

CHALLENGING VOICES

A resource for FE colleges in handling contentious issues with students



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CONTENTS

Contents page	1
Challenging Voices: Handling contentious issues with students	2
Introduction: <i>REsilience</i> , FE project	3
Part One: Difficulties with dealing with contentious issues	6
Part Two: Causes of contentious discussions	16
Part Three: Stimulus for discussion	24
Part Four: A college case study	29
Self Evaluation Questionnaire for F.E.	33

Challenging Voices

Handling contentious issues with students

An REC/FBFE Project

Challenging Voices has been written for colleagues in the FE sector to provide support for managing contentious issues. Difficult topics can arise in any subject or course. Rather than shut down sensitive conversations, young people are saying that they want the chance to discuss them. They want their voices heard and they are prepared to listen to others. *Challenging Voices* is the second in a series and follows the *Emerging Voices* guidance for developing spiritual, moral, social and cultural provision in FE colleges.

The resources developed to support the programme have been drawn from *REsilience*, a project developed by the RE Council of England and Wales:

www.re-silience.org.uk. They have been adapted and extended for use with FE colleagues and we are grateful for the support given by the *REsilience* team. The *REsilience* Project is a self evaluation, planning and training opportunity for teachers of religious education. While its purpose is to help increase teachers' confidence when addressing contentious issues, particularly where such issues are sometimes used to justify extremism and violence, the ideas and support are also relevant for professionals working in FE colleges. An important aspect of the project is to dispel ignorance and misconceptions that create suspicion and barriers between communities. A team of trained mentors is available across the country. If colleges would like further support, this is available from info@religiouseducationcouncil.org

The audience for these materials are professionals with responsibility for tutorial sessions, course leaders and tutors for courses. While they are particularly relevant to English and Humanities, they are designed to provide support for all subjects since contentious issues may arise whether or not they are part of a planned programme.

REsilience: FE project

'We sometimes get comments and tough questions which can be hard to deal with. We don't want to discourage our young people from talking freely about things that matter to them, but we aren't always confident in managing these discussions.'

This guidance has been produced to support colleagues in FE settings get to grips with potentially difficult discussions relating to students' identity, background, beliefs and values. A self-evaluation questionnaire - the SEQ (page 33) - has been developed to help colleges identify levels of confidence amongst staff when faced with handling difficult discussions. A number of colleges have trialed the SEQ and their observations have shaped this guidance: what to do when contentious issues arise in lectures, tutorials or informally and how to use contentious issues to stimulate learning.

The guidance is in four sections. The first gives examples of where challenging discussions might arise. There are some strategies for dealing with these and guidance on how to get the best out of discussions.

In the second part we outline some of the contexts that give rise to contentious issues. While these can be sensitive, they can also provide opportunities for rich learning and there is guidance on how to achieve this.

The third section gives links to video clips and suggested question prompts, together with activities to help students co-operate and negotiate when they find themselves in heated discussions.

The final section shows how one college is using contentious issues to secure engagement and motivation for their students in English and Humanities.

Background

The project worked with three colleges to identify the main concerns in handling contentious issues, relating to identity and background, beliefs and values. Colleagues said that these can arise in a number of contexts:

- unexpectedly in a lesson
- in tutorials either unplanned or as result of the tutorial content
- sometimes they are used to stimulate discussion and debate in vocational courses, English and Humanities

Why not just ignore contentious issues?

Contentious issues are a part of life. Different perspectives on beliefs, values and identity often result in people disagreeing. Colleges are energetic in preparing young people for employment where they are likely to encounter people with backgrounds and values that are different from their own. Helping young people manage discussions where people might disagree is an important part of their development. If we do not pay attention to handling contentious issues they are likely to fester and create the conditions for further disagreement. However, if we approach difficult issues honestly and creatively they can be powerful opportunities for learning.

Colleges know that they need to comply with the Public Sector Equality Duties. There is also an obligation to create opportunities for spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development. SMSC development does not sit in a neat curriculum box. It does have a great deal to do with how colleges provide students with the chance to talk about their beliefs, engage with other people whose ideas might be different from their own and to have the chance to be imaginative and creative in resolving any disagreement. If students are able to engage openly and honestly with questions about life, what it means to live together and how to understand their own and others' backgrounds, then colleges are addressing both equality duties and SMSC.

Handling disagreements provides opportunities for personal and social development. Students need to understand that 'not everyone thinks like me'. When given the opportunity to listen to people with opposing views they have the chance to broaden their horizons. At the same time they are likely to have a clearer awareness of their own views.

There are no quick fixes. This is a way of working which calls for imagination, humour and realism. Those colleges that are successful know that they don't need to have

all the answers and that it is acceptable to agree to disagree. What they have in common is a commitment to honour the backgrounds and beliefs of their students and to allow appropriate expression of these both formally and informally.

This project has also found that contentious issues can lead to higher outcomes for students. Dealing with difficult subjects develops students' personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTs). And finally, students say that when they are given the chance to talk about difficult issues they are more motivated to explore answers than if they are just dismissed.

REsilience: FE project

Part One

Some of the difficulties with dealing with contentious issues.

This is what colleges in the pilot had to say

- Some students are not prepared to listen to any opinion that is not the same as their own. A few might make their points personal rather than disagreeing with the viewpoint.
- The discussion may be dominated by a small number of students.
- Students could take exception to opinions that challenge their family's values.
- There may be tensions in the local community that are expressed in racist language.
- Students from minority groups, including those with religious beliefs, might feel threatened if they hold an opinion at odds with the views of most of their class or group.
- Some students may use the issues to 'have a dig' at others.

In addition, lack of time might make lecturers feel deep discussion is a luxury they cannot afford. Creating the conditions for respectful listening saves time in the long run. Some students may be less able to participate than others if they are speakers of English as an additional language or are simply not very confident speakers - there are suggestions for working with EAL students at the end of this section.

So, how can we make sure that difficult issues are not hijacked in order to cause trouble? ...

It helps to set ground rules for discussion. These are more likely to be successful if they are agreed between lecturers and students. The ground rules can be displayed for everyone to see and to act as a reminder for respectful discussions. Here are some examples of ground rules which have been agreed with students:

We will:

- *Show respect for other people's views and listen to one another without interruption*
- *Avoid taking over the discussion and allow others to speak without interruption*
- *Agree to disagree on occasion*
- *Be clear about common ground and areas where we agree to differ*
- *Not ridicule, make fun of or put down a speaker (e.g. 'that's rubbish')*
- *Aim our criticisms at arguments and not individuals – we will challenge the ideas, not the person*
- *Always try to back our arguments with evidence or good reasons*
- *Try to distinguish between facts and opinion*

Students may wish to change ground rules over time and should be encouraged to do so, provided that they can justify suggested changes with good reasons.

How can we respond to challenging comments which come out of the blue?

One of the concerns which arose from the SEQ was how to handle contentious issues which had not been planned. The scenario: during a teaching session an inappropriate comment is made which could be perceived as either racist, sexist or insulting. What should the lecturer do? There are a number of ways of responding and here are three suggestions:

- You judge that the comment was made without intending to be insulting. You decide that this is a chance to clarify what is acceptable and pause the lesson or tutorial to ask what other students think about the comment. This can be done in a way which is non-judgmental but which creates the space for talking about how it might feel if the tables were turned. Almost every student has been on the receiving end of stereotyping and can articulate what it feels like to be misrepresented.
- You decide to continue with the lesson but say that it is a comment which needs to be talked about and it will be 'parked' until the end of the session. It can be useful for students to have the chance to make their observations anonymously on post-it notes, which are then discussed at the end of the lesson. When this is done calmly and in a spirit of enquiry, many potentially contentious comments can be defused.
- If you judge that the comment has been made deliberately to cause offence you decide to challenge it quietly and one-to-one, without drawing attention to the whole group.

Controversial issues in tutorials

Sometimes controversial issues come up in tutorials. Here, it is important to prevent reinforcing stereotypes or raise tension between students. It is important to find approaches that meet the need for balance and objectivity. The maturity and skills of students also need to be taken into account. Young people are likely to express a wide range of responses when confronted with controversial questions. Their different experiences, learning styles and emotional intelligence levels can lead to different reactions. This section offers ways of introducing controversial issues and of managing the responses that result.

What the tutor can do ...

When controversial issues arise, it is important to judge when, how and if to express personal views and opinions. Doug Harwood (1) has identified possible roles for lecturers when dealing with controversial issues in the classroom. Any of these roles may be appropriate depending on the topic, age of students, previous work done and other factors. Tutors may wish to discuss the roles with their groups or invite students to take one or more of the roles themselves.

- Impartial Chairperson – here, the tutor ensures that all viewpoints are represented. The tutor facilitates but does not state his or her own position. Instead, they say ‘On the one hand we have....and on the other....’
- Committed – the tutor is free to offer his or her own views. ‘My personal view is.... and some of you may disagree...’
- Devil's Advocate – the tutor adopts provocative and oppositional stances irrespective of own viewpoint. This enables the tutor to ensure that all views are covered and challenged if a consensus view emerges early on. It also helps to challenge young people's existing beliefs. ‘You say this, but what about this...?’
- Advocate – where the tutor presents all available viewpoints then concludes by stating own position with reasons. In doing this, the tutor is

showing that it is important to evaluate all viewpoints before forming an opinion.

- Declared Interest – the tutor declares own viewpoint so that students can judge later bias, then presents all available positions as objectively as possible. 'My view is this....and I am going to try and be fair to all sides in this argument.'

The examples above are based on 'Teaching Controversial Issues' from Oxfam's Global Citizenship Guides. Further guidance on the role of the tutor: www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial

Encouraging students to express their own ideas and beliefs in a sensitive and respectful way: Challenging prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping

Students should be encouraged to express their own ideas and beliefs with sensitivity and respect. This is the case even when those ideas and beliefs are negative or controversial. Students are unlikely to learn about or from the opinions of others when expressed aggressively or without consideration for those with different opinions. They need to learn the rules of public debate where it is unacceptable to make personally hurtful comments or damaging remarks. This can be a difficult issue for lecturers because the more contentious the issue, the more likely it is that passions will run high and polite discourse gives way to excited argument. A passionate response may be desirable since it is unreasonable to expect students to be neutral or apathetic to serious issues of this kind. The challenge for lecturers is to maintain sensitivity and respect even in these conditions. Here the lecturer can make common cause with citizenship and explain that British democracy is built on the principle of civil and rational discussion in which all views can be expressed, explained and considered.

How to get the best out of discussions

The main danger of discussions in lessons and tutorial is a lack of rigour. This can happen when expectations are low or there too much discussion between the lecturer and the whole group, or there is no proper focus or task (e.g. avoid 'talk to your partner about...')

However, straying from the focus can be a good thing if it takes the discussion where the students want to go and is based on reason and deep thinking – there does not always need to be a final conclusion. If the discussion has been worthwhile, it often continues afterwards.

Organising groups

The number involved in discussion can vary from two upwards. Different groupings result in different types of involvement.

- Pairs – are easy to organise and effective for a quick sharing of ideas. But they expose students to a very limited range of ideas.
- Doubling up - balloon: where two or more sets of pairs join to share and compare ideas. This broadens the range of ideas for students to consider.
- Listening triads – in which students in groups of three are allocated a task; talker, recorder and questioner. These roles can be rotated. This is a very good strategy for developing skills of listening and talking.
- Ambassadors – a group sends an ambassador to other groups in order to introduce new ideas. All involved have to develop the skills of listening and the ambassador has to give clear and concise explanations.
- Role experience – in larger groups, students can take on the roles of chair, scribe and reporter. Each of these roles means that as well as developing skills of listening and recording, students suspend their own beliefs and ideas in order to give time for, record, and report the ideas of

others in the group.

- Develop a community of enquiry. Section 3 has suggestions to start discussions and enquiries with a range of clips. After watching these students can suggest key questions to talk about.

Organising discussion

- Case study – Rather than ask a question (e.g. 'Do you think war is ever justified?') offer a case study, such as newspaper reports or television debates. Case studies are valuable in providing 'real life' relevant issues and focus discussion on solving an issue or dilemma. Generalising from the particular to the general is one way to deepen students' understanding of issues (e.g. by asking 'Is this always the case?' or 'Can you think of opposite examples?').
- Controversial statement – Rather than ask a question like 'Do you think terrorism can ever be justified?' provide a statement or quotation (such as 'One person's terrorist is the other person's freedom fighter') and ask students to discuss whether they agree or disagree.
- Walkabout – This can take various forms. The idea is to display clues, evidence, arguments, examples, etc. around the room and for groups to decide which applies to their question. For example, post pictures, words and arguments that can be used to decide whether or not specific wars have a religious dimension.
- Perspectives – The whole group studies the same topic but smaller groups discuss different aspects or questions: for example, the stance of different religious groups on sexual orientation. Care needs to be taken when asking students to take different stances on contentious issues – what are they basing this on? Where might this take the discussion? When different stances have been considered, what then? Students might be suspicious when looking at topics such as homophobic and racist stances that the lecturer is aiming to point students to a 'correct' stance? A gay student (or someone whose religious beliefs make them opposed to same-sex relationships) might feel compromised and uncomfortable. It is important that the focus is on the issue, but sometimes it is hard to separate this from the personal. It is helpful to students to know about the

different foundations on which people base their views (e.g. divine authority, reason, sacred texts, teachings from sacred leaders etc) resources. Section 2 has help with this.

- Honouring the work – too often the results of good discussion are lost. It is not always necessary for there to be a tangible outcome, but it will make the process more secure when students have the chance to reflect on their learning and for this to be recorded in some way.

When atmosphere matters....

Concepts such as prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping need to be explored and discussed in a way that focuses on the issues, for example by discussing some prejudiced views in the third person ('Some people suggest that ...') which will help to avoid having students express such views themselves. Lecturers will want to make sure that they can

- establish a classroom climate in which all students are free to express sincerely held views without fear
- act as a facilitator
- ensure that a wide variety of opinions is heard
- encourage students to understand the distinction between opinions and facts
- try to encourage exploratory talk, rather than adversarial debate that requires one view to win over another. This can be done by helping students 'unpack' a problem. For example, by putting the problem in a circle in the middle of the board we can ask, 'Who is affected by or has an interest in this issue?'
- challenge a one-sided consensus that emerges too quickly. Rather than challenge directly (which may imply that the lecturer knows the 'right' answer) it is better to ask questions which put it back to the students, such as 'Is that always the case?' 'What evidence is there for that view?' or 'Why might someone disagree with that view? What might they argue?'
- be aware of the needs of individuals in the class when tackling issues of social, cultural or personal identity (e.g. issues of sexual orientation)

- challenge inaccurate information/evidence and inappropriate behaviour, making students aware of consequences of breaking ground rules
- model the qualities and skills of dialogue in discussion

The following resources developed by the NUS are helpful in facilitating dialogue:

www.nusconnect.org.uk/news/article/faith/Facilitating-Dialogue-on-Faith-and-Sexuality-in-FE-Resource-Pack

Questions to help students develop their answers: give reasons, justify their points of view and include alternative points of view.....

Can you explain that...?

What do you mean by...?

Can you give me an example of...?

How does that help...?

Does anyone have a question to ask...?

Why do you think that...?

How do you know that...?

What are your reasons...?

Do you have evidence...?

Can you give me an example/counter-example...?

Can you put it another way...?

Is there another point of view...?

What if someone else were to suggest that...?

What would someone who disagreed with you say...?

What is the difference between those views/ideas...?

What follows from what you say...?
Does it agree with what you said earlier...?
What would be the consequence of that...?
Is there a general rule for that...?
How could you test to see if it were true...?

Do you have a question about that...?
What kind of question is it...?
How does what was said/the question help us...?
Where have we got to/who can summarise so far...?
Are we any closer to answering the question/problem...?

Working with EAL students

Many students with English as an additional language are able to engage with contentious, abstract ideas, but may need support in accessing them and articulating their ideas. It is helpful to use pictures, photographs and visual stimuli for them to respond to. Ideas can also be made comprehensible through body language and role-play possibly within a story or case study. It is important to create a stress-free environment where it is acceptable to make mistakes and learn from them. EAL learners also have the right to stay silent, to listen to what is being said and to tune in to the discussion before attempting to speak.

(1) www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial

Part Two

Background on some of the areas from which contentious discussions might arise.

- *Identity, tradition and belonging*
- *The advantages and challenges of diversity within communities*
- *Why different traditions have different responses to ultimate questions and ethical issues*

Why should colleges pay attention to identity, tradition and belonging?

Many areas of the curriculum in FE settings touch on religious, moral and social issues.

- In GCSE Humanities for instance, students might be expected to analyse arguments for and against dilemmas such as ethics in business and the media, abortion and capital punishment, the causes of evil and suffering and responses to human rights.
- In Science questions of the origins of the universe can trigger personal responses which are informed by the faith background of students.
- The speaking and listening sections of many English courses expect students to be able to respond to ethical dilemmas with sensitivity and insight.
- Business, hospitality, social care and other vocational courses expect students to have an understanding of the diverse backgrounds of the communities in which they will be working
- Tutorial sessions may result in discussions which are informed by the home backgrounds of students. Local and global affairs can result in discussions in tutorials. For those colleges which do not have students from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is still important that controversial issues are considered from a range of perspectives. They are likely to be working in a world which has to take account of cultural and faith perspectives.

The ethos of FE settings needs to embody the principle of respect for all members of the student community. In spite of an overcrowded timetable, opportunities should be taken to allow students talk about their religious, ethical, cultural and philosophical beliefs. Such discussions should also include those students who have views which are not necessarily drawn from a faith background. Those settings which do so are providing students with opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills which in turn lead to higher achievement. In presenting their ideas, listening to others and summarising their arguments they are gaining important skills for life and future

employment. When making space to consider sensitive issues relating to identity, tradition and belonging, colleges are creating opportunities for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of their students.

Developing sensitivity to the home backgrounds and beliefs of students

Colleagues dealing with contentious issues need to be sensitive to the backgrounds of their students. A broad knowledge of students' religious and belief profiles is important for those colleagues teaching courses which touch on issues which are potentially contentious. For example, work on Israel/Palestine is likely to have particular sensitivities for Jewish and Muslim students. Similarly, the background knowledge and feelings of Muslim and non-Muslim students on issues such as jihad or Al Qaeda need to be taken into account in the Humanities curriculum. The continuing dispute over the sovereignty of Kashmir has the potential to create friction between Hindus and Muslims, as did the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya and subsequent riots in 1992; the attack on the Ram mandir that now stands on the site of the Babri mosque in 2005 had a similar impact. It is important for colleges to be alert to world and national events, such as those arising from the 'Arab Spring' and consider their possible implications for the college and local community.

There may also be concerns and contentious issues which arise from the local community. There are likely to be wide-ranging responses and it is important to be aware that the home backgrounds of some students may offer different responses to ethical and moral dilemmas. Attitudes and beliefs about alcohol or arranged marriages for example might differ from the consensus of opinion of others within the college, and these alternative perspectives need to be voiced. Reluctance to engage with these issues from diverse perspective might result in increased tension. There is sometimes reluctance to engage on the part of students, due to a wish not to cause insult to those whose backgrounds and belief systems are different from their own. However, establishing ground rules and creating an inclusive, supportive environment can create the conditions for open and honest exploration of ideas. (See Part one for strategies to support this.)

Identity, tradition and belonging

Identity is an emotional issue. It is about our feelings and sense of belonging, not just about definitions and categories. Identity is also closely related to history, justice and

relationships. So it carries many agenda and assumptions. For example, awareness of the history of the Crusades, centuries ago and links to modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan all colour many Muslim perceptions of the West today. We all have complex identities. One category is not enough. We may be British, but also English; or we may be partly French, Irish or Welsh. We may be black, Asian or white. We may have a shared heritage from different parts of the UK or elsewhere. We may have a religious faith. Or we may share a religious heritage rather than being an observant believer. We may be deeply conscious of our identity in historical roots such as the slave trade or the coal mining industry. Other personal factors may also define us in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, family ties, profession or trade. Identity is complex. Religious and cultural traditions are an expression of identity and belonging as well. They may be distinctive or unseen. They may involve food, dress, festivals, worship or celebration. They may be secular, such as New Year's Eve, or overtly religious, like Passover/Pesach or Eid ul Adha. Or indeed they may be a bit of both, like Guy Fawkes' Night.

How do these issues contribute to SMSC development?

Identity and belonging raise many important issues in relation to SMSC. These questions link directly to the agenda around being positive about pluralism and diversity within a wider context of social integration and national solidarity. These contexts provide opportunity for spiritual development in that young people are able to consider thinking about their own identities and be willing to use their imagination to respond to others' views. Moral development is concerned with taking an interest in moral and ethical issues. It is about being aware of the influences on our ideas of right and wrong, about knowing the difference between right and wrong and understanding the consequences of actions. Social development relates to working with people from different backgrounds and taking an interest in the way communities function at different levels. Cultural development happens when young people have the chance to encounter and appreciate a wide range of cultural influences on their heritage.

Creating space for considering contentious issues can make a positive contribution to community cohesion, for example experiencing and affirming both 'sameness' and 'difference' within the college and the wider world; learning from others' experiences and beliefs through listening and learning, participating and leading. It can also build a sense of belonging and of group identity.

Students develop their personal moral landscape when opportunities are created for discussion about ethical and moral issues. The links between religion, moral stances and ethics may emerge and it is important that students have the chance to interrogate these against their own life stances. When this happens colleges are supporting young people in their spiritual, social, moral and cultural development.

Some questions to consider:

- Should people expect conformity? How far does living peacefully and co-operatively with others require one to try to be, in some sense, the same as everyone else? Is diversity something positive or is it divisive?
- Is integration important? For example, if we say integration is desirable, does that apply to some things (like sharing a common language for example) and not others (like shaking hands)?
- What does it mean to be British? Is this a legal status? A birthright? An inherited trait? What are the essential qualities or values linked to being British? Or does this not make any sense in today's world?
- Should we accept all traditions and beliefs? Should we put tolerance first even if there seems to be an issue of justice? What might we say about some religious attitudes to marriage, gender and sexual orientation, for example? In any case, who decides what is unjust? Who belongs? When can we say someone does or doesn't belong to a community or nation? Who has that right? Is it how long your family has been here? If so, how long do you have to live in a country before you do belong? And, come to that, in England, what about the Anglo-Saxons, Danes and Vikings whose descendants live in Britain today. Do they belong? This question is at the heart of what migration, ethnicity and identity mean in the lives of individuals.
- What does it mean to have plural identities? Which identity is most important when a young person is at home? At school? In a place of worship? A community centre? In a youth parliament?
- What different kinds of identities can be brought to the fore through social networking media? (e.g. joining a Facebook group for young Humanists)
- People sometimes fear difference. How can we deal with this?

What challenges might arise in dealing with identity, tradition and belonging?

- Some students or lecturers may feel others stereotype them because of their name, dress, gender or an aspect of appearance.
- Students or lecturers may feel some aspects of their identities are more acceptable than others, leading to concealment or denial.
- Students might experience conflict or peer pressure in relation to one or more aspects of their identity.
- Students may lack knowledge about some aspects of their identity and may fear questions they would regard as intrusive – or they may welcome them (e.g. when students are invited to talk about aspects of their family's religious belief or practice)

How can lecturers address such challenges?

- By exploring issues around identities in a way that brings out their plural nature
- By aiming to create an ethos where students feel comfortable to express their own beliefs and perspectives, knowing that all members of the class are valued as people.
- By avoiding the expectation that students will 'represent' their faith perspective unless this has been agreed.

Advantages and challenges of diversity within communities

Whilst diversity can enrich a society, attitudes towards it are not always positive. For some, the advantages of living in an integrated, diverse society are outweighed by the challenges. This can particularly be the case where a significant number of people feel that others have better life opportunities than they do, and that their own cultural heritages are not valued as highly as those of others. In areas where social and economic changes have been to the disadvantage of longstanding inhabitants (e.g. in areas of traditional manufacturing industry where former employment opportunities no longer exist), the sense of disempowerment and disregard may sometimes result in hostile attitudes to the existence of diversity brought about by immigration. Such social tensions may affect colleges and may make it hard for discussion of contentious issues related to religious or non-religious belief to be open, impartial and fair to all involved.

Why should colleges pick up the challenge of discussing diversity?

Students will almost certainly value the opportunity to talk about the issue of what an ideal society would be like, the circumstances under which people can live together in harmony and how much and in what contexts differences between people matter. In providing the chance for these topics to emerge and be discussed, the college itself becomes more cohesive. The challenge for lecturers is to enable discussion of this kind to take place in such a way that students express their views honestly but with respect for other members of the group, and that particular care is taken in relation to all those in the group who might feel vulnerable.

Consideration of the advantages and challenges of a pluralistic society can give all colleges, whatever the composition of their local catchment and population, opportunities to show how they recognise and value diversity. Where colleges have a student body which does not have a wide range of backgrounds, it is still important to include views from a wide range of perspectives – use of video clips, news and case studies can help with this. This can broaden students' awareness and experience of their own and others' identities and concerns beyond the more obvious dimensions of ethnic background and religious affiliation to embrace academic achievement, socio-economic status and sexual orientation.

How do different traditions find answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues?

Colleges might find it helpful to have some background on the sources of authority which inform religious and beliefs since these are likely to inform their viewpoints.

Many students will not identify with a faith tradition. It is important that their perspectives are acknowledged. Secular and Humanist stances are also grounded in moral principles. Even those who do not self identify as Humanists may nevertheless have thought out positions on giving responses to ultimate questions and ethical issues. Humanists use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues. They subscribe to the Golden Rule which is an ethical code found in many faith traditions which states that one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself. According to a Humanist view the principle of the Golden Rule can be worked out by anyone without referring to God.

The tendency towards personal interpretation in areas of religion has developed with literacy and education. In previous centuries relatively few believers in any tradition

had the education or the material resources required to study their religious tradition and scriptures and were therefore dependent on religious leaders for guidance as to God's law (for Jews and Muslims), God's will (for Christians and Sikhs), or the requirements of dharma (for Hindus and Buddhists). Today, not only can believers study scripture for themselves but also they can read of the differing interpretations of scripture by a wide range of religious scholars from all over the world before coming to their own conclusions. Even for those who cannot read, or who do not know the languages in which their sacred scriptures are written, television and the internet give access to a wide range of sermons and lectures from scholars and lay preachers. In addition, democracy, broadcast media and the market economy have made people increasingly used to having their preferences and thoughts listened to and taken seriously. Current debates within the Anglican Church would assure any onlooker that the Archbishop of Canterbury does not command, and in some cases hardly influences, the religious beliefs and moral behaviour of all Anglicans. The same is true for religious leaders in all the major religious traditions.

When dealing with ethical issues and ultimate questions (those to which there are no proven answers) there is often great interest and engagement from people of religious and non-religious beliefs. Discussions about purpose, meaning, right and wrong are of interest to many people who enjoy debating and sharing ideas. Such topics have the capacity to both divide and unite a group and much will depend on the atmosphere in which these discussions are held.

Lecturers and their students need to be very clear that the theological and ethical teachings of any religion are not necessarily adhered to by all who identify with that religion. Also, different members of a tradition may interpret its teachings in different ways. For example, individual Christians hold very different beliefs about the use of violence. These range from complete pacifism to belief in the concept of 'just war'. Teachers and students might know this to be the case but may not understand why. The reasons will depend partly on the weight individuals and groups give to different sources of authority. In the case of Christian beliefs (about war, for example) these sources include the Bible, especially the teachings and example of Jesus; interpretations of the Bible by theologians across the centuries; opinions of church leaders; a person's own conscience and the application of reason. Similar considerations would apply in other religious traditions. It is important to be aware that there is a point at which belief about matters which can be proved moves to faith in things which cannot be proved. This applies to religious and non-religious perspectives.

How can lecturers support students in understanding how different traditions find answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues?

- Lecturers need to achieve a proper balance between allowing students to share their opinions and providing the resources for them to explore the views of others, including religious viewpoints. This exploration will enrich their understanding and make them more able to make informed and balanced judgements.
- It is important to get to grips with the complex reasons for the diversity of opinion within religions. Only a simplistic and generalised presentation of a religion would suggest that all its members turn to particular sacred texts and favour a literalist reading of them for answers to life's questions. While it is true that some people do turn to their sacred texts for guidance, they vary in the way that they do so. For example, some Christians take the Ten Commandments as definitive guidance to decision making while others look rather to Jesus' more concise summary of the commandments, 'Love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. For other people of faith, traditional interpretations within their community, or commentaries by highly respected scholars, or rulings by religious leaders, can be as important as scripture as they are viewed as authoritative interpretations of scripture, or expressions of God's will. Examples of non-scriptural authoritative texts would include papal edicts (Roman Catholicism), the Talmud (Judaism) and Hadith (Islam), but here it must be understood that in each of these cases authoritative interpretations from the past are themselves subject to further contemporary interpretation.
- Talking about denominations and groups within a religion has to be carefully done in order to avoid categorising believers' views in an over-simplistic and inaccurate way. There is diversity within as well as between denominations. This is because, for many individuals, beliefs are arrived at by a complex process of interaction between influences of religion, education, culture and reason.

Additional resources which may be available to lecturers:

- Where it is available, college chaplaincies can provide support – some chaplaincies have access to local and national faith networks to find people to speak, run workshops on issues such as Fair Trade, Conflict Resolution, World Development, or otherwise support the college.
- Many chaplaincies have resources to support SMSC learning in college – eg fbfe, AFAN, Three Faiths Forum, Lokapi Foundation, St Ethelburga's Centre, NUS, World Week, Multi-Faith Week
- Many chaplaincies are able to support community building and can help staff and learners to be familiar with different religious perspectives.

Stimulus for discussion

Part Three

In this section we suggest some clips to get discussions going.

When we use a stimulus such as a video clip, story or picture we make it possible for people to comment or just think. A stimulus is the focus which creates a space for commenting on contentious issues. The clips could be used in courses such as Health and Social Care, Business, Hospitality and Tutorial.

Health and Social Care	<p>Random Rant: Teaching people how to treat you:</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3s_DW6r0Ek</p> <p>A thoughtful view on how to treat others. It shows how treating other people well sends the signal for how we want them to treat us.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you agree with the speaker?• What would life be like if everyone followed her advice?• How difficult is it to put what she says into practice with our friends and family?• How difficult might it be to do this in a work situation when the people you are working with are being unpleasant?• What would your 'Random Rant' on treating other people as you would like to be treated look and sound like?
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	<p>Getting On: Language Help Line Jo Brand</p> <p>An amusing look at trying to communicate with someone when we don't speak the same language. It helps us to think about what would have been a better and kinder way to communicate with the patient.</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC8Y-Xzm8oU&feature=related</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the nurses trying to do? • Were they getting it right? • Would there have been a better way?
Business	<p>A real person, a lot like you</p> <p>A short animation about who might be on the receiving end of our outbursts.</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfwwHa-7Ux8&feature=relmfu</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think the angry email was sent? • How can we treat people as individuals? • How would you feel if you always got great customer service? • What's it like to be ignored? • If everyone were treated as an individual, what difference would it make?
	<p>Values in Business: I miss the mob</p> <p>An animation asking questions about how much profit should businesses try to achieve. What is really important in business?</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFRLSAPnIG0&feature=relmfu</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are people more important than profit? • Can we make a business from helping other people? • How much is enough money?

Tutorial	<p>Who do you think you are?</p> <p>Graham Norton</p> <p>This clip is suitable for use in tutorials or in a course which considers identity. It opens up questions about belonging and feeling different. How does it relate to students' experiences? Do we all have a sense of being an 'outsider'? What are some of the reasons we might feel an outsider?</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiUr9ysJ_lc</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which part of the film did you find most interesting? • What made you think? • Did you find anything surprising? • Do you think everyone has a similar story to tell about his or her own background? • Can you relate to any part of it? • Do you think we would treat people differently if we all had similar experiences of being an outsider like Graham Norton?
	<p><i>Roma Gypsy</i></p> <p>This clip gives insight into one person's experience of sensitivity about his home background. It describes what it is like to have a Roma background and has the potential to stimulate discussion about where we come from and whether we should be proud of our backgrounds.</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbVpM3-8MPA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strikes you about this film? • Were there difficulties for the narrator? • Can you make any links with your own experience of growing up? • Why do you think he was proud of his background? • Is it a good thing to be proud of where we come from? • What do you find interesting about backgrounds which are different from yours?

	<p>Become Someone</p> <p>This takes a wry look at the self-help industry and asks the question 'Who decides who we are?'. It opens up questions about influences, creating the 'perfect' life, having it all and encourages the viewer to wonder about who they really are and what they want from life. It has the potential to go in a number of directions e.g. 'Who am I? Who influences who I am? What kind of life do I want to have?'</p> <p>http://www.afan.uk.net/stuff/theme/identity/become-someone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I decide who I am? • Who or what influences my understanding about who I am? • Are some aspects of my identity more important in different situations? • How would I like others to think about my identity? • How should I think about others' identity? • Why are there so many books written about getting life right? • Where do we (in this group) get guidance? • These books aren't about material things, so what are they about?
	<p>Balance</p> <p>An animation by Wolfgang and Lauerstein which is open to many interpretations. It lasts approximately 15 minutes and feedback shows that it is well worth it.</p> <p>'Balance' is a surreal animation exploring the nature of identity, relationships and motivation.</p> <p>It is worth watching as a group with post-its ready for students to make a note of what they found thought-provoking, difficult and what they think the film is trying to say.</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfBMimsvTKI</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think the film makers wanted us to think? • Does it have anything to say about co-operating with others? • Does it have any parallels in life? • Can we take any lessons from this film that would help us work together better in this college?

Hospitality	<p>Don't punish everyone</p> <p>An amusing animation on what happens when we try and make a rule for everything.</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GCm-u_vlaQ&feature=player_embedded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why is it tempting to make lots of rules?• How do we feel when we have to follow lots of rules?• What would be a better way of dealing with customers?• How can we make sure we don't punish everyone for one person's mistake?
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Part Four

How working with contentious issues develops personal learning and thinking skills – a college case study

Colleagues working at Kingston College in Humanities and English are very clear that engaging with contentious issues results in higher outcomes for learners. They have found that using contentious issues in an evenhanded way supports their students' higher order thinking skills. For example:

- Information-processing skills enable students to gather, sort, classify, sequence, compare and contrast information, and to make links between pieces of information.
- Reasoning skills enable students to justify opinions and actions, to draw inferences and make deductions, to use appropriate language to explain their views, and to use evidence to back up their decisions.
- Enquiry skills enable students to ask relevant questions, to plan what to do and how to research, to predict outcomes and anticipate responses, to test theories and problems, to evaluate conclusions, and to refine their ideas and opinions.
- Creative thinking skills enable students to generate and extend ideas, to suggest possible hypotheses, to use their imagination, and to look for alternative outcomes.
- Evaluation skills enable students to evaluate what they read, hear and do, to learn to judge the value of their own and others' work or ideas and not to take all information at face value.

140 students take the Humanities GCSE course at Kingston College and the grades achieved are consistently above national results. The course requires students to research, comment on and apply their thinking to contentious issues. For example, students created a questionnaire to use with members of the public on their attitudes to abortion. This meant that students set aside some of their own, deeply-held views to ask open questions about faith and personal perspectives on abortion. This

required imagination and sensitivity and a willingness to encounter viewpoints which were different from their own. This year, they will be exploring reasons for the riots in summer 2011 and will be researching people's thinking about why they occurred. Again, this will involve creating high quality questions, probing answers and dealing with wide-ranging responses. This work is likely to be emotionally charged as the riots affected many from their own age group.

The senior lecturer running the GCSE English course at Kingston works closely with the Humanities' leader to ensure that dilemmas and controversial issues are carefully explored. Over 400 students take the English Language course. This course is mandatory for progression onto Level 3 courses including BTEC, Vocational and A-Level. Again, results are significantly higher than national expectations and students' outcomes in Speaking and Listening Assessments are outstanding. The English department believes that it is important to instill a love of language and expression for all students following the course. The department knows that the quality of English is likely to impact on students' achievements in other subjects as well as their future prospects. They know that the critical thinking developed through working with contentious issues adds value to their other courses.

Lecturers in the English department were concerned that students were not engaging sufficiently with the poetry section of the exam specification. The poetry was chosen to reflect different cultures, but many students were not finding this element of the course stimulating. In order to overcome this, lecturers decided to use a college wide Cultural Awareness Day to talk about their own backgrounds. By bringing in photos, clothing, food and sharing these simply and openly with students, the lecturers found that conversations opened up and they were able to make the links back to the cultural poetry which was part of the exam specification. After the session by lecturers, which was warmly received by students, they were then invited to share elements of their backgrounds with other students. Through providing the opportunity to grapple with diverse backgrounds and beliefs, lecturers were creating opportunities for students to develop language and skills to question one another about different cultures and to articulate what was important about their own. As a result of this, the exploration of the poetry for the exam specification was richer and more meaningful.

Amelia Jane DAY, Advanced * GCSE Student:

The classroom is an easy way to express different opinions. It's a safe environment, especially with the teacher who can facilitate discussions. The group is a microcosm of society. It helps therefore to work as a team rather than against each other. It's the only way to achieve progression.

Euthanasia was a tense topic in Humanities. Half the class didn't even understand what euthanasia actually involved. They were not able to articulate their ideas sensitively and this was quite challenging in the beginning. However, once you realise that you don't have to change your opinion but just allow people to express theirs there's, you can reach some sort of an understanding.

We also learnt about the environment. From that I gained a sense of responsibility, especially because we are the dominant species in the world. In terms of outcomes we didn't just learn about facts, we learnt about people. There's a philosophical side to what we do and what we achieve. You can draw your own conclusions and grow your opinions.

In English we studied *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley. We discussed moral issues simply by the teacher giving us a list of scenarios and asking us what we would do in particular situations. From that she was able to discuss responsibility, socialism and capitalism. I liked hearing about what other people thought about the society in which we live.

When we studied the poetry unit for our exam, this was challenging. The poetry dealt with different cultures and the material was sometimes difficult because it used different language. I wasn't made to feel isolated from it however, instead I was able to enjoy the experience and just develop my knowledge. I wasn't made to feel that I had to agree with everything that I was presented with.

In the English media assignment, we explored the rather dark issue of cab safety. We were presented with quite upsetting images. It was a contentious issue and some people were upset about it. However, I thought it was good because it dealt with our age group and the teacher wasn't afraid to hear what we had to say about it. This happens in society so why shouldn't you talk about it?

* Advanced GCSE – where students follow a mixture of GCSE and AS level courses.

Joe Monks, GCSE Student

In Humanities I achieved a controlled assessment assignment on abortion. Initially I thought it was a good issue because there's a lot to discuss about the subject. My personal opinion as a young male is that abortion should be legal. I think I'm quite liberal politically and everyone should be allowed their independence. I enjoyed people having different opinions on the subject. It didn't change my mind on the subject - it was just an enriching experience.

I think euthanasia should also be legal. I think such a controversial issue like this needs to be reviewed as well as discussed. People are always going to have different opinions but the point is, we don't all have to agree.

People shouldn't be told what to think or feel. Humanities helped me express my ideas, it gave me more information and I had more depth of knowledge than at secondary school, especially where controversial issues were concerned.

In English we had an assignment called 'Don't get me started...'. That kind of an assignment can breed negativity and give you a free pass to be disrespectful. However I think it was good to see different sides to people.

The culture day was really fun. I enjoyed the atmosphere and learnt a lot without feeling like I had to change in any way as a person. There is a Comfort Zone at Kingston College and it might sound cheesy but it's made me hungry for education. I want to read history at university.'

SELF EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR F.E.

CONTROVERSY AND CONTENTIOUS ISSUES

Please rate your confidence in understanding and responding to the following questions in the context of SMSC education

What do people mean when they refer to an issue as controversial or contentious?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
What is meant in the context of faith and belief by terms such as knowledge, belief, theory, truth, fundamentalism, conservative, liberal, extremist ?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Why do people have different interpretations of the same faith/belief?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
How do different faith traditions find answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Some people talk about “shared values” in the UK. Are there any shared values? Can people who do not share values live together in the same community?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT CONTENTIOUS ISSUES

This section is about attitudes and approaches for engaging with contentious issues in the context of spiritual, moral, social and cultural education

Please indicate how confidently you adopt the attitudes and approaches listed below in the classroom

Demonstrating respect for different values, cultures, religions and beliefs in your teaching/practice	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Demonstrating appropriate sensitivity towards the backgrounds and beliefs of students	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Adopting an impartial stance in the classroom/in your setting/context	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Encouraging students to recognise the advantages as well as the challenges of diversity within their communities	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Challenging prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping, in all their forms	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Encouraging students to express ideas and beliefs in a sensitive and respectful way, even when they are negative or controversial.	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Managing discussion effectively and handling disagreements, especially when controversial issues arise	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Knowing where to find, and use effectively, up-to-date information and resources to support students' understanding of equality and diversity and community cohesion	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Knowing where to find appropriate speakers with different faith/belief perspectives	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	

CURRICULUM ISSUES

Please rate your confidence in responding to the following issues in the context of SMSC education

Religious extremism	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Terrorist organisations claiming religious authority such as Al Qaeda	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Right-wing inspired race hatred	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Faith and belief teachings about homosexuality	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Issues of identity, faith/cultural traditions and belonging	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Social, cultural and political aspects of faith and belief in the modern world	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Women & gender equality	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Please consider how confident you are that SMSC education provision in the college:

Has identified effective strategies for managing/discussing contentious issues?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Is based on a sound knowledge of a range of faiths and beliefs?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Is effective in promoting equality, diversity and community cohesion?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	
Has identified constructive links with appropriate sources of advice and support, including local faith communities?	Very confident	
	Confident	
	A bit confident	
	Not confident	