



# **Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom**

**A Resource for Citizenship Education**

CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit  
in collaboration with the  
Professional Development Service for Teachers

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## Acknowledgements

### Writing Team

Lesley Emerson, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast

Mary Gannon, Education for Reconciliation Project, CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit

Conor Harrison, National Co-ordinator, Cultural and Environmental Education, Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

Valerie Lewis, St Ailbe's School, Tipperary Town

Anne-Marie Poynor, Western Education and Library Board

### Project Steering Committee

Maureen Bassett, Education Consultant, Combat Poverty Agency

Bevin Cody, Head of Communications and Public Affairs, Combat Poverty Agency

Lesley Emerson, Lecturer in Education, School of Education, Queen's University, Belfast

Conor Harrison, National Co-ordinator, Citizenship Education Support Team, SLSS

Anne-Marie Poynor, Assistant Advisory Teacher, Western Education and Library Board

Sandra Gowran, Co-ordinator, European Year of Citizenship through Education

### Project Evaluator

Dr. Phyllis Murphy, Centre for Equality Studies, University College Dublin

### Citizenship Education Practitioners and Schools

Eileen Coleman, *Regional Development Officer, Citizenship Education Support Team, SLSS*

Judith Coughlan, *Sacred Heart Secondary School, Daingean Road, Tullamore, Co. Offaly.*

Mella Cusack, *Citizenship Studies Project Manager, CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, Captain's Road, Crumlin, Dublin 12.*

Michael Domoney, *Bandon Grammar School, Bandon, Co. Cork.*

Eileen Gray, *Regional Development Officer, Citizenship Education Support Team, SLSS*

Brendan Greene, *St. Clare's Comprehensive School, Manorhamilton, Co. Roscommon.*

Annette Keane, *Colaiste Muire, Tourmakeady, Co. Mayo.*

Edel Murray, *Ursuline College, Sligo, Co. Sligo.*

Audrey O'Reilly, *Mountmellick Youth Development Centre, Mountmellick, Co. Laois.*

Deirdre Phelan, *St. Ciaran's College, Kilkenny, Co. Kilkenny.*

Mary Geraldine Shevlin, *Clifden Community School, Clifden, Co. Galway.*

**Design** by Valerie Lewis, St Ailbe's School, Tipperary Town

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## Foreword

It always amazes me when a number of people have a similar idea and when they put their heads together things begin to happen in order to bring that idea to life – this is exactly what happened with regard to this teaching and learning resource on Controversial Issues. Back in 2006, almost six years ago, in conversation with Maureen Bassett, the Education Consultant from the Combat Poverty Agency (which unfortunately no longer exists) we hatched an idea to organise a training and development programme for a group of ten experienced Citizenship Education practitioners. With the support of the Combat Poverty Agency we embarked upon a partnership to provide training and to develop a resource on tackling Controversial Issues. Over two years, we organised a training programme for the ten Citizenship Education practitioners under the careful stewardship of Lesley Emerson, from the School of Education in Queen’s University Belfast.

It was a real voyage of discovery for all involved – there were choppy seas at times that had to be navigated through as well as the calm waters that appeared as we neared the end of our journey. This teaching and learning resource is the direct result of that training programme and its implementation in a number of schools in the Republic of Ireland through the work of the Citizenship Education Support Team and the work of Anne-Marie Poynor of the Western Education and Library Board, and Dr. Mary Gannon, of the Education for Reconciliation Project in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland.

We are indebted to Lesley Emerson, Anne-Marie Poynor, Dr. Mary Gannon, and Valerie Lewis of St. Ailbe’s School, Tipperary for all of their work in bringing this resource to life. It is wonderful to see this teaching and learning resource in print after its long gestation, but as the saying goes, ‘Better late than never!’

I commend all who have been involved in making that 2006 idea a reality. Thank you to the team of teachers who took that initial leap of faith and their students who participated in those early lessons. We are indebted to the Combat Poverty Agency who provided the initial funding to make it all possible under the leadership of Bevin Cody and Maureen Bassett, and to the Education for Reconciliation project, funded by Peace III, who have facilitated the publication of the resource. And a very special thank you to Lesley Emerson for sharing her facilitation skills, her expertise and her passion for all things controversial.

I know that those of you who have a copy in your hand and are reading this will have the same opportunity we had to embark upon a really interesting voyage of discovery with your Citizenship Education students as they explore Controversial Issues in a structured and safe way.

Conor Harrison,  
National Co-ordinator, Cultural & Environmental Education  
Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)  
Spring 2012

## Introduction

The **purpose** of this resource is to provide you as teacher with

- The opportunity to reflect on a number of issues associated with teaching controversial issues in the classroom
- A practical approach which allows students to explore controversial issues which arise in citizenship and other areas of the curriculum in a way which is safe for both teacher and students.

*The resource is divided into three sections*

### Part 1: Thinking about Controversial Issues

This section will provide you with an opportunity to consider some of the key debates surrounding pedagogical approaches to controversial issues and to think through your own perspectives in relation to these debates.

### Part 2: Teaching Controversial Issues Toolkit

This section will provide you with a wide range of teaching and learning strategies which are particularly useful for teaching controversial issues.

### Part 3: Putting It All Together

This section will provide you with a brief overview of how to construct a series of lessons on a controversial issue.

*It is anticipated that the resource will assist you in:*

- Understanding the nature of controversial issues in the curriculum
- Clarifying your own perspective in relation to what you seek to achieve by teaching controversial issues
- Clarifying your own perspective with regard to the stance you take when teaching controversial issues
- Identifying practical strategies for creating a conducive classroom climate in which students can safely explore controversial issues
- Framing controversial issues in a safer manner
- Selecting appropriate classroom methodologies for the safe teaching of controversial issues
- Applying the toolkit to other teaching contexts.



It is strongly recommended that you work through **Part 1** of the resource, using the reflective questions and activities, before exploring the remainder of the resource, since this will provide insight into an overall approach to teaching controversial issues, within which to locate the methodologies.



## **Part 1**

# **Thinking about Controversial Issues**

## Introduction

This section provides an overview of some of the debates surrounding the teaching of controversial issues, before outlining a particular *practical* classroom approach designed to help teachers and students engage with these issues as *safely* as possible.

What is a controversial issue?  
What makes issues controversial or not?

Why should we teach controversial issues?

What is my starting point in deciding to teach controversial issues? Which values will underpin teaching and learning?  
What is my goal?

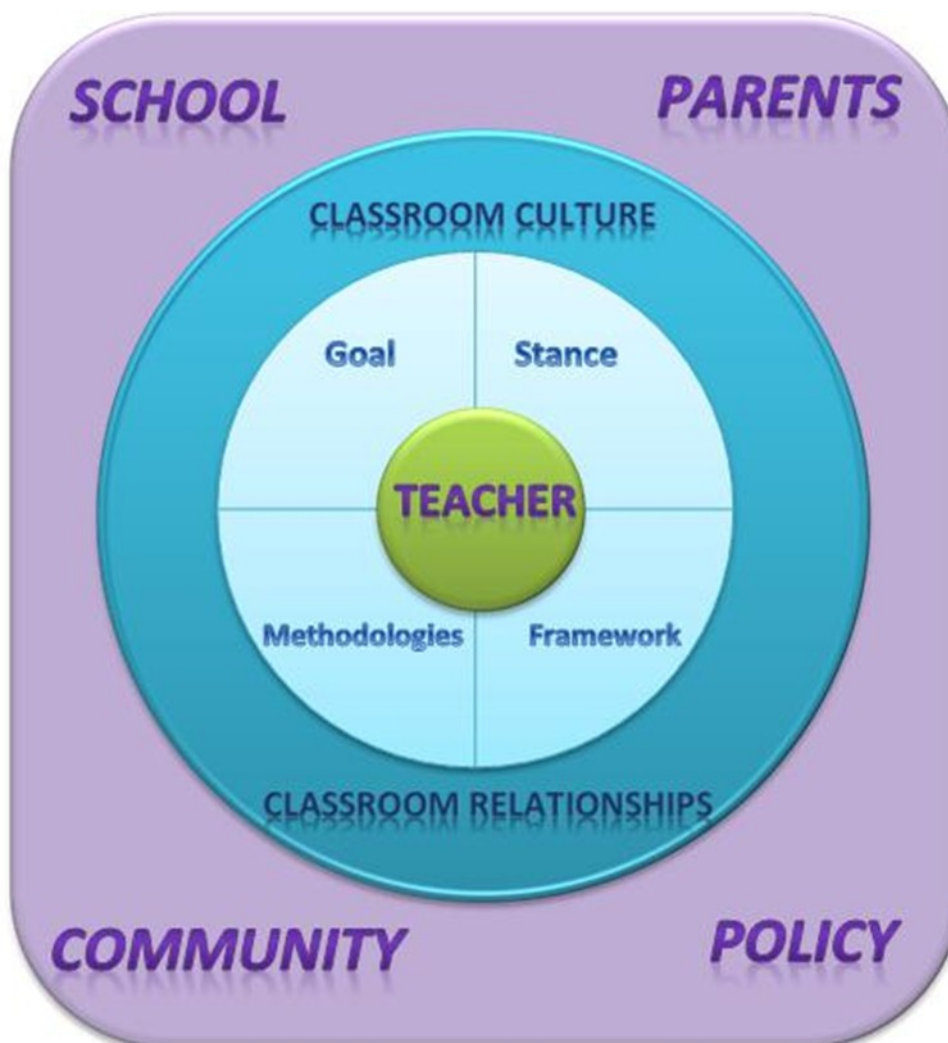
Neutral or Advocate - what stance should a teacher take?

Which methodologies are best?

What's the best way to frame controversial issues?

## Building Confidence in Teaching Controversial Issues

The model used in this tackling controversial issues resource was developed by Lesley Emerson from the School of Education in Queen's University, Belfast. It is based on the premise that the teaching of controversial issues must begin with an acknowledgement that as a classroom teacher you often have little control of the context within which you work. As the diagram below illustrates, teachers operate in a classroom context which is influenced by school ethos, parental expectations, community context, and educational policy – factors over which you may have very little influence or control.



However, you can influence the culture of your own classroom and the relationships established within it. Therefore, when thinking about classroom based teaching of controversial issues, we need to start with those factors over which you, as a teacher,

have immediate influence, and consider the following.....

- *Your overall aim in teaching controversial issues*
- *The values which underpin the teaching and learning of these issues*
- *Your goal in relation to specific issues*
- *The stance or position that you, as a teacher, take on specific issues*
- *The frameworks you use to explore the issues*
- *The classroom methodologies you select.*

All of this needs to be underpinned by safety:

- **Safety for teachers:** an approach which allows the topic, including its controversy, to be covered, but which does not place you as the teacher in a difficult or dangerous situation
- **Safety for students:** an approach which allows students to explore a range of perspectives on an issue, but does not expect them to disclose personal information or encourage them to feel exposed because of their views.



The remainder of this section will unpack the model through exploring the series of questions mentioned on page 10.



*We need to find ways of teaching controversial issues safely - without leaving students exposed*

## What is a controversial issue?

When someone talks about something being controversial, it usually means that it involves more than just simple disagreement between people. In general terms, controversial issues can be described as being:

- Issues that deeply *divide society* – such as euthanasia, economic cutbacks, social welfare payments, immigration.....
- Issues that challenge *personally* held values and beliefs – strong political positions, racism, gay rights, civil partnerships.....
- Issues that generate *conflicting* explanations - historical events, conflicts such as Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel...
- Issues that evoke *emotional* responses - crime and imprisonment, education, abortion, disability....
- Issues that may cause students to feel *threatened* and *confused* – where their families have very strong views on an issue, where peer pressure is strongly in favour of one side of an argument....

### Task

Make a list of issues below which have been, or you think could be, controversial in the context of your school and the students whom you teach, and then reflect on the points on the following page



? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

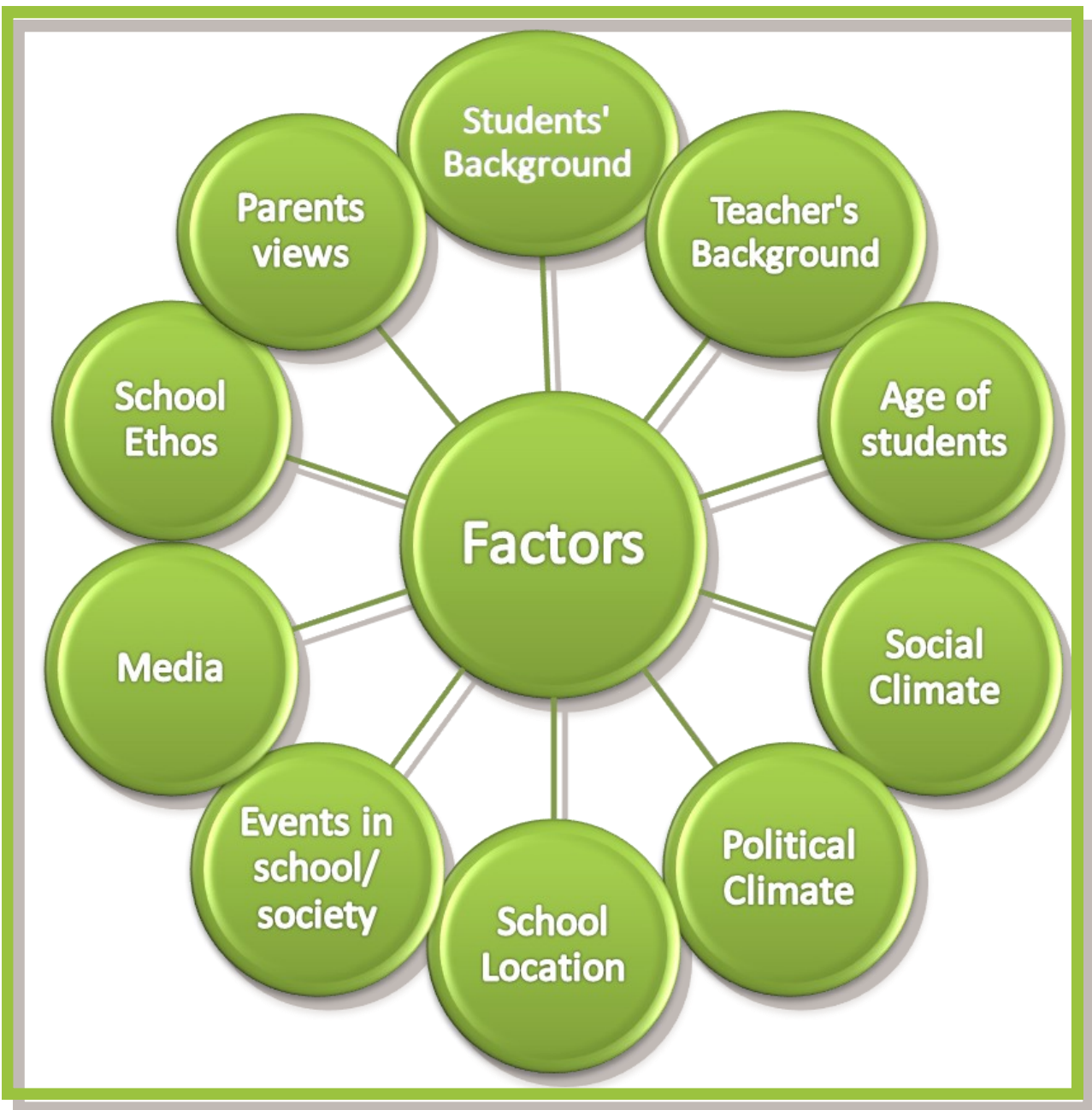
? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Controversial issues vary with context!

What might be controversial in one school, with a particular group of students coming from a particular community, may be totally uncontroversial in a different context or at a different time. So we need to be aware of the context in which we are teaching potentially controversial issues, and be prepared for the controversy. We might also need to be prepared to inject the controversy into topics which students, due to their own background and life experience, do not see as controversial.

## Factors which can make an issue controversial



### Task

Take each of the factors listed in the previous diagram and provide two examples where they could impact on whether an issue is controversial or not. For example, a government budget change can suddenly make government social or health policies extremely controversial.

Factor	Example 1	Example 2

### What Issues are Controversial in My School Context?

Having reflected on what issues might be controversial in your particular context, it is helpful to look at how comfortable or not you would feel teaching about specific issues on the list you made earlier. The following exercise is a tool for reflecting on where you stand.

*(This methodology is also a very useful and safe way to establish the range of opinions and positions in a class group – but without asking students to state their opinion in front of the whole class.)*

## Comfortable or Not?

*Create a spectrum across a page like this:*

*No Way!  
Wouldn't touch it*

*No problem.  
Would have a go!*

Take the list of potentially controversial issues that you have made previously.

Look at your list and decide where **you** would place them on the spectrum. Record each topic on your spectrum as appropriate. Try to find examples for both ends as well as some that fit in between. And try to give as many examples as possible

- \* *What are the general features of the issues you've identified as too controversial to teach?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- \* *What are the general features of the issues you've identified as safe to teach?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- \* *Could any of the safe issues ever become controversial? How?*

Remember that it's normal to feel uncomfortable about teaching certain issues. The approaches and teaching strategies described later on may help you deal with this feeling and provide you with a safe way of teaching them.



## Why Teach Controversial Issues?

Schools should help their students to handle questions of value, to learn to make judgements which are truly their own, as well as learning to take responsibility for their own lives.

*Dewhurst, D. (1992). The Teaching of Controversial Issues, Journal of Philosophy of Education, 26(2), 153-163*

### Task

Unpack the statement above by:

- Coming up with two arguments for and against this statement
- Matching the statement to the aims of the citizenship curriculum
- Matching the statement to the set of skills that students are expected to develop.



The statement matches with the following aims of the citizenship curriculum:



The statement matches with the following skills students are expected to develop:



The quotes below represent some of the reasons given by teachers in Northern Ireland as to why they have chosen to engage with controversial issues (*Emerson, Lesley (2010) Unpublished*). Taking each of these in turn, identify a Plus and a Minus for each one, and then reflect on and formulate your overall aim in teaching controversial issues.

**Teacher A** - *I want to expose students to issues and perspectives beyond their own experience; to shake them up a bit; get them out of their comfort zone*



**Teacher B** *I want to provide students with opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills*



**Teacher C** *I want to prepare students for responsible adulthood (by giving them the opportunity to think through the issue as fully as possible in the classroom, rather than have to suddenly engage with it in adulthood)*



**Teacher D** *I want to assist students in making sense of the complex world around them*



***I believe that teaching controversial issues is important because***

.....  
.....  
.....

***My overall aim in teaching controversial issues is***

.....  
.....  
.....

## Clarifying Values and Goals in Teaching Controversial Issues

Because teaching an issue that is controversial can be difficult and challenging for both you and your students, it is essential that, before you begin, you have clarified for yourself

- What set of values will underpin my teaching?
- What is my goal in teaching about this particular issue?



### Values

Citizenship education is firmly based on human rights and its associated values. The values that you may want to promote in teaching about issues that are controversial in your context may vary depending on the issue in question.

However, in planning how to approach an issue with your students, it is very helpful to clarify the specific values on which you are basing your approach. For example, if you are teaching about racism, your values will probably include respect, tolerance, and equality.

### Goals

Before teaching a specific issue that may be controversial for your students, it is helpful to be very clear about what your goal is in raising or responding to the issue. Depending on the issue, your goal may vary – it could be to help students view issues from multiple perspectives; to engage them in critical analysis of government policy; to challenge the majority view of the students or their community e.g. sectarianism, racism; or simply to raise awareness.



### Task

Go back to the issues you identified on page 13 and think about which values should underpin teaching about each of them. Then complete the worksheet on the following page.

## Clarifying Values and Goals

Issue	Values	Goals



*Having clear underpinning values and a clear set of goals, means that*

.....

.....

.....

.....

## **Reflection**

*Often in discussions surrounding the teaching of controversial issues teachers assume that their goal must be the reduction of individual prejudice and the building of a more tolerant society, through changing the attitudes of students. One concern with this assumption is that it arguably raises unrealistic expectations of the curriculum itself and more importantly, of teachers. It also has the potential to place students in a position where they feel exposed, and therefore unsafe. A much safer place to start is by raising awareness about issues at a societal rather than individual level. This may, in turn, challenge the actions of students and affect their attitudes.*

*From a teacher's perspective it is easier to feel confident in tackling controversial issues, if you don't feel under pressure to change attitudes, and if you recognise that it is an acceptable goal simply to raise awareness of issues and to promote critical thinking among students about them.*

## Creating a Conducive Classroom Climate

‘The creation of a supportive and sensitive classroom ethos is a crucial pre-requisite to constructive dialogue.’

*McCully, Alan (2004) Practitioner perceptions of their role in facilitating the handling of controversial issues in contested societies: a Northern Irish experience. University of Ulster.*

The development of a class contract or set of ground rules for group discussion is normal practice within the citizenship classroom. In introducing controversial issues into the classroom, it is important to have a safe and fair environment where issues can be freely discussed, but where it is also recognised that freedom of expression must be tempered by human rights values. It is strongly recommended that students spend time in developing a class agreement, which encompasses values as well as behaviours.

### Agreeing Core Values in the Classroom

A simple way of agreeing core values is to ask the students to work in groups of three to answer the questions:

- *How would you like to be treated by other students when you are working together in class?*
- *How should we treat each other when we disagree about serious issues?*
- *What are your rights and responsibilities as a member of the class?*

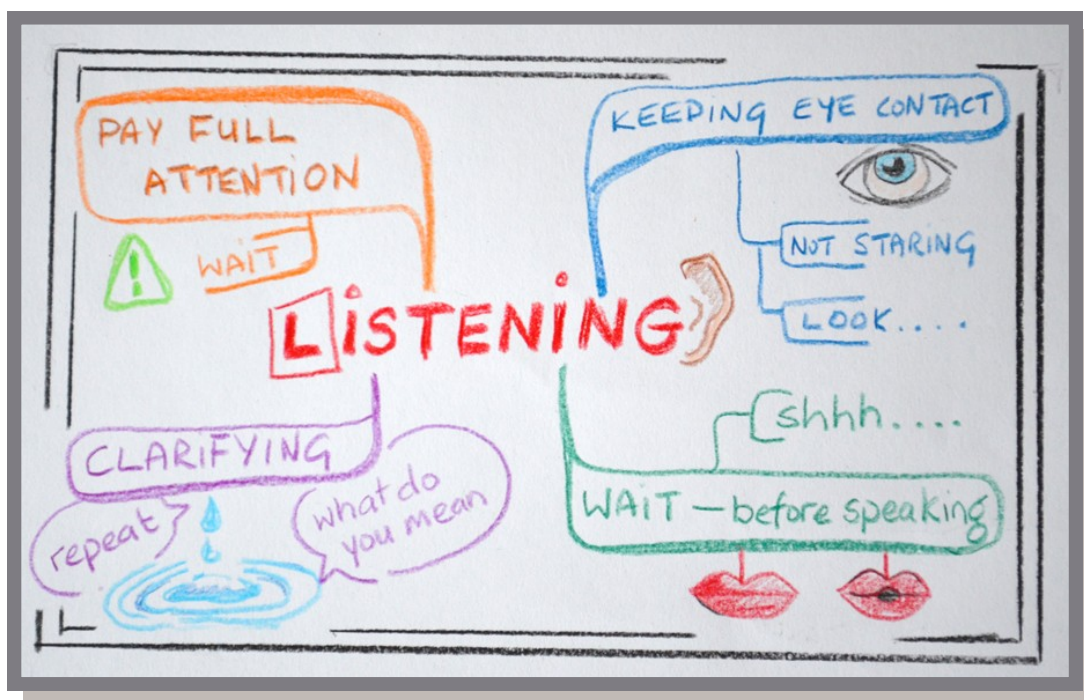
Take feedback from each group, listing all their suggestions on the board, with one tick for every time a suggestion is repeated. It is likely that students will include ideas such as; being respected, being listened to, not being put down or dismissed out of hand, tolerance of different ideas, co-operation, taking turns, participation, allowing others to disagree with the majority.

### From Values to Practice

Often, values such as respect or tolerance are advocated, but without any real unpacking of what they might mean in practice. How do we really respect others, especially when we fundamentally disagree with them? Do we really believe that all people are equal? Young people may find it helpful to unpack these ideas through the next methodology.




Take five or six key points from the list on the board, and use the *Circular Brainstorm* methodology on page 42 to ask the students to reflect on what these would look like in practice, and to list the behaviours associated with each. Examples of some of the behaviours which might be associated with *Respect* and *Listening* are given below.



Once these core values are established and students have explored what they mean in practice, it is useful to articulate these in a student-friendly way and display them in the classroom. Three possible ways are suggested below.

1. Students create a catch phrase that can be displayed and referred to. This example summarises core values in the form of a name FRED:

**F** - **freedom** of expression  
**R** - within a **respectful** environment  
**E** - where everyone is seen as **equal**  
**D** - and **diversity** is celebrated



*Students may wish to create their own catch phrase based on a core value which has particular significance for them*

2. Students develop a statement of their agreed vision for relationships and values within the class. This could take the form of a formal statement, a poem, a graphic, a rap or another method which they choose.
3. The complete list of values initially suggested by the students can be made into a Wordle design. ([www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net) - input a list of words including repetitions and Wordle automatically makes a design, with the size of the words reflecting their frequency in the text). This example shows the agreement made by 11 year olds in a primary school.



<http://dayintheclassroom.edublogs.org/files/2011/06/Class-Contract-Framed-u5iqbt.jpg>

*Whichever method is chosen, a laminated copy of the statement, catch phrase or Wordle should be put up in the classroom to remind students of what they have agreed.*



## What stance should a teacher take?

Having clarified your values and goals, it is important to consider what stance or position you as the teacher will take in relation to a particular issue. While some educators advocate that the teacher should always be neutral, this is virtually impossible. Depending on the issue and the context in which you are teaching, any one of a number of teacher stances may be appropriate.

The exercise below will help you think through the situations in which each of the positions may be appropriate or inappropriate, helpful to students or unhelpful.

There are many different types of teacher stances - here are five basic approaches teachers can take:



### Neutral Facilitator or Impartial Facilitator



You act as a **neutral facilitator** at all times – never expressing a personal view at all. Related to this is the **impartial** stance, where you recognise that while you have your own views, you provide a fair and balanced representation of a wide range of perspectives.

### Declared Interests

You **state your position** on an issue, particularly if you have strong views on it - so that the students know where you stand.



### Devil's Advocate



You deliberately express a view **contrary** to the view of the class, in a situation where there is consensus among the students on a certain issue. This allows the airing of more perspectives on the issue.

### Official View

You take the **official view** – representing the views of the school or the community.



### Ally



You **support** the views of a student who holds a minority view within the class, to ensure his or her view is given due weight. You become his or her **ally**.

### Task

Taking each of the five position cards on page 27, think of situations or issues which would make each position Appropriate or Inappropriate, and list these on the cards

*Appropriate*

**Neutral Facilitator**

*Inappropriate*



*Appropriate*

**Declared Interest**

*Inappropriate*



*Appropriate*

**Devil's Advocate**

*Inappropriate*



*Appropriate*

**Official View**

*Inappropriate*



*Appropriate*

**Ally**

*Inappropriate*



While it might appear common sense that teachers should be **neutral**, the reality is that this is almost impossible to achieve. We will always reveal our perspective through the tone we use, the language we use, body language. For this reason it may be better to aim to take an **impartial** stance. However this again is difficult to achieve, particularly if teachers have very strong views on a topic.

Reality also dictates that in many schools, teachers are expected to present the **official view** – particularly in faith schools on issues of morality. In some cases this can be very useful, as it provides the teacher with a foundational position to present to the students.

There also will be times when students' views need to be challenged and teachers should act as **devil's advocate** – particularly when the class as a whole appear to hold the same view. In this case you can deliberately inject controversy to ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives. However, you need to be careful that you do not present extreme views solely to provoke, and that you do it to expand students' exposure to a range of views.

All of the five stances described have strengths and weaknesses and the appropriateness of their use will change depending on the circumstances – the particular group of students, the topic, the school. As you plan to teach a specific topic, you may find that going back to the cards above will help you to work out in advance what your most appropriate stance would be.



## Framing Controversial Issues

The way in which you frame a controversial topic can make a considerable difference to providing safety and confidence for both you and your students in exploring controversial issues.

The basic principle behind this approach is that you look at issues from a structural rather than a personal perspective. This means that you can discuss an issue without making either you or students vulnerable or putting them under pressure to reveal their personal views, especially when doing so could expose them to strong reactions from others. It also makes it easier to discuss issues which personally affect some students in the class, (*for example, students from minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds, Traveller students, students with disabilities*) without making them vulnerable or having them become the target of the discussion.

The following sections look firstly at the broader framing of issues, and then the technique of framing questions for discussion.

### Framing Topics or Issues

Controversial topics framed from a structural perspective can provide, at the very least, a positive agreed starting point to the topic and set the parameters for any subsequent debate. The following three frameworks are appropriate ones to use within citizenship education, because they are based on principles either embedded in law or generally held in society. They are Human Rights, Law, and Social Responsibility.

### A Human Rights Framework

Human rights, as embodied in the UNDHR, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other HR declarations and conventions, can be used to frame controversial topics. This provides a universally agreed foundation for examining controversial issues and allows students to look at how rights can be balanced in conflicting situations. It also means that issues can be viewed from a structural perspective rather than that of personal beliefs or morals.



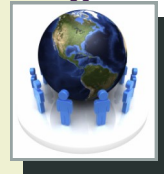
### A Legal Framework

Presenting topics within a legal framework (e.g. what should **the law** say about gay couples adopting children?) can allow space for students to present their own moral perspectives, but within a context of the state's responsibility towards all its citizens.



### A Social Responsibility Framework

A social responsibility framework can also be used to structure topics, for example by looking at the roles of the individual, society and the state in relation to addressing controversial issues such as racism, poverty, or homophobia.



This structural approach to teaching controversial issues potentially creates opportunities to safely challenge both the actions and attitudes of students without shining a light on the position of any individual student within the classroom.

In addition to safety for teachers and students, it has the potential for deeper resultant citizenship learning. It extends students' understanding of issues of social significance. For example, rather than only exploring how they as individuals should deal with prejudice and challenge racist attitudes, a structural approach necessitates also engaging with societal and governmental responsibility for tackling racism and challenging discrimination.



### Re-Framing Questions to Reflect a Structural Focus

The following are questions which might be discussed in class, framed taking an **individual (private) focus**:

- How do **you feel** about the increase in the number of people from other ethnic groups in society?
- Would **you** be friends with someone from another ethnic community?
- How would **you** respond if someone told a racist joke?

When the questions are re-framed taking a **structural (public) focus** some of the heat is taken out of the issue:

- How has **society** responded to the increase in the number of people from minority ethnic communities in Ireland?
- What could the **government** do to tackle racism?
- How **might** an **individual** respond if someone told a racist joke?

This does not remove the controversy from the topic but it does allow space for safer discussion of it. Individuals are not placed in a position of exposing their personal prejudices and the issue is discussed at a societal level, rather than at an interpersonal/intrapersonal level.

## Examples of Questions which have been Reframed by Teachers at in-service

It is sometimes difficult to work out how to reframe questions, but it does become easier with practice. Below are some examples of how teachers at in-service workshops had their first try at using the technique. They are provided, not as perfect examples, but as a prompt to your own thinking. You may like to go through them and see if you can come up with alternative ways of reframing the questions.

### **Personal Focus Questions**

1. Have you ever been involved in a racist/sectarian incident?
2. Have you ever made racist remarks or jokes?
3. What would you do if your friends made racist remarks or jokes?
4. Would you be friends with someone from a different religious background, cultural group or someone with a different skin colour?

### **Public Focus Questions**

1. Are you aware of examples of racism/sectarianism incidents in society?
2. How could an individual respond if someone told a racist or sectarian joke?
3. How can schools deal with racist or sectarian incidences?
4. How well are religious and cultural diversity accommodated in school? In the community?

### **Personal Focus Questions**

1. How do you feel about the growing cultural diversity in Ireland/NI?
2. What do you think about migrant workers coming here?
3. Do you think they should get the same benefits as native people?
4. Do you agree that migrant workers should adapt to our way of doing things?

### **Public Focus Questions**

1. How has society responded to people from minority ethnic groups working within Ireland/NI?
2. What myths and stereotypes exist about migrant workers in our society?
3. How could society include minority ethnic groups in their communities in a more inclusive way?
4. How have people in Ireland/NI benefited from living in an increasingly multi-cultural society?

### **Personal Focus Questions**

1. How do you feel about the increased profile of the gay community in Ireland/NI?
2. Would you be friends with someone who is openly gay? Would you remain friends with a friend if they come out as gay?
3. How would you respond to the word gay being used in a negative or insulting manner?
4. Do you think gay marriage should be allowed?
5. Do you think gay couples should be able to adopt?

### **Public Focus Questions**

1. Do gay people have the same rights as heterosexual people?
2. How are their rights protected under the law?
3. What can the Government/schools do to protect and promote gay rights and treat them equally with heterosexual people?
4. What could the school do to tackle homophobia?
5. What could the school do to affirm the identity of teachers and pupils who are gay?
6. Should the law be changed to allow gay couples to adopt?

#### ***Are Personal Questions ever Appropriate?***

*While asking structural questions is normally safer than asking purely personal ones, this does not mean that students can never reveal their personal views. Where you are trying to encourage empathy, or where students have strong views which they feel safe to express in a small group or to the whole class, then it may be appropriate to facilitate this. This is where work on building a conducive climate in the classroom can ensure that this is done in a respectful environment.*



## **Conclusion of Part 1**

**Part 1** of this resource has taken you through the initial four steps you can take to ensure that you can safely teach controversial issues in the classroom:

- Clarifying Values and Goals
- Creating a Conducive Classroom Climate
- Identifying the appropriate stance to take
- Deciding on the best way to frame controversial issues

**Part 2** outlines the fifth step, Using Appropriate Methodologies, and provides examples of methodologies which are effective and safe for teachers and students.



**Part 2**

**Teaching Controversial Issues**

**Toolkit**

## Introduction

This section provides examples of specific methodologies which are particularly useful for teaching controversial issues. For convenience, it is organised into sections. However many of the methodologies are applicable to a number of the sections.

### **Encouraging Discussion**

*Think Pair Share*  
*Circular Brainstorm*  
*Carousel Discussion*  
*Jigsaw Discussion*

### **Facilitating Debate**

*Speed Debate*  
*Walking Debate*  
*Spectrum Debate*  
*Yes and.... Debate*

### **Developing Critical Thinking**

*5 Whys*  
*Analyzing Newspapers*  
*What's the Point?*  
*Comparison Alley*  
*Thinking through Challenges*

### **Developing Empathy**

*Role Play*  
*Conscience Alley*  
*Using Photographs*  
*Silent Conversation*  
*On the Margins*  
*Other People's Shoes*  
*Consequence Wheel*

## Top Tips for Safe Teaching of Controversial Issues

- **Don't** use whole class discussion – use small groups instead
- Establish clear procedures and routines with the class
- Create additional spaces for students to express views

### Small Groups

Small groups provide a safe way for students to engage with controversial issues. Whole class discussion is not recommended because it:

- Can allow some students to dominate
- Can make some students vulnerable or feeling pressured to reveal their opinions in front of all their peers
- Does not necessarily allow students with minority views to contribute to the discussion.

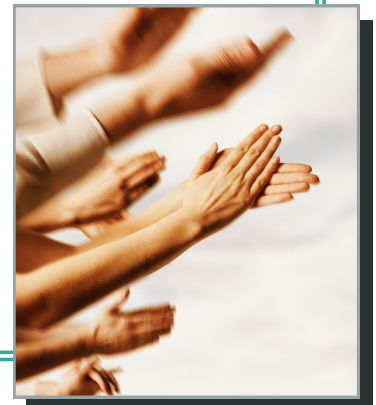
Some small group activities described in this section allow the class to have a *de facto* whole class discussion, but through the use of pairs and groups. For example:

*Circular Brainstorms* (page 42) allow groups to share and comment on ideas, but without needing to express them publicly in front of the whole class.

*Carousel Discussion* (page 44) has the effect of a whole class discussion as each student hears the opinions of a large number of students but in the safety of a series of paired discussions.

#### How Best to Use Small Groups

- Actively eavesdrop on the discussion happening in small groups. Move around the classroom so that you can get an overall picture of where the students are going with their thinking
- Prompt groups to move them on if they are getting stuck on something.
- Feedback is not always necessary. Always taking feedback from groups makes the process very long and slows the momentum
- Structure the groups carefully – think about the make-up of the groups and try to achieve a mix of ability, background, gender
- 3- 5 students is generally the ideal size for groups, but pairs are often a safe number to start with, or to allow for faster work on a specific task.



- Assign roles to individuals within each group to ensure participation
- If some students are particularly dominant, try giving them the role of recorder of the discussion, in order to give other students more opportunity to speak
- Change the make-up of groups over a period of time to allow students to hear different perspectives.

### Group Work and Skills Development

Group work helps students develop the skills of active listening, participation, and critical thinking. You may need to assess students' skills in this area and provide them with structured support to develop them if necessary. Some ways of doing this include:

- Basic listening exercises
- Turn taking by students, as in circle time
- Students summarising the previous speakers points before making their own
- Encouraging a range of perspectives through the use of role cards or position cards
- Asking students to produce arguments *for* a point of view and then *against* the same point of view.

## Classroom Procedures and Routines

It is good practice to establish routines within the controversial issues classroom. Routines provide security. Students should be aware that at certain points in the class time will be taken to stop and review what they have been discussing, and that at the end of the class there will be a summary, de-brief and time for individual reflection (page 40). Examples of some procedures are given below.



### Recording Points of Consensus and Disagreement

- Take time to **acknowledge and record agreement**: this will prevent the discussion from becoming overly repetitive
- Take time to **acknowledge and record disagreement**: this will prevent the discussion from getting bogged down. It also demonstrates to students that contrasting perspectives are a normal aspect of dealing with difficult issues.

### **Time Out**

Establish a clear procedure for handling heated situations. For example, if a class is becoming heated call a 'time out'. Students should know that this means they need to, for example, individually reflect on the class so far, write down why they think it has become heated and how they think the class should proceed from this point. The students can then share their ideas for moving forward.



### **Reflective Templates**

At the end of a class students should be given time to individually reflect on what they have been discussing. It is helpful to have a standard format or template that they can routinely use in each class. An example is given on page 40.

## ***Creating Additional Spaces for Expression of Views***

While it is good practice in general to provide all students with the opportunity to express themselves, it is all the more important that the space is actively created to do so in a controversial issues classroom, particularly for students with minority views. Many of the methodologies outlined in the next section are designed to give all students in the class a voice and to build their capacity to express themselves. However it is also useful to provide physical space for students to record ideas freely. Examples of how this might be done are given below.

### **No Easy Answers Board**

Create a No Easy Answers Board for recording difficult questions or points on which the students cannot agree. This acts as a reminder to students that no-one has all the answers, and that in life, it is not realistic to expect that groups will agree on everything. These questions or points can be returned to at various intervals to see if students' thoughts have developed since they first discussed them.



### **Graffiti Wall**

Dedicate one area of your room as a Graffiti Wall where students can record their thoughts on the issues they have been discussing. You could also record any relevant comments made during summaries or de-briefings. Students could also record other issues that they would be interested in examining in future classes, or their thoughts on current affairs issues as they arise.



Three thoughts I have on this issue:

1.

2.

3.

Two other viewpoints that I found interesting:

1.

2.

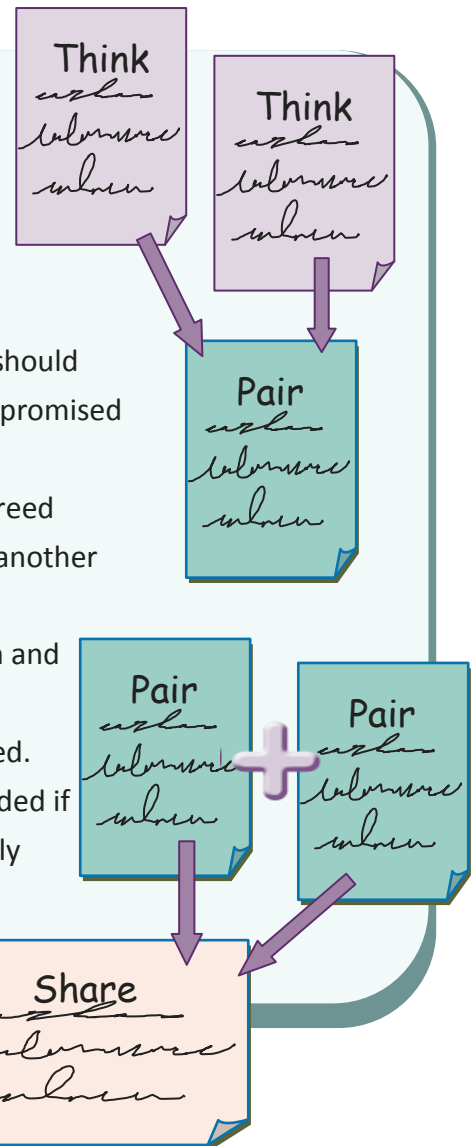
One aspect that I would like to explore further:



## Think Pair Share

This technique enables students to think about their own responses to issues and gradually reach out to those around them to consider their thoughts on an issue as **well**. It is a useful way of encouraging less vocal students to share ideas initially in pairs and then in larger groups. It also ensures that everyone's views on an issue are represented and allows a whole class consensus to be arrived at without a whole class discussion.

- Ask a question or describe a scenario *e.g.* 'At what age do you think children can be held responsible for a crime they have committed?'
- Students should individually write down their ideas/ thoughts
- Students then form pairs and compare their answers. They should discuss the ideas and then reach an agreed position (or compromised position). This idea should be recorded
- Pairs should then form fours and compare their previous agreed positions. The four should then discuss the ideas and reach another agreed position. This should be recorded
- Fours can then feedback their ideas through a spokesperson and the teacher can facilitate the exchange of ideas
- The final agreed position of the class should then be recorded. Minority Reports (i.e. dissenting views) should also be recorded if individuals feel very strongly that their view is not adequately represented.



*Think Pair Share can help students to prioritise ideas. For example, ask students to identify three or four basic human rights for children. As they share they can compare their answers, prioritise and eliminate, to reach an agreed set of three or four rights.*

## Circular Brainstorm

Circular brainstorms are useful methodologies for dealing with controversial issues: they allow students in small groups to arrive at a whole class conclusion without having a whole class discussion.

Write four or five issues/questions onto separate sheets of large paper. Each sheet needs to have a different issue, topic or question under discussion.

For example to summarise the topic of homophobia you could label the sheets like this:

- **Sheet 1** Causes of homophobia
- **Sheet 2** Effects of homophobia
- **Sheet 3** What can individuals do about homophobia
- **Sheet 4** What can society (*churches, youth groups, businesses, schools etc.*) do about homophobia?
- **Sheet 5** What can the government do about homophobia?

Place each sheet on a separate desk and divide the class into the same number of groups as sheets.

Each group should record their ideas on the sheet within a limited time

After a couple of minutes tell the groups to rotate clockwise to the next sheet. The group should read the ideas generated by the previous group and then ✓ the ideas they agree with, ✗ those ideas they disagree with, ? those ideas they are not sure about or add or amend other ideas

Continue this rotation until each group returns to its original position.

Each group can then feedback to the class the key ideas generated.



Each group should have a different coloured marker which they keep with them. If inappropriate comments are written down you can at least locate which group did it!

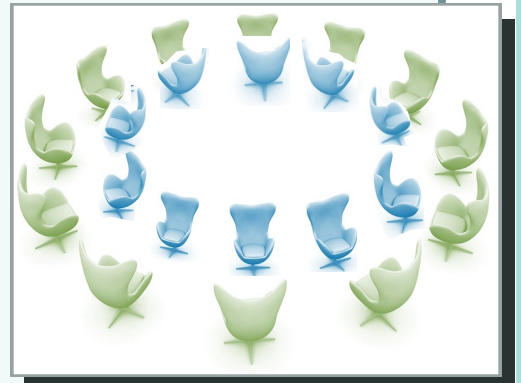


- If you do not have room for groups to move around the classroom, then simply rotate the sheets of paper instead
- This technique is very useful for encouraging less vocal students to participate in discussion. They may feel more comfortable talking in a smaller group.

## Carousel Discussion

This method builds up student confidence in discussion techniques as they only engage in short discussions. It also allows students to sample a wide range of views without holding a whole class discussion. It often results in students refining and expanding their original ideas or thoughts on an issue. It is useful for controversial issues since it allows students to talk in pairs rather than to the whole class; it allows students to arrive at a whole class conclusion without a whole class discussion; it encourages active listening.

- Split class into two groups
- One group should form an inner circle (*seated or standing*) and the other group forms an outer circle. Students should be facing each other
- Pose a question to the class (*e.g. 'Do you think everyone should be able to say whatever they want in public?'*)
- The pairs facing each other should exchange views for approximately one minute. Then ask the outer circle to rotate clockwise
- Ask this new pair to discuss the question. Continue the rotation until students have had an opportunity to discuss the question with a wide range of partners
- During these rotations increase the time available for discussion and encourage students to reflect the views they have heard from others. This encourages them to synthesise ideas and share the opinions of others
- De-brief the activity: did your opinion change in any way during the carousel? Did you make stronger arguments as you moved to new partners? Did you pick up any interesting views?
- Select one or two students to summarise the views of the whole class based on what they picked up in the carousel.



- If your room does not have sufficient space then students can be placed into two lines facing each other. When asked to move on, one row could shift left. Students at the top of a line could move to the bottom
- This method could also be used as an alternative to role play. Each student could be assigned a role and given a scenario. Students could then form a carousel, introduce themselves in pairs and tell their partner in role how they feel about the scenario .

## Jigsaw Discussion

This approach to group work is particularly suited to teaching controversial issues. The basic idea of this methodology is that the students are divided into groups of four or five. This is their home group. Each member of the home group is numbered 1-5. All the 1s from the home group meet to discuss one aspect of the topic, all the 2s another, and so on. Finally the home groups reassemble and each member provides feedback from their topic group, thus enabling the home groups to hear multiple perspectives on the same issue.

This methodology can be used for three different purposes:

- To help students view an issue from multiple perspectives
- To explore several aspects of an issue
- To help students come up with solutions to a problem or a class action plan.



*Examples of each of these, with the required materials, are given below.*

Purpose	Issue	Materials required
1. To understand multiple perspectives	Controversial environmental issue	Views of interested groups and their proposed solutions. Groups could be asked to develop a specific number of key arguments to support each group's point of view.
2. To explore different aspects of an issue	Barriers to peace in Palestine and Israel	Information about five specific barriers and why they cause conflict. Students to answer similar questions about each barrier to make it easy for home groups to compare the barriers.
3. To come up with possible solutions or action plans	Racism	Questions: what could the government, the community, the school, the individual or others do? Some information to prompt students' thinking could be provided and students asked to produce 3-4 ideas.



**Note:** it is important that the topic groups are given clear instructions as to what they are to do with any material they receive. Otherwise they will find it hard to focus and the feedback to their home groups will not be effective.

## Facilitating Debate

Engaging students in a debate about contemporary issues that affect their lives enables them to recognize that disagreement, if managed well, is a natural and healthy feature of democracy. Debates allow students to display their citizenship skills and express their opinions. However, not all students will be confident in doing this and may not have fully formed views on the issues under debate. The following debating techniques are designed to assist students in the formation of the views and to build their confidence in debating.

### Speed Debates

This is a useful strategy for building students' capacity to debate an issue and to explore a range of perspectives.

Give each student a post-it note or small card.

Display a statement to the class relating to the topic you are studying. The statements should be easily understood, but should be selected on the basis that they will invite a degree of disagreement amongst the class

*e.g. 'War is never acceptable' or 'The government should not be providing aid to other countries when we need the money here'*

Ask the students to reflect on the statement and to write down on their post-it a number between 1 and 5 based on this scale:

- 1 means 'Agree strongly'
- 2 means 'Agree'
- 3 means 'Not sure'
- 4 means 'Disagree'
- 5 means 'Disagree strongly'

Now ask the students to show their numbers to each other, to find someone with a different number to them (preferably as different as possible) and to join that person in a pair. The pair then have 2 minutes to discuss why they chose the number they did for the statement.

Take brief feedback. Ask if anyone would change their number and why.

1 - Strongly Agree

2- Agree

3- Not Sure

4 - Disagree

5- Strongly Disagree

## Walking Debates

Walking debates allow students to position themselves and state a view without the pressure of having to speak; they also bring out the nuances of the issue. In a walking debate students should be allowed to stand in a neutral place and not take a position on an issue. Walking debates are extremely useful for giving every student a voice regardless of whether or not they actually speak out. They also provide an opportunity for students to explore the grey areas of difficult issues and encourage students to confront ambiguity.

Make 3 large signs **AGREE** **DISAGREE** **NOT SURE**

- Place the Agree and Disagree signs at opposite ends of the room, with the NOT SURE sign in the middle, as if along an imaginary line
- Read out one of the statements for discussion and ask the students to stand nearest the sign that reflects their opinion on the topic
- Emphasise that it is okay to stay in the middle, listen to the debate and then move according as their opinion is formed.
- When students have taken a position ask them to say why they have taken that position
- Encourage dialogue /debate among students to persuade those who don't share their opinion to change sides
- Don't underestimate the importance of a good statement – one that is open ended and will give an opportunity for a variety of opinions. Statements should evoke a range of responses (e.g. *“everyone should be able to join a peaceful protest”* as opposed to *“everyone should join a peaceful protest”* since the first statement leaves room for some interpretation).

**AGREE**

**Not Sure**

**DISAGREE**

*\*An example is given on page 47 of appropriate statements to use in a walking debate on human rights.*



If your space is limited a class set of cards can be used. Each student receives a set of AGREE/DISAGREE/NOT SURE cards and holds up the card relevant to their opinion on a given statement.



### **Note of caution!**

It may not always be appropriate to use a walking debate for every controversial or sensitive issue, as some students may feel very exposed at having to literally take a stand. However they are extremely useful for discussing broader complex societal issues which students may not have considered in detail before.

## Some Sample Statements

### **Everyone should be free to say whatever they want**

*Prompt questions:* Should you be able to insult other people? What about racist/sectarian comments? What about expressing political opinions? Flags? Emblems? Political slogans? Is there a difference between expressing identity in your own home/community and in a more public context?

### **No one should be tortured or treated inhumanely**

*Prompt questions:* What if the police suspect that a person has information about a terrorist attack? What if they know that there is a bomb primed and ready to go off and that the suspect knows where it is? Is torture ever justified?

### **Everyone should be able to join a peaceful protest**

*Prompt questions:* Are there any situations where this may not be true? What if the protest is racist or sectarian? Does that make any difference? What types of protest are OK? What if it restricts the movement of the people who live in the area? What if it disrupts their family life?

### **Everyone's privacy should be respected**

*Prompt questions:* What about people who put themselves in the public eye? People who sell their story to the paper? What if the police need to break into files on a computer to find out if there is criminal activity? What about locker searches in school?

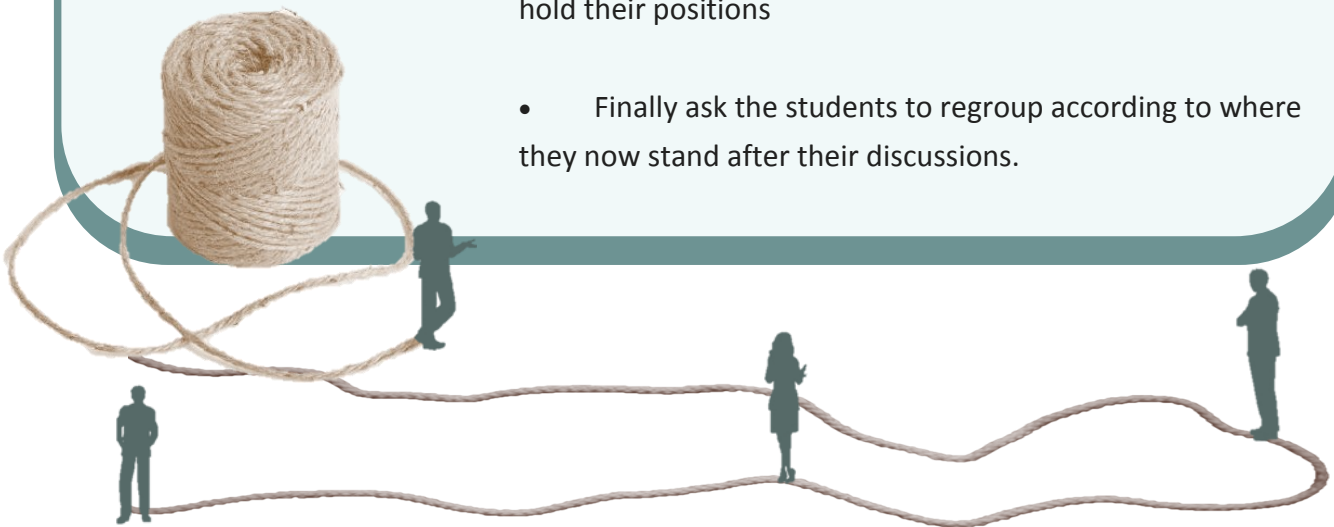
### **Everyone should be allowed to follow their own religious beliefs**

*Prompt questions:* What if these beliefs cause harm to others? Or incite hatred or violence? What if these beliefs cause harm to themselves?



## Spectrum Debate

- This allows students to look at a spectrum of views, within the class, on issues that can be viewed from strongly opposing but justifiable positions, for example, views on imprisonment versus restorative justice for people who have committed a crime
- Present the two opposing positions to the class, being careful to ensure that they are equally balanced i.e. that one is not obviously more justifiable than the other. Using the front of the classroom or other appropriate space, lay a piece of string on the floor to represent the spectrum of opinions which lie between the two views
- Give each student a few minutes to consider the two views and then to stand along the spectrum in a position which reflects their views. When they are all in position, ask them to talk to the students nearest to them (maximum 3 students in a group) and explain why they are standing there
- Then, provided there is a reasonable spread of opinion, ask the students to identify someone who is somewhere on the other half of the spectrum i.e. holds a different opinion to them, and to discuss in groups of 2 or 3 why they hold their positions
- Finally ask the students to regroup according to where they now stand after their discussions.



This activity allows students to consider and express their views and shows even slight shifts in opinion which occur after discussion. It has advantages over a Walking Debate in that it ensures all students express their opinions, but as they do this in small groups rather than in front of all their peers, it is a safer method to use when issues are particularly sensitive or controversial.



## “Yes, and...” Debate

“Yes, and” debates help students to concentrate on the positive aspects of certain topics. This debating method is generally used in small groups but can also be used as an entire class exercise. Students are encouraged to add to the original statement and discover only positive attributes to the chosen topic by commencing each of their own statements with the word “yes, and.....”. Further extensions of the exercise are explained which can give a broader outlook to a given topic, once students are familiar with the concept.

- Divide the class into groups of 4/5
- Explain to the groups that a statement for discussion will be read aloud by the teacher
- Students will be expected to discuss this statement in their group
- However, each student must begin their contribution with the words “yes, and.....” followed by the comment they wish to make
- Students may find this concept difficult at first, so a few examples may be appropriate
  - “Everyone should get the medical care they need free of charge”
  - “Yes, and.....they should be able to get their medicines at hospital”
  - “Yes, and.....they should not have to travel with sick children”
- While the practicalities of operating some of the suggestions may not be feasible the idea of this debate is to encourage students to look for the positive aspects of an issue and look at the ways it can be developed
- All groups may have the same topic or different aspects of the same issue may be discussed by different groups. Allow time for feedback not just on the topic, but also on the process of beginning each statement with the words “yes, and....”

“Yes, and”

“Yes, and”

“Yes, and”



Once students have become familiar with the concept of “Yes, and ...” you can try the “No, but....” approach. It is interesting to note the comments and their different approach from the positive.



Mix both the “Yes, and ...” with the “No, but....” approach. Try using different approaches with different groups, but also different approaches within the groups. Get students to note the differences.

## Developing Critical Thinking

This uses a process of asking 'why' at least five times to unpack complex issues. It is a particular useful technique to use with younger/ less mature students to help them to get to the root of the issue. It also encourages higher order thinking skills and calls upon students to reassess views that they express too instantly. An example is given below:

### 5 Whys

Q: **Why** don't young people want to vote?

A: Because politics is boring

Q: **Why** is it boring?

A: Because it's got nothing to do with real life

Q: **Why** has it got nothing to do with real life?

A: Because politicians aren't interested in the kind of things that are important to us

Q: **Why** are politicians not interested in those things?

A: Because our views aren't that important to them

Q: **Why** are young people's views not important to politicians?

A: Because they don't need our votes



Students can then make a **link** between the first question and last response and how they arrived at that position.

This can be done in pairs and the response to each answer recorded for use in a whole class discussion/ de-brief.



## Analysing Newspapers

Students can use these templates to record and analyse information from newspapers—these are useful in the case of controversial issues in that they can be used to show editorial bias and how different people can report the same story in a number of ways.

### What's the Point

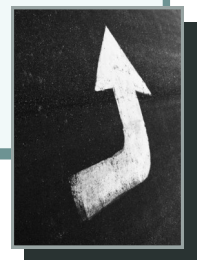
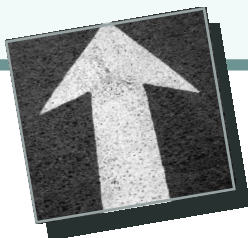
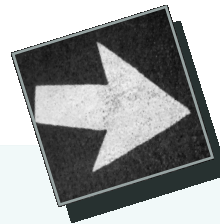


- Students scan or read the news item
- Record the headline in the bottom section of the triangle
- Record the three main points of the story in the middle
- Record the basic point being made in the story at the topic
- Repeat for the same story but in a different newspaper - compare and contrast to draw out bias.

### Comparison Alley



- Use this template to compare and contrast the same story in **two** newspapers
- Record similarities in the central band
- Record differences corresponding to each paper in the top and bottom sections.



This exercise works well for a range of abilities. With more able students, comparisons can be made across a range of media. With weaker students, transcribing text and adding words to their vocabulary bank are valid exercises. This work can also be undertaken as a whole class exercise.

## What's The Point

*What do you think  
is the main point  
of the story*

*What are the  
main facts  
of the story?*

*What does the  
headline say?*

Comparison Alley

*Newspaper Name:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Similarities*

*Newspaper Name:* \_\_\_\_\_

## Thinking through challenges

*This thinking tool is useful for getting students to think about their own responses to an issue - but in a safe way which considers the consequences of each choice.*

- Distribute the template to each student
- Place a dilemma/topic/suggestion in the Challenge box at the bottom of the sheet  
e.g. Someone tells a homophobic joke
- Ask the students 'How could someone respond?'  
What choices do they have? (*Remember to frame questions in general terms rather than pointedly asking a student what they would do*)
- Explore all options e.g. you could laugh, you could challenge it there and then, you could say nothing, you could say nothing then but challenge it later
- Ask the students to record these choices in the doorway boxes above the original challenge box
- Then ask the students to consider the possible consequences for each choice and to record these in the consequence paths that lead from each doorway.

*Take feedback and discuss with the students how to respond to challenges in a socially responsible way which will not place them in undue danger. Discuss the risks and challenges associated with taking a stand.*



With a less able group this exercise could be undertaken as a teacher led class. Each choice could be discussed and the possible consequences listed for each action. Words such as *dilemma* and *consequence* could be referred to from a rights and responsibilities perspective, in relation to the person in question and those who witness the dilemma.

# Thinking Through Challenges

*Consequence*

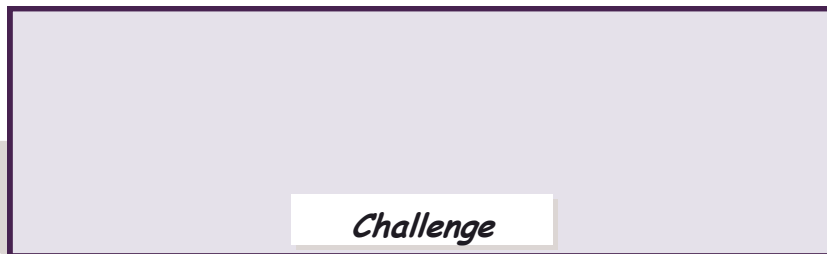
*Consequence*

*Consequence*

*Choice Door 1*

*Choice Door 2*

*Choice Door 3*



## Developing Empathy

### Role Play

Role playing can be both interesting and useful to students when dealing with controversial issues. It emphasises real world experiences but also challenges students to deal with complex topics, which often have no right answer. Role play offers the opportunity to analyse and engage with multiple perspectives

Role play is not about the quality of acting or putting on a performance. You do not need to relinquish your position as the person in charge. Create cues and opportunities to step out of role and discuss any issues which arise. While role plays can be as simple or as complex as you require, the examples listed below demonstrate the possibilities of using the methodology in short accessible sections.

- Two migrant workers have just landed in a new country. Ask two students to role play the first conversation they have after they arrive. This can be done with students, in pairs, and feedback can take the form of conversation with the class about the things that were discussed. When students are feeling braver, some might re-play their conversation for the class
- A new incinerator is to be built in a small town. Many different groups in the town have different viewpoints on the benefits and costs. Students can work in pairs as you give them a role based on the different viewpoints e.g. scientists, local residents, small business owners, unemployed. Each pair can have a conversation, in role, with another pair about the new incinerator
- Someone tells a racist joke, within a group. Discuss the possible responses. Ask the students to role play the different responses and to follow through on the actions that could be taken.



*With all role plays, always allow time to debrief when the role play is complete. Discuss not only the outcome, but how it felt to be in the role.*



Role play can involve

- Small groups of students playing out different sections of a scene
- Groups of students playing out different scenarios of the same scene
- The entire class, with each student playing a different role within a given situation



## Conscience Alley

This technique is an alternative to a longer role play which allows students to get a quick overview of all the issues related to a particular scenario. It is useful, as it can be carried out relatively quickly and is suited to younger or less able students, since they do not have to remain in role for very long. They also do not need to know a great deal of information about the issue, as their role card will simply state who they are and how they feel about the particular scenario being discussed.

- Explain the scenario to the students (*e.g. 'There has been an increase in youth crime in your area. Some local people are threatening to use violence to control the young people they believe to be involved'*)
- Then place each student into role by giving him or her each a role card which tells the student who they are and briefly how they feel about the situation (*e.g. young people, local residents opposed to violence, members of political parties, reporter, local residents who support violence, social worker, youth worker, parents*)
- Ask students to stand in two lines facing each other with a pathway up the middle
- Randomly select a student and ask them to state their role
- Ask remaining students, in role, to think of one statement they would like to make to this individual
- The selected student then walks between the lines and the remainder of the class make their statements as they pass by. (You may need to repeat this a couple of times encouraging students to get into role)
- De-brief by asking the selected student which arguments they found convincing and what their view is on the scenario
- The activity can be repeated by selecting other students to walk in role through the Conscience Alley .



## Using Photographs

*Photographs can easily be used to stimulate discussion. Here are just a few suggestions:*

### Display

Display a range of images and/or cartoons relating to a particular issue (e.g. policing) and ask for their immediate response to them. What is the photographer or cartoonist trying to say about the issue? Do they agree/ disagree? How do the various images make them feel?



### Selection

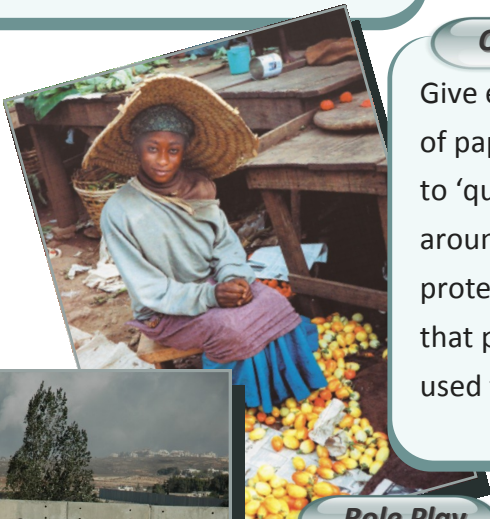
Students could select a photo (e.g. a favourite, or a photo that makes them feel uncomfortable - you as the teacher can decide on the criteria to be used for selection) and then explain to their group why they have chosen it.

### Caption

Ask students to put a caption under a photograph. Each group could be given the same photo (e.g. a starving child in Africa) and the range of groups captions discussed. Students should discuss how the choice of caption can elicit a variety of responses.

### Question

Give each group a photograph mounted on a larger sheet of paper (e.g. a photo of a march or protest). Ask students to 'question' the photograph and to record their questions around the outside of the photo (e.g. What are they protesting about? Why are there police there? What does that person standing to the side think?) Questions can be used to stimulate further discussion.



### Role Play

Ask students to develop a role play based on a photo. They can name individuals in a picture, invent relationships between them, imagine how each person feels... They should then take on the roles and act out what they think is happening and what might happen next.

### Character

Each student could choose a character from a photograph and take on the role. Other class members can then question them in role.



## Silent Conversation

This discussion strategy uses writing and silence to help young people explore issues in-depth. A written conversation slows down the thinking process and gives them an opportunity to focus on the views of others.

1. Gather together a range of stimulus material on the topic (*e.g. newspaper items, photographs, poetry*). As far as possible provide stimuli which come from a personal perspective *e.g.* people relating incidents in their lives. Ensure that they are age and ability appropriate. An example of a stimulus is given on page 60
- Explain that the activity is to be completed in *complete silence*. All communication must be done through writing or drawing
- Make sure you give all instructions in advance of the activity so that the silence will not be broken.

*You may wish to display these instructions so they can be referred to during the activity:*

2.
  - In twos or threes, read the stimulus material in the middle of the your flipchart carefully
  - Write down your thoughts or any questions you might want to ask the rest of your group
  - Your group can only answer by writing down their responses
  - Everyone can write at the same time
  - You can use lines to link up answers to comments; or comments on comments
  - When instructed, you can leave your group and move around the other sheets, recording your comments, questions and answers regarding the new stimulus material.



3.
  - Place students into groups of two or three and begin the silent conversation
  - After around 10-15 minutes instruct the groups to break up and move around other pages, adding to them if they wish to
  - When students have examined the other pages ask them to return to their original groups and to read their original sheet
  - Ask each group to feedback.

*Examples of stimulus for a silent conversation*

*I wonder why he got involved. It sounds like he didn't know why - and yet he killed other people. That makes me really angry.*



*But at least he changed when he was in prison.*



“I was only six months married when I went into prison. That broke up – we decided it was for the best. The worst experience was sitting down and not really understanding why you made the choice. Asking questions like, What was it all about? What is the difference between us anyway? What are we? Where do we belong on this Island? How can we achieve respect for our own beliefs without having to use violence?’ “  
(Political Ex-prisoner Northern Ireland)  
  
Emerson, Lesley (2011) *From Prison to Peace* Belfast: NI Community Foundation

*A bit late for the people who died.*



*He must have been quite young – imagine how his wife felt when she found out what he had been doing.*

*What ways.....?*

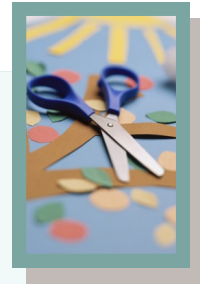


*I wonder if he thought about other ways to fight for his beliefs.....?*



## On the Margins

This strategy is designed to help students develop empathy and to challenge stereotypes of groups who are often marginalised in society, for example, Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers, migrant workers, minority ethnic groups, people who are homeless. This activity is best carried out before the students have explored the issue in too much depth.



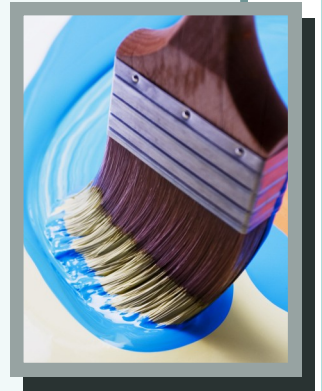
*Note: This activity will require a double period or two classes*



- Tell the students they are going to design a wall mural depicting a group of people in our society. They can use any resources available to create their mural. They can use words, but cannot use the name of the group they are asked to depict since the rest of the class will have to guess this from their mural.

For this activity you will need three envelopes for each group of people:

1. This contains the name of the group
  2. This contains some facts about the group
  3. This contains some voices of people from the group
- Provide a large sheet of paper for each group (e.g. a flip chart page) and felt tips, coloured paper, scissors, glue, magazines, and newspapers for the class. Divide the students into groups of 5 and distribute the first envelope to each group with the name of the group they will be depicting
  - After 15 minutes (once the class have mapped out the contents of their mural) stop the work and distribute the second envelope containing some facts about the group. Tell the students they must find a way to include these facts on the mural. These facts may challenge some stereotypical images they already have on the mural, so the students may need to change what they have done so far. This provides an excellent opportunity to discuss stereotypes with the students
  - After another 15 minutes stop the class again and distribute a third envelope containing some voices of people from the group they are depicting. Again tell the students they must find a way to include these voices on the mural. These are real statements from individuals from these groups. This is a useful tool for building empathy
  - When the murals are finished, ask the students to display them. Discuss what they have learnt through this activity and what they would like to explore further.



*The following pages contain the relevant resource sheets for three marginalised groups:  
Travellers, migrant workers, and people who are homeless.*

## Facts about Travellers

- Travellers are widely acknowledged as one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Irish society.
- In 2008 the Traveller population in Ireland was estimated to be 40,129 - 36,224 in the Republic of Ireland and 3,905 in Northern Ireland.
- Travellers are the largest minority ethnic group in Ireland.
- Travellers have been living in Ireland since the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a nomadic group of people (they move around from place to place)
- They have their own language that they use amongst themselves called Gammon, Cant or Shelta. It is a very old language.
- They have strong ties between members of their extended family and have a strong sense of community
- The life expectancy of Traveller men is currently 61.7 years, compared to 76.8 for the general population. (This is the same as the life expectancy of the general population in the 1940s.)
- The life expectancy of Traveller women is currently 70.1 years, compared to 81.6 for the general population. (The is the same as the life expectancy of the general population in the 1960s.)
- Traveller infant mortality rate is 14.1 per 1,000 live births, as compared to 3.9 per 1,000 live births for the general population.
- 82% of Traveller families live in houses, and 12% live in official halting sites. However, 6% - 419 families - still live in the side of the road and are waiting for official accommodation.

Source: [http://www.dohc.ie/publications/traveller\\_health\\_study.html](http://www.dohc.ie/publications/traveller_health_study.html) and [www.itmtrav.ie](http://www.itmtrav.ie)

## Voices of Travellers

*“Being a traveller is the feeling of belonging to a group of people. Knowing through thick and thin they are there for you, having the support of family systems”*

Michael McDonagh

*“There’s great respect for marriage. Women have more status if married.”*

*“There are massive weddings and funerals. Anybody can go. There’s no invitations. From babies to the grandparents, they all go.”*

Young people from Ballyfermot Travellers Development Education Group

*“Travellers are very religious. I love a lot of blessed pictures and statues and plenty of holy water in the place. If I miss Mass it takes a lot out me. We are very superstitious. We believe in ghosts - it gives us an idea that there’s life after death.”*

Kathleen McDonagh

*“Travellers in houses like to see a bit of green in front of them or around them”.*

Ballyfermot Travellers Development Education Group

Source:<http://travellervoices.posterous.com/guidelines-for-teachers>  
<http://www.paveepoint.ie/voices2.html>

## *Facts about Migrants*

- Anyone who lives or works in a country that is not their country of citizenship is considered a migrant.
- Unofficial estimates suggest there may be up to 45,000 migrant workers in Northern Ireland – in addition to long established Jewish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Pakistani, Sikh and Irish Traveller minority ethnic communities.
- Almost 40,000 jobs in Northern Ireland in 2008 were filled by migrant workers who contributed £1.2 billion to the local economy.
- It is estimated that migrant workers contribute around 3.7 billion to the southern Irish economy.
- A 2009 survey showed that 47% of people felt that migrant workers took jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland.
- The same survey found that 37% of Northern Ireland employers had difficulties in recruiting native-born workers to fill vacant positions.
- Ireland is in the top ten of countries whose nationals emigrate to work and has the second highest proportion of its population living in other countries of the EU.
- International students are entitled to work up to 20 hours per week to support themselves while in Ireland. Students contribute an estimated €900 million annually to the economy.
- More than two thirds of people think that migrant workers make Northern Ireland open to new ideas and culture.



## Voices of Migrants

*"You heard stories from these places where everything is shiny and bright, where to get money is so easy, where there is a job for everyone who wants it. You see the presents they bring when they go home in Christmas, you see their clothes and cool electronic things, you see how their parents managed to refurnish their home. It seems that outside things are easier than at home."*

Romanian man, 28, (Kitchen Porter)

*"Chinese parents think that to go abroad and to learn how other people live and to learn their language makes our character stronger. They feel proud because they think I come to Ireland, and when I go back, I would be able to afford to give them a better life"*

Chinese woman, 23, (English language student and part-time worker in a fast food restaurant)

*"I was earning €3.20 per hour, and I heard that the minimum wage is above €6, but because I didn't have papers I couldn't tell to anyone, and I couldn't change my job. I came here because my country didn't require a visa to enter Ireland, and then I decided to stay because I met a guy from Slovakia. When his country gained access to the EU, we got married and now I can work legally."*

Argentinean woman, 26, (Chambermaid)

*"They (Irish people) don't understand why I work so hard. Latvian people are well known in Ireland for being very good workers. Last year Latvians were attacked in Dublin. Some Irish think we are going to steal their jobs. Bosses like hard workers, but other people get angry and don't like us. They don't understand, or they don't want to know that if I work so hard it is because I need the money".*

Latvian woman, 25, (Waitress)

Source: <http://www.nuigalway.ie/cisc/documents/00022ciscwp.pdf>

## *Facts about Homeless People*

- In 2008 between 4, 500 and 5,000 people in Ireland were homeless. Approximately 600 of these were children
- There are more homeless people in Northern Ireland than in England or Scotland or Wales
- A fifth of homeless people are aged between 16 to 18 years old
- 50% of homeless people are single, 41% of homeless people are families seeking accommodation
- Some of the most common causes of homelessness are:
  - Poverty
  - Unemployment
  - Debt
  - Addiction
  - Family breakdown
  - Mental health issues
- “Homeless” does not necessarily mean that the person is sleeping rough - they could be staying in a hostel, bed and breakfast or in other temporary accommodation
- The majority of homeless people are single adults - the Homeless Agency's 2008 survey found that in Dublin alone there were 1439 single homeless people - the majority of these were men, who tend to be homeless for longer periods than women
- 1 in 5 of homeless people in Dublin in 2008 were children (under 18).

Source: <http://www.focusireland.ie/images/articles/Homeless%20Numbers.pdf>

## Voices of Homeless People

*"My mum and her new husband were always fighting ...she'd had enough and left. She moved in with my Gran.. there was no room for me. I stayed with different friends for a while...but eventually got a place in a hostel. I've applied to the Housing Executive for somewhere to stay but the waiting list is long"*

Karen, 18 (Student)

*"I used to live with my father but he died last year. I couldn't afford the rent on our flat so I stayed with my girlfriend. When we broke up I ended up sleeping rough... some nights I can get a place in a hostel but mostly I sleep in parks and doorways"*

Seán, 20 (Unemployed)

*"We got married last year. We've been staying with my mum and dad so we could save for a deposit for a house. Mark was made redundant from work and we can't afford to rent somewhere on my wages"*

Cathy, 23 (Shop Assistant)

*"When we lost our home I was 12. I thought we were just moving to a different place. The next thing we were on the streets. I hadn't a clue what was going to happen. We used to get €27 a week to live on, we were starving.....we used to be filthy our clothes were in bits from sleeping out. I felt other people were looking down on us."*

Frankie (Focus Ireland)

## Other People's Shoes

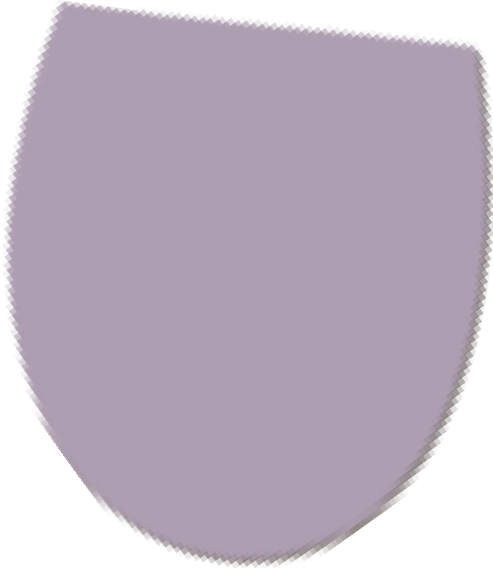
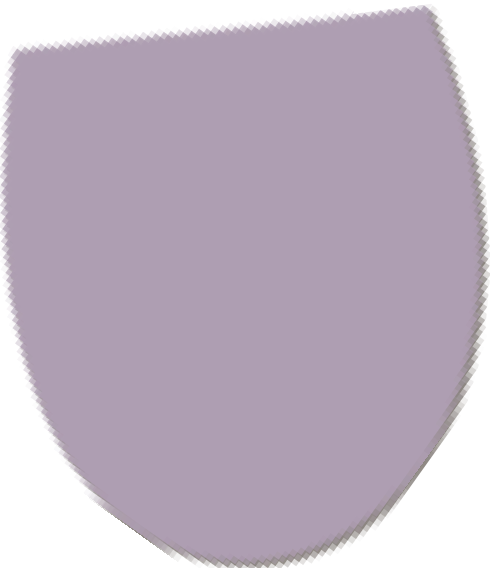
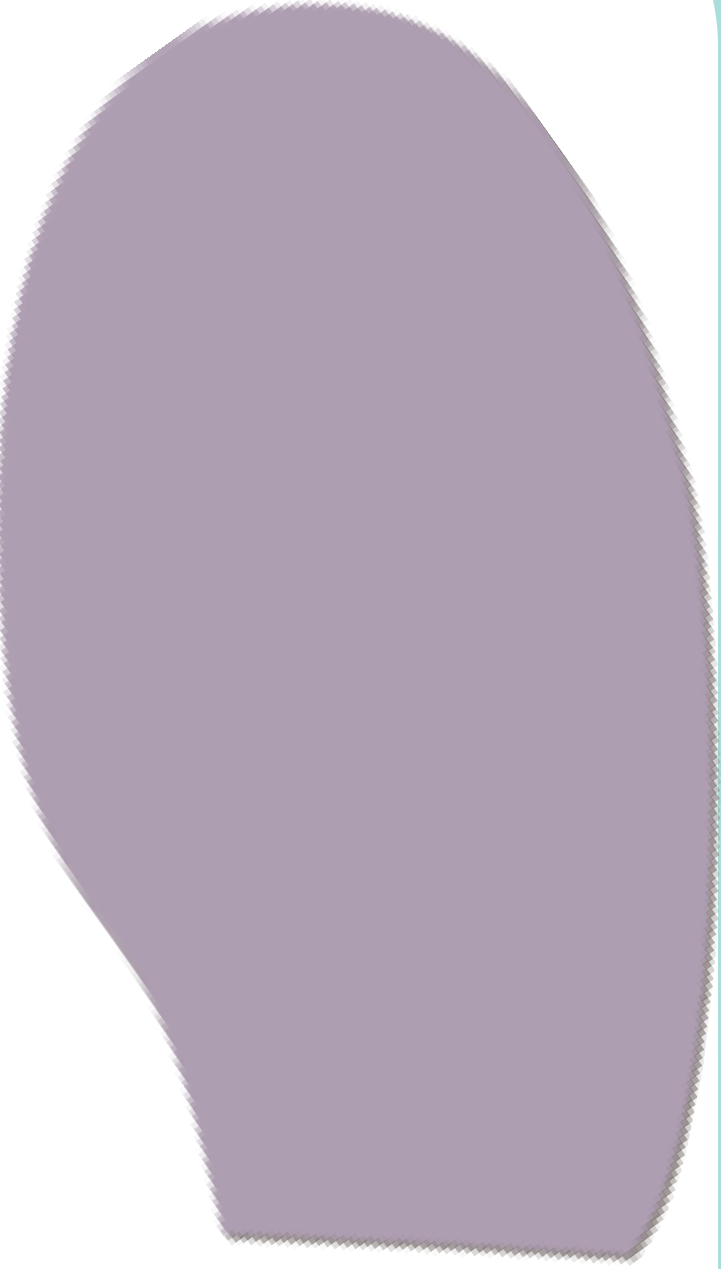
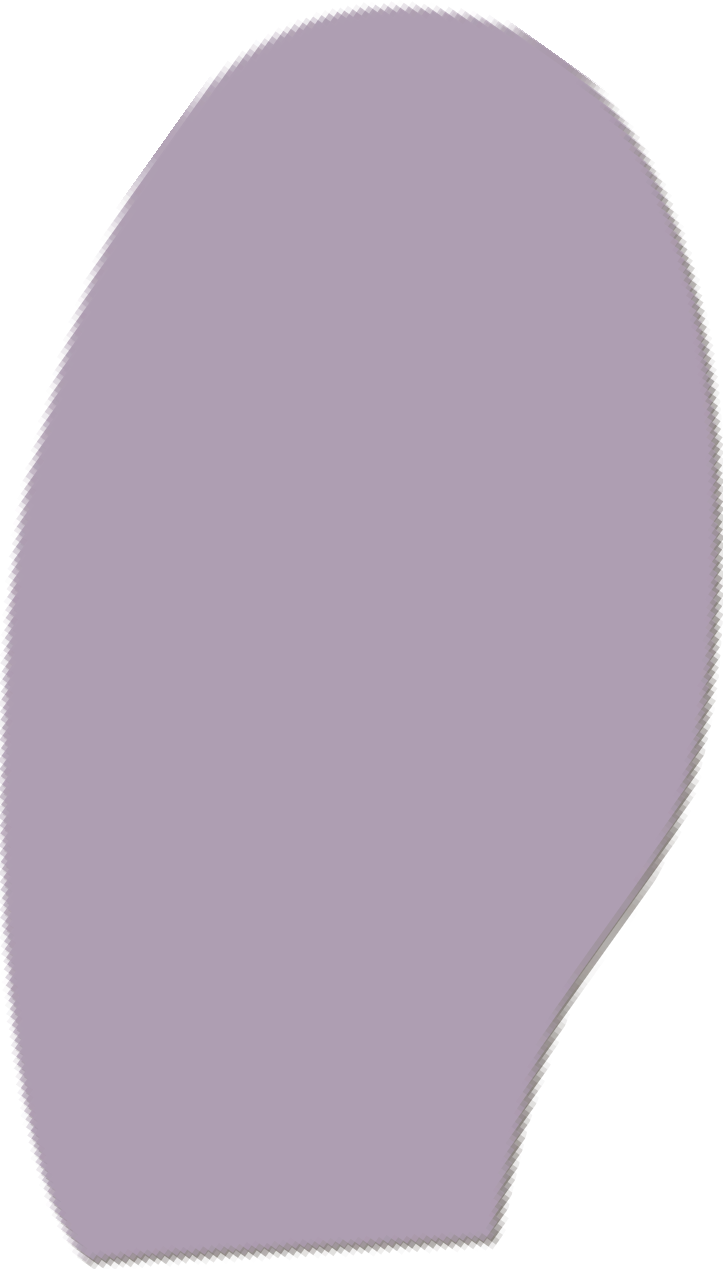
This is a very simple technique to assist students in reflecting on the views of others and to build empathy. It is best used towards the end of a topic when students have been exposed to a range of perspectives.

- Pose a question for the students (*e.g. Why are certain groups marginalised in our society? What should the government do to tackle poverty? What should the law say about abortion?*) Remember to frame the questions in the structural/public sphere (page 30)
- Provide each student with a shoe print template
- Ask them to record their answer to the question inside the shoes
- Collect all the shoe templates and redistribute to the students ensuring that nobody has their own shoe print template. You can do this in a number of ways:
  - \* *Shuffle the shoe prints and simply randomly distribute*
  - \* *Lay out the shoe print template face down and ask students to select one each*
  - \* *Lay out the shoe print template face up and ask students to select one. Tell them it can be a perspective they agree with or one they do not agree with or just a random selection, this will ensure that nobody's opinion is revealed or exposed.*
- Tell the students that they must now represent, argue or discuss the view on their shoe print for the rest of the class
- Hold a discussion, based on the original question posed, asking the students how it felt to represent/argue/discuss someone else's position.



It is very useful to have a range of shoe print template pre-prepared from which the students can select. These should represent a wide range of views, particularly if you think the class may all hold similar perspectives. You can place shoe prints into the mix which will act as devil's advocate.

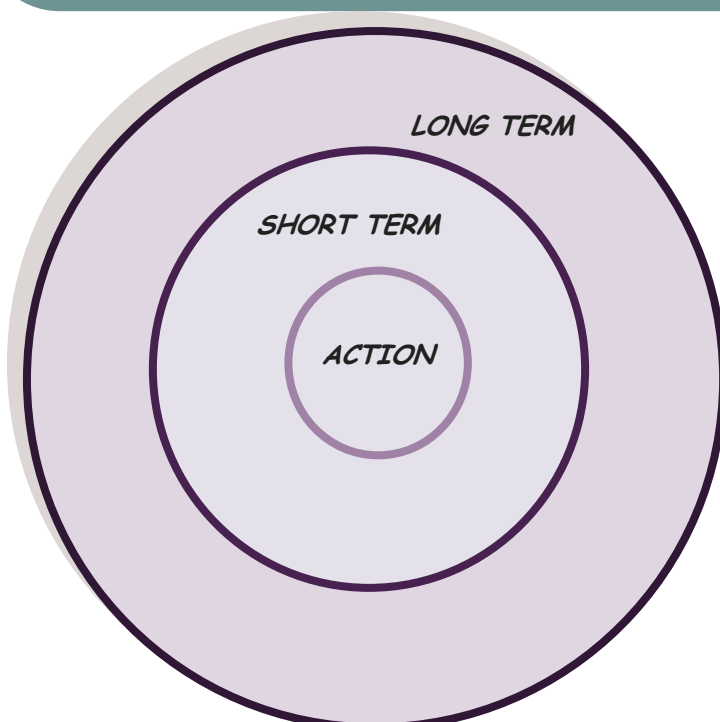
Other People's Shoes



## Consequence Wheel

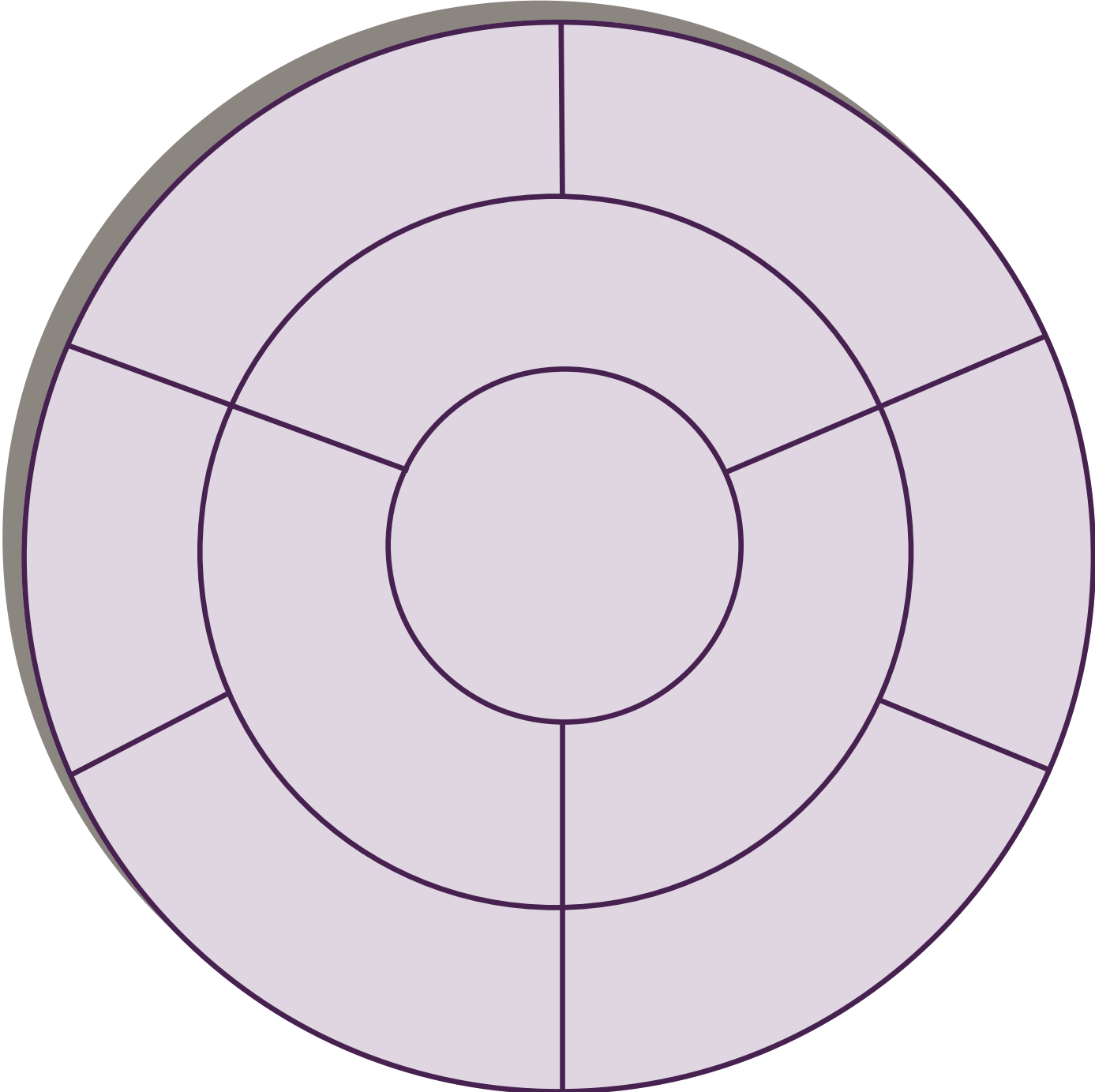
This is a useful methodology for helping students to see the larger consequences (both negative and positive) of particular actions or events. It can be useful in developing empathy around an issue since it helps students see, for example, the impact of a hate crime on an individual and their family, but also helps them see that society as a whole can be adversely affected by such a crime and, as such, this will have an effect on them. It can also be used to chart the impact of positive events or actions.

- Divide the class into small groups and distribute a Consequence Wheel to each group
- Provide the class or each group with a scenario e.g. racist attack outside a shop
- Ask each group to decide on three immediate consequences of the situation in the middle of their wheel and to record these in the three spaces provided. Encourage students to think about the consequences of the action on individuals, the community as a whole.
- For each of these immediate consequences ask students to think of two follow on consequences and record these in the six spaces provided
- Choose a representative from each group to present their completed template to the rest of the class. Record examples on the board as each group feeds back. Ask the class to think of ways in which they could group the consequences of crime listed on the board. For example, they may suggest grouping them in terms of their effect on individuals, on the community etc or they may suggest other alternatives.



A simpler version could be used where students record immediate consequences in the inner circle, long term in the outer circle – like a ripple effect diagram

*Consequence Wheel*







## **Part 3**

# **Putting it all together**

## Introduction

This section explores briefly how to construct a unit of work around a controversial topic. It begins by suggesting some key building blocks of such a unit of work, before providing a generic template for planning. The building blocks are:

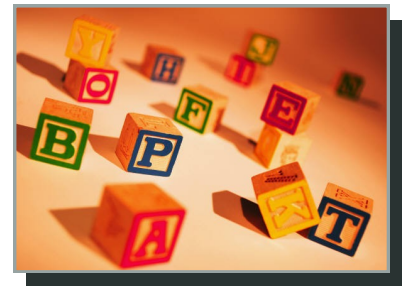
- Raising Awareness of the Issue
- Developing Empathy
- Exploring how to Respond.



The building blocks are important features of a unit of work, but do not necessarily need to be worked through in order. Rather it is suggested that you ensure all features are present when you are planning to teach a controversial topic. So, for example, you may wish to start with an empathy activity before presenting or researching information.

### ***Building Block 1 - Raising Awareness of the Issue***

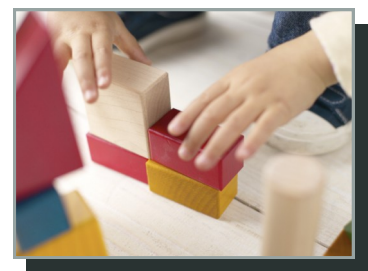
A good place to start when teaching a controversial issue is by raising awareness of the issue and presenting key facts and figures. There are a number of ways that this can be done, for example, by using videos, websites, newspaper items ( page 51 ). However care must be taken to ensure that students are aware that even so called facts can be disputed. It is worth spending some time exploring this with them, helping them check for bias and encouraging them to question the information they are given.



Another useful strategy for presenting facts/figures is *Each One Teach One* (page 76)

### ***Building Block 2 - Developing Empathy***

It is clearly useful to encourage pupils to place themselves into the situations others might find themselves in, and to explore a topic from someone else's point of view. Again a range of strategies can be used to achieve this, such as the strategies discussed in the section Developing Empathy (page 56), as well as visiting speakers, or visits to organisations.



## Building Block 3 - Exploring how to Respond

Having explored the controversial topic in some detail it is important that students are given an opportunity to think about how to respond to the issue. A Social Responsibility framework is a useful way of dealing with this aspect of the topic: what can individuals, society and government do about this issue? Remember at this stage to frame the topic and related questions from a structural rather than a private/ personal point of view (page 30).

*Jigsaw Discussion* (page 44) could be used to support pupils in researching and presenting ideas on how individuals, society and government could respond to the problems arising from the topic discussed.

Finally, pupils should be given an opportunity to think through their own responses to an issue, but, as noted above, without feeling threatened or exposed. The *Thinking Through Challenges* method (page 54) is a useful tool for helping students to think about their own responses to an issue - but in a safe way which considers the consequences of each choice.



### Creating a Unit of Work

When planning a unit of work on an issue that could be controversial, it is helpful to go through a mini-version of the process outlined in Part 1 and then choose from the methodologies described in Part 2.

This will ensure that you have thought through:

- Your overall aim in teaching this unit
- The values underpinning the unit
- The key ideas and questions you want to cover
- The most appropriate methodologies to use

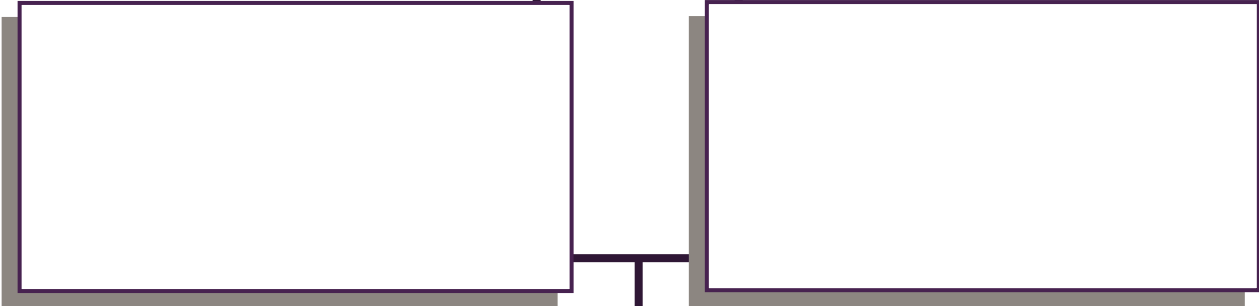
*The Planning a Unit of Work template (page 76) will assist you in doing this.*

Planning a Unit of Work

Overall Aim



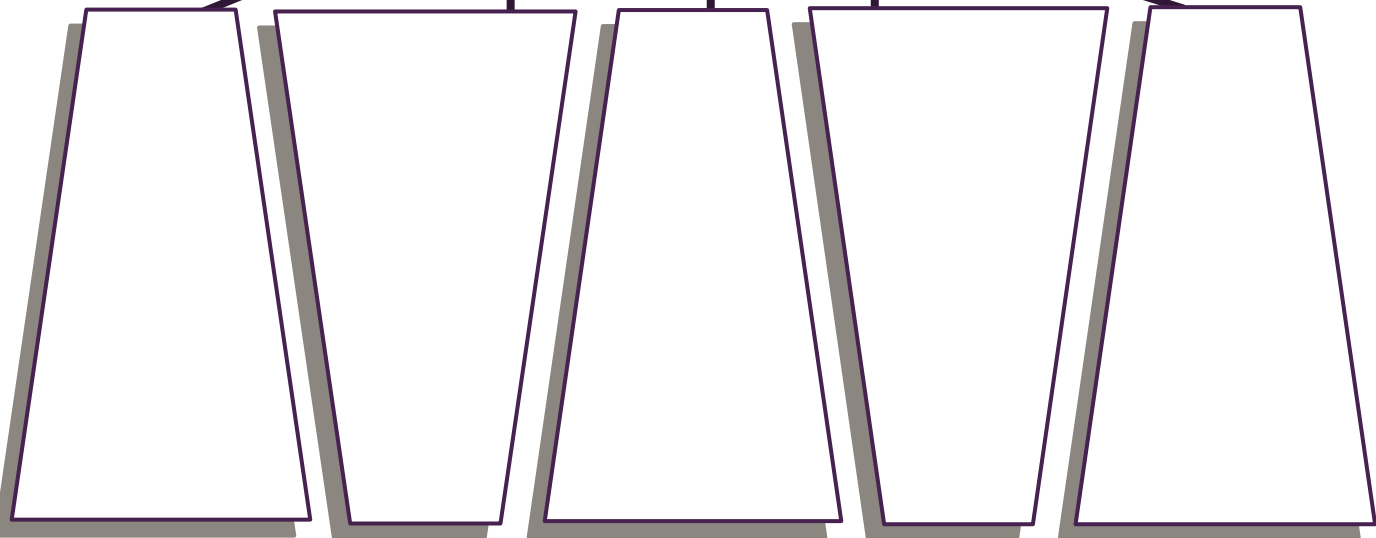
Values



Key Aspects and Questions



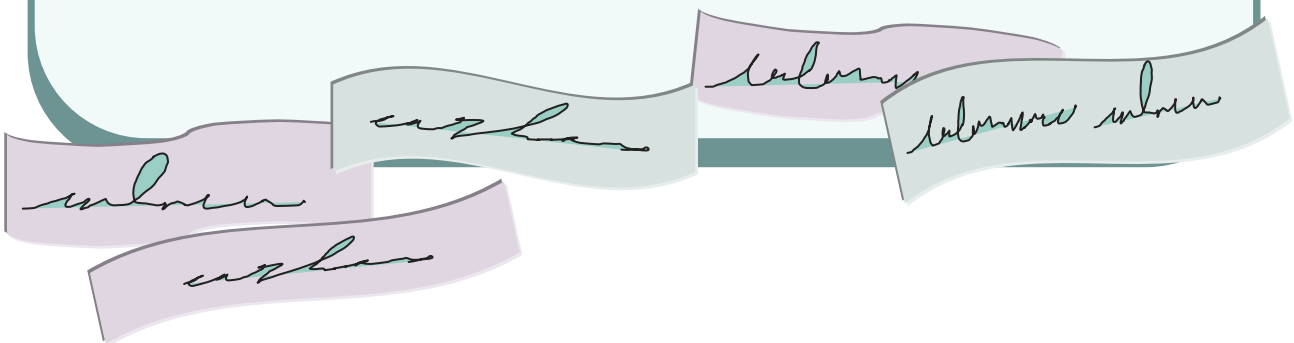
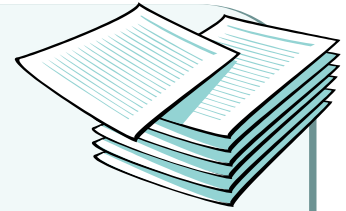
Methodologies



## Each One Teach One

This strategy is an alternative mechanism to lecturing as a means to transfer large amounts of facts or figures (particularly at the start of a topic). It allows you to provide a wide range of facts and figures to a class and also helps them to make connections between the pieces of information they are being given.

- Draw up a list of **20-30 facts or figures or pieces of information** on a sheet of paper (*e.g. facts and figures about minority ethnic groups in Ireland etc.*)
- Cut this into **strips** (one statement per strip)
- Distribute one strip to each student (*you can use your judgment here to give less or more challenging information to different students as you see fit*)
- Each student should familiarise themselves with their statement
- Students should then get up and move around the class **explaining their statements** to each other. They should aim to get their information across to as many people as possible (*Encourage students to expand on their statement by giving examples or making links with other statements etc.*)
- After giving students enough time to adequately transfer their information, conclude/ de-brief the activity by asking:  
    *“Did anything **surprise** them?” “Did they learn anything **new**?”*
- You could also ask pupils share what they have learnt under a range of **headings**
- You could also draw out from students which statements were **easiest to learn** from others and reasons why this was the case (*this will assist them in thinking about how they best learn new ideas*)




This activity places students in the role of an “expert” of their fact giving them confidence to speak out in class. It also encourages students to make links between related facts/ statements or to draw out potential contradictions .


# Assessing your Planning Framework

## Assessing your Planning Framework


Methodologies selected to teach controversial issues need to be subjected to a pedagogical risk assessment. This is outlined below (with some examples of methodologies which would pass the risk assessment, all of which are outlined in detail in Part 2).

- 
- *Have I planned carefully?*
  - *Why is the issue controversial/sensitive?*
  - *What responses can I expect from the students?*
  - *How do I feel about the issue? What stance will I take?*
  - *How will I ensure students are exposed to multiple perspectives?*
  - *Am I promoting active student involvement?*
  - *Am I building the capacity of my students to engage in discussion?*
  - *Am I balancing formal and informal discussion?*
  - *Am I encouraging equal participation?*

**Suitable methodologies:** Walking Debate, Carousel Discussion, Think Pair Share, Circular Brainstorms, Spectrum Debate, Speed Debates, 5 Whys.

- 
- *Am I pre-empting possible problems?*
  - *Am I providing distance from the issue?*
  - *Am I developing empathy for others?*
  - *Am I dealing with conflict as it arises?*
  - *Am I maintaining focus by continual review?*

**Suitable methodologies:** Role Play, Small Group Work, Use of Photographs, Silent Conversation, Conscience Alley.

- 
- *Have I provided time for closure?*
  - *Am I summarising: what did the class agree on? disagree on?*
  - *Am I de-briefing: what worked in the class, what didn't?*
  - *Am I providing time for individual student reflection: what did they learn?*

**Suitable methodologies:** Think Pair Share, Reflective Sheets, No Easy Answers Board, Recording Agreement/Disagreement

## And Finally.....

### **Responding to Controversial Issues which arise unplanned in the classroom**

It is obviously easier to teach about controversial issues when you have had time to plan a unit of work on an issue or topic. Responding to controversial issues which spontaneously arise in the classroom can be more difficult. However, this becomes much easier once you have worked through this handbook, reflected on your key aims and values, developed a class agreement with the students, and become comfortable with using the suggested methodologies. It will gradually become second nature to automatically introduce a safe methodology whenever a controversial issue arises. Students too will know that this is how such issues are dealt with, and will be less inclined to create a difficult situation in the class.

### **Responding to Offensive or Negative Comments**

Sexist or racist joke or throw away comment: Many people make jokes about others without thinking what they are saying. If a student does this in the classroom, there may be peer pressure on others to laugh or appear to agree. This could be used as an opportunity to have a discussion about why people make sexist or racist jokes; how people feel about such jokes; where humour stops and offence begins; how to respond in different circumstances. This also takes the focus off the student who made the comment and allows him or her to consider the issue without becoming defensive.

### **Fall Back Position**

If offensive comments are ignored, the students who make them get the message that they are acceptable, and the others that they are not protected from them. Taking such comments seriously supports students in thinking through the consequences of their behaviour and making more responsible choices about what they say and do. If there is insufficient time to adequately deal with something on the spot, then it is wiser to acknowledge the comment, let the students know that it is an important issue, and agree that you will come back to it at another time.





## Further Reading and Resources

## Further Reading

*These readings can be accessed on the web and may give you further ideas on specific aspects of teaching controversial issues.*

Oxfam Development Education Programme (2006) *Teaching Controversial Issues* Oxford: Oxfam Great Britain  
[www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/)

*Teaching Controversial Issues* (2004) University of California: Centre for Faculty Excellence  
<http://cfe.unc.edu/publications/fyc21.html>

Harwood, Angela M. - Hahn, Carole L (1990) *Controversial Issues in the Classroom* ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education Bloomington IN  
[http://www.coastal.edu/cetl/resources/Controversial\\_Issues\\_in\\_the\\_Classroom.pdf](http://www.coastal.edu/cetl/resources/Controversial_Issues_in_the_Classroom.pdf)

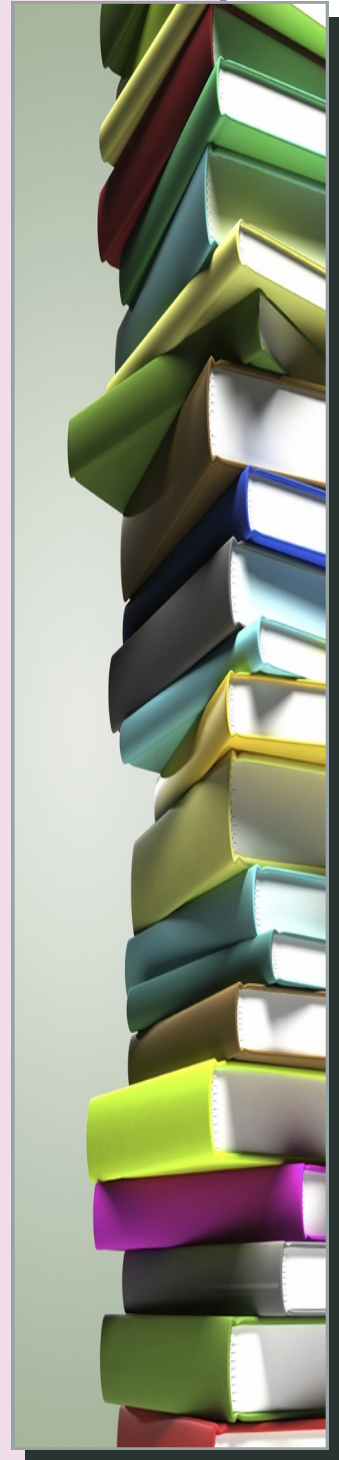
Draft of Framework for Teaching Controversial Issues  
[www.evolutionnews.org/OHFram0906%5B1%5D.doc](http://www.evolutionnews.org/OHFram0906%5B1%5D.doc)

Highberg, Nels P. (2010) *Leading Effective Classroom Discussions on Controversial Issues* in The Chronicle of Higher Education  
<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/leading-effective-classroom-discussions-on-controversial-issues/23834>

### Books

Claire, Hilary & Cathie Holden (2007) *The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Issues*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Cowan, Paula & Henry Maitles (2012) *Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom. Key Issues and Debates*. London: Continuum.







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