

What are some approaches for teaching controversial topics in citizenship education?

One of the most difficult things about teaching controversial topics in citizenship education is deciding how to approach topics. The following list hopefully will give some tools to help you approach or bring in a challenging topic in the classroom while teaching important skills *such as interpersonal, conflict management, analytical and problem solving skills*. These approaches are most suitable for the higher ELSA levels.

Approach 1: T-Chart

Level: ELSA 4-7

CLB Competency Area: 🗣️ Social Interaction; 🗣️ Interaction; 🗣️ Information

As a class or in small groups, choose an issue that is important at the community, provincial or national level. Create a t-chart in order to discuss and assess the pros and cons of this issue. Each student should come to a conclusion and justify it in a paragraph. Students determine what should be done about the issue. As a follow-up, students can write a mock email to their MP or MLA discussing their opinions, suggestions or conclusions and thoughts on the issue.

Approach 2: Values Continuum and Exchanging Views

Level: ELSA 4-7

CLB Competency Area: 🗣️ Information

1. Read a debatable statement to the class, for example:

‘Violence is never justified in protests, either by protesters or by police.’

2. Ask learners to choose their position on the debatable statement and write it on a piece of paper. They should write a number between one and five, with one being ‘strongly disagree’ and five ‘strongly agree’.
3. They should now find someone who shares their viewpoint and discuss the statement for three minutes. If they change their mind at any point, they can write their new view on the paper.
4. Learners should then move on to find someone whose position is one step removed from their own and discuss the statement, and finally someone who has a very different view from them.
5. Finally, come together as a class and discuss the process.

How many of you have found that you have changed your position?

What led you to change your mind?

What have you gained from this process?

Approach 3: Talking Stick

Level: ELSA 4-7

CLB Competency Area: 🗣️ Information; 🗣️ Information

1. Ask the students to move their chairs into a circle. Give one student a stick.
2. Remind students that whoever is holding the stick is asked to speak his/her mind on the subject or issue in question. When they are finished, they pass the stick to the person next to them.
3. Remind students when they are not holding the stick, they are not to speak and should try not to think ahead about what they are going to say. The goal is to listen and concentrate on the words of the speaker.
4. Remind students that they are not to judge and question the speaker. All viewpoints are okay. No one is allowed to comment on what another has said. However, practice active listening skills by having students summarize what each person says.

Approach 4: Role-Play

Level: ELSA 5-7

CLB Competency Area: 🗣️ Social Interaction; 🗣️ Information; 🗣️ Information

1. Ask students to briefly report on their previous experiences of using role plays in teaching.
2. Explain to students that they will role play interested parties in a current issue. The interested parties will come together in a public meeting to decide on a solution to the current issue.
3. Have students read background information on the current issue.
4. Distribute role cards to some students or groups of students. Role cards should be used to formulate their position and argument on the issue. Some students will not receive role cards, and, instead, will receive more informational activities on the issue to work on while students with the role cards formulate their arguments.
5. Student or groups of students with role cards take on the role of a particular interest party that will be involved in deciding on the issue.
6. When ready, students express their views and solutions to the issue at the public meeting which is convened by a president.
7. The president decides the order in which participants speak. Students without role cards act as a voting audience.
8. When all arguments are presented, the president then calls on the audience to vote on the solution.
9. Reconvene as a class and evaluate the economic, social and environmental effects of the decision.

Approach 5: Creative Controversies

Level: ELSA 5-7

CLB Competency Area: 🗣️ Suasion; 🗣️ Suasion; 🗣️ Information

1. Students research a position, learn the relevant information, and prepare a persuasive "best case possible" for the position.
2. Students present in a persuasive and convincing way the "best case possible" for their position.
3. Students engage in an open discussion in which they argue forcefully for their position, refute the opposing position, and rebut attacks on their position.
4. Students reverse perspectives and present the opposing position as accurately, completely, persuasively, and forcefully as they can.
5. Students drop all advocacies, create a synthesis or integration of the opposing positions, and reach a consensus on the best reasoned judgment that may be made about the issue.

Approach 6: Six Hats

Level: ELSA 6-7

CLB Competency Area: 🗣️ Information; 🗣️ Social Interaction; 🗣️ Suasion

1. Give the class a text presenting a problem or an issue.
2. Organize the class into groups of six. Ask groups to find a solution to the problem. Each member gets a hat. There are six metaphorical hats, each one a different colour.
 - The white hat is neutral. While wearing this hat, the thinker simply focuses on information. What information is missing or needed for a solution?
 - The red hat signifies emotion. How do I feel about the solution? What do I like about the solution? What do I not like about the solution?
 - The black hat is the role of judge. What is wrong with the solution? Will the solution work?
 - The yellow is positive. Thinkers look for the benefits and values of the solution. What is the strongest point of this solution? Why is this the best solution?
 - The green hat signals creativity. Under this hat all the possible solutions can be explored. What are other solutions? Is there a better solution?

- The blue hat is for overview. The process of thinking is managed with this hat and all the different threads drawn together. What thinking is needed? Whose perspective is needed? Which colours haven't said enough? What are the conclusions?
3. Learners wear only one hat at a time and only use the mode of thinking which goes with that particular colour. The hats should be periodically redistributed throughout discussion to maximize perspectives brought forward.