

**Teaching controversial issues:  
Reflections of a Life and Society (Secondary 1-3) teacher**

Many modules in the Life and Society (Secondary 1-3) curriculum involve controversial issues, such as standard working hours and retirement protection. A teacher shares his experience teaching the module "Public Finance of Hong Kong", in which he asks his students to discuss whether the Government of Hong Kong should follow the example of the Government of Macao and make direct cash payments when having a budget surplus.

As students have some prior knowledge of the preparation and functions of the budget, the teacher prepares different types of reference materials to facilitate students' examination of the issue from different perspectives, including surveys to collect different stakeholders' views on social policies or phenomena (such as the Wealth Partaking Scheme launched by the Government of Macao, surveys on the situation of the poverty issue in Hong Kong conducted by non-governmental organisations); government reports (such as wage statistics from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong, information on the revenue and expenditure of the HKSAR Government for the past 10 years); as well as articles in the Basic Law relating to public finance.

**Establishing ground rules**

As his students come from different socio-economic backgrounds, some are new arrivals from the Mainland and some are from low-income families, he establishes ground rules to ensure that all students are able to express their opinions in a free and safe environment. Before the group discussion, students are reminded to observe the ground rules to prevent reinforcing stereotypes or arousing tensions when discussing issues. The ground rules include the following:

- Challenge ideas, not people;
- Examine and evaluate your own stance and be open-minded to alternative and opposing positions;
- Respect the views of others; and
- Give reasons for your view.

### **Facilitating the discussion of a controversial issue**

The teacher facilitates the discussion of a controversial issue through performing multiple roles. He leads students to distinguish between facts and opinions, identify sources of information and assess the accuracy and objectivity of the information. He also guides them to identify the embedded assumptions, beliefs and biases. He may act as a resource person, providing hints or directions to students who need help in searching for further information relating to the issue. He also regards himself as a chairperson who ensures that different views and standpoints are presented and that the discussion is not dominated by a single authoritative view or standpoint. He is also a referee who calls a “time out” when the discussion becomes side-tracked or students show signs of stress and become emotional. Sometimes, he acts as a mediator and asks students to refocus on the ground rules if they express their views disrespectfully.

Sharing from his experience, the teacher recommends breaks for students to take stock of the viewpoints discussed, refocus on the issue and decide how to proceed. If students arrive at a consensus too quickly, he will play devil’s advocate and challenge their views by presenting opposing stances. For example, if most students agree that the Government should make direct cash payments, he will ask whether billionaires are entitled to receive money. This is done to ensure that all views are covered and challenged and to help the students evaluate their beliefs and values. The teacher shares that teachers can perform a range of roles and have to be flexible in choosing which roles to perform according to the topic and the progress of the discussion.

### **Developing thinking skills and nurturing positive values and attitudes**

The teacher reminds that controversial issues are open-ended and may never be completely resolved. The aim of the discussion is not to find a perfect solution to or give a verdict on an issue but to help students recognise and respect others’ perspectives and the values behind different stances. Students have to justify their opinions, use appropriate language to explain their views and provide evidence to back up their decisions. They have to evaluate other people’s views and must not take all information at face value. These skills are essential, as students will grow up and face an ever-changing and challenging world.