
**Reading Description Disclaimer:**
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The syllabus
The new K-6 HSIE syllabus is very different from other documents that may have been used in this learning area. It mandates both outcomes and subject matter for each stage of learning.

In the past, teachers had considerable autonomy to choose the focus, units and subject matter for social studies. Now the focus is on the staged outcomes and the prescribed subject matter.

For most teachers, the immediate task will be to prepare a K-6 plan that covers these outcomes and subject matter and to then develop detailed teaching and learning programs. As this task unfolds, it will become obvious that teachers will be drawn into teaching about a range of issues and ideas on which the community does not have universally held views. Potentially controversial issues are scattered throughout the syllabus at every stage.

In the past, the lack of a HSIE syllabus and explicit subject matter meant that teachers could simply avoid topics that were likely to be sensitive or controversial in their communities. The new syllabus does not provide this level of comfort.

The issues
Some of the broad syllabus areas that are likely to concern teachers are the environment, Aboriginal studies, religion, culture, politics and heritage. It is not possible to avoid teaching related to cultural differences, personal and family heritage, religious differences, Aboriginal history, environmental change, political ideas, community participation, reconciliation, human rights and many others.

Sometimes teachers can be overwhelmed by the prospect of engaging students in these issues, but there is support and there are some basic guidelines to help overcome such concerns.

Policy
The Department's policies on Controversial issues in schools and Anti-Racism provide clear guidelines for teachers. Here the key words are sensitive, objective and balanced.

Some of the practical suggestions given are as follows:

- Make sure your school plan and program are consistent with the syllabus.
- Be proactive by informing the school community, through meetings and newsletters, about the nature of the syllabus and school programs.
- Involve the school council, parent organisations and student representative council in the development of a school plan for HSIE.
- Each year inform parents about the content of your class teaching program. Where a variety of views exist on a matter, give students access to these views through a range of sources.
- Provide a balance of material on different views, but don't give undue attention to extremist views.
- Make sure literature used is balanced, either individually or in total.
- Use guest speakers wisely, making sure that you discuss their invitation with the principal and advise parents.
- Be objective, but, when requested, provide your own opinion without giving it undue weight.

Practice
The fundamental approach to teaching about controversial issues is to recognise that values teaching involved.
The syllabus is clear about the place of values. There are values to be taught:

Interest in, and informed and responsible attitudes toward people, cultures, religions, societies, environments and learning with a commitment to social justice, intercultural understanding, ecological sustainability, democratic processes, beliefs and moral codes, lifelong learning.

Within each of these values there is a range attitudinal positions. Most members of the Australian community would subscribe to these values and still collectively hold a range of attitudes about each aspect or context in which they occur. Locating airports, developing freeways, denying visas, voting for a party, granting land rights, may all be about social justice and ecological sustainability, but you can be sure that the Australian community is not unanimous about detail of such matters.

For this reason appropriate pedagogy is the lifeline for teachers. It is in the area of values that the values clarification approach has its place. It advocates exploring the attitudes and values which students and others hold about particular issues. This approach encourages the use of a variety of sources of material and both primary and secondary research, where possible. It promotes critical analysis and encourages students to review their attitudes in the light of new knowledge. Such a review can lead to either attitudinal change or confirmation of existing attitudes.

A number of specific techniques can be used to assist students to explore these attitudes and values, including:

- class discussion values continuums
- values voting role-plays
- moral dilemmas public interviews
- rank ordering group work.

Each of these methodologies can assist students to understand their own values and to explore other people's values. They will be the subject of further description in professional development to support the implementation of the syllabus.

Curriculum guarantees and sensitivity

The new HSIE syllabus provides the community with a curriculum guarantee that students will learn certain knowledge, develop particular skills and have explicit values reinforced. In implementing this syllabus schools will program for all of this to happen. But it doesn't mean that schools have to go out of their way to challenge their community and confront them with alternative positions.

Where communities are divided on a particular issue— for example, local depletion of native forests, an Aboriginal land claim, development of a freeway, construction of a religious building—it might be better to either look at other subject matter to achieve the outcome or to investigate a similar issue in a different community. What must be avoided is the provision of a forum in which stereotypical and polarised views can be further entrenched by adverse community reactions.

Enquiry methods incorporating values clarification are essential to achieve the values and attitudes outcomes of this syllabus. In teaching about controversial issues, teachers need to recognise their own attitudes and values. Often the teacher can lack the knowledge base to successfully provide the understanding which students need. Guest speakers are another important strategy, especially Aboriginal people, when you are teaching Aboriginal history and contemporary issues in Aboriginal Australia.

The approach is really common sense backed up by the Department’s helpful policy statements and appropriate pedagogy. This combination will result in a sensitive, objective and balanced approach.

John Gore
CEO, HSIE