

Lesson 2

Why do people disagree?

What are differences based on?

Learning objectives	<p>The students are able to consider reasons why people have different opinions on important issues.</p> <p>The students are able to discuss contested issues.</p> <p>The students are able to consider what values are necessary to underpin democratic societies.</p>
Student tasks	<p>The students make statements about and defend their views on a range of issues.</p> <p>The students analyse the sources of disagreements on publicly contested issues.</p> <p>The students consider influences on their own values.</p> <p>The students develop guidelines to encourage respect for pluralism and ensure that the quality of respect and dialogue over public issues is upheld.</p>
Resources	Large labels for the “four corners” exercise.
Methods	<p>Discussion.</p> <p>Reflection.</p> <p>Critical thinking.</p> <p>Developing rules collaboratively.</p>

Key concept

Pluralism: Pluralism exists in societies which do not have one official set of interests, values or beliefs. Citizens have the right to freedom of conscience, religion and expression. The exception is that views which threaten other people’s freedom of belief are against the law and are not tolerated. A state in which only one religion is allowed or where no religion is tolerated would not be pluralist.

The lesson

The teacher asks the class to consider the following controversial statements, one at a time:

Agree or disagree?

- It is wrong to eat animals.
- If a student is HIV positive he should not be in the same class as healthy children.
- Pacifists should not be compelled to join the armed forces.
- Capital punishment should be banned.
- A woman's place is at home.
- Children under 14 should not be allowed to work.
- Smoking should be banned in public buildings.
- People should pay more taxes.
- Free speech is not a good thing.

Each corner of the classroom is labelled with the following:

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

The teacher reads out each statement in turn and asks the students to move to the appropriate corner of the room, according to their views on the above questions. If they cannot decide, they should remain where they are.

When students have taken up their positions, the teacher asks someone in each of the four corners to say why they have chosen that position. No discussion should be allowed at this stage. Then the teacher asks any students who have changed their mind, to move to a different corner, as appropriate.

Next, the teacher asks students who have not made up their mind try to explain why they cannot decide. They should write down the reasons given for the indecision (for example, they may need more information, it is not clear to them what is meant, they can see arguments on both sides, etc.)

The exercise is repeated three or four times with different statements. On each occasion, the teacher should be concerned not so much with debating the particular issue, but with eliciting the reasons why people hold different views.

In a plenary session, the teacher points out that the same issues evoked very different responses from class members. He/she can then introduce the concept of pluralism and ask the class the following questions, explaining that they can help to understand the reasons why pluralism exists in societies:

- Think back over the questions we considered. Which ones provoke the strongest feelings? Why is that?
- Where do we get our ideas, values and beliefs from? (This will help students see that our ideas on controversial issues can come from different sources.)

The teacher then asks the students to what extent they think they are influenced by the following:

- their parents' ideas;
- what their friends think;
- their religion or culture;

- the media, e.g. newspapers, TV, the Internet;
- teachers;
- their own personality.

The students then work individually and arrange the items in order of importance in the shape of a pyramid, with the most important at the top, like this:

item

item item

item item item

The teacher asks the students to compare their pyramids in pairs. Which factors are felt by the class as a whole to be most important? This could be discovered by weighting the items as follows: give items in the top row six points, items in the middle row four points and give items in the bottom row two points each. In groups of four, students total the points given to each item. Compare the findings of each group. Were the same factors at the top of the list of importance?

The teacher explains that pluralism develops in a free and open society. However, no society can function without a minimum level of shared agreement among its members. He/she asks the students to list some values or rules that they think would help overcome dissenting values or interests. The students could, for example, suggest the following:

- Respect other people’s opinions.
- Try to put yourself “in other people’s shoes”.
- Remember that talking is better than fighting.
- Try not to give offence.
- Give people a chance to have their say.

If people cannot agree, we may need a mechanism such as voting in order to make a decision.