

Tips for Managing Controversial Topics

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1. Never ignore intolerant remarks.

Never leave remarks unchallenged or unexplored. If you ignore something hateful, this teaches students that intolerance and trivialising are okay. Worse, it makes some students feel like they aren't protected in the classroom. When someone makes a comment that is hurtful, upsetting or intolerant, it's a good idea to discuss it calmly and try to consider why some people might feel this way. However, you need to balance exploring the comment with making sure the student who said it doesn't feel isolated or attacked! If you can do this, you can turn a heated moment into an opportunity for deep learning and development. And remember, all your students should be protected in the classroom, no matter who they are or what they're saying.

2. Connect students to groups outside the classroom.

Sometimes you're not going to be the best person for your students to speak to. But that doesn't mean you can't help – there are plenty of resources at your disposal if you're willing to use them. If a student feels isolated and alone, you're in a unique position to lead them towards books, after school clubs, religious groups, and other extracurricular groups. These outlets are places where students can engage with their interests and gain **exposure to new ideas** and new people in healthy ways.

Most importantly, for students grappling with their religious identity or with intolerant views they can explore and challenge ideas in a supportive environment free from fear. Helping students to find groups outside of the classroom can encourage them to take pride in their identity, to make new friends, and to become exposed to new people. And, above all, it protects them from the judgement they might encounter elsewhere.

3. Make things comfortable, for everyone, no matter what they believe.

In the classroom, you need to establish ground rules and create an atmosphere of respect and tolerance. It's important to lead by example, so you'll need to have a firm grip on your emotions too.

Remember that taboos are different for everybody and never be surprised at what some people believe. Everyone is different. **Overcoming intolerant beliefs** is hard because these thoughts and opinions are often deeply embedded. But you have a uniquely powerful position as an educator to be a source of inspiration, tolerance, and hope in every child's life. Remember to keep an open mind, and try to understand how every child came to the opinion they have even if the belief differs widely from your own.

4. Don't know how to navigate something?

Schedule it for another time. This allows you to do your research, plan a

conversation, and let everyone cool off. Making a firm commitment to speak about the issue again with a student or group of students gets them to reflect on the issues raised, and reflection is an important part of learning.

5. Know when to talk outside of the classroom.

Supporting students who've had a difficult time in class can help them learn from their experience and feel supported. You may need to support people whom you don't agree with as well. It's just as important to speak to the student who got upset as it is to speak to the student who made the remark or held the belief.

6. Recognise when students are distressed.

Sometimes you may have to guess what's upsetting a student who's showing visible signs of distress. Without mentioning who in the room is being affected, it can be a good idea to introduce other perspectives if the conversation begins to get one-sided.

7. Respect that some students might want to remain silent.

Some issues are scarier for some people. Talking about ISIS and Islamophobia might be a terrifying subject for Muslim students. They might be worried about the views of their peers, or they could worry that hateful language and generalisations might be directed at them. If they choose to remain silent be sure to respect this. Don't put them on the spot and don't ask for their view as a Muslim.

8. Make use of The Five Minute Rule.

The **5 Minute Rule** is an activity that allows students to explore marginalised, invisible or controversial views by trying to get into the mindset of a person who holds that view for five minutes.

Students can ask for this exercise to be used or you can implement it at any time. The 5 Minute Rule requires you to set a timer for five minutes. During this time, the group must refrain from criticising the perspective in question and try to get into the mindset of someone who believes it.

You can prompt students using the following questions:

- What's interesting or helpful about this view?
- What are some intriguing features of this viewpoint?
- What would be different if you believed this perspective?
- Under what conditions might this idea seem truthful? Think social, cultural, economic conditions, etc.

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