

Contemporary, controversial and Christian?

In reading *Christian students' views on terrorism and religion*, by John Fisher, this month's *Blast from the past*, on Page 6 of *TCFNews*, I was reminded of how major international events, and war in particular, unsettle students. A relatively short time on this earth has provided today's students with only a few moments of war, often in distant places and not involving Australians. To have Australia actually join the invasion of another country is disturbing for students as well as controversial in the wider community.

Students want to make sense of the world they live in, and major international events are not always absorbed easily into their developing world views. In these circumstances, students often turn to their teachers for an explanation, to answer questions and for reassurance. Teachers have not always been sure about how to respond to these circumstances, sometimes wondering if this is merely a distraction from the task at hand.

While teachers should avoid being "sucked in", they do have a responsibility to teach the whole child and the social development of students is strongly related to a set of values that enables them to develop a world view that can accommodate, not approve, the worst that humans can do. Teachers are "significant others" who can provide a different and often multiple perspectives on issues and world events.

Teachers in government schools can draw on the *Controversial issues in schools* policy in which teachers are reminded that *schools are neutral grounds for rational discourse*" and that students should have the opportunity to learn about different perspectives. The policy is also clear about the teacher's role, indicating that when appropriate, or when requested, the teacher can provide his or her opinion providing it *balanced and restrained*. In providing different perspectives and "balance", not every extreme view needs to be covered, nor equally, but it is expected that a range of views held in the Australian community be discussed.

Discussions involving problematic knowledge occur ideally where the classroom environment supports listening to others and an attempt by the teacher and student to understand, not necessarily agree with, the views being put. When talking about the acceptance of difference, it is the right to be different that is accepted, not necessarily the difference. Not all differences are good. Some are illegal or offensive.

Teaching about contemporary and controversial issues is important for the development of students' understanding of the world and their place in it. For some Christians, acknowledging other perspectives is uncomfortable, yet even amongst Christians there is a range of perspectives on issues, including whether Australia should have invaded Iraq.

Christians should never be afraid to provide a range of Christian and community views because secure in the God who created all things and in his unchanging nature they know he is in control. Students need to understand how Christian perspectives can both differ and still provide insight into the issue at hand, providing important alternatives to secular (non-religious) and other religious world views. Being called to live "in the world" it is both unloving and contrary to the nature of God to impose or to tolerate the expression of one only Christian perspective on all issues, even if it is the truth. To be "in the world" is to engage the world through dialogue and to promote "the Truth".

In a similar way, Christians need not be intimidated by other secular and religious world-views and become reluctant to express their perspectives and faith. They have the same rights to express their perspectives as the rest of the community.

The classroom environment for teaching about contemporary and controversial issues is not about developing only listening skills. Good teacher-student and student-student relationships are fundamental to both listening and discussing. If these relationships are not apparent, then teaching about controversial issues can unleash the hurt and pain of broken relationships between members of the class and, while it might provide an opportunity for reconciliation, it might lead also to chaos.

For Christian teachers in both government and non-government schools, teaching contemporary and controversial issues is a must if Christian perspectives are to be revealed and students are to know the “author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

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