

Dealing with sensitive/challenging conversations

Teaching SPHE/RSE is a challenging task, and there will be questions and topics which teachers may feel more or less comfortable discussing. **Looking at myself and what I bring to the classroom** is important in this context.

All educators find themselves dealing with sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom and the likelihood of this arising in SPHE/RSE is greater due to the nature of the topics examined and their personal importance.

These challenging moments can become opportunities for learning as they challenge students to consider not only their opinions, but also their values, beliefs and worldviews. Because a topic is a sensitive one, does not mean it should be avoided but it does need careful facilitation. **The teacher as facilitator of learning** provides useful guidance on facilitation skills. The following are further suggestions that will help the teacher to prepare for and deal with these situations.

Communicate the learning intentions

In preparation for each lesson, be clear on the learning intention and what learning you want to achieve with the students. Share the learning intention with the students and invite them to think about what they might be bringing to this learning. By making the students aware of the purpose of each class it will also enable you to keep the learning on track and focused around clear objectives.

Model behaviours

Students can learn a great deal from teachers' behaviour, so it is important to model the behaviours you want to develop in your class:

Listen respectfully to all students and affirm their right to express their views and opinions in a respectful manner; Show balance in representing different perspectives accurately and fairly; Avoid generalisations, e.g. 'young people are...' and withhold judgement statements, e.g. 'young people should...' which will invariably close down discussion and lead students to saying what they think you want to hear rather than what they actually think or feel; Avoid slipping into a position of engaging in an argument with a student or a group of students.

And don't take yourself too seriously! Judiciously use humour to diffuse things but be careful not to direct a joke at a person or group.

Know your own triggers and limitations

Be aware of your own triggers and limitations when facilitating conversations about certain topics. It might sometimes be appropriate to acknowledge these with your students. If need be, take a deep breath and allow a moments silence to allow you time to think before speaking. It's also okay to acknowledge your own lack of knowledge and inform students that you will need to do some research and return to the topic later.

Anticipate discussions

It is helpful to try to anticipate what students might say during discussion around a topic. By considering in advance the differing opinions and viewpoints that may arise on a particular topic you will be more able to respond appropriately to questions and viewpoints and be ready to gently challenge misinformation, stereotypes or unhealthy attitudes.

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Find out what students know or think about an issue before opening up discussion

Find out what they know about an issue, what they think they know but aren't sure about, where their information comes from, and what questions they are likely to have. This can be done through anonymous surveys, question box, brainstorming, KWL, etc.

Depersonalise the discussion

This can be done by using the third person. So, for example, ask 'What do you think someone your age might think or say about....?' Or 'What are the reasons why young people might feel under pressure to?' instead of asking 'what do you think?' 'What are the pressures that you are experiencing?' If a student voices an opinion or attitude that is judgemental or unhealthy, try to broaden it out and have a look to see if this is a prevalent attitude in society. In this way the discussion becomes more generalised without focusing on the student who voiced the opinion or attitude.

Appeal to students' better nature

In introducing a topic that has the potential to become controversial, make an appeal to students' better nature by reminding them that personal or thoughtless remarks made in class may offend or embarrass their classmates. Most students do not want to intentionally hurt others. Reminding students at the beginning of each class of the group contract/ground rules that they have agreed is also helpful. Make sure that you, the teacher, observe these rules too!

Encourage participation

Encourage student participation from the outset, and this begins by consulting with them regularly on what they need to learn about in SPHE/RSE. While the SPHE/RSE class should be a safe space where students can discuss matters of importance for their lives, participation can never be forced. It is important to acknowledge that students may wish to participate in some activities by simply listening and observing.

Check out a range of effective teaching and learning approaches [here](#).

How to safely interrupt or pause conversations?

There will be times in the SPHE classroom when the teacher, as facilitator, will need to interrupt, pause or close down a particular line of conversation. Sometimes, it may be obvious when safe interruption is needed, for example if someone is being disrespectful or if it seems that a disclosure is imminent. However, at other times it may not be so obvious. A good clue is to remain aware of your gut feelings as these can alert as to when boundaries are being crossed and a topic is being opened up that might be best dealt with beyond the classroom setting.

Safe interrupting ensures that the SPHE classroom remains safe for all. Below are some suggestions for managing this scenario.

- If a group or individual student is not adhering to the rules move towards where the ground rules are written and give a reminder of the rules.

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- If the group/student moves away from the topic, move towards where the learning intention for the lesson is written and draw the group's attention to this. There will be times when you may give the group a choice to change the topic or digress and that's okay but this too should be agreed.
- Safe interrupting can also be used to steer the discussion or behaviour within the group and to re-establish boundaries.

The following statements may be helpful when safe interrupting is needed

- 'Let me think about that first' or 'I will come back to you on that' can provide time for you to consider the issue or seek support/guidance from colleagues. These phrases can be used if you feel boundaries are being tested or if you need to seek advice or if you need time to reflect on something.
- 'Can I pause you at this point? it sounds like you have something important to say and I want to give you the time to do that. Can we talk after class?' This can be used if you feel the student is attempting to raise a personal concern that is not directly related to the lesson.
- 'Can I hold you there? it seems to me that it might be best to have this conversation after class, later, privately'. This can be used if you feel a student is about to open up a topic that is not suited to a classroom setting.
- 'I see we are moving off our agreed topic. So I'd like to press the pause button on this discussion and go back to our earlier question.' This can be used when you want to steer the discussion back on track.

Establish a means of closure

Ensure that the discussion is brought to closure with sensitivity to the feelings that may have been aroused. Regular check-ins with the students about how the class is going is also important. Tell the class you are available to them after class to talk about anything that might have come up in class. A list of supports that are available to them in the school and the wider community should be made available too. Remember these challenging moments are not all negative and they can become opportunities of learning by gaining a broader perspective on the topic. They are also an opportunity to reaffirm the class boundaries and ground rules which will promote future open discussion. Remind students of the class contract/ground rules that they have agreed. Finally, be sure to check in with yourself too and support yourself or seek support to help manage any concerns.

Further useful resources

[Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom, CDVEC, 2012](#)

[Teaching Controversial Issues, Oxfam, 2018](#)

Other relevant topics

Teacher as facilitator

What makes a safe SPHE/RSE classroom?

What makes an inclusive SPHE/RSE classroom?

Dealing with disclosure about sexual abuse