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THE TEACHING OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN GEOGRAPHY

by

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INTRODUCTION

The cognitive approach appears to reign in most geography classrooms. The emotive and the psychic approaches receive only cursory attention. The result has been a lack of deeper understanding of the issues involved in a topic. This contributes to the partial or biased education of our students and we suspect it also contributes to poor results in the 'O' and 'A' level examinations.

This paper presents points in favour of the emotive approach and describes how controversial issues can be tackled in the 'O' and 'A' level geography classrooms.

DEFINITIONS

In certain areas of life, people vary dramatically in their particular beliefs and values. They disagree about statements, assertions or issues. Such issues are controversial in nature and people are apt to invest a good deal of emotion in them (Loukes, Wilson and Cowell, 1983). Every subject in school has its controversial issues. In geography we are wrestling with issues such as race, sexism, apartheid, the nuclear threat and the problems of developing countries.

Deciding whether an issue is controversial is itself controversial (Wellington, 1986). For example, race relations need not be controversial to people who regard it with moral seriousness (Dearden, 1981). What then is a controversial issue? The answer to this question is itself controversial since authorities differ.

Rudduck (1986) says a controversial issue is one that divides students and parents and teachers because it involves an element of value judgement which prevents the issue from being settled by evidence and experiment. Dearden prefers an epistemic account and says that a matter is controversial if opposing views can be held on it without these views being contrary to reason. Gardner (1984) makes a useful point when he says that for an issue to be controversial, it should be important. It cannot be controversial if nobody thinks about it. Wellington (1986) has provided us with a working definition. He says that a controversial issue must involve value judgements so that it cannot be solved by facts, evidence or experiment alone; it must be considered important by an appreciable number of people.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE EMOTIVE DOMAIN IN GEOGRAPHY

Relevance is the touchstone to guide us in geographical education. Issues that are relevant to the immediate or future lives of students (such as unemployment, teenage pregnancies and the threat of nuclear war) have the power to capture their interest, resulting in better participation and understanding (Straddling, Noctor and Baines, 1984).

In 1975, Bridges and Scrimshaw complained that there was heavier emphasis on the cognitive aspects, at the expense of emotive ones. This seems to be still very much the case in geography teaching: Knowledge and skills are predominant, at the expense of the emotive approach. There is not much reference to people's opinions and feelings about the environment or consideration of how and why people act to change the environment. Where community issues are studied, emphasis is on the facts of the case, with no probing of the motivations, values and emotions of the people involved. For example, on the topic 'How a village makes a living' emphasis is placed upon the crops, the animals reared, marketing of products, profit, soils and terrain, rainfall and temperatures. The villagers' feelings, attitudes and values are ignored and yet they bear on peoples' activities and life. Here is one of the root causes of bias in geography, as 'when a study on the "quality of housing" becomes a cue for teaching survey methodology or an entire chapter on "Contrasts in living standards" is devoted to the problem of deriving indices to measure standards of living' (Gilbert, 1984, p.89).

One of the major causes of this problem has been the scientific legacy that all knowledge is based on empirical evidence, objectively collected, and that anything that is not is not worth pursuing. The crisis of science is the loss of meaning for life, complains Husserl (1970). The dignity of people rests on rational behaviour that is directed by a symbolic anticipation of a goal. This is being replaced by a conditional reaction, as in methods of propaganda and advertisement that create the 'mass man'. This is a state of affairs which is an abolishment of individual discrimination and decision. The vast irrationality pervading our world today, exemplified by drug abuse, illicit sex, apartheid, mugging etc, is an attempt to fill the vacuum created by scientific attitudes which have derationalised the dimension of values. As a result, the public turns to the schools to ask for a better training of our next generation and blames schooling or uses it as a scapegoat when things go wrong. Geography educators can no longer afford to be innocent bystanders. We have a challenge before us in helping students to rediscover and to recreate absolute values in this troubled world of ours.

Before asking teachers to tackle controversial issues it is important first to explain the nature and characteristics of beliefs, attitudes, values and ideology and to make teachers understand the aims of 'values education'.

According to Rokeach, (1973) **beliefs** are inferences made about the world through one's experiences and perceptions of the world, e.g. a person sees litter in a park (a belief); after seeing it for many days he/she may find it distasteful because it is an eyesore (an attitude). This distaste may engender a desire for unpolluted environments (a value) whereby the person tries to ensure he/she does not drop litter in public places. This value may even make him/her join an anti-pollution campaign such as promoting lead-free petrol. Elms (1976) recognises three categories of beliefs;

- **descriptive or existential**, e.g. I believe there are many starving people in the world;
- **evaluative**, e.g. I believe that is a bad thing; and
- **prescriptive or exhortative**, e.g. I believe something ought to be done about it.

Rokeach (1973) defines an **attitude** as an enduring organisation of beliefs around an object or situation which makes one respond in a particular manner. An attitude dictates behaviour and it is through behaviour that it manifests itself. But an attitude may change according to beliefs held at a particular time or as a result of different experiences and perceptions built into one's cognitive and emotive domains. An attitude

Geography has the responsibility of developing the students' values, sensitivity, awareness, rationality, choice and action in the environment and society. Some selected aims of value education in geography are listed below:

- to clarify the range of attitudes and values likely to be held about a particular question, issue or problem concerned with people-environment relationships;
- to analyse the ways in which the values held by decision makers influence the use of space;
- to clarify one's own values and attitudes about particular problems concerned with the use of space;
- to use values analysis as an element in one's own decision making;
- to use geography as a medium for the development of socially desirable values;
- to develop caring attitudes and concern about environmental problems;
- to put positive values into action; and
- to provide a better understanding of spatial patterns and interaction, since these are related to the values held by people.

TEACHING STRATEGY, AN EXAMPLE (adapted in part from Fien and Slater, 1981)

- a) Topic Introduction: Economic Aid to Developing Countries. There should be plenty of evidence for each side of the argument, to help students to make choices and to argue for their choice. e.g. tables, statements, pictures, videos, graphs, newspaper articles, textbooks, parliamentary debates, seminar reports, IMF reports and so on.
- b) The teacher gives time for the students to study the evidence and to make their choice about which side to argue from. Students give reasons for their choices.
- c) Students with similar views are grouped into pairs and asked to find the four most convincing reasons for their choice.
- d) Two pairs with opposing views then work together to examine the lists of reasons they hold and decide the most convincing argument.
- e) Each group is required to probe the values behind their arguments.
- f) Students are asked to reconsider choices made in (b).
- g) Students are asked to compare their final point of view with their original point of view, where appropriate.
- h) As homework, each student writes an essay supporting his/her viewpoint.

Credit is given according to the quality of argument.

The aim is to come up with students like Elliot's (1973) student who said:

Before I studied war in the classroom, I was a pacifist and couldn't see that anyone else could reasonably hold any other position. I am still a pacifist but now I appreciate that others can differ from me but have good reasons to do so.'
(p.27).

A balance between the cognitive approach and the emotive approach is required. The inner world of people must be taken into account because their choices and decisions are value laden. This is important when explaining spatial patterns and behaviour.

We can ignore the emotive approach but we cannot avoid it because what is taught, how, why and even what is **not** taught, and the decisions curriculum planners make, are all based on the values of the people concerned. Even those teachers at 'A' and 'O' levels who are so worried about examination results will find that students who have had an equal dose of the cognitive, emotive and psychic skills are better prepared and achieve more than those exposed to the cognitive approach alone.

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