

GATEWAY DOCUMENTS 2.6 AND 2.9

Developing the skills necessary for discussion and balanced decision making

Managing discussion effectively?

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Effective use of discussion and enquiry is essential to teaching and learning about controversial and contentious issues because:

- students need to understand that there may be substantial disagreements among their peers; this is an important part of learning that 'my friends don't always think like me';
- students are given the opportunity to listen to people with opposing views as a means to understanding them better and in order to broaden their horizons and to help them come to a clearer awareness of their own views;
- teachers become aware of students' existing opinions, beliefs, experiences, misunderstandings and prejudices;
- teachers become aware of any misinformation (e.g. in the media) that has led to the formation of students' views;
- teachers become aware of sensitivities and disputes in the local community.

An additional factor is that Ofsted inspections have found that discussion is overall students' favourite activity in RE. Discussions are particularly popular with boys.

(see also Gateway 2.7 *Encourage pupils to express their own ideas and beliefs in a sensitive and respectful way, even when they are negative or controversial* and Gateway 2.8 *Challenging prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping*)

KEY QUESTIONS

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

Lack of time allocated to the subject might make teachers feel deep discussion is a luxury they cannot afford. Some students may be less able to participate than others if they are

speakers of English as an additional language or are simply not very confident speakers. It may be seen as an 'add on' rather than a central aspect of students' learning. However, the Non-statutory National Framework for religious education (NSNF) includes a section on 'promoting key skills through religious education'. Three of these skills are particularly required for discussion and balanced decision making.

Religious education provides opportunities for pupils to develop the key skills of:

- communication through developing a broad and accurate religious vocabulary, reading and responding to a range of written and spoken language (including sacred texts, stories, poetry, prayers, liturgy and worship), communicating ideas using the creative and expressive arts, talking and writing with understanding and insight about religious and other beliefs and values, reflecting critically on ultimate questions of life, using reasoned arguments;
- working with others through sharing ideas, discussing beliefs, values and practices, collaborating with each other and developing respect and sensitivity;
- problem solving through recognising key issues to do with religious belief, practice and expression, interpreting and explaining findings and making personal decisions on religious issues (for example, considering their own and ideas from religious traditions about good and evil), ethical dilemmas and priorities in life.

The nature of the subject means that topics of discussion are likely to involve strongly held personal and philosophical beliefs. It requires particular skills to manage and participate in such discussions sensitively, and particular strategies to make the learning effective (see Gateway 3.1). *Transforming RE*¹ identified as a particular issue the need for students to learn how to discuss concepts in a structured and systematic way.

How can teachers address such challenges?

Setting ground rules. Ground rules for discussion should be agreed between teachers and students, displayed on classroom walls and drawn to the attention of students at the outset of planned discussion. Some typical examples of ground rules are as follows:

- Avoid dominating the discussion and allow others time to speak;
- Agree to differ on occasion;
- Avoid ridiculing, making fun of or putting down a speaker (e.g. 'that's rubbish');
- Aim criticisms at arguments and not individuals;
- Always try to back your arguments with evidence or good reasons;
- Try to distinguish between facts and opinion;

¹. *Transforming RE* (2010), Ofsted's report on religious education in schools 2006-9, p14

- Distinguish between common ground and areas where people agree to differ;
- Listen politely to each other without interruption.

Students may wish to change ground rules over time and should be encouraged to do so, provided that they can justify suggested changes with good reasons.

Facilitating the discussion. The prevailing rule in a badly managed discussion is ‘the survival of the loudest’. Many books and articles have been written about managing discussion (see ‘Further reading’ below). Some basic principles are as follows.

- Avoid lengthy whole-class discussions, which limit the number who can contribute and leave the majority idle.
- Use a range of grouping strategies to provide opportunities for students to develop the skills necessary for discussion and balanced decision making (see Appendix, *Classroom organisation*).
- Encourage group members to take on specific roles, such as chair, scribe, rapporteur.
- Be clear what kind of discussion is involved. For instance, is it dialogue (sharing views, not seeking a particular conclusion) or debate (persuading, seeking to resolve different views)?

Engaging with students. A skilled and respected teacher has the potential to influence students’ views. Maintaining neutrality can be difficult as we sometimes subconsciously express a reaction to what someone has said through, for example, facial gestures or tone of voice (see Gateway 2:4).

During a discussion of a controversial issue the teacher should aim to:

- establish a classroom climate in which all pupils are free to express sincerely held views without fear, although teachers need to be aware that students may sometimes be reluctant to speak openly because of a fear of consequences outside the classroom;
- act as a facilitator;
- avoid expressing personal opinions as if they are facts;
- try to encourage exploratory talk, rather than adversarial debate that requires one view to prevail over another, by using techniques which help students ‘unpack’ a problem. For example, put the problem in a circle in the middle of the board and ask, ‘Who is affected by or has an interest in this issue?’ Then each stakeholder can be examined in turn as to how they are affected; then asked how might each be able to do something about it, and so on;
- ensure that a wide variety of opinions is heard;
- make available a balanced selection of evidence/resources and present these sources as open to interpretation, qualification and contradiction;

- challenge a one-sided consensus that emerges too quickly in the classroom. Rather than challenge directly (which may imply that the teacher knows the 'right' answer) ask questions which put it back to the students, such as 'Is that always the case?', 'what evidence is there for that view?' or 'Why might someone disagree with that view?, what might they argue?'
- take due care for the needs of individuals in the class when tackling issues of social, cultural or personal identity (e.g. issues of sexual orientation);
- challenge inaccurate information/evidence and inappropriate behaviour, making students aware of consequences of breaking ground rules;
- model the qualities and skills of dialogue in discussion.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Hess, Diana E. (2009) *Controversy in the classroom: the democratic power of discussion*, Taylor and Francis.

Crombie, B and Rowe, D (2009) *Dealing with the British National Party*, Citizenship Foundation, especially 'Structured methodologies for exploring controversial issues' London. Routledge. Available on www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/news.php?n783

Hannam, P and Echeverria, E (2009) *Philosophy with teenagers: nurturing a moral imagination for the 21st century*, Continuum (esp Chapter 6)

Henning, John (2007) *The art of discussion-based teaching: opening up conversation in the classroom*, Routledge

Echevarria, A. and Leat, D. (2006) *Thinking through school*, Chris Kington Publishing

Wintersgill, B. (2007) *The effective use of discussion*, REonline:
<http://news.reonline.org.uk/article.php?10>

Signposts for further resources

www.sapere.org.uk Website for the Philosophy for Children pedagogical model/project.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110202110631/teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/tacklingbullying/racistbullying/preventing/controversialissues/> Guidance on Teachernet about teaching controversial issues.

www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial Global Citizenship Guides. Teaching Controversial Issues

<http://www.interfaithweek.co.uk/index.php/resources> This section of the Interfaith Week website provides illustrative and evaluative reports from 2009 onwards.

Citizenship Foundation, Teaching about Controversial Issues, 2003

Race Equality Teaching, Talking and Teaching about the War, 2003

(see also Gateway 1.7 Appendix on religion, ethics and decision making)

Signposts for further action

Students often say that there are more opportunities for discussion in RE than any other subject. Where this is so, RE teachers are in a position to share expertise with teachers of other subjects.

APPENDIX

Some pointers for successful discussion lessons

The main danger of discussion-based lessons is lack of rigour and consequently poor learning. This can happen when:

- expectations are low and important principles are relaxed; notably learning objectives become ‘activity statements’ such as ‘pupils will explore...’ or ‘pupils will compare ideas...’. Discussion, like any other learning activity, should result in students gaining in knowledge and understanding, and in enhancing specified skills. Beyond this, some agreed syllabuses are specific about the development of attitudes and dispositions, and the general requirement to promote moral development entails a legitimate concern by teachers with the development of the student as a person. One result of discussion lessons may be that each student is able to articulate their own view on the issue discussed; a valuable way of achieving this can be the formulation of a personal opinion statement at the end of a discussion, perhaps to be read only by the teacher and the student.
- on the other hand, a good enquiry is not necessarily the result of tight learning objectives – sometimes the facilitator does not know where the discussion will lead – it is the quality of the enquiry that is important.
- whole class discussion is poorly managed. Any lengthy period of discussion will have limited value if it is conducted by the teacher with the whole class (as happens surprisingly often). Too few pupils will be participating and this invariably leads to non-participants losing interest. This defeats the object of the exercise. Whole class discussions can be very positive and should not necessarily be avoided; enquiry based discussion in P4C nearly always involves the whole class (see *Signposts* Hannam and Echeverria; for other approaches, see Crombie and Rowe, especially ‘Structured methodologies for exploring controversial issues’).
- discussion strays from the focus. There can be several reasons for this: too much time has been allowed for a particular question; there is no problem to solve or issue to resolve; there is no proper focus or task (e.g. avoid ‘talk to your partner about...’);

discussion is uninformed because pupils are left too long to share their limited experiences without being given new information; pupils are not invited to support, expand upon or challenge each others' responses. However, straying from the focus can be a good thing if it takes the discussion where the students want to go and is based on reason and deep thinking – there does not always have to be a problem to solve or issue to resolve – or even a final conclusion to reach.

Class organisation

The number involved in discussion can vary from two upwards. The depth and extent of skill development is related to the type of grouping. For example:

- Pairs – are easy to organise and effective for a quick sharing of ideas. But they expose students to a very limited range of ideas.
- Doubling up; balloon: where two or more sets of pairs join to share and compare ideas. This broadens the range of ideas for students to consider.
- Listening triads – in which students in groups of three are allocated a task; talker, recorder and questioner. These roles can be rotated. This is a very good strategy for developing separately skills of listening and talking.
- Ambassadors – a group sends an ambassador to other groups in order to introduce new ideas. All involved have to develop the skills of listening and the ambassador has to give clear and concise explanations.
- Role experience – in larger groups, students can take on the roles of chair, scribe and reporter. Each of these roles demands that as well as developing skills of listening and recording, students suspend their own beliefs and ideas in order to give time for, record, and report the ideas of others in the group.
- Develop a community of enquiry (see Gateway 3.1). Start discussions/enquiries with a range of stimuli – pictures, film clips, objects and let students come up with key questions to talk about.

Organising the task

One of the most common reasons why discussion, though fun, may not lead to learning is that teachers do not plan it as a task. This can result in unfocused and uninformed discussion. The following strategies should help remedy this.

- Case study – Rather than ask a question (e.g. 'Do you think war is ever justified?') give pupils a case study, such as newspaper reports or television debates on the enquiry into the Iraq war. Case studies are valuable in providing 'real life' relevant issues and focus discussion on solving an issue or dilemma. Generalising from the particular to the general is one way to deepen students' understanding of issues (e.g. by asking 'Is this always the case?' or 'Can you think of counter-examples?').

- Controversial statement – Rather than ask a question like ‘*Do you think terrorism can ever be justified?*’, provide a statement or quotation (such as ‘*One person’s terrorist is the other person’s freedom fighter*’) and ask students to discuss whether they agree or disagree.
- Walkabout – This can take various forms. The idea is to display clues, evidence, arguments, examples, etc. around the room and for groups to decide which applies to their question. For example, post pictures, words and arguments that can be used to decide whether or not specific wars have a religious dimension.
- Perspectives – The whole class studies the same topic but different groups discuss different aspects or questions: for example, the stance of different religious groups on sexual orientation. Some caution needs to be shown when asking students to take different stances on contentious issues – what are they basing this on? Where might this take the discussion? When different stances have been considered, what then? Students might be suspicious when looking at topics such as homophobic and racist stances that the teacher is aiming to point students to a ‘correct’ stance? A gay student (or someone whose religious beliefs make them opposed to same-sex relationships) might feel compromised and uncomfortable. It is important that the focus is on *the issue*, but sometimes it is hard to separate this from the personal. It would also be important to debrief students about the different foundations on which people base their views (e.g. divine authority, reason etc).
- Outcomes – There should be an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning and for this to be recorded in some way.

The teacher’s participation in discussion work

There is a danger that once teachers have set up a well-organised discussion they are left without a further role. The role should be mainly to facilitate or to intervene in order to help students discuss more productively:

- Challenge – not accepting woolly or vague statements or limp reasoning but challenging students by asking them to say a bit more about a particular aspect or say why they think as they do, or asking for clarification (e.g. ‘*I’m not sure what you mean. Could you explain that to me please?*’). It is not just the teacher who should be doing the challenging – students should be developing their questioning skills and asking others to provide reasoned arguments based on evidence.
- Set up a counter example – for example, if a group of pupils are arguing vociferously in favour of capital punishment say, ‘*Do you know the story of Derek Bentley...?*’.
- Make a suggestion – suggesting ways of moving forward when a group is stuck.
- Provide new information/evidence – this can be done in a number of ways (e.g. clue envelopes on the wall; interrupting the lesson to introduce new evidence). It can be used effectively with drama, as ‘characters’ appear to give their testimony.

- Reinforce good practice – offering a comment or justification for a view offered by a pupil as a good example of what is required (though taking care to avoid giving the impression that some views are more worthy or valued than others).
- Summarise – during or at the end of the lesson or session pull together the main points clearly, and involve students – use them to track discussions and summarise at the end: has it been a good discussion or enquiry? how could it be improved next time?