

GATEWAY DOCUMENT 3.1

Effective strategies for teaching contentious issues

(see also Gateways on curriculum issues in Section 4)

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

A problem for many teachers across subject areas is engaging students fully in their studies. This is rarely an issue when a contentious issue is up for class discussion as any class of adolescents is likely to have enthusiastic advocates on either side of the debate. However, such class discussions can be counter-productive, and nerve-racking for the teacher. Handled badly, a class discussion of a contentious issue can get out of hand and inflame rather than resolve differences. Without structure, guidance and careful facilitation by a skilled teacher such discussions produce more heat than light, with participants becoming ever more entrenched on a particular side of the dispute.

It is undoubtedly the duty of the school, and of the religious education lesson in particular, to give students the opportunity to explore contentious issues in a measured, informative way that gives everyone the opportunity to understand the issues better, and to understand, and ideally develop some sympathy for, the positions of all parties to the dispute. More than this, students need the opportunity to develop for themselves an ability to analyse issues and to enter into deliberative dialogue, and become effective advocates of positions they espouse. It is the role of the teacher of RE to equip students with the necessary skills, to encourage appropriate attitudes, and to provide a model of good practice and the opportunities for students to engage with the contentious issues that matter to them.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

- Emphasis upon discussion, collaborative enquiry and dialogue may remove barriers to thinking and open up possibilities of inclusion and participation.
- Through coming to understand why different people see things differently, students may come to understand that individuals are often influenced by how they and their family or

community might be affected by a proposed course of action, or by their sense of justice, or by deeply held religious beliefs.

- Students will learn to distinguish opinions and value judgements from what can be agreed between contending parties to be a description of the state of affairs and to challenge any consensus of opinion that emerges too easily.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- Unanticipated questions and issues mean that responses may sometimes have to be made on the spur of the moment while taking into account the context and previous discussions.
- Some questions cause anxiety for teachers and students as they touch on deeply held beliefs, personal sensitivities or moral panics.
- Some students may be, or may become, so emotionally connected to an issue that they feel unable to engage with reasoned argument and dialogue.
- Issues may arise that suggest tensions between competing family/community and school values. Students may have to negotiate such conflicting sets of values.
- Fear of undermining parental or community views – the enquiry process might encourage students to question their religious and cultural upbringing.
- A fear of ridicule or of being isolated may cause some students to be wary of expressing their views, asking questions or thinking aloud.
- Over-simplistic categorisation of individuals, cultures or communities, for example, ‘Buddhists,’ ‘the Hindu community’, ‘disabled people’, and a failure to affirm peoples’ multiple and dynamic identities.
- In some cases of international conflict, such as Iraq or Afghanistan, the range of opinion presented to students in the classroom might be too narrow and based on, for example, the western media alone.

How can teachers address such challenges?

- By providing a learning environment where students can express themselves without fear, ensuring that ground rules for discussion in the RE classroom are adhered to and are taken seriously;
- By showing their commitment to a respect for the concepts of truth and evidence and the development of critical thinking and analytical skills;
- By helping learners to think for themselves and become more self-aware of their thoughts and values (e.g. by encouraging them to take on a facilitator role during discussions and avoid ‘taking over’);

- By ensuring that all significant conflicting views and opinions are fairly represented, presenting all information and opinion as open to interpretation, qualification, contradiction and rational criticism;
- By providing students with skills to weigh up evidence, choose between alternatives, evaluate pros and cons, listen and reflect before reaching a conclusion, agree to disagree and follow conventions of mutual respect and reasoned argument;
- By defusing difficult situations as appropriate. The strategy chosen will depend on a teacher's pre-existing relationship with the class and may include asking students, to write rather than speak about their feelings, or to talk in small groups rather than in a whole class setting, or by the teacher stopping to reflect with the class on how people are speaking if things get heated;
- By presenting controversy as something that is not just about current issues but also about interpretations of the past, and that is an inevitable feature of democracy;
- By insisting that freedom of expression does not include the right to be threatening or abusive, particularly towards those who are especially vulnerable;
- By providing reassurance and developing resilience through the shared experience of grappling with difficult issues together;
- By avoiding unintentional bias, for example by the teacher or a student setting themselves up as a sole authority on a subject or by implying a 'correct' opinion that cannot be challenged;
- By accessing good quality training in the facilitation of communities of philosophical enquiry.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Hannam, P. and Echeverria, E. (2009) *Philosophy with teenagers. Nurturing a moral imagination for the 21st century*, Continuum.

Haynes, J. *The Costs of thinking: Teaching thinking & creativity*, Autumn 2005.

Singer, P (1993) *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self interest*, Oxford University Press.

Splitter, Sharp (1995) *Teaching for better thinking*, Acer.

Signposts for further resources

General resources

<http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?79> Controversial Issues: Guidance for Schools, Citizenship Foundation:

www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/_arc_SOP/Page8/DCSF-00804-2008

Learning together to be safe. A toolkit to help schools contribute to the prevention of violent extremism, DCSF (please note the caveat on the DCSF website about changes to government policy)

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/> Teaching Controversial Issues (2006) Oxfam

www.sapere.org.uk Society for Advancing Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education offers an effective strategy to meet many of the points raised. SAPERE offers courses and members have access to a range of resources.

www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk The Schools Linking Network '*facilitates links between schools to help children and young people explore their identity, celebrate diversity and develop dialogue.*' Real interaction with people of different perspectives is a crucial way of widening horizons and opening minds. Your school or authority may have arrangements in place for twinning with another school. It isn't necessary to have the whole structure in place to do this. You could invite students or teachers from a neighbouring but contrasting school to share in an activity.

www.stonewall.org.uk/ Anti-homophobic training for teachers; support for gay teachers and students

www.threefaithsforum.org.uk/ Three Faiths Forum provides guidance and CPD on controversial issues in the classroom.

Classroom resources

Cohen, M (2002) *101 Philosophy Questions*, Routledge

Hunt, D (2005) *Introducing Philosophy of Religion*, Nelson Thornes

Hunt, D (2007) *Introducing Religion and Ethics*, Nelson Thornes

Law, S (2000/2003) *The Philosophy Files 1 and 2*, Orion

Tackling Tough Questions (Book and DVD) (2008) RE Today,

Lewis, E (2009) *Thinking About God's Nature* (Book and CD), RMEP

Lewis, E (2009) *Thinking About Truth* (Book and CD) RMEP

<http://www.kidstaskforce.com/watchover.html> *Watch Over Me*, Kids' Task Force. A series of quality soap dramas introducing topics including terrorism and forced marriage

Signposts for further action

Consider working with a specialist theatre-in-education company to explore these issues, for example:

- *Not in my Name*, Rozila Kana. Theatre production which enables people from all backgrounds to speak about terrorism and extremism (Rozila.kana@lancashire.pnn.police.uk);
- *One Extreme to the Other*, GW Theatre Company. Powerful stimulus material looking at Muslim and right wing extremism (www.gwtheatre.com)

Consider the extent to which the school already has or wishes to develop a shared approach to:

- the fact that young people make comments and ask questions about controversial topics not only explicitly but also through their behaviour outside the classroom; this may suggest the need for a whole school approach.
- the way it deals with racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. incidents
- the development of a whole school ethos and curriculum in which every child does matter and feels safe
- the provision of CPD for all staff to help them deal effectively with contentious and controversial issues in the classroom
- the application of Philosophy for Children (www.sapere.org.uk) across the curriculum.

APPENDIX

Learning can be based upon open, respectful dialogue and enquiry such as the *Philosophy for Children* pedagogical model, key features of which are:

- starting points or stimuli to engage students in questioning and safe debate, for example a newspaper article, a picture, a film clip (look out for those which involve moral/ethical issues where faith is the issue, like 'Christian man refuses to drive bus with Humanist slogan', 'Muslim supermarket worker refuses to sell alcohol', 'a Hindu organisation campaigns against use of images of Hindu deities on shoes');
- student initiated discussion, not dominated by the teacher, for example where the students decide what the most important questions are and explore them together;
- ground rules agreed democratically which establish respectful participation and mutual trust;
- the use of materials which encourage skilful thinking in the areas of information processing, reasoning, enquiry, creativity and evaluation;
- the planned development of skills that encourage students to become independent and creative thinkers whilst also effective team players in a variety of scenarios
- an acceptance that not all controversial issues can be dealt with in the same way;

- the encouragement of open-mindedness on the part of students towards views with which they disagree;
- debates about fundamental moral and human rights principles.

However knowledge is also important. Another way of addressing controversial and contentious issues is to help students develop deeper understanding and that might require more structured work around a question, including presenting them with relevant new information and helping them to assimilate it.