, conflict, inappropriate comments (eg racial comments) to encourage critical thinking. This can be done by reflection, asking for analysis or evidence for the assertion, probing questions to get to underlying assumptions, reference back to classroom expectations. You can ask questions like: 'what is another perspective on that'? In these ways, the idea, rather than the person can be challenged
- Bring topical issues from the media into the classroom for discussion and analysis

Manage emotions

- Anticipate and debrief strong emotions such as anger
- Anticipate student cynicism or them becoming demoralised in the face of feeling powerless to make changes they may come to believe are necessary. Build action plans into assessment
- Manage your own emotions as the teacher, by debriefing with other staff and/or the Staff Development and Training Unit

Respect and overcome resistance

- Expect resistance and plan to return to some issues on several occasions
- Offer interpretations of resistance gradually
- Manage emotions, both students' and your own
- Ask students to analyse their resistance once emotions have been dealt with
- Avoid personalising resistance; rather focus on strategies to challenge ideas
- Encourage independent learning activities, for example assessment which requires students to assess the evidence for and against some propositions they feel strongly about; or to critique material/articles which promulgate a biased view

Use experiential activities

- Experiential activities have the potential to reduce the sense of 'us' and 'them' if they are planned carefully, supported and monitored during the activity, and debriefed carefully
- Experiential activities such as role play, simulations and field work personalise the learning experience by connecting students' experiences with concepts discussed in the classroom
- Experiential activities can be used to help students (especially 'dominant culture' students) to understand that they too are 'raced' and have cultural norms

Use a conceptual framework

- Base the topic around key concepts to provide students with analytic tools for understanding the issues which are examples of the concepts. This may enhance engagement with concepts rather than argument about examples. For example, a topic on cultural diversity could be based on the concepts *prejudice, discrimination, forms of resistance, structures of inter-group relations* and *minority group formation*
(Downey and Torrecilha, 1994)

Moderate classroom incivilities

See Boice (1996), for strategies for managing classroom incivilities:

- Establish ground rules for classroom discussion that include respect and giving a fair hearing
- Teachers and students to moderate over-attachment to ideas
- Teachers and students to moderate over-emotional reaction to criticism of ideas

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http://www.edchange.org/
See the Multicultural Pavilion for classroom strategies

http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/inclusive/controversial.htm
for establishing classroom ground rules

In a recent educational evaluation focus group, a young man explained why he felt he had learnt so well in a particular classroom. The teacher concerned had espoused a student learning focused curriculum and had set out to establish and teach these principles through classroom interactions. The student reported that:

The teacher set up an atmosphere of group work collaboration and mutual respect. She collaborated with us in our work and listened to us, modelled accepting behaviour, and made it clear that a similar standard was expected of us. She encouraged us to take responsibility for our learning and to explore our reactions to the curriculum content. This meant that one day I really listened to a Fundamentalist Christian, something I could never imagine doing, and heard her explanation of why she felt so strongly about and could never accept abortion. I did not have to change my beliefs, but I found I was able to understand how she thought and could empathise with her feelings about it. It was a real learning experience for me on many levels. I also was able to articulate my own beliefs more fully and understand more deeply why I felt as I did. I think we both changed our thinking a bit that day.

Controversial issues teaching review.

To what extent do I.......

Highly evident = 5   **Somewhat evident = 3**
Hardly evident = 1   **Not evident = 0**

What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?

Plan to include controversial issues in the topic?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Anticipate controversy?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Use assessment tasks which help students to shift from black and white thinking to more principled thinking?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Establish classroom norms with students which moderate incivilities?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Manage student resistance?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Anticipate and debrief emotion?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Ensure inclusive discussion?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Build respect and trust among students?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0

Discuss the conditional nature of knowledge?

☐ 5   ☐ 3   ☐ 1   ☐ 0