

ACTIVITY 5: WHAT MAKES SOMETHING CONTROVERSIAL

What Makes Something Controversial

Purpose	Students will learn the definition of a controversial issue, why certain topics become controversial, how factors like values, identity, evidence, and emotion influence controversy, and that disagreement is a normal part of life that can be handled with respect.
Time	25 - 30 minutes
Materials	Board or flip chart, 8–10 prompt cards OR statements written on the board, Pens/paper (optional)

Activity Steps (15 minutes total)

1. Warm-up: Quick-fire Sorting (3 minutes)

Task:

Teacher displays 8–10 issues (mix of neutral, mildly contentious, and clearly controversial).
Example list:

- Should school uniforms be optional?
- Is pineapple on pizza acceptable?
- Should the voting age be 16?
- Should phones be banned in schools?
- Should the UK switch to only renewable energy?
- Are AI-generated videos trustworthy?
- Should contact sports be banned?
- Should animals be kept in zoos?
- Should social media platforms restrict political content?

Task:

Students raise hands (or use mini whiteboards) to sort each item into one of three categories:

1. Not controversial
2. A bit controversial

3. Very controversial

No explanations yet.

2. Reveal: “Why did you classify it that way?” (3 minutes)

Teacher asks:

- “Which ones did we disagree on?”
- “Why did some feel ‘very controversial’ while others didn’t?”

Circle or highlight 2–3 items where the class disagreed the most - these become the focus.

3. The Four-Factor Explanation (2 minutes)

Teacher introduces the four reasons issues become controversial:

1. Values clash: Different beliefs about right and wrong
2. Identity & experience: People’s backgrounds or personal experiences shape their views
3. Facts & uncertainty: Evidence may be incomplete, complex, or interpreted differently
4. Emotion: Fear, anger, pride, or hope can intensify disagreement

Write these on the board as a mini-framework.

4. Group Challenge: Apply the Framework (5 minutes)

Students work in pairs or groups of three.

Each group picks *one* of the disputed issues from earlier (chosen by the teacher).

Task:

In 2–3 minutes, groups answer:

- Why is this issue controversial?
- Which of the four factors apply? (values, identity, facts, emotion)
- What might help people discuss it more safely?

Groups share one sentence back to the class.

Teacher highlights patterns:

- “Most controversial issues involve more than one factor.”
- “Emotion and identity can often make a disagreement feel deeper.”

5. Closing Reflection (2 minutes)

Teacher asks one question for hands-up or think-pair-share:

“What is one thing you will now check before deciding whether an issue is controversial?”

Options students might say:

- Whether it affects people differently
- Whether strong emotions are involved
- Whether facts are unclear
- Whether values clash

Close with the message:

“Controversy isn’t a problem in itself - it’s how we understand it, talk about it, and manage our responses that matters.”