

# Teaching controversial issues... where controversial issues really matter

This is the fourth in a series of *Teaching History* articles about teaching history in Northern Ireland co-authored by Alan McCully. The first two articles (in editions 106 and 114) outlined teaching strategies to help pupils in Northern Ireland understand and relate to complex and often controversial issues from Ireland's past, particularly in relation to the present. The third article (in edition 120) considered the significance and relevance of recent research into history teaching in Northern Ireland from the perspective of both pupils and teachers, proposing a spectrum of how teachers approach controversial issues in the classroom: from risk-taking, to containment to avoidance. It also introduced a very explicit link between the issues facing teachers in Northern Ireland and in England, where history teaching is not as controversy-free as is sometimes supposed. The article in this edition draws on a considerable wealth of international scholarship to present some well-founded and practical suggestions about how teachers might handle controversial issues in the classroom. Although the emphasis is on teaching in Northern Ireland, the potential, as in the previous articles, to translate the messages and strategies to other contexts is clear. What is more, the authors' knowledge and experience of history teaching in Northern Ireland makes what they have to say about teaching controversial issues especially compelling, wherever you teach.

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Northern Ireland often challenges people's assumptions about society, government, religion, and other aspects of the social world. We have watched visiting colleagues from England, for example, stare in amazement at the battery of electronic surveillance devices mounted along the city walls of Londonderry. Could the British government really intrude so blatantly into the life of the surrounding neighbourhood? We have listened to their indignation as they surveyed political murals painted alongside blocks of homes. '*Why, if anyone tried to put up one of those back in Slough, the police would tell them to get down straight away!*' Northern Ireland differs from its neighbours in some striking regards, and these differences warn us against a too-facile application of policies and ideas that are well-suited for other contexts. Such caution is especially important in teaching about controversial issues in history.

The benefits of engaging students in controversial issues discussion are well-established in international scholarship. If modern democratic societies depend on the ability of citizens to take part in reasoned discussions with those whose opinions differ from their own, then surely it is our job as educators to develop this ability in our students.<sup>1</sup> Encouragingly, there is empirical evidence that such efforts can succeed and that classroom discussions, in which several sides of an issue are explored and in which students feel comfortable expressing their views, are associated with a range of positive outcomes (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> And not insignificantly for teachers, students *like* courses that emphasise discussion. The history classroom seems a natural venue for such discussions, both because the past is nothing if not one long series of controversies, and because current policy debates are invariably rooted in history.

However, it is all too easy for discussion to deteriorate into unproductive free-for-alls on the one hand, or thinly veiled recitations with occasional student comments on the other—and neither is likely to lead to the benefits envisioned for open discussion. As a result, researchers and practitioners have developed guidelines for making controversial issues discussion effective.<sup>3</sup> But these guidelines require judicious application in Northern Ireland, because public policy there is not simply an intellectual exercise. With 3500 violent deaths over the last 35 years, little political consensus or real reconciliation, and increased polarisation of Nationalist and Unionist communities in recent years, controversial issues *matter* to a degree that is not always obvious in other Western nations.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in Northern Ireland, the very fact of taking part in discussion is controversial, as the difficulty of recent attempts to secure a working government

Figure 1: The benefits of discussion in the classroom

Students who regularly take part in classroom discussion are more likely to:

- ▶ vote in later life
- ▶ support basic democratic values
- ▶ take part in political discussions
- ▶ follow political news in the media
- ▶ be interested in the political process
- ▶ have confidence in their ability to influence public policy

demonstrates. In the following section, we look at how history teachers in Northern Ireland might adapt approaches to discussion to better suit their unique circumstances. The section is divided into three sections, each of which set out some recommendations about how teachers might

foundation of the history curriculum in the United Kingdom, a curriculum which is admired throughout the world for abstaining from the promotion of nationalist passions and other emotional attachments.

Supporters of controversial issues discussion also tend to emphasise a rationalist approach in which students carefully weigh the evidence for and against opposing positions, always keeping their emotional responses in the background. Moreover, some educators argue that the value of history for issues discussion lies precisely in the fact that it most often deals with topics that are so remote that they no longer arouse great passion (see Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> This perspective is repeated almost as a mantra among some educators: *'If students learn to analyse distant issues, they will be able to analyse current ones as well.'*

Alas, there is little evidence that this is anything more than a mantra. Transferring patterns of reasoning from past to present is a very difficult undertaking for students and is unlikely to occur without direct support by teachers. In Northern Ireland, this difficulty is compounded by the fact that many of the most important historical issues are still 'clouded by bias and urgency,' and many students do still have 'personal and immediate emotional involvement' in the events of the past. Even for students who do not exhibit overt prejudice or extreme political views, history is nonetheless often tied to their sense of cultural identity, and any discussion of important events in the region's past has the potential to arouse strong emotions. This was clearly

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go about teaching controversial issues in Northern Ireland. Much of this provides food for thought for history teachers everywhere, however. The main recommendations are:

**Recommendation 1:  
Deal with emotions**

**Recommendation 2: Mix it up**

**Recommendation 3: Find support**

**Recommendation 1: Deal with emotions**

**Holding your nerve**

As history educators, we tend to be most comfortable with a coolly rational approach to history. We have all succeeded in our own schooling as we analysed the events of the past, tried to look objectively at the causes and consequences of historical decisions, and pulled together evidence in support of reasoned interpretations. This approach is the

demonstrated in a specifically Northern Ireland context in a previous *Teaching History* article.<sup>6</sup>

If teachers in Northern Ireland hope to engage students in controversial issues discussion, particularly those that might involve connections to the present (and why would they be controversial otherwise?), they must be prepared to grapple with students' emotional responses. On a practical level, this is important because such responses, if unacknowledged, may act as a barrier to careful consideration of evidence and argument. Ultimately, if emotional issues are ignored, then far from learning to deal with difficult issues rationally, students may simply come to see school history as irrelevant to their own concerns. And students are, after all, entitled to their emotions. Asking them to ignore their own identity as the price for public discussion may demand too much, and it is not necessarily a demand we have the right to make.

**Being safe and winding down**

There is no set of technical procedures that will enable teachers to meet this challenge without trepidation, for much depends on the individual's own personality and experience, as well as on the unique characteristics of her students. However,

Figure 2: Is history remote?

Alan L. Lockwood and David E. Harris argue:

*History presents events that are removed from students' daily lives. This remoteness allows for more dispassionate reflection about right and wrong. Judgments are less clouded by the bias and urgency that often hinder clear thinking about current situations, in which there may be personal and immediate emotional involvement*

there are a few principles that teachers can attend to as they develop their own approaches. A long-standing principle of controversial issues discussion is that the classroom must provide a 'safe environment' for students to express their ideas, and in Northern Ireland this environment must include safety for strong emotions. Interviews with skilled practitioners suggests that this requires them to 'hold their nerve' when students respond emotionally. Particularly at the beginning of discussions—and especially for students who have not engaged in such issues in school before—teachers may need to allow more highly charged discussion than would otherwise be considered permissible. Shutting down discussion too quickly because it appears to be getting out of hand is tempting, but strong—even 'irrational'—reactions may be a necessary first step before students learn to express themselves more articulately and respectfully. Teachers may also need to provide an opportunity to 'wind down' from emotional sessions rather than simply calling them to a halt when class is over.<sup>7</sup>

### Allowing extremes

Teachers in Northern Ireland may also need to allow a wider range of viewpoints to be expressed than their colleagues in other countries would permit. One basic principle of discussion is that teachers should respond non-judgmentally to students' ideas, yet we all have our limits: we consider some positions to be appropriate ones for public discussion and some to be so extreme that even voicing them in a classroom context is not proper. In Northern Ireland, however, extreme positions are often held with sincerity and integrity, and for teachers to rule such positions off the table sends the message that students' views were not valued after all—a sure way to shut down discussion. As teachers, we may hope that students will reject violence or overt prejudice, but we are unlikely to bring about such changes by dismissing them as illegitimate. If we truly believe in the value of democratic deliberation, we have to accept that discussion will lead to better ideas, rather

than trying to bias the process from the beginning. Teachers will still set limits, no doubt, but those limits may need to be broader in Northern Ireland than elsewhere.

### What about *your* views?

A related issue is that of disclosure: the extent to which teachers should allow their own positions to be known. Many teachers (and many members of the public) assume that teachers should not reveal their own positions on controversial issues, lest they unduly influence students. Recent research in the United States casts doubt on this assumption, for two reasons. First, students can generally infer their teachers' positions through body language and other subtle cues, especially when those views differ from their own. Second, students consider themselves to be capable of developing positions on controversial issues without being influenced by their teachers; as it turns out, we may be giving ourselves too much credit in thinking that students will change their ideas just because they know what we think.<sup>8</sup>

In Northern Ireland there is a further reason not to avoid disclosure. In a region where few people have been untouched by the Troubles, and where conflicting views are such a clear and present feature of public life, it seems disingenuous for teachers to pretend that they have no opinions (although they may want to wait for students to enquire about their views rather than revealing them prematurely). Even worse is a tactic many teachers consider basic to their pedagogical toolkit—playing 'devil's advocate' by systematically taking a stance contrary to whatever students say. In Northern Ireland, discussion of controversial issues takes place only among people who trust each other, and when teachers refuse to reveal their stand, or intentionally take a position in which they do not believe, students perceive this as a violation of trust. The result is a deterioration of the safe environment necessary for discussion. Teachers in Northern Ireland will still want to challenge students' ideas, but they must do so without concealing or disavowing their own. And importantly, part of this disclosure may involve teachers in admitting their own doubts, confusions, and uncertainties, so that students can feel safer when they too feel a lack of clarity.<sup>9</sup>

### Summary: dealing with emotions

- Hold your nerve when students respond emotionally
- Provide a chance to wind down at the end of class
- Allow extreme positions to be voiced
- Do not hide your position
- Admit your own uncertainties

How far are these recommendations useful for teachers working in contexts other than Northern Ireland?

For example, can you think of any topics in the English curriculum that might benefit from these kinds of approaches?

## Recommendation 2: Mix it up

An important finding of recent U.S. research is that some benefits of discussing controversial issues may depend on the level of ideological diversity among students in a classroom. It may also depend on their teacher's willingness to activate that diversity by providing opportunities for students to articulate and hear differing perspectives on political issues. Citizens who are aware of ideological diversity in their community appear to embrace conflict as a necessary part of the democratic process. When students attend classes with others who have positions similar to their own, however, they may not recognise the value of conflicting viewpoints when they encounter them outside school, and so they may simply dismiss them as 'biased' or perhaps as offensive. Moreover, even when students within a classroom have divergent viewpoints, they may not recognise or appreciate these differences unless their teacher makes them an explicit topic of discussion. If teachers do not capitalise on students' ideological diversity by bringing their ideas to the surface, students may assume a greater degree of consensus than actually exists.<sup>10</sup>

At first glance, it seems that schools in Northern Ireland are ill-suited to meet this requirement, for nearly all schools there are almost exclusively Catholic (Maintained Schools) or Protestant (Controlled Schools). Within these schools, it would be rare to find a student—or adult—who wanted to be seen as embracing the other community's political agenda, particularly because any of the small number of students who attend the 'other' community's schools will keep their opinions to themselves to avoid ostracism or even violence.

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Even in Integrated Schools, which draw nearly equally from the two religions and which enrol approximately 5% of Northern Ireland's students, students sometimes resent publicly expressing their allegiances for fear of getting 'kicked about' after school, as one student told us. On the other hand, by the time they reach secondary school, nearly every student in Northern Ireland is aware that Nationalists and Unionists have differing political views (even though they may not yet be entirely clear on the specific positions that these allegiances entail), so it may seem less necessary to expose them to such ideological differences in school. No one in Northern Ireland will grow up with the mistaken idea that everyone agrees with him or her, nor will they conclude that conflict is alien to the political process.

Yet our research with students there shows that they very consciously and explicitly expect school history to provide them with alternatives to the historical perspectives they encounter outside school, which they consider one-sided or even ignorant. They expect that by learning about multiple historical experiences and interpretations, they will be able to develop a more reasoned understanding of the past and of the origins of the recent Troubles. At the same time, they make it clear that learning such alternatives will not cause

them to change their basic political allegiances—they fully intend to remain committed Unionists and Nationalists, albeit better informed ones who have fewer prejudices against the other community. There is some evidence in our research, however, that schools may not be fulfilling this expectation as well as they might, and that as students progress through the secondary curriculum, their community-based historical identifications actually become stronger. And even though Northern Ireland has a curriculum which is carefully balanced between Nationalist and Unionist perspectives, and which is uniformly implemented across school types, some students draw selectively from that curriculum in order to bolster their emerging sectarian identities.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. research might suggest that this is inevitable, given the lack of classroom diversity within Northern Ireland's segregated educational system.

### Finding diversity

We think, however, that the problem needs reframing. It is tempting—unavoidable, even—to think of controversial issues in Northern Ireland in terms of the divide between Unionists and Nationalists, but this may not be the most important form of ideological diversity for classrooms there, given that students are unlikely to hear such alternatives from their classmates, or to change their allegiances if they were to hear them. Instead, students might be better served by being exposed to divergent perspectives *within their own religious and political traditions*. Neither Nationalists nor Unionists are homogenous groups, and although members of each community are likely to feel a strong affinity to others within their community, they nonetheless differ

on any number of political, religious, economic, cultural, and even linguistic issues. This may be the most important kind of ideological diversity for students to learn about in school, because while they know clearly which side they are on, they are still developing their ideas about what it *means* to be on that side. Public sources of political information, however, are not effective at informing students of the range of views within either community. Marches, speeches, and other political activities, in fact, often aim to limit the range of interpretations by making it appear that any good Unionist must adopt this position, or any true Nationalist must support that one. The media, meanwhile, are given to presenting the most extreme views on either side; the surest way for a politician to be ignored by the press in Northern Ireland is to say something moderate.

But in classrooms in Northern Ireland, even in seemingly homogenous communities, students are likely to come from families who hold a variety of opinions—not opinions from both sides of the divide, but alternative opinions within a single tradition (see Figure 3). If any of these issues are presented in terms of a dichotomy between Nationalist and Unionist views, students' choices will be clear—a Unionist should support the Apprentice Boys parade, a Nationalist



Catholic primary school children and their parents are protected from Loyalist protests as they walk to Holy Cross Primary School along the Ardoyne Road on 2001. The Catholic primary school lies in the middle of the Glenbryn estate, a small loyalist enclave in a part of the city which has been one of the most brutal battlegrounds in 30 years of the Troubles. *Picture by: Paul Faith/PA Archive/PA Photos*

should oppose it. But if the issue is reframed—*‘What are the different Unionist positions on when and where marches should take place?’*—the choices are less stark, and students’ positions less determined by accident of birth.

### Activating diversity

As the U.S. research shows, however, teachers must activate this diversity: they must design discussions that will bring out the variety of students’ perspectives, so that class members can gain a better understanding of the different opinions that may be held by committed Nationalists or steadfast Unionists. Within the history classroom, there are at least two principal ways this might be accomplished. The first is by helping students better understand the diversity of experiences and perspectives in the past. Not all transplanted Scots benefited from Plantation in the sixteenth century, for example, and not all native Irish were displaced; not all Unionists gleefully enlisted in the World War I, and not all Catholics opposed it. Discussing such within-community differences in the past may help students overcome the belief that Irish history has been one long struggle between two factions, a struggle which can be neatly mapped onto contemporary positions. In addition, teachers can engage students in more current—and controversial—discussions by soliciting their ideas about how history is used today to support different perspectives within each community. Some Nationalists, for example, nostalgically recall that in the time of their childhood (or that of their parents),

Unionist marches were a time for both communities to get together and enjoy a good parade; others will argue that for a hundred years, marches have been an opportunity for triumphalist provocation by the other side. A skillful history teacher could use these differing uses of the past as a way of surfacing the variety of meanings that the past holds within a single community. This internal diversity may be the most important and effective stimulus for discussion of controversial issues in Northern Ireland’s schools.

### Summary: mixing it up

- Look for subtle forms of diversity within your classroom
- Explore and exploit the full spectrum of views within your classroom and use the historical context to help you tease out the subtleties

How far are these recommendations useful for teachers working in contexts other than Northern Ireland?

Can you identify topics that you teach where a more nuanced view of diversity in your classroom might be useful to explore?

Might, for example, issues of identity such as the concept of Britishness, be a possible area?

Figure 3: Controversial issues *within* Northern Ireland's primary political/religious communities

- ◆ **Is violence ever justifiable?**
- ◆ **What should the role of the police force be?**
- ◆ **Should potentially divisive symbols be displayed?**
- ◆ **Should marches take place when they may provoke others?**
- ◆ **What kind of economic development would best serve the community?**
- ◆ **Which political parties best serve the causes of Unionism or Nationalism?**
- ◆ **Should Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland cooperate over issues related to Northern Ireland?**

### **Recommendation 3: Find support**

Engaging students in discussion of difficult inter- and intra-community issues, and managing the volatile emotions that may come with such discussions—while still trying to achieve the academic objectives of the history curriculum—clearly places tremendous demands on teachers. Of course, many history teachers in Northern Ireland (as elsewhere) do not consider controversial issues discussion to be part of their remit, and some may explicitly avoid such topics, either because they consider history to be a purely academic subject which is not meant to contribute to societal goals, or because they hope schools can provide a sanctuary from the Troubles. But even teachers who would like to contribute to peace and reconciliation may recoil at the immensity of the task or try to 'contain' issues so that they are less immediate or volatile.<sup>12</sup> If teachers are going to help students confront controversial issues in the ways we have been discussing, they will need a great deal of support.

#### **Support from your school**

One study in the United States found that teachers who regularly discuss controversial issues depend on support from the school leadership teams, the overall culture of the school, and the school's mission. As Hess puts it, 'their teaching is aligned with, not in opposition to, what is expected in school'.<sup>13</sup> This recommendation, too, must be modified to take into account Northern Ireland's unique circumstances. In Northern Ireland, it is highly unlikely that the community will consider controversial issues to be part of a school's mission, and fellow teachers may be just as unlikely to support such efforts—nor can administrators be counted on to see the wisdom of discussing difficult topics. Interviews

with practitioners there, on the other hand, suggest that it is support for their professionalism—rather than for issues discussion itself—that is most important. That is, teachers must have the confidence of school leaders and others, so that they feel free to act on their professional judgment and to take risks (even if colleagues disagree with the specific nature of those risks).<sup>14</sup> This is perhaps a variation of craft knowledge that we all have learned as teachers—namely, if you're good at what you do, you can get away with anything. Teachers who have well-developed rationales, plan good lessons, and implement them effectively will be allowed to take risks that are denied to their less skilled peers.

#### **Getting together: the role of networks**

But where do teachers develop these skills? Most will not have received extensive training (or any at all) in how to manage discussion of controversial issues during their teacher training programmes. In fact, the 'culture of politeness' that surrounds public discussion in mixed company in Northern Ireland makes it difficult for teacher educators even to broach the subject during coursework. Nor do published historical materials currently available there provide much help, for they rarely make even minimal attempts to connect past and present. Certainly teachers can hone their craft over many years of trial and error, working in lonely isolation, and spending their personal time developing materials on their own—and this is precisely what many of them do. It might be more effective (and more personally rewarding) if teachers in Northern Ireland were to develop support networks, which in other contexts have been instrumental in providing meaningful professional development.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly important given that a teacher may find herself the only staff member in a school who aims to discuss controversial

issues; by connecting with similar peers elsewhere, she could share resources and teaching ideas, as well as feel part of a community with like purposes.

### A flexible curriculum

Finally, controversial issues discussion might be supported by a more flexible curriculum. When teachers feel locked into a curriculum that foregoes connections between past and present, and when they feel they have no alternative but to cover a set of required topics, they may see little opportunity to engage with broader issues (although many do so, even within that context).

Ultimately, if emotional issues are ignored, then far from learning to deal with difficult issues rationally, students may simply come to see school history as irrelevant to their own concerns. And students are, after all, entitled to their emotions.

The proposal for a reformed secondary history curriculum in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, encourages students to directly explore the relevance of historical study in their contemporary lives. For example, in the context of studying Irish history young people should have opportunities to 'explore how history has affected their personal identity, culture and lifestyle' or 'investigate how history has been selectively interpreted to create stereotypical perceptions and to justify views and actions'. In addition to examining the short and long term causes of the partition of Ireland, students also should apply their learning to how partition 'has influenced Northern Ireland today'.<sup>16</sup> This obviously opens up the possibility to discuss contemporary, controversial issues, but teachers must also take advantage of the flexibility it offers to treat such issues differently in varied communities. The one-size-fits-all model that has prevailed since implementation of the Northern Ireland curriculum has helped guarantee a common core of learning, but it has had the disadvantage of failing to address the unique perceptions of given communities. Not everyone grows up with the same myths, misunderstandings, or interpretations of the past, and teachers must adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their own students.

### Summary: finding support

- School leadership teams should support teachers' professional judgments
- School networks should be formed to share resources and experiences
- The curriculum should allow flexibility to address local differences

Which of these sources of support are/could be available to you?

Might the revised Key Stage 3 curriculum in England, due to be introduced in September 2008, provide similar kinds of flexibility to the new curriculum in Northern Ireland?

### Conclusion: using what we know

Teachers should be inspired by the fact that discussion of controversial issues can lead to a range of positive outcomes, and that there are useful guidelines, derived from research and practitioners' experiences, that promote the effectiveness of such discussions. Northern Ireland's situation, however, makes it clear that these principles must be applied with thoughtful attention to local circumstances. Principles such as 'provide a safe environment' or 'seek the support of school leaders' cannot be implemented in the same way in Northern Ireland that they might be elsewhere. Indeed, any

teacher, in any country, must be thoughtful about adapting pedagogical techniques to his or her own context. In the rest of the United Kingdom as well, controversial issues will have to be treated differently depending on how particular groups of students respond to specific issues. Issues related to racism or terrorism (and the intersection of the two), for example, may well provoke strong emotional responses in some parts of England as discussed in a previous article in *Teaching History*.<sup>17</sup> As in many realms of education, there are no easy answers or universal precepts for teaching controversial issues: teachers must use their professional expertise to make judgments about how best to meet students' unique needs.

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