

INNOVATIVE RELIGION AND WORLDVIEWS IN SCHOOLS

Dealing with Controversy – Islamophobia

Conscious of its internal diversity, and of its context in a highly plural religious, ethnic and cultural part of the country, the school fosters a boldness to talk well about difference. At the same time, it knows that difference isn't always comfortable, and teachers want to move beyond a soft, even romantic, conception of 'cohesion' or 'respect'. Instead, they want a space in which pupils feel they can surface their most inner questions and concerns, even where that feels hard.

The RE team has devised an effective method for addressing this, focused on holding difficult conversations on sensitive issues. This depends centrally on pupils setting their own rules for discussion and this part of the process is given plenty of time at the outset. This doesn't just tick the box of 'coproduction' with the pupils: it is absolutely the essential core aspect of success. By agreeing their own rules of engagement, pupils feel their way in to a group which is safe, own their feelings, and identify a shared boundary, even where they might individually see things differently. From there they can agree to disagree, and differences can be heard with acceptance. What starts in the classroom stays in the classroom.

The model began with a discussion on race and has been adapted for Islamophobia. The teacher begins with a session in which the rules are identified. Everybody is invited to write at least one rule on a post-it and these are then shared for reflection. At first pupils walk round the room simply looking at the notes, without discussion, and taking time to absorb. Then they are facilitated into discussion about any that stand out, perhaps as very obvious, or as especially difficult. By the end of the session a draft of the rules is agreed and pupils are asked to take them away and think about them for a time. This is followed by a second session in which the class is invited to feedback their reflections on both the rules and the process. Any issues are talked over and differences are noted. This is the point at which the rules are agreed. Any

dissenting participants are invited to live with those aspects they feel less convinced about. So far there has been agreement and nobody has been unable to agree to stay with the process.

Now the class is ready to engage in the discussion itself. This starts with a teacher input which is a series of statements about Muslims from various news sources. Questions are posed which the class discuss in small mixed groups, and feedback as a whole. A second set of statements builds on the first and tightens the focus, and heightens the sense of controversy.

Is Islamophobia an irrational fear?

Is Peterborough Islamophobic?

Is the UK Islamophobic?

Is the world Islamophobic?

This time the discussion is less consensual and it becomes clear that different pupils are drawing their lines in different places. That is ok because it is central to the rules to listen and accept. In the process some pupils ask questions they worry might seem stupid or rude, and they preface them by saying so. The others give them permission to ask and the questions turn out to be ones many in the class were holding. Finally the teacher shares a media statement which shocks almost the entire class, and they seem to have found the point at which all of them can agree that this is Islamophobia.

In this space, pupils' assumptions and prejudices are challenged in counterpoint to media representations. This brings to the fore the reality that Islam is 'lived', not a monolithic block of unchanging practice and beliefs, the same for everyone, everywhere. At the same time it highlights the contingency and heterogeneity of every worldview. Finally, pupils are equipped to handle controversy by surfacing their views boldly but sensitively, and they learn to disagree well.

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What makes innovation possible?

In this example, the teacher's own vision, energy and charisma are key. There is a readiness to be bold and take risks which is rooted in his values as a teacher – to learn bravely and not to shy away from difficult conversations. He feels it is all the more important to talk about the things we find hardest.

It also matters that this teacher is an RE specialist. This underpins his confidence with the ideas of Islam such that he feels able to lift 'facts' off the page and set them in their lived context. The class can explore controversies and boundaries because the teacher is knowledgeable in the first place.

The preparation and readiness of the pupils is another important dimension. It helps that the school is visibly diverse: the challenges are literally there to see. The young people are brought forward in this space as each-others' questioners and answerers. This generates a sense of curiosity which feels so much better than repressed nervousness or bafflement. This doesn't need to mean that less diverse schools can't take this kind of approach. It might need some creative thinking to generate a similar environment: perhaps building up mixed groups in partnership with other schools in a series of sessions to complement the more common 'visit to a Mosque', for example.

Finally, this teaching and learning takes place outside of GCSE RE. It is compulsory but not examined. Teachers and pupils talk of this as a unique space in which all the really difficult things can be looked at without fear of getting it wrong. This space is so clearly valued, despite the lack of 'exam reward'. It is precisely the absence of that 'qualification' pressure that sets the space free to explore.

Key Messages:

- The importance of safe space with shared rules
- Being bold to address misconceptions and misunderstandings, not ignore or repress them
- Deliberately dealing with controversy, facing it on purpose, not avoiding the difficult issues
- Pupils' ownership of the rules and the space in a group which they have shaped
- Freedom from exams