

The silent debate

Gayle shares an approach she has developed across key stages 3 and 4 which helps students arrive at their own views on complex geographical issues.



Accompanying
online materials

Having been inspired in my teaching by many *Teaching Geography* articles, I wanted to make a contribution to the journal with a technique I have found useful. 'The function of geography in school is to train future citizens to imagine accurately the conditions of the great world stage and so to help them to think sanely about political and social problems in the world around' (Fairgrieve, 1926, p. 18). Geography lends itself to a wide range of approaches for engaging students; yet secondary students can find it challenging to engage with some more complex issues. I have explored and trialled a variety of techniques and one that I have had most success with is 'the silent debate'.

Since being introduced to this technique by a colleague I have developed a number of different versions, and have led CPD sessions in school to demonstrate its benefits. It gives students an opportunity to think about their 'own position on an issue and to argue this, rather than always being asked to adopt a role' (Lambert and Balderstone, 2004, p. 295). It also helps students to understand other people's views, and the reasons for them.

The first thing you need for a silent debate is a series of ten or so thought-provoking statements about the topic you are teaching. This can take some time, as you must consider the age and ability of the students when selecting from a range of ideas. Before the lesson, write the statements on large pieces of paper and place them around the classroom.

It is important to prepare the task carefully and to give clear instructions. Kyriacou (1991) reminds us that 'the care and effort that teachers take over preparation can have a major positive impact on

pupils' sense that the teacher cares about their learning and that the activities to be undertaken are worthwhile and important' (p. 27). At the start of the silent debate, give students these instructions:

- Write your opinion about the statement on the piece of paper.
- If you agree with something someone else has said, tick their statement.
- If you disagree with something someone has said, place a cross by the statement.
- If you wish to ask a question, write a question mark and your question on the paper.
- There should be no talking, this is a silent debate.

The first time I attempted a silent debate it was with my year 9 classes, who were looking at potential threats to Antarctica. (The thought-provoking statements I prepared are available to download.) Previously, students had analysed a series of photos of Antarctica and identified positive and negative aspects of potential developments in the region. The silent debate that followed was very successful: all the students enjoyed being able to get up and move about the classroom and comment on other students' views (Figure 1). I added a few thought-provoking points of my own, to move the debate on or help clarify points. A class discussion followed, and students finished the lesson with some extended writing explaining their views on the future of Antarctica. The quality of their writing was much improved, as was the key geographical skill of being able to understand different points of view and explain reasons for them.

Figure 1: Students move around the classroom and comment on other students' views. **Photo:** Gayle Sloggett.



This approach lends itself to teaching controversial issues in geography, as it gives students an opportunity to discuss and understand issues that they might not otherwise be exposed to. Nick Hopwood (2007) emphasises that care is required when covering such issues:

- 'teaching to generate a 'culture of argument', where different views are listened to and where appropriate countered
- trying to encourage a tone of 'confident uncertainty' – i.e. confident learners, who know that there is invariably more to know
- providing opportunities to practice making informed decisions and expressing viewpoints.'

The silent debate gave me a context for covering controversial issues in which students could feel secure and confident enough to take part actively throughout the lesson. With a year 8 class working through a unit on Africa, I tackled the topic of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa (Figure 2). I prepared students with a series of images, class discussion and directed questioning. To introduce the silent debate I gave each student the statements on a prepared grid. Students were asked to decide on the most appropriate ways to tackle the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa and list them in rank order. The silent debate followed (Figure 3); then there was time for reflection and discussion. Students were told they could change their rank order if they had changed their mind. Group discussions and directed questioning helped students to develop their viewpoints and make informed decisions. As a result, students not only considered other people's views and opinions but also reflected on their own choices and the reasons they had made them.

I also think that the silent debate approach helps GCSE students prepare for the decision-making paper, which requires them to identify and explain the views of stakeholders and make decisions based on both their prior knowledge and their evaluation of the source material provided. Some students struggle to articulate other people's views and their own decisions. In preparing students for this paper, using pre-release materials, I asked students to consider the options given, make an initial response and give a brief reason (much as in the year 8 example above). The options are then written on large pieces of paper and placed around the room; students complete the silent debate; then they are given time to reflect on their decision, perhaps changing it and giving their reasons. One way of helping students to engage with other viewpoints is to give them role cards with specific information about particular stakeholders: they must use this information during the silent debate. The follow-



Figure 2: HIV/AIDS awareness in rural Malawi.
Photo: Ruth Totterdell.



Figure 3: Students discussed ways of tackling the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa.
Photo: Gayle Sloggett.



Figure 4: The silent debate can be used across a range of topics on key stage 3 and 4.
Photo: Gayle Sloggett.

up discussions and written work resulting from these activities have been much enhanced by the silent debate, and many students have made excellent progress.

I have found the silent debate a really effective way of engaging students with a wide range of subject material, and I am in the process of integrating silent debates across key stages 3 and 4 (Figure 4). Students clearly enjoy these lessons and soon learn how the technique works; from the teacher's point of view its silent nature makes managing behaviour easier, allowing you to focus on promoting further debate. Have a go yourself! | **TG**

References

- Fairgrieve, J. (1926) *Geography in School*. London: University of London Press.
- Hopwood, N. (2007) 'Values and Controversial Issues'. Available online at www.geography.org.uk/gtip/thinkpieces/valuesandcontroversialissues (last accessed 22 October 2015).
- Kyriacou, C. (1991) *Essential Teaching Skills*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lambert, D. and Balderstone, D. (2004) *Learning to Teach Geography in the Secondary School*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Ofsted (2015) *School Inspection Handbook*. pp. 38–41. Available online at www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015 (last accessed 9 November 2015).

Online resources

Gayle's thought-provoking statements on the potential threats to Antarctica are available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/tg and click Spring 2016.

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