

**Teaching Controversial Issues in a Divided Society:  
Learning from Northern Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

The paper draws on the author's professional experience as teacher, curriculum developer, researcher and teacher educator working with controversial issues in the context of the Northern Irish education system during thirty years of conflict and subsequent peace-building.

It argues that while teaching controversial issues in any educational context offers challenges particular difficulties are faced in a society characterised by violent divisions around national identity, ethnicity or religion. Such situations can generate deep emotional reactions in students that override their capacity to engage in rational dialogue, or cause them to avoid such discourse at all. Facilitating understanding in these conditions requires specific responses on the part of the practitioner in order to establish a conducive and trusting environment for interaction.

Arising from the collective experience of three major curriculum initiatives in the field the paper identifies ten points on which to build effective practice. In the conclusion these are placed in the context of recent writing on the relationship between education and divided societies.

## **Introduction**

In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, the work arising from the major humanities / social studies curriculum projects of the time promoted a vibrant literature on the teaching of controversial issues in schools in the United Kingdom as curriculum developers wrestled to give curricula contemporary relevance (Stenhouse 1971, Shipman et al 1974, Stradling et al. 1984, Wellington 1986). The introduction of national curricula suppressed enthusiasm in the nineteen-nineties but with the emergence of forms of citizenship education in the UK interest has been re-invigorated. (Harwood 1996, QCA 1998, McLaughlin 2003, Claire 2004). Meanwhile, in the USA attention has been more consistently sustained over time by the prominence given to the Social Studies. The literature from both countries confirms that successful teaching around controversial issues places special demands on the role of the teacher. Research also suggests that preparing teachers for this work is problematic (Parker and Hess 2001, Smith and Robinson 1996), not least in contexts where there are deep societal divisions.

This paper examines the learning acquired by the writer over a thirty year period as practitioner, curriculum developer and researcher working with controversial issues in the particular context of Northern Ireland [NI]. First, while it is envisaged that its content will have general value for those in the field it argues that divided societies (particularly those characterised by violent conflict) provide special challenges and need specific responses. Briefly, it then outlines the evidential experience on which its arguments are based; and, finally, it lays out ten guidelines for effective practice and relates these to recent thinking on the role of education in mitigating conflict in divided societies.

## **Teaching Controversial Issues in a Divided Society**

Smith and Print (2003, p.3) draw attention to the challenges posed for citizenship education in schools by ‘divided societies where intimidation and the threat of violence is used for political ends’. They define such societies as:

somewhat contentious and problematic. In one sense all societies are divided, but we wish to concentrate on those societies where internal divisions, be they based on religion, ethnicity, wealth, culture or some combination of factors, have rendered those societies less stable.

The NI conflict resulted in over three thousand five hundred deaths in thirty-five years. Even during ten years of ceasefires and a peace process it has proved very difficult to achieve any political consensus or bring about any serious reconciliation between its Unionist (mainly Protestant) and Nationalist (mainly Catholic) communities. Value positions are deeply held and distrust is endemic, especially when individuals perceive themselves to be ‘victims’ through the loss of family, friends or property to violence. In such circumstances it is difficult to contemplate compromise with those they associate with causing harm to them or their community. Therefore, raising contentious cultural and political issues in a deeply divided society often sets in train emotional dynamics that makes the facilitation of positive discourse very challenging for the practitioner.

Here, a distinction is being made between what Hess (2002) calls ‘controversial public issues’ such as nuclear disarmament, juvenile crime or state-assisted suicide and controversial issues emanating from within a divided society. Though ‘public issues’ may generate strong views they can, usually, be best handled in class by placing an emphasis on enquiry, evidence and reasoned argument. Nurturing critical objective reasoning in young people to help them work through difficult material is important but there is a danger of placing an undue emphasis on the capacity of individuals to think rationally and constructively in emotionally charged situations when the issues under consideration go to the heart of students’ sense of ethnic or cultural identity. Hence, when the term “controversial” is used in this paper it is in the context of this emotionally ‘sensitive’ dimension. Community relations practice in NI has shown that

facilitating this successfully is a critical factor in determining whether or not a practitioner in an educational setting can engage participants in effective learning (See Eyben et al. 2002 pp.30-31, McCully, in press). Unless the emotional dimension is taken account of, and given expression, then there is a danger that it will dominate any attempt at engagement, and block out more rational thinking processes (Johnson 1998, p.141). If emotion dominates participants are likely to retreat into defensive, “tribal” positions. By contrast, if discussion is thoroughly rational there is a danger that “politeness” prevents real opinions being expressed and more contentious engagement is avoided (Arlow 2004, p.264; Eyben et al. 2002, pp. 15-16).

Therefore, an appropriate pedagogy is required that balances the rational and emotional, the cognitive and affective, if practitioners are to successfully engage young people in educational activity that widens their understanding and encourages them to clarify their thinking on a range of contentious issues.

### **The Evidence Base**

A minority of educationalists in NI have long advocated that controversial issues related to the conflict should be dealt with in classrooms. The substance for this paper draws on four initiatives in which the writer has had direct engagement over a thirty year period. The first was the Schools’ Cultural Studies Project [SCSP] (Skilbeck, 1973, Robinson 1982, McCully 1985). A direct curricular response to communal division it was issues-based, and borrowed from the enquiry focused methodologies of the social studies. Its evaluators concluded,

It has got these sharp issues into the curriculum of Northern Ireland schools and it has produced many, many examples of courageous, high risk and seemingly successful probing (Jenkins et al 1980, p.254).

Its teachers gained huge insights into teacher-based curriculum development, experiential pedagogy and risk-taking but, significantly, the project failed to gain long-term sustainability in the days prior to a statutory curriculum.

Second, in history teaching, too, the writer sought to go beyond the enquiry objectives of the ‘new’ history to pursue what Slater (1995, pp.125-6) refers to as the ‘extrinsic’ or societal

applications of the subject. This approach was given statutory support in the 1990s when the cross-curricular theme of Education for Mutual Understanding [EMU] (DENI 1992; Smith and Robinson 1996) was introduced by deeming that EMU was a responsibility of all subject teachers. However, in evaluating the theme Smith and Robinson (p21) concluded that most teachers continued to avoid controversial issues in their teaching.

Third, in the late 1990s Speak Your Piece [SYP] (McCully et al. 1999) responded to the EMU evaluation findings. Using a Channel 4 TV series around cultural and political themes in NI as a resource, the project worked with two pilot groups of teachers and youth workers to take forward the pedagogy of handling controversial issues (Speak Your Piece 1997). Particularly, it helped disseminate experiential community relations youth work practice into formal education. Toward the end of SYP twenty of its strongest practitioners were interviewed to gain insight as to what constitutes effective practice (McCully In press). In turn, this has informed the fourth initiative, the emerging Local and Global Citizenship programme which becomes a statutory part of the revised NI Curriculum in 2007 (Arlow 2004). From this range of experiences guidance emerges for teaching controversial issues in a divided society.

### **Guidelines for Effective Practice in a Divided Society**

The learning outlined below, then, draws from an amalgam of experiences. It encompasses a variety of working contexts including segregated schools, mixed (Protestant and Catholic) groups, and informal youth settings. However, the guidance is focused especially on practice in the formal education sector. While it is common for schools to place their community relations emphasis on fostering cross-community contact through extra-curricular activities (O'Connor et al. 2002 p.33) it is argued here that the strength of the formal sector lies with curricular provision and this is where teachers should focus their efforts in responding to communal tension. However, this response must be innovative, engaging and overtly relevant to young peoples' needs and, therefore, there is still much to learn from informal education and inter-community links between schools. Teachers and students from partner schools exchanging views should be the natural progression of curricular work. Indeed, early contact

between teachers from different backgrounds is an essential pre-requisite for effective practice. Teachers must first work through the issues themselves, experience uncertainty and discomfort and clarify their own thinking, before introducing issues to young people..

Several of the ten factors listed are widely acknowledged as good practice in any context. However, the commentary with each details their specific application in divided societies.

1) *A Trusting, open relationship between practitioner and students.* Both SCSP and SYP demonstrated that while institutional support for work on sensitive issues is important the key unit of change is that of practitioner and young people. Trust-building is crucial to this. Articulating deeply held positions and laying these out for scrutiny involves risk-taking. A secure environment, in which the ground rules of discourse have been firmly established and fostered, is essential. When the going gets tense or uncomfortable young people will look to the teacher for reassurance. Much depends on professional judgment. In the words of one SYP youth worker, “If young people see that the worker is very confident in what they’re doing and not a bit concerned about saying what their view and attitudes are about things, I think that does create a certain safety”. Therefore, time spent on establishing trust is critical for progression.

2) *Understanding where the group is coming from, being sensitive to personal biography and acting through professional judgment:* McVeigh (1997) has challenged the concept of symmetry in community relations work in NI. In other words, it is dangerous to assume that one model of practice is appropriate to all young people from whatever background in a society where experiences and perspectives vary so enormously. Skilbeck (see Robinson 1982, pp.33-36), argued that schools should conduct a ‘situational analysis’ to best ascertain the needs of their students. ‘Craft knowledge’ is a critical tool. McLaughlin (2004, p. 159) calls this ‘pedagogic *phronesis* or practical wisdom’. The effective practitioner seeks to understand young peoples’ backgrounds and evaluate how far they can be challenged, before the risk of alienation becomes too great. Ensuring security in the community is also a factor.

Still, there is the chance that events in an individual's biography, unknown to the teacher, will stir unexpected emotions. Teachers should be prepared for that eventuality, hold their nerve and ensure the young person is given the space and support, in and beyond the session, to work through difficult issues. In essence, professional judgment, based on experience, dictates the appropriate level of challenge.

3) *Sharing biography, acknowledging the possibility of uncertainty.* Sharing personal story is a powerful builder of trust. Giroux (2001, p.9) argues that 'the practices of witness and testimony lie at the heart of what it means to teach and learn'. When past experiences are recounted, however uncomfortable they are to the listener, they are likely to have an impact if told with honesty and sincerity. SYP practitioners were very aware of the power of selective disclosure from their own biographies and of "modelling" their fears and uncertainties around difficult issues. One teacher put it simply when he talked of mutual learning,

so if you are beginning a journey, as I try to depict this, you have got to be yourself, as practitioner, part of the discovery and part of the journey, rather than saying, I know the end point I want to bring you to.

In divided societies 'neutral chairmanship' as advocated by Stenhouse and others (HCP 1970, pp.6-9) is not an option. Practitioners, too, are products of that society. In the words of one, "I don't think there is anybody neutral ... I think you have to strive to be impartial."

4) *Recognising the legitimacy of expressing strong points of view but ensuring that all views are challenged.* Cultural and political expression in NI is often aggressive and advocarial and such images dominate media representations. Unsurprisingly, people become wary of offering opinions that might provoke offence, hence they adopt the strategy of avoidance referred to earlier. Neither aggressive posturing nor avoidance contribute to trust building. A challenge facing those addressing controversial issues is to foster an open environment in which it is legitimate to express strong viewpoints and emotion without speaker or listener resorting to rancour. Class agreements can encourage this by vetoing the use of offensive language and establishing the right of opinion to be heard but, also, challenged.

5) *Building up the confidence and capacity to handle potentially controversial issues*: SCSP referred to this as “the gradient of controversy”. Programmes should be constructed so that teachers and students, first, have the opportunity to gain experience of handling less contentious issues. Thus, they can engage in a process of confidence and skill building that leads, progressively, to more difficult material. However, the end-goals should be transparent.

6) *Using distancing and comparative study, when appropriate*: Linked to 5) is a programme structure that asks students, first, to examine societies in conflict removed in time or space before returning to divisive issues at “home”. This is a well practiced approach in the context of Northern Irish community relations work. In youth work, it is common for groups to travel abroad to other divided societies such as Cyprus or Israel. SCSP asked students to investigate apartheid South Africa through their studies. The SYP videos were introduced from Jerusalem using “a home thoughts from abroad” format. As the Local and Global Citizenship programme evolves there are encouraging signs that the learning between local and global is developing as mutually informative. However, previous experience indicates that “the gradient” and “distancing” approaches have dangers, also. Despite declared intentions they, too, can become part of the avoidance culture. Groups (and practitioners) can become too comfortable following common pursuits and come to resent the “threat” of controversy posed by local issues. Critical reflection on the part of the practitioner is an essential check against complacency (JEDI 2002, pp.32-34).

7) *Using key concepts as reference points*: A main criticism of Education for Mutual Understanding was that it put too much emphasis on individual relationships and did not sufficiently address those structural inequalities in society that contribute to the underlying causes of conflict (Smith and Robinson 1996 p.82 ). Smith (2003 pp.24-27) argues that young people require reference points by which to judge the efficacy of situations. SCSP encouraged students’ understanding of a series of organising concepts including “prejudice”, “community”, “democracy” and “terrorism”. The idea of a conceptual framework has re-emerged in Local and Global Citizenship, but in a more focused and coherent form. The key

concepts of Diversity and Inclusion, Equality and Social Justice and Democracy and Active Participation are all underpinned by human rights principles. An understanding of these concepts, and others such as Prejudice and Stereotyping, can be developed incrementally and when emotion threatens to block out discussion on sensitive issues that learning can be accessed to enable students to think their way through the difficulties.

8) *Examining multiple perspectives and interpretations*: Recognising that events and issues are likely to be interpreted differently depending on the perspective of participants is an established principle of controversial issues practice. Yet, in a divided society, students can be very resistant to even simulating events from “the other side”. Again, distancing and comparative study may help to open them to alternative opinions. Ultimately, critical thinking at the core of controversial issues practice is developed by creating an understanding amongst participants that contentious situations are multi-faceted and complex. Effective practice presupposes that doubt and confusion, arising from the airing of conflicting viewpoints, are catalysts for reflection. Yet, this paper acknowledges that there are those in divided societies who fortify the certainty of their positions by refusing to contemplate doubt. This has resonance with Tomasi’s D-citizens, those who ‘reject liberal principles and public reason’ (see McLaughlin 2004, pp.156-157). Existing practice still struggles to break down their resistance to participating openly and engaging in the exchange of views.

9) *Underpinning opinion with enquiry and evidence*: Once approaches to unblock the power of emotion have been addressed it is vital that thinking is moved on. Stress has been placed on participants drawing on personal experience to inform others of their positions. That raises the possibility that dialogue, particularly in informal settings, might become trapped in circular arguments, restricted by the limited experience of participants. Perhaps, SYP was open to this criticism. It is essential that the cognitive / affective balance is re-asserted, by exposing opinions to investigation and the analysis of evidence. The school setting should be well placed to encourage this intellectual rigour by drawing on the knowledge and thinking processes of the established disciplines.

10) *Using experiential learning approaches and attractive resources as short-cuts into controversy*: Northern Irish teachers frequently highlight lack of training and resources as important reasons why they are reluctant to tackle sensitive cultural and political issues (Smith and Robinson 1996, p.21). Yet, arguably, most teachers are familiar, to some extent, with active approaches, discussion, small group work and independent learning in their subject teaching. In reality, it is more likely that their reluctance emanates from uncertainty and lack of confidence. Youth work experience suggests that practice can be most quickly taken forward by working alongside more experienced colleagues. Logistically, such arrangements are more difficult in teaching. Yet, when teachers become familiar with experiential activities designed for the purpose they realise that they do possess the skills necessary to lead young people into the issues in a trusting environment. Similarly, appropriately created resources can also provide short-cuts to open and frank discussion. In the SYP videos a studio debate involving young people both modelled positive dialogue and legitimised the exploration of difficult issues in the classroom. Experiential activities and attractive resources, then, can be catalysts towards building teacher confidence.

## **Conclusion**

Practitioners in the community relations field in Northern Ireland understandably become frustrated that, despite over thirty years of heavy financial investment in developmental work, overt sectarianism and communal division continue to be a feature of everyday life.

Unquestionably, over the years, there has been a lack of cohesion and progression in policy and practice, not least in the formal school sector. Yet professional educators should also take credit for initiating many high-risk innovations that deserve to be shared with educators in other contested societies. Recently, leading educators from Northern Ireland have applied their indigenous learning to other regions of conflict (Smith and Vaux 2003, Gallagher 2004), while, mindful, that other such situations have unique contexts requiring tailored responses. In making comparisons, they acknowledge the complex relationship between education and

conflict. It is, often, that the problem is less one of lack of educational provision but rather one that the values of the dominant group in society pervades the education system, thereby contributing to inequity, grievance and potential instability. Smith and Vaux (2003, pp28-29). argue that only through a transformation of its value base can a curriculum develop ‘a preventative role’, and, thereby, successfully, address ‘identity issues such as language, religion and culture’, thus helping to mitigate conflict. In practice, Gallagher (2004, p.155) calls for the ‘robust recognition of the voices and perspectives that have been traditionally excluded.’ The key for him is ‘to promote participative dialogue and to ensure that absent voices are made present; to develop . . . the interconnections [for] the maintenance of inter-ethnic harmony’.

The application of the ten points outlined above will not, in themselves, transform the values base of an educational system but, once there is a climate of change, they can help teachers to handle participative dialogue, including controversial issues, effectively. Appropriate training, strategies, resources and experience also play their part in developing the effective practitioner. The guidance offers a pedagogical framework for taking professional development forward. Encouragingly, in the case of NI the new Local and Global Citizenship programme, emerging from curriculum reform, has the potential to embrace these ideas and offer teachers the context, time, space and flexibility to challenge young people to think critically about the issues that divide them.

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