

Teaching controversial issues: Talking about religious freedom and the imagined 'other'

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Context

- English schools must 'promote the fundamental British values' (FBVs), defined in statutory guidance ([Home Office, 2019](#)) as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs'
- The Deliberative Classroom resources ([ACT, 2017](#)) aimed to teach the FBVs as controversial issues

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Deliberative Classroom case studies

1. The UK welfare system's rules on family and marriage in relation to polygamous relationships (and under what circumstances the state should acknowledge such relationships).
2. The UK's new £5 banknotes (which include small quantities of beef fat), and whether the state has a responsibility to respect the beliefs of vegans and Hindus.
3. The case of a gay couple being turned away from a B&B because the owners felt it contradicted their Christian beliefs.

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Theoretical starting points

1. Deliberative democracy
2. Empathy in education

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Methodology

- Visits to four secondary schools in England which were using the Deliberative Classroom resources
- Recordings of students' small group discussions and class plenaries
- Analysis using qualitative coding

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Results and discussion

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Key findings

1. Speculative contributions
2. Empathy and its limits

Speaker 1: "I think this is ridiculous and Professor David Solomon who came up with it, I'm sorry, but his response was very petty, he should have been, like, this is how we did it, making use of waste products, I'm sorry if I offended."

Speaker 2: "But David Solomon is probably someone who makes plastics for a living and develops that kind of thing, so it's not his job to make sure it suits everyone."

Speaker 1: "Yes, that's true."

Speaker 2: "Like if the government said we need you to make a plastic that's durable and can go on the outside of plastic notes..."

Speaker 2: "I reckon they said to David Solomon, look we want a nice durable plastic can you make one, and he said yeah, sure."

Speaker 1: "Yes, I think David got a bit stupid about it, but..."

Speaker 3: "I just feel weird that my £5 note contains animal fat."

Speaker 2: "And David Solomon probably feels quite upset if he's getting blamed for it."

(Stour Grammar small group)

"Maybe we should allow other people to follow their faith. Someone you disagree with, like Satanists. Maybe they should be allowed to go onto the street, kidnap someone and sacrifice them."

(Arun Grammar small group)

"It is the same-sex couple's choice, so they should not be treated any differently."

"If they just don't like gay couples that's just wrong because it is discriminatory [inaudible] especially if they don't have a reason for it but if it [is] due to their religious beliefs, then I think that would be OK"

(Arun Grammar)

Empathy

- Hoggett suggests a 'need, both in theory and practice, to go beyond an either/or approach to reason and passion, cognition and emotion, towards what ... might best be described as a felt thoughtfulness' (Hoggett, 2009, p. 59)

Implications for teaching controversial issues

- Understanding does not mean condoning but the understanding ('felt thoughtfulness') is still valuable
- All teaching resources need to find a balance around how issues are framed and it is important that educators are conscious of what complexity they choose to reduce in presenting issues.
- Teachers should value the use of humour, playful speculation and thought experiments. Students' use of such creative strategies seem to help them to empathise with others, and to start to imagine what the world looks like from others' perspectives.

References

- ACT. (2017). *The Deliberative Classroom: Topical Debating Resources and Teacher Guidance*. Retrieved from www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/deliberative-classroom-topical-debating-resources-and-teacher-guidance
- Hoggett, P. (2009). *Politics, identity and emotion*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm.
- Home Office. (2019). *Revised prevent duty guidance for England and Wales (updated April 2019)*. London: Her Majesty's Government.