

Principles for classroom discussions

1 Values and standards

It is entirely appropriate for teachers to assert and stress the values in, for example, UK equalities legislation and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

2 Critical thinking

The fundamental educational task is to help pupils think for themselves, and to sort out and clarify their emotions and values.

3 Safe spaces

Fears of ridicule or of being isolated may lead pupils to be wary about expressing their own views, or about asking questions, or thinking aloud ('exploratory talk'). So special care has to be taken to make sure they feel safe and secure.

4 Freedom of speech

Freedom of thought and expression is an important value and should be protected in schools as in wider society. It is not, however, an absolute value. For it has to be balanced with the equally important right not to be intimidated or abused.

5 Ground rules

It is valuable to establish a set of ground rules setting out how pupils are expected to behave when discussing controversial and sensitive issues with each other. Preferably the rules should be clarified and negotiated through discussion, not simply laid down.

6 Controversy is a fact of life

It is miseducation or even indoctrination to say or imply there is consensus around certain issues when in fact there is not. It can be reassuring to children and young people, as distinct from merely alarming or depressing, to be reminded that their elders are in disagreement with each other about important matters.

7 Duty of care

The conflicts and controversies of adult life can leave young people feeling confused and anxious and things said in classroom discussions can cause distress. A key task for adults is to provide reassurance, and to help children and young people cope, and develop resilience.

8 The teacher's own views

Teachers' own views should not be presented as inherently correct. They may well, however, be a useful resource for pupils as they seek to make sense for themselves of troubling events. Children and young people do reasonably wish to know how adults see, feel and judge.

9 Teaching and practice of skills and conventions

It is valuable from time to time to focus explicitly on helpful and unhelpful ways of contributing to a group discussion. For example, an entertaining role-playing exercise can involve all pupils in a group trying to be unhelpful in various specific ways! Also, lists of helpful and unhelpful ways of contributing can be used in 'fishbowl' exercises, involving pupils observing how members of a group interact.

10 'Political correctness'

Discussions are sometimes inhibited because pupils are uncertain whether a word is offensive. It can therefore be valuable to focus explicitly from time to time on the choices of terminology which are available and to consider issues of meaning, nuance, offensiveness and so-called political correctness.

11 Engaging with parents

It is frequently prudent and courteous to inform parents in advance if classroom discussions of sensitive and controversial issues are being planned.

12 Impartiality

Teachers are not allowed by law to promote partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in schools. The Education Act 1996 requires school governing bodies, headteachers and local education authorities to 'take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political issues are brought to the attention of learners, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views'.

13 Media literacy

Pupils need skills in distinguishing between facts whose accuracy can be readily checked and statements of opinion and interpretation; and in distinguishing between language that is neutral and language that is emotive or loaded; and in identifying bias, agendas and underlying interests.

14 Whole-school policy

It is valuable if all members of staff discuss and clarify together principles such as those in this paper.
