

Myself as an SPHE teacher

Making the most of sensitive/challenging discussions

Any teacher can find themselves dealing with sensitive and challenging topics, although the likelihood for SPHE teachers is greater due to the nature of the topics explored and their personal importance for students.

Discussions on sensitive/challenging topics can be challenging, but they can become opportunities for learning as they challenge students to think about and question not only their opinions, values, beliefs and worldviews but also those of others. Sensitive/challenging topics should not be avoided, but they do need careful facilitation.

The following suggestions will help you to make the most of sensitive/challenging discussions in SPHE..

Know your own triggers and limitations

There will be questions and topics which you may feel more or less comfortable discussing. Be aware of your own triggers and limitations on specific topics when facilitating discussions. It might sometimes be appropriate to share your stance or perspective with your students. On other occasions, you may need to take a deep breath and allow time to think before speaking. It's also okay to admit your own lack of knowledge and tell students that you need to do some research and return to the topic later.

Share the learning intention(s)

In preparation for each lesson, be clear on the learning intention(s), that is, the learning you want to achieve with your students. By sharing the learning intention(s) with your students, you will be better able to keep the learning on track and focused.

Find out what students know and anticipate how the discussion might develop

Find out what students know about a topic, what they aren't sure about, where their information comes from,

and what questions they have. This can be done through anonymous surveys, question box, brainstorming, KWL, etc.

Anticipate what students might say in discussing certain topics. By considering in advance the differing opinions and viewpoints that may arise you will be more able to respond appropriately to questions and viewpoints and be ready to gently challenge misinformation, disinformation, stereotypes or unhealthy attitudes.

Appeal to students' better nature

Most students do not want to intentionally hurt others. In introducing a potentially sensitive/challenging topic, appeal to students' better nature by reminding them that personal or thoughtless remarks may offend or embarrass their classmates. Reminding students of the agreed class contract/ground rules at the beginning of class may also help.

Encourage participation

Encourage student participation from the outset. This begins by consulting with them regularly on what they need to learn about in SPHE, and on how the class is going. While the SPHE class should be a safe space where students can discuss matters of importance in and for their lives, participation should never be forced. There may be times when individuals may wish to participate by simply listening and observing.

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

Making the most of sensitive/challenging discussions

Depersonalise the discussion

Ask probing questions using the third person like...

'What do you think someone your age might think or say about....?' *What are the reasons why young people might feel under pressure to?'*

instead of...

'what do you think?' *'What are the pressures that you are experiencing?'*

If a student voices an opinion or displays an attitude that is judgemental or unhealthy, respond by broadening out the question and asking if this is a prevalent opinion or attitude in society. In this way the discussion becomes more generalised without focusing on the individual student.

When and how to safely interrupt

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 discussion. It may be obvious when this 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. Be attuned to your gut feelings as this alert you when boundaries are being crossed or the discussion is branching off into issues that might be best dealt with beyond the classroom setting.

Possible classroom scenario

Sample teacher response

An individual or group is not adhering to the ground rules/group contract

Move towards where the ground rule/group contract are displayed and highlight the relevant extract to the entire class

Students raise something that you need time to consider or reflect upon or seek support/guidance from colleagues.

'Let me think about that first.'
'I will come back to you on that.'

An individual or group goes off topic

'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.'

or

Move to where the learning intention(s) are displayed and draw the attention of the class to this.

One or more students seem to be attempting to raise a personal concern that is not directly related to the learning intention(s).

'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?'

One or more students seem to be about to open up a topic that should not be discussed in class.

'Can I hold you there? it seems to me that it might be best to have this conversation after class/ later/privatey.'

Establish a means of closure

It is important to conclude discussions in a way that is sensitive to the feelings that may have been aroused. Acknowledge to students that these challenging discussions can be positive experiences because of the opportunities for learning and gaining a broader perspective on the specific topic(s), and for building our skills or competencies around communicating and working with others.

Tell students you are available after class to talk about anything that might have come up in class. Make available a list of in school and community supports that they can access. Finally, be sure to check in with yourself and seek support to manage any concerns that may have arisen.